

Most of the money consisted of \$1 bills from women—and some men—all across the country. Some sent larger amounts. “This \$5 is in honor of the women in my life: my mother, my wife, my two daughters, and my granddaughter,” one man wrote. UNFPA informed Lois and Jane about each other, and they joined forces, formalizing their campaign as 34 Million Friends of UNFPA (www.34millionfriends.org). They began going on speaking tours, and the movement gained steam. People around the country were exasperated by the social conservatives’ campaigns against reproductive health—the defunding of UNFPA, the denunciations of condoms and comprehensive sex education, the attempts to cut off support for family planning by aid groups like Marie Stopes International—and they were eager to do something concrete to help. Sending in a dollar bill wasn’t a panacea, but it was very easy to do.

“No one can say I can’t give a dollar,” Jane noted. “We’re even getting donations from college students and high school students. You can take a stand for the women of the world for just the price of a soda.”

Both Ellen Goodman and Molly Ivins wrote columns praising Jane and Lois and their work, and donations reached two thousand a day. Jane traveled with UNFPA to Mali and Senegal—her first visit to Africa—and began speaking and campaigning nonstop.

“From that time on, I have given my life to this,” she told Sheryl. “I’m going to follow this to the ends of the earth to further this cause. . . . Forty women every minute seek unsafe abortions—to me this is just a crime against humanity.”

After President Obama announced in January 2009 that he would restore funding for UNFPA, the question arose: Is 34 Million Friends still necessary? Should it fade away? But by then the group started by two indignant women had raised a total of \$4 million, and they saw vast needs remaining—so they decided to continue their work as a supplement to American government funding of UNFPA. “There is a huge unmet demand for family planning in the world today,” Jane said. “There is huge need for fistula prevention and treatment. With population pressures and environmental pressures, and economic pressures in much of the world, women will bear the brunt of gender-based violence even more than now. So for me 34 Million Friends is my work. It is my passion. I don’t think any cause is greater for the long term for people, the planet, and peace. So for me, on we go!”

CHAPTER NINE

Is Islam Misogynistic?

A majority of the dwellers of hell will be women, who curse too much and are ungrateful to their spouses.

— MUHAMMAD IMRAN, *Ideal Woman in Islam*

On Nick’s first trip to Afghanistan, he employed an interpreter who had studied English in university. He was a very brave man and seemed very modern until one particular discussion.

“My mother has never been to a doctor,” the interpreter said, “and she never will go.”

“Why not?” Nick asked.

“There are no female doctors here now, and I cannot allow her to go to a male doctor. That would be against Islam. And since my father died, I’m in charge of her. She cannot leave the house without my permission.”

“But what if your mother were dying, and the only way to save her would be to take her to a doctor?”

“That would be a terrible thing,” the interpreter said gravely. “I would mourn my mother.”

A politically incorrect point must be noted here. Of the countries where women are held back and subjected to systematic abuses such as honor killings and genital cutting, a very large proportion are predominantly Muslim. Most Muslims worldwide don’t believe in such practices, and some Christians do—but the fact remains that the countries where girls are cut, killed for honor, or kept out of school or the workplace typically have large Muslim populations.

To look at one broad gauge of well-being, of 130 countries rated by the World Economic Forum according to the status of women, eight of the bottom ten were majority Muslim. Yemen was in last place, with Chad, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan right behind it. No Muslim country

ranks in the top 40. Kazakhstan ranks highest, at number 45, followed by Uzbekistan, at 55.

We tend to think of Latin America, with its legacy of machismo, as a man's world. But Mexico and other Latin countries actually do pretty well at educating girls and keeping them alive. Most Latin nations have populations that are majority female. Maternity hospitals even in poor neighborhoods of South American cities such as Bogotá and Quito provide free prenatal care and delivery, because saving women's lives is considered by society to be a priority.

