



# Sakena Yacoobi

NOMINEE • Pages 70–89

## WHY SAKENA?

**Sakena Yacoobi was honoured by the World's Children's Prize Foundation in 2012 for her long and dangerous struggle to fulfil Afghan children and women's right to education, healthcare and to learn about their rights.**

Sakena founded her organisation, Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL) in 1995, during times of oppression and intense conflict. The Taliban regime had banned girls from going to school. But Sakena opened 80 secret schools, trained teachers, and created secret mobile school libraries. Today, Sakena and AIL run hundreds of schools, health clinics and hospitals in Afghanistan and Paki-stan, and have trained 19,000 teachers. The teachers learn new methodologies and have helped 4.6 million children learn critical thinking skills. Every year they give 125,000 children education and healthcare. Through Sakena's work more than 5.5 million Afghan children have gained new opportunities and faith in the future, despite extreme poverty and 30 years of war in Afghanistan.



**"All you need is a classroom, a chalkboard, some chalk and a trained teacher. That's all that is needed to change the lives of all the children in a whole village," says Sakena Yacoobi. Her teachers giving lessons to girls in the computer room.**

**As a young girl Sakena Yacoobi is the only girl in her class. She thinks to herself, "Why can't girls go to school?"**

**When war hits Afghanistan, Sakena is studying in the USA. She wants to return home and help those worst affected by the war – women and children. When girls are banned from attending school, she opens secret schools.**

**Almost 30 years later, she is still fighting for Afghanistan's children, and more than 700,000 of them have received education and healthcare through Sakena and her organisation, AIL.**

**S**akena's own story begins many years ago, in Herat, a beautiful old city. Sakena's father buys and sells houses and fridges and radios from abroad. Her mother is a housewife.

Sakena is their first child, and for a long time she is an only child. So her father wants her to be both a daughter and a son to him. At the age of four, he sends her to a religious school,

where the teacher is a mullah, a Muslim priest.

"I was the only girl in a class of 15 students. I wasn't shy, but sometimes the boys did tease me. Why should a girl go to school, they asked. I thought: why shouldn't a girl study? Sometimes the boys hit me. When I complained to the mullah he didn't tell them off. Instead he got angry at me! But I found it easy to learn. By the age of 6 I knew as much as the mullah," recalls Sakena.

### **Dressed as a boy**

When Sakena is young she wears a little headscarf, which is an Afghan tradition for girls. But sometimes Sakena's father dresses her up as a boy.

"I hid my long hair under



a hat. And I wore shirts and shorts. And hey presto! I was transformed into a boy. It was fun! I could join in with the boys' wild games. We did wrestling, arm-wrestling, and fighting. I was big and strong for my age, so I often won."

Sakena's father took her everywhere with him – on business trips, to dinners, and to parties where only men were allowed. He really wants another child, and would love a son, but it takes time.

"My mother was pregnant constantly, but the children didn't survive. Once she nearly bled to death giving birth. The babies were stillborn, or so weak that they didn't survive more than a couple of weeks. It was awful to see how sad my mother was every time she lost a child that she had carried for nine months. The same thing happened to

other women in our district. So I thought: why should so many women and children suffer? There and then I decided to change that!"

#### Father's secret

Sakena's father is strict. After school it's time for homework, not playing. Every evening she shows him her homework jotter and he reads, wrinkles his nose and says, "You can do better! Do it again, do it right!" And she has to start over.

One day when Sakena is 10, she shows him her homework as usual, and as usual she gets the response, "That's not good enough! Do it again!" But Sakena knows that there is not a single mistake, so she plucks up the courage to reply, "Read it and point out exactly what is wrong!" And she hands the jotter back to her father. He just looks at her, and says in a low voice, "I can't read."

"And then he turned his face away. I could hear he was crying. It was a shock. I thought my father could do anything, but he was illiterate. In all these years, he had only pretended to correct my homework. And I had let

myself be tricked. After that day, he never asked to see my homework again. I never told anyone what had happened. It was our secret. My father didn't want people to know that he couldn't read or write."

#### Turns down suitors

Sakena often hears her grandmother, aunts and other relatives on her father's side complain that Sakena's mother hasn't given him any sons. They say that she is useless, and that Sakena's father should take a new, younger wife. Sakena can't stand to hear this. But her father

doesn't want a new wife. He's happy with the wife he has.

Finally, when Sakena is 14, she gets a little brother. By now she is in Year 8 and she takes care of all her father's business paperwork. She is like his secretary. At school, she sees the other girls leave, one after another. They get married and become housewives, even though they are only children. Child marriage is common in Afghanistan. And Sakena has suitors too.

