STANDING GROUND

Today in Afghanistan, more than four million children are out of school – the majority of them young girls. A year after the fall of Kabul UNICEF Afghanistan's Sam Mort speaks to Yalda Hakim about this crisis of education, and how she still has hope for the future.

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 has had a transformative impact on the place of women and girls in Afghan society. A year ago, Afghan girls went to school, and Afghan women held positions of authority in government and civil society. While Afghan women faced many forms of discrimination and challenges, the Afghan state recognised their essential equality under the law.

No longer. Under the Taliban, Afghan women have experienced the most sudden and significant reversal of rights to occur anywhere in the world in modern history. Afghanistan is now the only country on the planet where girls are prevented as a matter of policy from receiving an education – locked out of their classrooms simply because of their gender.

While the international community has been largely muted about these developments, one woman who has refused to stay silent is UNICEF Afghanistan's chief of communication, Sam Mort. Based in Kabul throughout the crisis, Mort says she feels a huge sense of responsibility to the forgotten children of Afghanistan and is determined to fight for their rights and wellbeing. She speaks to the BBC's Yalda Hakim – an Afghan-Australian journalist, who has reported from Afghanistan for the past 15 years – about UNICEF's plans to establish 15,000 community-based classes across the country – including providing 38 million textbooks – and why the organisation's work is more important than ever.

Sam Mort: "As you know better than anyone, Afghanistan is a country that has had decades of insecurity, natural disasters, conflict, hardship, poverty – that's why UNICEF has been there for the last 70 years. But the last nine months or so, things have gotten much harder for children … Since the freezing of funding, since the sanctions, since the isolation by the global community, it really is the children who have suffered. At the same time, because →

Girls attend class in an Accelerated Learning Centre (ALC) in Alisha village in the central region of Afghanistan, June 2022.

IMAGES COURTESY OF UNICEF

A group of primary school girls gather on a rock-covered hill high in the mountains near their school in Nuristan Province.

there is no more fighting, or [only] sporadic fighting, large swathes of the country have opened up for us and there are children in those areas who need protection, need a vaccine, who are drinking contaminated water. So our work has doubled. We can't do enough, fast enough."

Yalda Hakim: "And what has it been like operating there with the Taliban now in power?"

SM: "They're becoming increasingly assertive – as we've seen with the dismantling of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the regulations on dress, girls not going back to school – at a time when the needs are greater than ever. So it's a bit of a balancing act."

YH: "Afghanistan has been described as the saddest country in the world. How do you deal with the misery that exists in every corner and aspect of life – especially right now?"

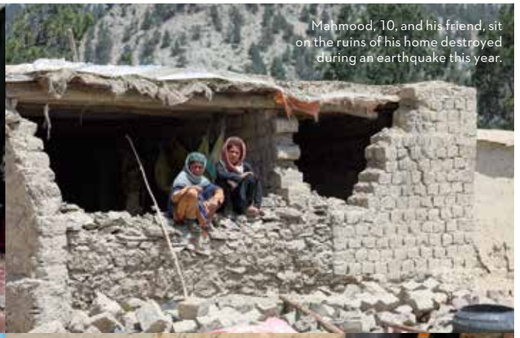
SM: "We chip away – it is a long-term process. There is no difference in the love of an Afghan parent, compared to an Australian parent or a Scottish parent. I feel more invested in Afghanistan than any country I've been in. It's amplifying those children's voices and helping the world understand what the needs are. There is no greater need than girls' education. If the global community could listen, could walk into classrooms and listen to girls demand an education, they would change their minds and I feel a huge responsibility to amplify those voices. We were in Paktia [a province in eastern Afghanistan] and we were talking to grade six girls. We asked them what they would do if the de facto authorities didn't change their minds on the ban on secondary education. This one little girl, Moska, said: 'We must all have hope, we mustn't give up. We must all pray that there will be a class for us next year.'