In contrast, opinion polls underscore that Muslims in some countries just don't believe in equality. Only 25 percent of Egyptians believe that a woman should have the right to become president. More than 34 percent of Moroccans approve of polygamy. Some 54 percent of Afghan women say that women should wear the burka outside the house. Conservative Muslims often side with the top religious authority in Saudi Arabia, Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz, who declared in 2004: "Allowing women to mix with men is the root of every evil and catastrophe."

Muslims sometimes note that such conservative attitudes have little to do with the Koran and arise from culture more than religion. That's true: In these places, even religious minorities and irreligious people are often deeply repressive toward women. In Pakistan, we met a young woman from the Christian minority who insisted on choosing her own husband; infuriated at this breach of family honor, her brothers bickered over whether they should kill her or just sell her to a brothel. While they argued, she escaped. After the Taliban was ousted in Afghanistan, banditry spread and Amnesty International quoted an aid worker as saying: "During the Taliban era, if a woman went to market and showed an inch of flesh, she would have been flogged; now, she's raped." In short, often we blame a region's religion when the oppression instead may be rooted in its culture. Yet, that acknowledged, it's also true that one reason religion is blamed is that it is often cited by the oppressors. In the Muslim world, for example, misogynists routinely quote Muhammad to justify themselves.

So let's face the question squarely: Is Islam misogynistic?

One answer is historical, and it is no. When Muhammad introduced Islam in the seventh century, it was a step forward for women. Islamic law banned the previously common practice of female infanticide, and it limited polygamy to four wives who were supposed to be treated



A fully covered woman in Kabul, Afghanistan, with her daughter (Nicholas D. Kristof)

equally. Muslim women routinely owned property, with rights protected by the law, while women in European countries often did not have the equivalent property rights. All in all, Muhammad comes across in the Koran and the traditions associated with him as much more respectful of women than early Christian leaders. After all, the apostle Paul wanted women to keep silent in church, and the early Christian leader Tertullian denounced women as "the gateway of the devil."

Yet over the centuries Christianity has mostly moved beyond that. In contrast, conservative Islam has barely budged. It is still frozen in the world view of seventh-century Arabia, amid attitudes that were progressive for the time but are a millennium out of date. When a girls' junior high school caught fire in Saudi Arabia in 2002, the religious police allegedly forced teenage girls back into the burning building rather than allow them to escape without head coverings and long black cloaks. Fourteen girls were reportedly burned to death.

The Koran explicitly endorses some gender discrimination: A woman's testimony counts only half as much as a man's, and a daughter inherits only half as much as a son. When these kinds of passages arise in the Bible, Christians and Jews mostly shrug them off. It has been much harder for pious Muslims to ignore unpleasant and antiquated passages in the Koran, because it is believed to be not just divinely inspired but literally the word of God.

Still, many modern-minded Muslims are pushing for greater gender equality. Amna Wadud, an Islamic scholar in the United States, has written a systematic reinterpretation of chauvinist provisions in the

Koran. For example, verse 4:34 refers to wives and is usually translated roughly like this: "As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and beat them." Feminist scholars like Wadud cite a barrage of reasons to argue that this is a mistranslation. For example, the word translated above as "beat" can have many other meanings, including to have sex with someone. Thus one new translation presents that same passage this way: "As for women you feel are averse, talk to them persuasively; then leave them alone in bed (without molesting them), and go to bed with them (when they are willing)."

The Islamic feminists, as these scholars are known, argue that it is absurd for Saudi Arabia to bar women from driving, because Muhammad allowed his wives to drive camels. They say that the stipulation that two female witnesses equal one male witness applied only to financial cases, because women at the time were less familiar with finance. That situation is now obsolete, they say, and so is that provision. The feminist exegesis argues if the Koran originally was progressive, then it should not be allowed to become an apologia for backwardness.

