

# Sahar

EDUCATION FOR AFGHAN GIRLS

سحر



A quality education for every child  
in Afghanistan, fostering mutual respect  
and sustained peace.

**2017 - 2018 Impact Report**



Our vision at Sahar started in 2001 with building bridges of understanding between the U.S. and Afghanistan for peace and cooperation. Now we build schools, computer centers, and manage teacher training in the northern province of Balkh, home to the notable city of Mazar-i-Sharif. We have worked in the midst of ongoing conflict for over a decade to increase the status of girls and women in Afghanistan through education,

enabling them to participate actively in the social, political, and economic arenas in their communities.

Afghanistan's largest sub-population is school-aged children. **41%** of the population is under fifteen. **63.5%** is under 25. That includes **10,407,640** girls and young women, of which over **2,500,000** are out of school. Only **38%** of the population is literate. Afghanistan's youth are very much both its present and its future. However, youth face significant barriers in accessing education. Girls in particular are disproportionately affected by these challenges. Some of the obstacles that adversely impact their ability to attain an education include poverty, early or forced marriages, insecurity, lack of female teachers, schools for girls, poor quality of education, and lack of family or community support.

Sahar works in response to these conditions. Where there is no school, we build one. Where there are no instructors, we train aspiring teachers so they can teach effectively. When people question the importance of educating a girl, we provide young women with important technological skills that give them a unique, competitive edge for both higher education and employment. Where girls face the threat of being married off at a young age, we step in with community leaders, mentors, and education about the constitutional rights that girls have regarding marriage.

We also partner with numerous organizations, from the Afghan Ministry of Education to the Afghanistan American Friendship Foundation, and other nonprofits on the ground



helping provide services. We also work with nonprofits and other groups across the United States for fundraising and educational opportunities. Since its inception, we have enabled over 200,000 girls to receive an education, with over 20,000 girls participating annually in our programming. We build schools, realizing that community support and engagement is absolutely crucial to every step of the process. We seek to locally source materials and hire only Afghan workers, and hand off school management and maintenance to the Afghan Ministry of Education, encouraging local leadership and sustainability.



We realize there are many gaps in education after Taliban rule. If someone wants to teach but lacks the skills, we help them learn. If someone wants the training but lacks transportation to it, we help get them there.

We provide girls with important technological skills that will not only improve their chances at better educational and work opportunities but will spill over to their families and friends, bringing entire communities up as we educate young women.

We break down barriers that hold girls back. When early marriage is likely and girls drop out, we bring in Afghan women, leaders in their communities, workplaces, and schools to teach girls about their constitutional rights to say no to early marriage, develop leadership skills, and help them

improve their confidence.

There is also important work in our own communities. We developed a fellowship for Afghan women in the U.S. to spend a year with Sahar and share their skills in supporting this work.

Working with these incredible girls and young women has shown us that with support and encouragement, there are no limits.

**Will you join us?**

“ I am 18 years old and in 11th grade. I am very interested in school. When I was in 7th grade, my uncle tried to marry me to his son, but I refused. We moved to Mazar. My father’s job was not good due to the Taliban. They came to the village again & my father was killed. After they left, I went to school. I want to be a doctor. I would serve my home, community and villages. I’m very happy to be back at school. ”

—VARZADH



## GREETINGS FROM SAHAR

**O**n behalf of the staff and our Board of Directors, I am excited to share with you our 2017 Impact Report. Since 2001, Sahar has been on the ground in northern Afghanistan, building and supporting schools, training teachers, teaching computer education, and preventing early marriage. None of this incredible work would be possible without the support of our many amazing donors and supporters, so from the bottom of my heart, thank you! *Tashakoor!* تشکرا!

In this report, we provide a view of the major programs that we oversee and support. We will share some of our achievements and also about some of our upcoming goals. I hope you will be inspired by our work—the same inspiration that guides us in everything we do. It is the hope we see in young girls as they go to school and realize the many amazing possibilities that their futures can hold. It is the excitement they exude when they gain new skills.

