



On the Threshold of Change - Girl's Education Does Make a Difference

25 Years Monika Girls High School Bagrote Valley/Pakistan

Project Report 1992 - 2017

The school for girls had a modest start. Furnishings were basic, means limited. Elders reaction to such a novelty was cautious at best. A hitherto male sphere to be suddenly trespassed? An education for girls?

Yet winds of change had started to blow in Bagrote, a remote valley in Pakistan's province Gilgit-Baltistan. An ambitious lot of only twenty girls were to set a milestone in the region's schooling history. And what at first seemed to be an uphill battle has now changed into easier sailing for Bagrote's young female population. As today's students prove: Girl's education does make a difference!

Yet today's serious efforts to put girls and boys on an equal footing had to come a long way. Bagrote Valley is a region long admired by writers, travellers, and scientists for its location at the very heart of the gigantic Karakorum range of mountains and its age-old customs. A two-hours jeep ride away from Gilgit, the urban centre of the province Gilgit-Baltistan, the valley of Bagrote extends over roughly 25 km. The valley is lined with terraced fields which are fed by a highly sophisticated irrigation system and inhabited by approx. 9000 people of the Shia faith. Mainly farmers they grow wheat, corn, potatoes, tomatoes, apricots and nuts, breed goats, sheep and cattle. Many families do not have a regular income due to a lack of education and opportunities. Age-old traditions are still prevailing which allows the scientist ample insights into the area's huge variety of languages, history and geography but are not conducive to change.

It was in this tradition that I first set foot to Bagrote in **1990**. Being an anthropologist myself I came as a member of the interdisciplinary German-Pakistan Culture Area Karakorum Project (CAK) to undertake research into the culture of Bagrote where I particularly focussed on women's culture and development.

At the time of my stay, girls were still neglected in favour of boys when it came to schooling and formal education. Only a small number of girls had passed primary school privately with no access to a middle and high school education due to a lack of facilities. Others were totally without the opportunity to learn reading and writing and to study Pakistan's lingua franca Urdu in a place where the local language is a different one, Shina.

Many teenaged girls privately stated their keen interest in gaining these basic skills. Some even went so far as to share their concern about their inferior position in a changing society. They feared to be married to an educated boy which may result in neglectance by their husband and a feeling of shame by their own children for an illiterate mother. Although on paper Government primary schools for girls had existed

in the larger villages in Bagrote since **1991**, no teachers had been appointed to Bagrote until recently.

It was then that I initiated Monika's Girls High School as a small neighbourhood school. Following a joint initiative with my host, twenty girls were the first to be taught by a young local in his private house in Datuchi-Das in **1992**. A year later, the number of students had increased to 40 attending primary and secondary syllabuses. Two female teachers from Gilgit were soon appointed as full-time teachers and were paid for by donations. In that year our neighbourhood school shifted to an old empty school building, located near the linkroad to Datuchi-Kot.

In **1994**, the number of female students had increased to more than 70. Due to a lack of educated local women, two local male teachers were appointed full-time. This decision was made in consultation with the girls' parents. Expenses for the teachers continued to be covered privately.

In October **1995**, I came back to Bagrote to visit our private high school. At that time, 118 girls were studying at all levels, from primary to 10th class. Students in secondary level came from the villages of Datuchi, Sinakir, Hope, and Bulchi. Since its start in 1991, our private school has been open to female students from all villages. Some girls live an hour's walk away from our school and cover this distance daily.

Government officials promised to support our school in its quest for a new school building. The old building with three rooms needed repairs and had become much too small to host 118 students. With the help of a small German women's organization (Forum Kinder in Not e.V.), I was in this year able to provide salary funds for three teachers for another three years and some additional funds for necessary repairs on the old building and equipment.

In **1996** and 1997, a total of 16 girls passed final exams and are now working as village health workers in the area of Bagrote or as primary school teachers. Since the beginning of **1997**, a female local volunteer teacher has been teaching full-time at our private school along with the three teachers previously mentioned. In 1997, the villagers of Datuchi themselves provided voluntary support. They constructed a school wall and a schoolyard. For this purpose they even moved the linkroad to Datuchi-Kot, which had previously passed right alongside the school building.

In June **1998**, I paid a second visit to Bagrote to watch our private school progress. 122 girls were attending classes. Female students came from the villages of Sinakir, Hope, Bulchi, Oshikhandas, and Datuchi. That year, two girls' students passed final exams. One, though married, went to Gilgit and later to Peshawar for professional nurse and midwife training. Education does make a difference!

