The 2015 American Educational Research Association (AERA) theme is “Toward Justice: Culture, Language, and Heritage in Education Research and Praxis” What are key lessons you’ve learned about advancing justice for women and children in Afghanistan?

The keys to advancing justice for women and children in Afghanistan during the last ten years have been the following: education for women and children; job training for women; having a ministry of women affairs; increasing the number of female lawyers; education for men.

Education is most important for advancing justice for women and children. The kind of education needed is one that teaches critical thinking skills so that women and children can learn to think for themselves and solve their own problems. When women and children are educated and have critical thinking skills, they ask questions. They know what their rights are under Islam and in Afghanistan, and they can speak out and stand up for their rights. When they are educated, women know who and where they can go to for help in securing their rights.

Because there are so many widows and poor women in Afghanistan, in addition to learning to read and write, it has been essential for women to learn a skill so that they can earn a living, skills that allow them to get a job and support their family. Some work at home; others work in government jobs; and a few own businesses. When women have a way to earn a living, they become more self-sufficient, have more self-esteem, and are better able to advocate for justice for themselves and their children.

In the last twelve years, it has also been important to have a Ministry of Women Affairs (MOWA) in Afghanistan. There had never been a ministry in Afghanistan dedicated to the welfare of women. MOWA advocates for women. Women have a place where they can go, be heard, and find justice.

With an increase in women lawyers in Afghanistan, women now have a person that they can go to who understands their rights and can advocate for them and help them to achieve justice.

Finally, it is very important to
educate men as well as women. Many men are also illiterate. When men are educated in a system that teaches critical thinking skills, they also begin to think and ask questions. They begin to understand their rights and the rights of others (women and children) under Islam and under the laws of Afghanistan. They learn about equality and, as they see the change in the women and children in their lives as they are educated, they learn that justice is for all, not just men.

What is it like to be a girl in Afghanistan, and what possibilities does education provide?

Despite the problems that we have, it is a good time to be a girl in Afghanistan. It isn’t as peaceful as when I was growing up in Herat in the 1960s, but there are many more education opportunities now than when I was a girl. Education for everybody was only beginning in the 1950s and 1960s. There weren’t enough schools or trained teachers but it was a beginning. It all came to a halt with the invasion of the Soviet Union and the many years of war. Some girls were still going to school in Afghanistan in the large cities, but education was almost nonexistent for rural girls and for refugees in Pakistan and Iran. When the Taliban came to power, there was no education for girls in Afghanistan, except for secret home schools.

However, now there are millions of girls in schools and there are more educational opportunities for women and older girls in learning centers. Girls are going to universities and learning English and computer skills. Some girls are traveling abroad to study in India, Europe and the U.S. They are becoming doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers, journalists, even engineers. Graduates of high school and universities are finding jobs in hospitals, schools, NGOs, the government and private businesses. Entrepreneurial girls are starting their own businesses. They open English courses and internet cafes, start girls’ gyms, and train tailors.

The minds of girls are being opened. They are learning to think and question, write and create. In a recent competition between students of private schools, the top student was a girl in one of my private high schools.

Although there are still barriers to education for girls, there are also more and more opportunities for girls to study. They are taking advantage of them, and their parents are supporting them.

Tell us about the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL): its history, its goals, its strategy, and its main accomplishments to date.

The Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL) is an Afghan women’s non-governmental organization (NGO) which I founded in 1995 to help address the problem of poor access to education and health services for Afghan women and children, their subsequent inability to support their lives, and the impact of this on Afghan society. AIL is playing a major part in reconstructing education and health systems capable of reaching the women and children of Afghanistan. AIL serves more than 400,000 women, men and children annually and employs about 430 Afghans, over 70% whom are women. It offers pre-school through post-secondary education; training opportunities to teachers in interactive, critical thinking methodologies and to members of civil society in subjects such as human rights, women’s rights, leadership, and peace; it also provides health education and health care through its clinics and Community Health Workers.

AIL’s visionary programs (which include interactive teacher training, women’s learning centers, mobile literacy classes, workshops for expectant mothers workshops, leadership workshops, love and forgiveness conference) have had a major impact on Afghanistan and its people. Over 12 million Afghans have been direct beneficiaries of AIL education, training and health services. A number of AIL’s programs...
have been replicated or adopted by the Afghan government and other NGOs.