You may not know that ‘sahar’ means ‘dawn’ in Persian, both in Dari and Farsi. The work that we do, from the smallest of projects to building new schools, is motivated by the desire to see an entire country of Afghan girls who have access to education and opportunities. It has been a privilege to support the work that this incredible organization has done, and I am thrilled to see what the future holds. Thousands of young girls have gained access to educational opportunities that show them there is indeed a new dawn coming, opportunities for them to not only live but thrive.

Won't you join us for the sunrise?

Sincerely,

**GINNA BRELSFORD**  
**Executive Director**

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“ It is difficult for my family members to go to school and continue studying, but my family supports me—this means a lot to me. I love going to school and want to keep learning. It is essential for every person to make an effort and open their minds, not only for themselves, but for society. I have witnessed educational conditions in Afghanistan for young girls improve; more girls are passionate about pursuing their studies. Everyone must encourage their daughters to go to school. If their daughters go to school, they may become more enlightened, knowledgeable, and open-minded. In this way, they will not only bring themselves, but others around them & society out of darkness into the light. ”

—RABIYA H.



## INNOVATIVE BUILDINGS

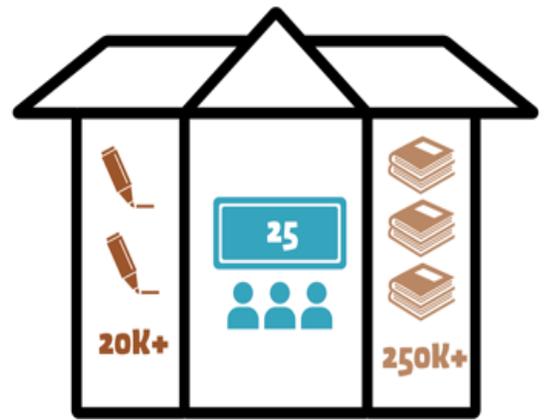
Under the Taliban, hundreds of schools for girls were forced to shut down, either due to coercion or attack. Rebuilding has been a slow process. Areas in Afghanistan with more Taliban support still face school closures, and even Balkh province is not free from threats and acts of violence.

It may be easy for us to take schools and spaces for granted, but as we learn in Afghanistan, dilapidated buildings can detract from student learning. From holes in the roof to not enough space for students, we've seen many difficult learning environments.

Sahar works to facilitate the design of school buildings that deliver dignity, improve health and well-being, and have the greatest positive impact on communities. Our teams include academics, architects, school leaders and local communities to leverage the construction process to maximize economic, educational, and environmental outcomes.

We've seen the importance of community support and involvement in every step of the process, and commit ourselves to this -- from purchasing supplies from local business owners to working explicitly with local laborers. If certain architectural plans involve skills beyond their current capacity, we don't bypass them -- we work *with* people, training them with even more skills. Not only do we build schools in the best way possible, we also try to leave people with more ability than what they started with.

We value the importance of our partnerships and local leadership. All schools Sahar helps, from building



-  Schools built, refurbished & supplied
-  Girls served annually
-  Girls served since 2001

from the ground up or delivering supplies, end up under the administration of the Afghan Ministry of Education.

“I'm excited to go to the new school with new chairs and a new, modern library & laboratory. I always wanted to have a beautiful class in school. I've seen students in films who went to modern schools with nice, clean classrooms. I hope our class will be like that.”

—TABEVA

## SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT: GAWHAR KHATOON

Sahar partnered with the Janet W. Ketcham Foundation, the University of Washington's Department of Architecture and Seattle-based architectural firm Miller Hull to design the newest school in Gawhar Khatoon. The school provides for kindergarten through grade 12 classes, and serves at least 3,000+ students per day. The school is positioned to become a key institution for educating several thousand women and girls in the important urban center of Mazar-i-Sharif, becoming a gateway to higher education. Gawhar Khatoon has been designed to serve as a major contributor in Afghanistan's push toward development, promoting stability, comfort, and community engagement. Additionally, nuances in design and architecture draw from the local cultures and values of the Muslim society.



The school provides local children with much-needed access to fresh air, plants, and trees. The school's outdoor activity spaces provide a culturally acceptable place for physical fitness. Additionally, seating and gathering areas have been designed to promote social interaction between students. Educational gardening has a long tradition in Afghan culture, and several areas on school grounds have been planted with fruit-bearing trees, or have been designated as vegetable and flower gardens to be tended to by the students. Water is a precious resource in the city, and all of the landscaping is irrigated by a system that recycles biologically treated wastewater.

