



IMPACT STORY



IN AFGHANISTAN WOMEN AND GIRLS STRIVE TO GET AN EDUCATION

Photos © UN Photo/Shehzad Noorani.

“Educating women and girls and women’s empowerment in our community is my dream,” says Beheshta, a 20-year-old Afghan girl who recently completed classes offered by the UN Women-supported Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) Centre in Parwan Province, northeastern Afghanistan.

Education is often not an option for many women and girls in Afghanistan. According to Government figures, only 26 per cent of Afghanistan’s population is literate, and among women the rate is only 12 per cent. Among school age children, 38 per cent (4.2 million in real numbers) do not have access to schools, most of which are girls.

Attacks by insurgents who oppose women’s education lead to regular closures of girls’ schools. Moreover, 50 per cent of schools do not have buildings and other necessities, and a dearth of textbooks, teaching materials and equipped laboratories, along with the large number of school closures or relocations directly affects the quality of education.

After graduating from high school, Beheshta wanted to pursue a higher education in a government university, but she did not pass the *kankor*, or entrance exam.

Every year, more than 100,000 secondary school graduates write the *kankor*, but due to insufficient spaces and limited capacity, only about half of those students find a spot at the government universities and colleges. Those who fail either

go to private institutions, which are very expensive and out of reach for most Afghan families, or try to pass the entrance exam again.

Beheshta’s parents were not able to pay for her education in a private institute, so, when she had the opportunity to join the English language class at the ICT Centre, she saw it as a second chance.

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Opened in 2011, the key objective of the UN Women-sponsored Women’s ICT Centre in Parwan is to enable women’s economic participation through training in the English language and computer skills. The Centre also provides job placement support for graduates in private schools, with NGOs, municipalities or the Provincial Department of Women’s Affairs.

Beheshta successfully completed the course, along with about 80 other girls, and is currently teaching English to new students and members of her own community, in the same ICT Centre where she studied.

“It seemed to me like a fairy tale that I would get a job and earn money for my family while supporting women and girls as a whole,” she says proudly.

While Beheshta’s story and the barriers in accessing primary and higher education is a familiar one in Afghanistan, some progress is evident. The country became Party to the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), also known as the Women’s Bill of Rights, on 5 March 2003 and Afghanistan submitted its first-ever periodic report to the CEDAW Committee on 10 July 2013.

The Afghan Government was supported by UN Women in the process of drafting the report.

According to that first periodic report, the percentage of women in universities is increasing year-by-year – reaching 20 per cent of the university population in 2006, and 24.8 per cent by 2009.

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- *Beheshta*, 20-year-old ICT Center graduate Afghan woman

The report states that the last eight years have also seen a “tremendous increase in the overall number of educational institutions in the country and women have benefited substantially.” It specifically mentions English language courses, computer classes, and preparation classes for university entrance exams provided by private educational institutions.

The report highlights progress and challenges in several areas, including the lack of security and violence against women as the single most important challenge to the country’s implementation of CEDAW. On the issue of education, the report underlines that much work is still needed. It mentions various strategies for education, especially for women, and says the establishment, promotion and construction of buildings for girls’ schools are at the top of the priority list for the Ministry of Education. To increase the number of female students in professional and technical education schools, the Ministry also plans to run public awareness programmes in media.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

UN Women Afghanistan website:

<http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/countries/afghanistan>

Afghan Women Network:

<http://www.afghanwomennetwork.af>

Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW):

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw>

Combined initial and second periodic reports of Afghanistan to the CEDAW Committee

http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=CEDAW/C/AFG/1-2&Lang=E

Accompanying the Government’s report is the Civil Society Shadow Report, by the Afghan Women’s Network, which was submitted to the CEDAW Committee in April 2013. UN Women also provided support for that report, which among other recommendations urges the Government to develop programmes that will help girls prepare for university entrance exams and overcome key barriers and challenges that women encounter when trying to find work, such as traditional beliefs about women’s roles as mothers rather than breadwinners.

Meanwhile, speaking about the long journey towards women and girl’s education, Beheshta says: “I am aware that it takes a long time but I’m hopeful to see this happen and be part of this valued process.”