



Women Teachers in Community-based Schools in Afghanistan

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Introduction

The restrictions imposed by the Taliban regime on Afghan women and girls impacted all spheres of daily life. One of the most detrimental was the ban on women's access to education. This is a restriction that has long-term ramifications, and is a major factor in the continued social and political marginalization of women in Afghanistan. Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, much progress has already been made, and by March 2003 almost 1.4 million girls were enrolled in school (MoE 2005). Especially in urban areas young people and their parents have high expectations of education to open up new opportunities and to improve their lives; at the macro level, the importance of education underpins discourses of national development, as well as family and individual well-being. For women's rights activists, education is a critical force in redressing the widespread social exclusion of women and their limited participation in public and political spaces. Developments such as the appointment of the first female provincial governor, the recent appointment of three women cabinet ministers and several deputy ministers in addition to a woman candidate among the 16 contenders for presidential office in the October 2004 elections are certainly encouraging and point to significant shifts in attitudes towards women's political participation. However, the realities for most rural women in Afghanistan can be quite different; illiteracy and the lack of education create significant practical as well as socially-constructed barriers to women's social, cultural and political participation. In some Provinces, educated and active women – including school teachers - are being targeted by conservative political-religious groups.

Literacy levels for Afghan women are approximately 20 percent - less than half that of Afghan men (UNICEF 2006). The percentage of women and girls with access to primary, secondary or tertiary education stands at a mere 27 percent, less than half that of Afghan males. Women make up only 19 percent of higher education students and their participation is mostly limited to a small number of subject areas, such as education, medicine, language and literature (MoHE 2004). Although the numbers of women in public offices and activities are growing, there are still very few women participating in community fora and decision-making bodies, such as Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs). There are efforts being made, through the country-wide National Solidarity Programme,¹ for example, to establish women's community committees, but most communities remain controlled by male-only bodies.

¹ The National Solidarity Program, led by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development and supported by many different donors, provides technical assistance and assigns grants to the rural communities for reconstruction and/or development projects that are planned and managed by the communities themselves through a democratic process. Community Development Councils are elected

One of the reasons given for women's non-participation is their lack of education. Not only does this impact on the way men think about women, but it also contributes to women's own acceptance of the status quo and to their lack of confidence in their own capacity to participate and to be involved in making important decisions, compared to male family members. In a recent study of gender and decision-making in Afghanistan, the reason often given by men and women to explain women's non-participation in decision-making is that women are "without knowledge" (Wakefield 2004a). This refers very much to the lack of formal education of women – quite ignoring any other forms of knowledge that women may have. Limited participation for women is not just an issue in the public sphere. Afghan women are also often excluded from family decision-making processes; traditional gender roles that exclude women from participation in important family decisions, such as the education and marriage of their children, are perpetuated by the fact that so many women lack basic education. They are often considered by male family members as only able to contribute to decisions made relating to the household tasks and responsibilities they have, such as food buying and preparation (Wakefield 2004b).

Education is a powerful force for change, but the education sector in Afghanistan faces significant challenges in addressing gender disparities in Afghanistan: over 60 percent of school-aged girls remain out of school (HRRAC 2004), and it is clear that it will take many years of targeted efforts for the huge gender disparities in education to close. The legacy of civil war and the Taliban regime is a devastated education system, which, despite important national policy developments and significant support from the international community, still has very limited reach, especially in rural areas. The number of schools across the country is inadequate for the number of potential students, especially girls, and the teachers are generally under-qualified and under-supported, struggling to manage in difficult conditions. School construction, especially for girls, is a priority for the Ministry of Education, but in the interim, the IRC and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are supporting community- or home-based schooling for children in areas where there are no accessible government schools.

This chapter focuses specifically on the women teachers who play critical roles in this programme; it explores the tensions and contradiction of being a woman teacher - of the power and the powerlessness of women who play a significant role as change agents in their communities and yet who do so from within the limited scope of their home and their gender-defined roles in conservative communities. It draws from data collected as part of the Healing Classrooms Initiative – an ongoing, action research initiative of IRC's education team² - to provide insights into the perspectives and experiences of girls and women teachers, supplemented by data collected as part of a study was conducted with

through secret ballot and these councils then lead a participatory process in the community to decide how the grants will be used (www.worldbank.org/af).