A useful analogy is slavery. Islam improved the position of slaves compared to their status in pre-Islamic societies, and the Koran encourages the freeing of slaves as a meritorious act. At the same time, Muhammad himself had many slaves, and Islamic law unmistakably accepts slavery. Indeed, Saudi Arabia abolished slavery only in 1962, and Mauritania in 1981. In the end, despite these deep cultural ties, the Islamic world has entirely renounced slavery. If the Koran can be read differently today because of changing attitudes toward slaves, then why not emancipate women as well?

Muhammad himself was progressive on gender issues, but some early successors, such as the Caliph Omar, were unmitigated chauvinists. One reason for their hostility to strong women may have been personality clashes with the Prophet's youngest wife, Aisha, the Islamic world's first feminist.

Aisha was the only one of Muhammad's wives who was a virgin when he married her, and she grew to be a strong-willed woman with whom he spent a great deal of time. Aisha knew firsthand the perils of a society that treated a woman as a fragile chalice of honor, for she herself was once accused of adultery. While traveling across the desert in a caravan, she lost a necklace and went to look for it—and then was left behind by the caravan. A man named Safwan found Aisha and res-

cued her, but since they had been together without a chaperone, they were accused of having an affair. Muhammad sided with her—that's when he had the revelation about needing four witnesses to attest to adultery before punishment could be applied—and ordered that the accusers be flogged with forty lashes.

After Muhammad died in Aisha's arms (according to Sunni doctrine, which is disputed by Shites), she took on an active and public role, in a way that annoyed many men. Aisha vigorously contested views of Islam that were hostile to women, and she recorded 2,210 hadith, or recollections of Muhammad used in Islam to supplement and clarify Koranic teachings. Ultimately Aisha even led an armed rebellion against a longtime adversary, Ali, after he became caliph. That insurrection is called the Battle of the Camel, because Aisha commanded her troops by riding among them on a camel. Ali crushed the rebellion, and then for centuries Islamic scholars discounted Aisha's importance and rejected her feminist interpretations. All but 174 of her hadith were discarded.

Yet in recent decades some Islamic feminists, such as Fatema Memissi, a Moroccan, have dusted off Aisha's work to provide a powerful voice for Muslim women. There is, for example, a well-known statement attributed to Muhammad stipulating that a man's prayers are ineffective if a woman, dog, or donkey passes in front of the believer. As Memissi notes, Aisha ridiculed that as nonsense: "You compare us now to donkeys and dogs. In the name of God, I have seen the Prophet saying his prayers while I was there." Likewise, Aisha denied various suggestions that her husband considered menstruating women to be unclean.

Another dispute about the Koran concerns the idyllic black-eyed virgins who supposedly will attend to men in the Islamic afterlife. These are the *houris*, and some Islamic theologians have been quite specific in describing them. A ninth-century scholar, Al-Tirmidhi, recounted that *houris* are gorgeous young women with white skin, who never menstruate, urinate, or defecate. He added that they have "large breasts" that are "not inclined to dangle." Suicide bombers have often written about their expectations of being rewarded by the *houris*, and Muhammad Atta reassured his fellow hijackers on the eve of 9/11: "The *houris* are calling you."

The bombers may be in for a surprise. The Arabic language was born as a written language only with the Koran, and so many of its

words are puzzling. Scholars are beginning to examine early copies of the Koran with academic rigor, and some argue that a number of these puzzling words may actually have been Syriac or Aramaic. A scholar who uses the pseudonym Christoph Luxenberg for his own protection argues that "hourī" is probably a reference to the Aramaic word for "white grapes." That would be plausible, because the Koran compares the hourī to pearls and crystal, and because accounts of Heaven from the time of the Koran often included bounteous fruit, especially grapes to refresh the weary.

Would there be as many suicide bombers if the presumption was that martyrs would arrive at the Pearly Gates and be handed a dish of white grapes?

