

LOCKED ROOM AFGHAN WOMEN'S VOICES THE AFGHAN TIMES

AND IUF ASIA/PACIFIC

MARCH 2025

LOCKED BUT NOT SILENT

Despite oppression, Afghan women continue to resist, raising their voices through online education, secret gatherings, and defiant acts of protest.

UNLOCKING THE FUTURE

In the face of Taliban restrictions, Afghan women fight for their rights, finding new ways to learn, work, and reclaim their futures beyond closed doors.

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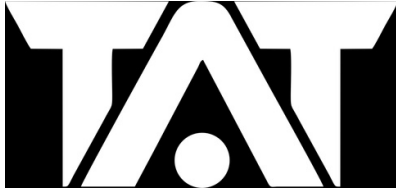


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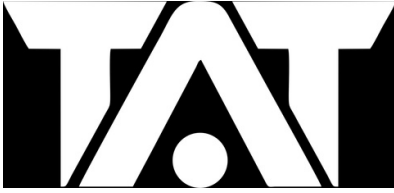


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Dr Muhammad Hidayat Greenfield

IUF Asia/Pacific Regional Secretary



In the 3 years and 7 months since the Taliban seized power in August 2021, there have been dozens of new policies, decrees, directives and regulations at national and provincial level designed to remove women from every aspect of public life. The purpose is to lock women away in their homes to be unseen and unheard in society. Each new law, decree or regulation is like another iron bar, another lock, added to the cage in which women and girls are imprisoned.

This is not systematic and planned. It is angry and chaotic. Each new policy, decree, directive or regulation is an angry reaction to the determination of women to continue to express themselves, to work, to teach and be educated, to speak out, to publish, to report, and to act in compassion and solidarity with others.

Ultimately this cascade of new restrictions on women and girls is just the angry and fearful reaction of the Taliban to women's courage and their powerful belief that they will return to public life. It is a reaction to women's hope.

Even for the most repressive political regimes extinguishing hope is an impossible task. Using religion to justify repression never works because religious belief is hope. And everything the oppressors do is against the religion and this simply exposes the hypocrisy and ignorance of the oppressors. That is why the exclusion of women from public life - locking them away - is such an angry and chaotic political process. It cannot be justified and has no legitimacy. And everyone knows it.

We should therefore be hopeful but not complacent. As the angry reaction of the oppressors becomes more desperate, it poses an even greater danger to women and girls. Just as women refuse to be silenced within Afghanistan, we must not remain silent internationally. The hope of women in Afghanistan - as expressed in these courageous stories- must be met with international solidarity. Their courage and our humanity demands it.



**TALIBAN
RESTRICTIONS ON
WOMEN SINCE 2021**

2021

- 
- AUGUST 15. 2021**
Women in government roles were told to stay home, except in roles deemed “essential,” such as healthcare.
 - AUGUST 23. 2021**
Women were prohibited from holding leadership positions in government or other sectors.
 - SEPTEMBER 6. 2021**
Co-education in schools and universities was banned, mandating strict gender segregation.
 - SEPTEMBER 18. 2021**
Young women in grades 7–12 were barred from attending school, pending “curriculum reviews.”
 - SEPTEMBER 20. 2021**
Women were required to wear hijabs in public, with stronger enforcement in later months.

2021 - 2022

NOVEMBER 1. 2021

Universities reopened under strict gender segregation. Women were taught separately, allowed to study only select subjects, and required to use separate entrances.

AUGUST 23. 2021

Women were prohibited from holding leadership positions in government or other sectors.

MARCH 23. 2022

After a brief announcement to reopen girls' secondary schools, the Taliban reversed the decision, sending girls home hours after they arrived.

MAY 7. 2022

Women were ordered to wear a full-body covering, with punishments for non-compliance.

JULY 15. 2022

Women were restricted from entering public parks and gyms, citing an inability to enforce strict gender segregation.


2022 - 2023

- 
- OCTOBER 1. 2022**
The Taliban prohibited women from participating in any kind of sports.
 - DECEMBER 20. 2022**
The Taliban announced that women were no longer allowed to attend universities.
 - DECEMBER 24. 2022**
Women were barred from working in NGOs, leading to a significant disruption in humanitarian aid operations.
 - JANUARY 8. 2023**
Women were prohibited from teaching in private educational institutions.
 - FEBRUARY 1. 2023**
Women were banned from public bathhouses, essential for hygiene in areas with limited running water.

2023

- 
- FEBRUARY 10. 2023**
Women remaining in government offices were dismissed, except for limited healthcare roles.
 - MARCH 5. 2023**
Women were prohibited from driving in certain provinces, further restricting their mobility.
 - APRIL 15. 2023**
Vocational training centers for women, including computer, language, and professional courses, were closed.
 - MAY 1. 2023**
Women were banned from traveling long distances without a male guardian.
 - JULY 20. 2023**
Women were barred from attending public religious gatherings, including prayers in mosques.

2023 - 2024

- 
- NOVEMBER 10, 2023**
Afghan women were prohibited from applying for international scholarships or study-abroad programs.
 - FEBRUARY 15, 2024**
Women working as TV presenters were forced to leave their positions, replaced by male counterparts.
 - JUNE 1, 2024**
Women were barred from entering parks, gardens, and public recreational areas entirely.
 - OCTOBER 5, 2024**
Female doctors were required to be accompanied by a male guardian at all times, further discouraging women from working in healthcare.
 - AUGUST 10, 2024**
Women running small businesses, such as tailoring or home-based crafts, were ordered to close down.

2024

DECEMBER 3, 2024

The Taliban ordered the closure of midwifery and nursing training centers, removing one of the last remaining educational pathways for women.

DECEMBER 26, 2024

The Taliban has doubled down on its ban on women working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), issuing a follow-up directive on December 26, 2024, to enforce the controversial measure first announced in December 2022.

DECEMBER 28, 2024

The Taliban banned windows overlooking areas where women gather, such as courtyards and kitchens. Existing windows must be blocked or modified.

Note: This is not a comprehensive list of the Taliban's restrictions on women. Day by day, the Taliban imposes additional limitations, systematically eroding women's rights and freedoms in Afghanistan.



WOMEN

WOMEN'S STORIES BY THE AFGHAN TIMES



WOMEN'S STORIES BY THE AFGHAN TIMES

DREAMS LOCKED BEHIND GATES

THE CLOSURE OF MIDWIFERY TRAINING CENTERS IN AFGHANISTAN

On December 3rd, 2024, during a meeting, the institute directors were informed that women and girls are no longer permitted to study at their institutions. No details or justifications were given.



The sun was low over Kabul, casting a soft orange glow on the mountains as Amina

stepped out of her modest home. Her bag was slung over her shoulder, filled with notebooks and a well-thumbed anatomy textbook. She walked quickly, eager to make it to her midwifery training center before the streets filled with the familiar chaos of the morning. This wasn't just another day of lessons. For Amina, it was a step toward a life where she could save others—and herself.

Her journey to the center was lined with memories of her battles to get there. She remembered her father's reluctance when she first spoke of becoming a midwife. "It's not safe for women to study anymore," he had said, his voice heavy with worry. But her mother had stood firm. "If we need midwives, who else will help the women in our villages?"

That argument had convinced him, though Amina knew it wasn't without a shadow of fear.

As she neared the gates of the center, she noticed something was wrong. A group of women—her classmates—stood huddled together, their faces pale, some streaked with tears. The heavy iron gate, usually open by now, was shut. Amina quickened her pace.

"What's happening?" she asked, her voice tinged with unease. One of her classmates, Zohra, looked at her, eyes brimming with anger and despair.



”

They've closed it. They told us not to come back.

Zohra

The words hit Amina like a physical blow.

She pushed her way closer to the gate, as though proximity might offer clarity. Beyond the locked entrance, the training center stood eerily silent. No familiar voices discussing lessons, no instructors hurrying to class. A lone guard stood near the gate, refusing to answer their questions.

"Is this temporary? When will it reopen?" Amina's voice cracked as she demanded answers. But there were none.

One woman, older and with a worn face, tried to rally them. "Standing here won't change anything," she said softly.

”

The Vice and Virtue officials (Taliban) are nearby. We need to leave.

The woman said



On December 3rd, during a meeting, the institute directors were informed that women and girls are no longer permitted to study at their institutions. No details or justifications were given.

Amina felt her legs weaken as she watched her hopes collapse before her. She thought of her classmates who had left their children at home, of the women who had traveled from distant villages for the chance to learn. She thought of the patients she would never be able to help—the mothers and babies who would now face even greater risks because there would be no one to care for them.



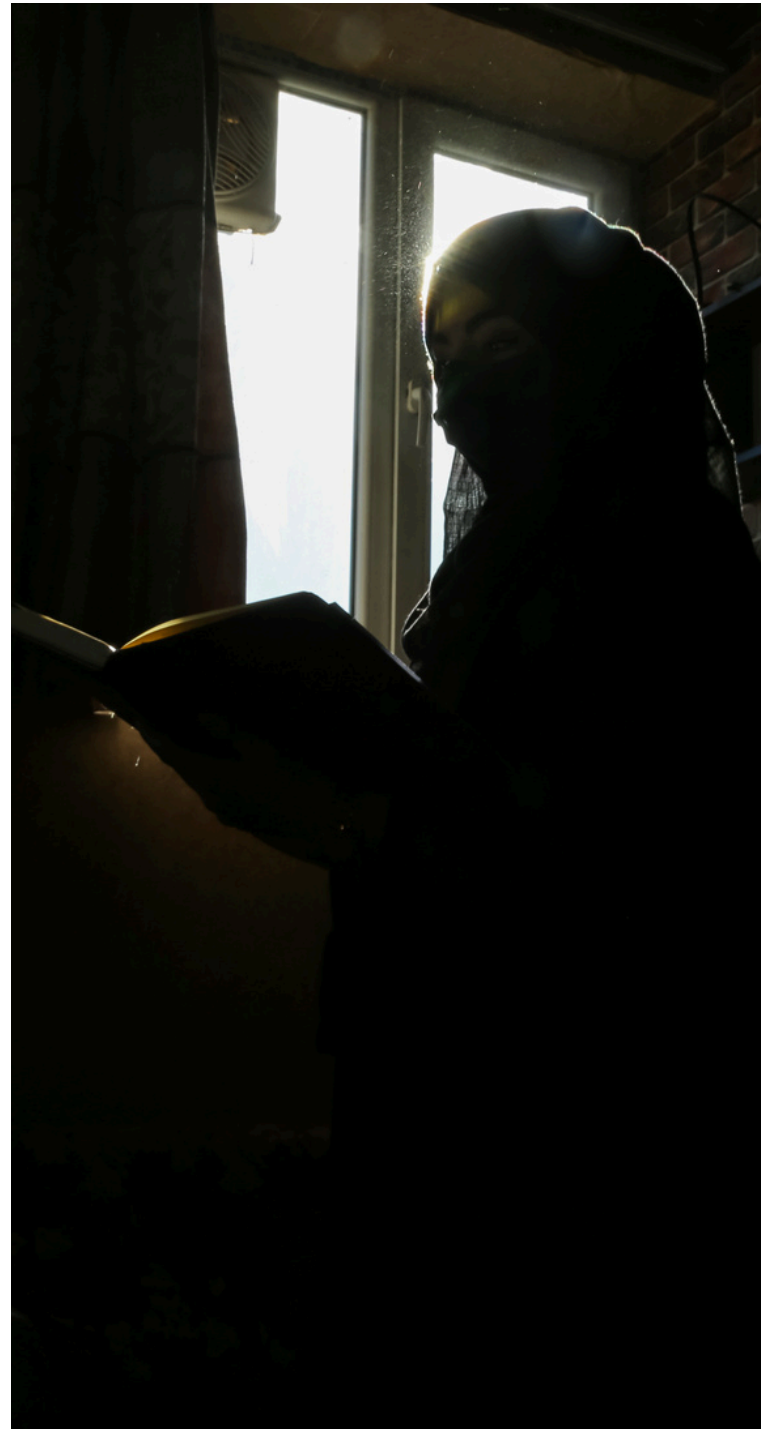
As they began to leave, some of the women sang softly, their voices trembling but defiant. The words were an old Dari song about resilience, one their mothers had sung to them as children. It was both a protest and a farewell.

The walk home felt longer than ever. When Amina reached her front door, she didn't know how to explain what had happened. Her mother, always strong, would try to comfort her. But what comfort was there when the future seemed to shrink smaller every day?

That evening, as she sat in the quiet of her room, Amina opened her anatomy textbook one last time. She ran her fingers over the pages she had studied so hard, over the notes she had written in the margins.

For a moment, she let herself dream of what could have been: a bustling clinic filled with women who trusted her, babies crying their first cries, families rejoicing.

But the dream faded as quickly as it had come, leaving her with the heavy reality of a future that was no longer hers to claim.



Nasrin's Fight

From Journalist to Midwife in a Land That Bans Dreams

Nasrin was used to hearing her voice carry over airwaves. For years, she had been a journalist—a rarity in a profession dominated by men, even before the Taliban's resurgence. She had reported on everything from cultural festivals in the northern provinces to the challenges faced by widows during harsh winters. Her voice was steady and confident, a beacon of hope for women who found strength in hearing one of their own challenges the status quo.

But that voice had been silenced. When the Taliban retook power, the restrictions on women in the media were immediate. Female journalists were told to stay home, their presence in the newsroom deemed "improper."



Nasrin had fought back at first, penning anonymous articles for underground publications and assisting her colleagues from the shadows. But as the walls of control closed in, even that became too dangerous.

Nasrin's dreams of journalism were forced to evolve. She couldn't give up entirely, not when there was so much work to do. "If I can't tell stories, I'll help write a new chapter for the women here," she had resolved. That's how she found herself in the midwifery training program. It wasn't what she had envisioned for herself, but it was a lifeline—a way to remain useful, to contribute to her community, to reclaim a sense of purpose.

For months, Nasrin poured herself into her studies. She learned how to deliver babies, manage complications, and counsel expectant mothers. The course was rigorous, and the lack of resources was a constant challenge, but Nasrin and her classmates bonded over their shared determination. They would whisper plans to one another about how they would return to their villages and serve the women who needed them most.

The closure of the midwifery program felt like losing her voice all over again. Nasrin stood outside the locked gates,



the echoes of her classmates' frustration and despair swirling around her.

She stared at the building where she had dared to dream anew, now inaccessible. Her fists clenched as the anger burned through her.

”

This is not the end,

Nasrin

She muttered to herself as she walked back home that day, her steps heavy but resolute.

That evening, as she sat alone in her room, Nasrin opened a notebook where she had sketched out her plans for a rural clinic. The pages were filled with diagrams, notes on birthing techniques, and names of women she had promised to train once she completed her certification. She flipped through them slowly, her heart aching with each page.

Her eyes landed on an empty section at the back of the notebook. Picking up a pen, she began to write again—not articles this time, but a letter. It was addressed to the women of Afghanistan, a manifesto of resilience. She wrote about their courage, about how their spirit could never be truly silenced. She wrote about finding ways to learn in secret, to share knowledge, to continue fighting even in the face of relentless oppression. When she finished, Nasrin sat back and read her words. Her voice, though confined to ink and paper, was alive once more. The Taliban might have taken her microphone, her classroom, and even her future as a midwife, but they could not take the one thing she refused to relinquish: her will to fight for the women of Afghanistan.

Nasrin folded the letter and placed it in the notebook, knowing that one day, someone would read it. Maybe it would inspire them to pick up where she had left off, to dream again in a land that seemed determined to bury dreams. For now, it was enough to know that her voice still existed, even if it was just a whisper in the dark.

The country already faces a severe shortage of midwives, with the United Nations estimating that an additional 18,000 are needed to meet healthcare demands.

Afghanistan has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, with 620 women dying for every 100,000 live births. This shortage in skilled midwives exacerbates the already dire situation. The impact of these new restrictions on the healthcare system is yet to be fully understood, but it is expected to further strain an already fragile healthcare infrastructure, especially in rural areas where women and children often face the most severe health challenges.

For women in Afghanistan, the path to education and professional empowerment has become increasingly restricted, and with it, the ability to protect and improve the health and well-being of their families. The closure of midwife training programs not only robs women of an opportunity to contribute to society, but it also places Afghan mothers and babies at greater risk, undermining decades of progress in maternal healthcare.



HEALTHCARE



HALTED



Shattered Dreams and a Healthcare Crisis: The Impact of Midwifery Training Bans in Afghanistan

The closure of midwifery and semi-medical training centers in Afghanistan has left countless young women in despair, robbing them of the opportunity to pursue their dreams and serve their communities. These restrictions have not only derailed their careers but also threatened the future of healthcare for Afghan women and children.



Tehmina Uzma Dreams Blocked Twice

Tehmina Uzma, a midwifery student from Kabul, has experienced the heartbreak of being denied education not once but twice under Taliban rule. Initially an economics student, she shifted to semi-medical studies in early 2022 after universities were shut to female students. By her third semester, in end-2024, the Taliban issued another decree closing semi-medical institutions to women, forcing her to abandon her studies yet again.

“The decision to ban women from education has not only stolen our dreams but also affected our mental health in ways that are hard to describe,” Tehmina shares. “It’s like being trapped in a cage with no way out. Half of society—women—has been silenced and immobilized.”

She emphasizes the broader societal impact of such policies, adding, “If women can’t study, it’s not just their futures that are destroyed—it’s the entire nation’s progress that’s halted. A society cannot move forward with half its population paralyzed.”

Despite the challenges, Tehmina continues to advocate for change. “Education is not just a right but a necessity. Midwives play a vital role in saving lives, and we cannot abandon that responsibility.”

Farishta Seddiqi A Lifeline for Mothers Cut Short

Farishta Seddiqi, also from Kabul, was in her third semester of midwifery training when the Taliban closed down non-medical and semi-medical institutions at the end of 2024. For her, the decision represents a national crisis, as Afghanistan already suffers from one of the highest maternal and infant mortality rates in the world.

“This decision isn’t just about us as students—it’s about the countless mothers and babies who will suffer without trained midwives to care for them,” she explains. “Afghanistan desperately needs female healthcare providers, but the government has slammed the door on that possibility.”

Farishta highlights the psychological toll the ban has taken on her and her peers. “Many of my classmates feel this is the death of their dreams. We worked so hard, only to have everything snatched away.”

She adds, “This isn’t just about education. It’s about survival. Without midwives, the risks during childbirth grow exponentially, and lives will be lost. We are ready to serve, but we need the chance to learn and prepare ourselves for that role.”

Madina Azimi A Nation’s Health in Jeopardy

For Madina Azimi, a third-semester midwifery student, the Taliban’s decision to close midwifery centers at the end of 2024 was devastating. She recalls vividly the day she saw the gates to her institute locked.

“It felt like the end of the world for us, Walking to the institute that morning and seeing other girls turned away was heartbreaking. It wasn’t just our loss—it was a tragedy for the entire community.”

Madina points out that Afghanistan’s health system is already fragile, with many mothers and infants dying due to a lack of proper medical care. “Midwives are critical to addressing these issues,” she says. “Without female healthcare workers, the lives of Afghan women and children are at risk. Education is the only way to save them.”

She also describes the mental health impact of the closures. “We live in constant uncertainty, wondering if we’ll ever be able to return to our studies. Education was our only hope for a better future—for ourselves and for our country.”

Madina, like many others, calls on the international community to intervene. “We need support to break these barriers. The world must recognize that this isn’t just an issue for Afghan women—it’s an issue for humanity.”



A Healthcare Crisis in the Making

Afghanistan's maternal mortality rate remains one of the highest globally, with an estimated 620 deaths per 100,000 live births, according to WHO data from 2021. The ban on midwifery training not only disrupts the lives of aspiring students but also worsens the healthcare crisis in the country. Female healthcare workers, especially midwives, are essential in a society where cultural norms often prevent women from seeking care from male providers.

