



WHY HAS SAKENA BEEN NOMINATED?

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.



Sakena Yacoobi



"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.

Sakena'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

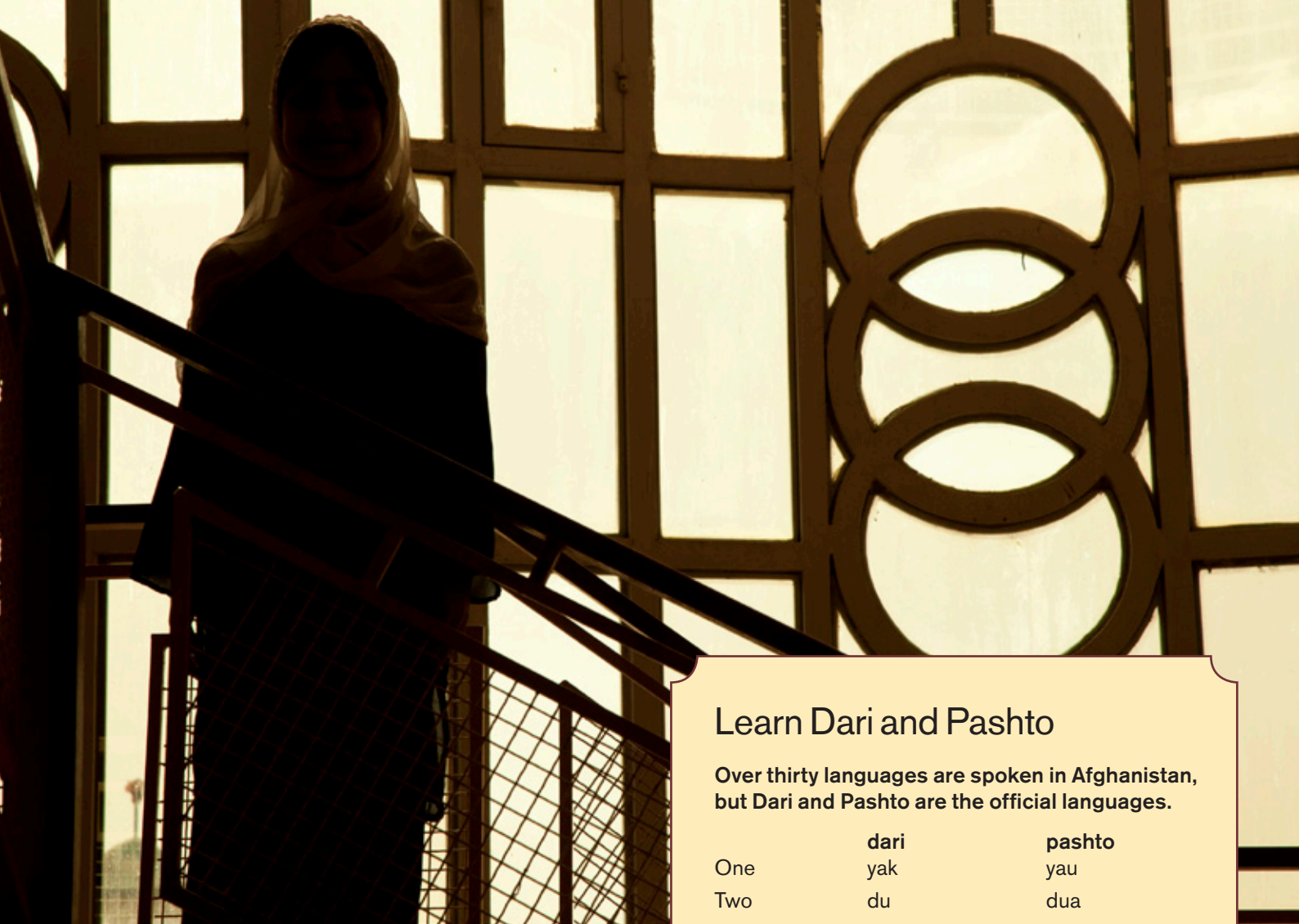
different Afghan groups have been at war with each other. Many innocent people have been affected by the wars. All Afghans have relatives who have been killed or injured, and many families have had to flee their homes. **Between 2001–2021 the government was** fighting the Taliban and other rebel groups,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



Nouria gets a lift to school.