"The idea that 12-year-olds are praying for an education … I met a little girl at an internally displaced persons [IDP] camp outside of Kabul and she told me: 'My family is very poor and I walk an hour to school every day with no breakfast. Yesterday I was beaten by the teacher when I got to school because I didn't have an exercise book. I had an exercise book that I had written on all the pages, the front cover and the back cover, around all the margins, and there was no white paper left.' So the teacher beat her. Her mother was next to her with tears in her eyes. She said, 'What can I do … bread or an exercise book, because we don't have money for both of these things.' I said to little Tamima, who was 10, 'Are you going to go back to school without an exercise book?' She said yes, and I asked why. She said: 'Because I want to be an engineer and UNICEF needs to build a school here because sometimes my legs are too tired to carry me.'"

YH: "They've been dealt such a bad hand and yet you hear these stories, the hope and the determination – it's so inspirational."

SM: "I've never known strength like the strength of an Afghan woman. I wonder sometimes how they get out of bed in the morning. My question is, where does that spirit, strength and fierceness come from in a 10-year-old in an IDP camp whose mother has not gone to school? People ask if it is difficult to work in Afghanistan. Yes, it's bloody difficult to work in Afghanistan, but you have days like that, days that keep you going for weeks and weeks."

Mobile health and nutrition team counsellor, Fouzia, advises a mother and her children in Alisha village, June 2022.



Mahmood, 10, and his friend, sit on the ruins of his home destroyed during an earthquake this year.

Eight-year-old Nasrin stands outside the tent where she now lives with her family in Gayan, June 2022.

Sam Mort, of UNICEF Afghanistan, with a young girl, Rahima, at Reg-R-e-Shan IDP camp in Herat, western Afghanistan.

IMAGES COURTESY OF UNICEF

YH: "Since the US withdrawal and the Taliban takeover, what I hear over and over again when I speak to Afghan women is two words – 'betrayal' and 'abandonment'. They were told by the West to go out on a limb, dream big, become doctors, journalists, hold office, be in the military; we will support you, fund you, train you – and in the end, abandon you. I went to a secret school in Kabul recently and when I spoke to the girls, they told me they'd heard about undercover schools from their mothers who went to them when the Taliban were in power in the 90s, but never in their wildest imaginations did they think they'd be forced to attend them in 2022."

SM: "A lot of our national staff went to secret schools, a lot saw their schools burnt. It's one thing never to have had education and not know, it's another thing to have had that world open up and then have it taken away. It is particularly cruel. But they will not be kept down."

YH: "Afghan families know that education is a ticket out of their poverty."

SM: "Yes exactly, absolutely."

YH: "You're in Afghanistan now, working with Afghans in one of the most difficult periods in the country's tumultuous history. Is there a moment, or a person that you can think of, that helps you to keep going and someone who has inspired you?"

> "This one little girl, Moska, said: 'We must all have hope, we mustn't give up. We must all pray that there will be a class for us next year'"

SM: "There was a moment, last August, in that terrible week when we had 10,000 people outside the airport. There was a security alert … we had the two suicide bombers. There was a mother, father, and a little boy who was three called Mudaris. When the bomb went off, his father handed him to a serviceman who was about to put him over the wall. The father was killed outright. We got Mudaris over the wall and into the UNICEF safe space. Mudaris's mum was badly injured and taken to hospital. We took him back to the UNICEF compound where we have a creche. This little guy ran over to the see-saw. I was on one end and he got on the other. We were going up and down on the see-saw. All of a sudden, Mudaris put his hands up in the air and I shouted to him, 'Hold on, hold on!' My colleague said to him in Pashto, 'Why did you let go? You have to hold on tight.' He said: 'Because when I go up high, I think I can reach the stars and I want one to make my mum feel better.' This is a three-year-old who had just lost his father, he must have experienced the explosion to some extent, hadn't seen his mother since being put over the wall and was already thinking of what he could do for her. That sense of optimism and hope. I said at the time, if that little guy is reaching for the stars, then we all need to reach for the stars and do our best for these people."

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