Afghanistan's youth are very much both its present and its future. However, youth face significant barriers in accessing education. Of these challenges, girls in particular are disproportionately affected, due to poverty, early or forced marriages, insecurity, lack of female teachers and schools for girls, poor quality of education, and lack of family or community support. Sahar works in response to this. 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.

In our own community in Seattle, Washington, 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.

Our Vision

Our vision at Sahar started in 2001 with building bridges of understanding between the U.S. and Afghanistan for peace and cooperation. Eighteen years later, we build schools, computer centers, and manage teacher trainings 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 nearly two decades 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.

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 break down barriers that hold girls back. When girls are likely to drop out due to early marriage, 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.

In our own community in Seattle, Washington, 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.

Afghanistan's largest sub-population is school-aged children.

Of the population is under fifteen. is under 25.

That includes girls and young women, of which are out of school.

Only 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. Of these challenges, girls in particular are disproportionately affected, due to poverty, early or forced marriages, insecurity, lack of female teachers and schools for girls, poor quality of education, and lack of family or community support. Sahar works in response to this. 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.
Letter from the Executive Director:

On behalf of the staff and our Board of Directors, I am excited to share with you our 2019-2020 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!

In this report, we provide a view of the major programs that we oversee and support. You will learn about 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 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 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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Innovative Buildings

Under the Taliban, hundreds of schools for girls were forced to shut down, either by 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. From holes in the roof to not enough space for students, we’ve seen many dilapidated buildings and difficult learning environments that detract from student’s learning.

Program Goals

Deliver dignity, improve health and well-being, and have the greatest positive impact in communities

Maximize economic, educational, and environmental outcomes for the girls and women we serve

To leave people and schools with more tools and resources than they started

Key Highlights

- Our construction and design teams includes architects, school leaders and local communities
- We engage in community support and involvement by purchasing supplies from local business owners, working explicitly with local laborers, and training those we hire to gain even more skills
- Upon completion of construction all of our schools are turned over to the Ministry of Education for ongoing operation
Given the success of the 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.

The new Boarding School is designed to provide a nurturing, safe, inspiring place for girls from rural areas to come together to learn and grow. The buildings use local materials and vernacular forms to connect culturally to the students while also being responsive to the neighborhood micro-climate. The buildings are organized around two main courtyards: A “learning” courtyard and a “living” courtyard. At the heart of the building, a large flexible dining and activity room links the learning and the living sides of the school. Classrooms, library, and computer labs ring the more formal learning courtyard. The classrooms are designed for optimum learning with natural daylight and ventilation from operable windows that also help cool the spaces in summer. Four dormitory “pods” that each house 64 girls are organized to create the living courtyard, providing access to fresh air, plants and trees. At the center of each dorm pod is an interior two story court that is day-lit from above. By breaking the building into a series of courtyards of differing scales and character, the design helps rural girls, who may not have ever been to the city, feel at home. Each dormitory space houses 8 girls, and also has desks for doing homework and group activities.

The use of local building materials; walls from a nearby brick manufacturer, wood lattice screens from local craftspeople, wood windows built in Mazar-e-Sharif and tiles from local ceramics industries are combined into building forms that are similar to what has been built for centuries in Afghanistan.

Education is also one of the most powerful levers available for addressing climate change. Women with more years of education have fewer and healthier children, and actively manage their reproductive health. This is the number one strategy for reducing global carbon emissions— in fact, the potential positive impact to our planet for educating girls in developing countries is 17 times greater than constructing net-zero energy buildings.

“The Sultan Razia Girls Boarding School is a new model for the country, and will be the first public boarding school in Afghanistan. It will offer the opportunity to educate 256 rural girls in a safe and welcoming, and sustainability designed, boarding school in the region’s most populous city.” Dave Miller

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.
In 2013 Sahar partnered with the University of Washington’s Department of Architecture and Seattle-based architectural firm Miller Hull to design the Gawhar Khatoon Girls School, winner of the 2018 American Institute of Architects (AIA) Honor Award. With support from the Janet W. Ketcham Foundation, the design of Gawhar Khatoon provides a comfortable learning environment while also operating essentially off the grid. This particular model serves as an example for future Sahar schools, and other institutions in the community. 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 operate on almost no budget, often leaving insufficient funds for things like heating fuel.