Nouria went to secret school

Thunder roared and rain whipped the earthen houses in the village of Ghani Khel on the night she was born, fourteen years ago. The girl's father, Khan Wali, held her up in the light of a gas lamp and vowed:

"You will have the same chances in life as a boy, to go to school and learn a trade."

The girl was named Nouria, which means light in Arabic. "She will be a role model for other girls," her father wrote on the back of his copy of the Koran, the holy book of Islam, the night she was born.

The years passed. Nouria turned seven and started going to a school built by Sakena Yacoobi's organisation, AIL. Nouria was good at reading and writing, but found maths difficult. She loved her school, where boys and girls could study in

the same class. But one day when Nouria arrived at school, there was a note stuck to the door with a knife. "This school is closed. We will cut the throats of parents who send their children here," it said.

Nouria, who was 11 years



Nouria, 14

FAVOURITE FOOD: Sweets

BEST FRIEND: My cousin Fatima

WANTS TO BE: A teacher

LIKES: School, poetry, stories, sweets

HATES: War

FAVOURITE ANIMALS: Tigers and eagles

old by now, knew exactly what was going on. The Taliban had closed the school! She ran home and told her father. On the same day, Taliban soldiers turned up in the village. They went from house to house telling people that they had taken over the village. Everyone had to obey their orders.

"They had beards and black turbans. And so many weapons... pistols, rifles and rocket launchers. I was sad and afraid of what was going to happen," explains Nouria.

Took food

The Taliban soldiers started to invite themselves into people's houses. Late at night



➔ they would knock on the door. “Give us food,” they would say, “or we’ll beat you to death.” Since there were so many of them and they were armed, no-one dared say no. Nouria’s father asked her mother, Amina, to lay everything they had on the table. Rice, lamb steak, raisins, nuts and vegetables. The soldiers sat there and wolfed down all the family’s food. Then they disappeared out into the night. The same thing happened time and again. The family didn’t have enough food, and Nouria often had to go to bed hungry.

Secret school

The school remained closed. Until Nouria’s father and the teachers at Sakena Yacoobi’s school came up with a plan to hold secret lessons.

“We would gather a handful of students and one teacher in someone’s kitchen or living room. We pretended to be running errands so we could get there without being found out. We hid our schoolbooks under our cans. Then we went home again, one at a time, not in a group. It was terrifying, but also a little bit exciting. We didn’t trust everyone in the village – some of our neighbours sided with the Taliban and thought girls

shouldn’t go to school,” recalls Nouria.

For over a year, the Taliban governed the village and Nouria went to the secret school. Then one day, there was news on the radio. The leader of the Taliban men who had terrorised the villagers had been killed in battle. Now Nouria and the other children could relax. The school would open again, in its usual building with classrooms, desks and chalkboards. The villagers who had supported the Taliban fled.

Future dreams

Two years have passed and Nouria is now 14. She has just moved in with her grandfather in the city of Herat to start a new school. The village school can only take students up to Year 6. Nouria dreams of becoming a teacher and educating girls about their rights:

“Unfortunately, girls don’t have the same chances as boys in Afghanistan. But there shouldn’t be any difference. We are equal. I learned that at Sakena Yacoobi’s school. Without that school, I wouldn’t even have been able to write my own name.”

Nouria’s parents miss her, as she lives so far from home, but her father says it’s worth it.

“My daughter will be a role model, a light for other children. I made that vow when she was born. So she has to go to a good school, even if that means we can’t see each other every day. It’s like the poet says: ‘A beautiful flower often has thorns’.” 🌍



“My daughter will be a role model, a light for other children. I promised that when she was born,” says Nouria’s father.

Father smoked opium

Nouria's cousin Fatima grew up in constant fear of her father. He beat her and sold everything the family owned to buy opium, a dangerous drug. Now Fatima's life is much better, and it has been ever since her uncle helped her.

My father used to beat us all the time. He hit me, my mother and my little brother with his hands, stones, sticks and a whip. He smoked opium and was addicted to drugs. When he didn't have enough money for drugs he went crazy. Once when I was watering the vegetables, he grabbed me and shouted: 'What are you doing here? You should be inside!' He aimed his pistol at my head and said that he'd shoot me if I didn't behave. I was shaking with fear," says Fatima.

Father sold everything

Fatima's family lived in a remote rural village, in a simple earthen house with high walls all round it. Fatima was sad and afraid all the time. She didn't dare tell anyone what things were like at home. After all, her father had told her that he'd beat her to death if she did.