Many children going to school in Afghanistan must do so in less than comfortable conditions. Schools are often connected to a limited or unstable power supply, and these institutions operate on almost no budget, often leaving insufficient funds for heating fuel. The design of Gawhar Khatoon provides a comfortable learning environment while also operating essentially off the grid. This particular model serves as an example not only for future Sahar schools but for other institutions in the community.

## PROJECT SPOTLIGHT: A BOARDING SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

**G**iven the success of Gawhar Khatoon school, we've partnered once more with the University of Washington's Department of Architecture, Miller Hull Partnerships' architects David Miller and Margaret Sprug, and Sahar's team in Afghanistan for another exciting project. With the generous support of the Janet W. Ketcham Foundation, we asked architecture students to design a school that will serve as a pillar of its community for years to come and educate and support thousands of Afghan girls.

“ At the time when I enrolled in school, our school didn't have any room, so it was a problem for us. Now it is a good place – we can learn at this school. I wish one day to graduate from this school and continue to the Teacher Training Center and become an official teacher for our school. Then I can help the students, be of service to my people, society, and country. ”

—YASAMIN

Our goal: a quality school to educate and inspire girls, equalizing opportunities for students from rural areas to learn, grow, and give back to their communities. Currently, Sultan Razia Girls' School is in poor condition, and unable to meet the demand of students. We envision an improved and expanded school, with boarding facilities for students commuting from rural areas, including



living and educational facilities include classrooms, labs, activity areas, common areas, administrative offices, meeting spaces, and healthcare facilities.

University of Washington architecture students were given information about the project, goals, and limitations, and put their skills and imaginations to work. The results were inspiring. Over ten incredible plans were presented, showcasing each person's talent and creativity. We selected

the design of Alison Acosta. We were impressed by her unique fusions of Afghan cultural norms into structures that seek to unite form with function. Her careful planning illustrated that the buildings' intended use and purpose synchronized with the design and appearance, fitting into the fabric of the community instead of interrupting it or standing out.

## TEACHER TRAINING

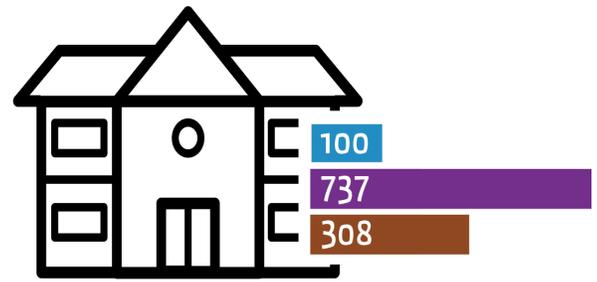
Some challenges that we encounter are linked to cultural attitudes on educating girls, but there are also many logistical difficulties. Having adequate schools is part of the problem, but another is having qualified instructors, particularly female teachers. Of the 412 districts in Afghanistan, 245 do not have a single woman qualified to teach. Students are typically separated by gender by secondary school, and it is uncommon for male teachers to teach female students, especially in rural areas. In Balkh province, nearly 80% of the schools are in rural communities.

Teacher training centers in Afghanistan are officially run by the Afghan Ministry of Education with a small handful in Balkh province. Sahar steps in to offset specific needs and costs, supplementing areas that may be lacking resources. We particularly support additional training in areas where there currently is none, especially computer courses, in-depth English studies, math, and science.



This holistic approach, as it makes them better teachers.

Whether by additional funding, assistance in managing the training centers themselves, or bringing in adjunct faculty to teach certain subjects, we seek to empower teachers with important skills and knowledge that enable them to make a difference in their own lives, and in the lives of their students. Their commitment is always a source of inspiration for us. When teacher centers are officially on a break, many people take this as an opportunity to spend additional time in the classrooms and



One teacher training center

### Teachers

-  Teachers enrolled
-  Graduates to date (2009 – 2016)
-  Participants in transportation benefits (2012 – 2016)

computer labs.

