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CNN

## Acid attacks, poison: What Afghan girls risk by going to school

By Allie Torgan

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Terrorists will stop at nothing to keep Afghan girls from receiving an education.

"People are crazy," said Razia Jan, founder of a girls' school outside Kabul. "The day we opened the school, (on) the other side of town, they threw hand grenades in a girls' school, and 100 girls were killed.

"Every day, you hear that somebody's thrown acid at a girl's face ... or they poison their water."

There were at least 185 documented attacks on schools and hospitals in Afghanistan last year, according to the United Nations. The majority were attributed to armed groups opposed to girls' education.

"It is heartbreaking to see the way these terrorists treat ... women," said Jan, 68. "In their eyes, a woman is an object that they can control. They are scared that when these girls get an education, they will become aware of their rights as women and as a human being."

Despite the threat of violence, Jan continues to open the doors of her Zabuli Education Center, a two-story, 14-room building where 354 area girls are receiving a free education.

"Most of the (local) men and women are illiterate," Jan said. "Most of our students are the first generation of girls to get educated."

Seven small villages make up Deh'Subz, where the school is located. Though Deh'Subz is not Taliban-controlled, Jan has still found it difficult to change the deep-rooted stigma against women's education.

On the evening before the school opened in 2008, four men paid her a visit.

"They said, 'This is your last chance ... to change this school into a boys' school, because the backbone of Afghanistan is our boys,' " Jan recalled. "I just turned around and I told them, 'Excuse me. The women are the eyesight of Afghanistan, and unfortunately you all are blind. And I really want to give you some sight.' "

Jan has not seen the men since.

"You can't be afraid of people," she said. "You have to be able to say 'no.' Maybe because I'm old, the men are kind of scared of me, and they don't argue with me."

The Zabuli Education Center teaches kindergarten through eighth grade. Without her school, Jan says, many of the students would not be able to receive an education.

"When we opened the school in 2008 and I had these students coming to register, 90% of them could not write their name. And they were 12- and 14-year-old girls," Jan said. "Now, they all can read and write."

Jan's school teaches math, science, religion and three languages: English, Farsi and Pashto. It recently added a computer lab with Internet access.

"They can touch the world just sitting in this house," Jan said. "The knowledge is something that nobody can steal from them."

To shield the students from attacks, Jan has built a new stone wall to surround the school. She also employs staff and guards who serve as human guinea pigs of sorts.

"The principal and the guard, they test the water every day," Jan said. "They will drink from the well. If it's OK, they'll wait. ... Then they'll fill (the) coolers and bring it to the classroom."

Jan says she is so scared of poisoning that school staff members accompany children to the bathroom and make sure the children don't drink water from the faucet. Additionally, the day guard arrives early each morning to check for any gas or poison that might be leaked inside the classrooms. The guard opens doors and windows and checks the air quality before any children are allowed to enter.

"People are so much against girls getting educated," Jan said. "So we have to do these precautions."

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Born in Afghanistan in the 1940s, Jan traveled to the United States in 1970 to attend college. Much of her family was killed or fled Afghanistan during the Russian invasion. She stayed in the U.S., raised a son and opened a small tailoring business. She became an American citizen in 1990.

Jan was always involved in various philanthropic efforts and community organizations in Duxbury, Massachusetts. She worked for many years to forge connections between Afghans and Americans.

Then the events of September 11 shook her to the core.

"I was really affected personally by what happened to the innocent in the U.S.," she said. "It's something that you cannot imagine for a human being to do to other human beings."

Almost overnight, Jan turned her small store into a workshop and launched an exhaustive campaign to help victims, first responders, U.S. soldiers and Afghan children. Jan and community volunteers sent 400 homemade blankets to rescue workers at ground zero and assembled and shipped nearly 200 care packages for U.S. troops in Afghanistan. When she heard that U.S. soldiers needed shoes to distribute to Afghan children, Jan and her volunteers sent them more than 30,000 boxes of shoes.

Still, in the back of her mind was a bigger dream. On a visit to her homeland in 2002, she noticed that women and girls were struggling from years of Taliban control.

"I saw that the girls had been the most oppressed," she said. "The Taliban regime was very brutal, brutal in the way that the woman had no place in their book. The woman had no right. No say in anything."

Jan said that while her life in America was fulfilling and rich, her dream was "to do something for Afghanistan and to educate the girls."

So in 2004, she began searching for land on which to build a school. In 2005, she began fundraising through her Massachusetts-based nonprofit, Razia's Ray of Hope. Then, on a visit to Afghanistan, Jan was able to negotiate with the Ministry of Education to secure the land where the Zabuli Education Center now stands.

"After five years now, (the men) are shoulder to shoulder with me, which is such a great thing," Jan said. "It's unbelievable how much they are proud of the girls."

The school is entirely free. Jan says it costs \$300 to teach each girl for an entire year. Those fees are covered by donations to her nonprofit.

Read about the CNN Heroes of 2012

Although she isn't there every day of the week, Jan spends as much time at the school as possible. She meets with her students' fathers and grandfathers two or three times a year to

address any issues and make sure she still has their buy-in. She also deals with community elders and locals to ensure that the school has local support.

Jan, who takes no money for her work with the school, believes the education her students receive will benefit not only future generations of Afghan women but the country as a whole.

"My school is very small. It's nothing big. But for this to start here, I think it's like a fire. And I think it will grow," she said.

"I hope that one day these girls ... will come back and teach, because I'm not going to be there all my life. I want to make this school something that will last 100 years from now."

Want to get involved? Check out the Razia's Ray of Hope Foundation website at [www.raziasrayofhope.org](http://www.raziasrayofhope.org) and see how to help.