Our basic strategy is based on the following principles:

1. *Listen and work with the people in a community.* We believe it is essential to listen to what women and men want in any community we are going to work with. We do not impose our views or design programs that we think might be best for a community; instead we meet with the women and men of the community and let them identify what their problems and needs are. AIL staff and the community members discuss the various ways to meet those needs, and then the community priorities dictate the design of programs and which services are provided.

Once agreement is reached on where to start, we develop an agreement and outline the responsibilities of each party. This has been very important for building trust between AIL and the community; that trust helps sustain the projects. AIL continues to listen and meet with the community members. When changes are needed, the community members and the AIL staff meet to decide what to do next and the agreement is revised.

2. *Provide high-quality, culturally sensitive services and programs.* AIL believes that it is very important to maintain high standards for our staff and for the people who participate in our programs, as well as to provide high quality services and programs. When you offer high quality education and hold high standards for yourself and for the people you work with, the recipients respect and trust you, and they also respect and trust themselves. Even though it may be difficult for them, recipients will try to live up to the expectations that you have for them and start to raise the expectations they have for themselves.

It is also important to understand and respect the culture and customs of the community you are working with. This is much easier when the community identifies the needs and requests the programming, as the community members will already have taken their culture and customs into consideration.

By providing high quality and culturally sensitive programs and services, there is greater trust in AIL and the community begins to look again at their needs and feels confident in requesting more services.

3. *Require community participation and contribution to ensure success.* When the community and its members participate and contribute to establishing a program, community members realize that they are part of the project, which greatly enhances the potential for its long-term sustainability. AIL assumes that the community has something to contribute. This increases self-esteem in the community because community members realize that whatever they contribute is valued. Community contribution does not have to be monetary. In Afghanistan, the community usually provides security, space, volunteers and some materials.

4. *Recognize that education and transformation takes time.* When AIL started, Afghanistan had one of the lowest literacy rates in the world. It was a society that was suspicious of education and change. Its country and people were devastated and conflict was ongoing. Afghans continue to be faced with conflict and insecurity. However, by using the core concepts outlined above, in the areas where AIL works, transformation is occurring through education. Women, who were illiterate and poor, are now educated and supporting themselves. Their children are attending school. AIL Learning Centers have become community networking centers for women, where they can meet and exchange ideas. Women now request human rights, leadership and election workshops. Women vote, and some are leaders in their community. Women and their families are healthier because health information is included in every class.

In places where there has been long-term
conflict, educating people takes time and requires patience to wait until people are ready. This can only be done in a step by step way as people are able. More importantly, it requires restoring trust, reestablishing core values and rebuilding self-esteem without rushing to expand and develop programs.

AIL has been successful in educating Afghans by focusing its efforts at the grassroots, working with communities to give them a sense of ownership and control over their lives, respecting the culture and personal dignity of community members and responding to actual versus perceived needs.

Your work and advocacy to promote education and health among women and children in Afghanistan has involved risks and dangers not many would take, especially after the Taliban closed girl’s schools in the 1990s. What are risks you’ve faced and what moves you to continue to do the work you do?

Since I was a child, I wanted to improve the life of Afghan women. Initially, because I had seen so many women and babies die due to lack of medical care, I wanted to be a doctor. I did earn a master’s degree in public health, but I got more and more interested in education. I saw that education had transformed my life. My parents were illiterate, but my father, a successful businessman, wanted all of his children to be educated. I was the oldest and the first to attend school. My father was so dedicated to education that he even let me travel to the U.S. to study—I was the first girl from my city to study in the U.S. Education has opened my mind and broadened my horizons, and I knew that education was the key to transforming the lives of Afghan women and girls.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, I was studying in the U.S. and unable to leave. When finally I was able to travel, I returned to the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. There were more than 7 million refugees, mostly women and children. They were devastated, hopeless and illiterate. I knew that only education could help them. But there were few schools and most Afghans were very suspicious of education and did not believe that girls should be educated at all.

The first risk was doing anything involving education with a suspicious, untrusting population, whose homes and villages had been destroyed, their families dead, and their communities torn apart. The self-reliant Afghans that I had known as a child were now dependent on others. To bring education to children required rebuilding trust, community and self-esteem in the adults. When we started in the refugee camps, we first met with people who had started schools (there were only about 3000 students in schools.) They wanted training for their teachers, who taught by rote memorization, but they didn’t want us to change their books. We gave their teachers high quality, culturally sensitive training that encouraged critical thinking skills. The training was completely new, and its results were revolutionary. When teachers used our methods, students learned to read in 3 months, not 3 years, and both students and teachers began to enjoy being in school. Most importantly, we didn’t change the curriculum or introduce new subjects, we just changed the methodology of teaching, producing amazing results.

