

# Features



## One Woman a Year: Empowering women through education

As a current postgraduate, fully funded by two merit-based scholarships, and as a former undergraduate and postgraduate at MIT, Cambridge, and Yale, I have seen the vast opportunities accessible to students at the top institutes around the world. Yet, globally, most women do not have such access. And thus, I founded a charitable company called One Woman a Year International (OWAY), which aims to advance education for women in the developing world, by providing resources for them to pursue higher education in developed countries. Our pilot project enables women from Afghanistan to pursue their full undergraduate degrees at the University of Oxford, for the very first time. Education, according to Shaharзад Akbar (Wolfson, 2009), is one of the greatest needs and desires for Afghan women today.

OWAY emerged in 2011, the year Thomson Reuters claimed Afghanistan to be the world's most dangerous country for women to live in. During this time, the international community, including former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and UK Foreign Secretary, William Hague, convened at the International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn to discuss the future of the country as NATO troops begin to withdraw in 2014. At OWAY it is our belief that investing in women's education plays an integral roll in increasing overall global security.

A key component behind this urgency is the speculation surrounding the possibility of the Taliban gaining power over Afghanistan in the post-NATO withdrawal. In *Half the Sky*, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn outline a strong correlation between the nurture of terrorists and the marginalisation of women; particularly, the number of Muslim terrorists 'has little to do with the Koran but a great deal to do with the lack of robust female participation in the economy and society of many Islamic countries'. These findings subsequently led the US Pentagon to mould its counterterrorism strategies by investing in girls' education. Last November, BBC Urdu special correspondent Mohammad Hanif wrote in *The Guardian* that, 'An educated female population is more threatening to [the Taliban] than armies equipped with all-seeing drones.' In essence, educating women is a form of non-violent resistance against terrorism.

Yet, even with basic education, there are barriers that still prevent women from making change. Malcolm Ehrenpreis,

gender specialist at the World Bank, stated last year that, 'In the last 20 years or so, women and girls have reached much higher education levels than they had before. Yet there has been very little progress in terms of access to the economy.' However, if young women can access higher education at prestigious universities like Oxford, they will:

- hold greater economical and political value, and thus power to make changes on the national level;
- have the backing of the university name, which allows them to be taken seriously when they enter politics, law or business, and successfully enforce policies rather than merely standing in as token puppets; and
- contribute to greater female participation in their countries' economies and societies, which has the potential to disempower extremist thinking, groups and terrorists, as shown by the US Pentagon.

For centuries, Oxford University has educated many of the world's greatest female leaders, humanitarians and social changers, including former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto, founder of Pakistan's People's Party and the first woman prime minister of a Muslim country, Nobel Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the Burmese National League for Democracy, and Indira Gandhi, the first female prime minister of India and the second female head of government in the world.

What is more, OWAY's investment in undergraduate education for women could bolster the human capital in their countries. Former World Bank President Robert Zoellick stated that investing in women and girls is central to 'breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty'. But further empowerment such as through higher education would enable them to obtain higher economic value and make sustainable political changes on the national scale. MIT Professor of Economics Robert Townsend recently found that it was more likely for families to be lifted out of poverty due to the highest level of education of just one young family member, rather than having basic education for several family members. Providing more Afghan women with the opportunity to access university degrees may be a force in turning Afghanistan into a key competitor in the global economy.



A family riding horseback along the Yakawlang highway in Afghanistan, toward a clinic or social event in another village.



A group of school girls in a remote village in Afghanistan.

In addition to decreasing terrorism and increasing human capital, a woman with higher education can use her clout and political leverage to improve her country's judiciary system in favour of protecting basic human rights. An OWAY patron and Afghanistan's only Foreign Attorney who has litigated in Afghanistan's legal system, Kimberley Motley has been demonstrating how such changes to Afghanistan's court system are possible. For example, Motley's representation of Gulnaz, an Afghan girl who was jailed for being raped and impregnated by her uncle, resulted in an unprecedented move by President Karzai to grant, for the first time ever, a Presidential Pardon to Gulnaz for a moral crime. In addition to this, Gulnaz's case highlighted the need to address violence against women in Afghanistan and a new department within the Attorney General's Office was created for victims who want to report violence against them.