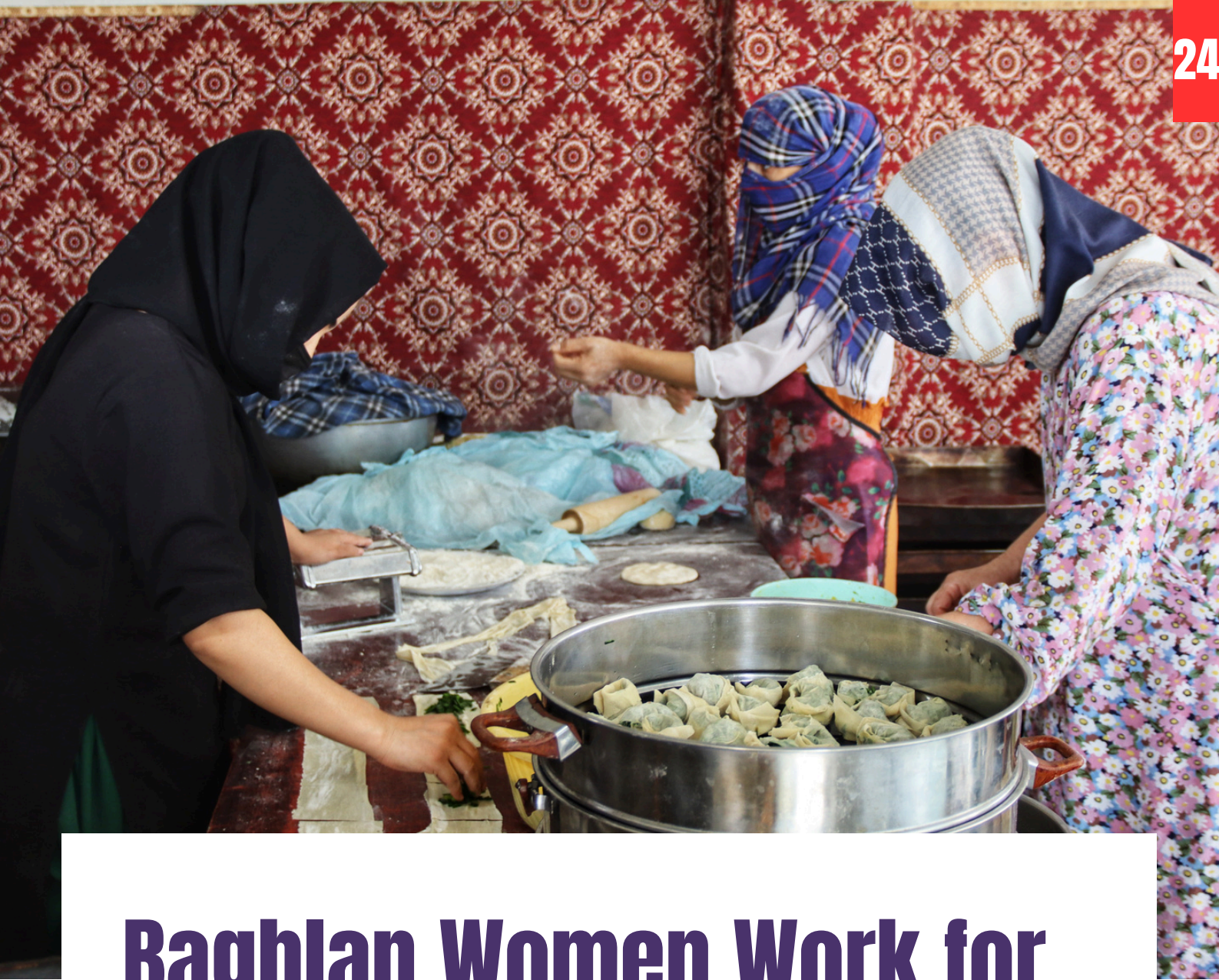
The Taliban's restrictions, particularly the bans imposed in 2022, 2023 and 2024, have silenced the voices of women who could have been the backbone of Afghanistan's healthcare system. The stories of Tehmina, Farishta, and Madina are not just individual tragedies—they are a reflection of a nation's loss.





A Healthcare Crisis in the Making

As Farishta aptly puts it, “When you close the door to education, you are closing the door to life itself—for us and for the generations that follow.”



Baghlan Women Work for Economic Survival

Demand Education and Skills

Many of the small restaurants in Baghlan province run by women are designated as "women-for-women" spaces, exclusively catering to female customers. Under Taliban policies, the presence of men in these establishments can lead to closures, with several restaurant owners reporting that the Taliban have shut down their businesses multiple times for alleged violations. This has added another layer of difficulty for women entrepreneurs trying to sustain their livelihoods.

While the food sector has become a vital source of employment for women in Baghlan, the underlying need for education continues to be a central concern.

BAGHLAN

Despite economic and social hardships, women in Baghlan are making remarkable contributions through their work in food processing and related industries. These efforts, while addressing immediate financial needs, highlight the broader demand for education and empowerment. Interviews with women from the province shed light on their struggles and aspirations.

Hamida Seddiqi: Women Entrepreneurs Supporting Local Industries

Hamida Seddiqi, a representative of Baghlan women entrepreneurs, revealed that more than 2,000 women in the province are engaged in various sectors, including food processing, tailoring, and carpet weaving. Of these, she noted, 50 percent are young women who dropped out of school. "These women are actively involved in sustaining their families, but many are also women who were forced to leave education behind," Seddiqi said. She emphasized the importance of education as a long-term solution for women's empowerment.

Taiba: A Mother Providing for Nine

Taiba, a widowed mother of nine, works in the food sector while also paying for her children's education. She explained that her job allows her to meet her family's financial needs, but she called on the NGOs to create more opportunities for women in similar circumstances.

”

I'm grateful for this work, but many others like me need jobs to support their families and their children's education.

She said

BAGHLAN

Angiza Panah: Empowering Women in the Workforce

Angiza Panah, head of the Ariya Baghlan factory, has been instrumental in supporting women through training and employment. With the help of an NGO, she has provided opportunities for 63 women, many of whom are engaged in food-related work. "Our goal is to create opportunities for women who are otherwise unable to work or study," Panah stated. Her efforts are focused on empowering women to gain financial independence while learning essential skills.



DREAMS DASHED BUT STILL HOPEFUL



Women workers
Afghanistan

BAGHLAN

Najiba Sherzai: A Breadwinner Advocating for Education

Najiba Sherzai, the sole breadwinner of her family, supports her household and covers the medical expenses of her disabled brother. She expressed gratitude for the opportunity to work and learn sewing skills during these difficult times. However, Sherzai emphasized that education for women remains the most pressing issue. She urged the Taliban to prioritize reopening schools, stating, "women's education is more important than anything else."

Parwana: Forced to Work Amid School Closures

Parwana, who has been training in a tailoring workshop for the past two months, shared that she turned to work as a necessity after schools and universities were closed to women. "I started working here to address my economic problems," she explained.

Fatima: Dreams Dashed but Still Hopeful

Fatima, a resident of Baghlan, had completed her education up to 12th grade and was preparing for the Kankor university entrance exam. However, her hopes of furthering her studies were shattered when education opportunities were restricted. Now working in a tailoring factory, she called on the Taliban to accept her demands and reopen educational institutions for women.

”

Education is the foundation of our future. Without it, we cannot grow or contribute fully to our society. Please reopen our schools.

She said



Women-only restaurant

Building Success, One Dish at a Time

Samira Mohammadi, a resident of Kabul, has turned a small bolani shop into a successful and thriving restaurant business. With an initial investment of just 7,000 Afghanis (approximately USD 100) three years ago, Samira began her modest venture. Today, her restaurant, "Banwan Afghan," meaning "Afghan Women," has become a well-known establishment, celebrated for its high-quality food and unique flavors.

”

When I started this small business, I had very limited resources, but women's support and words of appreciation encouraged me to expand my business. Now my dream is to invest in other areas and provide employment for other women.

Samira Mohammadi





IRABUD

"Banwan Afghan" offers a diverse menu that combines traditional Afghan cuisine with international dishes. Among its popular offerings are bolani, ashak, mantu, samosas, and German rolls. The restaurant also serves a variety of kebabs, shorma kebabs, ice cream, and sherakh, earning it a reputation for excellence and a loyal customer base.

One of the most inspiring elements of Samira's success is her dedication to empowering women. Female employees play a vital role in the restaurant's operations, benefiting from not only financial independence but also valuable skill development.

”

When I started working here, I only knew how to make bolani, but now I've learned to prepare a variety of dishes. I'm happy to work in an environment that supports women.

said one employee

Samira is optimistic about the future. She plans to open another branch of "Banwan Afghan" and is seeking support from aid organizations to further expand her business. Her ultimate goal is to create more employment opportunities, especially for women, and inspire others to overcome challenges and achieve their dreams.

”

We not only work together here, but we also help each other learn. This place is a great opportunity for us to grow both personally and economically.

said another employee



Her university was closed by the Taliban, and she now works in a restaurant.

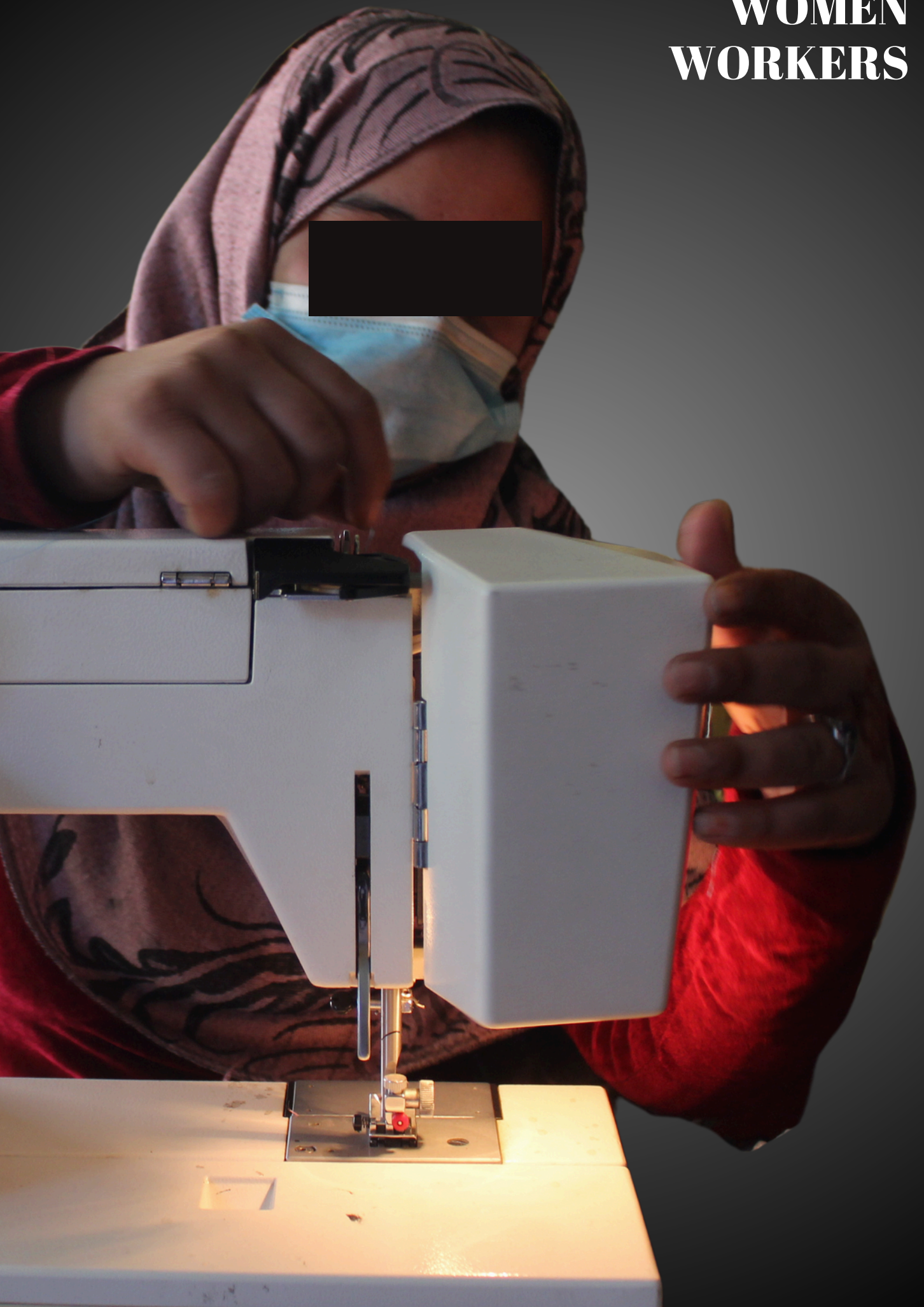


Women entrepreneurs in Nangarhar Province demand a special market for their products

Female entrepreneurs in Nangarhar are calling on the aid organisations to establish a dedicated market for their handicrafts. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, which led to the closure of educational institutions for women and most work places, many have turned to traditional crafts to support their families.



WOMEN WORKERS



These women not only seek a dedicated marketplace to sell their products but also urge the authorities and aid organizations to provide continuous support for skill development and training.



A Factory Run by Women for Women

One such initiative is a tailoring and embroidery factory established by Bushra Bibi in Nangarhar. Currently, the factory employs around fifteen women and girls who are unable to pursue formal education due to Taliban restrictions on women in Afghanistan. They work in two shifts, balancing household responsibilities while earning an income.

Bushra Bibi started her business with a single sewing machine and has since expanded, providing financial stability for her family and job opportunities for other women.

”

When my husband fell ill in 2018, I had no choice but to start this business. I had very little money, just one machine. Now, not only do I support my family, but I also help other women who have dropped out of school to learn a trade.

— Said Bushra Bibi

She emphasized the need for a dedicated market for female entrepreneurs in Nangarhar, similar to those available in Herat, Mazar, and Kabul.

”

There is no women's market here. We make Afghan clothes, but we can't sell them easily. We are forced to sell in villages or wait for occasional exhibitions. If the institutions cooperate with us, it will make a big difference," she added.

— Said Bushra Bibi

The Impact of Taliban Restrictions

Since the Taliban took control in 2021, they have imposed severe restrictions on women's rights, barring them from secondary and higher education, government jobs, and many public spaces. As a result, many women have turned to home-based and small-scale businesses such as carpet weaving, tailoring, embroidery, and leatherwork to sustain themselves.

The women working at Bushra Bibi's factory say they are grateful for the opportunity to earn a livelihood but insist that economic empowerment alone is not enough. They call for the reopening of schools and universities to ensure a better future for young women.

While some cities in Afghanistan had designated women-only markets before the Taliban's return to power, Nangarhar and many other provinces still lack such facilities. As a result, female entrepreneurs are forced to rely on informal networks and occasional exhibitions to sell their products.

Despite these challenges, women like Bushra Bibi remain determined. They hope that with greater support from the aid organizations, they can expand their businesses, improve their skills, and create a sustainable future for themselves and their families.



A Call for Action

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A designated market, along with access to education and training, would not only enhance women's financial independence but also strengthen the local economy. The women of Nangarhar urge the authorities to recognize their contributions and provide the necessary infrastructure to support their businesses.

—— said a women's rights activist, who requested anonymity.



”

As restrictions on women's rights continue, many fear that opportunities for economic and social growth will remain limited. However, female entrepreneurs in Nangarhar remain hopeful that their voices will be heard and that their demands for a special market and greater support will be met.

—— the activist added.

Behind the Beauty of Afghan Rugs

THE SILENT SUFFERING OF AFGHAN WOMEN WORKERS

Under the first light of dawn in a remote village near Herat, Amina— a resilient 42-year-old widow— rises from her modest dwelling. With tired eyes but a determination born of years of hardship, she sets out on a daily journey that many in her community share. For Amina and roughly 10,000 other women across Herat province, each day is an arduous battle against time and poverty—a battle fought on the uneven terrain of hand-scouring wool, the very fiber that eventually transforms into the world-renowned Afghan rug.



A Stark Disparity

Despite the astronomical profits reaped by merchants and artisans abroad, the women whose labor initiates this process receive a pittance—a mere \$30–\$50 USD per month. Fatima, another worker with years etched on her face, voices her frustration: “I see these rugs in the windows of high-end stores overseas. They sparkle with the promise of a better life, yet all I have is the weight of my own struggles. Our work is the foundation of this beauty, and yet we remain the most exploited.” Such disparities have long stirred anger and despair among the laborers, who find themselves trapped in a system that values profit over human dignity.

The Human Cost of Exploitation

For many of these women, the burden extends beyond the physical toll of labor. Widows and those whose husbands or sons have succumbed to addiction often find themselves isolated, without a family support system to rely on. Their lives, already marred by personal loss and societal neglect, are further burdened by a system that denies them fair compensation and basic rights. “We have no voice,” a local activist laments. “Without the freedom to associate and organize, these women are forced into silence. They have no legal recourse, no collective bargaining power, and their pleas are routinely ignored by those in power.”



A Day in the Life

Before the sun casts its full glow, Amina and her peers gather in open-air workspaces. They labor from dawn until dusk, their hands skillfully cleaning raw wool. Yet for all their effort, the reward is minuscule: between 100–170 AFN per day—roughly \$1–\$2 USD. “Every morning, I wake with hope that today might be kinder,” Amina confides, her voice trembling with both weariness and an unspoken plea for change. “But as I see our work turned into something beautiful and valuable, I feel invisible—like the price of our labor is never truly acknowledged.”

From Wool to Wealth

After the painstaking cleaning process, the wool is collected and sold to male owners who manage the next phase of production. Exported to neighbouring countries, the wool undergoes a metamorphosis as skilled artisans spin it into the intricate patterns of Afghan rugs. These rugs, celebrated for their artistic designs and cultural significance, command high prices in international markets. In fact, some premium Afghan rugs have been known to fetch over \$5,000 at prestigious auctions, turning a simple material into a symbol of luxury and refined craftsmanship.

Restricted and Voiceless

The situation is compounded by the strict regulations imposed by the Taliban regime. Under a framework of harsh restrictions, these women are not only economically exploited but also politically and socially marginalized. Any attempt to seek justice or demand better wages is met with severe limitations. “We cannot even approach the authorities,” explains another human rights advocate. “The regime’s tight grip ensures that any protest or collective action is swiftly suppressed, leaving these women without an option but to endure their exploitation silently.”

Activism and the Call for Change

Local human rights activists emphasize that the lack of freedom of association is at the heart of this systemic exploitation. “It’s a cruel irony,” one activist remarks, “that while the world marvels at the craftsmanship of Afghan rugs, it turns a blind eye to the suffering of the women who make them possible.” This disparity between international market success and local economic despair fuels a growing call for reforms that would not only ensure fair compensation but also restore dignity and agency to these workers.



Global Demand Versus Local Desperation

The international market’s appetite for Afghan rugs continues unabated, with collectors and luxury buyers drawn to their unique artistry and rich history. These rugs have become a status symbol, celebrated in international galleries and upscale retail spaces. However, this global demand starkly contrasts with the daily reality of the women in Afghanistan. While the world cherishes these handmade masterpieces, the women behind them remain ensnared in an exploitative labor system, their struggles largely invisible to the international community.

The Road Ahead

A human rights activist said:

“As discussions around fair trade and ethical labor practices gain momentum globally, the plight of these Afghan women must be at the forefront. There is an urgent need for both local authorities and international organizations to intervene—ensuring that those who labor in the shadows receive not only fair compensation but also the right to organize and advocate for themselves. Only then can the true beauty of Afghan craftsmanship be celebrated without overshadowing the human cost of its creation.”

In the face of overwhelming odds, the resilience of Herat’s women remains unbroken. Their silent voices, echoing through the fields and workshops, call out for recognition, justice, and change. Their stories compel us to look beyond the surface of luxury and appreciate the immense sacrifices that underpin every thread of Afghan heritage.”



WOMEN IN

ART





Women in Art

ANGELA ANDAR

FIGHT TO PRESERVE

ART AND EMPOWER
AFGHAN WOMEN

In a country where restrictions on women's activities have tightened significantly in recent years, some courageous women continue to defy the odds, preserving their art and inspiring others. Among them is Angela Andar, the manager of the Afghan Lapis Lazuli Gallery—a space dedicated to painting and engraving.

Established four years ago through Angela's vision and her family's unwavering support, the gallery stands as a symbol of resilience and creativity. Angela's dream was not just to showcase her art but also to create a safe and inspiring space for other women to express themselves freely.

"I've loved art since childhood," Angela says. "I always wanted to work in this field. My family has always supported me, especially my brother, who encouraged me to pursue my passion. He told me we must show our talents, even though we never had the opportunity to complete our education."

Angela acknowledges that the landscape for women in Afghanistan has drastically changed. "Now, only the art sector remains as a space where girls are active," she notes. Despite these limitations, she and her colleagues continue to use their art to express their emotions and talents.

Her message to other women is one of hope and determination: "Do what you love. Whether it's sewing, painting, or any other art, never give up. Don't lose your spirit. Education is important, but working in other areas can also help you succeed."

Angela believes that community support is crucial to achieving her long-term vision. "We need our community to stand by us so we can expand the gallery and provide opportunities for more girls. Opening schools for girls is also critical. Education is the foundation for development and achieving our goals."

She also calls on Taliban to lift restrictions on women's education and work. "Girls have complied with the government's requirements, such as wearing the hijab. Now it's time for them to listen to us. Education and work are our rights, and we hope these rights will be restored."





THE GULBAND

ART GALLERY

A HAVEN OF
CREATIVITY AND
EMPOWERMENT
FOR AFGHAN
WOMEN

The Gulband Art Gallery, founded and directed by Aziza Akhlaqi, stands as a powerful symbol of resilience and hope for women. Designed to provide young women with opportunities to express themselves through art, the gallery has become a thriving center of creativity.

When the Taliban regained power in 2021, women's access to education was abruptly cut off. In response to this crisis, Akhlaqi envisioned and brought to life a space where women could develop their artistic talents and find solace. Despite limited financial resources, she personally funded the establishment of the gallery.

"Women's schools were shut down, and I felt a deep wave of anxiety but also a strong determination to find a solution," Akhlaqi said. "I decided to create a space where women could showcase their talents and find inspiration despite the restrictions."

The gallery now serves 65 students, ranging in age from 14 to 35. While some students can afford to pay tuition, most study for free due to economic hardship. The Gulband Art Gallery not only provides technical training in art but also offers a safe environment where women can share their stories and preserve Afghan culture.

"The goal of the Gulband Art Gallery is to give these girls a voice through art," Akhlaqi explained. "It's about more than painting or drawing—it's about safeguarding our traditions, expressing our experiences, and empowering women to be heard."

Though its early days were marked by a lack of resources and equipment, the gallery has grown into a flourishing hub of artistic expression.

"We started with almost nothing," she recalled. "But the passion of our students and belief in our mission kept us going."

Students at the gallery describe it as a place of hope and purpose. "Through art, I've found a way to express myself and share my story," said one student. "This gallery has given me a purpose and a dream for the future."

Akhlaqi has called on international organizations to support the gallery by promoting and purchasing student artwork. She believes investing in women’s education and employment is vital not only for individuals but also for Afghanistan’s progress as a nation.



The Gulband Art Gallery is not just a center—it is a message,

Akhlaqi said.

“It shows that, even in the toughest of times, we can create opportunities and inspire change. Together, we can make a difference.”

Through the Gulband Art Gallery, Akhlaqi is transforming lives, preserving culture, and proving that art can be a powerful force for resilience and change.





