Investing in Women’s Education in Afghanistan

A Conversation with Yale World Fellows
Aziz Royesh and Orzala Ashraf Nemat

YJIA: You have both worked to advance the rights of women in Afghanistan, particularly with respect to their access to education. Why is education a priority to you vis-à-vis other issues such as health care and security?

Orzala Ashraf Nemat: I started working on education during a time when it was entirely forbidden by the ruling power, the Taliban, for girls to get an education. My motivation was based on this strong restriction against girls’ education on the one side and the contradiction that I found on the other side when I tried to look into the religious principles. I did not find justification for it. I tried to look into our historical background and again, I could not find any justification for it. That is what motivated me to start in a very basic way to teach girls my age in the refugee camps back when I was myself a refugee. This led to a larger initiative of creating home-based literacy classes inside of Afghanistan for girls. My main reason for focusing on education is because education is a real means to empowerment. It is education that empowers children — girls and boys. I believe it is not only the education of girls that is important. Education is important for girls and boys. It provides children with self-confidence and the ability to see things in a different way, away from violence, away from war and all the difficulties they have experienced.

Aziz Royesh and Orzala Ashraf Nemat worked close to each other in Pakistan and Afghanistan for many years as leading civil rights activists focused on education, but they did not cross paths until they became Yale World Fellows. A leading advocate for equal access to primary and secondary education in Afghanistan, Mr. Royesh founded a school for Afghan refugees in Pakistan in 1994. With a focus on critical thinking and human rights, the school eventually moved to Afghanistan where it now teaches 2,500 Afghan students, about half of whom are girls.

Orzala Ashraf Nemat became a Yale World Fellow in 2008. She founded the Youth & Women’s Leadership Centre in 2010 and was previously the founder and chair of Humanitarian Assistance to the Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA). Ms. Ashraf Nemat has established training programs for Afghan women and children in refugee communities in Pakistan and Afghanistan and launched underground literacy and health education programs for women and girls. She is also increasingly involved in political advocacy and development at the national level and is on the board of directors of the Afghan Women’s Network.
Aziz Royesh: I believe that education is an important investment for the community. We have to build on the community’s resources and use education to help people deal with the difficulties and problems they have in their ordinary lives. But I do not believe that education alone can make things better. There is the perception that people in Afghanistan—and in most Islamic countries—have difficulties with modernity, civil rights, and civil norms because they are uneducated. I do not think this perception is true because in Iran, for example, 99 percent of Iranians are educated, yet the world still has problems with President Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Khamenei. Education alone is not the solution. The important point is the vision behind education. That is how we started our educational program in Pakistan, which we brought back to Afghanistan. We concentrated mainly on a humanistic vision behind our educational programs. We tried to deliver the message to the community that if all individuals are regarded as human beings, there is no difference between boys and girls. If you want to have a better life, access to facilities and to welfare, you have to empower women before men because women impact the intellectual potential and vision of children the most. This is why we focused on equal access to education for both boys and girls.

YJIA: Do you believe that women’s rights have improved since the Taliban was in power? Can you discuss what has changed for women?

OAN: First of all, when issues of human rights and women’s rights are discussed in Afghanistan by the media and international community, a picture is drawn depicting Afghanistan at an absolute zero level of opportunity before the military intervention and the fall of the Taliban in 2001, after which women were suddenly liberated and educated. I would like to counter and challenge that picture with the fact that historically in Afghanistan, the issue of human rights—and specifically women’s rights, their rights in the political field, their social rights in terms of their marriage age, and their access to education—have been under discussion since the early 20th century. Back in 1919, we had a very progressive king, Amanullah Khan, who started to promote equal access to education. This continued for the years he was ruling after Afghanistan’s independence. This is a legacy that we cannot ignore. Then, during wartime, starting with the Soviets and continuing with the Mujahadeen during the civil war, the infrastructure of Afghanistan was completely destroyed. By the time the Taliban arrived, the very basic infrastructure left was used as Taliban headquarters instead of remaining as institutions of education.

After 2001, there was definitely a need to focus on girls’ education and human rights because we had just come out of a war where war crimes had been committed, human rights had been violated, and basic rights for women had been denied entirely. So compared to the time of the war, especially from 1978 until 1992 and then from 1996 when the Taliban came to power until 2001, we have made significant progress in the field of women’s rights and girls’ education. Now by “significant,” I don’t want to dramatize progress. With the help of the international community, we have managed to build more schools for girls and improve their access to education. In the remote villages, however, the quality of education has not changed. More schools have been built, but because the approaches taken by international organizations have resulted
in a lack of community ownership, many of the schools have been burned down by the Taliban, insurgents, and anti-government forces.