² The IRC is an international NGO, with education programmes in over 20 crisis-affected countries. Since 1997, IRC has been providing support for education within Afghanistan and also facilitating the educational reintegration of returning refugee students and teachers. See www.theirc.org

the support of the USAID EQUIPS 2 project on complementary schooling.³ Detailed interview data comes primarily from teachers and students in home-based schools in Kabul Province, collected by one co-author, working with an Afghan research assistant/ translator. As technical advisors with the IRC, we are based at headquarters, but work closely with education teams in IRC's different country programmes; we are highly engaged with the Afghanistan education programme, especially as it is a pilot country for the Healing Classrooms Initiative. The IRC Afghanistan programme is one in which attention to gender equality is particularly critical; it is also a program from which there are significant lessons to be learned about working with women teachers and on girls' education.

IRC Community-based Education Programme

IRC's Education Programme currently supports community-based schools in different districts in five Provinces of Afghanistan where there is limited access to government schools – Kabul, Logar, Paktia, Nangarhar and most recently Herat. At the time of the data collection, IRC was supporting 193 classes, serving a total student population of 5764, over 70% of whom are girls. In communities which request the support of IRC to provide education for their children, teachers who are identified and/or accepted by the community are encouraged to create a suitable classroom space in their homes or in a public building such as a mosque. These teachers are generally the most educated men and women in the community (usually with Grade 10 education, but sometimes lower), and individuals who are considered trustworthy and reliable. Sometimes it is the mullah, other times it is a government school teacher who runs a home-based class in the afternoons; there are also Grade 12 students who attend school themselves in the mornings and teach in the afternoons. The teachers run their school for 3 hours a day, 6 days a week, delivering the Ministry of Education curriculum. Classes are single-sex or co-ed, and the teachers male and female. However, given the cultural restrictions for girls on traveling to distant government schools, priority is given to classes for girls. Communities are encouraged to give priority to identifying and supporting women teachers because in some communities (but not all) it is understood that parents will only send their girls to a class taught by a female teacher who is known and trusted in the community. IRC supports this process, visiting the families of potential women teachers, providing training and regular supervision visits from female trainers.

