

Internet Education of Girls and Women in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The UNESCO Millennium Education Goal 4 states that it is important to "*ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.*" However, girls and young women in Afghanistan have not been able to get these rights. They have lost their dreams of an education. Secondary schooling is banned. They have lost their right to determine their future and their capacity to inspire their children. This article will show how we are using the internet to change this. We hope to inspire these girls and young women to attain an education. This article will show how we established 6 classes for girls in Jalalabad with local teachers who taught 365 students while we set up a website to allow these girls to learn and gain an education.

Keywords: Education, girls education policy, women, equality, implementation challenges.

Introduction

The Rotary Club of Carlton has conducted a number of projects in Afghanistan. Donated funds were used to establish two girls' schools near Jalalabad in Nangarhar Province in 2013. This was followed by a project to establish a Youth Website and the following year Workshops on Democracy in Jalalabad prior to the elections. In 2016 we funded a Workshop on Peace & Conflict Resolution. At that time, troops from the United States of America and forty-seven other countries were deployed into Afghanistan and were in control of the country for 20 years as part of the USA led "Global War on Terror" (Davidson, 2021).

With the withdrawal of these troops, Afghanistan was quickly overrun and controlled by *de facto* authorities after the fall of Kabul on the 15th August 2021. Following reports that girls were being deprived of a secondary education, it was suggested by a fellow Rotarian that we should explore the online education of Afghan girls and women. The authors successfully applied for funding from Rotary District 9800 and Rotary International and had access to A\$15,000 to establish home teaching in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. The authors were able to obtain the computers and other

teaching materials to set up six classes in Jalalabad. With the arrival of the first \$1,500 instalment of Rotary funding in Jalalabad on the 5th February 2023, three used laptop computers were immediately purchased for the three teachers we had trained to start the project. Initial student numbers were low, but grew steadily through February. When the second instalment of \$1,500 arrived, a further three laptop computers were purchased on the 30th March 2023 for another three teachers to commence classes on the 1st April 2023.

From the 1st April 2023 until mid-January 2024, we were employing six female teachers in Jalalabad City, Afghanistan, to teach classes to a total of 365 girls and women in their Pashto language using the Afghanistan Curriculum for subjects in most secondary years (with no Year 12 students). Four teachers taught from a home, while two teachers who did not have their own home taught in the larger spaces in the schools' in which they had taught. Students were recruited by word of mouth and the classes filled quickly. The demand was high. Some of the class material has been entered onto our website, together with material obtained on-line. Some project material was added by volunteers in Melbourne.

The photo below is taken of a class in a school facility in Jalalabad. Considerable care was taken to protect the identities of the teacher and her students. They were studying the material prepared about Ecosystems that our team in Melbourne had put together and sent to them on the internet. This teacher was reported to the Taliban soon after this class.

Figure 1

The group working together on the Ecosystems Project sent from Australia



The Ecosystems Project occurred as a result of the tremendous collaborative support of our Afghan Girls' and Women Education project which was up and running as a result of interaction between both the team from Melbourne and the team in Jalalabad. The Melbourne team had conducted regular bi-weekly Zoom meetings with teachers, starting from the first week of April.

As the six groups were all composite classes, the team in Melbourne constructed four interactive school projects that were developed with the teachers in Afghanistan. Topics from the Victorian Secondary School Curriculum in Australia, such as ecosystems, environmental disease control, healthy food and climate change were translated and conveyed in their local language through verbal presentations to groups who then worked together in pairs. This not only gave basic learning using new topics, but also gave the composite classes greater cohesion. In addition, the students were all taught Computer, English language plus other necessary prerequisite subjects such as Science.

Challenges in Afghanistan

Undertaking a project like this in Afghanistan with new governing authorities has been quite challenging at times. For the security of both teachers and staff as well as the co-ordinators and couriers, we have not been able to make any comments online and have needed to maintain internet silence. Names of individuals involved with this project have not been used in this paper. The photographs below were taken with care that no student could be identified.

In early April, one of our assistants reported that he was concerned that there was a new security person at the Bank Entrance who was randomly asking for identification. He was fearful for the safety of his family. We quickly sent more money to another institution to ensure that salaries could be paid. We also arranged for another member of our team to make himself available for one Saturday a month when he is home from Kabul to pick up future transfers.