"I was fat, and not very pretty, but lots of people still wanted to marry me, because I had a good reputation. But my father always asked me,



### Allah means God

In the stories about Sakena and her work for children in Afghanistan, sometimes Allah is mentioned and sometimes God. But it's the same thing – Allah means God.

## Most dangerous country for women

Afghanistan is the most dangerous country in the world for women to live in. Violence, lack of healthcare and widespread poverty make Afghan women the most vulnerable. One in eleven women die when giving birth. Four in five girls are married off, through forced marriage or arranged marriage. Only one in ten women can read and write.





➔ ‘Sakena, do you want to marry this man?’ And I always answered, ‘No father, I want to go to school!’ And my father respected that. He was a good man.”

### Coming home to the children

Sakena is the first person in her extended family to graduate from school. After high school, she wants to continue studying, but at this time there is only one university in the whole country. It’s in another city, far from home. The problem is solved when

Sakena makes friends with an American family who are visiting Afghanistan. They say that they can take her back to the USA with them to study. Sakena wants to go, but her father ponders the issue for a long time. Letting his daughter study near home is one thing, but letting her disappear off to the other side of the world is another. Finally, he agrees. Sakena is over the moon.

Just as Sakena Yacoobi moves to the USA, war comes to Afghanistan. Cities and villages are bombed, battles are fought in alleyways and

on mountainsides. Many are killed or have to flee. After much hardship, Sakena’s mother, father and brother manage to get to the USA. The family is reunited. And the story could have stopped there. But Sakena can’t forget her homeland. She isn’t satisfied to live in peace and safety, while her people suffer.

They need schools and hospitals.

“My heart burned for my people. I wanted to help those affected by the war, particularly the women and children. My parents were not pleased with my decision. My mother said, ‘You can’t leave us again. We need to stick together.’ But my father agreed with

## Afghanistan

28 million people live in Afghanistan. It is a country of high mountains that are snow-capped all year round, deep valleys, forests and large deserts. The summers are hot, with temperatures over 40 degrees. In the winter they sink to

minus 20, with snowstorms and ice. The most common crops are rice, potatoes, pomegranates, mangoes and watermelons. There are many rare wild animals, like bears, eagles, gazelles and snow leopards. The people keep sheep and cows as



Sakena Yacoobi's goal is to make sure that there isn't a single girl in Afghanistan who is not allowed to go to school to learn to read.



me. 'If this is what you want, then it is also God's will,' he said."

Sakena travels to the Afghan refugee camps, where she gets a job as a manager of a teacher training program. Soon she opens a school for girls. And another. And another. After one year, there are 3000 girls attending

Sakena's schools. The next year, there are 27,000. Sakena also founds clinics and teacher training courses. When the Taliban, who govern Afghanistan at the time, ban girls from going to school, Sakena doesn't give up. Instead, she opens secret schools for girls. More and more, until there are 80 secret



Children and their mothers waiting at one of the hospitals run by Sakena Yacoobi and AIL in Afghanistan.



livestock, and horses, donkeys and camels as pack animals or for riding.

### Wars

There have been wars going on in Afghanistan for over thirty years. Only the old people remember a time of peace. Sometimes foreign armies have occupied the country, and at other times

