



**NANSEN
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2015 Winner of
UNHCR's Nansen Refugee
Award

BIOGRAPHY

Ms Aqeela ASIFI

Pioneer in educating Afghan refugee girls

Aqeela Asifi is the 2015 winner of UNHCR's Nansen Refugee Award, recognised for her indefatigable efforts to help girl refugees access education.

Asifi herself is an Afghan refugee living in Pakistan. She escaped with her husband and two small children from Kabul, Afghanistan in 1992 during the Mujahedeen siege. She was just 26 years old when she arrived at the stifling, remote Kot Chandana refugee village in Mianwali in the south-eastern Punjab province of Pakistan. In the early 1990s she was one of more than three million exiled Afghans in the country. Kot Chandana was then home to nearly 180,000 people.

At that time, she had no idea she would spend most of her life as a refugee. Instead she focused on daily survival and maintaining her family's dignity and independence. As a former teacher she was immediately struck by the lack of schools in the refugee village and a total absence of learning opportunities for girls. She felt deeply that she wanted to help girls to learn, but living as a refugee in a conservative community, she realised there would be no simple solution. She also had her own challenges with a growing family to care for and no real means of supporting them. But she was determined to bring education to the refugee girls of Kot Chandana.



In the beginning she says the community did not know what to call her. There was no word for a female teacher. Once she had the hardwon backing of the village elders, Asifi bravely went door-to-door to convince reluctant parents to let her tutor their children. She began with just 20 pupils in the back room of her brother-in-law's tent. She persevered and eventually she was given permission to set up a formal tent-school for girls.

Borrowing a tent Asifi carefully planned her course of study to reflect Afghan cultural traditions as well as literacy and practical home management lessons. She wanted to equip her pupils with essential life skills to help them thrive while living in the limited confines of the refugee





settlement. With even the most basic school supplies out of reach, she spent each night writing out worksheets for the students by hand. All the while, with jobs scarce, her husband was struggling to support his family.

Over the course of the following two years her tiny school blossomed and her accomplishments led to much-needed funding from the Pakistani government. This has allowed Asifi to earn a small salary and to employ two female teachers. She expanded into six tents and was able to include girls from the local Pakistani community in her classrooms.

Now, 23 years after Asifi arrived, her tent-school is a permanent building. Kot Chandana has changed too, its population shrinking to 13,400 as refugees began returning home after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Only 1.5 million Afghans remain in Pakistan. Afghanistan has one of the youngest populations in the world, and children also make up more than half of the Afghan refugee population. With so many young minds education is a vital part of their future security and well-being. Asifi's dedication has helped guide more than 1,000 girl students through to the eighth grade – with each student receiving a nationally-endorsed certificate confirming their achievement. Asifi's efforts encouraged more schools to open in the village and now another 1,500 young people (900 girls, 650 boys) are enrolled in six schools throughout the refugee village today.

Asifi remains a trusted mentor and role model to two generations of pupils who still come to her for advice and guidance. Her teaching legacy has even had a cross-border impact with two of her former students taking up the profession in Kabul after their return.

Asifi has remained in Kot Chandana all these years to ensure refugee girls can go to school. But soon she and her family may be following in the footsteps of the millions of Afghan refugees who have made their way home to Afghanistan. Now she says the school will be able to continue without her.

Asifi is a true symbol of triumph over adversity. With her quiet patience and determination she has changed the lives of hundreds of young refugees, offering them a pathway out of poverty, and a chance to build themselves a future when they return to Afghanistan.

“My education mission continues even if I return [to Afghanistan], because I consider every child as my own. If I am concerned about the education of my children, I am equally mindful of all the children's education,” she says. “When you have educated mothers, you will almost certainly have educated future generations. So if you educate girls, you educate generations.”

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