We also fund teacher transportation from their villages to urban training centers, breaking down the barrier of cost that travel can impose. Not only does this allow them to receive their certification, but they can then return to their villages to teach other aspiring teachers who may have more difficulty traveling. Training these teachers effectively sustains programs for girls' education in rural areas. Our more remote Afghan training center was so successful that it was later used by the Ministry of Education as a model for similar projects.

Hundreds of teachers have been trained thanks to Sahar's centers and support, with women comprising



more than 70% of these graduates. These new teachers are giving thousands of Afghan girls access to an education that they otherwise would not have. Additionally, trained teachers can make a living wage which strengthens and stabilizes their own families and communities.

Since training centers are administered by the Ministry of Education, it can be difficult for us to further track teacher improvement, where they are appointed to, and additional data on measuring their impacts. We focus on what we do know and can measure: how many teachers do we reach and how many graduate, how many are women, with families, from rural areas. It is with this knowledge that we see the incredible impacts that trained and inspired teachers will have.

**“ I am a girl who lives in Mazar-e-Sharif and am married to one of my relatives. Before my engagement, they came to our home and requested me but I had a problem. I was scared of being and living in another village, because of security and freedom. Now I have a baby girl, and my husband sometimes leaves the country to work and support the family. I graduated from the Teacher Training Center course. I teach English language and computer skills. I'm doing this to try to make all of my students happy, and trying my best to succeed in my job and help students be successful so they can serve our country and help it develop. ”**

**—ROYA**

## DIGITAL LITERACY

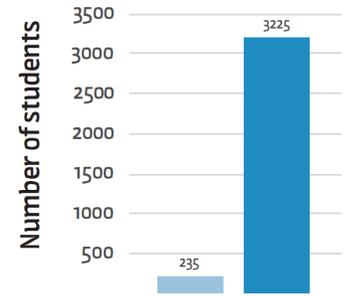
Like much of the country's infrastructures, Afghanistan's communication systems continue to be a work in progress. Estimates state that only 10% of the population has access to the internet, which was banned under the Taliban. As student enrollment continues to grow, so does the need for technological education. Countless studies have shown positive correlations between computer-based skills and educational achievement, and such skills extend far beyond the walls of a school.

Sahar operates computer centers in several of our schools in urban areas, serving hundreds of girls each year. Students are so enthusiastic about learning computer skills that it can be hard to match supply with demand. Some students practice typing on a makeshift cardboard keyboard until they can gain access to a computer. The Ministry of Education requested that Sahar and our implementing partners



operate computer centers on a year-round basis, and we offer four 12-week sessions throughout the year. There are currently 5 computer centers, 2 of which we currently manage. Every three years, we transition the management and maintenance of these centers over to the Ministry of Education. This continues to reinforce our working relationship with the government, as well as encouraging local leadership and

long-term sustainability. Computer center programs are available to 5th, 6th, 11th, and 12th grade girls at each school. The younger students are old enough to have learned to read at a basic level as well as to speak and write some English and to start thinking about the future. Their learning is geared towards learning the basics of operating computers, internet usage, Microsoft Word, and related knowledge. The 11th and 12th grade girls who participate in the program are in need of more advanced technical skills in order to continue



Number of active computer centers

### Students



Students currently enrolled



Graduates to date across all centers



on to higher education or to find jobs. Learning computer and Internet skills exposes these students to new ideas, cultures and ways of life. Whether or not these girls ever move far from their village or even home community, they will have learned valuable skills they can take with them wherever they go.

Students must apply to the computer literacy program through their school principal, and are chosen based on strict criteria including a high attendance rate and good English skills. Participants must also agree to tutor younger students in the use of computers. Over the course of the program, students receive 60 hours of instruction. At the end of the session, students complete a test to show their mastery of the knowledge and skills and receive a certificate of proficiency when they pass. We are proud to share that students have maintained an 80 percent graduation rate since the program's inception.

In addition to the amazing success of the computer centers, we have expanded them to include a six-month pilot coding project at one school for 20 outstanding graduates from the computer literacy program. Students learn basic computer coding concepts, designing a project and learning about employment opportunities for girls in technology. Not only will this challenge their learning and skills, it will provide them with exposure to additional professional opportunities.

