



CHILDREN OF URUZGAN

CASE STUDIES

People, projects, pictures ...



Save the Children



Saleha, 18

Midwifery student

Saleha remembers one day last year when a pregnant woman died in front of her. She was at home in her village in the remote Gizab district of Uruzgan. “The woman was one of our neighbors”, she says. “My mother had been called over to help. The neighbor woman’s clothes were soaked with blood. The baby was stuck and wouldn’t come out – and all we could do was bring her water! There was no medicine, there was no doctor. Later that day, the woman died and the baby with her. It was terrible. I cried so much.”

Saleha was 17 at that time. She was in 8th grade of her area’s girls’ school. She was the oldest student, the one with the best grades, too. She was well known in the village as “the literate girl”.

One year later, Save the Children community mobilizers contacted the village elders and asked if they wanted to nominate a girl from the community to participate in a two year midwifery training course. The elders agreed. Gizab district has only one midwife for 43,000 people. They asked Saleha. And she accepted.

“It is terrible to think that we could have helped our neighbor if we just had known what to do”, she says.

Today, Saleha is one of 24 students enrolled in the midwifery school run by Save the Children in Uruzgan. Improving health care for pregnant mothers and newborns is part of the AusAID funded “Children of Uruzgan” program. In this poor and remote province of Afghanistan, nine out of ten women still deliver their babies at home and without skilled assistance. Hundreds of mothers die every year due to pregnancy complications.

Nine out of ten women deliver their babies without skilled assistance

The lack of knowledge about good hygiene practices and a healthy diet for children aggravates the situation. Reliable data is not yet available, but experts guess that among the nine children dying every day in Uruzgan many are newborns. 1

National numbers indicate that most of the children dying in Afghanistan die in their first 40 days.

Saleha's training will take two years. Then she will go back to her village and work for the closest health center, taking care of pregnant women and newborns. Thousands of women have never had access to health care because their families wouldn't allow them to be touched by male doctors or because the next health post was too far away. Now, will then have someone to turn to.

For the interview Saleha sits in one of two new Skill's Labs of the midwifery school. Plastic babies, bellies, placentas, medical instruments and more training materials just came in from Pakistan. The training facility had to be built from scratch. Midwifery education is new in Uruzgan. The whole province only has 20 midwives, most of whom came in from other provinces.

The program started four months ago. For the first weeks, the lessons are strictly theoretical. On the agenda: topics such as anatomy, physiology, infection prevention for pregnant women, the role

“I don't want to see another woman in pain, not being able to help”

of the community midwife, ante- and post-natal care. Practical training in private clinics and the district hospital started after three months. The education level in Uruzgan is quite low. Only 0.6 per cent of all women can read and write. “We work with every single student to bring her literacy skills and general knowledge up to date”, says school director Homeira Siddiqi.

“Many things were surprising for me”, says Saleha. “For example there are signs when a woman is pregnant. Her breasts look different, and she stops bleeding. I didn't know that.”

“The girls only knew that there is a marriage - and then there are babies”, says one of the five female trainers, Dr. Nasifa Alokozay, 38. “Everything in between is a huge question mark for them.” Dr. Alokozay studied medicine in Jalalabad, Nangahar province, and runs her own clinic in Tirin Kot. She is a pioneer in a province where women rarely leave the house, let alone work in public. She also helped to build a nurse training program two years ago. She remembers driving to work and being deliberately hit by another car. People tried to frighten her.

She had a hard time finding enough girls to do the training. “Parents told me that girls are not supposed to leave the house and they are too stupid to learn complicated things.”

Now, she sees a change in the people's attitudes towards girls' education and girls working in medical professions. The first female health workers coming into the province made a huge difference in people's lives. The people in the conservative province started to change their minds, helped by extensive community outreach and mobilization by Save the Children. For the midwifery school, Save the Children had twice as many applicants as needed and even two more trainees than agreed with the Ministry for Public Health. “We didn't want to turn them away”, says the school director Siddiqi. “Uruzgan needs every midwife it can get.”



Saleha's family agreed to send their daughter to the big city, Tirin Kot, where she now lives in a dorm, well protected by female staff. Her father wrote a guarantee letter that he would support his daughter, the village elders confirmed in writing that they would protect her, and there is already an agreement with the provincial health department that she will be employed by the facility in her area.

“My district has only one single midwife”, says Saleha. “I want to serve my people. I want to save women and babies. I don't want to see another woman in pain in front of me, not being able to help.”



Sayed Bahadur Shah

Religious leader

“In the beginning I was a little hesitant to talk about women’s health”, says the religious leader. “You must understand: men usually don’t talk about women and their bodies in Afghanistan. But then I thought to myself: they tell us this can save the lives of our wives and daughters and babies. It is my duty to protect the lives of my people.”