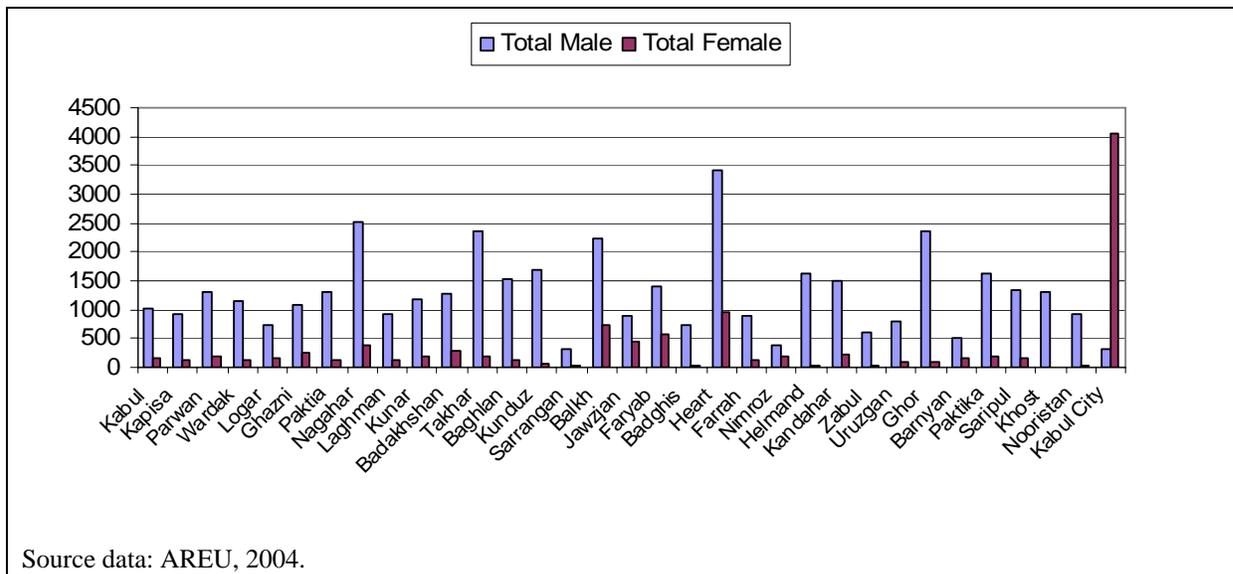
Women Teachers in Afghanistan

The Taliban regime brought women's and girls' education to a halt; Ministry of Education records for 2000 and 2001, for example, show that there were no women and girls in government schools at all. An increase to a proportion of 24.29% women in the teaching force by 2002, is therefore, a significant achievement, although, as is shown in the graph below, there is wide variation between different provinces, with by far the highest percentages of women in Kabul City and Kabul Province. Within the provinces, it

³ "Home-Based Schools in Afghanistan" written by J. Kirk and R. Winthrop, IRC, edited by J. Destefano and A. Moore, available at: http://www.equip123.net/docs/e2-Afg_IRC%20Case%20Study.pdf.

is also reported that there is a greater concentration of women teaching in the city centres than in the outlying districts.

Figure 6.1: Total numbers of male and female teachers in MoE primary schools in Afghanistan, by Province (2004).



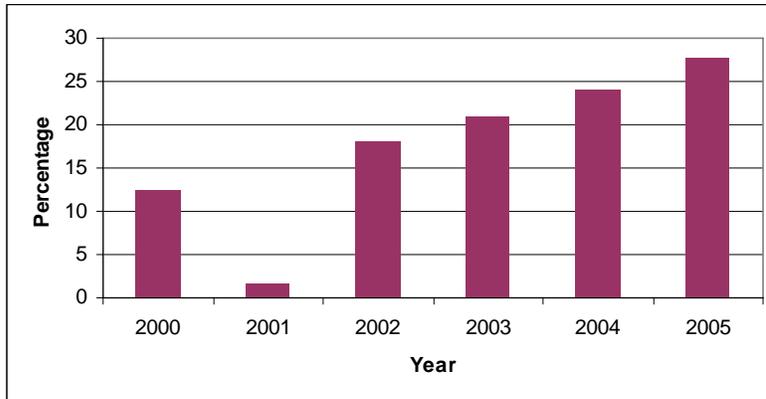
Within the framework of Education for All, the Millennium Development Goals and the Afghan Compact,⁴ increasing the numbers of girls in schools is a priority for the MoE which will, especially in the very conservative areas of the country require efforts to increase the numbers of women teachers. Plans are now being developed (Atmar 2006), but according to Ministry staff in August 2005, was no specific strategy to increase recruitment of women teachers. The total number of women teachers has increased between 2002 and 2004 from 12,938 to 14,943 (MoE Dept of Planning 2005). However during this time, the total number of male teachers grew faster resulting in a decrease in the percentage share in women teachers.

As the chart below shows, overall, at the time of the data collection (2005) women made up 28% of the teachers in IRC supported home-based schools. This percentage share has increased gradually over the years as is also shown above. In 2001, at the height of the Taliban regime, there were very few women teachers in the IRC schools. There had been women teaching in home-based schools and even after Taliban proclamations forbidding women from all work except for medicine, there were women who were teaching and were listed in the records under their husbands' names. Even this became too dangerous, however, and most women had to stop. As with the government figures, there are also wide variations across the different provinces; in Kabul Province, for example, 24% of

⁴ The Compact is the result of consultation between the Government of Afghanistan, the United Nations and the international community, launched on 31 January 2006, and represents a framework for co-operation for the next five years. The Compact follows the formal end of the Bonn Process in September 2005, with completion of the Parliamentary and Provincial elections, and will establish an effective mechanism for co-ordinating Afghan and international efforts over the next period.