**School Goals:**
- Serves as a safe gateway to higher education for girls and women in the urban center of Mazar-i-Sharif
- Development, stability, comfort, and community engagement for the students, families, and communities surrounding the school

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**Design includes local cultures and values of Muslim society**

**Provides much-needed access to fresh air, plants, and trees**

**Fruit-bearing trees** are designated as vegetable and flower gardens and are tended by the students

**With Afghanistan’s water scarcity in mind, landscaping is irrigated by a system that recycles biologically treated wastewater**

**Outdoor activity spaces provide a culturally acceptable place for physical fitness**
Teacher Training Center

Though we encounter many challenges linked to cultural attitudes on educating girls, there are also many logistical difficulties, one of which is having qualified instructors, particularly female teachers. Students are typically separated by gender by secondary school, and it is uncommon for male teachers to teach female students, especially in rural areas, so female teachers are desperately needed. Teacher training centers in Afghanistan are officially run by the Afghan Ministry of Education, with a small handful in Balkh province.

Key Highlights:
- Supports additional training in areas where there currently is none, especially computer courses, in-depth English studies, math, and science, courses that go beyond the curriculum established by the Ministry of Education
- Provides additional funding, assistance in managing the training centers themselves, or bringing in adjunct faculty to teach certain subjects
- Offsets specific needs and costs, supplementing areas that may be lacking resources.

Of the 412 districts in Afghanistan, 245 do not have a single woman qualified to teach.

In Balkh province, nearly 80% of the schools are in rural communities.

Program Goals:
- Deepen teachers knowledge of curriculum that is not offered by the standard MoE program
- Seek to empower teachers with important skills and knowledge that enables them to make a difference in their own lives, and in the lives of their future students
Like much of the country’s infrastructures, Afghanistan’s communication systems continue to be a work in progress. 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. To meet the high demand of girls to learn computer skills, some students practice typing on a makeshift cardboard keyboard until they can gain access to a computer. As of 2018 all computer centers have been passed over to the Ministry of Education for operation.

37.7% of the population has access to the internet, which was banned under the Taliban.

Over the course of the program, students receive 60 hours of instruction

We are proud to share that students have maintained an 80% graduation rate since the programs inception.

Story from the Field:
It isn’t just students who are learning! In one school, an administrator made a point to sit in on a number of computer classes, gleaning information for his own edification. Eventually, he became a school principal, and made a point to incorporate his computer learning with administrative work. Administrators from other schools heard about how well he was doing and began asking him for help and instruction.

Program Goals:
• Reinforce our working relationship with the government, and encourage local leadership and long-term sustainability
• Teach girls valuable computer skills they can apply wherever they go, whether they leave their home villages or stay
• Expose students to new ideas, cultures and ways of life whether or not these girls ever move far from their village

Key Highlights:
• Based on a request from The Ministry of Education, computer centers are implemented on a year-round basis, offering four 12-week sessions throughout the year.
• The management and maintenance of these centers is transferred over to the Ministry of Education every three years
• Computer center programs are available to 5th, 6th, 11th and 12th grade girls at each school.
• 5th and 6th grades are old enough to have learned to read at a basic level, to speak and write some English, and to start thinking about the future, and instruction is geared toward learning the basics of operating computers, internet usage, Microsoft Word, and related knowledge
• 11th and 12th grade students are instructed in advanced technical skills needed to continue on to higher education
• 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 agree to tutor younger students in the use of computers.
• 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.
Starting in 2017, we expanded our computer centers to include coding courses at two schools for 40 outstanding graduates from the computer literacy program. Students learn basic computer coding concepts, design a project and learning about employment opportunities for girls in technology. Not only does this program continue to challenge their learning and skills, it provides them with exposure to additional professional opportunities.

**Program Goals:**
- Encourage employment opportunities for girls in technology
- Expand career opportunities for girls when they graduate high school

**Key Highlights:**
- Students design and create their own website
- Students are chosen for this program from a highly selective cohort of graduates of our computer center
- No other program, public or private, exists in the area for coding

**2 active coding programs**

- 40 students currently enrolled
- 37 graduates so far
Throughout Afghanistan and Balkh province, early marriage remains a common custom. Sahar has been increasingly successful at educating girls in the K to 7th grade range, but began seeing a dramatic dropout rate around ages 12 to 13 due to early marriage. Girls in various cultural groups are married early for several reasons, including conflict resolution and bringing money to poverty-stricken families, and lack of or low education levels in the family.