Westerners sometimes feel sorry for Muslim women in a way that leaves them uncomfortable, even angry. When Nick quizzed a group of female Saudi doctors and nurses in Riyadh about women's rights, they bristled. "Why do foreigners always ask about clothing?" one woman doctor asked. "Why does it matter so much what we wear? Of all the issues in the world, is that really so important?" Another said: "You think we're victims, because we cover our hair and wear modest clothing. But we think that it's Western women who are repressed, because they have to show their bodies—even go through surgery to change their bodies—to please men." A third doctor saw that Nick was taken aback at the scolding, and she tried to explain the indignation.

"Look, when we're among ourselves, of course we complain about the rules," she said. "It's ridiculous that we can't drive. But these are our problems, not yours. We don't want anybody fighting for us—and we certainly don't want anybody feeling sorry for us."

Americans not only come across as patronizing but also often miss the complexity of gender roles in the Islamic world. "I'm a Nobel Peace Prize-winner and a university professor, but if I testify in a court, it won't take my testimony because I'm a woman," notes Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian lawyer. "Any uneducated man would be taken more seriously. . . . Iran is a bundle of contradictions. Women can't testify fully in court, and yet women can be judges presiding over the court. We do have women judges. Any woman who wants to travel abroad needs the consent of her husband. But our vice president is a woman. So when our vice president travels abroad, she needs the consent of her husband. Meanwhile, sixty-five percent of Iranian university

students are women, because they do better on entrance exams than men do."

Across the Middle East, attitudes are changing. Partly because of the leadership of prominent women such as Queen Rania of Jordan and Sheikha Mozah, the first lady of Qatar, acceptance of women's rights is spreading. A UN survey in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco found that more than 98 percent of people in each country believed that "girls have the same right to education as boys." Jordan, Qatar, and Morocco have been among the leaders in giving women greater roles. In Morocco, King Muhammad VI married a computer engineer who does not veil herself and who has become a role model for many Moroccan women. King Muhammad also reformed family law, giving women more rights in divorce and marriage, and he supported the pathbreaking appointment of fifty women imams, or preachers.

One of the promising efforts to stimulate change in the Arab world is led by Soraya Salti, a thirty-seven-year-old Jordanian woman who is promoting entrepreneurship in middle schools and high schools. Soraya's program, Injaz, teaches kids how to devise a business plan and then start and operate a small business. Many of them end up actually starting businesses, and the skills are especially useful for girls because of the discrimination that women face in the formal job market. By giving women an alternative way to pursue careers and earn incomes, as entrepreneurs, Injaz also facilitates the expansion of the labor force and economic development as a whole. Queen Rania has strongly backed Soraya, and the program has earned rave reviews. Injaz has now spread to twelve Arab countries and teaches 100,000 students a year how to launch businesses. "If you can capture the youth and change the way they think, then you can change the future," Soraya says.

A window into the squandered human resources in conservative Muslim societies is the Women's Detention Center in Kabul, Afghanistan. The jail is a single-story compound behind a high wall in the heart of the city, without guard towers or coils of barbed wire. Its inmates include teenage girls and young women who were suspected of having a boyfriend and then subjected to a "virginity test"—a hymen inspection. Those whose hymens were not intact were then prosecuted and typically jailed for a few years.*

*Examination of the hymen obviously is an unreliable gauge of virginity. But it is perceived as reliable enough in poor countries with low levels of education, and woe to the girl who has lost hers.

Rana, the middle-aged woman who serves as director of the detention center, is in some ways a pioneer for working women, having risen through the police ranks to direct the jail. But she believes that girls who lack a hymen should be prosecuted, if only to protect them from their families. Every year, Afghanistan's president pardons some inmates during the Eid al-Fitr festival that ends Ramadan. When women are freed, some of them are shot by relatives or, worse, "accidentally" scalded to death with boiling water. Jail is sometimes the safest place for a bold Afghan woman.

One inmate, Ellaha, a nineteen-year-old with short black hair and a round self-confident face, startled us by greeting us in English and approaching us. She sat down in the dingy little jail room and unself-consciously spoke of graduating from high school and attending one year of university while her family lived as refugees in Iran. Ellaha is charming, disciplined, and ambitious; in another culture, she would be an entrepreneur. Her problems began when the family returned to Afghanistan from Iran. Ellaha chafed at the more rigid Afghan customs, from the burka to the expectation that a woman will stay home all her life.

