

An American Teenager's Dream and Conquest

BY MIAN JAN, M.D., CHAIRMAN, DEPARTMENT OF MEDICINE PENN MEDICINE
CHESTER COUNTY HOSPITAL,

AND

MARIA KHAN, AN INTERN AT WEST CHESTER CARDIOLOGY

Gender inequality is arguably a global obstacle; this issue is of particular concern in Pakistan. Human Rights Watch recently ranked this nation as being the second most afflicted by gender inequality worldwide. The causes of gender inequality in Pakistan are multifactorial, but lack of access to educational opportunities is thought to be of particular importance. Estimates suggest there are 22.5 million children between the ages of 5-16 years that are not enrolled in school. Fifty nine percent of these children deprived of educational opportunity are young women. Addressing women's educational needs has been and continues to be a crucial component of any intervention aimed at mitigating gender inequality. The lack of religious, social, and facility support is an ongoing barrier to the education of young women in more conservative countries.

The Sonia Shah Organization (SSO) is a philanthropic organization with demonstrable success at combatting barriers women face in pursuit of education. Their mission is to engage, educate and empower women. SSO has supported the education of women by building a school, providing access to medical care, and providing the necessary resources to succeed. SSO currently strives to increase the number of scholarships that are available to support women deprived of educational opportunities.

Young Pakistani women face many societal barriers in terms of religions and social expectations when trying to obtain an education. Cultural taboos present many obstacles and barriers that function to suppress the educational opportunities of women in Pakistan enforced through violence by the Taliban. Traditional beliefs culturally engrained into elders stigmatize the pursuit of higher education instead of early marriage. As a matter of fact, the Sonia Shah school in Kangra, Pakistan was bombed which was expensive to repair and a new state of the art security system had to be installed.



Figure 1: The Sonia Shah School in Kangra, Pakistan

In 2016 at the Let Girls Learn event in London, which discussed female education worldwide, former first lady Michelle Obama noted in her speech, "It's not just about access to scholarships or transportation or school bathrooms. It's also about attitudes and beliefs." These girls have the same bright intellect and work ethic as we do; however, because of their gender, they are treated as second-class citizens who are unworthy of basic education. They are silenced when they protest and are simply shadows in society.

Grade school-age students must rely upon family financial support to purchase the educational materials that are needed to ensure their success. Given the impoverished state of many families in Pakistan, difficult choices result in which more male children tend to be supported in their education than female siblings. The deprivation of universally available course materials would not be consequential if Pakistani schools uniformly had access to electricity. If this were the case, female students deprived of class materials could benefit from the use of technology and class presentations.

While the gender equality issues described may seem simply too large and complex to solve, SSO has been effectively advocating for the advancement of women since 2012. The SSO was created in memory of Sonia Shah, a young American girl of Pakistani heritage whose life was taken far too soon by a car accident.



Figure 2: A student at admission and at graduation



Figure 3: A young student at the Sonia Shah School benefiting from technology including the Kindles.

The mission and values of SSO align with Sonia Shah's passion to mitigate the gender equalities she witnessed through educational empowerment. In 2013, Sonia Shah Organization partnered with The Human Development Foundation (HDF) to implement the project: Sonia Shah Memorial School. Sonia's dream was finally fulfilled on Sunday, October 19, 2014 with the opening of the Sonia Shah Memorial School in the village of Kangra in Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Her dream lives on through her family and a dedicated team of volunteers who run the Chicago-based nonprofit organization. In pursuit of their mission to alleviate gender inequality, the Sonia Shah Memorial School (SSMS) provides students with educational necessities that were previously unaffordable to female students. Because of generous philanthropy, the students of SSMS now have access to leading educational technology and resources. This windfall of technology freely available to students makes SSMS the first school in Pakhtunkhwa to incorporate such resources. SSMS has also addressed the need for electricity and safe drinking water through the installation of solar panels and state-of-the-art water filtration systems.