Trust had begun. Word spread, and we were asked to train many more teachers. Many of the “teachers” were individuals who were not teachers but were trusted by the community because of their values and ethics. In one camp a local mullah was teaching girls in the compound of his home. There were many more girls who wanted to learn, but there were no other teachers. We trained his wife and daughter to be teachers, and soon there were many more classes.
Again word spread and representatives from other camps began to talk to us about starting schools in their camp. We would meet with them and discuss what they wanted and how to do it. The only thing we asked was for each school to have 50% girls and 50% boys. They didn’t have to study in the same classroom, if that was a problem, but we talked to the representatives about the value of education for both girls and boys. Following our strategy, outlined in my response to the previous question, we were able to open schools for 15,000 children in one year. The community provided the space for classrooms and chose the teachers, and we trained them. If we had had more funding, we could have opened many more schools. There was no more risk.

The next big risk was when schools for girls were closed in Afghanistan under the Taliban. People inside Afghanistan had heard about our education work in the refugee camps, and they asked AIL to support home schools for girls inside Afghanistan. That involved a huge risk because the community had to be in complete agreement in the area of any home school or the school would be found and the teachers jailed or killed and who knew what would happen to the children. Again we followed our strategy. In the end we were supporting 80 secret home schools for 3000 girls in five provinces of Afghanistan. None of the schools were ever closed and many of the girls went on to finish high school and enter university after the fall of the Taliban.

Because of the danger, the girls never knew who was supporting their home school. They only knew the identity of their teacher, who was their neighbor or relative. Recently, I was speaking at a university and had the opportunity to meet with students from a local high school. Three of the students were Afghan girls. As a young girl, she had finished six grades in a home school in her province. She wondered if her school had been one of AIL’s home schools. I asked her questions about her teacher and the location of the school and, yes, she had gone to one of our home schools. The other two Afghan girls started asking me questions. They too had attended AIL home schools. Now all three are studying in the U.S. and preparing to go to university next year.

You ask me what moves me to continue to do the work I do. It is stories like these, and a thousand more, that keep me going. When I see the light in a child’s eyes, the eagerness of her questions and her delight in learning, I know that Afghanistan is changing, and I want to be there for whatever transformations continue to happen.

**What is the current status of education in Afghanistan, where would you like to see education in your country in 20 years, and what are key steps to get there?**

Currently, education in Afghanistan is in a much better place than it had been in the last 30 years. Many more children are in school and more and more high school graduates are going to university. Some men and women, who did not have an opportunity to attend school during the war years, are now becoming literate. However, we have a long way to go. We do not yet have qualified teachers and because of low salaries, many teachers are not always in their classrooms teaching. The quality of education in the public schools is not good, and parents who can afford it are sending their children to private schools. This is not good for the country as a whole because most people are poor. Although there are administrators who care about providing quality education, the system has become corrupted and many teachers and administrators are not doing their jobs. In small communities, the schools are often better than in cities because the communities care deeply about having a good education for their children.

In the next twenty years, I would like to see the following:
public schools for all children throughout Afghanistan.

quality education in all public schools with standards that must be met

well-trained university graduates as teachers in all public schools

higher salaries for teachers

better supervision and enforceable rules for teachers

university scholarships for those studying to be teachers

changes in the curriculum to add tracks for specialized skill training as well as college preparatory classes

a community-based school system where the community controls the school system and monitors teachers and quality of education

local and national funding of education but with local control

honest and capable administrators who work to energize the teachers and improve education in schools

I believe to achieve a quality educational system with all children in school, the most important change would be to have local communities overseeing and controlling the schools. Parents want their children to have a quality education from qualified teachers with good values. With control of schools at the local level, parents and community leaders would be able to choose capable teachers and ensure that teachers came to classes and did their job. The schools would be better because the community demanded it.

We also need to upgrade the status of teachers by increasing their salaries and giving scholarships to those who are studying to become teachers. Teachers need to have in-service training and opportunities to meet with other teachers and share ideas.

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