"My family wanted to force me to marry my cousin," she said. "I didn't agree to marry him, because he is not educated and I don't like his job—he is a butcher! Plus, he's three years younger than me. I wanted to study and continue my education, but my father and uncle wouldn't let me."

Ellaha found work with an American construction company and quickly impressed the managers with her intelligence and diligence. Her family was torn between horror at their daughter working with infidels and delight at the money she brought home. Then one of her bosses, an American named Steve, arranged for Ellaha to study at a university in Canada on a full scholarship. Ellaha saw this as an opportunity that could transform her life, and she leaped at it—even though her parents worried that it would be un-Islamic for a woman to travel so far away and study with men. The family also still wanted Ellaha to marry her cousin, partly because he was the son of her father's oldest brother, the family patriarch. Ellaha's sister, two years younger, was meant to marry the cousin's younger brother, but the sister followed Ellaha's example and resisted. So the family struck back.

"When it was almost time for me to go to Canada and I was asking about flights, they tied me up and locked me in a room," Ellaha said. "It

was in my uncle's house. My father said, 'Okay, beat her.' I'd never been beaten like that in all my life. My uncle and cousins were all beating me. They broke my head, and I was bleeding." Ellaha's sister endured the same treatment. After a week of daily beatings as they lay with their wrists and ankles chained, Ellaha and her sister agreed to marry the cousins.

"My mother guaranteed that we would not escape, and our family took us back to our home after we promised we would be obedient," Ellaha said. The family allowed Ellaha to resume her job, but her boss rescinded his offer of foreign study when he realized her family adamantly opposed the plan. Ellaha was heartbroken but continued to work hard. To help her do her work, she was given a mobile phone. Her family was aghast that she now could communicate unsupervised with men. The family demanded that she give up her phone.

"Then our father decided that we must marry. . . . My mother came and said, 'I have no power to help.' So we escaped." Ellaha and her sister fled to a cheap guesthouse, planning to go to Iran and stay with relatives while attending university there. But someone spotted Ellaha at the guesthouse and told her parents, so the police came to arrest her and her sister as runaways. The police subjected them to virginity checks, but their hymens were intact.

They were jailed "because their lives were in danger," explained Rana. "To protect her from the anger of her father, she's here." Ellaha acknowledged that that was a legitimate concern. "They were very angry," she said of her father and uncle. "I was scared that they might kill me." Ellaha's father, a carpenter named Said Jamil, was indignant when we tracked him down in Kabul. He didn't want us inside his house, so we spoke on the street. We asked him to promise not to harm Ellaha, and he did so, but he also vowed that he would no longer allow her "to be so free."

We don't blame Ellaha's difficulties on the Prophet Muhammad or on Islam as such. Islam itself is not misogynistic. But as many Muslims have themselves pointed out, as long as smart, bold women like Ellaha disproportionately end up in prison, or in coffins, in some Muslim nations, then those countries are undermining their own hopes for development.

There are many reasons for the boom in Muslim terrorists in recent decades, including frustration at backwardness in the Islamic

world, as well as resentment of corrupt rulers. But another reason may be the youth bulge in Islam—partly because of lagging efforts on family planning—and the broader marginalization of women.

A society that has more men than women—particularly young men, is often associated with crime or violence. The historian David Courtwright has argued that one reason America is relatively violent, compared to Europe, is the legacy of a male surplus. Until World War II, the United States was disproportionately male, and the frontier was overwhelmingly so. The result, he suggests, was a tradition of aggressiveness, short tempers, and violence that still echoes in America's relatively high homicide rates. The same analysis, while controversial, may also help explain why male-dominated Muslim societies have similar threads emphasizing self-reliance, honor, courage, and a quick resort to violence.