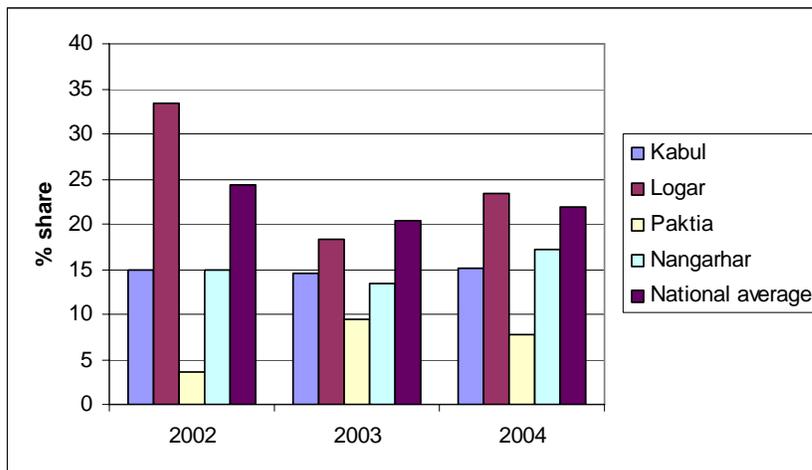
the IRC-supported teachers were women, but in Paktia, was only one woman teacher out of a total of 27 (less than 4%). Although on a national average, there is only a small difference between government and IRC-supported home-based schools, at the provincial level, because of the over-representation of women teachers in government schools in Kabul and some other major cities, there is a far greater representation of women teachers in the home-based schools.

Figure 6.2 Proportion of women teachers in IRC-supported community-based schools



Furthermore, as indicated in the graph below, the home-based school program has managed to consistently increase the proportion of women teachers, whilst this has not been possible in the government system.

Figure 6.3: Percentage share of women teachers in government schools, 2002-2004 in selected Provinces (those in which IRC’s community-based schools operate)



(Source data from MoE, Department of Planning 2005)

Although the primary focus of the IRC education interventions are the girl students, the importance of creating teaching opportunities for Afghan women is not underestimated. Our research suggests that teaching from within the security of their own home allows

women to play an active role in their community, challenging the norms of predominantly male-dominated community activity and the relative exclusion of women from development activities. At the same time, however, the women teachers face considerable gender challenges themselves, not least because as volunteer teachers, only minimally –if at all - supported by community contributions, they are unable to contribute to family finances. Working within their own homes with little opportunity to meet with other teachers, they experience isolation, and although they may be making a big difference in the lives of girls who can now attend school, their status, power and future opportunities within their own families may remain unchanged.

In a post-conflict, early reconstruction context especially, efforts to promote the participation of women in education are highly significant and this is especially so in Afghanistan. Schools – however temporary and ad hoc they may be – may be one of the first community organizations to start functioning. It is important that they set a high standard for gender equality and in encouraging the active participation of women and girls. IRC recognizes that making progress towards gender equality is not just a question of increased numbers of women teachers, rather that recognizing the gender-specific experiences of women teachers and providing relevant training and ongoing professional support are critical to empowering these women within their professional domain as well as within their own homes and families.

Women can gain Status and Respect in a Community by Becoming a Teacher

Women teachers describe how they are shown respect and appreciation, especially by parents, and are called *ustod* – a respectful title for a teacher. This is particularly important in male-dominated societies such as Afghanistan, where women rarely hold important positions in communities. One woman teacher describes, “The community is very happy that I am teaching, and whenever they see me they give me respect and say how much I know”. Another young woman who is only 18 years old is teaching a class in her home villages in the afternoons whilst attending secondary school herself in the mornings. She said: “I’m proud to be a teacher, for myself, and also in the village – they know I teach without pay, and I get respect for it”. Another woman explained that, as an outsider who married into the village, becoming a teacher has been a way of settling into the village for her. Through teaching, she has gained the trust and respect of the local people: “For example, when there are parties and ceremonies, I go, and if everyone is sitting on the floor, then they bring me a mattress – and everyone, young and old, calls me ‘Teacher’”. This possibility to be active at the community level and to make a significant contribution to the lives of girls, to the community and to the country as a whole may be especially satisfying and motivating for young women.