Another barrier to educational success is the lack of access to high-quality healthcare. Healthcare needs to be equalized to afford women the most opportunity. To ensure the health and wellness of all SSMS students, therefore promoting gender equality, in 2019, the SSMS invited volunteer physicians to perform checkups on the students. These checkups included checking vitals, administering vaccines, blood testing, eye exams, and supplying vitamins and medications necessary for a healthier life. They also ran tests for

malaria, typhoid, dengue, and HIV positive diseases that would normally prevent a student from coming to school, and could even cause the death of their entire family. Each student was supplied with a medical card that could serve as a medical record for future treatment.



Figure 4: Volunteer physicians performing check-ups on students

To preserve domestic skills during the progressive transformation of Pakistani society, SSMS opened a women's vocational center. Due to prevalent cultural barriers that prevent women from pursuing advanced professions, a woman with the most advanced studies may have no place in current society if devoid of basic domestic skills. Accordingly, products made in the course of teaching domestic skills at the vocational center are sold at auction in fundraising events such as the annual SSO Gala event held in Chicago, and provide honorable livelihood for these women who are war widows from American war with the Taliban.



Figure 5: Products created by the widows at the Women's Vocational Center.

Despite the emphasis being placed on projects in Pakistan, the Shah Foundation endeavors to mitigate the impact of gender inequality worldwide, and has even extended its initiatives across the USA. One such domestic effort is the Sonia Shah Scholarship program, which offers scholarships to women who are unable to complete their education because of financial burdens. To date, the program has awarded four students with scholarships that allow them to attend either a community college or a private four-year college.

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In strengthening its effort in the United States, the SSO utilizes its youth ambassadors (a group of young people up to the age of 26 years in Chicago), whose sole mission is to advance Sonia's agenda. The scholarship provides them with training skills that are imperative to develop the leadership necessary to further their mission of making the world a better place. This training enables them to assist their schools and communities. The SSO Vice President has asserted that, while obtaining the necessary support for their voices to be heard, they can inspire confidence in others. Many women with immense potential are left in the shadows in many countries. However, SSO youth ambassadors are quite the opposite; they are given the platform to raise enough concern and share their viewpoints with the rest of the world. They recently attended a SCARF event that allowed them to enhance their leadership and other abilities, for them to demonstrate how they will use them in the workforce.



Figure 6: The realities of the Sonia Shah Organization

Organizations such as SSO are instrumental in combatting systematic gender inequality through empowerment by way of access to educational opportunities. The efforts of the SSO in improving the education of women in Pakistan cannot be overemphasized. As they endeavor to increase their impact in the future, they already have achieved success in providing a better educational environment along with access to many resources. Without these resources, young women are put at a disadvantage to succeed in school and advance their education. As SSO continues to grow and carry out their mission, they aim to increase the number of scholarships they can provide for women afflicted by gender inequality and who cannot afford equal education opportunities.

We are continuing Sonia's legacy through Sonia Shah Organization, a (501) C3 based in Chicago, Illinois focusing on educating and empowering underprivileged girls in Pakistan and in the US. In the village of Kangra Pakistan, the school she started now has 300 children with over 70% girls. It is the first school in the district that provides not only free education but also uniforms, vitamins, and medical check up. It is the first school that has smart boards, computers, Kindles and 100% electricity from solar power. Over 150 women have graduated from the Sonia Shah vocational center. Here in the US Sonia Shah College Scholarship which provides community or private college tuition to deserving and underprivileged girls.



Figure 7: Students at the Sonia Shah Memorial School

Sonia Shah Ambassadors are not only volunteers but also trained and mentored to become leaders of the future and making a difference in the world. As one African proverb stated "If you educate a man, you educate an individual. But if you educate a woman, you educate a nation." Together, we can support SSO and her efforts to ensure that everyone is included, valued, and a voice that is heard in society.