WOMEN IN ART

FEMALE ARTISTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Determining the exact number of female artists in Afghanistan is challenging due to the country's complex socio-political landscape and the lack of comprehensive data. Despite facing significant restrictions, many Afghan women continue to engage in various forms of artistic expression, including painting, photography, music, and literature.

However, under the current Taliban regime, female artists face heightened challenges, including restrictions on education and public expression, leading many to continue their artistic pursuits in exile or through underground networks.



FROM PRISON TO EXILE

An Afghan Woman's Fight Against Taliban Oppression

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amia, a women's rights activist from Mazar-e-Sharif, is among the thousands of Afghan women whose lives have been shattered by the Taliban's return to power.

Once an advocate for freedom and equality, Sherzad's journey has taken her from the streets of peaceful protests to the harrowing confines of a Taliban prison and, ultimately, to a precarious existence in exile.

"When the Taliban took over in August 2021, we couldn't stay silent," Samia said. "We marched in the streets, demanding our basic rights—the right to education, to work, to live freely. But our peaceful protests were met with unimaginable violence."

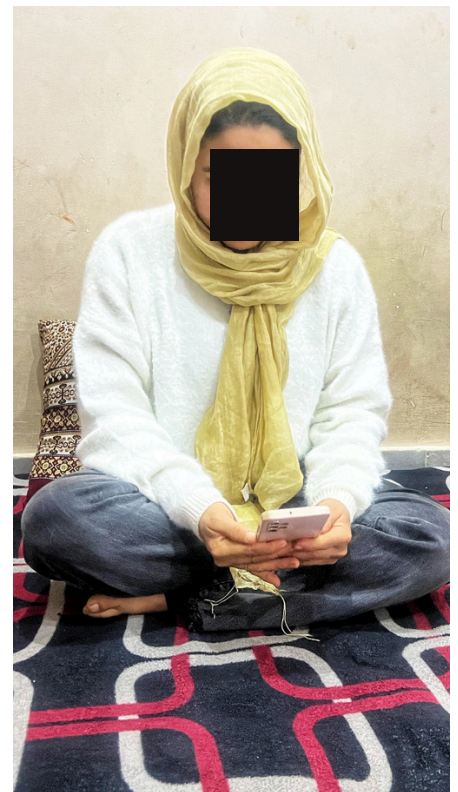
The Taliban's response was swift and unforgiving. Samia recounted the horrors that unfolded. "They came with their guns and batons, beating women, girls, and boys who dared to stand up to them. I was one of the women they dragged away," she said, her voice trembling with the weight of the memory.

In prison, Samia endured relentless cruelty. "They didn't just imprison us—they tried to break us," she said.

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We were beaten until we could barely stand. They forced us to confess to crimes we didn't commit. They made us stand before cameras and lie, saying we supported their regime, when all we wanted was our freedom.

— Samia



Samia's imprisonment was part of a calculated effort to crush dissent. "The goal wasn't just to silence us—it was to make an example of us," she explained. "The message was clear: no one who speaks out will be safe."

After her release on bail, Sherzad realized her life in Afghanistan was no longer tenable. The threats and surveillance followed her everywhere. "Every knock on the door felt like the end. I knew if they took me again, I might not survive," she said.

With her young son, Samia fled to a neighboring country, leaving behind her home, her work, and her dreams. But exile has brought its own set of challenges. "We live without legal documents, in constant fear of deportation," she said. "Every day, we wonder if we'll be sent back to face the same horrors—or worse."

Samia's story is one of countless others. Thousands of Afghan women and their families are trapped in similar limbo, facing an uncertain future while bearing the scars of Taliban repression.

"They've turned us into prisoners in our own country," Samia said.



But even in exile, I refuse to let them silence me. The world must know what is happening to Afghan women.





She has now turned her pleas to the global community, urging action. “I call on the United Nations and humanitarian organizations to hear our voices, to investigate what we’ve endured, and to protect us,” Sherzad said. “The Taliban’s recognition by the international community would be a betrayal of every Afghan woman who has suffered under their rule.”

Despite the dangers, Samia remains steadfast in her mission to fight for justice. “Justice must reach the rightful owners,” she declared.

We will not stop fighting for our rights and the rights of all Afghans. The Taliban may have silenced some voices, but they will never extinguish the fire for freedom.

SANAM KABIRI

Women's Rights Activist

AMID THE ONGOING SUPPRESSION OF AFGHAN WOMEN UNDER TALIBAN RULE, HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST AND MEMBER OF THE AFGHAN WOMEN PROTESTERS ASSOCIATION, SANAM KABIRI, HAS EMERGED AS A POWERFUL VOICE ADVOCATING FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS.



Kabiri, along with fellow activists, organized protests in cities across Afghanistan, including Kabul, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Takhar, Badakhshan, and Kunduz. These demonstrations aimed to draw international attention to the harsh realities Afghan women face, including the loss of access to education and employment.

However, these efforts came at great personal risk. Protesters, including Kabiri, were met with violent crackdowns. "Women have been beaten, imprisoned, and subjected to violence in attempts to silence us," she said.

Kabiri emphasizes the societal barriers women face in Afghanistan, describing it as a deeply traditional country where pressures to conform discourage dissent. "Many women have been forced to flee their homes and take refuge in neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan, where life remains challenging," she added.

In August 2022, Kabiri fled Afghanistan after receiving direct threats from the Taliban. The group attempted to detain her and her children, forcing her to escape to a neighboring country under perilous conditions.

Now living as a migrant, Kabiri describes her struggles in securing basic rights and resources.

"The conditions for migrants are extremely difficult," she said. "We need urgent access to safe countries where we can rebuild our lives."

Kabiri also noted the broader impact of Taliban policies on Afghan women, highlighting how professionals and activists were systematically removed from their positions, leaving many to grapple with severe economic and social hardships in exile.



She called on the international community to take immediate action to alleviate the suffering of Afghan women and to address their precarious situation. "If these issues remain unresolved, they will pose a serious threat to Afghan society as a whole," Kabiri warned.

Thousands of Women Denied Pension Rights Under Taliban Rule

Families Suffer Severe Hardship



A former civil servant, Nazifa, who dedicated 23 years of her life to the Finance Department of the Ministry of Defense under the previous government, has spent the last three years waiting for her pension rights, only to face crushing financial and health struggles. Her story highlights the plight of thousands of retired women, many of whom remain deprived of their pensions since the Taliban seized power in August 2021.

Nazifa, a mother and the main breadwinner of her family, describes her desperate situation: "Our pension rights have not been paid for three years. I am six months behind on rent, and my landlord has warned me that if I don't pay, I will have to leave the house. I also owe money to the shopkeeper and the pharmacy."

The challenges for Nazifa's family go beyond financial hardships. Her husband, also retired, is unable to contribute to their income, and both her son and daughter suffer from illnesses they cannot afford to treat. "The doctor told me my hand needs surgery, but I can't even afford medicine," Nazifa shared. "Our situation worsens by the day. We have no one to help in this."

Her family is just one among countless others affected by the suspension of pension payments since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. Reports indicate that thousands of retired civil servants, particularly women, are grappling with similar crises. These women, many of whom dedicated decades of service to their country, now find themselves unable to pay rent, afford medical care, or even buy food.

Since August 2021, when the Taliban returned to power, Afghanistan has plunged into an economic crisis, exacerbated by international sanctions, a freeze on foreign aid, and a collapsing public sector. Women, in particular, have borne the brunt of these changes. Many who served in government roles under the previous regime have been sidelined, with their pensions left unpaid, cutting off a vital lifeline for them and their families.

Nazifa pleads with authorities to recognize the dire situation retirees are facing and honor their commitment to the pensioners who helped build the country.

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We have served this country for years. This is our homeland. Where can we go? We have nothing left to sell to survive.

— Said Nazifa





For many women like Nazifa, the lack of pension payments has not only left them in financial ruin but also compounded their health issues. Unable to afford treatment, they are caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and illness.

Advocates have called on the Taliban administration to prioritize the payment of pensions and ensure timely financial support for retired civil servants, especially women, whose economic and social security has been systematically eroded. Until then, families like Nazifa's remain trapped in a grim reality, struggling to survive day by day.





'YOU WILL NOT GROW UP IN SILENCE': A FORMER ATHLETE MOTHER'S FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

It is a cold December day in Kabul, the biting wind swirling through crowded streets where men clad in thick coats shuffle past shuttered shops and muted markets. Hidden behind a nondescript door in a cramped apartment, Aisha* sits quietly, holding her three-month-old daughter. Her eyes reflect a deep pain—one that speaks of a stolen past and a future shaped by oppression.

Once a rising star in Afghanistan's fledgling women's sports scene, Aisha's life took a tragic turn when the Taliban regained control of the country in August 2021. At 23, she has gone from sprinting toward national glory to living in the shadows, restricted by a regime that has stripped her of her rights, her dreams, and her freedom.

In 2021, Aisha was banned from competing in sports—a policy implemented as part of the Taliban's strict interpretation of Sharia law. In 2023, she was forced into marriage with a Taliban soldier.

Now, as she cradles her infant daughter, Aisha has embarked on a new struggle: fighting to secure a future for her child in a society that denies women basic rights. This is the story of a woman's quiet resistance in the face of **systemic oppression**, and her fight for hope in a country where **women's voices have been silenced**.

Before the Taliban's return, Aisha was one of Afghanistan's most promising athletes. Hailing from a middle-class family in Herat province, she discovered her love for running at the age of 14.

Her talent was undeniable. By 18, she was competing in regional tournaments, breaking records, and inspiring young Afghan women to pursue their ambitions, despite societal challenges.

"I felt alive when I ran," Aisha recalled.

Every step on the track was a step toward freedom—not just for me, but for every girl watching." she added.

Her success was not without obstacles. Even before 2021, conservative elements in her community criticized her for participating in sports, calling it “shameful” and “un-Islamic.” Her family shielded her from much of the backlash, allowing her to continue training and competing.

But in August 2021, the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan. Overnight, women’s sports were banned under a decree that deemed women’s physical activity inappropriate and incompatible with their interpretation of Islamic values. Stadiums emptied, teams disbanded, and athletes like Aisha disappeared from public life.

The Taliban’s decree against women’s sports was swift and absolute. Officials declared that women’s participation in sports exposed their bodies and was therefore immoral. Female athletes were warned to stay home or face severe consequences.

For Aisha, the ban was devastating. “It felt like they had taken away not just my sport but my very existence,” she said.

The Taliban’s broader restrictions on women further eroded her sense of agency. Girls were banned from attending school beyond the sixth grade. Women were barred from most workplaces, forced to wear burqas in public, and prohibited from traveling without a male guardian.

Most recently, the Taliban banned women’s voices and closed midwifery training centers. “It wasn’t just about controlling our actions,” Aisha explained.

“It was about erasing us completely from society.” she added.

For months, Aisha stayed home, fearing the repercussions of leaving the house without a valid reason. Her once-strong body grew frail, her spirit weighed down by the suffocating reality of her new life.

Then, in early 2023, her family received a visit from a local Taliban commander. The proposal he brought was, in truth, an ultimatum: Aisha was to marry a Taliban soldier stationed in their district.

Like thousands of Afghan women under Taliban rule, Aisha had no choice but to comply. Refusing the marriage would have endangered not only her but her entire family.

The man she married was a 38-year-old Taliban soldier, a strict enforcer of the group’s laws. They met for the first time on their wedding day.

”

I used to go to school, but there was no time left.

— Aisha said quietly

Her new life was one of submission and silence. Her husband, deeply loyal to the Taliban’s ideology, forbade her from leaving the house, even to visit her family. He dismissed her past as an athlete as “disgraceful” and ordered her never to speak of it again.

In September 2024, Aisha gave birth to her daughter, an event that reignited her resolve. However, her husband and his family were anything but supportive. Expecting a son to carry on his legacy,

her husband expressed anger and disappointment upon learning the baby was a girl.

"He didn't even look at her," Aisha said.

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To them, a daughter was a burden, not a blessing.

— Aisha said

Their cold rejection only strengthened Aisha's bond with her child. "When I held her for the first time, I knew I couldn't let her grow up in the same chains," she said. Under the Taliban's severe restrictions on women, Aisha has begun resisting in small but meaningful ways. She dreams of a life where her daughter can have opportunities denied to her.

Though her daughter is too young to understand, Aisha whispers stories of strength and perseverance to her. These moments serve as reminders to Aisha of what she is fighting for.

Her resistance, though quiet, carries immense risks. Women who defy the Taliban's rules face severe punishments, including imprisonment, public lashings, or worse. Yet Aisha is determined.

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I lost my freedom, but I will not let them take hers.

— Aisha added

Through encrypted messaging apps, Aisha has reconnected with former teammates and other women in similar situations. Together, they are documenting the stories of Afghan women athletes who have been silenced, hoping to one day share their voices with the world.

Since 2021, Afghanistan has become one of the most repressive countries in the world for women, according to human rights organizations.

The Taliban's restrictions on education, employment, and mobility have left millions of women and girls without access to basic rights. Female activists, journalists, and educators have been silenced, and public life has become a space exclusively for men.

International condemnation of these policies has been widespread, but efforts to hold the Taliban accountable have been largely ineffective. Sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and limited humanitarian aid have failed to alleviate the suffering of Afghan women.

In the absence of external support, Afghan women like Aisha are finding ways to resist from within, quietly pushing back against the regime that seeks to erase them.

Despite the Taliban's restrictions on women, Aisha remains hopeful. She dreams of a day when her daughter can run freely in the streets, unburdened by the barriers that have defined her mother's life.

"I don't know if I will ever see that day," she admitted. "But I have to believe it's possible—for her, for all of us."

For now, Aisha's resistance is quiet but powerful. Every whispered conversation with other women, every shared story, and every hidden act of defiance is a step toward reclaiming the freedom stolen from her.

Aisha's journey is far from over. As she navigates the challenges of motherhood, marriage, and resistance, she remains determined to fight for a better future—not just for her daughter, but for all Afghan women.

Her story is a call to action for the global community, a plea for solidarity in the face of systemic oppression.

As Aisha's daughter stirs in her arms, she whispers a promise:

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**You will not grow
up in silence. You
will run.**

— Aisha



Bound by Silence

Maryam's Fight Against an Unyielding System

In a society where divorce is nearly impossible and the laws are stacked against them, Afghan women like Maryam fight to break free from abusive marriages, only to face a system that relentlessly closes every door to their escape.

Chapter 1

It's a cold and desolate morning in Kabul, the city shrouded in the gray haze of a coming winter. Maryam, a young mother of two, moves quietly through the small house she shares with her husband, Ramin, and their children. Her hands tremble as she prepares tea over a small stove, her thoughts scattered. She once dreamed of becoming a doctor, but those dreams feel distant now.

Maryam was married at 14, a common practice in Afghanistan, where young girls are often sold or promised to older men for the sake of family alliances or financial security. Her husband, Ramin, has always been strict, but since the Taliban regained power, his cruelty has worsened. He prevents her from leaving the house, speaks to her harshly, and demands obedience without question.

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I once dreamed of becoming a doctor, but now all I dream of is freedom—for me, for my children.

— Maryam

She often wonders if there is any escape. What if she could start over? What if she could make choices for herself, pursue her dreams, and most importantly—protect her children from this tyranny?

Chapter 2

The clock on the wall ticks toward noon, signaling the end of her chores

and the beginning of her next task: prayer. Maryam takes her prayer mat, faces Mecca, and whispers the words she has known since childhood. The act brings her peace for a few fleeting moments, but she can't silence the thoughts swirling in her mind.

The streets outside are quiet, the only sounds coming from the occasional military patrol. News from the world beyond is scarce, but Maryam has heard whispers of women's rights organizations, of protests in faraway places, where women are fighting for their rights to choose, to work, to live free from oppression.



Afghanistan, once a place of progressive change for women in the 1970s, is now a place where marriage is a prison and divorce is almost an impossible dream. Under the Taliban, a woman's ability to end a marriage is restricted by both cultural norms and rigid legal constraints. Maryam, like countless other women, is trapped.

Chapter 3

Maryam's children return from their Quran lessons, their small faces filled with joy and innocence. Ramin comes home shortly after, smelling of alcohol and anger. It is the same pattern every day. He demands dinner, then berates Maryam for not having the house in perfect order, even though she's already worked tirelessly all day.

This time, something inside Maryam snaps. She gathers her courage and tells him she wants to leave—to take the children and live with her family. But Ramin's response is swift and brutal, and Maryam knows her words will lead to more punishment. Yet, for the first time, she feels a small flicker of defiance.

That night, she begins to pack quietly, her heart heavy with the fear of what will come next.

Chapter 4

Maryam's escape is not without its complications. She takes her children to her parents' home in a village on the outskirts of Kabul, a place less likely to attract the Taliban's attention. There, they are safe—for now. But Maryam knows that even her family's support cannot erase the grim reality of her situation. She cannot simply file for divorce, as the legal systems under the Taliban offer no path for women to seek autonomy from their husbands.

In Afghanistan, divorce is rare. The laws, such as they are, place the burden of proof on the woman, requiring her to prove abuse, neglect, or severe mistreatment. Even then, the process is complicated and dangerous. For a woman like Maryam, who has no access to legal representation, who is constantly monitored by her husband's family and the authorities, divorce is an unattainable dream.

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The law doesn't protect us, and neither does my family. There is no place for me to run.

— Maryam

The laws under the Taliban uphold a woman's subjugation. There is no easy recourse for a woman who wishes to leave her marriage. Even though the country has seen brief periods of progress before, the reversal of women's rights under the current regime has left women like Maryam with little to no protection from violence, much less the freedom to escape it.

Chapter 5

The legal system in Afghanistan is starkly gendered. Under the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia law, a man has the right to divorce his wife at will, but a woman's ability to dissolve her marriage is severely restricted. Women like Maryam have no recourse, and even if they do find a sympathetic judge, they may face reprisals from their husbands, their families, or the state.

Women cannot access the courts without fear of intimidation or punishment. The idea of a woman choosing divorce, especially one who has been subjected to physical abuse, is not only discouraged but seen as an affront to the family's honor. Maryam is left without a choice but to endure, or to risk further violence in her attempts to seek justice.

Chapter 6

Maryam is not alone in her suffering. In whispers and hidden conversations, women across Afghanistan are finding solidarity with one another.

They share their stories, though they know the dangers of speaking out. Maryam connects with a small women's organization in Kabul that provides legal advice and safe houses for women escaping abuse. But even then, their resources are limited, and their reach is often short-lived.

One evening, after a long conversation with a counselor at the women's shelter, Maryam admits her fear: she has no idea what the future holds. The shame of divorce in a society that views women as the property of their husbands is overwhelming. Still, with each conversation, with each passing day, she feels a sense of resolve building within her. She will not let this be her children's fate.

Chapter 7

Days turned into weeks, and Maryam's fragile sense of safety at her parents' home began to unravel. Her father, though initially welcoming, grew anxious as word spread of Ramin's threats. "You cannot stay here," he told her one night, his voice weighed down with fear. "You know how dangerous this could become for all of us."

Maryam begged for more time, but the reality was unavoidable: her family could not protect her indefinitely. The community whispered about her rebellion, and the threat of retaliation from Ramin or the Taliban loomed. Maryam had nowhere else to go. Without work or legal recourse, and unable to divorce her husband, she faced a choice she never thought she'd make.

One morning, with her children clinging to her legs and tears blurring her vision, Maryam packed their belongings once again. Her mother wept silently, slipping a small bundle of money into Maryam's hand, a gesture of love and helplessness. "Use this wisely, my daughter," she said. When she arrived back at Ramin's home, his face was a mix of smug triumph and cold anger. "You should've known better," he muttered. Maryam lowered her gaze, her heart heavy with shame and defeat.

Chapter 8

Though her body was back under Ramin's roof, her spirit had changed. Maryam moved with careful resolve, no longer cowed by his words or his blows. She knew her reality, but she also knew something else: she was not alone. The women she had met in the shelter, the whispered stories of defiance, and the quiet skills she had learned—they stayed with her like a secret fire.

Maryam began sewing late at night, piecing together garments to sell discreetly in the market. She saved every afghani she earned, hiding the money in the folds of her prayer mat. She also started teaching her children in secret, instilling in them a hope she no longer had for herself.

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Maybe I won't see the change, but my children will. That's what keeps me going.

— Maryam

The legal and cultural walls around her life seemed insurmountable, but Maryam understood now that change would not come quickly. It would come in small steps—steps she might never see the end of, but which others might follow.

Conclusion

As the world watches from the outside, the plight of Afghan women continues to be a tragic reality. Though the international community has voiced its concerns, the legal and societal barriers in Afghanistan are insurmountable for many. Divorce remains a distant dream for women like Maryam, who continue to face oppression in their homes and in the streets.

The Taliban's hold on Afghan society has created a situation where women are silenced, their rights ignored. But even in the darkest of circumstances, there is a spark of resistance. Women like Maryam, though confined by their circumstances, continue to fight—not just for their own freedom, but for the future of the next generation. And for the first time in her life, Maryam dares to believe that she might one day decide for herself, and not be dictated to by the patriarchy that seeks to control her every move.

But for now, she holds onto hope—hope that one day, the world will stand with her and women like her, in their fight for the freedom to live on their own terms.

Learn more

In Afghanistan, many women continue to face significant challenges in their marriages, ranging from forced unions to domestic violence. These issues are exacerbated by legal and social structures that limit their freedom and autonomy, often leaving them trapped in unhappy and abusive relationships. The situation is compounded by a lack of legal recourse, especially under the Taliban regime, where women's rights have been severely restricted.



#CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Know Their Stories

#CHILDREN

In Know Their Stories, The Afghan Times shares real-life accounts of Afghan children facing hardships such as child labor, lack of education, urgent healthcare, and more. These stories bring attention to their daily struggles, giving them a voice and raising awareness about their challenges.