Program Goals:
- Keep girls in school until graduation from high school.
- Engage parents and community leaders, solidifying the long-term importance of educating girls within their own cultural frameworks.
- Increase fathers’ awareness of the long-term economic gain of having an educated daughter.
- Enable girls to not only discuss this within their families, but to share with members of their extended family, friends, neighbors, and others in their communities.

Key Highlights:
- The program began in 2015 in two schools, and has now expanded into eight schools.
- The program integrates conversations about child marriage with educational and community leaders— we invite guest speakers, many of whom are successful women leaders from the community, such as doctors, teachers, and lawyers.
- Activities include group discussions and projects, journaling, and reading.
- Topics include women’s rights as human rights, mental health and trauma, 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 partner 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.

Story from the field:
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.”

The legal age for a girl to marry is 16 and on paper, is not permissible at all before age 15

Within Afghanistan, this is a threat that faces almost

<table>
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<th>Rural Girls</th>
<th>Urban Girls</th>
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<td>44%</td>
<td>22%</td>
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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.

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.

Due to the strategic approach of not only focusing on directly impacting girls, but also working with their families and communities, we estimate indirect impacts to number in the thousands.

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Due to the strategic approach of not only focusing on directly impacting girls, but also working with their families and communities, we estimate indirect impacts to number in the thousands.
Building on the father’s session of our Early Marriage Prevention Program, we are piloting a year-long program that is more in depth than the EMPP sessions. Over the summer of 2019, we launched a workshop to encourage men to be active promoters in their communities for the rights of women and girls. Tools, resources, and effective techniques will be shared with the men, so that they can continue the work of challenging harmful gender stereotypes and engage other community members who are critical to changing attitudes about girls’ rights and opportunities.

While it is true that women and girls often have worse outcomes in terms of health, education and quality of life, than their male counterparts, both genders are equally affected by decades of war and conflict in Afghanistan. This has impacted the mental well-being and physical health of both men and women, and continues to put immense stress on households and their members. In order to move forward towards achieving better health and education outcomes, we must work together, allying with men and creating communities that recognize the value of both genders.

The eight areas covered over the four weeks are:

1. Fatherhood and Care giving
2. Human Rights
3. Gender Stereotypes
4. Conflict Resolution
5. Mental Health & Trauma
6. Physical Health
7. Leadership and Equality
8. Community Engagement

This program is aimed at accomplishing this goal by:

- Recognizing equality among both genders
- Promoting awareness on mental health and the implication of the notion of masculinity on wellbeing
- Encouraging peaceful and cooperative coexistence in communities by developing leadership
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. Since 2015, we have offered 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 five fellows since the inception of this program.

These incredible young women significantly impact Sahar’s programs and local communities in Seattle. Thanks to the skills and stories of our Sahar fellows, we have started new projects in Seattle and Afghanistan. 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. 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 fellows continue to support by remaining active in our work, serving in advisory capacities for new fellows each year.

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.

Financial Overview

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.
Sahar would not be where it is today without the support of so many: individuals, organizations, foundations and governments. From historical support that helped us establish our presence, including the generous contributions of Janet W. Ketcham Foundation, the Paul Allen Foundation and National Geographic, to innumerable individual donors, Sahar has thrived with your help! Our deepest thanks to all donors. For purposes of length, and in some cases privacy, we’ve listed only our institutional donors.

Thank you to everyone who has supported Sahar!
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 not to 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, & Kathryn Lineha. Our Board of Directors: Catherine Gelband, Eliza Hurlbut, David Miller, Anne Theisen, Merle Steiner, Nadia Hashimi, Margaret Sprug, Elizabeth Kronoff, Tracy Klinkroth, Shinkai Hakimi Joel Meyers, Colleen Farrell, Patti Meyers, and James Moore. 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 environments 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 eight years. With the support of Operations Manager Sophie Allen, their immeasurable efforts ensure Sahar’s programming runs smoothly, both in Afghanistan and in Seattle.

Sahar’s work would not be complete without the continuous and valuable contributions from our Afghan fellows: Airoksh Faiz Qaisary (2015-2016), Malahat Mazaher (2016-2017), Mahsheed Mahjor (2017-2018), and Shogofa Amini (2018-2019). Our incoming Fellow, Sapida Barmaki, began her work in August 2019. Tanya Fernandes, a recent graduate from University of Washington and intern during Summer 2019, contributed to the newest Sahar Program, Men as Partners in Change. And finally, thanks to Katie Cowin, a graphic design student at the University of Washington, who volunteered her time to create this report.