

EMPO

Expanding education opportunities for women and girls in south central Asia is opening new vistas for the women themselves and helping these nations to tap a long neglected resource.

BY SUSAN LADIKA

Nadima, one of IEAW's first students, during her first days in the United States in 2002

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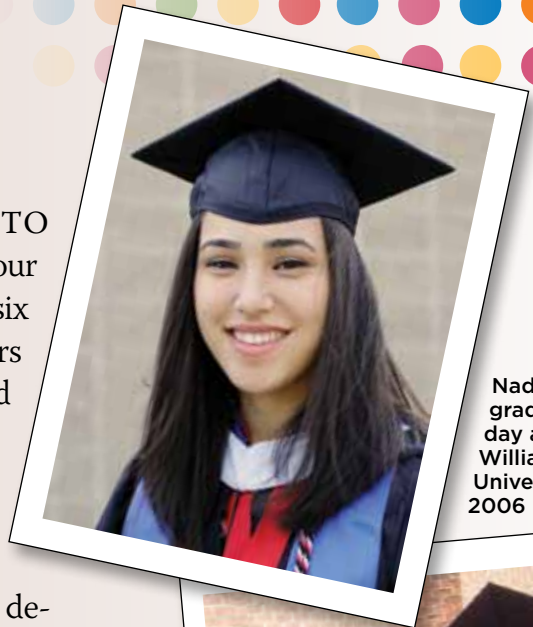
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HEN SADIQA BASIRI SALEEM CAME TO Mount Holyoke College in 2005, she was a far cry from your average college student. She had already helped establish six primary schools for girls and four women's literacy centers in her native Afghanistan, after years of Taliban rule had squelched women's rights in her homeland.

While attending Mount Holyoke in South Hadley, Massachusetts, she would travel each summer back to Afghanistan to continue her work with the Oruj Learning Center. Since her graduation with a bachelor's degree in international relations in 2009, she's established her homeland's first all-women community college, where 147 women are currently enrolled, while continuing her work with younger girls.

"Through Oruj, I wanted to address one of the most critical needs of Afghan society. I strongly believe that education is one of the most feasible steps toward bringing long-lasting peace and prosperity," Basiri Saleem says.

While Afghanistan lags far behind the other countries in South Central Asia when it comes to teaching basic literacy skills to girls, all the nations in the region have a long way to go when it comes to providing university education.

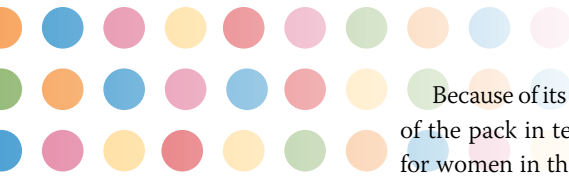


Nadima on graduation day at Roger Williams University in 2006



Paula Nirschel with student Sofia at her graduation.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the fourth article in an occasional series on improving education for girls and women in developing regions. The first was "Women's Work," which focused on the Middle East and published in the September/October 2009 issue; the second was "An Unprivileged Child," which focused on Africa and published in the January/February 2010 issue; and the third was "Women in Latin America—Opportunity Through Education," which published in the March/April 2011 issue.



Dalit women and children await the arrival of American University student in Terai, Nepal. Together, the groups began a vocational skills training program.

Because of its huge population, India is at the head of the pack in terms of total university enrollment for women in the region, but the percentages there and throughout the region are dismal. Only 11 percent of Indian women were enrolled in university in 2007, according to figures from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In Afghanistan the number of women enrolled was a lowly 1 percent, while Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal fell in between the two countries.

Figures are brighter when it comes to basic literacy skills, with about 75 percent of females between the ages of 15 and 24 considered to be literate in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, according to UNICEF. In

Pakistan the rate falls to 59 percent, and Afghanistan lags far behind, with only 18 percent of females considered to be literate.

“It’s really a shame to waste so much human potential,” says Surendra Kaushik, a professor of finance at Pace University in White Plains, New York, who single-handedly spearheaded a movement to create a women’s college in his hometown of Malsisar, India.

His goal is to “keep girls going up and up and up. You can only do it if you give them an opportunity and create role models.”

Basiri Saleem’s own university education was cut short while she was living as a refugee in Pakistan, and the Taliban forced her university to close, ending her



KATERINE GALE

dream of becoming a gynecologist. In 2002, when the Taliban were no longer in control in Afghanistan, she returned and joined forces with a handful of other women, to launch the Oruj Learning Center in the village of Godah.