It is early evening in the month of Ramadan, and Sayed Bahadur Shah sits in the yard of his mosque in Tirin Kot city, a small one floor building of mud bricks. His own house is on the same compound so some of his eight children gather around him on the plastic carpet on the dirt floor. His youngest son

Ahmad, one year old, crawls onto his lap. Ahmad’s eyes are lined with black khol against the evil eye as are the eyes of most of the men. Some villagers have come to see who Mullah Iman’s visitors are. They sit down quietly in a circle around their religious leader, the most influential man in their lives and advisor for all circumstances.

Three weeks ago, 34 mullahs from Tirin

Kot district attended the first course for religious leaders on maternal health at the Save the Children

Mullahs will be trained on maternal health and child survival

office. It is part of the “Children of Uruzgan” program to reach out to respected members of communities in order to make them allies in spreading messages and change people’s behavior. Mullahs will be trained on maternal health, child survival and child rights by the end of the project. Afghanistan still has one of the worst rates of maternal and child mortality in the world, and Uruzgan is considered worse than the rest of the country due to the lack of infrastructure and education.

In Uruzgan, nine out of ten women give birth without skilled assistance. Every year, an estimated 3300 children die in Uruzgan; that’s nine per day.

It was the first training - “and it was quite a challenge”, remembers the head of the Save the Children office. Some of the mullahs had one look at the material, threw the papers on the floor and started shouting. Discussing female body functions or family planning needed some getting used to in this deeply conservative society.

Sayed Bahadur Shah was among those who embraced the idea from the start. In the following four days, he learned about ante-natal care, post-natal care, danger signs in newborns, family planning, about what 3



a pregnant woman should eat, why mother's milk is so good for babies and much more.

Since then he has advocated actively for what he has learned. "In three Friday prayers, I taught the men what I know. I talked about the importance of having a birth plan ready and of vaccinations."

He can recite like Quran verses what he has learned. His prayer beads click through his fingers while he talks with a slightly raised voice: "The danger signs for a pregnancy going wrong are bleeding, oedema, eclampsia. Then you must see a midwife or doctor immediately. A woman needs at least four visits to a health facility during the pregnancy. Babies must be breastfed until their second year; it is very healthy, and cheap too." The men in the circle listen attentively. "Yes, yes", they murmur and nod their heads.

Apart from the prayers, Sayed Bahadur Shah also uses other opportunities to spread the word. "I already talked to my people about women's and newborns' health during two wedding ceremonies", he says. He is the religious leader of about 200 families in Tirin Kot, about 1200 people. "We come together for many occasions. I plan to talk about maternal health also at burial ceremonies and bazaar days."

He thinks that the message reaches his people even though it is such a new and daring topic in their conversations. Since he talked to the men in the mosque about how they could save their wives' and babies' lives, he heard about more people visiting the doctors in the city, and he has seen an increase in female visitors at his house shyly asking for more information. "I am the Mullah Imam", he says quietly and self confidently. "People respect me. They listen to me. If I raise this issue, they know it is not disrespectful against Islam."

"The people come to me for medical advise. Now, I can tell them more"

In Uruzgan, where the majority still do not have access to health care, religious leaders often are also authorities in terms of people's health. Sayed Bahadur Shah says: "My people often come to me for medical advice. I used to tell them what the Quran says. Eat clean, drink clean, keep your body clean. Now, I can tell them more. This is a new thing, but it is a good thing. I will talk to other religious leaders and persuade them to come to the next training."

Sardar Mohammad, 19

Community Health Worker

Last week, a little girl was brought to Sardar Mohammad. She had suffered from diarrhea for days. The father had come from five villages away to see the new community health worker in the area. He didn't know what to do. "He waited very long before he came to me. It was close. The child was already severely dehydrated", says Sardar Mohammad. "I quickly prepared an electrolyte solution and advised him how to feed the child." The little girl survived.

Three months ago, Sardar Mohammad started his work as a community health worker in the Chora district of Uruzgan. He is responsible for 2000 people from his own village and two more nearby, but people also come from farther away to see him. Many of his patients are children.

Community health workers are the backbone of the public health system in Afghanistan. They are volunteers who receive training and equipment in order to treat people with simple illnesses in their villages many of whom don't have easy access to doctors or clinics.

In Afghanistan, only 60 per cent of all Afghans have access to health care. Comprehensive surveys for Uruzgan are not yet available, but experts say that the situation is probably worse due to the lack of infrastructure, the mountainous geography and the high illiteracy rate. One year ago, Uruzgan did not have even two thirds of the community health workers needed for its population. 340 were available – 600 are needed.

Children of Uruzgan is bridging that gap. 260 new community health workers will be trained by 2015, and Sardar Mohammad is one of them.