This potential of teaching should not however mask the reality that for such young women, community-based teaching is a culturally acceptable compromise compared to continuing to higher education, which remains impossible. There are other contradictions in that although women may experience some expressions of community respect for their work, they are excluded from others; they generally have fewer opportunities for outside interaction with community members than the male teachers, and they are not, for

example, able to enter the mosque and hear the special prayers that are said for all teachers during Friday prayers.

Another important aspect emerging from women's stories of becoming and being teachers is the psychosocial benefit to women of the teaching experience. These women who have experienced conflict, displacement, most possibly loss or at least separation from family members are now experiencing the social and economic uncertainty of the transition towards peace. Women have indicated that instead of being alone, surrounded by their own problems, and constantly reliving the trauma and loss of the conflict, the opportunity to teach gives them something else to think about. One woman teacher interviewed stated, "School helps me forget my problems and sorrows – before I was teaching I was very sad all the time. I enjoy being with the children and it helps me forget my pain. They learn from me and I learn from them too". Male teachers may also find that there is psychosocial comfort and benefit of the teaching experience, but compared to women who in rural areas especially are mostly confined to the home, men have far more opportunities for relationships and interaction outside of the family and for active participation in the community life. As described in more detail below, IRC-organized teacher trainings also offer important opportunities for women to be together and to share their own experiences.

The potential of teaching – and teacher training - to provide psychosocial support also has to be read in the context of very limited support systems for women beyond the immediate family. Women in rural areas especially, tend to remain isolated and unable to access information, resources and services which may be of help to them.

Training for Women Teachers builds their skills to be Agents of Change

Regular, high quality training for all home-based school teachers is a critical component of the community-based school programme. The IRC aims to provide three trainings of approximately 13 days to each teacher per year. The men and women who accept to teach have usually never done so before; their own schooling experience will have been a very traditional one, almost exclusively based on rote learning. Therefore, the IRC basic pedagogy course is offered as priority to the home-based school teachers, providing instruction in the 'nuts and bolts' of teaching and classroom management (for example lesson planning, classroom organization, exam writing and grading). Training on psychosocial awareness and needs of students is also a particularly important and innovative component of the IRC training package for teachers.

The teachers, many of whom are highly motivated to improve their own education as well as their teaching skills highly appreciate the trainings. The impact for women is however, especially important. In accordance with the cultural norms of the communities, the trainings are often provided in single sex groups; male teachers with male trainers and female teachers with female trainers. As observed in an IRC programme evaluation, the atmosphere in the women teacher trainings is very lively and collegial, with the teachers readily engaging in discussions amongst themselves and with the trainers, and keenly trying out different activities. The free and open dynamic of a woman-only space was tangible in the training rooms; the trainers were able to engage even the shyest, youngest

teachers in the activities and to model for them active teaching strategies and an assertiveness and ‘voice’ that is otherwise rare for rural Afghan women to experience (Kirk 2005).

When interviewed about some of the training she had received, one home-based school teacher in Kabul province who had taken the pedagogy seminar in January said that it was very useful and that she had learned a lot from it and can now use new methods in her teaching. Apparently before the seminar she had no information on new methods, and did not use any, but now she is able to use, for example, ‘question and answer’ and ‘story methods’. The impact, she explained, is that the students are more interested – they were apparently bored in her class beforehand. Another woman teacher had taken Maths and Dari seminars and said that she very much appreciated the trainings. She had found the sections on lesson planning, lesson aims and objectives particularly useful, as well as the instruction on Dari grammar (Kirk 2005).

