UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION BY 2020: IN PERIL FOR AFGHAN GIRLS?
Dianne Rummery and Hally Siddons
Canadian Federation of University Women-Ottawa
This presentation is a cri de coeur to each of you to maintain vigilance for Afghan women and girls for whom the door to literacy is slowly opening.

Today we go to Afghanistan to examine their Millennium Development Goal #2, Universal Primary Education by 2020. Our particular concern is for the girls. It’s a daunting task to achieve this goal but progress continues to be made.

To succeed, the Afghan people must commit to education; the Afghan government must provide determined, focused and visionary leadership; and the global community must work with the Afghans to provide co-ordinated long-term development aid.

The rugged multi-ethnic country of Afghanistan, landlocked by Pakistan, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran, is located in one of the most politically turbulent areas of the world. One of the poorest and least literate countries, it is the most dangerous in which to live as a woman. War is endemic and has continued unabated for the lifetime of most of its citizens.

Afghanistan was at war in September 2000, when the UN Millennium Summit to establish the eight Millennium Development goals was held in New York. However, in 2004, although Afghanistan was still in conflict, the new government endorsed both the concept and the goals, adding a 9th goal to the usual 8. Afghanistan’s target date is 2020 as opposed to 2015 for other countries.
When the Taliban came to power in 1996, they banned education for girls. By 2001, the school infrastructure was decimated. By 2002 Afghanistan, still in conflict, had generations in need of education and skills. Because this country has one of the highest proportions of school-age children in the world, the demand for education was and is staggering. With the average Afghan family including 6.7 members, this demand continues to soar and also places huge financial burdens on the country.

Millennium Development Goal #2 is to ensure that by 2020, all Afghan children, boys and girls alike, complete a full course of primary schooling including literacy, numeracy and life skills. The indicators for this target will be the net enrollment in primary education, and the literacy rate of 15 to 24 year-olds, the demographic group prevented by war from attending school but who will become tomorrow’s leaders.

The third Millennium Goal is to promote gender equality and empower women. No country, let alone one ravaged by 30 years of war, can prosper without the productivity of half its citizens.
The Qur’an and Afghanistan’s Constitution commit to education for girls, but the will of the government to move protection of these rights from paper to reality is compromised by the harsh unwritten laws of tribal culture, and the lack of a justice system to back legislation.

With major security and political transitions occurring in 2014 and extremist groups still creating deadly havoc, the greatest barrier to achieving any of the MDGs is lack of security. And so the Government of Afghanistan added a ninth and fundamental goal to enhance security within the borders of the country.
All these goals are intricately linked. None can be considered in isolation.

Education has improved dramatically since the Taliban's misogynist regime. While establishing a definitive statistical picture in Afghanistan is controversial, all numbers available show a welcome upward flow. Due to the work of the Ministry of Education and a plethora of international aid agencies, there are now some 8 to 10 million Afghans enrolled in school; a third of that number is girls.
The latest available data (2010) from the Ministry of Education indicate that 71% of eligible children are enrolled in primary school, and that 58% of the children registered complete the course. Literacy rates of 15 – 24 year olds, a second MDG 2 indicator, have also improved.

Note the much higher numbers for illiteracy and lack of education in the rural areas. The scale of the challenge in rural areas is compounded by the remoteness and inaccessibility of thousands of villages, insecurity, low levels of family literacy, many different ethnic and language groups, elements of conservatism and distrust towards formal schooling, harsh climates, and few female teachers. One of the difficulties of planning improvements is the scant reliable data available from these areas.
Despite Afghanistan’s laudable progress towards MDG 2, critical challenges remain:

1. For a variety of reasons, many children still do not attend school.
2. The quality of teacher qualifications, infrastructure and supplies needs to be drastically improved.
3. Education needs to be made relevant to the local culture and labour market.
4. The Afghan government must allocate more of its budget to education to improve the quality and to become less reliant on donor funding.
5. Management limitations impede the execution of education plans and policies.

And girls, our special focus, face additional obstacles that must be overcome without delay.

**POVERTY:** According to a recent UN World Development Report, poverty is the greatest barrier across the world to a girl’s education, and over half of Afghans live in devastating poverty.

**EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGES:** Girls are forced into arranged marriages for a bride price which the family may use to settle debts; there is an impetus to marry girls at an early age, often to much older men. Education stops with marriage which often precedes puberty.

**INSECURITY:** Personal safety for both students and teachers is always at risk.

**LACK OF FAMILY SUPPORT:** Families are large and girls are needed to do domestic labour and child care at home.

**LACK OF FEMALE TEACHERS:** Trained women teachers are few and persistently harassed.

**LONG DISTANCE TO SCHOOL:** One of the greatest deterrents to attending school is getting there, often a two-hour trudge there and back.

**POOR QUALITY OF EDUCATION:** Teachers at the schools they reach are often unqualified, with few resources, little curriculum, and paid very little.

**NO GIRLS-ONLY SCHOOLS:** Girls-only schools are few, and often far from home, poorly built, without electricity, latrines or the security walls to protect female students.
HARRASSMENT: Girls risk constant physical and sexual harassment.

LACK OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT: Both family and community support are too often lacking, frequently due to tribal interpretation of religion and culture.

Oxfam notes that efforts to improve education have slowed and warns a new approach from both the Afghan government and donors is necessary to sustain the gains that have been made.

A major player, the World Bank, says Afghanistan’s progress on primary school completion is still insufficient to meet its target and that this is particularly true for girls.

Many reports from both Afghan and international sources make practical recommendations to improve access to and quality of education for girls.

Of crucial importance, both the Afghan government and international donors need to give a higher priority to education for both boys and girls and ensure funding goes where it is needed.

For aid to be effective donors must:

1. **Listen to the Afghan people**
   Otherwise when foreign aid ends, programs not rooted in Afghan culture or grafted onto existing Afghan-initiated projects will disappear.

2. **Assure long-term funding**
   Recognize that educating a country is a slow and long-term proposition.

3. **Enter a collaborative effort with the Afghan Ministry of Education to ensure programmes are sustainable.**

4. **Partner with other aid agencies** to be effective. More than 40 international aid agencies and trusts are stationed in Afghanistan with differing mandates.

And there is HOPE.
Many women and youth have found their voice in the cities. More than half the population is under 15 and many have a wide window on the world through technology and cell phones. Women are in parliament and in their own minds, there is no going back. Young women have joined forces to champion and celebrate women’s rights. A vibrant media is breaking silence on pervasive misogyny. And the world outside Afghanistan is watching with a renewed vigilance.

In conclusion, we salute the remarkable achievements in education orchestrated by the Afghan government in the last decade. We feel there is a determined and resilient commitment in Afghanistan to reach the Millennium Education Goal so that Afghan women will have the means to “Hold Up Half the Sky”, to help bring peace and stability to their country. However to provide equitable access to education, continued international vigilance and aid developed through global partnerships are essential. And the world must never let the education of Afghan women and girls be sacrificed at the peace table and beyond.