Trapped in Bricks

Thousands of Afghan Children Sacrifice Education for Survival

Amid worsening economic conditions, approximately 8,000 children in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province are engaged in toiling in brick kilns in the Surkh Rud district and Torkham town.

In one such kiln, seven-year-old Zainab works tirelessly alongside her family, shaping bricks with her small hands. Despite her harsh reality, her heart holds on to the hope of education. "Education is my dream. I want to grow up and serve the people," Zainab said. Yet, her aspirations are overshadowed by the heavy

burden of her family's economic challenges.

Every morning, Zainab leaves her home with her father, Gul Jan, and two brothers to work long hours at the kiln. Gul Jan, a 45-year-old father, explains that the family's financial struggles forced him to involve his children in labor. "I started working with my children because I have no choice," he said. "I need to pay off the loan I took from the kiln owner and cover other household expenses."

Gul Jan adds that his plight is not

unique.

"Hundreds of other families like mine are forced to work with their children in the brick kilns of Surkh Rud. We need help from the government and aid organizations to give our children a chance at education."

According to the Nangarhar Department of Labor and Social Affairs, 7,693 children are currently involved in hard labor in Surkh Rud district and Torkham town alone.



Experts stress the need for a comprehensive strategy to safeguard children's rights and alleviate economic hardships for families. Without sustainable measures, generations of children risk being trapped in cycles of poverty and illiteracy.

Amid the smoke-filled kilns, Zainab dreams not just for herself, but for a society where children like her can learn in classrooms instead of laboring under the weight of bricks. Granting children access to education, experts argue, is not just an investment in their future but a cornerstone for Afghanistan's development.

While Zainab's aspirations reflect hope and resilience, they also highlight the urgent need for intervention. For now, however, the path to a brighter future remains steep and uncertain in Afghanistan, where thousands of children continue to bear the heavy burden of survival.

Across Afghanistan, tens of thousands of children are engaged in labor in brick kilns, a common form of work for families struggling with extreme poverty.

While exact nationwide figures are difficult to obtain due to limited data and ongoing conflict,

estimates suggest that thousands of children, particularly in provinces like Nangarhar, Kabul, and Balkh, spend their days working in hazardous conditions instead of attending school. In Nangarhar's two districts alone, nearly 8,000 children are employed in brick kilns, highlighting the widespread prevalence of child labor in these facilities.

Many of these children are forced into this work to help their families repay debts to kiln owners or to meet basic household expenses, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and deprivation.

The Thirst of a Nation

Two Sisters' Daily Walk for Survival in Afghanistan

In the desolate hills of rural Afghanistan, life revolves around the simplest and most essential of human needs: water. It's dawn, and the sun casts its first light over a rugged, barren landscape. Two sisters, ages 15 and 14, drape scarves over their heads, tightening them against the chilly morning breeze. Today, like every day, they will begin a journey—one that takes them miles away from home in search of clean water, a task that has come to define their young lives.

With a steady determination far beyond their years, they urge their faithful donkey, a gray, weathered creature burdened with empty yellow jerry cans, across the rocky terrain. This journey, lasting several hours, is not just about water. It is a daily quest for survival—a routine that leaves no room for childhood.



The Daily Reality of Water Insecurity

"We wake up before sunrise," said the elder sister, her voice carrying the weight of fatigue. "We have to go early, or we will lose time." In the stark landscape of southern Afghanistan, time is measured not in minutes, but in distances to the nearest water source—a journey that, even under the best of conditions, can take three hours each way. The narrow, twisting path is a familiar one to the sisters,

but it remains dangerous. They know they must reach the water before it's too crowded, and before the water itself runs dry.

As they walk, their sandals kicking up clouds of dust, the only sounds are the braying of their donkey and the crunch of gravel underfoot. They are alone in a wilderness that is as harsh as it is beautiful—a wilderness made harsher by years of drought, neglect, and now, by a new political reality that has plunged the nation deeper into crisis. Since the Taliban returned to power,

the sisters' village, like many others, has been cut off from international aid. Development projects have vanished, promises of new wells have faded, and hope has become a distant memory.

A Childhood Stolen by Necessity

For these girls, fetching water is more than a chore—it's a sacrifice. Each day spent hauling water is a day lost to the potential of education



”

I used to go to school, but there was no time left.

— Said the younger sister

The school is far, and the needs of their family are many. Their parents, grappling with the instability that has swept across Afghanistan, rely on the girls to ensure that the household has enough water to survive.

The elder sister's face, framed

by a tightly drawn headscarf, is set with determination.

Yet, when she speaks of her dreams, there is a flicker of vulnerability.

”

I wanted to be a teacher, but first, we need water. Without it, we can't do anything.

— Said the younger sister

Their voices carry not just the weight of the water they bear, but the silent resignation of

two children forced to shoulder responsibilities that no child should face.

The Dangers Lurking in the Shadows

The path they take to fetch water is not safe. In Taliban-controlled regions, the sisters face dangers at every turn. There are rumors of violence, of roadblocks, and of girls who have disappeared while performing this same daily ritual. The new regime's restrictions have only amplified the risks, and the absence of security forces means that there are no protections, only the mercy of the unknown.

Yet, they continue. "We don't have a choice," the elder sister said, her voice low and resolved.

”
**If we don't go,
 there's nothing
 to drink.**

— Said the younger sister

Their mother, wracked with worry, waits for their safe return each afternoon, glancing anxiously at the horizon, hoping that this day will end like the last, without incident.

The water they collect—often cloudy, sometimes muddy—is rarely safe. Contaminated wells and polluted streams are all that remain for most villagers in this forgotten corner of the world. Still, it's the only water they have. The burden of illness is one they are familiar with, having watched neighbors grow sick and frail from the very thing they must drink to survive.



The Costs of Water Scarcity in Afghanistan's Forgotten Corners

The girls' story is not unique. Across rural Afghanistan, millions face the same desperate circumstances. Years of conflict have eroded infrastructure, and the international aid that once trickled in has all but vanished. Droughts, worsened by climate change, have shriveled streams and wells, and the relentless march of time has turned fertile lands into deserts.

The collapse of the previous government has only deepened the crisis. Water, once accessible through tenuous pipelines and sporadic aid projects, has now become a luxury—one that requires resilience, strength, and sometimes, the sacrifice of safety.

The sisters' worn faces tell the story of a generation robbed of its future. As they make the long trek home, the heavy containers sloshing with water, their pace slows.

The weight digs into their shoulders, leaving indentations on their fragile frames. The journey is harder in the afternoon sun, but there is no room for hesitation. The family must have water to drink, to cook, to wash—tasks that have become back-breaking necessities.

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A Cry for Global Awareness

Their daily walk is a stark reminder that water insecurity is not just an inconvenience, but a life-altering struggle. In Afghanistan, it means children sacrificing their education, their health, and sometimes their safety, to meet the most basic of needs. It is a problem that has slipped from the world's consciousness as political debates dominate headlines and humanitarian crises compete for attention.

Yet, the sisters' faces linger in the mind. They are young, but their eyes carry the wisdom of survival, the unspoken resilience of children who have been forced to grow up too fast. As they approach their village, the sun beginning to sink behind the hills, their mother rushes to meet them, relief washing over her face. The water they bring is poured carefully into clay jars, precious drops guarded like gold. Tomorrow, they will make the journey again, and the day after that, and the day after that.

What the World Must Do

Afghanistan's struggle with water scarcity is a call for urgent global attention. Sustainable solutions like rainwater harvesting and the construction of safe wells are not luxuries—they are lifelines.

Dr. Huda Ahmadi, a humanitarian worker focused on water access in Afghanistan, stresses, "Water is the most basic human need, and without it, survival itself is at risk. The international community must step in to provide the support and resources needed to address this crisis, especially in rural areas like Khost, where families are forced to walk for hours to find clean water."

The story of Afghanistan's water insecurity is not just about survival—it is about resilience in the face of crisis. "This is not just a fight for water," says Faizullah Kakar, an Afghan development expert. "It is a fight for dignity, for hope, and for the future of the generations that will inherit this land."

Afghanistan's ongoing battle for access to clean water underlines a critical issue: it is not only a matter of necessity, but of human rights. The faces of young children, the sick, and the elderly, who must endure the daily struggle for water, are a reminder of what is at stake. It is the future of a nation, the well-being of its citizens, and the ability to fulfill even the most basic human needs.

End



Open Skies, Closed Doors

The Education Crisis in Afghanistan

As the first light of dawn begins to illuminate the Afghan mountains, Fatima, a 10-year-old girl, wraps her scarf tightly around her head and shoulders, bracing against the chill of the early morning. Her younger brother, Bilal, just eight years old, struggles to keep pace as they begin their daily walk to school. Together, they travel along rocky paths that wind through the barren landscape, passing fields of parched earth and jagged hillsides. For nearly an hour, they walk in silence, their old, worn shoes kicking up dust in the cool air.

There is no school building waiting for them—only a wide, open field with a few scattered trees for shade. Their teacher, an older man named Hamid, sits on a stone, ready to greet them. Around him, other children, mostly boys, slowly gather, settling on the ground. Fatima is one of the few girls who dares to attend, but she knows her time is running out. In just a year, she will be forced to stop, as the Taliban only allow girls to study until the sixth grade.

”

I used to go to school, but there was no time left.

—— Fatima said

Her eyes, bright and determined, stand in stark contrast to the dry, dusty land that surrounds her—a landscape as challenging and resilient as the children who live within it.

A Forbidden Future – The Struggles of Afghan Girls

For Fatima and thousands of other Afghan girls, education is not a guarantee but a fragile dream, one that could shatter at any moment. Since the Taliban regained control in August 2021, girls have been allowed to study only up to grade six.



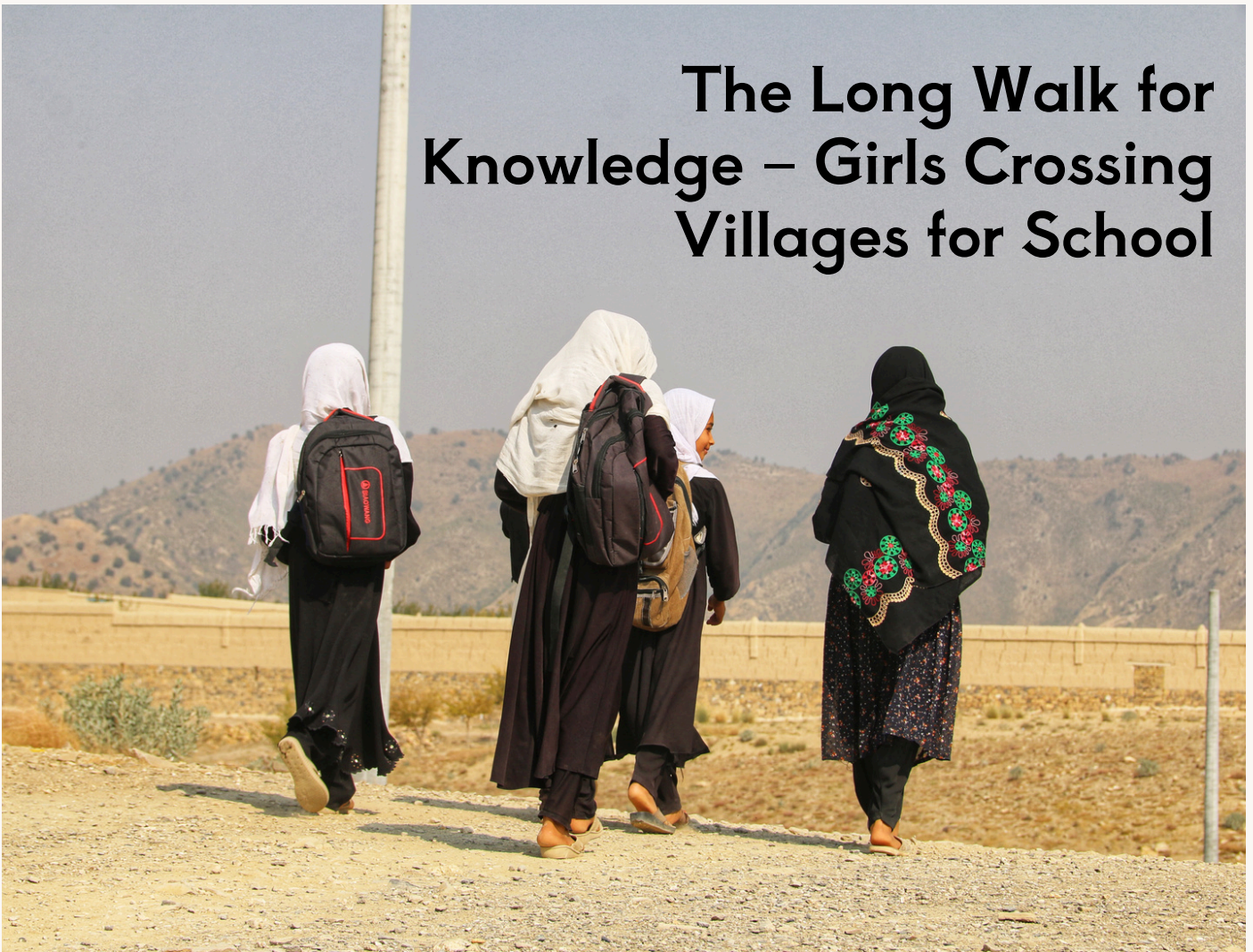
For those who have tasted the freedom of education, being forced to stop is a heartbreaking and confusing reality.

Eleven-year-old Aisha still remembers the day she learned she would no longer be allowed to go to school. “I was in the middle of a lesson,” she recalled, her voice barely above a whisper. “Our teacher told us we had to go home and that we might not come back. I cried the whole way home, holding my books because I didn’t want to let them go.”

Aisha’s family, like many others, believes in the importance of education, but they are too afraid to defy the Taliban’s orders. Now, Aisha helps her mother with household chores and cares for her younger siblings. “I read when I can, using my old books,” she says. “But it’s not the same. I feel like I am falling behind.”



The Long Walk for Knowledge – Girls Crossing Villages for School



It is not only the boys who make long treks for education; many Afghan girls under 11 also undertake dangerous and exhausting journeys between villages just to attend school. With limited educational facilities available, some girls walk hours each day, often risking their safety and defying cultural expectations, just to sit in a classroom.

Ten-year-old Layla wakes at 4:30 each morning to begin her journey. She walks alongside her cousin, Mariam, from their small village to a neighboring one where an open-air class is held. The girls cover their heads and faces with scarves, not just for modesty, but to shield themselves from the dust and to avoid unwanted attention from passersby.

“
We walk quickly, and we never stop, even when we're tired, It is not safe for us to be out alone, so we stay together and watch for each other.

—— Layla said

Sometimes, they arrive just as the sun begins to rise, the sky shifting from a deep purple to a bright orange.

Mariam, who dreams of becoming a doctor, knows the journey is dangerous. “We see boys playing in the fields, but we can't stop,” she says. “Some people tell us we should be at home, not in school. But I tell them, ‘This is my chance to learn. Don't take it from me.’”

Their determination is fierce, but they know their days in school are limited. For now, they keep walking, each step a defiance of the barriers placed in front of them.

A Forbidden Future – The Struggles of Afghan Girls

The lack of school buildings in rural Afghanistan has forced many communities to adapt. Across the country, thousands of children attend makeshift classes without roofs or walls, often exposed to the elements. In the summer, they face the searing heat, and in the winter, they endure biting winds and frigid temperatures. Yet, they come.

“Sometimes, the wind blows our papers away, and we have to chase them,” said Zabiullah, a nine-year-old boy whose school is nothing more than a clearing under an ancient walnut tree. “In the winter, our teacher lights a small fire, and we take turns warming our hands. We sit close together so we can hear him over the wind.”

Despite the challenges, Zabiullah’s face lights up when he talks about his favorite subject—math. “I like numbers,” he said with a shy smile. “They make sense to me, even when the world does not.”

For children like Zabiullah, these open-air classrooms are both a blessing and a limitation. They offer a space for learning, but the lack of proper facilities—desks, chairs, blackboards—hampers the quality of education they receive.

The Toll of Economic Hardship – Choosing Between School and Work

In many Afghan families, poverty dictates the choices children must make. With the country’s economy in a dire state, children are often forced to abandon their education to support their families. This is especially true for boys,



who are seen as breadwinners from a young age. The need for income pushes them into labor—whether it’s in fields, workshops, or markets—leaving little room for school.

Twelve-year-old Farhad works in a car repair shop six days a week. His hands, though small, are calloused and stained with oil.

After school each morning, he heads to the shop where he spends hours fixing tires and engines. “I like school, but I have to help my father,” he said. “If I don’t work, we won’t have enough to eat.”

His teacher, Mr. Jamal, understands the pressure many of his students face.

"I try to make my lessons practical," he explained. "I teach them things that will help them in the future—basic math, reading, how to understand a calendar. They need skills they can use in their work."

For Farhad and others like him, school is a luxury, and every lesson learned is a small victory against the harsh economic realities they face.

A Childhood Interrupted – Girls' Secret Schools and Hidden Learning

Despite the Taliban's restrictions, some Afghan girls continue to study in secret. In cities and towns, underground networks of female teachers have emerged, teaching girls behind closed doors, in basements, and in hidden corners of homes. These secret schools are often small, with only a handful of students, and operate with the constant threat of discovery.

Eight-year-old Maryam attends one such secret school. Every few days, she slips out of her house before dawn and makes her way to a neighbor's house, where a former teacher, Mrs. Khalida, holds classes for a small group of girls. "We have to be very quiet," Maryam said, her voice trembling. "Sometimes, we hear people outside, and we stop. We pretend to play if someone knocks on the door."

Mrs. Khalida, a former university lecturer, knows the risk she is taking. "I cannot just sit back and watch these girls be denied their future," she said. "They have a right to learn, even if the world has forgotten them."

These hidden classrooms are lifelines for Afghan girls, but they are not enough. Without proper support, the education they receive is patchy and incomplete. Yet, for Maryam and her classmates, it is a chance to dream.

The Unseen Teachers – Courage Amidst Chaos

Afghanistan's teachers are among the most unsung heroes in this educational crisis. Many have not been paid in months, yet they continue to teach, driven by a profound sense of responsibility. In rural areas, teachers are often community members who have some level of education—sometimes just a high school diploma or a few years of college—and who feel compelled to pass on what they know.

Abdul, a teacher in a small village school, gathers his students under a large mulberry tree each morning. He receives no salary, only small donations of food from grateful parents who value his dedication. "I teach because someone once taught me," he said. "Knowledge should not stop with me. It must continue, no matter the cost."

His students—boys and girls alike—listen with rapt attention as he explains basic science, using whatever he can find: rocks, sticks, leaves. His classroom may be unconventional, but for his students, it is a window to a world they might never otherwise see.



A Forced Transition – When Girls Are Married Off at 11

In many parts of Afghanistan, when girls reach the age of 11, their education is abruptly halted—not because of academic failure, but because of societal expectations. The tradition of early marriage often means the end of a girl's educational aspirations.

Ten-year-old Laila was one of the brightest students in her class. Her teacher, a man named Zahir, remembers how she would ask insightful questions and help others with their homework. But shortly after she turned 11, her life took a different turn. Laila's father, pressured by family and societal norms, arranged for her to marry a man three times her age.

"I didn't understand why I had to stop going to school," Laila said in a quiet voice. "I wanted to be a doctor, but my father told me it was time to grow up."

Her marriage ceremony was a small, quiet event in their village, attended by relatives and neighbors. Laila, dressed in a red dress, smiled nervously, knowing she was expected to be a wife rather than a student. Now, at just 12 years old, Laila is confined to her home, caring for her husband's children from a previous marriage.

"I still dream of being a doctor," Laila said wistfully. "But I don't think I will ever get the chance."

Finding a Way – A Girl Who Works to Make Carpets

While many girls face early marriages, some find other ways to continue contributing to their families without giving up on their dreams. Mariam, at 13 years old, has found an unexpected opportunity to keep learning and earning.

Mariam's family is poor, and she knew she had to help. She learned how to weave carpets from her grandmother and now spends hours each day in a small room at the back of their home, weaving intricate patterns. Her hands, though young, are steady, and she has already made a name for herself in the local market.

"I don't want to marry yet," she said firmly. "I want to work, learn, and one day, I hope to open my own carpet business. Education is still important, and even though I can't go to school, I can teach myself."

Mariam uses her earnings to help her family pay for food and basic necessities. Although her opportunities are limited, she finds pride in her work, and through her determination, she has kept the door to education slightly ajar.

A Nation Without Education – The Crisis of Afghan Students

Afghanistan's education system has been in turmoil for decades, and the situation has worsened under the Taliban's rule. According to the United Nations, more than 3.5 million children in Afghanistan are currently out of school, with girls disproportionately affected. The 2021 Taliban takeover closed educational doors to many girls and women, exacerbating an already fragile education system.

The World Bank reports that only 37% of Afghan children aged 6 to 14 were attending school in 2020, with this number dropping significantly for girls after the Taliban's return to power. Even before the Taliban's ban, many children, particularly in rural areas, lacked access to school buildings, teachers, and educational resources.

"Access to education has always been a challenge in Afghanistan, but since the Taliban returned to power, the situation has become dire," said Abdul Samad, a former Afghan educator. "Many children are not only out of school but are now forced into labor or early marriages, depriving them of any chance to build a better future."

The future of Afghanistan's children remains uncertain, and with every passing day, the number of children deprived of education grows.



FOR WOMEN

OPEN MIC

PODCAST BY THE AFGHAN TIMES



Open Mic is The Afghan Times podcast, where Afghan women share their stories in their own voices, on their own terms—open to every Afghan woman.

