

Feeding Girls' Hunger to Learn in Afghanistan

These days, it takes more than textbooks and pencils to be a schoolgirl in Afghanistan — it also takes tremendous bravery and tenacity. Since the ousting of the Taliban in 2001, Afghan girls are theoretically free to attend school. But they are stymied at almost every turn by vicious militant attacks, a lack of adequate facilities and teachers, and even their own parents' reluctance to break from the tradition that says "girls belong at home."

"The first challenge for girls' education in Afghanistan is cultural barriers," said Fazlul Haque, UNICEF Chief of Education for Afghanistan.

In a village just outside the city of Herat sits a mosque that doubles as a UNICEF-supported community-based school. Through small village schools like this, UNICEF and the Afghan education authorities work with

local communities and families, promoting education for girls who might otherwise be denied it. Every morning, as men stream from the mosque following prayers, 35 enthusiastic boys and girls arrive to begin their day's studies. Their teacher, a young woman, goes beyond the traditional curriculum, encouraging her students to ask questions and tell stories about their lives.

Nine-year-old Nafissa (not her real name) loves going to school, and though her father is not literate, he fully supports her studies. "He is 'maghroor' [proud] because I can read!" declared an excited Nafissa.

As of 2008, there were 3,446 community-based schools in Afghanistan, and 1,393 more are planned for this year. In addition, UNICEF is helping to build 72 brand-new schools and 600 classrooms, while also working to remove entrenched cultural



barriers to girls' education and train more female teachers. U.S. Fund for UNICEF partners — like The Delta Kappa Gamma Society International — have generously contributed to these and other education programs in Afghanistan.

But the way forward for girls is not easy — extremists in Afghanistan are doing their best to terrorize them out of going to school. In 2008 alone, there were 283 violent attacks on schools, resulting in 92 dead and 169 injured.

Despite the obstacles and threats, Afghan girls are hungrier than ever for education. "Over 2.2 million girls are now in school," said Fazlul Haque, "and we expect a 20 percent increase in primary school enrollment for girls by 2013, with help from UNICEF education programs."



In Afghanistan, girls eagerly head to school, where they study using welcome UNICEF school supplies. Despite extremist attacks, attendance is on the rise.