At school, Fatima was quiet all the time so she didn't make friends in her class. The other stu-

dents thought she was strange. At night Fatima had nightmares. Before falling asleep she would lie awake and imagine running away. She wished that she had a different father, a big, strong, kind father.

"My father only cared about finding money for opium. He got fired from his job. Then he sold all our kitchen utensils, pots, glasses and knives. Our uncle gave us a little bit of food, otherwise we would have starved. But sometimes my father even sold that food. I got headaches from hunger and couldn't concentrate at school."

A new life

Once, Fatima's father tried to quit smoking opium. It went well at first. He managed to get a job and started to earn a bit of money. But soon he was fired again. He had started smoking again.

"It was a disappointment. But the worst thing was when I saw my little brother, who was only 5, copy my father. My brother lit a reed and pretended to smoke it, as though it was an opium cigarette. I began to despair. Would he become like our father too? Would it never end?"

When Fatima's father broke into her uncle Khan Wali's house and stole money and a mobile phone, it was to be the last thing he did in the villa-

Fatima, 15

INTERESTS: School, TV, music
BEST FRIEND: My cousin Nouria
FAVOURITE FRUIT: Mango and melon
WANTS TO BE: A lawyer
HATES: Drugs and war
FAVOURITE THING: My new schoolbag
IDOL: My uncle Khan Wali, who thinks girls should study

ge. Her uncle gave him a good hiding. Then he took Fatima, her mother and her younger brother to his house. Fatima's father was chased out of the village and a whole new life began for Fatima.

"It was like waking up from a nightmare. Nobody beat us and we could eat till we were full every day. I had a lot to catch up with in school and started to spend the afternoons studying at AIL's Learning Center. I learned to read and write there, and I got over my shyness. My mother started to study there too. She had always been so sad, but she became happy. Now she has a job telling the women in the village how to look after their health." 🌐

Opium

Opium is a dangerous drug. It comes from poppies, a beautiful red flower that is grown in large fields in Afghanistan. Opium can be smoked or used to make heroin, which is injected with a needle. Anyone who takes the drug gets addicted and can only think about how to get more of it, not about how to get food for their families. Those who use it are mostly men. Afghan farmers grow opium because they are poor and can sell it for lots of money, not because they like drugs.

When Aisha is orphaned early in her life, she is very sad and refuses to talk. But the kind lady at the orphanage and the teachers at Sakena Yacoobi's education program gradually give her hope for the future. After an operation, Aisha now has a 'pacemaker', and dreams of becoming a teacher and helping other children whose lives are hard.

Aisha doesn't remember much about her father. But she remembers that he had an ordinary, safe face and a lovely dark beard. And she remembers hearing he'd been murdered.

Aisha was sitting eating with her mother and younger sister when a relative came and told them the terrible news. Her father, Said Ahmed, had been shot by thieves on his way to Iran to find work. Aisha's mother, Makol, was sad, but she drew her three children in close and said:

"Don't worry! I'll make sure we get by. I will be like a mother and a father to you. It is God's will. God gives life and God takes life, and we humans must accept our fate."

Mother falls ill

Without a father to support the family, life became difficult. Their mother Makol took on cleaning work at hospitals and in rich homes, but she still couldn't afford the rent. The family had to move from their house to a one-room house with an earthen floor, and could only afford to eat bread and drink tea. Soon, Makol fell ill.

"Mother had something wrong with her heart. She couldn't work, she just lay at home in bed. We got some rice from an aid organisation and from our neighbours, but no support from our relatives. Often we didn't have anything to eat," recalls Aisha.

Her mother got weaker and



8.00 a.m.

The AIL teachers come to the orphanage.

"We learn about English, computers and sewing. My favourite teacher is Seddique, who teaches English and computer skills. She teaches us so much. She begins every lesson by talking about life and society, and telling us that girls have rights too."

weaker. One morning, she simply didn't wake up. She had died during the night. A neighbour found Aisha and her sisters, sitting crying beside their mother.

To the orphanage

Aisha was taken to an orphanage. A concrete building in the middle of the city, with a big courtyard. There were lots of children there in the same situation. They tried to comfort Aisha.

"They said don't cry, we know how it feels. We have no

6.00 a.m.

"I get up, make the bed and do my morning prayers. I pray to God that I won't become ill again! Then it's time for a breakfast of egg, bread and tea."



Aisha's pacemaker help

mothers or fathers – only each other."

