



Community Engagement In Balkh Province: Building Support For Girls' Education

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ABSTRACT

Balkh province has one of the strongest education system in Afghanistan. Through better community support, girls can increasingly take part of its growing success.

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Education is a critical part of Afghanistan’s reconstruction plan. In fact, “[it] is fundamental for poverty reduction, development, nation building, good governance, peace and stability” (Afghan Ministry of Education, 2010). As a part of its new National Education Strategic Plan (NESP), the Ministry of Education (MoE) promises to confront challenges that prevent a strong education system in Afghanistan. Their main goals are: provide the necessary infrastructure for students’ to receive an adequate education, address the need for skilled and certified teachers, and strengthen the national education structure. Since they launched the reconstruction process in 2001, the MoE has achieved tremendous progress, and their work has been hailed as “one of Afghanistan’s biggest success stories of the post-Taliban era” (The Diplomat, 2016). In fact, the education system has gone a long way from where it started in 2001, especially in terms of female enrolment: the proportion of girls attending school has gone from almost null in 2001 to about 40% in 2015. This report will take a look at girls’ education rights since the rise of the Taliban, and will explore their progress to date. The region of interest is the Balkh province, in Northern Afghanistan. The section will take into account the strategic position of the province and its collaboration with Sahar Education. Finally, a model of school-community cooperation will be proposed, in order to nurture and strengthen support for girls’ education and empowerment in the community.

I. An Outlook of Afghanistan's Education System since 2001

A. Girls in school: impact, progress and obstacles

One of the greater challenges faced by the Afghan education system is the reintegration of girls, who have been barred from education by the Taliban regime since 1996. After the fall of the regime in 2001, the Government of Afghanistan (GoA), and its Ministry of Education started the process of restructuring the Afghan education system. In 2002, schools nationwide counted less than 1 million students, 34,000 schools and 4 teacher training colleges (Afghan Ministry of Education, 2002). Since then, the MoE has issued several strategic plans aiming to repair the broken school system. The number of students enrolled in school has increased 9 fold from 2001 to 2015. Of those 9.2 million students, 34% are girls (NESP, 2017). The MoE predicts that by 2020, enrollment numbers will reach 18 million and 100% of schools will have safe and useable buildings. The MoE has successfully rebuilt over 13,000 schools in order to accommodate the surge in enrolment (NESP 2017).

In 2015, 3.2 million girls were enrolled in Afghan public schools (Oslo Summit on Education for Development, 2015). The MoE predicts that it will reach 6.5 million by 2020. Balkh has one of the highest female enrolment rates in the country, which represents about 4.8% of the national number. In addition, the MoE is close to reaching its goal of 50% female teachers in the education system, with 30% of teachers being female as of 2014.

The huge increase in the number of students, especially female, is certainly a success, but it shouldn’t overshadow the deep inequalities that reside between urban and rural areas. In fact, the MoE reports that while there is in average 78% attendance in urban primary schools, the rural average is at 50% (NESP, 2017). In addition, a substantial amount of students—18.3% of the total enrolled in 2014—were registered as enrolled but never showed up at school. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report on Balkh province also found

a concerning number of unqualified teachers and ‘ghost’ schools (nonexistent schools that are marked as ‘functioning’ under the MoE’s management system). In 2015, the Oslo Summit on Education for development reviewed the Afghan education system and identified key obstacles that prevent the adequate supply of education to all parts of the country.

First, security is a concern in some parts of Afghanistan, which prevents schools from running (almost 10% of schools were forced to close due to security threats in 2012). Second, the lack of infrastructure is still a challenge despite the increase in new schools. Only half of government schools had adequate buildings in 2013, whereas the rest operated from mosques, tents or open areas. Finally, perhaps the most prevalent problem is the low number of teachers that are qualified to work in schools, which makes teacher training a top priority for the MoE in the coming years. While security is not a major concern in Balkh province, the latter two challenges are widespread in the region, as will be discussed in the coming pages.

B. National Strategic Plan

The problems mentioned above are issues the ministry wishes to address in its new National Education Strategic Plan, initiated in 2017. The NESPs are quadrennial plans that establish long term goals, a general budget and strategies for the given period. They provide a framework for the initiatives and policies that will be enacted by the MoE in the given period. In the new NESP (2017-2021), the MoE outlines its primary concerns as being the disparity of access and quality of education between rural and urban areas, as well as teacher training. Another point of interest is the ministry’s management system that needs to be updated as well.