The program quickly expanded, but Basiri Saleem still wanted more for herself. So she applied for a spot to study in the United States with the assistance of the U.S.-based Initiative to Educate Afghan Women (IEAW). "I wanted to not only get an education but also invest in developing my leadership skills," she says.

She was able to accomplish that thanks to the opportunities provided by the IEAW, a nonprofit organization based in Warren, Rhode Island, which links extremely promising young women from Afghanistan with colleges and universities in the United States. Currently 15 U.S. colleges and universities, clustered near the East Coast, provide full scholarships so the young women can come and study for their four-year degrees.

Inspired After September 11 Attacks

Paula Nirschel, wife of Roy Nirschel, who at that time was serving as president of Roger Williams University in Bristol, Rhode Island, launched IEAW in 2002 after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. When the terrorist ties to Afghanistan became clear, "I was in mourning for both countries," she recalls. As a result she started learning all she could about Afghanistan.

"I didn't realize the dire plight of women in Afghanistan," Nirschel says, so she decided to do something about it. E-mailing and calling anyone she could think of in the United States and Afghanistan, she finally connected with Robert Finn, who was then serving as U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan. She got him on board with the project and Finn and other U.S. embassy staff interviewed the first batch of Afghan women who applied to study in the United States.

The first four women from Afghanistan came to the United States to study in 2002. During the 2010–2011 academic year, 33 young women were studying at 15 schools, and 36 had already graduated.

Each summer the participants head back to Afghanistan, where they work, share their experiences about their time in the United States, and



IEAW Founder and Director Paula Nirschel with Afghan students in 2006.

keep close ties to their homeland. IEAW's mission, Nirschel says, is for the young women "to get educated, then go back home, and not cause brain drain."

Going Home, Giving Back

That's the goal of Marzia Nawrozi, who came from Herat to Meredith College in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 2009, and is double majoring in economics and political science. Her hope is to work on women's rights issues in Afghanistan after she graduates. She already volunteers each summer at the Afghan Women Lawyers Foundation and the Afghanistan Independent Rights Commission.

Nawrozi is also proud of the newfound independence she's acquiring during her time in the United States. "When I return to Afghanistan, because I'm independent, I won't have to rely on others for help. When women have education they won't have to suffer because they'll be able to take care of themselves and not depend on men."

That's a theme echoed by students and educators from throughout the region, who believe it's crucial for women to get strong educations and solidify their own personal independence and economic prospects, while breaking free from the bonds of traditionally patriarchal societies.

Economic Empowerment

By being able to work, at jobs such as those provided by international call centers, women in India have “amazing economic empowerment. It breaks down so much patriarchy,” says Janaki Rajan, an education professor from Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi, who has spent the past semester at Webster University in St. Louis under the E. Desmond Lee Professorship for Global Awareness in the School of Education.

Bringing education and empowerment to women is also one of the key goals of Kaushik’s endeavor. The Mrs. Helena Kaushik Women’s College was named for his wife, who was paralyzed by a stroke two decades ago. Kaushik met his wife while he was a graduate student in economics at Boston University in the 1970s. The couple began traveling through India periodically, and Helena Kaushik was very concerned about the girls she saw in the countryside who weren’t attending school, but instead were charged with doing household chores and caring for younger siblings.

In India, particularly in rural areas, “there’s disproportionate resource allocation in favor of boys,” Kaushik says. The disparity struck him even when he was a young boy growing up in the remote area. His younger sister’s education came to a halt when schooling for girls ended in eighth grade, and then she married at a young age.

In 1996 Kaushik took a sabbatical from his duties at Pace University and traveled through India lecturing. That trip rekindled his interest in start-

ing a university for the young women in the region where he grew up.

The Mrs. Helena Kaushik Women’s College opened its doors to 36 young women in 1999, and the project is funded entirely by donations, although the Indian government provided land for the campus. The goal of the school is to embrace students of all castes, religions, and incomes, and because income is limited in the region, no tuition is charged. The girls are only responsible for paying various fees, such as library and sports fees, which total about \$150 a year. Scholarships to help cover the fees are available and are awarded based on a student’s academic standing and financial need.

Since its opening, the school has produced more than 900 graduates, and now admits 200 to 250 young women each year, Kaushik says. The students can obtain bachelor’s or master’s degrees, and the school has a heavy emphasis on educating students to become teachers.

As India strives to meet the United Nations Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education by 2015, there’s a strong demand for teachers. In India, teaching is viewed as a prestigious profession, and teachers earn a good salary, he says.

