

## EXPERIMENT IN COMMUNITY EDUCATION PUTS 554 AFGHAN GIRLS IN SCHOOL

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Washington DC: High in the mountains of Afghanistan, with the snow still on the ground, teachers and pupils at the Godah primary school for girls marked March 8, International Women's Day, by preparing for a new academic year after a three-month break for winter.

The Godah school is at the heart of an innovative experiment in community education that seeks to reverse decades of neglect, illiteracy and discrimination against women in Afghanistan.

Godah is receiving support from the Omid Learning Center, a small Afghan nonprofit organization. The Advocacy Project (AP) is helping Omid to publicize its work and raise funds.

Omid ("hope" in Pashtu) is the brainchild of Sadiqa Basiri, 26, who received a good education in Pakistan as a refugee and vowed to provide the same opportunity for those who had never left Afghanistan. After returning home in 2002, Ms. Basiri drew on her own salary to start classes for 40 girls in the village of Godah, Wardak province, where she was born.

Introduced to Ms. Basiri through AP's coverage of Afghanistan, an anonymous donor in the United States offered \$39,000 to expand the Omid program. After a year, Omid is now supporting three schools with a combined 554 students. The government recently asked Omid to work with a fourth school in Nagrahar province, which has 335 girl students.

Omid's achievement can be measured by quality as well as numbers. After just six months of school, 91 percent of the students at Godah passed government exams in September 2004 - 28 percent with distinction. The drop-out rate was less than 5 percent, even though some students have to walk several kilometers to reach school every morning. Some are so poor that they even lack shoes.

Why do they persist? Because, says ten year-old Karina, a pupil at Godah, they want to read and write. When asked what she like to be when she grows up, Karina answers shyly: "A teacher."

This commitment to education is striking in a country where, according to some estimates, the literacy rate for Afghan women stood at just 1 percent in 2001. The rate has since risen with the return of refugees, but a recent report from the UN Development Program described the education system in Afghanistan as one of the very worst in the world. Eighty percent of the country's 6,900 schools were damaged during the wars.

AP marked International Women's Day by posting nine new web pages on Omid's work in 2004, drawn from Ms. Basiri's reports. Future reports will be edited and added as they are received.

The introduction to the new pages describes Omid as a “classic example” of how civil society can bridge the gap between war and peace and provide an essential service while government slowly emerges from the ruins of war.

Still, it has not been easy. Ms. Basiri’s first challenge has been to convince communities of the value of educating their daughters. In Godah she turned to her father, Janat Gul Basiri, a respected engineer, to win over religious leaders. Ms. Basiri also held meetings with mothers and grandmothers, some of whom wept at their own illiteracy.

Other communities have been less cooperative. Two neighboring villages in Kabul province were happy to ask Omid for help, but refused to work with each other.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle is a shortage of women teachers. As they grow older, girls become reluctant to engage directly with men. But all the teachers in Godah are men, because there is not a single qualified woman teacher in the entire valley.

Ms. Basiri hired one former doctor from Godah, only to lose her when the UN offered a higher salary. Ms. Basiri is now exploring the possibility of recruiting teachers from among the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan.

Another problem is the shortage of space which forced teachers to hold classes in two small mosques at opposite ends of Godah village, until Omid received a donation of tents from the US-Afghan Reconstruction Committee, a nonprofit organization. But the tents are becoming more crowded with each new class and Omid hopes to build a permanent structure – if it can acquire the land.

Relations with the Afghan government have also been uneven. Ms. Basiri hopes that all Omid schools will be absorbed into the national system, but this means building a strong partnership with a government that is struggling against a serious lack of resources, authority and capacity.

The government is also unsure how much to delegate to NGOs like Omid. The Ministry of Planning threatened to suspend the registration of NGOs until it was pressured to reverse course by Western donors.

The staff at Godah school are currently trying to accommodate one awkward government requirement. Keen to admit as many students as possible, the government wants to promote all girls in grades one and two. That, however, would reward failure - which is not the message Ms. Basiri wants to send to her fellow villagers. It is one more puzzle to be resolved on the road to enlightenment.

- In the summer 2004, AP sent Ginny Barahona, a graduate student at Georgetown University to intern with Omid in Afghanistan. [Read her blogs.](#)
- Read the recent UNDP report on Afghanistan titled "[Security with a Human Face](#)". The report covers several issues related to the rebuilding of Afghanistan, including education.