All this is compounded when the men are young. In Western countries, the cohort aged fifteen through twenty-four makes up an average of 15 percent of the adult population. In contrast, in many Muslim countries, this share has been more than 30 percent. "For each percentage-point increase of youth in the adult population," says Norwegian researcher Henrik Urdal, "the risk of conflict increases by more than 4 percent."

Youth bulges may well be particularly destabilizing in conservative Muslim countries, because women are largely passive and silent—amplifying the impact of young men. Moreover, in other parts of the world, young men aged fifteen through twenty-four spend many of their waking moments chasing young women. In contrast, in conservative Muslim countries, some young men make war, not love.

In strict Muslim countries such as Afghanistan, many young men have little hope of ever finding a partner. Typically in such nations, there are at least 3 percent more males than females, partly because females don't receive the same medical care as males. Also, polygamy means that the wealthiest men take two or three wives, leaving even fewer women available for the poor. The inability of a young man to settle down in a family may increase the likelihood of his drifting toward violence.

Young men in such countries grow up in an all-male environment, in a testosterone-saturated world that has the ethos of a high school boys' locker room. Organizations made up disproportionately of

young men—whether they be gangs or boys' schools or prisons or military units—are often particularly violent. We suspect that the same can be true of entire countries.

Countries that repress women also tend to be backward economically, adding to the frustrations that nurture terrorism. Farsighted Muslim leaders worry that gender inequality blocks them from tapping their nations' greatest unexploited economic resource—the half of the population that is female. In Yemen, women make up only 6 percent of the nonagricultural labor force; the figure is 9 percent in Pakistan. Contrast that with between 40 percent and 50 percent in countries such as China and the United States. As a UN Arab Human Development Report put it: "The rise of women is in fact a prerequisite for an Arab renaissance."

Bill Gates recalls once being invited to speak in Saudi Arabia and finding himself facing a segregated audience. Four fifths of the listeners were men, on the left. The remaining one fifth were women, all covered in black cloaks and veils, on the right. A partition separated the two groups. Toward the end, during the question-and-answer session, a member of the audience noted that Saudi Arabia aimed to be one of the top ten countries in the world in technology by 2010 and asked if that was realistic. "Well, if you're not fully utilizing half the talent in the country," said Gates, "you're not going to get too close to the top ten." The small group on the right erupted in wild cheering, while the larger audience on the left applauded tepidly.

Some evidence suggests that where families repress women, governments end up repressing all citizens. "The status of women, more than other factors that predominate in Western thinking about religious systems and politics, links Islam and the democracy deficit," writes the scholar M. Steven Fish. That may be because an authoritarian and patriarchal home environment is mirrored in an authoritarian and patriarchal political system.

The consequences of repressing women may run even deeper. David Landes, the eminent Harvard historian, in his magisterial book, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, explores why it was Europe that nurtured an industrial revolution, and not Asia or the Middle East. He argues that one of the key forces working in Europe's favor was openness to new ideas, and that one of the best gauges of that openness was how a country treated its women:

The economic implications of gender discrimination are most serious. To deny women is to deprive a country of labor and talent, but—even worse—to *undermine the drive to achievement of boys and men*. One cannot rear young people in such wise that half of them think themselves superior by biology, without dulling ambition and devaluing accomplishment. One cannot call male children "Pasha," or, as in Iran, tell them that they have a golden penis,* without reducing their need to learn and do....

In general, the best clue to a nation's growth and development potential is the status and role of women. This is the greatest handicap of Muslim Middle Eastern societies today, the flaw that most bars them from modernity.