And the Mrs. Helena Kaushik Women’s College experiences a large turnover among its own instructors. Most teachers are single women in their late twenties who have master’s or doctoral degrees and earn good pay, so they often receive marriage proposals from rich and powerful families in the bigger cities. Once they marry and move away they’re able to



Academic hall of Mrs. Helena Kaushik Women’s College.

continue their teaching careers while raising a family, Kaushik says. "Now an educated girl is very highly prized."

The students at the college are "so smart and focused and dedicated," Kaushik says. "They really want to go some place because they know the hardship from which they've come."

Maqsood Chaudhry, an electrical engineering professor at California State University Fullerton, also is working to bolster women's education, particular in science, technology, and engineering, in his native Pakistan.

In 2008 he received nearly \$200,000 from the American Council on Education Office of Higher Education for Development to support the "Partnership for Women in Science, Technology, and Engineering in Pakistan" program, and the grant will run through the end of 2012.

Through the program, Chaudhry is working with two universities, chosen by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). One is the Fatima Jinnah Women University in Rawalpindi, near the capital, Islamabad. The other is the Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University in Quetta, near the border with Afghanistan. It's in an insurgency area, and the region is economically depressed and education is lacking, particularly for women, he says.

Chaudhry says when he went to school in Pakistan, universities were primarily coeducational, but in recent years a number of women-only schools have been established. "When I heard this, I was very skeptical." But when he visited the partner universities, "I was pleasantly amazed at the roles the two universities are playing."

He found "the women in Pakistan are hungry for education," and some fathers would not allow their daughters to attend coed schools. Now these young women have more freedom and options because of the availability of all-women's universities. "These are havens for them."

While many young women in Pakistan who attend university are interested in studying science, technology, and engineering, female faculty to teach those subjects are lacking. Through the partnership program, Cal State Fullerton and the universities in Pakistan are working to boost the number of female



faculty members, while at the same time encouraging undergraduates to study those subjects by offering them scholarships.

So far about 15 faculty members have been trained through the program, and about 200 undergraduate scholarships have been handed out. By improving the number of faculty members, the all-women schools can then expand their science and technology offerings, he says.

One of those currently enrolled in the program is Aasma Zahid, who graduated with a bachelor's of science degree in software engineering from Fatima Jinnah Women University. At Cal State Fullerton, she's earning a master's degree in computer science, and then will spend two years as a faculty member at Fatima Jinnah Women University when she returns home in a few months.

Ever since she was a child, Zahid knew she wanted to be an engineer, drawing her inspiration from uncles who were engineers. By furthering her education and becoming a faculty member at the university, Zahid says she can "really help younger girls (become inspired) by seeing somebody in computer science."

During her two years in California she's also "gained a lot of confidence, living on my own, meeting new people, and seeing a new culture."

That's one of the benefits of programs such as the partnership, Chaudhry says. Those who study in the United States will "understand Western education and take back our standards. They'll tell people not everybody in the United States burns the Quran and not everybody in the United States hates us. This will have a very positive impact."

Students and faculty at Mrs. Helena Kaushik Women's College in April 2010.



Fostering Cross-Cultural Understanding

And that understanding can flow both ways. Betty Webb, director of international programs at Meredith College, which has hosted students from Afghanistan for five years, says, “all the news out of Afghanistan focuses on the divide between our country and Afghanistan,” and many of the students at the college have ties to the U.S. military. While they may hear a certain perspective from their family members, “there’s nothing that makes a country more real than knowing somebody from it.”

That’s one of the main aims of the IEAW program, Nirschel says. Because the young women who study at U.S. schools go home each summer and then are encouraged to return home at the end of their studies, “they teach Afghans about the real America and teach Americans about the real Afghanistan.”

When the program started, it was a challenge to find women who were academically qualified to take part, she says. Many had been schooled in basements, away from the prying eyes of the Taliban, or they had been educated while living in refugee camps in Pakistan.

MRS. HELENA KAUSHIK WOMEN'S COLLEGE



Encouraging Reluctant Families to Allow Daughters to Study Abroad

It also was often a challenge to get fathers to agree to allow their daughters to study abroad. But now because of the program's positive reputation, the IEAW receives 250 to 300 applications a year. Nirschel looks at each applicant's high school grades, class standing, TOEFL scores, work experience, and recommendation letters, and then interviews about 90 new prospects before selecting the finalists.

She matches them up with specific colleges and universities. Most are schools with 5,000 students or fewer, and they must be able to nurture the students, who have "lived such difficult lives." Some of the schools are all female, others are coed, and all offer full scholarships that cover tuition, room, board, and books.