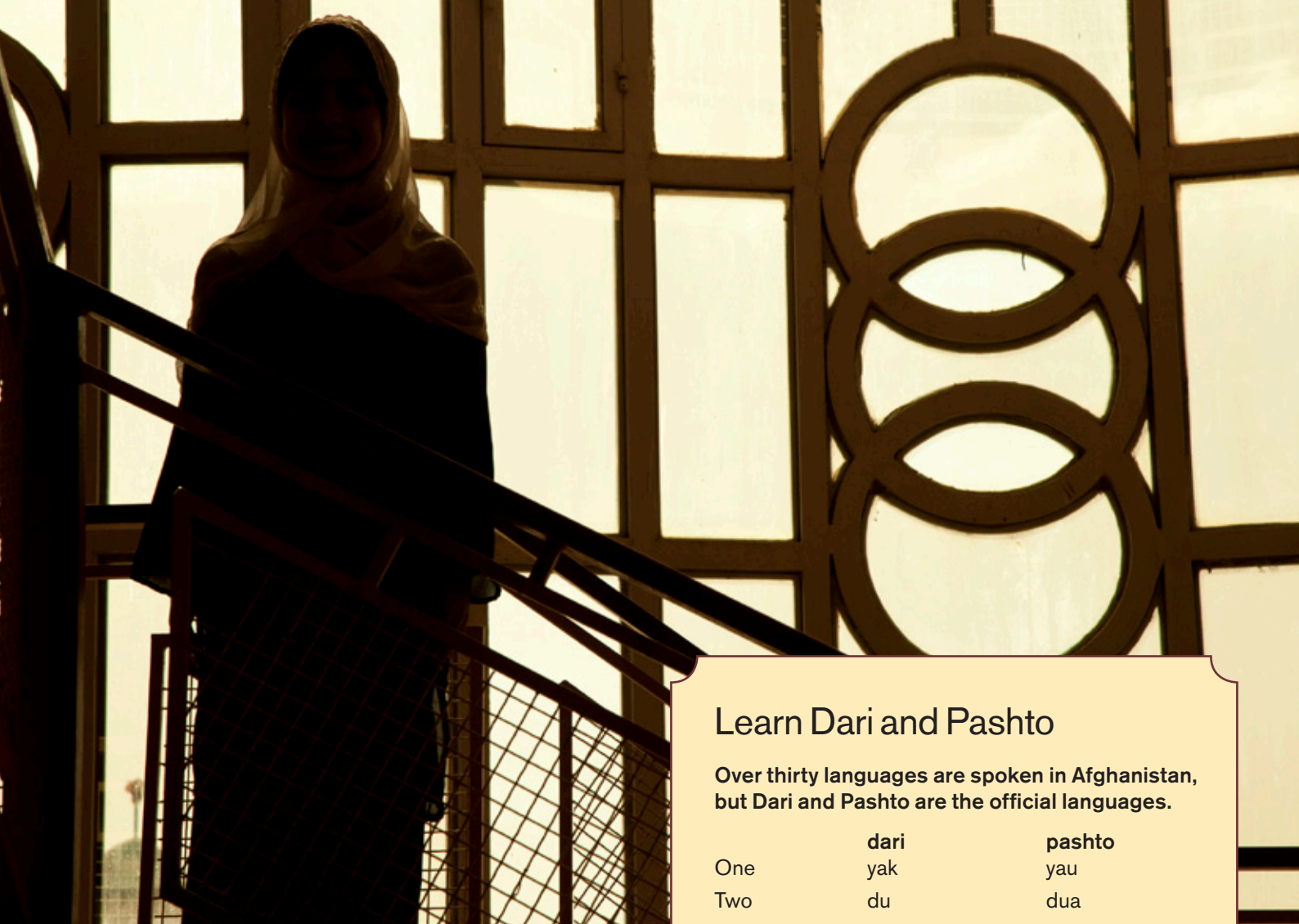
different Afghan groups have been at war with each other. Many innocent people have been affected by the wars. All Afghans have relatives who have been killed or injured, and many families have had to flee their homes. **Between 2001–2021 the government was fighting the Taliban and other rebel groups, with help from soldiers from the USA and**

other countries. Neither side seems to be 'winning'. The war just keeps going.

**The Taliban**  
**When the Taliban governed the country from 1997-2001, they made it illegal for women to work and girls to go to school. They also banned dancing, music, kite flying**

and TV. Anyone who didn't obey was killed or whipped. The Taliban is an Islamic fundamentalist movement **and since August 2021 they are back in power.**





## Learn Dari and Pashto

Over thirty languages are spoken in Afghanistan, but Dari and Pashto are the official languages.

	dari	pashto
One	yak	yau
Two	du	dua
Three	se	drei
Four	chahar	tsalare
Five	panj	penza
yes/no	Bala/Na	Hoo/Na
Good day	Salam aleikum	Salam aleikum
Goodbye	Khod hafez	De kuday pe aman
What is your name?	Nametan chist?	Staa num tse day?
My name is Muhammed!	Namam Muhammed hast!	Zama num Muhammed deh!

→ schools. Time passes, and Sakena works around the clock.

“I didn’t have any children of my own, but I feel proud and happy when I think of all the children I have helped. Thousands and thousands of Afghan girls. And quite a few boys too. I love them as though they were my own. Children are the future of Afghanistan.”

### Death threats and bodyguards

Sometimes Sakena gets death threats from men who don’t believe girls should be allowed to go to school. So she gets protection from bodyguards. Sometimes her schools and clinics are closed by armed gangs. So she opens them again, in secret. Sakena Yacoobi never gives up. Her goal is for every girl to be

allowed to go to school and learn to read.

“Everyone has a right to go to school. It’s just as important as eating or breathing. In the USA and Europe, children have computers, video games and mobile phones. Why should Afghan children not even be able to go to school? It’s not much to ask. All you need is a classroom, a chalkboard, some chalk and a trained teacher. That’s all that is needed to change the lives of all the children in a whole village. Look at me, I would never have come this far if my father hadn’t let me study.” 🌐

**When Sakena Yacoobi was little and the only girl in class she thought: “Why shouldn’t a girl be allowed to go to school?” She has devoted her life to giving the girls of Afghanistan, and boys, this opportunity.**