Sardar Mohammad shares the work with his grandmother who takes care of the female patients. Uruzgan is very conservative. Men wouldn't be allowed to see or talk to a woman, let alone touch her. This is why Save the Children always asks the communities to choose a man and a woman for the training. The communities usually choose the few

He starts health campaigns. There is progress - fewer children died

among them who can read and write. Sardar Mohammad went to the high school in the district capital until 9th grade. Only three other men in his village can read and write, "and they are very old", he says. That made him the best man for the task.

Previously, people had to walk 15 kilometers to reach the nearest doctor. "Children died all the time because the parents couldn't reach the doctor in time or didn't know what to do", Sardar Mohammad says. "Now, they just walk around the corner."

Sardar Mohammad and his grandmother have set up a room in their house as a clinic. "Every day, I see between two and ten patients. Many of them

are children", Sardar Mohammad says. Whatever he cannot treat, he refers to the health center in the district capital.

Sardar Mohammad has attended three trainings so far. "I learned about the importance of vaccinations and how to treat eye diseases. The most important thing I learned was how to recognize and treat diarrhea, the common cold, and pneumonia. Many children in my village die of these conditions."

"I was very surprised to learn that personal hygiene can save people's lives", Sardar Mohammad says. "Now, I brush my teeth every day. I wash my hands before I eat and when I come back from the toilet, and I wash my clothes once a week. I advise all people in my village to do so, too." Sardar Mohammad also started a campaign in the village to keep animals out of the houses and to use screens against the flies. He says, most of them listen and have already changed one or two things in their daily lifestyles.

Sardar Mohammad says it will take months until everybody has embraced the new ideas. But he sees progress. "I see less diarrhea cases compared to when I started." Fewer children died. He hopes to bring most of them safely through the winter. He and his grandmother have already sent them to the district clinic for vaccinations.





Khala Bibi, 55

Pre-school teacher

It is probably the most colorful house in the whole province. Flowers and hearts are painted all over its walls, inside and out. It looks like a shiny toy in the midst of all the drab dust-beige colored compounds in the steppe around Tirin Kot, provincial capital of Uruzgan. This house is one of the very first kindergartens for Uruzgan in southern Afghanistan.

Khala Bibi - Aunty Bibi - is the teacher here. She is "maybe 55", she is dressed all in black, and her wide smile shows very few teeth. Wherever she goes, children cling to her clothes.

"I love children", Khala Bibi says. "But children don't get much attention here. This has made me sad throughout my long life. Children don't grow well without love. They don't become good people." Years ago, two of her own children died from illnesses - she had six -, and her husband was killed by the Taliban. So at one point, maybe to kill the

sadness, Khala Bibi started to teach children in her neighborhood the Quran and some letters of the alphabet. "It became the joy of my old age."

When Save the Children offered Khala Bibi the opportunity to become a kindergarten teacher in the early childhood education scheme of the "Children of Uruzgan" program, she jumped at the chance. Some weeks ago she attended a one week course on Early Childhood Development (ECD).

20 kindergartens have already been established. By the end of the "Children of Uruzgan" program, a total of 50 pre-school classes will be set up for more than 1000 children. The groups are supposed to give poor children from rural areas a better start in learning and life. Activities include structured play with a range of simple toys to help children develop basic concepts of shape, size, direction and volume as well as skills in sorting, comparing, sequenc-

ing, drawing and coloring. Other activities include outdoor play and stories.

Khala Bibi says: “In the course I learned how to keep children busy and disciplined, how to play games with them, and that they have many rights. Then, Save the Children provided a lot of puzzles, books and other toys for the children in my group.”

Now, every afternoon from three to five o'clock around 30 children come to the house of the village's mayor where the community established the

30 children come every afternoon. Their favourites are the wooden puzzles

kindergarden. The children play in the yard on a carpet. The puzzles, made of wood by local carpenters, are their favorites. Khala Bibi

wanders from group to group, squats in the middle and plays along. She scolds two boys who have been fighting, she calms a crying girl, she picks up a sleeping toddler and hands out sweets she bought with her own money.

“I could have had many more children here”, she says. “Especially older girls. There are no girls' schools here, and the parents trust me. They want me to teach them how to read and write. But it became too full. I had to send away many of the older ones.”



“Pre-school groups are a new idea for Uruzgan, but they are very important”, Khala Bibi says. “Everybody agrees. I didn't have any problems in persuading the parents to send their sons and daughters. Children have no place in Uruzgan. There are not enough schools so the children stand in the streets and are bored. They get dirty and sick and the only thing they learn is how to pick a fight. The Taliban drive through the streets. It is not safe outside. In the kindergarden, the children are safe. They stay clean and don't become sick. In winter, they will be warm. And they learn something.”

Eight out of ten children don't go to school in Uruzgan and of those who do only ten per cent are girls. This is why Khala Bibi also teaches her children the alphabet and how to count. For many of them, it will be the only education they will ever get. For others, it will be a headstart into school, a better starting point into a system that still neglects the needs of many young students.