Most of the students in the IEAW program major in fields like political science, international relations, or business, and most want to go into politics in Afghanistan eventually, she says.



Students in the biology laboratory at Mrs. Helena Kaushik Women's College.

And it's not just women from other countries who benefit from time studying at U.S. colleges and universities. U.S. students and recent graduates also have found enrichment from travels and work experience in South Central Asia. Mindy Eichhorn, who is currently a doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, was drawn to India after studying about the country during a class on women in cross-cultural perspectives while a student at the University of Tennessee, where she earned a bachelor's of science in special education and a master's of science in education.

After Eichhorn graduated she headed to Hartford, Connecticut, to teach in the public school system, but she felt her calling was in India. She didn't want to go for a month or two because she would "still feel like a tourist." Instead she wanted to "really learn something about the community," so she quit her job and moved to India. Her plan was to stay for a year. She remained for four.

Her first stop in 2004 was Mukti Mission, a home for orphaned girls and abandoned women in a vil-

lage about an hour from Pune, where she worked for a year at a school at the orphanage. The class accommodated about 35 girls and women with special needs between the ages of 5 and 35. While she was there Eichhorn helped start a candle-making project for the students, and the profits from the sale of candles are used to help the mission.

When her work at the mission wrapped up, Eichhorn still wasn't ready to return to the United States, so she began working for a medical teaching college and hospital in Vellore, where she helped develop a pediatric unit at the hospital, and also worked at a school for the children of hospital staff, helping to establish an inclusion program for children with learning disabilities.

After that project she headed to Mumbai, where she worked for Destiny Education, a teacher-training consultancy, developing special education and inclusion education training for private schools in India.

After she completes her PhD, Eichhorn would eventually like to return to India and continue training

Students of Mrs. Helena Kaushik Women's College making rangoli.



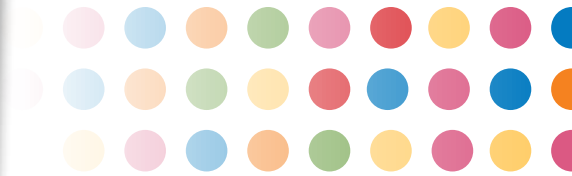
MRS. HELENA KAUSHIK WOMEN'S COLLEGE

teachers in that country. “The field of special education is still developing there. There’s still so much work to do.”

Another young woman who is drawn to India is Jessica Feingold, a cofounder of Life-improving Ventures (LiV), a nonprofit organization that was

lunge, an annual competition hosted by UNC that is designed to promote entrepreneurship.

Feingold views LiV’s project as a low-cost way to aid Indian women, who “fall behind in national attainment.”



Students just before an examination in 2010.

launched with the aim of increasing access to products and services that are designed to improve the quality of life for low-income communities around the globe.

Their first project is the Menstrual Hygiene Initiative, which is being piloted this summer, and is designed to provide sanitary pads to young women in rural India so they can remain in school and improve their educational and economic achievements. Now many young women in rural areas use things like rags and ashes, rather than sanitary pads, which may mean they miss school, and they also face the risk of infection.

Feingold, who has a bachelor’s degree in human biology from the University of Virginia, has spent time in India volunteering with Child Family Health International, hiking medical supplies into remote areas of the Himalayas.

She then enrolled in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), where she received a master’s of public health, and also took courses at UNC’s Kenan-Flagler Business School. The Menstrual Hygiene Initiative project recently received second place in the social ventures track of the Carolina Chal-

Helping a Vulnerable Population

Students at American University in Washington, D.C., have also worked to help improve the educational and economic achievements of women in South Asia through their efforts during Alternative Break, sponsored by the Center for Community Engagement and Service.

In 2009 and 2010 students from the university visited Nepal for three weeks, touring the country to assist women and children and learn about grassroots empowerment and social justice, particularly focusing on the plight of women and of Dalits—which are viewed as the lowest class in parts of South Central Asia.

Maureen Breslin, coordinator for student-athletes in American University’s Academic Support Center and staff adviser for the 2009 and 2010 trips to Nepal, says the group brought in books and other supplies for a school room that had been converted to a library resource center in Palpa. While there, students also helped instruct English lessons or spent time sharing experiences and perspectives with older students at the school.



The trips helped students see that despite “many differences, in the end people are people,” Breslin says.

Katie Gale, who is about to graduate from American University with a degree in literature, was part of the 2009 trip and was a student leader for the trip the following year.