Defying Limits

Born and raised in Kabul, Sana Siddiqi completed high school in 2020 and successfully passed her Kankoor examination (the university entrance exam) in 2021. That same year, the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan. Despite the turmoil, she was overjoyed to be accepted into the Environmental Science program at Kabul University—a dream she had cherished since childhood.

However, her joy was short-lived. On December 20, 2022, the Taliban banned women from attending universities in Afghanistan, forcing Sana to stay home. Refusing to give up, she enrolled in online courses, determined to continue learning despite the barriers.

She vividly recalled the heartbreak: “I cried a lot. I kept asking, why us? Why must women sacrifice so much?”

Undeterred, Sana sought alternative ways to pursue her education.

She took online leadership and public speaking courses, taught English to her classmates, and developed new skills like drawing.

When Sana discovered that medical institutes were among the few educational avenues still open to women, she made the difficult decision to switch fields and enrolled in a private midwifery program.

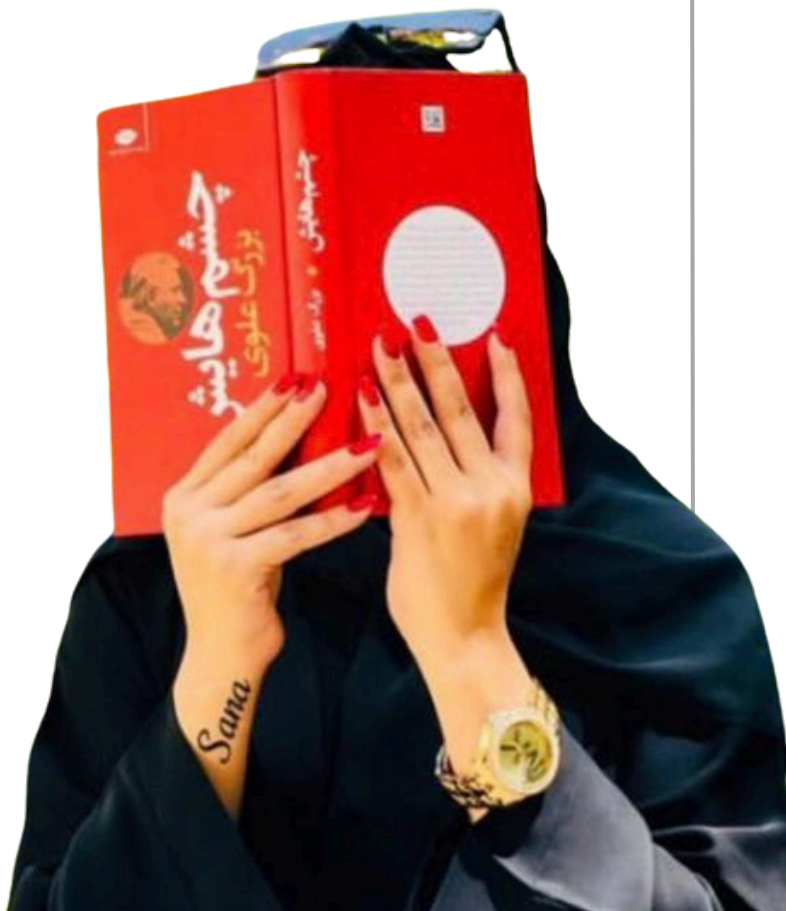
“It wasn’t my dream, but I had no choice,” Sana explained. Yet, even in this new chapter, she found joy in connecting with her classmates, who shared her pain and struggle over being denied access to education.

In early December 2024, the Taliban issued a directive banning women from enrolling in nursing and midwifery training programs across Afghanistan.

One morning, as Sana arrived at her institute, she saw girls weeping outside the gates. Sana described the moment as one of her darkest: “It felt like Afghan girls and women had no future. Studying became a shame for us, just because we were women.”

Despite the challenges, Sana remains steadfast.

“I will never give up. If I find even one way to continue my education, I will pursue it and achieve my goals. I know the power of Afghan girls—whatever we want, we can achieve.”



“I am Zuhail Faizi, one of the Afghan girls. Girls who have been neglected and overlooked many times. Just like other girls, I also had many dreams,” Zuhail began her story.

Her dreams were simple yet powerful—education, freedom, and a future filled with possibilities. But when the gates of schools and universities were closed, those dreams felt impossible to reach.

“I lost my hope,” she recalled. For months, there was no sign of change. Then, a flicker of hope returned. “I heard the news that girls could continue their education in the health department. My hope and dreams came alive again.”

With her family’s support, Zuhail joined an institute in the fall semester. “I’m so grateful to my family because they supported me in every decision and made the conditions favorable for me to continue my education.”

Still, challenges loomed. Every day brought uncertainty.

“Our first and biggest fear was that the gates of institutes would be blocked again,” said Zuhail.

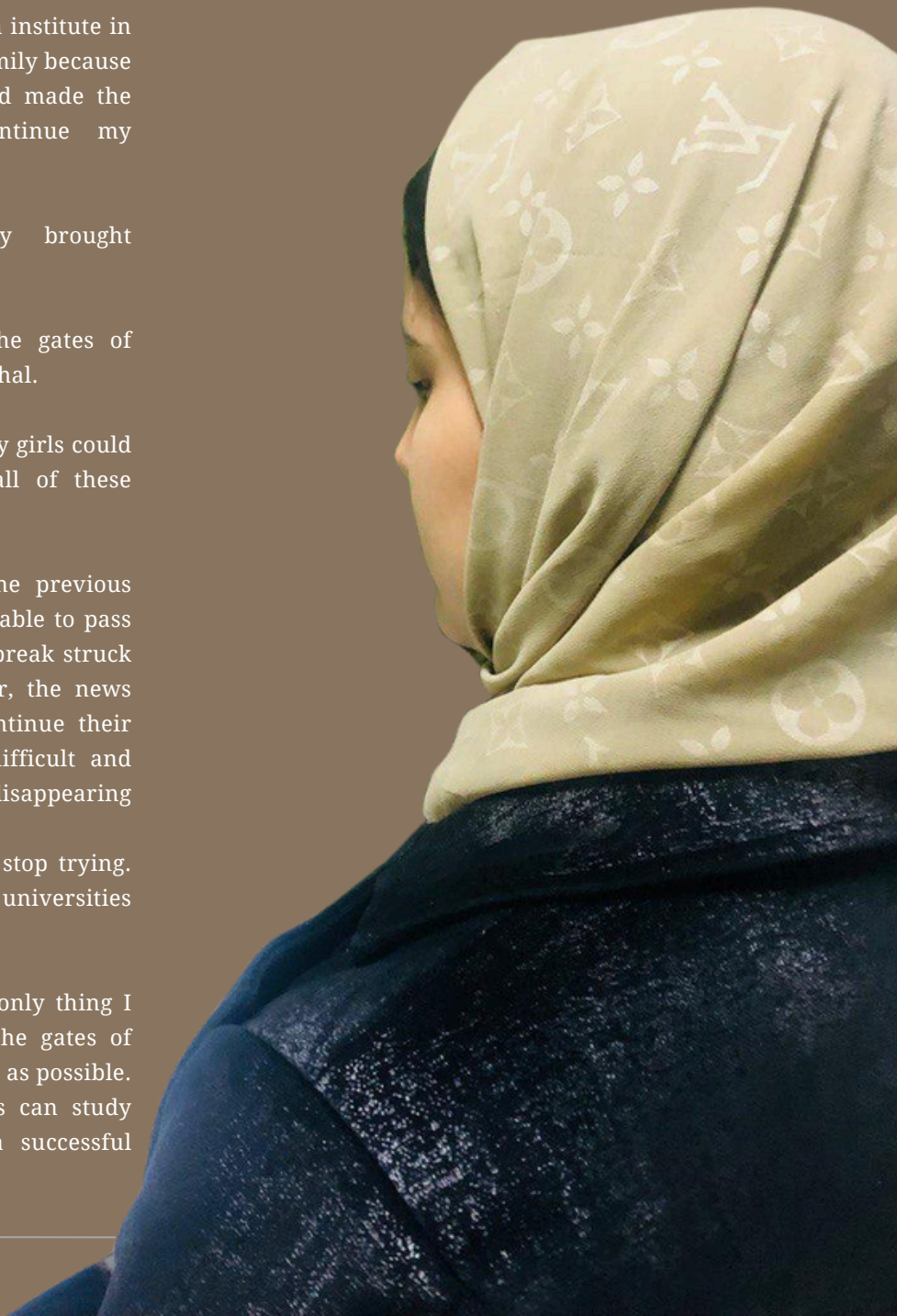
The economy also became a barrier. “Many girls could not continue their education because all of these institutes were private.” she said.

Despite the odds, Zuhail excelled. “In the previous semesters, I had a lot of success and was able to pass my exams with higher grades.” But heartbreak struck again. “At the end of the third semester, the news spread that girls are not allowed to continue their studies in this department. It is very difficult and frustrating. Our dreams and goals are disappearing one by one.”

Yet, she refuses to give up. “We will not stop trying. There are other opportunities, like online universities and courses.”

Her message to the world is clear: “The only thing I want from the Islamic Emirate is that the gates of universities and schools be opened as soon as possible. I hope for the day that all Afghan girls can study without stress or fear. We wish for a successful Afghanistan, far from ignorance.”

Afghan Girls' Fight for Education



"Afghan women's courage will light a path through the darkness. Their fight must be ours too." – Wazhma Sayel

WAZHMA SAYEL

FROM REFUGEE TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS ADVOCATE



UNYIELDING HOPE

“They say what lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us,” said Wazhma Sayel, an Afghan refugee turned advocate for women’s rights.

“For me, what lay within was the unyielding hope of a better tomorrow.” she added.

Born into a Pashtun family in Kunduz, Afghanistan, Wazhma’s life was uprooted by civil war, forcing her family to flee to Pakistan. “As a toddler, I didn’t understand what being a refugee meant,” she said, recounting the hardships of life in exile.

Despite systemic barriers, including being barred from attending Pakistani schools after fifth grade, Wazhma pursued education in refugee schools and broke cultural norms by studying English in a coeducational setting—becoming the first girl in her family to do so.

Financial struggles dashed her dream of becoming a doctor, but she shifted her focus to education, founding the Sunrise English Language Institute. This initiative provided Afghan refugee girls, often denied education, with a safe space to learn and grow. “It was a labor of love,” she said, despite facing backlash for challenging cultural norms.

In 2009, a new chapter began when she joined the Swedish Embassy in Pakistan, a move that symbolized her determination to break boundaries. By 2014, Sahil sought asylum in Sweden, where she earned both bachelor’s and master’s degrees in political science. Today, she uses her platform to advocate for Afghan women’s rights, particularly in light of the Taliban’s return to power.

“The ban on women’s education and healthcare is a tragic injustice,” she emphasizes, urging Afghan women to remain steadfast in their fight for equality. To the international community, she appeals for action: “Afghan women’s courage will light a path through the darkness. Their fight must be ours too.”

Her message is clear: resilience and education are powerful tools for change. “Together, we can write a new chapter for Afghan women—one of empowerment and endless possibility.”



Like many Afghan women, Zohal faced immense obstacles in pursuing her education, especially after the Taliban banned women from attending universities in December 2022.

Determined to continue her education, Zohal applied to American universities. Her hard work paid off when she received offers from Lewis University, Nazareth University, and UC Berkeley. She is now pursuing a degree in Law and Political Science while working with some organizations and running two of her own initiatives—“Positive Beliefs” and “Moving Towards Goals with Zahra Noori.” Through her work, she aims to empower Afghan women and girls and help them pursue their dreams.

Zohal’s achievements highlight the importance of persistence and determination. She encourages other Afghan girls to push forward, despite the challenges they face, and offers her guidance to anyone seeking scholarships or support.

Defying Odds



ARZU'S EMPOWERING JOURNEY

Arzu Naderi, a trailblazing Afghan woman who worked tirelessly by day and studied by night to overcome financial challenges, support her family, and pursue her dream of empowering Afghan women through education, law, and media

Arzu's journey began in 2013, working with children in both governmental and non-governmental organizations. She believed that "the next generation of Afghanistan needs proper education," and devoted herself to ensuring quality learning under expert supervision.

Later, Arzu shifted her focus to a private institution, advocating for Afghan women.



"Girls are vulnerable in every crisis," she said, pushing for discounted fees to ensure girls from low-income families could continue their education.

After joining the Independent Commission for the Implementation of the Constitution, Arzu pursued a degree in law. Despite financial challenges, she "worked by day, studied by night," determined to overcome obstacles and support her eight-member family.

Arzu believes that women can "overcome all barriers" through knowledge. Her own life is a testament to this belief, as she continues to inspire Afghan women to persevere and progress.

Currently, Arzu collaborates with the Afghan Journalists' Safety Committee, training journalists nationwide. Her work aims to "improve the capacity of Afghan journalists" and contribute to a stronger media landscape.

For Arzu, "no social or economic issue is too difficult" when tackled with education and strong will. Her efforts continue to pave the way for Afghan women to stand firm against societal challenges.

After the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021, Simin Nadeem and her family fled the country, seeking safety and education. With schools closed to girls and women and security threats escalating, they moved first to Iran and then to another country in Asia. Legal barriers prevented Simin from enrolling in formal institutions, but she continued her education through online platforms, including Classroom Without Walls (CWW). She also taught herself English through YouTube and online courses.

Beyond academics, Simin turned to painting as a form of expression. She describes art as “a language that transcends words,” capturing emotions and experiences often left unspoken. Through self-study, she explored classical, modern, and postmodern styles, using her work to reflect the struggles and resilience of Afghan women.

Determined to help others, she founded Strength and Steam, a free online school offering courses in English, cybersecurity, and health. Over four months, 40 Afghan women and girls benefited from these lessons. She also created an online library to provide learning resources for women denied education under Taliban rule.

Despite the challenges, Simin continues her studies. She passed the entrance exam for Afghan American University and is now enrolled in pre-university courses. She remains committed to advocating for Afghan women, emphasizing that even small efforts can create lasting change.

“My message to Afghan women and girls is simple; Never lose hope, keep learning, keep moving forward.” Said Simin Nadeem.

Resilience, Education, Hope



Fariha's Fight for Education

“They tried to take away our future, but Afghan girls do not give up,” says Fariha, a midwifery graduate and former teacher from Afghanistan.

“For us, education is not just learning—it is survival.”

Born and raised in Afghanistan, Fariha always dreamed of pursuing higher education. But on December 20, 2022, the Taliban banned women from universities, stripping them of their right to learn. “When universities shut their doors to women, midwifery and nursing were the only fields left for us,” she explains. “So I chose midwifery—not just for myself, but for every Afghan girl fighting to study.”

In 2023, she began her studies, facing strict rules that controlled every aspect of student life. “We had to cover our faces and hands completely. Male teachers were forbidden from teaching us. Classrooms were monitored. Our institute had separate buildings for men and women, and space was limited.” The challenges extended beyond education—economic hardship, emotional exhaustion, and the constant fear that one day, even this small opportunity would be taken away.

That fear became reality.

In early December 2024, the Taliban issued a directive banning women from enrolling in nursing and midwifery training programs across Afghanistan.



“The doors closed again. Once more, Afghan girls were told they had no place in education,” she says. “But we are still here. We are still fighting.”

Determined to make a difference, Fariha also worked as a teacher at a private school for women and girls below the sixth grade. “Every morning, I entered the classroom with a heavy heart, knowing that the older girls had no place to study. But I taught with passion, because every lesson was an act of resistance.”

Despite growing restrictions, Afghan women continue to resist. “We will not let our voices be silenced,” Fariha declares. “Education is our right, and we will fight for it.”

To the international community, she makes a plea: “Stand with us. Help us reopen our schools and universities. Do not turn away—Afghan women need your support.”

Her message is one of resilience and hope. “We are not giving up. And with the world’s support, we will reclaim our future.”

Turning Resilience Into Action

Adila Akhlaqi

"We do not need your apologies. We need action." These powerful words come from Adila Akhlaqi, an aspiring singer, educator, and advocate for Afghan women's rights.

Born and raised in Kabul, Adila was a 10th-grade student when the Taliban banned women from attending school. "Education means everything to me," she says. "When they closed our schools, I felt lost—like my dreams had been taken away."

But Adila refused to accept a life without learning. Searching for opportunities, she discovered Classroom Without Walls (CWW), an online education initiative, where she is now working towards her GED certificate to one day apply for university.

Beyond her studies, she has taken on leadership roles—serving as an assistant teacher, leading the Wings of Change (WOC) program, and managing CWW's YouTube project. "Helping Afghan women get an education gives me purpose," she shares. "It makes me proud to be their voice."

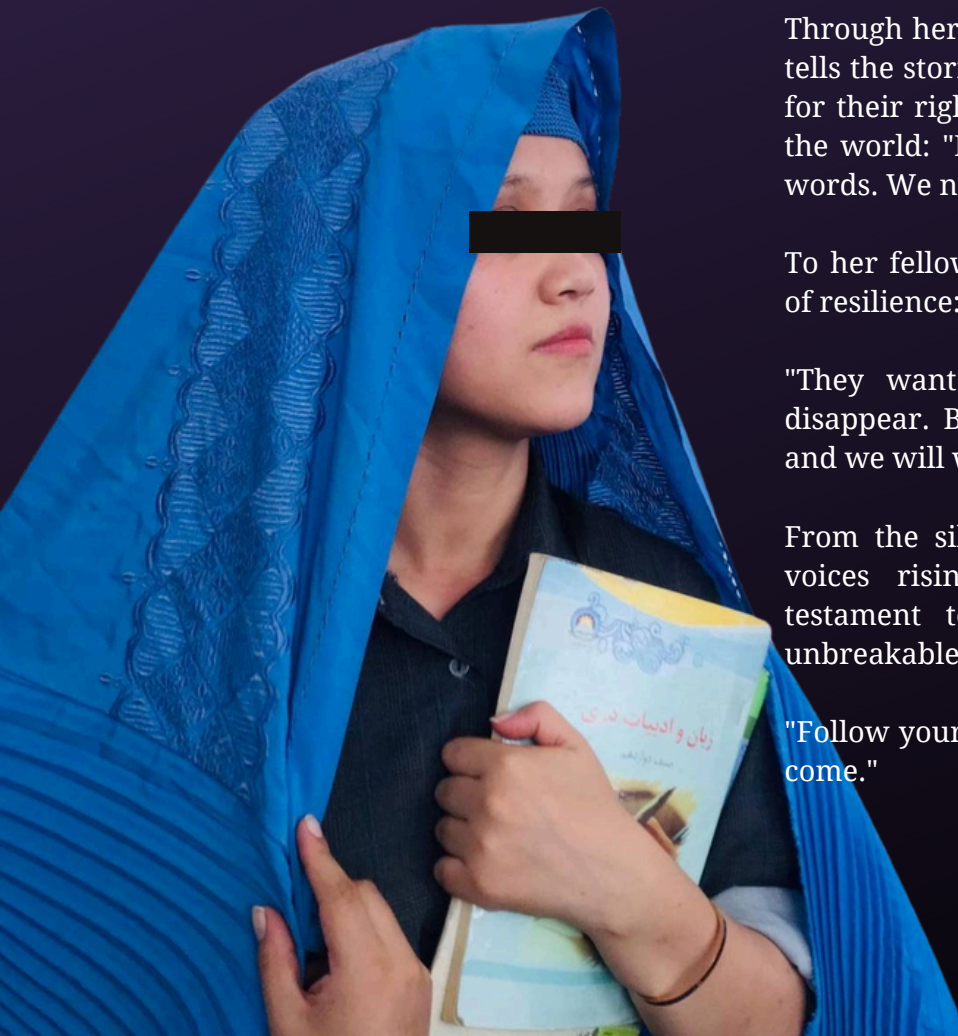
Through her art, music, and global outreach, Adila tells the stories of Afghan women who are fighting for their right to learn. But she has a message for the world: "Do not forget us. We need more than words. We need action."

To her fellow Afghan women, her message is one of resilience:

"They want us to give up. They want us to disappear. But we will not. We have each other, and we will win this fight."

From the silence of shuttered classrooms to the voices rising in protest, Adila Akhlaqi is a testament to courage, determination, and the unbreakable spirit of Afghan women.

"Follow your dreams. Never give up. Our time will come."



Sinah Sadat: A Fight for Education and Hope

"They took away our schools, our classrooms, our futures. But they could never take away our hope," says Sinah Sadat, a passionate advocate for women's education.

Born and raised in Afghanistan, Sinah was a 10th-grade student when the Taliban took control, stripping her and countless other women of their right to education. "One day, I was in school, surrounded by classmates. The next, the doors were shut, and our dreams were left outside."

With the sudden loss of her education, Sinah struggled with despair. The sight of an empty schoolyard, once filled with young women in black-and-white uniforms, was unbearable. "I would walk past my school, kiss its doors, and look inside, hoping it was just a bad dream."

Months of isolation and mental health struggles followed, but with the unwavering support of her family and friends, she found a way forward. She turned to online education, an option far from perfect but a crucial source of hope.

Two years later, Sinah's family made the difficult decision to leave Afghanistan for a neighbouring country. Without the means for legal visas, they endured a dangerous journey across mountains and deserts, walking through the night to avoid arrest. "We spent 12 hours hiding in the freezing cold. My mother and brothers collapsed from exhaustion, but we had no choice but to keep going."

But arriving in the neighbouring country was not the fresh start she had imagined. The barriers to education remained. Schools required foreigner stamps from the Afghan embassy, and even if she completed her studies, she wouldn't receive an official degree. "It felt like the same cycle of exclusion, just in a different country."

Refusing to let bureaucracy define her future, Sinah recommitted to online learning. Now, from the neighbouring country, she studies alongside 23 peers, serving as their student council president. "We lift each other up. We remind each other that our education is worth fighting for."