And it was true. Some of the children didn't know where their parents were, and other children's parents had been killed, were in prison or were so poor that they couldn't care for their children.

"The girls at the orphanage said they'd be like my sisters and they gave me dolls," says Aisha.

But she was inconsolable.

"I missed my mother and I cried myself to sleep every night. I was only six years old



11.00 a.m.

Aisha goes to the girls' school next door.

"Children from the orphanage and children who live with their parents all go to the same school. We orphanage children stick together, especially when the other children tease us. School is fun, but the lessons are a bit noisy. There are far too many students per teacher."



Aisha, 13

LOVES: My sister Fariba

HATES: Disease and war

MISSSES: My dead mother

LOOKS UP TO: My teacher Seddique

WANTS: To have a healthy heart!

LIKES: English, computers



As her heart beat for others

and I didn't really understand what it meant that my mother was dead. For a long time, I thought that one day she would come and get me from the orphanage."

"For a while, I was so sad that I stopped talking. I didn't join in with the classes, I just ran away and hid."

One kind lady

There was a kind lady at the orphanage, called Bibi Gul. She saw how sad Aisha was, and came to see her in the evenings to tell her stories

and cuddle her. Finally, Aisha started to talk again.

"Could you be my mother?" asked Aisha.

"You are safe with me," answered Bibi Gul.

So Aisha started to go to Bibi Gul's room at bedtime and fall asleep in her bed. Bibi Gul would never shoo her away, although she was tired after a long working day. She waited till Aisha had fallen asleep and then carried her to her bunk bed.

Bit by bit, Aisha began to feel safer and happier. She

started to go to school. And she also started going to classes run by teachers from AIL. They came to teach the girls to sew, speak English, and use computers. A new world opened up before Aisha's eyes.

"Before I came here I didn't know anything. I didn't even know that 'English' was a language! I had never seen a computer. And I couldn't even write my own name! Now I know so much, and I'm learning more all the time," says Aisha, who is very

fond of her teacher, Seddique from AIL.

Pacemaker

The years passed, and one morning when Aisha was eleven she was woken by a pain in her chest.

"It felt like a knife in my heart. A knife slowly turning, round and round," says Aisha.

Just like her mother, she had a heart defect. Her heart was too weak to pump all the blood around her body. The doctor who examined her





1.00 p.m.

"We have rice and beans for lunch almost every day at the orphanage. Sometimes just rice. But now and again we get spaghetti bolognese, that's my favourite. I'm pretty tired of rice."

explained that Aisha needed an operation – otherwise she could die.

But it's not possible to have a heart operation in Afghanistan. So the staff at the orphanage organised a concert, with singers and musicians who performed for free. All the ticket money went towards sending Aisha to Iran, to a modern children's hospital.

"I was the only one who didn't have my parents with me. But the other children and their mothers and fathers were kind. They gave me a book where they had all



Aisha stopped talking when both her mother and father died. AIL's teachers helped her, and now she wants to become a teacher to help children who have had a tough time.

written messages or drawn pictures, and they prayed to God for everything to go well for me," recalls Aisha.

She was put to sleep for the operation.

"When I opened my eyes after the operation I was lying alone in a white room. At first I thought I was dead, but then a doctor came in. He

said that they had put in a pacemaker, a little machine that helped my heart to beat. I have a scar from the operation," says Aisha.

Wants to help others

Back at the orphanage, Aisha felt better. But she still gets sudden chest pains from time to time.

What people say about Aisha



Drawing all the time

"When Aisha was younger she loved her dolls. She never tired of playing with them. But now they're not as important to her. Her favourite pastime now is drawing. Every time she has a free minute, she runs to get paper and pens, and starts to draw. We usually draw together. Princesses, horses, and beautiful palaces. And families with mothers, fathers and children."

Foziya, 12, friend

Alone at New Year

"Aisha is my sister. We stick together whatever happens, because we have nobody else in all the world. Let me tell you about Nowrooz, Afghan New Year. All the other children from the orphanage were picked up by relatives to go to New Year parties, but nobody came for us. We thought our uncle was coming so we waited all day, but he didn't come. We were so disappointed. The orphanage was totally empty, because the staff were on holiday. It was just me, Aisha and Bibi Gul who were left. Despite everything, we had a pretty good New Year. Bibi Gul told us stories until we fell asleep."

Fariba, 10, sister



"Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night with a sharp pain in my heart. It hurts so much. Then I lie awake and think about death, and about not wanting to die. Because there's so much I want to do," says Aisha.