While the two teachers using school facilities had enjoyed the larger space in their school, they were soon required to report to the authorities. The teachers took fright and immediately resigned for fear of reprisals. One left the country and gained a scholarship in Germany, while the other took a low profile before leaving for Germany sometime later. The subsequent feedback from a senior member of the Department of Education in Afghanistan was that they were accepting of girls and women being educated within homes only. We appointed two new teachers immediately. As we feared that reports on the internet could be the source of the information for the *de facto* authorities, we decided that any publicity with photographs should cease and that the internet material would not contain photographs or names for the security of our staff. There were no further reprisals. With approval for the other 4 teachers to continue to teach from their homes, we quickly found two replacement teachers. One taught a home-based Year 4 – 7 class in Kabul, while the other set up a home-based Years 7 – 11 school in the eastern part of Jalalabad. So, we were back in action. In mid-September, 2023 with 6 teachers teaching full-time, we were still supporting the education of 365 students. We continued to be concerned about reprisals against our other staff particularly as the two teachers who had left us had not reported as required. We were deeply troubled for them and closed down any further possible internet information that could be accessed, particularly publicity and information sharing with Rotary District 9800. This continued for the duration of the project.

The exchange rate of our monthly transfers was dropping to a level that we could not sustain. From the transfer of funds in June 2023, the transfer needed to be reduced to an average of \$1,250.00 per month. The exchange rate between the stable Australian dollar and the strengthening Afghan currency had fallen from 1 AUD = 60.68 AFN to 1 AUD = 45.00 AFN by the end of the project in December 2023. As we had purchased our electronic equipment, we could reduce our expenditure to \$1,250 per month on average. We were only just able to continue to make our regular payments to our six teachers. We certainly could not fund the development of a commercial website for the project. Fortunately, we found a group of schoolgirls in Melbourne, Australia who volunteered to put together a basic website.

Website Delays

While we had planned to have videos made of our classes, it quickly became obvious that we could not do it ourselves and began to look for help from a commercial company. One company agreed to help. However, by the August meeting of the Rotary Club of Carlton Board, when we needed to report negotiations with that company had

unfortunately stalled, as that company now expected monthly-payments that we could not afford within the project budget.

We expanded the Sub-Committee to enable us to find a solution and met on-line on the 7th September to discuss where further funding could be found to establish a website. The sub-committee made a number of suggestions. One of our attendees left that meeting and conceived a plan to set up a Project Website at school. Her information technology class teacher at school had invited her class to submit ideas for a class project to set up a website. The teacher approved the development of a website for our project to educate girls and women in Afghanistan in the Pashto language. It is now on-line and continuing to expand. Please see our website at www.education4peace.com. They had also found a similar website created in London, U.K. that was posting videos of classes for the Afghan education system. They gained the permission of the owner, another Afghanistan refugee, to copy what they needed from his website. That is a remarkable collaboration. The uploading of videos onto our website has now slowed down as the owner of the U.K. site is financially limited in the short term. We expect to see a further upsurge of video material in the next 6 months.

In December, with only one month to go for our project, the authorities searched the home of a senior ground support member, an event that required that resulted in us withdrawing from further activity in Afghanistan immediately for the safety of the staff. Meanwhile, the students we have taught this year will be able to continue their self-education via our website. The Rotary Project funds finished at the end of January 2024. But we have succeeded in completing this project despite the challenges.

The Melbourne Team

From the first week of April, a team of dedicated Australian and Afghan volunteers in Melbourne met on a regular basis to support the three English-speaking female Afghan teachers with content materials and teaching methodology to share with the other teachers. In May this team started training three of our female teachers on the use of online portals and websites. The team conducted regular bi-weekly Zoom meetings with teachers.

The total of 365 girls and women that have been taught in the classes by female Afghan teachers have gained a welcome return to learning through the past year. During this time, we attempted to find a way to prepare a low-cost website for this project. The aim was to allow our students to continue their education with access to a computer or to join a small group that has access to a computer. Eventually, we were offered a no-cost way to have a website constructed by three student volunteers in their IT class at their school in Melbourne, Australia. As the website develops, our students will be able to educate themselves as far as they want to go in their own homes. We hope they may then get scholarships to continue their studies elsewhere.

Clearly, we are appreciative of the people in Afghanistan who have willingly done the hard work as teachers and facilitators who paid the teachers and purchased the items our staff needed with money collected from banks or money exchange centres each month. We also valued the enthusiasm of our volunteers here in Melbourne. We are also grateful to the businessman in Afghanistan who gave 10,000 AFN (just over A\$200). We thank him for his support of the project.