In fact, the NESP brings up institutional reform, in which different actors involved in education, such as non-government organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs) or school *shuras* (councils) will be more involved in the service delivery phase. In other words, responsibilities like maintenance of schools, management, textbook distribution will be delegated to local, non-governmental associations. This decentralization comes from the need to address the considerable, often under-used sub-national capacity. Even though contributions from these entities have been substantial over the years, official recognition from the government would increase their reach and efficiency. In addition, it would reinforce their accountability with regards to school attendance, code of conduct, etc.

An important aspect of the new Afghan school system is teacher training. Shortage of qualified teachers is a challenge that the MoE intends to tackle in its 2017 NESP. Only 43% of teachers nationwide meet the minimum qualifications to teach at any given level. Currently, the requirements and trainings necessary to earn those qualifications are under revision. For instance, high school graduates are encouraged to teach in their community schools, and training workshops are provided in order to acquire the necessary credentials. In addition, the MoE awards scholarships for female students who are willing to commit to a program of professional development as teachers after their graduation. Furthermore, they work with the Ministry of Women’s Affairs to provide them with housing or special security provisions in underserved regions. Out of the 35 provinces, only 5 of them have more than 40% of female teachers, including Balkh province which has 56% of female teachers currently active. However, half the

provinces have less than 20% of female teachers, which highly discourages parents from sending their girls to school (NESP 2017).

When looking at the work of the MoE, it is important to note that its initiatives are limited by the resources it receives from the government. Education represents only 14.1% of total government expenditure, or 3.7% of GDP. It is an overlooked issue because of the nation's other concerns such as security and economy. The MoE has to operate within this context and maximize its impact despite its insufficient budget. In order to make up for those shortcomings, the MoE has established annual operational plans, which are more precise and quantified accounts of what the ministry has been able to accomplish at the national and provincial level.

C. Early marriage prevention program

While the number of girls attending primary school has reached 46% during the 2008-2012 period, the secondary school attendance rate has only reached 21% over the same period (UNICEF, 2013). The discrepancy between primary and high school enrolment rates point to a high number of dropouts of girls once they reach adolescence. In fact, as of 2016, 33% of girls between 20 and 24 years old were married before the age of 18 (Girlsnotbrides.org, 2016). Early marriage is one of the major reasons why girls do not stay in school beyond the primary level. In order to ensure equal access to education for every Afghan girl, tackling early marriage is of primary concern.

The NESP recognizes the role of practices such as early marriage in the low enrolment rates of female students. It outlined two major initiatives to be taken in the future:

First, the MoE commits to better involve communities in their local education system. Communities are essential in the management and preservation of schools. They also play an influential role in convincing parents to let their daughters go to schools. School *shuras* (councils) are composed of local elders, parents and teachers. They communicate their schools' needs to the Ministry of Education and NGOs like Sahar, who provide them the resources necessary to strengthen them. The MoE recognizes their important role; their goal is to formally recognize the *shuras* and work more closely with them in order to reach rural populations.

Second, through their relationship with the *shuras*, the MoE intends to encourage community leaders who voice their support for education. By officially delegating responsibilities to local *shuras* and leaders, they help ensure that children, especially girls, will get a basic education. In Balkh province, there have been numerous examples of *shuras* inciting families to send their girls to school. Their level of involvement directly correlates with the school's enrolment rate and its attractiveness to potential students. Ommolbilad High School, in Maazar-e-Sharif, is now in high demand because of its strong relationship with the community. With the help of parents and teachers, they have been able to rebuild the entrance and plant trees in the yard. The *shura* was also to thank for coordinating the receipt of grants by the EQUIP. Indeed, they communicate their school's needs with national agencies such as the MoE or NGOs, which better ensure that communities get the help they really need.

The EQUIP (Education Quality Improvement Program) is the second largest program in the education sector. Its main objective is to provide equitable access to education, especially for girls. It allocates grants to schools for infrastructure building as well as teacher training, awareness and mobilization programs. The EQUIP has played an important role in assessing teacher training needs and proficiency levels in government schools. In fact, Afghanistan does not yet have a standardized testing system that would allow it to assess learning outcomes. Thus, EQUIP has been detrimental in the evaluation of the education system.