Even though she has a new pacemaker, Aisha still can't run as fast as the other children. She gets tired and out-of-breath easily if she exerts herself.

"Sometimes I wonder why God made my heart so weak. And I ask to be made healthy and well. I just want to be like other children," says Aisha.

But she's doing really well at school.

"I love AIL's lessons. They are much better than at the normal school. My teacher Seddique has changed my life. Now I know what I want, and I have plans for the future.

One day, I want to speak English as well as my teacher. And know as much as she does about the world! Then I'll become a teacher too, to help children who have a hard life. That's my dream," says Aisha. 🌐

3.00 p.m.

"I go back to the orphanage and rest, play and do my homework. When I don't have the energy to study any more I draw, or go and talk to Bibi Gul. Then we watch programs with singing and dancing on the TV."



Sakena's teachers at the orphanage

There are hundreds of girls at the orphanage in the city of Herat, aged from three to eighteen. There are also around 25 boys, but they are moved to another orphanage when they are ten or eleven years old.

The orphanage children sleep in bunk beds and eat meals in a large hall. Around ten women take care of them. In the yard there is a play park with swings and slides, and inside there is a TV and a classroom.

The orphanage is run by the government of Afghanistan, but six days a week, teachers from Sakena Yacoobi's organisation, Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL), come in to teach the children.

Most, but not all, of the children also attend the school next door.



6.30 p.m.

"For dinner, we eat the leftovers from lunchtime. Then we can do whatever we like. I study a bit, pray and then go to my room to talk to my sister Fariba and draw."



So hard-working

"Aisha is one of my favourite students – she is so happy, so hard-working and so kind. And she learns quickly! But I'm a bit worried about her future. When the girls turn eighteen they are adults and have to leave the orphanage. Some get jobs, and others get married off to distant relatives. But some just disappear, and we don't know what happens to them!"

Seddique, 25, teacher

10.00 p.m.
Bedtime.



Whole body laughter

"I can't be Aisha's mother, I have so many children to take care of, but I try! She needs love and she hasn't had it easy. But she is really sweet and when she laughs her whole body shakes. It makes me so happy to see her laugh."

Bibi Gul, 64, who takes care of the orphanage children.





"I don't like wearing a burka. I think a headscarf is enough. The burka looks a bit dull. I have headscarves in different colours - today I'm wearing a red one. That's a happy colour," says Zarafshan, 16, who is a student and an AIL teacher.

"I wear a chador, because according to our tradition and religion, it is not suitable for a woman to show her hair or face to strangers. At home I just wear a headscarf," explains Makhfi, 14, who is learning to sew with AIL.

"I'm wearing a white veil, which I got at the orphanage where I live. It's beautiful," thinks Malalai, 7, who is taught by AIL teachers.



"I have worn a burka since the age of 14. All the women in my village do. It's our tradition and culture, and we are proud of our burkas. I feel safe in my burka," explains Freista, 20, a mother-of-three who is visiting AIL's clinic.



"I got my beautiful headscarf from my mother. But I can only wear it here at the center. Outside I wear a chador, because it's dangerous to draw attention to yourself - you can be kidnapped," says Fatima, 15, who is learning English with AIL.

What are you wearing? Burka, chador or headscarf?

According to Islam, a woman should cover her hair. But there is nothing in the religion to say that a woman should cover her whole face or eyes. However it is traditional in Afghanistan for most women to wear a burka, a garment that covers them from head to toe, when they leave the house. Others wear a chador, which is a large piece of fabric, and a few only wear a small headscarf.

Headscarf

Wearing a headscarf isn't any different from wearing a hat or a cap. It is worn by girls and women from modern, educated families in the cities.



eyes and face visible. The wearer holds it together at the front. The most common colour of chador is black.

Burka

Covers the whole body and head. There is a piece of netting in it that lets the woman see out. Burkas are often sky blue, but can be white, brown or green. It's hard to move around in a burka, and in the summer it gets hot under the fabric.

When do girls start wearing a veil?

Baby girls don't wear a veil at all. Until the age of six or seven, girls have colourful skirts, blouses and sometimes a little pastel-coloured veil. From the age of 7 to about 12, most girls wear a white or black veil. When girls are around 13-15 years old and start to grow into women, it's usually time for a burka. Women over the age of 60 sometimes don't bother with a burka.