YJIA: You mentioned that you believe the approach to community development by international organizations fails because it does not emphasize local ownership enough. Can you elaborate more on these approaches?

OAN: What I am very critical of is the militarization of development assistance. To me, building a school in a village is development assistance that should be implemented either by the government of Afghanistan through its institutional mechanisms such as the Ministry of Education, or by an Afghan NGO. NGOs have played a very significant role in filling the gap left by the absence of a proper government during the war. Now suddenly you see schools being built by the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), the civil side of the military. To “win the hearts and minds” of people, these military forces have decided to build schools. It is very unclear, however, whether the suggestion to build these schools came from the community, whether the community itself agreed to the project, or if the communities were consulted during the process and were given a role to play in terms of monitoring, constructing, and building the schools. Schools have indeed been built thanks to money from the United States or elsewhere, but the members of the community do not feel ownership over these schools built by kharegies, or foreigners. As a result, they think that the foreigners are the ones who should protect them.

On the other hand, for an NGO the process of building a school is totally different. First of all, we have a very clear account of where the money is coming from and who the donor is. We do not even think about the donor until we have the consensus of the local community. We go to the community and ask them to come up with a list of three things we have to do for them and their community. For example, they might decide on a clinic, a bridge, and a school. Then we negotiate. Clinics are excellent, but we are not an organization of health professionals. Bridges are excellent, but let’s encourage another organization with more engineering experience. So collectively, a decision is made by the community to build a school. Then the community monitors the whole process and contributes in some way, such as by paying for construction. This is the model I have in mind when I criticize the military model. Based on the model of local ownership, the school my NGO helped build has existed for six years or so. Thus far, there has been no record of insecurity. The school is directly protected by the local people. They have taken measures to protect the school because they had contributed the bricks to the building, and they can see their children benefiting. They do not see it as an outsiders’ school. This is one of the key factors, that of ownership.

AR: Orzala has a lot of experience in the field of education and working with communities to launch community-based development programs. In terms of women’s rights in Afghanistan, we have not had constant growth throughout our history. There have been many interruptions. At the beginning of the century, the king, Amanullah Khan’s efforts were interrupted by the clergy. Then, we had attempts at development by Zahir Shah, which was interrupted by the Daoud Khan coup in 1973, who himself
tried to pursue development but was interrupted by the communists. Then, of course followed the Mujahideen and the Taliban. We can, however, find one difference from the past. Throughout the history of Afghanistan, we did not have the democratic basis or concept of women’s rights or human rights. This is the first time that people are directly talking about democracy and human rights.

I am optimistic about the results and achievements we have made over the last nine years. The obstacles we currently have are not products of this age but are remnants of the past. They have been there for centuries. I am quite optimistic when I compare today’s civil society and the situation of women in Afghanistan to the past. I feel that both are much stronger and more institutionalized than before.

As for development projects, I believe we have to create an atmosphere where people can contribute and fulfill their responsibility of creating, supervising, and protecting the projects. We cannot rely solely on military support or the international community.

YJIA: There has been discussion of striking a peace deal with the Taliban. How would this deal affect women’s rights?

OAN: First of all, we at the civil society level have been saying from the beginning that there is no military solution. By saying this, we do not necessarily mean that development assistance should not have come to Afghanistan or that the Taliban regime should not have been toppled in 2001. But we are seeing the consequences of the military intervention which have led us into the tenth year of conflict where insecurity is still rife. The majority of the population, especially in the southern and eastern parts, lives in extreme insecurity. People do not feel secure because of the presence of the Taliban insurgents and other anti-government groups who are targets of military bombardments. The Afghan people are hostages to both sides of the conflict—the international forces and the local forces.

Women active in the field of political advocacy and human rights strongly believe that the status of women’s rights and the freedom of media and speech are critical values of justice that should not be compromised at any price. Peace without these values is an artificial peace. It is a peace we are renting, not buying. So before any peace negotiations or deal can be reached, it is very critical for both sides to consider these values. Justice is the key because it is not based on values from outside of Afghanistan. It is based on our constitution and position as a nation.

An extension of this interview addressing issues of corruption, culture, and reconstruction can be read online at: www.yalejournal.org, along with an Op-Ed piece by Aziz Royesh titled, “Women in Afghanistan.”

— Interview conducted by Hanna Azemati.