Sinah dreams of one day becoming Afghanistan's Minister of Education, determined to rebuild the system that was stolen from her generation. "I see a future where no girl is forced to beg for an education. Where classrooms are filled with eager minds, not empty chairs."

Her message to Afghan women—and to every woman denied the right to learn—is unwavering:

"School is not the only path to knowledge. If you have the will to learn, you will find a way. No matter how dark the world seems, resilience will lead you to the light."

From the mountains of Afghanistan to the refugee camps of the neighbouring country, from makeshift online classrooms to a future of leadership—Sinah Sadat's journey is a testament to the power of perseverance.

"You can chase your dreams from a cave in the mountains to a modern apartment in a city. Never stop learning. Never stop fighting."



Husnia Saeed: Defying Barriers Through Education

"I was one year away from my degree when they shut the doors on us. But education is not a building—it's a mindset, and I refused to stop learning."

Husnia was in her final year at the Faculty of Public Administration and Policy when the Taliban closed universities in Afghanistan to women on December 20, 2022. "Like thousands of other Afghan girls, my dreams felt out of reach. It was as if my future had been stolen."

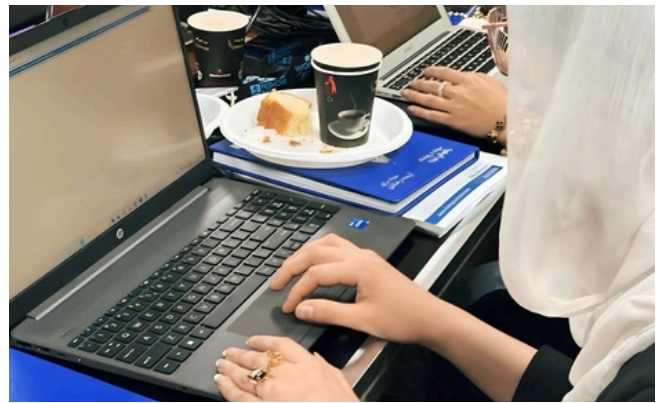
But she refused to let her education end there. Turning to online learning, she completed a research methodology program and earned a recognized certificate from Germany. Her thirst for knowledge led her to a leadership conference, where she excelled, earning recognition and later joining the organization as the Head of Human Resources.

"Through my work, I connected with people from around the world, gaining experience and proving that Afghan women are not voiceless—we are leaders, thinkers, and changemakers."

Her dedication opened doors to new opportunities. She joined an international education program collaborating with UNESCO, teaching English and computer skills to Afghan women who had been deprived of education.

"Despite the challenges we face every day, I was able to contribute meaningfully—to give other girls the education they were denied."

While teaching, she continued her own professional development, securing an internship at an international American company,



where she trained in human resources and digital marketing.

For Husnia, education is not just about personal success—it's about lifting others along the way. "If we can create opportunities for learning—not only for ourselves but for others—it is one of the greatest contributions we can make to our society."

Her message to Afghan women is one of resilience:

"Never give up on your dreams. There is always a way forward. Find the path that brings you closer to your aspirations, and walk it with courage."

And to the world, her request is clear:

"We don't need sympathy. We need action. Open the doors of education for Afghan girls so we can build a future that is educated and enlightened."

From lost opportunities to new beginnings, from online classrooms to international leadership, Husnia Saeed's journey is a testament to the power of perseverance.

"Education is not just our right—it is our strength. And we will never stop fighting for it."



SARAH AMIRI

Lighting the Way Through Resilience

"Nothing can stop a person, and a woman, from progressing. Even in the darkest times, you can always find a way to bring light." — Sarah Amiri

Sarah's journey began as a student at Harold University, where she was studying law and political science. However, like many young Afghans, her dreams were disrupted by the Taliban closing universities in Afghanistan to women on December 20, 2022. She recalls the devastating moment when the ban on education took effect, leaving her feeling uncertain about her future.

"At first, it was very difficult, and I thought I would never be able to achieve my dreams. But I soon realized that I had the power to create new opportunities."

Sarah found solace and strength in writing, a passion that had started when she was in third grade. Even as education was restricted, she continued to write, publishing work with the Families Institution and receiving positive feedback. Her commitment to growth led her to participate in numerous online classes and conferences, where she enhanced her communication skills and broadened her knowledge.

"Through every challenge, I found a way to keep moving forward. I continued teaching online, even learning German to help educate other Afghan women."

In 2023, Sarah's dedication was recognized when she was selected as a Literacy Ambassador by the World Literacy Foundation in Afghanistan. She continues to work toward improving literacy in her country, and her voice remains a beacon of hope for many. She is also an active member of the Path of Change organization, advocating for the rights of Afghan youth and women.

"My family has been my greatest support throughout this journey. They've always encouraged me to be my best self, and they continue to motivate me to help guide others."

Sarah's mission is clear: to serve as a role model for the young generation of Afghanistan. She is committed to showing them that, despite the challenges, there is always a path forward.

"Don't let life's problems become a reason to give up. The road to success is never easy, but through perseverance, we find strength."

Her message to young Afghans is one of resilience: "Stay on the right path, no matter the obstacles, and remember that success is built through struggle."

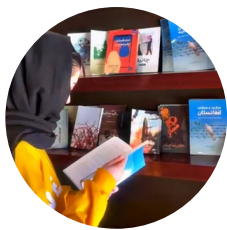
Sarah believes that challenges are a necessary part of growth and success. "If your path seems too easy and without obstacles, know that you're not on the right one. Struggle and difficulty are part of the journey to success."

To Sarah, faith and hope in God are central to her journey. "God is always watching over us, guiding us, and helping us reach our potential. And in the end, that light will always guide us forward."

From the depths of despair to new opportunities, Sarah Amiri's story exemplifies the power of resilience, determination, and faith. She continues to fight for a better future for Afghan youth and women, lighting the way for others to follow.

"No matter how dark the times may seem, always remember that light will find a way."





Hella Amarkhil

Young Afghan women's rights activist

"Even the smallest light can shine bright in the darkest night. This has guided me through challenges and shaped my journey."

— Hella Amarkhil

Hella's journey began in 2022 when she graduated high school and began her studies at the American University of Afghanistan. For her, education represents more than just a path to personal growth—it is a symbol of hope, a beacon that can guide her and others toward a brighter future.

"Education is more than just sitting in a classroom—it is a path to change, and no matter how difficult the road may seem, there is always a way forward."

Growing up in a society marked by daily struggles and challenges, Hella was inspired by countless stories of resilience and determination. These stories fueled her desire to create her own path and work toward a better future—not just for herself, but for others too. One of her proudest achievements so far is founding Beacon of Hope, an organization dedicated to empowering Afghan girls and women through skill-building workshops, leadership programs, and public speaking training.

"I've seen incredible transformations. Girls who were once afraid to speak are now leading discussions, sharing ideas, and dreaming big."

As an educator, public speaking trainer, and HR professional, Hella has learned how powerful it is to inspire others. Every accomplishment, no matter how small, brings her closer to her dream: making education accessible to every Afghan woman and girl.

"If I could change one thing, it would be the barriers Afghan girls face every single day. The situation is getting worse, and it breaks my heart to see so many potential futures being denied."

Her vision for the future is clear: a world where every woman and girl, no matter her circumstances, has the opportunity to go to school, discover her potential, and shape her own future. For Hella, leadership means bringing light into the lives of others, especially Afghan girls and women, showing them that they too have the strength to overcome any obstacle and achieve their dreams.

"My greatest goal in life is to be a leader who brings light into the lives of others, especially Afghan girls and women."

Hella credits much of her strength to her family, whose support has been invaluable throughout her journey. Their constant encouragement reminds her that she is never alone.

"I'm lucky to have a family that supports me in my education. They're always reminding me that I'm not alone in this journey."

To the global community, Hella calls for action: support Afghan girls and women in their fight for education and opportunities.



She believes that while changing the whole situation may seem daunting, there are tangible ways to make a difference—scholarships, online schools, and other opportunities that can help Afghan women develop their skills and abilities.

"Together, we can create a future where hope is stronger than fear."

To the young women in Afghanistan who may feel like giving up, Hella has a message of hope:

"Your story isn't over. Every challenge you face is shaping you into someone stronger. Take small steps, believe in yourself, and never forget that you are a light in this world, and your dreams matter."

Hella Amarkhil's journey is one of hope, determination, and the power of community. Her work with Beacon of Hope and her dedication to empowering Afghan girls and women are testaments to the difference one person can make. Through education, leadership, and unwavering belief in the future, Hella is lighting the way for others to follow.

"The smallest light can shine bright in the darkest night. And we are that light." - Hella Amarkhil

HARIR AFGHAN

Defying Darkness with Courage and Words

"I remain courageous, determined to banish negative thoughts and nurture hope for a brighter future." — Harir Afghan

Harir's story begins in 2020, a time when she was eagerly awaiting her grade 11 exam results. But the world around her quickly began to crumble. The Taliban's return to power brought with it profound changes—changes that shattered the dreams of countless young Afghan women like Harir, who were suddenly denied the right to continue their education.

"We were confined to our homes, our faith shaken, stripped of our basic right to education. The joy of sitting in classrooms, learning, and dreaming of attending university seemed to vanish overnight."



For Harir, this moment of darkness was crushing. The dream of continuing her education became a distant hope, as the Taliban's oppressive rule pushed her and her peers into a state of limbo. But even in the face of such overwhelming challenges, Harir refused to surrender to despair. Instead, she turned to what would become her lifeline—writing.

"Writing became a refuge, a way to express the pain and struggle that I could not speak aloud. Through words, I found my voice."

Her pain and frustration became the fuel for her creativity, and through writing, Harir began to advocate for herself and others. She penned novels, short stories, and essays that spoke of the hardships faced by Afghan girls and women. Writing became her tool for reform, a way to make her voice heard even when speaking out was dangerous.

"Through writing, I found warmth during the harshest seasons of disappointment and uncertainty. It gave me a sense of purpose, a way to push through the darkness."

Despite the ongoing hardships, Harir found ways to continue growing and developing. She worked remotely for an organization focused on capacity building and ran an online shop, both of which honed her skills in communication and networking. These accomplishments were significant in Afghan society, where success often requires tremendous courage and determination.

"Today, I am an online university student pursuing my passion in the fascinating world of media, which embodies sincerity, peace, and love."

Alongside her studies, Harir has continued her advocacy, working with several media outlets and participating as a guest speaker to raise awareness for the rights of Afghan girls and women. However, the road has not been easy. Restrictions on media and freedom of expression have intensified, but Harir remains steadfast in her commitment to creating change.

"Despite the challenges and oppression, I have not given up. I know that God's will, not the oppressive rules of the Taliban, will guide me out of this darkness."

Through all her struggles, Harir has learned to rely on herself. She holds firm to the belief that positive thinking can light the way, even in the darkest of times. Her journey is one of resilience, hope, and the unyielding pursuit of dreams, despite the obstacles in her path.

"This is my story—a testament to resilient hope and the relentless pursuit of dreams, even in the face of adversity."

Her unwavering spirit is a beacon for Afghan girls and women, proving that even in the darkest times, there is always a way to shine.

"No matter how dark the times may seem, always remember that you can still find the light within yourself to keep going."

FARISHTA SAMIM

A VOICE FOR THE SILENCED WOMEN OF AFGHANISTAN

“I want to be a voice for you. I want to tell the world about your strength, about how you wake up every morning and face a reality that most people can't even imagine.” – Farishta Samim

Farishta’s story begins in Afghanistan, a place she will always call home. Growing up, she attended Marfa High School, where she experienced some of the best years of her life. It was a school where young women were encouraged to dream, to lead, and to thrive—a place of opportunity where hope was abundant.

But everything changed when the Taliban took control over Afghanistan in August 2021. Dreams turned into a survival instinct, and the world that once seemed full of possibility became one where even the simplest freedoms, like education, were ripped away. For Farishta, it was no longer about school or future plans, but about surviving each day.

“We knew we couldn’t stay. We knew if we stayed, we might not survive.”

Farishta’s family, especially her sisters, were at risk due to their involvement with a music group, a part of the school that the Taliban despised. Music, art, and freedom were all deemed criminal by the regime.

When the Taliban regained control of the country in August 2021, they reimposed the ban on music, claiming it was against Islamic principles.



Faced with the imminent threat of violence, Farishta and her family made the difficult decision to flee. They were supported by the 31st Foundation, an organization that would give them the hope and resources they desperately needed.

“It was through this incredible organization that I found hope again. Through 31st, I have achieved so many goals and had so many beautiful experiences. They gave me the chance to raise awareness, to share my story, and to let the world hear my voice.”

Their journey took them from Afghanistan to Pakistan, and finally to Canada, where they found safety. Now, three years later, Farishta reflects on the life she left behind and the women who still struggle in Afghanistan.

“I know what it feels like to be afraid, to feel like the world is crashing down on you. But let me also tell you this: You are stronger than you think. You're braver than you know.”

Despite the security and opportunities she now has in Canada, Farishta carries the weight of her Afghan sisters with her every day. Her greatest mission is to amplify their voices, to remind the world that Afghan women are not forgotten, and that their dreams are still alive, even under the shadow of oppression.

“My biggest goal in life is to help you. I want to make sure your voices are heard, whether you're in Afghanistan or anywhere else in the world. You inspire me.”

Farishta calls upon the international community to act in defense of Afghan women, emphasizing that the world cannot ignore what is happening to them. Afghanistan remains the only country where women are banned from attending school, a tragedy that Farishta believes is a crisis for humanity as a whole.

“How can we call ourselves human if we ignore what's happening to Afghan girls? Afghan girls need your support, your advocacy, and your action.”

For Farishta, safety in Canada doesn't mean forgetting Afghanistan. Every step she takes here is for the women still in Afghanistan—the ones who can't speak, who can't dream, and who are waiting for the world to remember them.

“Don't stop dreaming. Don't stop hoping. Don't stop believing in yourself. You are brave. You are strong. And one day, the world will see that too.”

Farishta's story is not just her own—it's a collective story of all Afghan women who fight for their future. Through her words, she hopes to reach the woman who feels like giving up, to remind her that she is not alone, and that there are people fighting for her, standing with her.

“This is not just my story. It's our story. And together, we'll make sure it's heard.”

ZARLASHT NASERI

Defying Barriers, Embracing Growth, and Shaping Her Future

“I believe in myself and Allah, and I know I will have a better future—a happy and successful life.” — Zarlisht Naseri

Zarlisht was born in 2005 in Kabul, Afghanistan. Her childhood, although ordinary, laid the foundation for the powerful lessons she would come to learn. At the age of five, she began her journey in school, though her early experiences were far from easy. She was shy, introverted, and often faced bullying from other students. For a long time, she struggled to stand up for herself, but school became her first teacher in learning how to find her voice.

“Sometimes, you don’t learn everything from your home and family. I learned that I had to stand up for myself, even when my family had taught me to stay silent and be kind.”

By third grade, Zarlisht gained more confidence and started making friends. Her family supported her dreams of education, and her father always encouraged her to work hard, reminding her that education was the key to a brighter future.

“My father used to say, ‘Either you study or become a school killer.’ His words pushed me to work hard and stay focused on my lessons.”

At the age of 15, Zarlisht dreamed of studying economics and becoming an office worker. She hoped to build a future where she could make a meaningful impact. However, the harsh realities of Afghanistan shattered those dreams when the Taliban took control. The Taliban closed universities in Afghanistan to women on December 20, 2022. But Zarlisht’s spirit remained unbroken.

“Sometimes I think to myself, what a cruel world we live in. The boys are free to do whatever they want, but for girls, even the right to an education is denied.”

Despite these challenges, Zarlisht refused to stop learning. During the pandemic, when schools were closed, she took the opportunity to study independently, reading books and learning computer skills from her uncle. She knew that no matter the circumstances, learning must never stop.

“When life gets difficult, we must keep learning. We must find ways to grow, no matter the situation.”

She turned to other means of self-improvement, including drawing and improving her English skills through online resources.

“At 16, I started to feel the weight of depression. It was hard to believe in myself, but I kept pushing forward. I didn’t stop learning, even if I felt like my life was going nowhere.”

At 17, Zarlisht started attending an English course in Kabul, where her biggest challenge was confidence. She struggled to speak out loud and present in front of others. But with the encouragement of her mother, who taught her that facing her problems head-on was the only way to solve them, Zarlisht began to overcome her self-doubt.

“My mom told me that if I ran away from my problems, they would never go away. But if I faced them, they would eventually be solved.”

At 18, Zarlisht’s life took another turn when her family sent her to live with her grandparents. It was a difficult transition, but Zarlisht embraced the new responsibilities and challenges. She learned to navigate two homes, balancing the needs of her grandparents with her own aspirations.

“Home is where your heart is, but being away from my parents and living in two places was hard. I had to adapt, and I kept going.”



Through all the struggles, Zarlisht found the strength to become a teacher at the age of 18. She taught beginner classes and gradually improved her teaching skills. She had conquered her confidence issues and had grown into a powerful speaker, capable of addressing hundreds of people with poise.

“My first dreams were just dreams, but I made them come true. I never believed that if I didn’t get something, it was because of bad luck. Instead, I knew that every closed door meant a better one would open.”

Now 19, Zarlisht reflects on her journey with pride. She has learned so much and knows that her story is far from over. Every day is an opportunity for growth, and she is determined to keep learning and pursuing her dreams.

“Life is a lesson, and we must always strive to learn from it. I am grateful for everything I’ve achieved, but I know there’s so much more to come.”

Her strength, resilience, and unwavering belief in herself continue to drive her forward, and she is ready for whatever the future holds.

“Thank you for listening to my story. It’s not just my story—it’s our story. And together, we’ll make sure it’s heard.”

TAWOS NAZARI

Breaking Barriers, Embracing Leadership, and Forging a Path Forward

“The future is not that bad. There’s always a path forward, and you just have to find it.” — Tawos Nazari

Tawos Nazari is 19 years old and currently studying for her bachelor’s degree at the American University of Afghanistan. But her journey has not been without its challenges. Born and raised in Kabul, Tawos graduated from Sur High School in 2022, a time when the Taliban closed universities in Afghanistan to women on December 20, 2022.

“It was a hard time when I graduated. The Taliban had taken over, and everything felt uncertain. I thought I’d be able to continue my education, but the world around me seemed to collapse.”

With the doors of education closing for many Afghan women, Tawos found herself at a crossroads. But instead of accepting defeat, she chose to turn this barrier into an opportunity. She began exploring online education, a path that her family encouraged and supported her to pursue.

“My family always told me, ‘You have to break barriers to see the other side.’ At first, I wasn’t sure how to do that, but I started reading books and looking into online courses. I didn’t want to let the situation define my future.”

Through her self-study and exploration of online programs, Tawos found something that truly changed her perspective—an online leadership program. Initially, she didn’t know much about leadership, but as the program progressed, she saw a transformation in herself.

“I didn’t know anything about leadership at first. But after two months, I noticed a real change in my communication and leadership skills. It made me realize how much I could achieve, even when everything else seemed impossible.”

Tawos put her newfound skills to use when she worked at an online library, organizing exhibitions like the “Omid Art and Book Exhibition,” which focused on showcasing artwork and empowering women.

“At the time, everyone was going through tough circumstances. The exhibition was a way to offer hope. ‘Omid’ means hope in English, and that’s what we wanted to give to Afghan girls—hope for a brighter future, even in the darkest times.”

Her involvement in various campaigns and leadership programs continued to sharpen her skills. Tawos even passed an English test and applied to the American University of Afghanistan, where she was accepted to continue her education online.

“I couldn’t believe it when I got accepted. It was a huge achievement for me because education was always my dream. Despite the obstacles, I was able to continue my studies, and now I’m in my second semester as a university student.”

But Tawos’ journey didn’t stop there. In 2024, she was selected as a Global Youth Ambassador for the Dear World Organization, a role that further developed her communication skills and connected her to a global network of changemakers.

“Becoming a Global Youth Ambassador was one of the highlights of my journey. It gave me the chance to use my leadership skills and help others while continuing to grow as a person.”

Tawos now reflects on her journey and the lessons she’s learned. Her time in school made her realize that the traditional education system in Afghanistan, while valuable, needs to evolve. In her eyes, education should focus on more than just academic subjects; it should emphasize skills like leadership, critical thinking, and problem-solving—skills that are essential for success in the real world.

“The education system in Afghanistan has many good subjects, but what’s truly important are the skills. We need to focus on leadership, critical thinking, and problem-solving. These are the things that can truly change lives.”

Tawos also recognizes the unique challenges faced by Afghan women, especially under the Taliban regime, but she urges them not to lose hope. Even if they can't go outside, there are still ways to learn and grow from home.

"I know it's hard. I know it's challenging. But I want to tell every girl out there who feels trapped or silenced, to think about what they would do if they weren't under the Taliban's rule. Whatever comes to your mind, pursue it. Don't give up on your dreams."

Tawos believes that the barriers created by the Taliban are just temporary, and there's always a way forward.

"Don't let the situation define you. The Taliban regime is just a barrier. If we break it, we'll see a brighter future on the other side. Stay strong, stay hopeful, and keep moving forward."

As Tawos looks ahead, she is determined to bring about change in Afghanistan's education system and create more opportunities for girls and women to thrive. She knows that the road ahead won't be easy, but she believes in her ability to pave the way for a better future.

"The future is not as bleak as it seems. If we keep pushing forward, there is always hope. We have to keep learning, growing, and working toward change."

Tawos' journey is a powerful reminder that no matter how difficult the situation may seem, there is always a path forward. With determination, resilience, and the support of those around us, we can break through any barrier and reach our goals.

"Thank you for listening. Don't ever give up on yourself. The world is waiting for you to make your mark."