The Afghan Insurgent

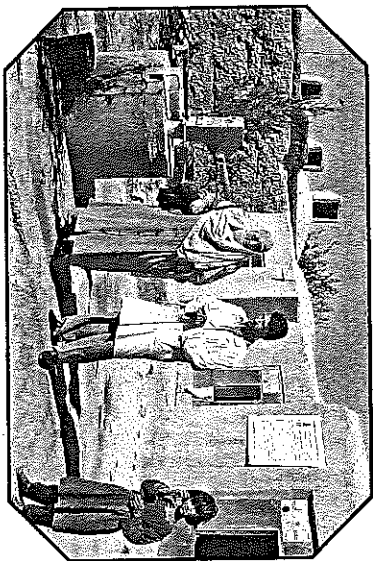
Western aid efforts have been particularly ineffective in Muslim countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan. After the American-backed victory over the Taliban in Afghanistan at the end of 2001, well-meaning aid groups dispatched hardy young Americans to Kabul. They rented homes and offices—sending Kabul real estate prices through the roof—and bought fleets of white SUVs. Kabul nightlife boomed, restaurants and DVD shops sprouted, and Kellogg's corn flakes appeared in grocery stores. On a weekend evening in Kabul, you could drop by a restaurant catering to aid workers and see \$1 million worth of SUVs parked out front.

The flood of aid programs targeted Afghan women, and they did some good. But typically they didn't reach far into the countryside, where they were most needed. Moreover, many Afghans felt threatened by Christians or Jews entering their country, walking around naked (by Afghan standards), and urging women: *Learn to read! Get a job! Empower yourself! Throw off your burka!* One aid group, innocently trying to gather names of local people for a database, asked for the names not only of men in each household, but also of women and girls. That was perceived as scandalously intrusive.

Another Western aid group, trying to improve the hygiene and health of Afghan women, issued them bars of soap—nearly causing a riot. In Afghanistan, washing with soap is often associated with post-coital activity, so the group was thought to be implying that the women were promiscuous.

Still, some aid groups have figured out how to operate effectively in this environment. The crucial steps are ensuring local buy-in and support for the project, and keeping Westerners largely out of sight so that it feels like a local initiative. Afghan villagers, as much as anybody, want a better life, and if aid can bring a well, a clinic, a school—then they will usually welcome it as long as it does not seem to threaten their culture. CARE has built and operated schools, including for girls, in troubled areas of Afghanistan without incident, even as many government schools have been burned by the Taliban. Like-

* Landes is correct that Iranians often call baby boys *doudoul talq*, or "golden penis." But this is not necessarily evidence of gender bias, since Iranians call baby girls an equivalent: *nanaz talq*, or "golden pubic area."



wise, the Bangladeshi group BRAC runs projects in turbulent Afghan provinces, and it succeeds because villagers protect the BRAC employees.

*Sakena Yacoobi
visiting one of her
clinics in Herat.*

To run a project successfully in a Taliban-influenced area, it's important to get support from the local mullahs. That may mean negotiating

what subjects girls will study, and perhaps using Pakistani textbooks rather than Afghan government textbooks. It may mean including Koranic studies in the curriculum. Or in some areas, the safest place to hold girls' literacy classes is in the mosque, for that stamps girls' education with a divine sanction—and the Taliban won't blow up a mosque. But even in the wildest areas, some measure of progress is usually possible.

One particularly effective agent of change in Afghanistan is Sakena Yacoobi, a force of nature who runs an aid organization called the Afghan Institute of Learning. Short and stout, her hair bundled in a scarf, waving greetings to one person while bantering in rapid-fire English with another, Sakena is perpetually in motion. Perhaps the reason fundamentalists haven't silenced her yet is that she herself is an Afghan Muslim, less threatening than an outsider. American organizations would have accomplished much more if they had financed and supported Sakena, rather than dispatching their own representatives to Kabul. That's generally true: The best role for Americans who want to help Muslim women isn't holding the microphone at the front of the rally but writing the checks and carrying the bags in the back.