Chador

A cloak that covers the whole body, but leaves the

Burka gives protection and oppresses

Many girls and women in Afghanistan are oppressed. Men make the decisions, and the burka is a way of limiting the freedom of women and girls. According to Afghan tradition, women should stay in the home and should not be seen outside, while the men are out in society.

However, all women in burkas are not powerless. They can have a lot of influence over the home, the housekeeping, bringing up children, and marriage. They can also wear a burka on the way to work, but take it off while they work. The burka can give a kind of protection.



Farid loves football and English

Farid never misses a football match with the boys who live nearby, nor his English lessons at the AIL Learning Center.

Farid lives with his mother, father and eight siblings in a small house with three rooms.

"My father is a teacher. He has an extra job as a bicycle mechanic, but he still struggles to provide for the family. Sometimes we get some money from relatives, and my father uses it for food and clothes," explains Farid.

Although Farid's family don't have much money all the children - even the girls - go to school. Farid's father knows how important education is. But he is also strict and bad tempered. Sometimes he hits Farid.

In the mornings Farid goes to an ordinary school, and in the afternoons he learns English at Sakena Yacooobi and AIL's Learning Center. That is his favourite thing - apart from football.

"My dream is to learn fluent English, then I want to study engineering. I want to build huge modern blocks of flats, so that people have a place to live. Every apartment would have lots of rooms, so that people don't need to live in overcrowded homes. But it's hard to become an engineer. Maybe I'll be a teacher instead."



Sport clothes

"I love football! Whenever I get the chance I play in someone's yard. I'm in a football team with the boys who live nearby, and we have a football strip of course. Unfortunately I don't have any football boots, but my father has promised that I can get some as soon as he can afford it. That's my greatest wish!"

School clothes

"When you go to school you need good, clean clothes with no holes, but they can't be so precious that they can't get dirty. I have an hour's walk to school, on dusty roads and narrow alleys. If it's hot and sunny the dust rises, and if it rains the road is muddy and full of puddles."



Good clothes

"It's important to look good at weddings. I got these clothes for my cousin's wedding. It was a big party in our home village. The food was great and there were about a thousand guests. The men celebrated together, and the women together in a different place. That's our tradition."



Baker boy escaped and became



5.00 a.m.

The alarm goes off and Muhammed wakes up. He lingers in bed for a few minutes, then wakes his brothers, Arif and Amin. Their mother and younger brother Yahya are up already.



5.15 a.m.

The call to prayer sounds from the mosque. Muhammed falls on his knees facing the Muslim holy city, Mecca, and prays Fajr, the morning prayer.



Seven-year-old Muhammed works from four in the morning until six in the evening at the bakery's hot oven. Sometimes he gets burns, and he is hit. When he accidentally burns a whole tray of loaves, he runs away and never comes back...

His dream of going to school comes true, and soon Muhammed, with help from the teachers at Sakena Yacoobi's Learning Center, has caught up with the others and became second top in his class.

When Muhammad is seven, he sells chewing gum and telephone cards at the market. But he hardly earns any money.

One evening, his father brings a stranger home. "This is Hamid, the baker. You're going to be his assistant. It's a good job," says Muhammed's father.

The baker looks kindly at Muhammed and says:

"There are lots of boys who want to work for me, so you should be glad you're getting the chance to learn the trade. You start at four tomorrow morning."

Hot and dangerous

That night, Muhammed can hardly sleep. He's pleased to have got a job, but he's nervous too. After all, he doesn't know a thing about bread and ovens. The bakery is quite far away from Muhammed's house, so he has to get up at three to get there on time. The sky is pitch black as he walks to his new job.

Things don't turn out as Muhammed had hoped. His job is to lift the bread in and out of a large stone oven. It's hot and dangerous. On the very first day, he burns himself so badly he cries.

"Stop wailing and show some gratitude, otherwise

you're out," says the baker, lifting his huge right hand. Suddenly he slaps Muhammed hard, right in the face.

Muhammed swallows his tears. "It might get better if I work harder," he thinks. After six hours' work it's time for a break for prayers and a lunch of bread and water. Then Muhammed goes back to work until six in the evening.

Walking home, Muhammed is so tired he nearly faints. He carries a plastic bag with his wages for the day – two dry loaves. But he doesn't complain in front of his mother and father.

Runs away home

Days become weeks and months full of hard toil, abuse and dangerous work around the hot ovens. On his lunch break, Muhammed slips out of the bakery and sits alone under a tree, nibbling his bread.