Because the home-based teachers receive no compensation for their work it can be difficult for some of them to justify the time and energy they spend in teaching, especially when it brings no direct benefit to their own families. IRC staff felt that many of the women teaching were very much dependent on the ‘goodwill’ of their fathers, husbands and/ or in-laws, that their tenure was somewhat tentative and that any time they could be forced to give up. However, some of the women teachers who participated in IRC-led teacher trainings assert that those trainings – and especially the seminar on psychosocial needs – do help them with their own children, and especially encourage them to be more patient and to talk more with their children. This is an indication of a small but significant way in which their being teachers empowers them within their own family; this is especially important, as indicated in the introduction, especially, as described above, in Afghanistan, women’s participation – or non-participation in ‘private’ and ‘public’ domains are very linked. Women’s participation as teachers may also be a motivation to their daughters to complete their education and to consider future possibilities which actively engage them in the public domain. What remains to be established, however, is the extent to which these family-level benefits are recognized by husbands and in-laws and can stand the challenges of traditional gender expectations of women being available for their own family and/or the economic pressures for women to be involved in income-generating work.

Importance of Women Teachers for Girls’ Education

The participation of women in education opens up access to schooling for more girls in Afghanistan; although there are communities in which male teachers are acceptable for girls, there are many in which access to school for girls depends on the availability and commitment of a woman teacher. Girls interviewed as part of the Healing Classrooms Initiative articulated these perspectives; In the three girls’ classes taught by women, we are told that this is an important issue for the girls’ families - that if there was only a male teacher then their parents would not let them attend. The girls in one class explain how they feel about their teacher, “It is important to have a woman teacher as she is like us and we can ask her the questions in our minds, and we can be very courageous in front her”. The girls in classes taught by men – as well as their parents - appear to be

comfortable with a male teacher (from the community who they know), although one girl does say, “It would be better to have a woman teacher, but it is alright”. Clearly in this community, a male teacher is better than no teacher.

In all communities, however, girls clearly articulated how important going to school is for them; they understand that going to school is the route to a positive future in which they can complete their studies, go out to work and thus be active in family and community life in a way which is not possible for girls who do not go to school. Although their schools may not resemble traditional schools, the girls who, through the home-based schools, are able to access education for the first time, nonetheless perceive these schools as very ‘real’. While they have some concerns about the sustainability of their school, the students appreciate that the lessons are just the same as in the formal schools. An IRC supported home-based school may not have all the resources students might like, but it nonetheless constitutes an educational experience to aspire to and to be proud of, especially as it may lead to better things in the future. Common amongst the students’ responses is a genuine appreciation for being able to go to school and to study; “I am very interested to learn new things”, says one 12 year old girl. Many of the students made the direct link between going to school and “having a bright future” and to becoming someone important like a doctor or a teacher. They identify learning manners and morals (known as ‘tarbia’ in Dari) as something particularly good about coming to school, but other subjects mentioned include Pashto, Dari, maths, Islamiyat, history and geography. “Learning to pray” and “learning to write” are what a boy and a girl in one class highlight– although their classmate finds it harder to single out any one thing. She says, “I like everything, reading, being able to write, doing prayers and learning ‘tarbia’”. Some of the girls explain how sorry they feel for the girls who do not go to school; “I really like coming to school and am very happy to learn something. In the future I can be part of my country’s future. I feel very sorry for the girls who don’t come – they’re just wasting their time”.

The girls interviewed are very keen to be seen as girls who go to school and even in very poor communities, they make a specific effort to look like school-girls. One girl says, for example, “...I also like to wear clean clothes and comb my hair and then people know that we are going to school”. She and her classmate do not wear a specific uniform, but they do keep certain clothes special for school and change out of them once they arrive home after class. Another girl in class which has adopted a simple uniform explains, “When I come to school people recognize that I am going to school because of my uniform and my clean white chador”.⁵ In terms of reversing the social exclusion of women and girls, the act of going to school is highly significant; it raises the public profile of girls and their needs, and positions them as active members of their communities in a way which it is hoped will build their interest and capacity for continued participation in public life.

Attending a home-based school is clearly a very positive education experience that the girls are very proud of. Such positive experiences in a small school, with a familiar and trusted teacher can build the girls’ and her family’s commitment to continued formal

⁵ Large headscarf worn by Afghan girls which for school attendance is normally white

education, and protocols between IRC and the Ministry of Education mean that girls who complete the community-based programme will be able to enroll in government secondary schools. These perspectives from girls whose access to education is to a large extent made possible through the commitment of local women teachers further underline the importance of the work they do and the agency they do have as change agents in Afghanistan. At the same time, the girls' words about being out and about in the community remind us that the women who make this possible for them remain relatively excluded themselves and apart from the occasional teacher training, do not have the same daily opportunities to meet and be with peers.

