

# The Afghan Institute of Learning: Bringing Human Rights Education to Afghan Women

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It is the mid-1990s. The people of Afghanistan are still living with war, displacement, and the oppressive Taliban regime. Millions of Afghan refugees are struggling to survive in refugee camps in the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan. The refugees have an overwhelming desire to return to their homes, values, and peaceful way of life. As they cope with the devastation wrought by the Russian invasion, refugees fear other foreign influences on issues such as women's rights. Refugees continue to worry about potential threats in the form of assistance organizations that are embedded with foreign values and agendas that could interfere with the ultimate goal of repatriation and Afghan self-determination in rebuilding the country. These fears give way to antagonism toward organizations and individuals working to promote "foreign" values in the camps. In this setting and social climate, discussions of women's rights provoke heated controversies that at times escalate to violence.

Most urban refugees have settled in Peshawar. They are more educated and slightly more open to women's programs. Peshawar and other cities of the Northwest Frontier Province have schools for girls, and some women work. Rural refugees living in camps outside the city area, are a great deal more conservative than urban refugees and resistant to programs for women, viewing them as a threat to Afghan culture and traditions. Penetrating their communities with critically needed education for women and girls is both imperative and incredibly difficult.

## The First Human Rights Workshops in Peshawar

An indigenous organization founded in 1995 and run by Afghan women, the Afghan Insti-

tute of Learning (AIL) initially gained the trust of the Afghan community by providing safe, secure, culturally sensitive, quality training workshops for female teachers in Peshawar and the refugee camps. AIL also supported a number of girls' schools and preschools in both places. When AIL began offering human rights workshops for women in 1998, Peshawar women were willing to attend even though human rights education was highly controversial.

The workshops offered were based on Islam and respectful of Afghan culture. They taught women their rights under Islam, which are basically the same as those outlined in international women's rights documents. The first women to participate in the workshops highly recommended them to other women, and their families endorsed them as educational and informa-

tive. Soon, waiting lists for workshops were growing.

### Reaching Rural Afghan Women

One day a school principal from a refugee camp community outside Peshawar came to visit AIL. He had heard about its human rights workshops and requested that AIL provide them to the women in his camp. He supported education for women and could identify women who would be interested in the workshops. The people in his camp had a solid reputation for fundamentalism and stark opposition to women's education. No nongovernmental organization (NGO) had been able to introduce human rights education of any kind to the women in this camp. NGOs working in the Northwest Frontier Province believed that beginning programs of any kind for women and girls in the camp was dangerous.

Still, AIL worked with the school principal to see if a human rights workshop could be held in the camp. Soon a group of women—with no education, of varying ages, and wearing traditional dress—arrived to participate in the workshop.

The two facilitators were educated, urban Afghan refugee women living in Peshawar. They began by explaining women's rights under Islam, citing passages from the Qur'an. Then they asked the women what they would like to discuss. At first, the women were reserved. Discussing personal problems with non-relatives, such as rape and incest, is taboo for Afghan women.

The women were uneasy at first, but by the end of the workshop they were all eager to tell their stories and there was not enough time for each to tell them. What happened?

Using case studies from a book, the women discussed rape, incest, harassment in the bazaar, not being able to go to school, and spousal abuse. Realizing that other women had had similar experiences, the participants were able to identify with each other, listen to each other,

offer advice, give support, cry together, and find a way to talk to their families about their rights, guaranteed under Islam. These traumatized and abused women reached out from their isolation to touch each other's lives with compassion and to solve their common problems.

### Impact of Human Rights Education for Women

The workshop graduation ceremony honored the women who had pioneered this groundbreaking program and taken a gigantic first step to advancing women's and girls' rights. A few days later, one woman who had participated in the workshop and who was an elder in her family told the AIL staff that she wanted her daughter to go to school. She said that she also wanted AIL to offer literacy classes for women and older girls who had never been able to go to school. She said that she had told her male family members that they would have to start sharing the work equally with the women. Her requests planted the seeds for the first women's learning center (WLCs) that AIL opened in January 2002. WLCs are designed to meet the multiple needs of Afghan women, especially for health and education, a new and unprecedented idea for Afghans. AIL now operates 18 WLCs in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

What did *not* happen after AIL offered the first human rights workshops for rural Afghan women? The workshops were not closed down by outraged community members fearful for the women's honor. No school buildings were burned down. None of the women who attended the workshop were harassed for participating. None of AIL's property was destroyed. Not a single person was harmed or negatively affected by a fear-filled outburst or conservative backlash.