There is a school next door, and Muhammed looks enviously at the boys on their way home from morning lessons. They laugh and swing their schoolbags. "I want to go to school too," thinks Muhammed.

After seven months, Muhammed has had enough. One morning he accidentally burns a whole tray of loaves, and is so afraid of the baker's

e second top in class



6.00 a.m.

Tea and bread for breakfast.

punishment that he runs away and heads home. In the evening he tells his father Atiq about how awful things are at the bakery, how he is

hit, and how easy it is to get burnt. He weeps and says he wants to go to school, learn to read and write, and not work these long days. At first his father is furious, but after a while he calms down.

“You are disobedient. But

Muhammed, 12

IDOL: Singer Zahir Shah, father Atiq

INTERESTS: Taekwondo, football, TV

WANTS TO BE: A soldier or a martial arts master

FAVOURITE FOOD: Spaghetti

HATES: Child labour

you are also brave. You can go to school on one condition – that you do your homework every single day,” says his father, Atiq.

“Thank you father, may Allah be with you,” says Muhammed.

Father's strict timetable

By this time, Muhammed's father has got a paid job as a government soldier. So the family can now afford to let Muhammed and his two older brothers study. But their father is strict. He writes a timetable that he pins to the wall in their small earthen house.

“You must make the most of every hour of the day. You must not waste a single minute,” says their father. The timetable tells Muhammed and his brothers what to do, hour-by-hour. In the mornings, Muhammed goes to school and after lunch he continues his studies at Sakena Yacoobi's Learning Center. The tough schedule has yielded results.

Muhammed is now in Year 5 and is in second top position in his class.

“When I started school I was behind the others.



6.45 a.m.

Muhammed runs to school – he doesn't want to be late!





11.15 a.m.

Muhammed studies English at Sakena Yacoobi's Learning Center. His teacher Zahra Alipour, who is 18, helps him.

"Muhammed does well at school, but his family have no relatives here, so there's no-one who can help them. They are short of money, for example, Muhammed has the same shoes in summer and winter. It's freezing when it snows. But I think he'll be fine – he's smart and he has lots of friends," says Zahra.

➔ Without the courses at Sakena Yacoobi's Center, I would never have caught up. The lessons at the Center are actually better than in school. The teachers are kinder, they know more, and they care more about us students. Ordinary schools are so row-



dy and noisy. And I get teased there because I'm clever."

Worried about father

Although Muhammed's father has a job now, the fam-

ily are not rich. To earn a bit of extra money, the sons take turns making rugs at home, beautiful patterned rugs that they can sell. It takes three months to make just one rug,



1.30 p.m.

Muhammed and his brother take it in turns to sit in the rug-weaving chair.

"I'm so used to making rugs that I usually put a book on the chair and read my homework while I'm doing it," explains Muhammed.

and that means spending several hours on it every day.

But life is not all hard work and homework. Five days a week, Muhammed and his brothers go to a taekwondo club to train in the Korean martial art. They have special training clothes and they have entered competitions. Once Muhammed won a bronze medal.

Today, Muhammed is satisfied with his life, but there is



4.30 p.m.

Today there is no taekwondo training, because the coach is away. Muhammed and his brothers practice their high kicks in the garden instead. They do push-ups, stretches, and some sparring.



one thing that worries him. The war.

"My father is a soldier. He's fighting the Taliban. Most days he works in town, guarding government buildings and manning checkpoints, but sometimes he's out in the provinces with his unit. He can be away for weeks at a time. Whenever he is, I pray several times a day that he won't be killed," says Muhammed.

When his father comes home from the war, he doesn't tell his wife or sons anything about what he has been through. He just sits quietly, drinking tea. And says extra long prayers.

8.00 p.m.

Muhammed does homework until his eyes ache. His father checks to make sure he isn't cheating.



Muhammed's timetable

Time	
5-7	Wake up, morning prayers and breakfast
7-10	Lessons at school
10-11	Homework
11-12	Lessons at the AIL Learning Center
12-13	Lunch and prayers
13-16	Rug making
16-19	Taekwondo training
19-20	Dinner and prayers
20-22	Homework
22	Bedtime!

Anyone found not sticking to the timetable will have to repeat their homework 6 times!



Sometimes Muhammed talks with him about what he wants to be when he grows up.