II. Balkh

A. Background of Balkh province

The northern province of Balkh is one of the most secure places in the country, which allows for cooperation between the government and numerous international organizations in large-scale projects such as education and agriculture rehabilitation. In recent years, more than 24 NGOs have been operating in the region, which is more than twice the number of active NGOs in the capital Kabul (Naval Postgraduate School, 2007-2008). As a result, the province has benefited from relatively high development. Balkh province's capital city, Mazar-i-Sharif, is the nation's fourth largest city.

Balkh province is home to a couple of longstanding higher learning institutions. Balkh university is the second largest university in the country. Its distinct position in Afghanistan is in part due to its past as a hub for Persian literature. In fact, its position on the Silk Road—an ancient trade route stretching from Europe to the Far East—has allowed it to participate in large intellectual and spiritual movements such as Buddhism and Persian poetry. The well established presence of education in the region makes it easier to successfully implement progressive programs such as early marriage prevention. Sahar works closely with the local community in order to ensure long-lasting support for girls' education and empowerment.

B. Education system in Balkh province

In fact, Balkh province has the fastest growing education system in the nation. As of 2016, the province has established 49 new primary schools, upgraded 36 secondary schools, and initiated 40 accelerated learning classes for children whose education has been interrupted for a long period of time. In addition, Balkh has made tremendous progress in ameliorating the management of its schools, namely through *shuras*. In 2016, 2,937 new *shura* members received official training in order to increase their efficiency (MoE). The results have been promising, as schools with effective *shuras* are more likely to have high enrolment rates and well-maintained buildings.

Indeed, even if the government builds new schools, they are likely to stop running after a few months if they do not have effective leadership. Reports such as the SIGAR have expressed concern over the poor state of a large number of schools visited by inspectors. Classrooms were worn out and presented some dangerous conditions for students such as exposed electric wires. In addition, among 19 schools visited, less than 40% of teachers were present on a normal school day. The same level of absenteeism was observed among the students as well. These problems imply that there needs to be a more permanent solution to the education system that can maintain

the schools and keep enrolment high. This is where school-community engagement comes in; in many districts, schools have been able to keep offering a standard quality of education to their students by relying on their local communities.

In fact, *Shuras* play an important role in rallying the community behind their efforts to provide a quality education for students. A shura is the school's management board. It is composed of local elders, teachers and parents, who meet regularly to discuss the problems facing the school and potential solutions. In Ommolbilad girls' High School, in Northern Balkh, parents helped renovate the school by graveling the yard and planting trees in the compound. "Every month we have council meetings and have solved many problems by sharing them with the community", said the school headmaster. The *shuras* play an important role in increasing female enrolment rates. Parents may be reluctant to send their girls to school for many reasons, such as prejudice or safety concerns, but shuras facilitate communication with families and work to tackle misconceptions about education. In Turabi girls' high school, members of the *shura* encourage parents to send their girls to school. "Now, we all go out in the community and to the mosques to tell everybody to bring their boys and girls here. If they don't, we encourage them until they do," says Hussein Ali, a member of the local *shura*. They now have around 2,000 students enrolled from grade 7 to 12. Because the *shuras* provide a platform for parents to discuss their concerns and express their needs to the government, more parents feel comfortable sending their girls to school. Involving the local communities in their children's education sets a strong precedent for the future generations of girls to go to school.

In addition, Balkh province has invested a tremendous amount of resources in extracurricular activities. In 2016, 366 schools have been equipped with sports facilities, and 355 school associations have been established or strengthened. These numbers are more than twice the national average, making Balkh a unique case in Afghanistan. Encouraging students to participate in activities outside the traditional classroom gives them skills they wouldn't be able to acquire otherwise. Similarly, Sahar's computer learning program empowers girls and helps them be more independent. In fact, it meets a high demand in high schools across Balkh province, in the northern part of Afghanistan. Sahar recognizes that Afghan girls need to be equipped with a strong set of skills in order to enter a competitive workforce where they are disadvantaged because of social stigma. The goal is to provide a model to be applied in all schools across Afghanistan by the Ministry of Education.