The workshops helped the participants and their families see what was possible for themselves and their daughters. It helped them envision a better life. Soon, there was a waiting list in the camps of rural women who wanted to take the human rights workshop, too.

AIL expanded its education programs to include not only human rights education for women but also preschool through post-secondary education for women and children; health education; peace education; enrichment classes; and income-generating skill training. AIL now serves over 350,000 Afghan women and children per year in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Human rights education is at the core of AIL's work because AIL is founded on the idea that education is a universal human right. Human rights are taught and modeled by all AIL teachers and in all AIL classrooms.

### Afghan Institute of Learning's Values and Philosophy

AIL teaches human rights in a way that is consistent with Afghan culture and religious beliefs. Principles that AIL emphasizes in its organization values, mission, practices, and curriculum include the following:

- *Diversity.* It allows increased communication and understanding between people of different religious sects and ethnic groups. AIL maintains a diverse staff that provide high-quality education, and promotes a classroom atmosphere that facilitates communication and understanding between different groups, shattering stereotypes. AIL provides health and education services to all Afghan women and children in need and has a diverse student body.
- *Equality.* Consistent with Islam, AIL teaches that all people are equal, regardless of skin color, family, ethnicity, and religion.
- *Fairness.* AIL teachers and staff emphasize that one wrong thing plants the seeds for another, that unfairness in one aspect of your life leads to unfairness in others.
- *Justice.* AIL staff and teachers emphasize that it is a crime to violate someone else's rights, violently persecute someone, or kill someone who is not guilty. Guilt can only be established according to the law, and

verdicts and punishments must be determined by legal authorities. AIL teaches that people should solve problems through negotiation and logic before resorting to violence.

- *Inclusiveness.* AIL works to include the whole community—men and women—in designing and implementing a new program. AIL does not discriminate in hiring or in accepting women and children into its education and health programs.

These principles underlie every AIL activity because staff believe that modeling the principles is critical to the success of any human rights education effort. AIL's comprehensive and integrated program of teaching human rights in its classrooms starts with these principles. The program provides students with respectful and peaceful alternatives for solving problems. The program emphasizes teacher training, classroom environment, and teaching methods.

### Teachers and teacher trainers

Because of their training, AIL teachers find opportunities to discuss human rights and peace. AIL teachers and teacher trainers also model human rights by their teaching and by organizing their classrooms in a way that respects human rights. Teachers do not use violence, threats, or intimidation to force their students to study. Instead, teachers prepare lesson plans and use teaching methods to engage students in the learning process. Teachers treat students with respect and work with them to solve any problems they might have in class.

AIL's teacher training workshops and seminars focus on a variety of topics to improve teaching styles as well as the quality of information presented. Topics of AIL's teacher training educational workshops and seminars include the following:

- discipline,
- classroom organization,

- teachers' behavior and characteristics of good teachers,
- solving students' problems,
- understanding students,
- effective conversation with students,
- solving classroom problems, and
- fostering children's potential.

During training, teachers are invited to share their ideas on strategies to discipline and organize classrooms, and to communicate with students and understand them while respecting their rights. Teacher trainers offer suggestions, advice, strategies, and activities for practicing new skills. When the teacher trainers open a discussion by asking teachers to share their ideas, they are modeling an open, interactive classroom atmosphere, where students feel free to share and discuss ideas. Teacher trainers also visit the classrooms of newly trained teachers and help them apply their new skills. To complete AIL's pedagogy seminar, teachers must satisfactorily use these skills with the help of a teacher trainer.

Students notice the difference after their teachers are trained by AIL. One student in an English class in Kabul said, "I feel very lucky to be a student in such an educational center, since the students here are taught in a friendly and disciplined atmosphere. AIL administrators always visit the classes and solve the students' problems in a friendly manner."

Another student in a fast-track education class said, "I started in a literacy class and now I am able to read and write as a student in grade six or eight... Besides we feel very safe in this center. All the staff, especially in the WLCs, attend to us and are very kind to us."

A teacher who took an AIL teacher training seminar said, "The trainers' every word and manner was a lesson for us to learn from. We learned many useful things from the trainers' behavior and attitudes. Since this seminar, we have been teaching the subjects and getting good results."

