

The wives of British soldiers are at the heart of a fight to nurture education in a land blighted by the Taliban, writes Rosie Kinchen

When British troops arrived in Helmand in 2006, about 70% of the population were illiterate, among them the governor, the chief of police and, tellingly, the Afghan province's director of education.

The poorest region in one of the poorest countries in the world, Helmand was to become the bloodiest battleground of the war in Afghanistan.

In Shin Kalay, a village in the Nad-e Ali district, things were radically different. Thanks to a recently built village school, boys and girls could not only read and write in Dari and Pashto, but they also had a decent grasp of English. While other children in the region worked in the poppy fields with their fathers or took care of the home with their mothers, here the soldiers met youngsters who talked about becoming teachers and doctors.

In 2008, shortly after the troops arrived in Shin Kalay, armed insurgents destroyed the school. Now the inspirational Afghan doctor who founded it has formed an alliance with a charity founded by British army wives to get it rebuilt.

The school was founded by Mohammad Khan Kharoti months before the 9/11 attacks. Kharoti, who grew up in Shin Kalay in the 1950s, was the first person in the village to go to primary school, walking four miles every day to get there. That education allowed him to train first as a nurse and then as a doctor.

After the Soviet invasion in 1979, Kharoti and his young family fled, first to Pakistan and then to America, where they have lived ever since in Oregon.

In March 2001, Kharoti returned to his home town. "The fields were covered in flowers," he says, "but that beauty was not the reality. The children were coming in from the poppy fields and I could see from their eyes and the way they were talking that the drugs were having an effect on them."

At the time, Afghanistan was under Taliban control and all nearby schools had been shut. Kharoti was adamant that the only way the country could change was through education.

He met the village elders and travelled to meet an influential Taliban leader in Kabul. He told him it was vital that the village children had some access to schooling — even the girls. Kharoti says: "I asked him, 'If your wife gets ill or has a baby, do

you want her to see a male doctor or a female doctor?' And I said, 'If you want her to see a woman, the girls need to be educated too'."

Permission granted, Green Village school was born in two rooms in the home of Kharoti's brothers. There were no literate women in the village of 10,000 people, so he persuaded two women to move there to work as teachers. Shortly afterwards they welcomed their first students, 10 boys and six girls.

Soon, they were overwhelmed by the demand for places. "People understood that it was a good thing if a child could read the labels on medicines, if they could read legal documents," Kharoti says. "They knew that this would stop them being taken advantage of in life." Many of the children were the first in their families to read and write.

When the British arrived in Helmand, the school had 1,200 students from the surrounding region, 400 of

them girls. As well as languages, the children were taught science, maths, religion and computer skills. Salaries for the 35 teachers were provided by the Afghan ministry of education.

By then the Taliban were starting to target education-related infrastructure and people. Between 2006 and 2008 there were almost 1,200 such attacks.

In 2008 Kharoti received a phone call at four in the morning. He was

told that a gang of armed men had entered the village and stolen all the furniture and blackboards from the school. Hours later they returned with a crane and bulldozer and began to demolish the building.

"It was horrendous," Kharoti says. "I cried and went into a kind of depression. Other than my family, this was the most important thing in the world to me."

It is still unclear who was responsible: some say it was the Taliban;

others that ISI, the Pakistani intelligence service, was paying people to stir up discontent; others that it was a construction company hoping to be paid to rebuild the school.

This is where the army wives enter the picture. British soldiers heard about the school's destruction and word reached the Afghan Appeal Fund, a charity founded by Lady Richards, the wife of General Sir David Richards, now the chief of the defence staff.

Since the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, the charity has been raising funds to build schools across the country. "We realised that it was important that we did something to help while the troops were out there on the ground," says Richards.

An article published in The Sunday Times about a school in Kabul operating out of ragged tents had drawn her attention to the desperate lack of education. "The tragedy is that Afghans are very proud of education; the children there go running into school, rather than dragging their feet like British children, but because of the conflict, the infrastructure to support that has fallen apart," she says.

The charity works with local non-governmental organisations and the military to find worthy educational projects, and then raises the capital to help. Fundraising is often done by military families who have been touched by the plight of the Afghan people during tours of duty.

Through sponsored bike rides, swims across the Channel and school fundraisers, they have already raised £50,000 to help rebuild the school in Shin Kalay. The money has allowed Kharoti and the villagers to erect a school building for 750 boys.

Girls are still being taught in villagers' homes.

Richards hopes the charity will continue to build schools in Afghanistan long after western troops have withdrawn. Whether or not this will be possible remains to be seen; the region is still unstable and the situation may get worse.

Kharoti will not admit defeat. With the help of the Afghan Appeal Fund, he plans to build a larger complex that he hopes will have 54 rooms, including a library and a computer lab, and will be able to accommodate several thousand students.

How does he know they won't pull it down again? "We don't," Kharoti says, "but the only chance that Afghanistan has is if we can educate the people. Those born 30 years ago have only known war — we must make sure that those growing up now have another option."

"And," he concedes, "it will have 24-hour security."

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