Zainab Noori

Turning Challenges Into Opportunities and Redefining Success

"Challenges are not the end of your story. They are just the beginning of something greater." — Zainab Noori

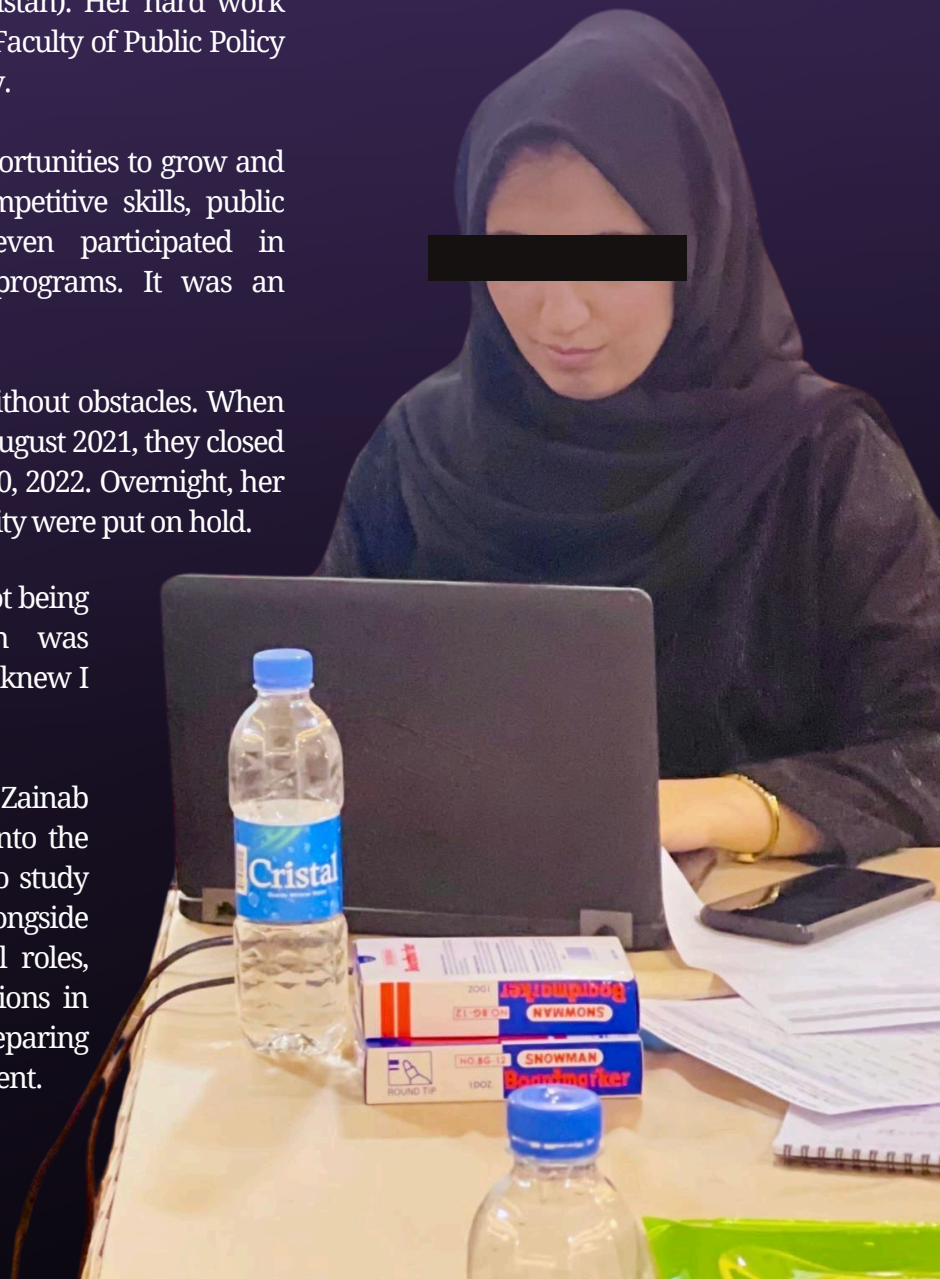
From a young age, Zainab Noori was passionate about education. She dreamed of building a brighter future for herself and those around her. That passion drove her to excel in school, where she graduated at the top of her class and earned an outstanding score of 320.79 on the Kankor exam (university entrance exam in Afghanistan). Her hard work paid off, and she was admitted to the Faculty of Public Policy and Administration at Kabul University.

"My time at university was full of opportunities to grow and learn. I took courses in English, competitive skills, public speaking, and human rights. I even participated in motivational speaking and values programs. It was an exciting time in my life."

However, Zainab's journey was not without obstacles. When the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021, they closed universities to women on December 20, 2022. Overnight, her dreams of continuing at Kabul University were put on hold.

"It was heartbreaking. The reality of not being allowed to pursue my education was devastating. But I refused to give up. I knew I had to find another way."

Determined to keep moving forward, Zainab worked tirelessly and was accepted into the American University of Afghanistan to study online Business Administration. Alongside her studies, she took on professional roles, working with international organizations in positions such as HR manager, preparing presentations, teaching, and management.



Currently, she teaches at two online universities in the fields of Computer Science and English Literature. But she didn't stop there—Zainab also launched her own business, which has grown successfully and brought her meaningful achievements.

"I realized that education isn't just about being in a classroom; it's about taking initiative, learning new skills, and creating opportunities for yourself and others."

Zainab's dedication to her education and professional growth has led to remarkable opportunities. She has been awarded scholarships from ten universities in the United States, including Lewis University, Nazareth University in New York, and the University of California, Berkeley, among others. These scholarships offer her the chance to study Computer Science, a field she is deeply passionate about.

"I'm beyond grateful for these opportunities. It's proof that hard work, perseverance, and resilience can lead to incredible outcomes, even in the most challenging situations."

Her accomplishments don't end there. Zainab passed the Duolingo English Test with a score of 130 and recently qualified for an international science competition, a new milestone in her journey. She is excited about the doors this competition might open and remains committed to lifelong learning.

Beyond her personal success, Zainab is dedicated to empowering others. She has conducted workshops on leadership, personal development, and effective communication, inspiring young women to dream big despite the barriers they face.

"To the girl who feels stuck or uncertain about the future, my message is simple: Don't give up. Challenges are part of life, but they can also be stepping stones to success. Believe in yourself, work hard, and take every opportunity to move forward."

Her journey is a testament to the idea that limitations exist only if we accept them. She encourages young women to keep fighting for their dreams, no matter how difficult the circumstances.

"Always remember—challenges are not the end of your story. They are just the beginning of something greater. Keep believing in yourself, keep working hard, and never let anyone tell you what you can or cannot achieve. The future is yours to shape."

Zainab Noori's story is a powerful reminder that resilience and determination can overcome even the toughest obstacles. Her voice is one of strength, hope, and inspiration for the next generation of Afghan women.

"Keep believing in yourself, and never stop dreaming big."

Alina Naseri

Defying the Ban and Pursuing Education Against All Odds

"In Afghanistan today, millions of girls are denied an education. But I am still learning. And that, in itself, is an achievement."

Alina is in the ninth grade, but like many Afghan women and girls, she faces immense obstacles in accessing education. Despite the Taliban's ban on girls' schooling, she has found ways to continue learning.



"I graduated from an English language program last year. I am also in my third year at an international online school, where I have successfully passed two grades. In a country where girls are shut out of classrooms, I consider this a big achievement."

If given the power to change something, Alina knows exactly what she would do.

"I would change the laws that prevent Afghan girls and women from getting an education. Women make up half of society, and without education, we cannot progress."

Her dreams are simple but powerful:

"My biggest dream is to complete my education—both school and university. I want to be a useful person for my family and my society, to build a better life for myself and those around me."

Alina's greatest support comes from her family, who stand by her and encourage her to pursue her education.

"They always tell me, 'Nobody can stop you if you work hard. Keep going, and don't let anything stand in your way.'"

To the international community, her message is clear:

"We call on you to help reopen the doors of schools and universities for Afghan girls. It has been nearly four years, and we are still waiting. We all have dreams. We all deserve a future."

Despite the challenges, Alina remains determined.

"I have achieved my short-term goals, and with effort and hard work, I will achieve my long-term dreams. No one can stop me. I see a bright future because I will never give up."

Her message to other Afghan women and girls is one of resilience and hope:

"Please, don't give up. This is your life, and no one can take it from you. Keep working hard, no matter the situation. You are stronger than you think."

From online learning to unwavering perseverance, Alina Naseri's journey is proof that education is not just about schools—it is about the determination to learn, no matter the obstacles.

"I will make a future for myself. No one can take that away from me."

MAHNAZ HAIDARY

Bridging Family Dreams and Community Empowerment

"I once dreamed of helping my family. Now, I dream of helping an entire community—where both genders can thrive with diversity, equality, and equity."

— Mahnaz Haidary

Mahnaz's journey is one of resilience and achievement. As a former player for Afghanistan's U-15 national soccer team, she broke barriers in sports. But her activism didn't stop there.





Mahnaz Haidary

Young Afghan soccer player and women's rights activist

"My involvement in sports and the Afghan community has shaped me into a strong character. I wanted to do more, so I founded the Diverse Educational Association, leading a team of international volunteers to bring education to those who need it most."

Through her leadership as the founder and president of the association, she has impacted both her community and the volunteers who dedicate their time to the cause.

"Education and sports are two areas where I strive to make a difference. Through my work, I am already creating small changes in the education of my Afghan brothers and sisters—but I will not stop until these changes become significant."

Her path has been shaped by many experiences, including participation in global programs like the AFS Global Student Accelerator Program, where she deepened her understanding of her community's needs.

Despite the challenges, she has always had one constant source of support—her family.

"My mother once asked me if I wanted to work or study. Without hesitation, I answered: study. I made that promise as a child, and I have kept it ever since."

Her message to the global community is urgent:

"Do not forget the pain Afghan girls are enduring. Do not forget what this government has done—what they did to your mothers 40 years ago, and what they are doing to us now. Afghan girls have dreams just like you. Support us."

And to her fellow Afghan students, she offers a message of hope:

"Do not lose faith in your education. I know the situation is difficult, but remember—after the darkest night comes the dawn. Believe in yourself and in your future. One day, your patience and hard work will pay off."

From the soccer field to the classroom, from grassroots activism to international leadership, Mahnaz Haidary's story is a testament to the power of perseverance and the unyielding spirit of Afghan women and girls.

"We are here. We are dreaming. And we will not give up."

MOZHDA HAKIMI

Defying Limits Through Lifelong Learning

"Age is just a number. What matters is the experiences I have gained and the lessons I continue to learn every day." — Mozhda Hakimi

When the Taliban closed secondary schools for girls (grades 7–12) in Afghanistan shortly after taking power in August 2021, Mozhda was in grade nine, but that didn't stop her from learning. She embraced online platforms, focusing on languages, graphic design, and teaching.

"I may not have completed my formal education, but I have gained valuable skills and knowledge through online learning. Education doesn't always come from classrooms—it comes from the willingness to learn and grow."

Her achievements, both big and small, are a testament to her resilience. One of her proudest moments was being interviewed on an international TV show called Yak. She also found joy and purpose in teaching English to other women and organizing events and creative projects.

"Teaching others and helping my community grow has been one of my greatest passions. It's not about the recognition; it's about making a meaningful difference in someone's life."

Mojda is deeply committed to improving education, especially for Afghan women and girls. If she could change anything in the world, it would be to create equal opportunities for women and girls and improve education in Afghanistan.



"Education is the foundation for a brighter future. If we want to build an equal society, we must start with empowering girls."

Her dream is to inspire others through her work, particularly in the areas of education, creativity, and personal development.

"I want to contribute to society, not for fame or recognition, but to leave a meaningful legacy for future generations."

Mojda's family has been a constant source of support throughout her journey.

"My family is my pillar. They encourage me, motivate me, and stand by me, no matter what challenges I face."

Despite the struggles many Afghan women and girls face, including economic hardships and political turmoil, Mozhda remains determined.

"The challenges are real, but Afghan girls are strong. We are resilient, and we can continue moving forward, no matter the obstacles."

Mozhda is well on her way to achieving her dreams, even though she knows there's still much to do.

"Every small success brings me closer to my bigger goals. The journey itself has been the greatest lesson."

Looking ahead, she sees her future as an open book—filled with opportunities to grow, contribute, and achieve her dreams.

"I know the road ahead is long, but with hard work and determination, I will accomplish everything I aspire to."

Her message to other Afghan women and girls is one of hope and strength:

"If you've chosen silence or failure, remember—it is not the end. Silence will never bring change. You are stronger than you think. Speak up, believe in yourself, and let your courage shape the world."

Mozhda leaves us with a powerful quote from Rumi:

"In this world, let us leave nothing but love, nothing but kindness."

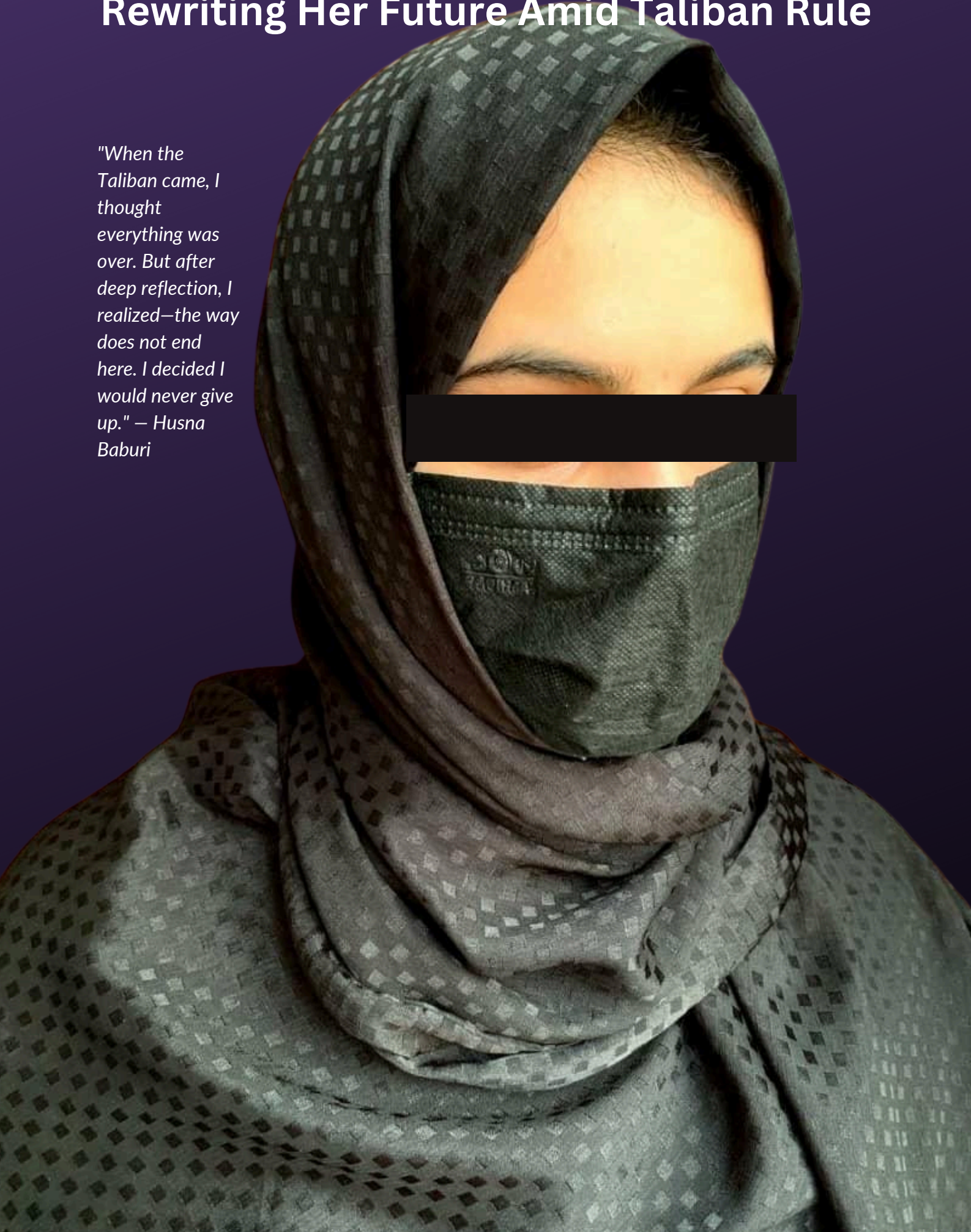
From online education to inspiring change, Mozhda Hakimi's story shows the power of perseverance, self-belief, and the unwavering strength of Afghan women and girls.

"The world needs your courage and your voice. Keep speaking up."

HUSNA BABURI

Rewriting Her Future Amid Taliban Rule

"When the Taliban came, I thought everything was over. But after deep reflection, I realized—the way does not end here. I decided I would never give up." — Husna Baburi



Husna was just one year away from graduating when the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021. They closed universities to women on December 20, 2022, causing an immense psychological toll.

"Losing my education felt like losing a part of myself. It was one of the hardest things I've ever faced. But I refused to let it break me."

Determined to continue learning, Husna sought new paths. She immersed herself in graphic design and completed a six-month program. She joined international workshops in leadership and management and represented Afghanistan as a psychologist in a Persian-speaking regional forum.

"Being the voice of my country among other nations was a proud moment. I carried the weight of Afghan girls and women on my shoulders."

Beyond learning, she found purpose in teaching. She began volunteering as an online English teacher and established an online psychology class to share knowledge with fellow students.

"When we learn something, we have a responsibility to pass it on to those who need it."

Husna also explored art. For the past two years, she has been learning painting—a form of self-expression and resilience. And through it all, books remained her constant companion, helping her find solace and strength.

"Reading books increased my knowledge, but more than that, it helped heal me."

Despite all her achievements, her biggest dream remains unfinished: to complete her education and serve her people as a psychologist.

"Mental health is overlooked in our country. I want to help people find real smiles again. I want to improve their lives, one step at a time."

Husna's family has been her anchor, supporting her through every challenge.

"They stood by me when I was in university, and even now, as I navigate this uncertain path, they continue to encourage my growth."

If she could change one thing, it would be education for girls and women.

"I would create opportunities for every girl who has been denied education. Because when we educate girls, we change societies."

To the global community, her message is clear:

"Do not forget Afghanistan. Do not forget Afghan girls and women. Support us, especially in education."

Though she hasn't yet reached her biggest goals, she holds onto faith.

"With hard work and the help of Allah, I will achieve my dreams. I will never stop fighting for my purpose."

Her final message to Afghan women and girls is one of strength and urgency:

"If you feel like giving up, remember—life always offers another chance. Never accept failure. Keep learning, keep growing. The best way to succeed is to start with yourself."

She leaves us with a powerful reflection:

"The book of life never repeats. We hold the pen, and how we write our story is up to us. Let's make it one we can be proud of."

From psychology to painting, from lost dreams to new beginnings—Husna Baburi is rewriting her own story, one chapter at a time.

"Life doesn't offer second chances. So let's make the most of the one we have."

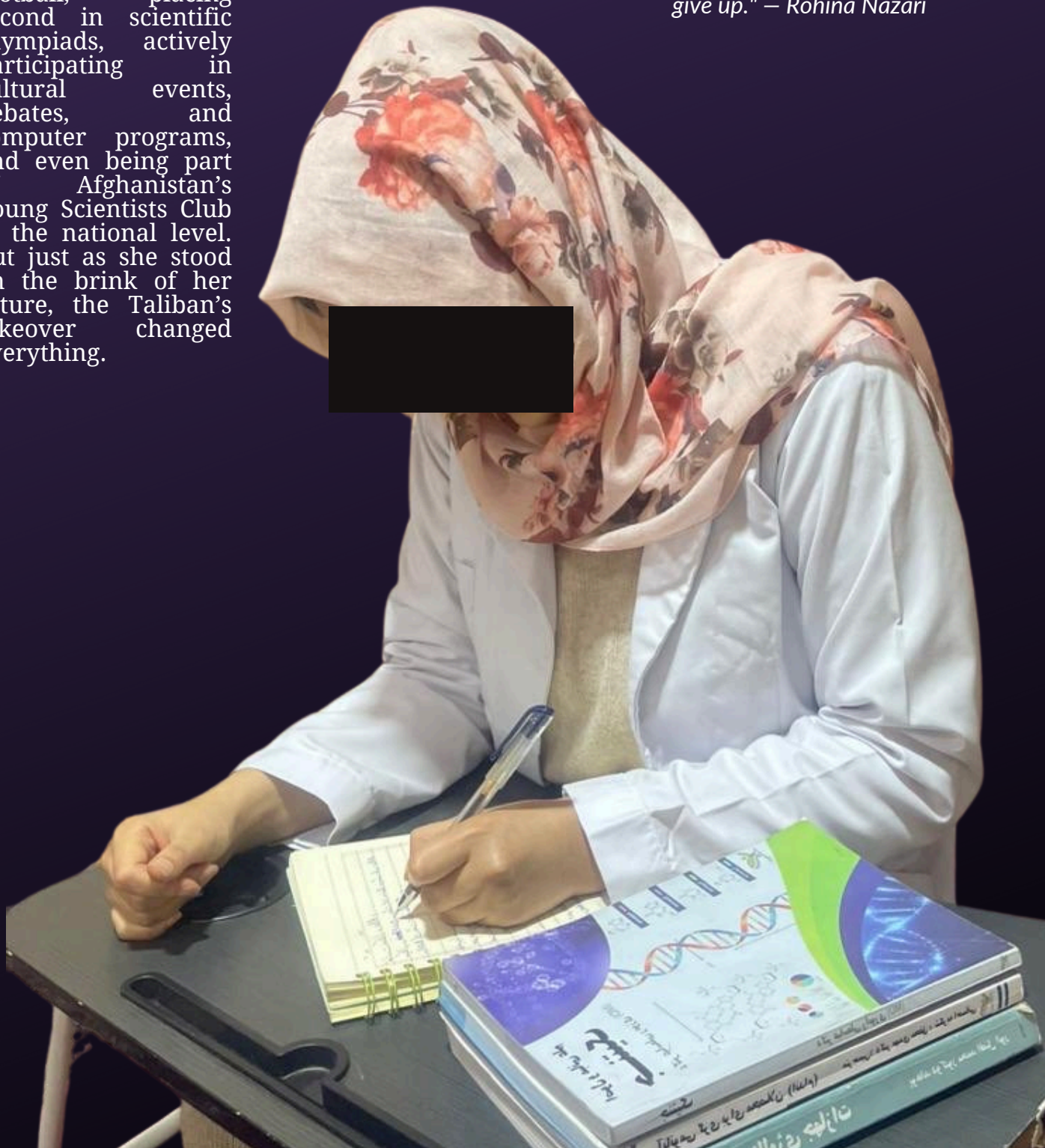


ROHINA NAZARI

Defying Oppression and Reclaiming Her Future

Rohina graduated high school with remarkable achievements—winning medals in football, placing second in scientific Olympiads, actively participating in cultural events, debates, and computer programs, and even being part of Afghanistan's Young Scientists Club at the national level. But just as she stood on the brink of her future, the Taliban's takeover changed everything.