#### Afghan Institute of Learning classrooms

AIL supports schools, offers classes in its WLCs, and trains teachers for other schools and centers, at their request. AIL offers women and children leadership and human rights training, preschool through university classes, WLC literacy classes, WLC enrichment classes such as English and computers, health classes, and income-generating skill training.

AIL classrooms promote peace and human rights through messages and pictures. The classroom atmosphere is open and interactive. Students are asked to share their ideas and opinions without persecution or ridicule. AIL enlists the support and help of the local community to protect its schools and WLC classrooms. AIL teachers and staff are respectful of Afghan culture and traditions and, therefore, minimize the potential for conservative backlash against AIL's progressive programs.

AIL classrooms are diverse with respect to ethnicity; religion; gender (if the community prefers, girls and boys have separate classes); and socioeconomic status. This diversity allows students to learn how to interact with people different from themselves in an atmosphere of safety and respect.

#### Teaching methods

Teachers use methods that elucidate human rights in a way that is comfortable for students and sensitive to students' culture and religion, and that promote discussion and critical reflection on human rights issues.

One method is brainstorming. Teachers ask students to list their rights. Students respond to each other. Teachers strengthen and reinforce the students' ideas by referring to international human rights documents, Islam, and cultural customs.

AIL teachers also help students generate ideas about their rights through the case study. For example, this one is from *Safe and Secure*:

*Eliminating Violence Against Women and Girls in Muslim Societies.*

Maliika is 40 years old and has worked on a construction site just outside of Dhaka since before she married Saiful 20 years ago. Her hands and feet are raw and covered with cuts and blisters from breaking stones. Yet Maliika has never seen her earnings in full; her husband takes the pay envelop from her as soon as she receives it... Is Saiful violating Maliika’s human rights? If so, which rights is he violating?

Students discuss case studies and some, of their own will, offer examples of what they or someone they know experienced. Participants are never encouraged, pressured, required, or even asked to share their personal stories. However, some participants, if they feel safe and comfortable, will volunteer to speak. Students may also role-play case examples to generate ideas and discussion about human rights.

After identifying their rights, the students discuss how they can defend them in an unjust society. Students give advice and suggestions to solve human rights problems and raise awareness about human rights issues. In some discussions students are so empowered and energized that they make plans to solve human rights problems that they and their neighbors face. These plans have included opening poorhouses to help widows and their children, hospitals for women, and women’s literacy classes.

**A Guide to Teaching Human Rights in the Afghan Classroom**

Human rights as outlined in numerous international documents are consistent with Afghan values. Because human rights education is new, AIL’s trainers and teachers must be culturally sensitive. This guide outlines cultural issues related to teaching human rights to Afghans.

<i>DO</i>	<i>DO NOT</i>
Teach negotiation skills and effective communication. Teach people to respect each other. Teach strategies for solving problems peacefully. Teach alternatives to war.	Teach “no war” or passiveness. Afghans have been fighting for a quarter century to protect their homes, families, religious beliefs, livelihoods, and country. Instead, recognize and respect Afghan history and the threats facing Afghans.
Use interactive teaching techniques such as role-play and group work to engage students in learning.	Teach in a way that is not interactive and that does not value student’s perspectives.
Model the human rights principles that your organization is advocating when making decisions and managing a classroom.	Treat students disrespectfully or use violence or intimidation to force students to attend to their studies.
Teach self-advocacy and assertiveness. Teach communication skills that help solve rather than exacerbate problems.	Teach submissiveness. (In Afghan culture, a principle such as “turn the other cheek” is considered weakness and letting others use you.)
Consult religious law as well as human rights principles. When describing human rights problems, use examples that are relevant to Afghans, their lives, their country, and their daily experiences.	Try to impose values that are foreign to Afghan culture or Islam.
Teach people to use logic and reason to solve problems. Explain human rights by giving examples and basing your argument on logic and legal arguments. Say that “resorting to violence begins an endless cycle of violence” and is one example of a logical reason for not using violence.	Tell people to behave peacefully and respectfully toward each other because it is good for them. (Be able to give logical reasons.)