Discussion

Education of the girls and women of Afghanistan will not only raise their expectations for their own future, but give their children the desire to receive an education. Hopefully, an enlightened approach to the education of women can be restored in Afghanistan very soon. We seek to educate for peace and equality for women via the internet.

The long-term effects of restricting girls' education in schools are yet to be seen. Without education, girls will be forced into the traditional role of women as carers, child-bearers and cooks. It will be difficult for them to achieve equality with men in the home and in society. In time, without education they will be excluded from training to be teachers, nurses, doctors and other members of the work-force as they once were. Many families are already marrying off their teenage daughters (Ahmadi, 2024).

This will be accelerated by the contraction of the economy. Since the takeover by the *de facto* authorities in 2021, the Afghan economy has contracted by 27 per cent, leading to economic stagnation, with unemployment doubled and only 40 per cent of the population with access to electricity according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA, 2023). The World Bank also stated that "the economy contracted by 20.7 percent in 2021, followed by a further contraction of 6.2 percent in 2022 (World Bank, 2024). Considering a population growth rate around 2 percent, per capita income is estimated to have fallen by a staggering 30 percent between 2020 and 2022." According to the Afghan government's estimates, 42 percent of the total population of Afghanistan lives below the poverty line. Also, 20 percent of people living just above the poverty line are highly vulnerable to falling into poverty. The average salary in Afghanistan is reported to be around 30,000 Afghanis per month (Time Camp, 2004). In Afghanistan, 54.5% of the population lived below the national poverty line in 2016. In Afghanistan, the proportion of the employed population below \$2.15 purchasing power parity a day in 2023 was 34.9%. For every 1,000 babies born in Afghanistan in 2022, 58 die before their 5th birthday (Time Camp, 2024).

The BBC has reported in March 2024 that teenage girls are despairing as the school ban continues. They feel 'mentally dead'. They also reported that the Taliban still had Islamic issues to resolve before girls and women could attend schools. The girls they interviewed still hope to return to school, but they felt that 'we don't live, we are just alive', and while 'we are physically alive, we are mentally dead'. They felt themselves 'in a real dungeon' and are 'treated as nothing'. When families are struggling to get enough to eat - as many in Afghanistan are - accessing online education is simply not seen "as a priority for their daughters", notes Amnesty International's regional campaigner (Farzan & Drury, 2024).

Since September 2021, more than 2.5 million girls and young women lost access to formal education in schools. From December 2022, more than 100,000 female students were unable to attend their tertiary institutions (UNESCO, 2023). Even though the authorities said that they did not oppose female education, and that older females could return to school, once they had created a "safe environment for girls" (Jackson, 2022). This was well received by the international community. The United States of America announced that it would pay the salaries of all teachers in Afghanistan if the Taliban re-opened all girls' schools (West, 2022). While they had perceived that the Taliban may have needed financial help, their offer was ignored. Education for girls stops after primary school.

While the Afghan currency has continued to strengthen internationally, funds for food, health and education are low and the people are battling to survive. Six million people are currently facing starvation. Funds being channelled through United Nations agencies and Non-Government Organisations are largely responsible for the survival of the people of Afghanistan. Over 70% of Afghans still live in rural areas where traditional and conservative ways of life remain. The controlling authorities represent these values (Farr, 2022). In 2021, only 37% of Afghan women could read and write, compared to 66% of boys (Farr, 2022, West, 2021).

Future Plans

While this work was designed to be self-sustaining, the Website has still to be completed and made fully available to all girls and women throughout Afghanistan who aspire to proceed to tertiary education either in Afghanistan or on scholarships to overseas institutions. We want to provide these women with easy access to computers in private schools and centres strategically located throughout Afghanistan, with consideration of internet availability and power supply. We are investigating how this could be achieved and hope that a source of further funds will be found. When we have more users of the website, we will include a feedback site to allow us to assess the effectiveness of our website.

Conclusions

This project shows that our website can provide an on-line education for girls and women throughout Afghanistan. We have also effectively used the internet to communicate with Afghanistan teachers from Australia and introduced new learning material for group student discussion in Afghanistan. The website is well established as a source of video classes, and we will continue to be committed to restoring the dreams of Afghan girls and women. In a small way, we have tried to meet the UNESCO Millennium Education Goal 4 on Sustainable development with our commitment to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

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