

# Project Highlights



AGA KHAN FOUNDATION  
CANADA

An Agency of the Aga Khan Development Network

This report summarizes the progress, findings and impact of a project supported by Aga Khan Foundation Canada.

## Educating Girls in Afghanistan: Widening Access Through Whole School Improvement



Grade 1 students in Badakhshan province, eagerly raise their hands to answer their teacher's question.

Afghan girls face many barriers to educational achievement—ill-equipped schools, rigid gender roles, and a lack of trained teachers. Using a collaborative “whole school improvement approach”, the Girls Education Support Program has increased enrolments and kept girls in school by improving the quality of schools and teaching, while building parent, community, and government support.

There are bright spots along the rocky path of Afghanistan's development. In 2003, only one in four Afghan children was enrolled in school. By 2011, this figure had doubled, to 54 percent. And while only one in ten Afghan women can read or write, half of their daughters now get at least some primary education. Despite these gains, too few girls attend school, and there are formidable challenges to keeping them there. Afghanistan has one of the world's lowest school attendance rates. Forty-two percent of girls never complete primary education.

Schooling for girls is vital to the future of Afghanistan, which ranks near the bottom of the Human Development Index. Investments in education have been shown to improve development outcomes, while raising women's income and self-esteem. Increasing girls' enrolment lies at the heart of the country's Millennium Development Goals. But enrolment alone is not enough: girls need to reach secondary level and beyond—and enjoy quality education—if women are to fully contribute to Afghanistan's potential.

**“When I first came to the college, my community said mean things to my father. But now the girls and young mothers wish they had this opportunity. The community elders have a different form of respect for me.”**

Surilaya, 22, attends a GESP-supported teacher training college in Bamyan.

## Going Beyond The Classroom

Since 2008, Aga Khan Foundation Afghanistan, with funding from Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development and Aga Khan Foundation Canada, has led a holistic, five-year effort to improve education for girls and women in 24 target districts in four northeastern provinces: Badakhshan, Baghlan, Bamyan and Parwan. The Girls Education Support Program (GESP) set out to: increase girls' access and sustain their progress into higher levels of schooling; create a supportive environment for girls through better teaching and learning practices; and enhance the capacity and commitment of stakeholders to further girls' education.

This approach reaches beyond the classroom to sustain girls' education for the long term. It supports not only school-aged girls, but preschoolers, mothers, teachers, school administrators, community leaders, and government officials who make decisions that shape girls' learning opportunities.

### GESP SUPPORTS:

- A better learning environment in 216 schools, including six "model" schools
- Training and mentoring for some 10,000 educators
- A flexible response fund for transport, teacher upgrading, exam preparation, school improvements, and community gatherings
- Early childhood development for 2,000 preschoolers in 75 centres
- Mothers' literacy groups for over 6,000 women

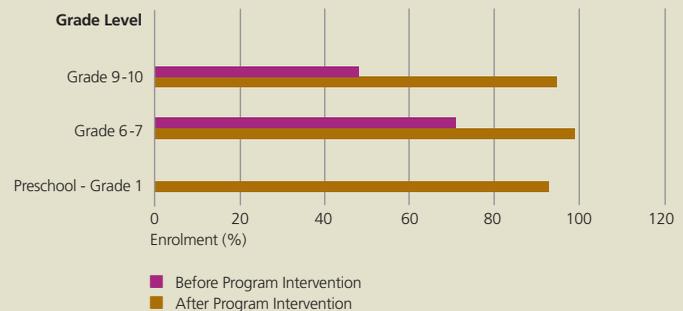
The program builds on Aga Khan Foundation's long experience in supporting education in some of the world's poorest regions. Education anchors the Foundation's efforts to promote positive social change, improving the wellbeing of individuals, communities and their nations. The "whole school improvement approach" is a product of sustained learning about what is effective in the classroom. It looks at all contributing factors, and how to motivate parents, policymakers, and other key stakeholders to support girls' education.

The Foundation's work in Afghanistan is carried out in cooperation with national-, provincial- and district-level education authorities, and aligns with Ministry of Education curriculum requirements.

## Increasing Girls' Access To Schooling

Many factors conspire to deny Afghan girls access to a good education. These range from the sheer distance some must walk to school, to domestic pressures, to traditional beliefs that exclude girls and women from public spaces. In deciding whether to send their daughters to school, parents want to know they will be safe, in a context where kidnapping and attacks are a real threat. A shortage of qualified female teachers perpetuates itself, dampening girls' enrolment and their chances of ever becoming teachers.

Progression rate of girls entering and continuing in the education system



Using an integrated approach, the program addresses constraints identified by government, community and school stakeholders, and by girls themselves. To increase children's school "readiness" and family support for education, 75 early childhood development centres were established. Over 600 school improvements have been carried out to date, such as ensuring separate latrines for boys and girls; safe drinking water; and boundary walls to protect schoolyards. Salary incentives and transportation are attracting teachers to remote areas. Intensive classes and exam preparation sessions are helping girls qualify for higher learning. A dormitory built for female students at a teacher training college is also helping to increase the number of qualified female teachers.