### **Afghan Institute of Learning's Method of Fostering Community Involvement and Change at the Grassroots Level**

AIL's human rights, WLC, and other educational programs succeeded where none other had. The reason can be traced to AIL's values, principles, and philosophy, which have helped develop a grassroots method of organizing effective and revolutionary community programs for women and girls. The main principles of this method include the following:

- Begin at the grassroots with locally identified needs.
- Start with the least controversial service in the least conservative area.
- Do not impose services on a community.
- Offer high-quality, culturally sensitive programs, incorporating feedback from participants.
- Act at the request of the community when expanding services.
- Require that the community help develop the program.
- Recognize that in Afghan culture, trust and relationships are personal, not organizational.
- Set flexible rules.
- Hold high standards, have high expectations, and model them.
- Offer more controversial programs in a voluntary, culturally sensitive way after trust has been established.

The AIL staff and executive director developed and piloted this method in refugee camps and have used it to expand their work to Afghanistan.

### **The Afghan Institute of Learning**

AIL, an Afghan women's NGO, was founded on a belief that educated people are the key to a future, developed Afghanistan. AIL was started in response to the lack of educational opportunities for Afghans in Pakistan, particularly

women and girls. Today, AIL has offices in Kabul and Herat, Afghanistan and Peshawar, Pakistan and has expanded its WLC services to:

- Offer quality, nontraditional, lifelong educational services to Afghan women and children in cities and rural areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan based on the requests and needs of women and children. Offerings include literacy and fast-track classes; skill-training classes (e.g., sewing, embroidery, knitting, carpet weaving, flower making, crafts); and enrichment classes (e.g., English, computer, math, science, Qur'an, calligraphy). Health and peace education is integrated into the curriculum.
- Support traditional primary, secondary, and home schools for girls and boys in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where no other traditional educational opportunities exist. Support includes providing an administrative structure, teacher training, and supervision, and may include providing books and supplies, teachers' salaries, and facilities' rent.
- Support innovative preschool classes, involving parents.
- Provide human rights, leadership, and empowering education training to women so that they learn to communicate effectively, assert their rights, and take leadership roles in their communities.
- Provide student-centered, interactive training for teachers and health professionals so that they can provide quality education and health services.
- Improve people's health by providing clinical health services, health education, and health workshops, and by training female health professionals and traditional birth attendants. AIL operates health clinics and mobile health units to deliver vital services such as medical exams, medication, and vaccinations to urban and rural Afghans.
- Provide counseling services to women and children and develop counseling materials

for Afghans, who have been subjected to enormous trauma and stress over the last 25 years.

- Develop postsecondary educational opportunities for women and men through an innovative, private university, specializing in education, health, math, and computer science.
- Develop training seminars, course curricula, instructional materials, and workshops tailored to the needs of teachers and health professionals (e.g., literacy teachers' seminar, kindergarten teachers' workshop, school administration workshop, workshop to train health professionals).
- Publish *Voice of Education*, a magazine for AIL staff, students, and the public.

AIL programs are comprehensive and emphasize quality and meeting the community's needs. In Pakistan AIL has developed a kind of "ministry of education" for the schools it supports. AIL provides a curriculum and structure for the schools; trains teachers and administrators; supervises and assists teachers and administrators; distributes materials, supplies, and salaries; and, through its model schools, sets a standard for quality education. AIL works with communities to meet their needs, resulting in home schools for girls in Afghanistan, mobile libraries, literacy classes for older girls and women, and enrichment classes.

Believing that training is the key to quality education and health and an informed society,

AIL continuously trains teachers and health professionals, offers human rights and leadership workshops, and develops training curricula.

AIL requires community participation in all its projects. Believing that the best results are achieved when everyone is integrally involved, AIL works with community leaders to plan, develop, and implement all projects. No project is started unless the community has requested it and is involved in it. Utilizing this visionary strategy, communities now contribute 30–50% of project resources.

AIL has thus been able to develop critically needed health and education programs for Afghan women and girls and to implement these programs in a culturally sensitive way. AIL has been able to deliver these services to rural women and to offer controversial programs in a way that unites people around their common goals.

AIL uses the following materials in leadership and human rights workshops:

*Safe and Secure: Eliminating Violence Against Women and Girls in Muslim Societies* (Montreal, Canada: Sisterhood Is Global Institute, 1998). Sisterhood Is Global Institute. E-mail: [signi@qc.aibn.com](mailto:signi@qc.aibn.com). Web: [www.sigi.org](http://www.sigi.org).

*Leading to Choices: A Leadership Training Handbook for Women* (Bethesda, Maryland, USA: Women's Learning Partnership, 2003). Women's Learning Partnership. Email: [wlp@learningpartnership.org](mailto:wlp@learningpartnership.org). Web: [www.learningpartnership.org](http://www.learningpartnership.org).