**“ I am so happy that I participated in this class, because this program helped me very much with my school lessons. Before this class, I didn't even know how to turn on the computer. I am very satisfied with my teacher who helped me to learn about computer programs and become more comfortable using them. ”**

**—FARIMA**

## EARLY MARRIAGE PREVENTION PROGRAM

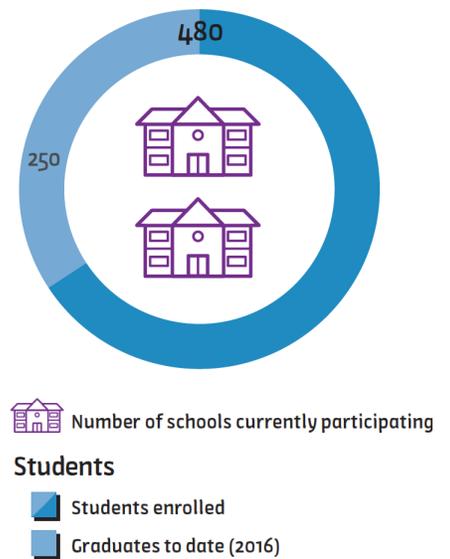
Sahar has been increasingly successful at educating girls in the K to 7th grade range, but we began seeing a dramatic dropout rate around ages 12 to 13 due to early marriage. In Afghanistan, the legal age for a girl to marry is 16, and on paper, it is not permissible at all before age 15. However, throughout Afghanistan, and especially in Balkh province, early marriage remains a common custom. Girls in various cultural groups can be married early for several reasons, such as being used to resolve conflict and bringing money to poverty-stricken families. Additional factors that influence the likelihood of early marriage include lack of or low education levels in the family. Within Afghanistan, this is a threat that faces almost 44% of rural girls, and 22% of urban girls. While this is unfortunately a global issue, United Nations sources state that of the annual figure of 7.3 million underage girls who marry early, 12% of that number—an incredible 876,000 girls—are Afghans.

The aim of Sahar’s early marriage prevention program is to keep these young girls in school until graduation from high school. We launched this program in 2015 in two schools. The program integrates



conversations about child marriage with educational and community leaders in addition to the girls who participate. We invite guest speakers, many of whom are successful women leaders from the community: doctors, teachers, and lawyers. Other activities include group discussions and projects, journaling, and reading. We also engage parents and community leaders, solidifying the long-term importance of educating girls

within their own cultural frameworks. Examples of topics covered in the program include discussing women’s rights as human rights, what Islam and the Qur’an say about early and forced marriage, what the constitution of Afghanistan says about early marriage, impacts on education, health, and





employment.

We explore partnership opportunities with local Afghan organizations to coordinate community engagement programs and use their existing relationships with the Ministry of Education, principals, teachers and parent associations at their schools. Girl leaders in schools are identified as candidates for self-esteem programs to encourage them to remain in school and to spread awareness of their legal

rights to not marry until age 16. Regarding impacts at home, the program aims to increase fathers' awareness of the long-term economic gain of having an educated daughter. For those girls who are able to continue through to graduation from high school, opportunities for employment and earning power increase. According to the UN Population Fund's studies, one extra year of secondary school increases a girl's future wages by up to 25%. If she receives 7+ years of education, she will likely marry four years later than she would otherwise and have 2.2 fewer children on average.

As the early marriage prevention program expands to include a third school, even more of Afghanistan's girls will have access to these kinds of opportunities, brightening the future of the entire country. Due to the strategic approach of not only focusing on directly impacting girls as well as working with their families and communities, we estimate indirect impacts to number in the thousands. Each girl will be able to not only discuss this within their families but can share with members of their extended family, friends, neighbors, and others in their communities. In the words of a male elder in an impacted community: "We are very happy that this office provides information for our girls related to their rights and launched such an effective program. We request that you continue this cooperation with our school."