"I want to be a soldier too, but my father doesn't want that. He says it's a job where you never learn anything except obeying orders and killing. But I think it seems exciting. And the pay is good. My father wants me to be a teacher or a businessman instead. We'll see what happens," says Muhammed. 🌐





Zarafshan blogs about Afghanistan

A few weeks ago, Ismet, 19, and Hajatullah, 20, had no idea what the internet was. But a young girl has taught them all about it and now they're surfing the net, reading news about sport and politics.

A young girl in a red headscarf, Zarafshan, 16, is the computing teacher at Sakena Yacoobi's Learning Center in Herat. She has never travelled abroad, and yet she has friends all over the world. Because Zarafshan is a blogger. In her blog diary she talks about life in Afghanistan, in English.

"I write about real and tragic stories, about child marriage, war and abuse. About things I've heard at home, at the market or on the radio. It's important to tell the truth about our country. That's the first step towards changing and improving conditions for women and children," she says.

There is free internet access for both teachers and

students at the Learning Center, unlike the internet cafés. It costs money there, and most people in this poor suburb don't have any. Thanks to their internet connection, the Center has become a vantage point on the rest of the world.

"Through the blog I have made lots of foreign friends. We email each other and talk about our lives. I have learned lots of new things," explains Zarafshan.

But right now she doesn't have time to talk more. Ismet and Hajatullah want help. They've just created their own email addresses, but they don't have anyone to email. With a few instructions from their teacher, Ismet sends her first ever email. To her cousin Hajatullah, on the seat next to her. 🌐

A story from Zarafshan's blog

Where are my children?

"I was married off at the age of 14, to an older man. After a year of marriage, the war started and my husband lost his job. Life was hard. We had three children - two daughters and a son. One day, I sent my son to the market to sell cigarettes, and he never came home. I was praying to Allah, the all-powerful, when one of my son's friends came to our house. He said that my son had been killed when a bomb exploded. My whole body seized up, but I managed to walk there. The explosion was so powerful that I couldn't even find my son's body. That was the worst day of my life. One year later, my man fell ill and died. I was pregnant, and gave birth to twins. I couldn't provide for them, so I gave them to a woman who couldn't have children of her own. I often wonder what has happened to them. Where are they today? Where are my children?"



Zarafshan has just taught cousins Ismet and Hajatullah how to send emails.



Ahmed Muktar, 12

IDOLS: My father and grandfather
WANTS TO BE: Head of an aid organisation or a famous author
LOVES: Reading books and making up stories
HATES: Adults who beat children
DREAM: Peace in Afghanistan
FAVOURITE DISH: Meat stew

Ahmed was beaten and wrote a book

Ahmed Muktar is something of a celebrity in Western Afghanistan. He's often on TV, on the radio and in newspapers, talking about the book he wrote. A book for and about children.

"Teachers must not beat children, they must listen to them," says Ahmed.

When I was eight, my father sent me to a religious school. The teachers were extremely strict and the students were beaten all the time," says Ahmed.

Ahmed was beaten often. He found it hard to concentrate and to remember his homework. Even if he had done his homework he was so

afraid of giving the wrong answer that he sat in silence. So the teacher thrashed his back with a whip.

"Once the teacher tied my feet together with a rope. He took my shoes off and whipped the soles of my feet. It was so painful," says Ahmed.

To Sakena's school

Ahmed's teacher may have kept the class quiet, but he was ignorant. There were too many students in his class and any who couldn't keep up didn't get any help. In the end, Ahmed was so afraid of going to school that he refused to go, however many threats or promises his parents made. His father realised the school must be bad. He moved his son to one of Sakena Yacoobi's schools instead, which had a good reputation. It was totally different.

"The teachers were kind,

attentive and knew lots. And they were not allowed to hit the students. I started to get so excited about going to school – there was so much to learn!" explains Ahmed.

No beatings allowed

At the new school, Ahmed got better grades and gained confidence. One day, the students' homework was to

make up a story. Ahmed enjoyed it so much that he just kept on writing. His story became a book, which his father helped to get printed.

"I want to be a role model for other children. And to show that there are Afghan children who do good things and can write books," says Ahmed.

The book is about what it's like to be a boy in Afghanistan and the difference between good and bad teachers. With it, Ahmed became the youngest author in Afghanistan. He got to go on TV, on the radio and in newspapers to spread the word about his book.

"It's important to do your homework and work hard. But it's just as important for the teachers not to be too strict. They must not beat children. They must listen to them," says Ahmed. 🌐

