The path ahead

Razia Jan is on a one-woman mission to improve the lives of girls in Afghanistan.

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A SAFE SPACE TO LEARN

Razia Jan has won over hearts and minds and overcome security threats to give hundreds of Afghan girls the opportunity to determine their own path in life.

"When a girl marries in Afghanistan, she disappears. She loses her voice and her freedom, because her husband believes his wife is his property and that no one should respect or see it."

For Razia Jan, the tremendous toll taken on the rights of girls and women in Afghanistan during the period of Taliban rule was devastating to see. She had enjoyed a Catholic education in her home country and then moved to the USA in the 1970s to pursue higher education, eventually setting up her own tailoring business.

Other Afghan girls weren’t so lucky; while the Taliban was in power between 1996 and 2001, most girls’ schools closed and female enrollment in education dropped from 32 per cent to just 6.4 per cent.

Inspired by the tragic events of 11 September 2001 – which also prompted her to collect 30,000 pairs of shoes for Afghan children – she returned to her homeland determined to make a difference.

The result is the Zabuli Education Center, a private school for girls in Deh ‘Sabz, a district of the country’s capital, Kabul. All classes from kindergarten to age 17 are free, paid for entirely by donations through Jan’s charity, Razia’s Ray of Hope.

"When I was growing up, we had great freedom: women could do everything," says Jan. "But I could have an education, and no one told us to wear the burqa: we were free. I want girls now to have those opportunities."

Freeing minds

The secret to the Zabuli Education Center’s success – it has grown from having 110 students to more than 400 in six years – is the local community’s hard-earned support.

"It was difficult at first to free people’s minds and make them feel positively about girls’ education," says Jan. "But families now appreciate their daughters and understand the value of the education we’re giving them, and are eager for their youngest children to start lessons as soon as possible."

"Students and their parents don’t take this opportunity for granted, unlike in countries such as the US or the UK where everyone gets a great education. Schooling isn’t a birth right here, as it is elsewhere in the world."

Support from the local community is