Sakena grew up in Herat in northwestern Afghanistan, and although she was accepted by Kabul University, she couldn't attend because of the violence at the time. So she traveled halfway around the world to Stockton, California, attending the University of the Pacific on a scholarship as a premed student. Afterward, she studied public health at Loma Linda University (while bringing thirteen members of her family to safety in the United States). But Sakena wanted to help her people, and so she moved to Pakistan to work in the Afghan refugee camps, where she tried to provide health care and education. She began by opening a girls' school in Peshawar with three hundred pupils; a year later, she had fifteen thousand students. The Taliban barred girls from getting an education in Afghanistan, but Sakena nonetheless opened a string of secret schools for girls there.

"It wasn't easy, and it was very risky," she recalls. "I negotiated that if people supplied houses and protected the schools and the students, then we would pay the teachers and provide supplies. So we had thirty-eight hundred students in underground schools. We had rules that the students would arrive at intervals, no men were allowed inside, and people would work as lookouts."

The operation was immensely successful, protecting eighty secret schools and suffering only one Taliban raid. "That was my fault," Sakena admits. "I allowed an Englishwoman to visit, and the children talked and the Taliban raided the next day. But we had advance warning, and so the teacher dispersed the children and turned the classroom into a regular room of the house. It was okay in the end."

Sakena's operation for Afghan refugees in Pakistan was even larger and included a university for women as well as literacy classes for adults. Once the Taliban fell, Sakena moved her Afghan Institute of Learning back to Kabul, and she now provides education and other services for 350,000 women and children in Afghanistan. The institute has 480 staff members, 80 percent of them women, and it operates in seven provinces. Many of the women students at Kabul University are graduates of her programs.

The institute runs a teacher-training program, as well as workshops that focus on teaching women their legal rights both in civil law and Islamic law. That's a sensitive issue, of course, but it is more palatable to the clerics when it comes from a Muslim woman in a headscarf than from American infidels.

"Education is the key issue for overcoming poverty, for overcoming war," Sakena says. "If people are educated, then women will not be abused or tortured. They will also stand up and say, 'My child should not be married so young.'"

The institute teaches religion as well, but in a way that might horrify fundamentalists. Moderate passages from the Koran are taught, so that women can direct their husbands to passages that call for respect for women. Often it is the first time that either women or men have realized that there are such verses in the Koran.

Sakena runs an archipelago of fixed and mobile health clinics, which offer Afghans family planning services and free condoms. Another fundamental part of her work involves economic empowerment measures. "When people have empty stomachs, they can't learn," she says. So the institute offers classes in a range of skills that enable women to earn an income. These include sewing, embroidery, hairstyling, and computer science. Young women who can master computer skills can get jobs as soon as they graduate for \$250 per month, several times what most young men earn.

Sakena has now been widely recognized for her work, and UNFPA and other groups channel assistance through her. Bill Drayton's team selected Sakena to be the first Ashoka Fellow from Afghanistan. She is indeed one of the great social entrepreneurs of Afghanistan (a perfect model for Ellaha, the young Afghan woman in jail, if she isn't murdered by her father), and constantly in danger. She shrugs it off.

"Every day there is a death threat." She laughs. "I'm always changing cars, changing bodyguards." It pains her, as a pious Muslim, that some fundamentalists want to kill her in the name of Islam. She leans forward and becomes even more animated. "From my heart, I tell you: If they were educated, they would not behave like that. The Koran has quotation after quotation that says you must treat women well. Those people who do bad things, they are not educated. I am a Muslim. My father was a good Muslim, and he prayed every day, but he did not try to marry me off. There were many offers for me when I was in the sixth grade, and he said no.

"That is why these people are afraid of educating women—they are afraid that then the women will ask questions, will speak up... That's why I believe in education. It is such a powerful tool to overcome poverty and rebuild the country. If we took the foreign aid that goes to

guns and weapons and just look one quarter of that and put it into education, that would completely transform this country?"

Sakena shakes her head in exasperation, and adds: "The international community should focus on education. On behalf of the women and children of Afghanistan, I beg you! If we are to overcome terrorism and violence, we need education. That is the only way we can win."