Conclusions and Implications

At such an important time of transformation and development in Afghanistan, the quality of education provided for girls and the support and encouragement for women teachers is critical. For girls, attending school may be a first, yet significant step in a process of increased participation in public and private domains. Women teachers are also challenging the social exclusion of women and girls in Afghan society; in public they may be recognized and respected as teachers and in their families they may be more informed caregivers for their own children. However, their agency is limited and has to be constituted from within the geographical and cultural space of their own home.

Rough projections from current numbers of students and teachers towards the Education for All target of universal primary education in Afghanistan indicate the recruitment priority for teachers in general and especially for women teachers. Assuming an approximate number of Afghan children of primary school age of 11,400,000 (extrapolated from UNICEF MICS data, 2003 and from RALS data 2003), for them to be educated in classes with an average of 40 students per teacher, then a total of 285,000 teachers is needed. With approximately 68 000 teachers currently in government service, this implies a necessary increase of 217,000 teachers. A generally conservative, but ambitious target for Afghanistan of 30% women in the total teaching force implies a total of 85 500; based on the current figure of almost 15 000, this implies an additional recruitment drive of 70 500 women (Kirk, 2006, from MoE planning department statistics). Furthermore, as indicated by the figures presented in the earlier section of the chapter, particular efforts are needed to ensure that women teachers are also deployed in rural communities and that they are not over-concentrated in the cities to the detriment of rural girls whose access to education may depend on them. Such large scale recruitment is complicated not only by the limited resources available to pay teachers and therefore to increase the numbers on the payroll in Afghanistan but also the limited pool of potential women teacher candidates; educated women with the required 12th grade education and family support to work outside the home are most likely to accept more lucrative positions with NGOs and UN agencies rather than taking a poorly-paid government position.

From the data discussed, community-based schooling in Afghanistan is one way to work against social exclusion for both women and girls; more specifically, it is also a means to increasing the numbers of women in the teaching profession. Women with lower levels of education than the government requirements have an opportunity to build their capacity through classroom experience, training and ongoing professional development

support from IRC staff. Ultimately, however, the community-based model should only be seen as a transitional strategy and not one which should become entrenched as a ‘second rate’, non-formal system that is ‘good enough’ for women and girls but still not on a par with the mainstream, boys’ system. The long term strategy, which is in line with the new draft Community Based Education Strategy of the Ministry of Education (MoE 2006) is that the community-based schools are gradually phased out and that the teachers and students should eventually integrate into government schools as they are (re-)opened or enlarged nearby fully, or that the community-based schools are formally integrated into the government system as ‘satellite classes’ linked to a nearby primary school. Advocacy to the national, provincial and district education authorities on the capacities and ‘alternative qualifications’ (Kirk & Winthrop forthcoming) of the home-based school teachers means that women who have been teaching in community-based schools are being accepted into the government schools and taken onto the official payroll.

Findings from the Healing Classrooms Initiative assessment and subsequent studies are encouraging IRC Afghanistan’s education programme to shift from an access only perspective, to orient education to the strategic gender needs of women and girls. Through staff training and a specific focus on gender issues, gender is being integrated across the programme and into the different components of the support for community-based schooling. More attention is being given to the specific needs and perspectives of women teachers and possibilities are being explored for including gender-focused and women-specific content within teacher trainings, which would aim to further strengthen their positions within families and communities. The experiences and results of such a shift will be shared in order to inform the approaches to gender equality in education being used by the Ministry of Education and other significant actors in education in Afghanistan.

The learnings from the IRC Afghanistan’s home-based school programme are being shared not only within the educational community in Afghanistan but also within the community of educators engaged in education in emergencies, chronic crises and early reconstruction contexts (primarily through the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)). Although Afghanistan is certainly a very particular situation, some of the potential but also the challenges of engaging and supporting women affected by conflict and post conflict transformations in educational reconstruction have resonance in other countries, such as Liberia and Sudan.

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