In **1999** the number of students had gone up to 152 reaching 174 in June **2000**, 216 in September **2003** and 235 in September **2004**. And our efforts had far-reaching consequences: Elders were meanwhile more than willing to forfeit traditional barriers and fight for modern causes. A Government Girls Middle School had been established in the largest village, Farfui and several Government Girls Primary Schools are now operating in each of the six villages.

Furthermore, three English Medium Community Schools practising even co-education have been founded in 1997 and 1998 by DUBANI, a young locally based self-help development organization of the villagers of Bagrote and the neighbouring Haramosh Valley. In 2002, the community schools which are funded by the students' parents who are mainly teachers or wealthy farmers have been united and nowadays are operated by the Bagrote Association for Social Enhancement (BASE), a new self-help initiative. Despite being the driving force for female education in Bagrote our privately run school still lacked full formal recognition.

And despite numerous concerns by parents regarding possible laziness or even worse disobedience by educated girls the young and eager students are proving the opposite: Girls are still fulfilling their various duties at home and when graduated are also active in community work, mainly teaching and health care. Some contribute a regular cash income to their families.

Their marriage options have increased among the local male and educated youth. The average age of marriage and in turn maternity age has risen which already led to a lesser number of childbirths, to healthier mothers and babies and to family planning practices. The extended knowledge is visible in households in which educated girls live and work. Step by step, a change in attitudes towards child rearing, nutrition, hygiene and health care takes place.

Education does make a difference. An impressive number of 235 students in **2004** and the spinoff just described proves that the Monika Girls High School has meanwhile gained a reputation which far exceeds the narrow borders of Bagrote Valley.

In early **2005**, a further milestone has been reached by expanding into the sphere of higher secondary education: Newly arranged 11th class' instructions were attended by 35 girls students. With the start of the new term, their number further increased and Bagrote people proudly started speaking of their Girls College. Meanwhile the girls school hosted 250 students.

At my visit in **2006**, 265 students visited the school and 40 young ladies attended 11th and 12th class instructions. In **2007**, their number had climbed up to 44 while 221 girls studied in our school.

In Bagrote, the girls' interest in formal education seems to have met no limits yet, as figures and activities in the year **2010** prove: 299 school students and 63 college students, climbing up from 270 and 28 in **2008**. Since March **2009** also instructions for the Certificate Teaching are provided, as some young ladies are very eagerly trying to meet all formal requirements set by the Education Department for a teacher's post at government schools.

The disastrous rain floods in **summer 2010** which have struck and destroyed large areas of Pakistan have been comparatively mild in Bagrote. Inhabitants, cattle and houses have remained safe. But crops (wheat, fruits and vegetables) have been destroyed by the water. Prices for daily goods like food, gas, wood have increased by 50-100%. The electricity supply broke down. Luckily, the school buildings have dried quickly and classes have been restarted after summer.

During my stay in September **2011** the girls school hosted 307 students and numbers were still on the rise, as admissions for college classes 11 and 12 were on-going.

At my visit in September **2012**, 355 girls' students visited the school. The expenses for 14 teachers have been funded privately. Additionally, we have been able to construct one more classroom.

In **2013**, 289 Bagrote girls attended pre-school and classes 1 to 10, and 65 young ladies attended college classes 11 to 13. Grade 13 which is also called 3rd year has been started in September 2013 for the very first time. Two additional teachers have been hired for this new class.

Yet, another milestone was reached in **2014**: Grade 14 resp. a 4th year college class started in September. 18 teachers were guiding 217 girls and 89 college students. And the additional classroom constructed in late 2012 by our funds accommodates a computer lab on the school premises. Computers and further equipment have been provided by the regional school authority, and a IT instructor.

In October **2015**, 222 high school students and 50 college students were instructed by 15 privately funded and 10 government teachers. At the time of my visit in May **2016**, 61 college students were instructed. And, for the first time, a science college class was started.

Returning to Bagrote in May **2017**, 82 college students were being taught in six classes and 208 school girls in ten high school classes by 15 privately funded and 12 government school teachers.

Disabled persons have no opportunity for schooling in Bagrote. With the help of a hearing impaired young local lady who has attended special schooling in Karachi, we try to encourage hearing impaired children to attend a literacy class. Since January **2013**, she teaches a small group of children with great success. For three years in a row, two students of this group stood first and second in primary school exams. Experiencing these achievements may raise awareness among the valley's population for special children's competences and interests. This pilot project is supported by the students of a special education school in Neuwied, Germany.

The expenses for the privately funded project teachers in schooling year 2017-2018 will sum up to 20.000 EUR.

The people of Bagrote and myself are very grateful for the donations by friends and friends of friends which keep our school project running and growing. The girls of Bagrote send their heartiest greetings and warm thanks to all supporters.

Monika Schneid
Hamburg, December 2017

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