"When the Taliban took over, all my dreams, hopes, and goals seemed to vanish before my eyes. But I reminded myself—I still had goals to achieve, and I couldn't give up." — Rohina Nazari



"I was in shock. In fear. I thought everything I had worked for had been ruined."

Yet, instead of surrendering to despair, she pushed forward. She secured a scholarship and began her studies in medicine—the field she had dreamed of since childhood. But after just one year, when the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021 and later closed universities to women on December 20, 2022.

"It was incredibly painful to have my education taken from me—not because of my ability, but because of my gender."

In that moment, Rohina made a promise to herself:

"I wouldn't stop. I wouldn't accept these circumstances."

Determined to keep learning, she turned to online programs, joining courses in English, German, and leadership. She participated in Afghanistan's largest youth dialogue, studied atrophy, and even explored art. Over the past nine months, she has mastered web design, UI/UX design, HTML, and coding, successfully designing her own project.

"Learning these skills was not easy. It required time management, responsibility, and discipline. But I kept going."

Despite the obstacles, Rohina's persistence paid off—she was accepted into an online university for women and now studies remotely. But she wanted to do more than just learn—she wanted to give back.

She now volunteers with the NYU Learning Academy and Hope Organization, which provide online education for Afghan women and girls. She works as a graphic designer and education coordinator, helping connect Afghan women and girls with educational opportunities.

"I introduce my friends to programs that can change their lives. I encourage them to read, to learn, to grow."

Even with a full schedule, she continues to push forward. She is currently preparing for an international English exam, applying to universities abroad, and learning graphic design, particularly Photoshop.

But Rohina's ambitions don't stop there.

Her greatest dream is to become a heart surgeon—a goal she refuses to abandon. She also plans to establish a foundation that supports Afghan women and children, using education as the most powerful tool for change.

"I believe education can transform society. I will do everything in my power to ensure Afghan girls have access to it."

To the world, her message is clear:

"Support education. Invest in programs that provide skills, learning resources, and job opportunities for women. Many Afghan girls can no longer physically attend school, but online platforms can offer life-changing opportunities."

And to every Afghan woman fighting against the odds, she says:

"You are stronger than the difficulties you face. Believe in yourself. Each of you has unique talents and immense potential. Discover yourself, and together, we will bring light and color to even the darkest days."

Through loss and uncertainty, Rohina Nazari continues to carve her own path—one filled with knowledge, perseverance, and hope.

"I know my journey will not be easy, but I will never give up."



SARAH LATIFI

Defying Closed Doors,
Reclaiming Her Future



"I am an Afghan girl with thousands of dreams, and I refuse to give up. The Taliban may have closed the doors of schools, universities, and workplaces to women, but I will continue to grow, to learn, and to fight for my future." — Sarah Latif

When the Taliban took control in 2021, Sarah was in her second semester at Kabul University. Like millions of Afghan women, she watched as her future was taken from her overnight.

"The disappointment was everywhere. Schools closed. Universities shut down. Women were told they could no longer work. The world became smaller, darker."

But Sarah refused to sit in silence.

"I want to show the Taliban that they cannot limit us."

She turned to art, pouring her emotions and dreams onto canvas. Within a year, she created a collection of paintings, participated in two exhibitions, and even sold several of her artworks.

Alongside her painting, Sarah dedicated herself to learning and growth.

- She took online English classes, expanding her communication skills.
- She completed an online computer course, mastering different software and digital tools.
- She studied fashion design for four months, igniting a passion for creativity and business.
- She attended seminars on women's empowerment, later becoming a trainer for women in her own home.

But one of her greatest passions became handmade jewelry making.

"In six months, I learned how to craft jewelry professionally. This is something I want to build into a future business—one that represents my homeland and empowers Afghan women."

Despite the challenges in Afghanistan—poverty, restrictions, and a lack of opportunities for women—Sarah remains hopeful.

"It has been four years since Afghan girls have been banned from education. The future feels uncertain, and sometimes I wonder if I will ever achieve my dreams. But I know that I must keep trying."

She dreams of representing Afghan women on an international level, fighting for their rights in global organizations. She also wants to expand her art, using painting as a form of expression and resistance.

"My teacher and I are planning to create a painting course to help girls in this situation. We want to give them an outlet, a voice through art."



In addition to painting, she hopes to establish her own handmade jewelry brand, crafting unique pieces that celebrate Afghan culture. But she knows she cannot do it alone—she needs support.

"I am grateful to my family for standing by me. But I also want to be a supporter for them and for my country's people."

Her message to the international community is clear:

"Afghan girls have been deprived of education for nearly four years. The world must not stay silent. Educated people build strong societies—yet we are being denied the right to learn, to work, to dream. We need both material and spiritual support. We need jobs, scholarships, and educational opportunities."

To the Afghan women and girls who feel hopeless, she says:

"Develop whatever talent you have. Show the world—and the Taliban—that they cannot limit us."

And above all, her message is one of hope:

"One day, we will finally get what we want. Nothing is permanent. Never give up."

Sarah Latifi stands as a testament to the power of art, education, and resistance. Though her future remains uncertain, one thing is clear—she will never stop fighting for it.



SHOUGHLA HAMEED

Transforming Obstacles Into Opportunities

"There is nothing impossible in life. Obstacles are not roadblocks—they are opportunities that help us rise, grow, and make our mark in the world." — Shoughla Hameed



Born into a Pashtun Afghan family, Shoughla grew up in a society where educating women and girls was often discouraged. Despite coming from a middle-class background with financial struggles, her parents made it their mission to ensure all their children, including four daughters and a son, received a proper education.

"My parents always stood like a mountain at our back. They faced criticism for allowing us to study in a co-educational system, but they never wavered."

From a young age, Shoughla and her siblings took on teaching jobs to support their education. Inspired by their parents' resilience, they fought for their future despite the societal backlash.

After completing high school at BiBi Aisha Girls School in Peshawar, Pakistan, Shoughla pursued her lifelong dream of studying medicine. She enrolled at Ariana University in Peshawar, but soon after, an Afghan government mandate required universities to relocate within Afghanistan. This forced her to move to Ghazni province, a region known for its conservative values and strict social norms.

"In Ghazni, women were not allowed to leave their homes without permission. Studying in such an environment was a battle every day."

Determined to continue, Shoughla later transferred to Nangarhar University, where conditions were slightly more manageable. But her biggest challenge was yet to come.

"In my fifth year of medical school, I became a mother. The joy of having my daughter was immense, but balancing motherhood with medical school was exhausting. The social judgment I faced only grew stronger."

Despite the criticism from men who couldn't accept a woman pursuing a career alongside them, she pushed forward, determined to prove that women are just as capable and deserving of success.

However, life in Afghanistan became increasingly dangerous for her family. Due to threats against her husband's life, they were forced to flee the country in 2016. Seeking refuge in Turkey, Shoughla's life took yet another turn.

"Becoming a refugee was never part of my plan, but survival required us to leave. I had no choice but to start over."

Granted temporary protection status by the UNHCR, she quickly found a way to help others, volunteering with SGDD-ASAM, a partner organization of the UNHCR. Using her medical knowledge and multilingual skills (English, Urdu, Pashto, Persian, and Turkish), she assisted refugees in accessing healthcare, finding housing, and enrolling their children in school.

"Helping displaced families reminded me that suffering knows no borders. It deepened my commitment to serve those in need, no matter where I was."

During this time, she also welcomed her second child, a son, further strengthening her resolve to create a better future for her family. But the refugee life was filled with uncertainty and hardship. The struggle to balance multiple identities – student, mother, refugee, and immigrant – was overwhelming.

Then, in late 2023, her family was accepted for resettlement in the United States.

"Leaving everything behind for a new country was terrifying. Would I be able to start over? Would my dreams still be possible?"

The transition was difficult. Despite her medical degree and years of experience, she was told she had to start from entry-level jobs. It was a heartbreaking realization, but she refused to give up.

"Success isn't a straight line; it's a series of peaks and valleys. But dreams don't disappear—they evolve."

Just two months after arriving in the U.S., she was offered a position in the medical field as an ophthalmic technician in Washington, D.C. While she may not hold the title of doctor just yet, she knows her journey is far from over.

"I will rise again, not just for me, but for my children. I want them to see that persistence pays off, that no matter how difficult life gets, you can rebuild and achieve your goals."

Her biggest lesson in life?

"Never let others define your limits. You are the creator of your own story. Restart, reset, and refocus as many times as needed until you become the best version of yourself."

To Afghan women facing similar struggles, she says:

"Keep faith and believe in yourself. This dark time in Afghanistan will pass. History has shown that nothing is permanent. We will rise again."

Through her unwavering determination, Shoughla Hameed is a testament to the power of education, perseverance, and hope. Though she has faced countless setbacks, she continues to push forward, rebuild, and inspire others to do the same.

Her story is a reminder to all Afghan women that their dreams are worth fighting for.



ASILA

Shattered but Unbroken

*"A girl made of glass,
she broke but
became sharp." —
Asila*

Asila's dream was clear from the start—to bring justice to her people. She graduated from the Faculty of Law and Political Science with boundless enthusiasm, securing an honorary role at the Herat Court of Appeal. Each day, she poured herself into her work, undeterred by the heat of summer, the chill of winter, or the dust of autumn.

"My duty gave me energy. I never felt tired. It was an effort to achieve my dream."

But dreams, like the winds of Herat, can change direction in an instant.

The Night Everything Changed

Asila had built a world for herself—a world of purpose, dignity, and hope. But when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021, everything was ripped away from her overnight. The justice she had fought for, the career she had built, and the independence she cherished were all erased in a single moment. The city that once felt like home turned into a place of fear and uncertainty. The doors of the courtroom slammed shut, and with them, the dreams she had nurtured for years vanished.

"With the change of government, I stopped dreaming. I was isolated at home. Everything became colorless."

But she refused to let despair define her. She reached within, found strength, and stood up once again.

A New Path Through Virtual Education

With the doors of education and work closed to Afghan women, Asila searched for new avenues. The virtual world became her refuge. Her first step was securing a place in the Women's Leadership Academy by the ILSO Institute, where she honed her skills in essay writing and leadership.

Her journey continued:

- Organizing book-reading sessions as an editor and analyst
- Gaining acceptance into the Women's Leadership Program
- Joining the Vienna Institute for Countering Extremism
- Participating in the largest online conference in Central Asia
- Engaging in various educational programs across different disciplines
- Publishing her first article, Ethnic and Religious Prejudices

Achievements Amidst Adversity

In a year defined by restrictions, Asila carved out victories:

- Publishing an article on an international platform
- Receiving a scholarship for a Business Management course from EBU University of Luxembourg
- Participating in Innovate X_COI, the largest online conference in Central Asia and the Pacific
- Securing a scholarship from the ITS Education Asia Foundation

Her mission remains unchanged: to build a prosperous society by educating and uplifting Afghan children and women left behind by conflict and oppression.

Her Message to women

"Turn challenges into opportunities. A mobile phone and an internet connection can be powerful tools. Work on your skills, educate yourself, and understand your rights.

If a woman is broken today, it is because of her own lack of awareness. Never despair. Women are strong, even when they seem fragile. This is not the end of the road. The end of our suffering is just the beginning of something new."

Her Message to the World

"Afghanistan is not separate from this planet. If the world supports it, the world benefits. If it abandons it, the world will suffer."

Asila's journey is a testament to resilience, self-empowerment, and the unbreakable spirit of Afghan women. Though she was denied her dream of serving as a judge, she continues to fight for justice through education, writing, and advocacy.

Her story is a beacon of hope for Afghan women, reminding them that even in the darkest times, they have the power to rise.



PARMINA MOHAMMAD

A Light in the Darkness

"I believe education is the key—not just to changing my life, but to transforming society." — Parmina Mohammadi





Parmina Mohammadi

Qualified nurse & women's rights activist

"The circumstances are difficult, but you are stronger than the obstacles. Your small but consistent steps will be the foundation for big changes."

Parmina, a nursing graduate, has dedicated her life to creating opportunities for Afghan women and girls. From 2015 to 2018, she worked as a field leader in Warchal Canada projects in Afghanistan, providing support and hope to those in need. In 2023, she took another bold step—establishing free English classes for women and girls, reviving their dreams of a brighter future.

But when the Taliban banned higher education for women on December 20, 2022, everything changed. The decision shattered the dreams of countless Afghan women, including Parmina, who had worked tirelessly to build a future through education.

"The closure of universities didn't just block my education—it shattered the futures of thousands of Afghan girls."

Faced with an impossible choice, Parmina left her homeland, seeking safety and opportunity in a neighbouring country. Migration meant separation from her family, adapting to an unfamiliar culture, and starting over. Despite the hardships, she persevered, securing a job in a clinic's nursing department while keeping her dream of education alive.

"I believe education is the key—not just to changing my life, but to transforming society."

Parmina calls on the international community to take serious action, urging world leaders to stand with Afghan girls in their fight for education and basic rights.

"Education is not just a human right—it is hope itself."

Her message to Afghan women and girls is clear:

"Never give up. The darkness may seem overwhelming, but you are the light that will shine through. Keep fighting, keep believing, and know that a bright tomorrow is coming."

Through every setback, Parmina Mohammadi remains a beacon of strength, proving that even in the face of oppression, hope endures.





VOICES UNBREAKABLE

On this Women's International Day 2025, Afghan women have shared their messages with the world—voices of resilience, hope, and the fight for education, freedom, and equality.

2025

Prepared By :

The Afghan Times

www.theafghantimes.com

International Women's Day

Sinah Sadat

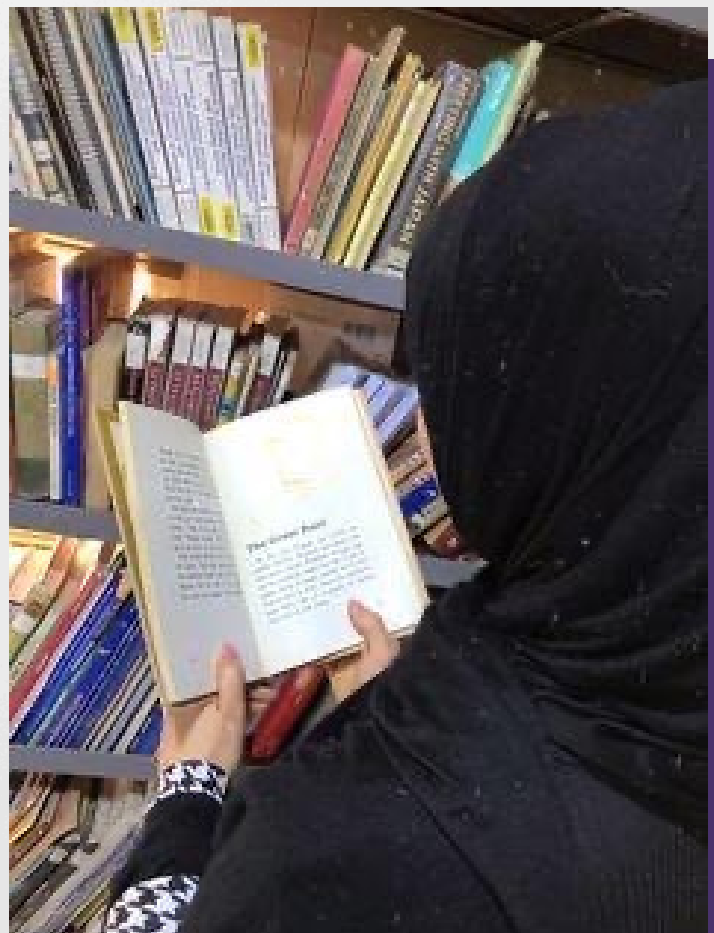
"On this Women's International Day, I urge the world to stand with Afghan women and fight for their basic rights. For far too long, they have been deprived of education and work—rights that should never be denied. Please do not turn a blind eye. Speak up, stand with them, and be their voice in a world that too often silences them. Together, we can make a difference."



International Women's Day

Zarlasht

"As an Afghan woman, my message to the world on this International Women's Day is that empowerment through education and equal opportunities is the key to transforming lives. Every woman deserves the freedom to dream, to learn, and to build a future where her voice is heard and her rights are respected."



International Women's Day



Adila

"As an Afghan woman, my message on this International Women's Day is to empower us to reclaim our rise and our voices. We deserve freedom, education, and the opportunity to shape our own futures. Stand with us in solidarity."



International Women's Day

Dewa Vidar

"Hello, I am Vidar, an Afghan girl pursuing my bachelor's at the Asian University for Women in Bangladesh.

To all Afghan women—stay strong. Listen to your heart and chase what truly makes you happy. The obstacles in your path are not barriers; they are the fire that shapes your strength. Remember, you are not weak—you are unstoppable.

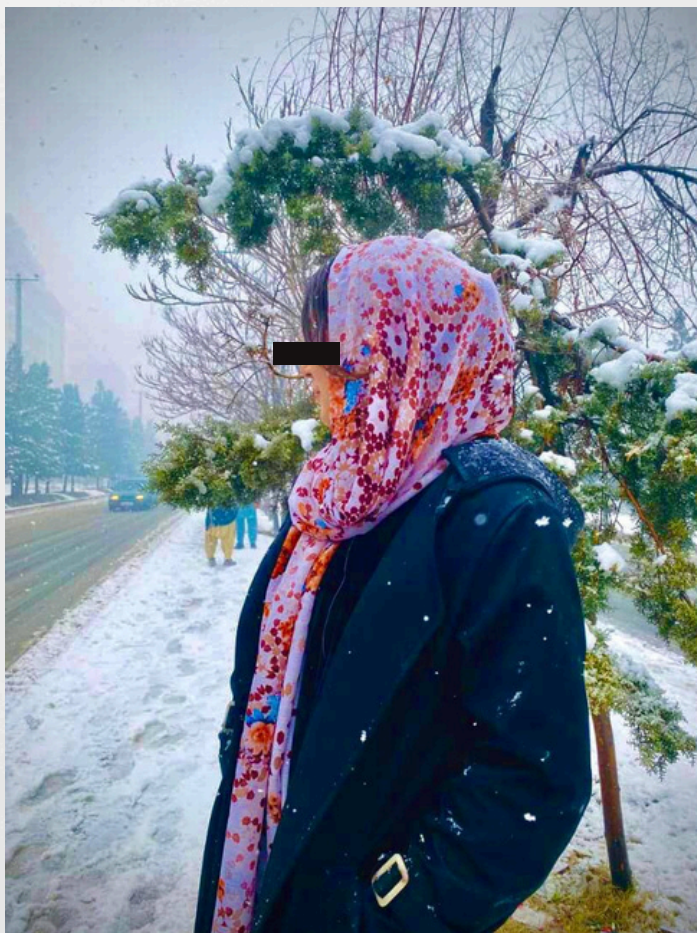
On this Women's Day, let the world hear our voices, our courage, our dreams, and our right to rise."



International Women's Day

Alina

"As an Afghan woman, I want the world to hear that we are resilient, strong, and deserving of education, freedom, and equality. Do not forget us. Do not forget to support us. Stand with us in our fight for our rights and dignity."



International Women's Day

Heela Amanzai

"As an Afghan girl, my message to the world on this International Women's Day is simple: do not forget us. We are strong, resilient, and full of hope, but we need your support. Every woman deserves education, freedom, and the right to shape her own future. Stand with us, raise your voice, and help us build a better tomorrow."



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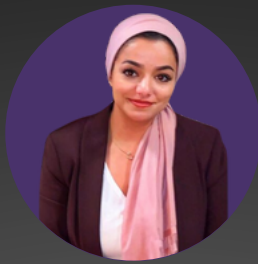
Editorial Note:

For safety reasons, we have changed the names of some women featured in this magazine and have covered certain faces.

This is to protect their identity and ensure their security while sharing their stories. We appreciate your understanding and support.



"We do not need your apologies. We need action." — Adila Akhlaqi



"For me, what lies within is unyielding hope—a light guiding us toward a better tomorrow." — Wazhma Sayel



"Your strength defies silence; together, our voices will ignite change." — Farishta Samim



"I will rise again, not just for me, but for my children." — Shoughla Hameed



"I once dreamed of helping my family. Now, I dream of helping an entire community." — Mahnaz Haidary



Thousands of Women Denied Pension Rights Under Taliban Rule, Families Suffer Severe Hardship

WOMEN

KNOW THEIR STORIES

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THE AFGHAN TIMES
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