**“ I cannot explain the impacts of this program in words; it was so effective! I think it was the first program for Afghan girls about their rights. Before this, there was no program talking about early marriage for girls. I can say that all participants learned many useful things from all 12 sessions. We learned how to fight against early marriage. Additionally, we talked about inappropriate & rude customs in society. My message to other girls who participated in the program is to retell and spread the lessons learned and issues discussed here to other girls! ”**

**—RAIHANA**

## SAHAR FELLOWS PROGRAM

Since we began our work, we have prioritized the roles of Afghan communities and people— from involvement in the creative process and actual construction of schools to their inputs and shaping of our programs and perspectives. In 2015 we began to do this in a new way by offering an annual year-long fellowship in our Seattle office. Afghan women nationals are strongly encouraged to apply, enabling us to continue to consistently maintain an appropriate cultural lens within our programming. This paid opportunity is highly competitive and includes research, writing, communication, and fundraising opportunities. We have had two fellows since 2015 with another prepared to join us in the fall of 2017.

These incredible young women have had incredible impacts, on Sahar as well as in our local communities in Seattle. They have the ability to speak about challenges on the ground in Afghanistan in ways that most of us cannot, by making these difficulties real and relatable. They share the amazing stories of progress and hope, things that they have seen with their own eyes, inspiring us further in the work that we do. Our first fellow has continued to support this endeavor by remaining active in our work, serving in an advisory capacity for this fellowship program. She regularly shares photos, videos, and updates on our programs and projects when she returns to Afghanistan.

We've also started new projects in Seattle thanks to the skills and stories of our Sahar fellows. Once our supporters learned about our fellowship program, they sought to be involved in new ways. Our fellows have had the opportunity to speak multiple times at local schools, sharing about Islam, their experiences in Afghanistan, as a Muslim in the United States, and more.

Additionally, in 2017 we began a series of community conversations, issue briefings on various topics. They are relevant to the work that we do, but also bring a broader or more focused lens. Previous briefings have included global development programs for women, and the role of Islamophobia in the context of American Muslim lives. These events have also served as a way to involve local women leaders in these areas, and have been exceptionally well received amongst our supporters and the wider community.

We are excited to continue this fellowship well into the future, to further strengthen the work that we do, and help share even more diverse perspectives.

(Due to security and personal preferences, we have chosen to not identify our fellows with photographs.)

## SUPPORTER ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

**S**ahar would not be where it is today without the support of so many: individuals, organizations, foundations and governments. Your help makes change possible!

Circle of Sisterhood  
Seattle Foundation

Seattle International Foundation  
Seattle Foundation Giving Together  
Washington Women's Foundation  
International Foundation

Virginia Wellington Cabot Foundation  
Girls Rights Project

Dining for Women  
Seattle Rotary

One Day's Wages  
Janet W. Ketcham Foundation

National Geographic  
Education Foundation

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation  
The Lacewing Foundation

Paul G. Allen Family Foundation  
Madison Community Foundation  
The Clarence Foundation  
Moccasin Lake Foundation

Hedberg Foundation  
Aspen Community Foundation  
American Friendship Foundation

Pledgeling Foundation  
Tableau Foundation  
Renaissance Charitable Foundation

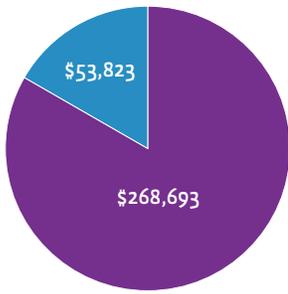
ExxonMobile Foundation  
NOVA

Womens Fellowship of Neighbor-  
hood Church of Palos Verdes  
Estates, CA  
Bethany Presbyterian Church  
Sacramento Region Community  
Foundation

*For brevity, we are listing non family  
foundations.*

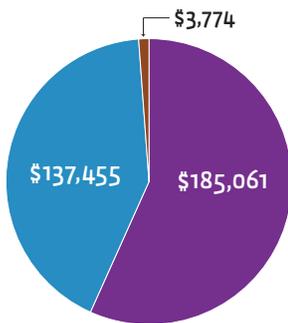


## FINANCIAL OVERVIEW



### Expenses

- Program Expenses
- Management and Fundraising Expenses



### Income

- Unrestricted Income
- Restricted Income
- Net Income

Sahar closely manages its financial relationship with its implementing partner in Afghanistan, the Afghanistan American Friendship Foundation (AAFF), a non-profit organization registered in Afghanistan. AAFF maintains its financials on-line with access given to Sahar so that all expenditures can be carefully monitored at all times. Expenditures are accounted for in detail for each project that is funded by Sahar. AAFF carefully sources all materials and program expenses so that the most efficient use of resources is realized.