Figure 8: Students at the Sonia Shah Memorial School

"The road is long but full of hope" Sonia Shah
 Changing the World, One Girl at a Time

For more information please email info@soniashahorganization.com or contact the SSO at 312 479 2458.



Figure 9: Sonia Shah Ambassadors

Life Well Lived

There is a moment in one's life when time stands still. It's the start of a perpetual nightmare that stays with you for the rest of your life. Such a moment began for me on September 6, 2012 when my brother-in-law Shah called to let me know my eighteen-year-old niece who was about to begin college, had an accident and passed away. I still recall his words, "Our angel is now with the angels."

Prophet Muhammad said peace be upon him, "Faithful never die but perhaps they are transported from this perishable world to the world of eternal existence."

Sonia Shah was an American girl of Pakistani Pashtun heritage. Whatever our nationality or ethnicity, we could all be proud of calling her one of our own. Usually, when a person passes away at this young an age, people ponder on what this person would have achieved if they had lived for a longer time. However, in the case of Sonia, we find ourselves wondering how this unusual girl was able to achieve so much and impact so many in her all too brief eighteen years of life. Sonia lived a short life but what a life it was. Abraham Lincoln said, "In the end it's not the years in your life that count; it's the life in your years." Sonia lived and studied in four countries, Thailand, England, USA, and finally graduated from Zurich International School in Switzerland. She was an honor student and spoke Pashto, Urdu, Spanish, Mandarin, and English. She loved history and was thirsty for knowledge and understanding of the world around



her. She wanted to go into politics to make a difference. In 2011, she was the youngest intern at Capitol Hill and in 2012 she was one of the youngest interns at the Obama campaign headquarters. In his condolence letter, President Obama stated, "Although Sonia was

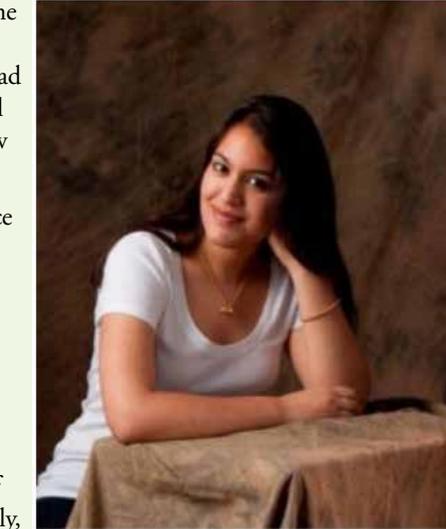


Figure 10: Sonia Shah (1993-2012)

one of the youngest interns at the campaign headquarters, she was one of the most determined."

Sonia was especially close to me because we were similar in many ways and shared common interests. However, she did not have the hang-ups and prejudices that I carry.

In 2011 I went to visit my sister in Switzerland. I was blessed to spend most of my time with Sonia and she was mature way beyond her years. She took me around Zurich by the public transportation system and no matter how many times I told her let's take a taxi, she gave me that dazzling smile and said, "Save your money uncle." When I joked with her about the lack of significant art in Zurich she sheepishly proved me wrong by taking me to Fraumunster Church where Sonia showed me a large beautiful stained glass window painted by Russian artist Marc Chagall. That was Sonia, she was the daughter I always wanted but never had at least until then. Since then I now have a five-year old daughter Jasmyn who is the star of my life. Sonia would always make her point not in an obnoxious

way but to share her point of view. During my visit we also took a wonderful trip to Lake Como and on the way she insisted we stay in the beautiful town of Lugano. Sonia knew all the history of the little towns. I will never forget our discussions, always as equals.