In the Palpa area, there were clear signs of educational progress, Gale says. While many of the women were illiterate, their daughters were enrolled in school. But girls’ attendance often dropped off in the higher grades. In areas where money is tight, boys are sent to school while the girls stay home, taking on more household responsibilities.

Things were less encouraging in the Terai Belt in the south of Nepal, “where education seemed a privilege very few could afford, male or female,” Gale says. Girls are married off at a young age, or they are at a high risk of becoming victims of human trafficking.

Looking for a way to help empower the women in that region, Gale and a couple of other students donated money to purchase sewing machines in 2009.

A girl in Nepal, where American University student Katie Gale led a student trip touring the country for three weeks to assist women and children and learn about grassroots empowerment and social justice.



“What was inexpensive for us was completely out of the question for them.”

By the next year’s visit, the program had taken off. The women were using their sewing skills to raise money, and their children seemed better nourished and more energetic, Gale says. Unfortunately, recent unrest has forced visitors and workers from nongovernmental organizations to leave the region.

Some Challenges Remain

Despite risks in many parts of South Asia, efforts to improve the lot of women and girls persist.

Although universal primary education is the law in India, plenty of issues still remain, Rajan says. In rural areas, major stumbling blocks are a lack of female teachers, the long distances the girls would have to travel between home and school, and a lack of toilets for girls, Rajan says. Families worry about the safety of their daughters, particularly if they come from the lower classes. “People think it’s absolutely acceptable to assault girls from the lower caste.”

The girls also often face discrimination at school, where teachers may believe the students are “only Dalits. What are you going to do with an education?” Rajan says. At the same time, the Dalit girls may be forced to clean the school because of their position in society. Instead, girls in rural areas often drop out of school in third grade, when they are old enough to care for their siblings or do housework.

Things improve if students make it through primary and secondary schools, with affirmative action ensuring slots are set aside in public universities for disadvantaged groups like members of the lower caste and disabled students. “The problem is [that] we need affirmative action starting in first grade,” Rajan says.

Rajan is concerned about how things may change at the university level because of a bill currently in Parliament that would allow foreign universities to operate in India. Many students from wealthy families currently travel abroad to study, so having foreign universities in India would open up that educational opportunity to the middle class. But she fears that could leave public universities primarily as a place for only the lower classes.





Getting Girls Educated in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, the challenge for girls for years was simply getting an education. Nawrozi, who is now studying at Meredith College, experienced it firsthand when the Taliban took control of the country when she was just 7 years old, and she could no longer attend school, though girls under the age of 10 could continue to go to the mosque and learn how to read the Quran. Her father also helped educate her at home.

When the Taliban fell she started school in seventh grade, and then came to the United States as a high school exchange student for the 2006–2007 school year. She dreamed of returning to get her college degree, and her acceptance into the IEAW program made that a reality, when she returned to the United States in 2009.

When she returns home she wants to be a role model by “persuading other girls to get an education either abroad or in Afghanistan. Education not only

IEAW students Nadia, Salma, and Haseena graduate from Roger Williams University in 2010.



Mrs. Helena Kaushik Women's College students and faculty celebrate Lohri, the new year, in 2010.

helps women be independent, it also helps our country's economy improve," Nawrozi says.

That's a prime motivator for Basiri Saleem, whose first all-girls' school was open to students between the ages of 7 and 24, taking in young women who had been denied an education under the Taliban. Now the six schools that are part of the Oruj Learning Center cater to girls between first and ninth grade, and Basiri Saleem is in the process of creating secondary schools so the girls can receive high school educations. There are currently more than 3,600 girls in the program's primary schools.

The Oruj Leadership and Management Institute, the all-women's community college that Basiri Saleem helped launch, will graduate its first class of 62 women later this year. They receive an education in management and advocacy skills. "We hope that some of our (younger) students will be granted permission by their parents to leave their villages and come to Kabul and study at the college."

Not one to stop there, Basiri Saleem is working with professors at Kabul University to transition the Oruj Leadership and Management Institute into a four-year school, and she's looking for colleges and



A student dancing in a cultural function at Mrs. Helena Kaushik Women's College in 2009.

universities abroad that would be willing to offer scholarships or fellowships to her students. She's also looking for colleges and universities, primarily in the United States, that would send professors to Afghanistan for a semester to teach management courses.

"For me, getting an education in the U.S. is not about educating one person, it's about educating thousands of women." **IE**

SUSAN LADIKA has been a journalist for more than 20 years, working in both the United States and Europe. She is now based in Tampa, Florida. Her last article for *IE* was "Women in Latin America—Opportunity Through Education" in the March/April 2011 issue.