In addition, each project is completed pursuant to a Memorandum of Understanding between Sahar and AAFF with a detailed project budget for each. This transparency results in high confidence that funds sent to Afghanistan are efficiently and properly used. Sahar also has weekly conversations with AAFF regarding project finances and impact.

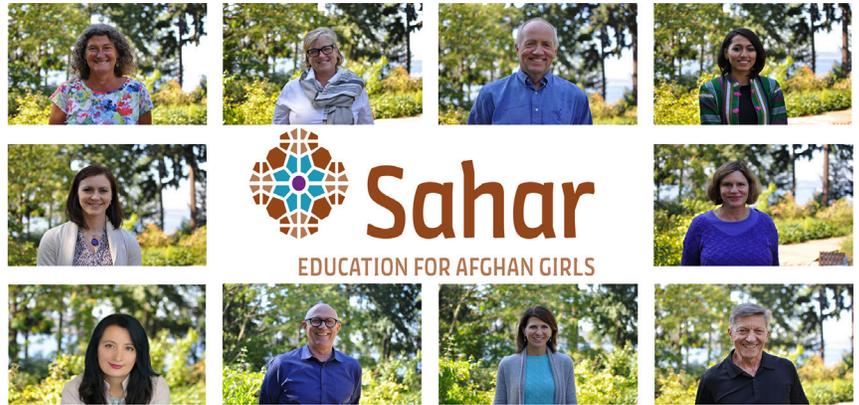


“Our school had problems; every term we faced hardship. We didn’t have chairs, books, or a proper classroom. We studied in small classrooms that had been destroyed with time and the war, impeding our ability to learn. When it rained, our classroom would fill with water. We couldn’t study & were forced to leave. We would frequently fall ill. We resumed our lessons when it was sunny. We constantly faced problems. Now we are so happy that Sahar has come to help! With chairs and abundant books, our ability to study has vastly improved. You have our inexhaustible thanks and kind wishes for your help.”

—SHEKERI

## OUR TEAM

Our work would not be possible without the incredible efforts of many amazing people, in both Afghanistan and the United States. Due to ongoing security issues, we choose to not name our team members on the ground in Afghanistan but recognize that the work they do makes Sahar possible. They have our unending gratitude for all that they do.



We wish to recognize our founders, without whose vision none of this would be possible: Julia Bolz, Michael Johnson, Angi Proctor, and Kathryn Lineha.

Pictured above is our Board of Directors: Catherine Gelband, Eliza Hurlbut, Dave Stapleton, Ellaha Sharifi, Kelsey Noonan, Dr. Suzanne Griffin, Dr. Shinkai Hakimi, David Miller, Anne Theisen, and Walt Adam. When asked why she supports Sahar, Catherine says, “Data shows educating girls is the most powerful tool for advancement. It is absolutely no question that girls want to learn and be in school. We create beautiful learning environments that honor their desire to learn.” Regarding the importance of the environment in which students learn, Dave Miller explains further: “People need to see the quality of schools Sahar is building, and how much these beautiful facilities do to change young girl’s lives in Afghanistan.”

In Seattle, Executive Director Ginna Brelsford has been overseeing Sahar’s programming for six years. With the support of Operations Manager Qxhna Titcomb, their efforts ensure Sahar’s programming runs smoothly both in Afghanistan and in Seattle.

Former Fellow Airoksh Faiz Qaisary serves as an advisor to our Fellows Program as she pursues a master's degree in international affairs. Malahat Mazaher served as a 2016 - 2017 Sahar Fellow, and is currently working as a business development manager in Kabul. Our incoming Fellow for 2017 - 2018 is Mahsheed Mahjor, who recently graduated with a double major in international and women's studies. University of Washington graduate student Nina Boe served as Senior International Research Intern for 2017, whose work included creating the 2017-2018 impact report, various videos & supporting the 2017 annual fundraiser, and other projects.



# Sahar

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