The most admirable traits of Sonia were her love of humanity, her desire to make a positive contribution without any need for applause or recognition. It was this desire that she expressed in her college essay, "I love history because it's the best story I've ever been told. It is surprising, fascinating, and sometimes fantastical, yet its truth gives it a power no fairy tale or novel could ever have. I used to be content to learn about the past, but now I want to take action, to become a part of the story that so enralls me. I'm happiest when learning about the world around me, but now I desperately want to be able to use what I learn, to make an impact on the world I work so hard to understand. A life spent in passive observation, would be unsatisfying. My heroes have always been brilliant, flawed people who have acted, who have changed our history and made our world. Now I want to try to join, instead of only watching them. I want to serve and help others while I am pursuing my passions and interests.

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Figure 11: Iram Shah building homes with Habitat for Humanity with President Jimmy

I want to leave this world knowing that I have changed it in some quantifiable, positive way, no matter how minuscule. I want to make history, instead of just witnessing it.”

Sonia wanted to internship with one of the legislators to fulfil her goal of public service. Once I gave her the name of a senator I knew and she told me she could never work for him because he was a bigot. I was surprised at her tender age she knew about politics and had ethics beyond her years. Subsequently, she worked with Admiral Sestak in Washington, D.C. and when he heard about her accident he was so despondent he called and spoke about her with a lot of love and admiration.

Sonia came to visit us in Philadelphia and had a list of things she wanted to see from Constitution Center to the Liberty Bell and Amish country but had no interest in the malls as a young girl of her age would. She always had a couple of jeans that she wore and once we were invited to a charity function and I asked her about buying new clothes but she had no interest in buying things for herself but was focused on the concept of charity and helping others.

Sonia always worried about the girls in Pakistan and especially from our village in Kangra, which is in a remote part of Pakistan and at that time, was full of Talibans. At that time Sonia was going to high school in Switzerland, she graduated a year early and during that gap year she decided to visit Kangra despite our objections because at that time that area was considered the most dangerous place on earth. Pakistani summers have extreme heat and Sonia who grew up in Switzerland, London, and Chicago not only tolerated the heat and wearing a chador that covers every part of one’s body but she welcomed the challenge. Her only peeve was that she had been to Mecca and knew that nobody covered their faces during Hajj, the pilgrimage. She also took note of why women had to eat after men even though they are the ones cooking the food; she wondered why they couldn’t eat together. It was then that the seed of the organization was planted in this young girl’s mind to empower the girls of that remote area. With the help of Sonia’s mother, my sister Iram Shah was able to buy a plot of land for future construction of the school. Now 8 years later, that dream of Sonia’s is very much a reality. A very high standard school, water filtration plant, and widows vocational school is now up and running. She started to raise funds when she got back to build the school. She raised enough funds to lay a foundation wall but then the tragedy struck!



Figure 12: Iram Shah speaking at a fundraiser in Chicago

I don’t know why we do not cherish our girls as much as we should. Please cherish them for one never knows when they will be no more. Tagore said about death, “Death is not extinguishing the light; it is only putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.” Today, we must rekindle that flame that burnt and shone so brightly in Sonia’s heart. Let’s keep that flame going, as we are here to champion that mission she started to build a school for girls in a village where girls thirst for knowledge but knowledge is withheld from them. I write this heavy hearted for I miss her but I also write this in gratitude because I am sure many of Sonia’s goals and aspirations have been achieved.

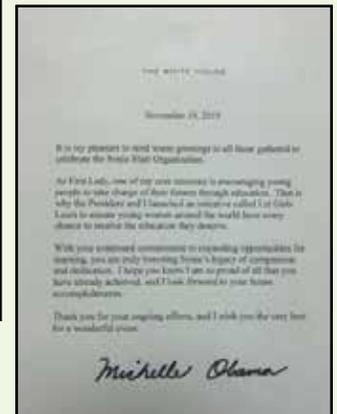


Figure 13: Recognition by former president and first lady Barack and Michelle Obama

This article was written in collaboration between Mian Jan, M.D., Chairman, Department of Medicine Penn Medicine Chester County Hospital, and Maria Khan, a student interning with West Chester Cardiology. Her dream is to become a cardiologist to provide medical care both here and particularly in the third world countries.