C. Looking to the future: Community engagement

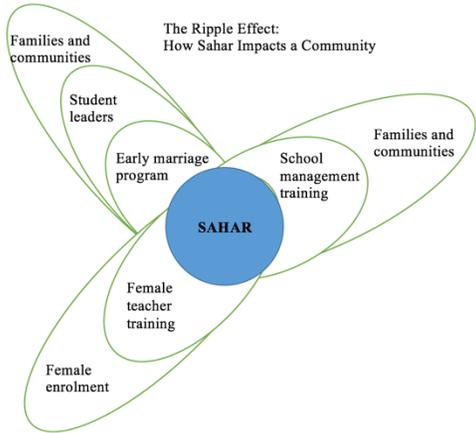
Implemented in 2016, Sahar's early marriage prevention program is a new approach to its commitment to ensure a safe learning environment for girls. Indeed, Sahar has recognized the importance of learning about and discussing social issues that affect girls' education. The program typically contains 12 weekly sessions, in which girls are invited to have different discussions around human rights, the Afghan constitution and international women's rights laws. The goal is to make sure girls know about their constitutional right to refuse to marry, and more importantly, it gives them the agency to think, work in groups and present their ideas to the class. The program encourages critical thinking and creativity, so that students are not only able to

stand up for themselves, but also lead smaller ‘study groups’ in which they mentor younger students and teach them what they learned in their program.

Because the program is still in its early phase, there is no evaluation process that has been put in place yet. The best way to know if the program is having a positive influence is to wait a few years and observe the dropout rate in the high schools in which it is implemented. Sahar is currently considering expanding the program to include the parents of the schoolgirls, especially the mothers. To do so, Sahar would need to cooperate with the school officials as well as various community leaders and the AAFF (Afghanistan-American Friendship Foundation). Involving parents in the early marriage prevention program would raise support for girls’ education among the community. It would also warn against the harmful effects of early pregnancy on both the mothers and the newborns. Lastly, it would also inform parents—especially male family members—about the positive relationship between years stayed in school and future wage earnings, because one of the main causes for early marriage is economic gain.

Community support is at the center of every successful social initiative. In instances where the government is not always able to provide basic services, community associations such as *shuras* or CSOs are better placed to solve problems in their community. When the government is open to cooperation with them, it strengthens the implementation of any initiative and guarantees permanent support among the community. Similarly, involving more parents in their children’s education helps establish the importance of sending their children to school. Expanding the early marriage program to parents—especially mothers can change the beliefs that lead to child marriage. The best way to eradicate harmful practices is by raising awareness among those who perpetuate it. Sahar has the potential of mobilizing the community against early marriage by including parents in their program.

Guaranteeing girls access to education is more than providing infrastructure and teachers. It requires a social change, which can be achieved through school and community engagement. A sustainable change comes from leaders within the community. Empowering young leaders is one of the pillars of Sahar’s work. In the case of Afghanistan, policy change is already achieved; girls are legally guaranteed the right to education since 2001. However, rural regions often lag behind in reforms. This is where capacity development comes in. It ensures that the change the government is igniting eventually becomes a widely accepted norm.



Sahar can help create sustainable change by recognizing and affirming young leaders. Through the early marriage prevention program, we are already equipping young girls with the tools they need to tackle harmful practices in their society. In fact, a number of girls interviewed by Sahar confirmed they were unaware of their rights before attending the training. Once they go through the program, they can spread the information to their peers and family, thus creating a ripple effect that can reach large proportion.

The figure above shows how Sahar impacts a community through multiple spheres of impact. In fact, whenever they train teachers, students or *shura* members, they in turn become advocates for girls' rights and educate their peers, families and communities. This occurrence, simple in appearance, is at the center of social change. Individuals are often introduced to new concepts through social networks. If each student or adult trained by Sahar has the tools to utilize their networks to advocate for change, the impacts will be far-reaching. Examples of this are already present in schools with strong *shuras*, such as Turabi and Ommolbilad High school. The impacts of the early marriage program are promising as well.

Capacity development is an important aspect of Sahar's work. Since its creation after 2001, it has provided technical support to schools in need of infrastructure. Over the years, new initiatives, such as the computer center, have emerged, aiming to improve the skills and knowledge of students and their teachers. The early marriage prevention program marks a new level of community outreach for Sahar. Recognizing that girls' education is affected by their traditionally ascribed roles is an important step towards social change. The program, by training young girls to mentor their peers, sets the ripple effect in motion. However, its effects might be limited by the social status girls hold. In fact, well-established leaders such as elders, members of the *shuras* have a bigger sphere of influence. In the future, Sahar can expand the early marriage prevention programs to adults as well, especially local leaders and parents, who play a significant role in their daughters' future. The government is achieving great strides towards equal access to education, but the gap between goal and achievement can only be closed with the help of a supportive community. Balkh province is an example of how community engagement can strengthen the education system. Sahar can take part in the process by helping young trailblazers potentiate their leadership abilities through specialized workshops and training.

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