The enforcement of such new national policies in Afghanistan are only effective if acknowledged and accepted in local communities, since the values and traditions of these communities dominate the lives of their citizens. And subsequently, it is hoped their attitudes toward high-financial-gain markets that exploit women may also change. For example, sex-trafficking, a multi-billion dollar industry, can be significantly curtailed if many women in high-risk communities garner clout and influence in their society. In *Half the Sky*, Kristof and WuDunn provide such an analogy: 'When India feels that the West cares as much about slavery as it does about pirated DVDs, it will dispatch people to the border to stop trafficking.'

These goals may seem far-fetched but they are not impossible. In one of his TEDx speeches, British MP Rory Stewart, who trekked along the mountainous range in Afghanistan in 2002 and established the Turquoise Mountain Foundation in Kabul, stated that 'The world... can be changed very, very rapidly by someone with sufficient confidence... knowledge and... authority.'

Indeed, such an example was seen in the last year, when the world rapidly diverted its attention towards girls' education, spearheaded by Pakistani schoolgirl, Malala Yousafzai, who was shot in the head by the Taliban for her work as an education activist. Nearly a year later, she called for universal access to education at the United Nations, now known as Malala Day. Backing her was UN Special Envoy on Global Education and former UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. 'The way to give practical support to the liberation struggle now under way – and to reach the most marginalised,' writes Brown in his blog, is to 'narrow the gap in educational opportunities between rural and urban, and between rich and poor areas. Doing more for those who have least is the only way to deliver opportunity for every child.'

In line with Malala Day and Mr Brown's vision, OWAY's target at undergraduate education merges the gap between those most poor, who have access only up to secondary school level, and those most privileged, who have access to and beyond postgraduate level. The possibility of OWAY as a vehicle for social mobility in Afghanistan has the potential to deliver opportunity to the most marginalised groups there,

but to perhaps one day make the reality of marginalisation purely historical.

However, a crucial step in turning this vision into reality is to prepare the poorest girls for the rigour of undergraduate education, by providing them with high-quality secondary school education. In Afghanistan there are hardly any private schools, and these few are accessible only to the wealthy and often ex-patriates living in the capitol. None are UK-certified, and prospective undergraduates must often travel abroad to obtain A-level or International Baccalaureate certificates.

Recently, with the support of University of Oxford's Pro-Vice Chancellor in Education, Dr Sally Mapstone, we found that bolstering the quality of secondary school education in Afghanistan is a crucial step in ensuring that students will have the aptitude needed for them to gain a place at the University of Oxford and excel in their studies. With these findings, OWAY is also aiming to support and partner with organisations working towards establishing the first schools in Afghanistan to accommodate an International Baccalaureate curriculum. Therefore, for our first round of applicants, OWAY will be accepting a young woman who has an Afghan parent and may live in another country as a refugee.

Our work at OWAY serves as a vehicle for young women in Afghanistan to be empowered and have a voice. In an open letter for CNN's Girl Rising, Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan wrote, 'Role models can inspire. Campaigns can motivate. But if we want all girls everywhere to rise up, then we must find them, befriend them and support them.'

As an Oxbridge community with such clout and resources, let us come together and help uplift the voices for young women to rise up around the world.

**Written by Jessica Lam**

Edited by Susan McClelland

Photos provided by Javed Noorani

More information can be found at our website:  
[www.onewomanayear.org](http://www.onewomanayear.org)

Jessica Lam is a US National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow and American Association of University Women (AAUW) American Fellow, pursuing a DPhil in Physical Theoretical Chemistry at Merton College. In the group of Mertonian Professor Tim Softley, she uses lasers to break apart a supersonic-jet of molecules, traps the atomic fragments in magnetic fields, and uses them for collisions and chemical reactions in the quantum physics regime. She graduated from MIT with two BSc degrees in Chemical Engineering and in Physics, and two minors in Chemistry and English Literature, as well as from Yale University with a Masters in Chemistry. Jessica plays for the Oxford University Volleyball Club and was awarded two Half-Blues in 2012 and in 2013.