As a result of these efforts, more girls are entering school, staying on through key transition years, and finding their way towards teaching and other careers. Ninety-three percent of preschoolers are entering first grade in focal areas, and 95 percent have continued from grade 9 to grade 10— a crucial point when many parents worry about their daughters' marriage prospects. The program also supports girls so they can sit university entrance exams. Nationally, only one in ten of those who pass the entrance exam are women. In program areas, nearly 60 percent of graduating girls now sit the exam, of whom more than half have passed.

## Better Teaching, Better Learning

Afghan families, especially those in poverty, sacrifice a great deal to send their children to school. Finding their child frustrated by poor teaching convinces many that the effort is simply not worth it.

Strong, gender-sensitive teachers can make a huge difference, giving girls the confidence and courage to stay in school. To create a climate for high quality, girl-friendly teaching, the program provides training, mentoring, and peer support to teachers and school managers.

### GENDER-EQUITABLE TEACHING

As of 2013:

- 2,417 young women have entered teachers college since efforts began.
- 6,568 administrators and teachers were trained in gender-equitable learning support.
- 3,789 teachers were mentored in applying these approaches.

Staff members have mentored over two thousand teachers, discussing class management and pedagogical issues such as lesson planning, inclusiveness, and gender sensitivity. As they have gained confidence, teacher learning circles have grown, such that they now mentor each other. This makes an important contribution to sustaining quality teaching in government schools.

Training workshops and resource packages focus on gender and child rights, effective school management, and helping girls through school transition. As a result, teachers better understand how their own classroom



Students take part in an art lesson at an early childhood development centre in Baghlan province.

practices affect students' motivation and self-esteem. Even small changes, such as alternating between boys and girls when asking questions, or changing seating arrangements, can help girls engage.

In consultation with provincial education authorities, in 2008, six model schools were selected to serve as beacons, demonstrating how gender equity could be applied in the classroom. A wider pool of educators is learning through them about the whole school improvement approach. As of March 2013, over 700 educators had taken part in training courses and exposure visits hosted through these model schools.

## Building Long-Term Commitment

For girls to succeed in school, they need support at home, in their communities, and from all levels of government. They do best when they have literate and involved parents who can help them with homework, and engage in school councils and other support activities.

The GESP has worked with parents, communities, teachers, school leaders, local councils, district and provincial education departments, and other key officials to build support for girl-friendly schooling approaches. Mothers' literacy classes, for example, help women understand the importance of their daughters' education.

The growing commitment of families and communities is evident from their willingness to advocate and even generate new funds for girls' education. Program-wide, over 5,000 people, including village elders and spiritual leaders, have taken part in community conferences on girls' education. These have helped participants gain the skills and confidence needed to push for more school construction, transport, and teachers. In Bamyan's Waras district, for example, when the lack of a qualified grade 7 teacher threatened girls' education, the community raised funds to help recruit two new teachers for grades 7, 8, and 9. This not only benefited the girls, but increased the community's sense of ownership. *Continued on back.*



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To shape a policy environment that will sustain girl-friendly schooling, the Foundation plays an active role in working groups led by the Ministry of Education, and has involved Ministry officials in program efforts so that the Government can apply the approach and lessons more widely. This interaction has helped to inform new policies on early childhood education, community-based education, and provisions for schooling in emergency situations. Gender-sensitive teaching is also being institutionalized through teacher training colleges.

## Looking Ahead: Supporting Afghan Ownership

As the program concludes, progress can be seen in rising enrolments, more qualified and confident teachers, and girls continuing on to higher grades. Many have achieved outstanding success. In 2011, a student from Khinjan Model School achieved the highest university entrance exam score in Afghanistan, and went on to study Law. Before, not a single girl in the district had ever passed the exam.

To ensure that such gains are sustained, the program works with the broadest possible range of stakeholders, fostering ownership by Afghan educators, officials, families, and communities. Peer mentoring among teachers is key to maintaining professional development

for high quality teaching. Early childhood development centres are raising funds through their own efforts to help cover salary and other costs. And to ensure lessons are applied more widely, information has been shared within target districts, with ministries and with other development and donor organizations.

Though the outlook for Afghanistan remains daunting, Aga Khan Foundation is committed to girls' educational achievement over the long term, as the brightest hope for the country's future. There is much left to do, both within program areas and nationwide. Building on its GESP experience, the Foundation will broaden and deepen efforts to improve girls' education in Afghanistan in the coming years.



Girls Education Support Program (GESP) project area

## Aga Khan Foundation Canada

Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC) is a non-profit international development agency, working in Asia and Africa to find sustainable solutions to the complex problems causing global poverty. Established in 1980, AKFC is a registered Canadian charity and an agency of the worldwide Aga Khan Development Network.

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