

Faces of Resilience:

Portraits of Afghan Women
Human Rights Defenders



Introduction

Amid decades of conflict, foreign invasion and impoverishment, Afghan women and girls have found ways to nurture gender justice and resist oppression. The Afghan women human rights defenders who appear in this book have been active in local civil society organizations, international organizations and government platforms. They have taken their messages of gender equality to radio and television, as well as to the Afghan streets, their communities and their families. Collectively, their stories span from before the first Taliban regime in the 1990s, through the 20-year US invasion of Afghanistan, to the second Taliban takeover in August 2021 and its aftermath.

Many Afghan women, including those featured in this book, utilized pockets of civic space following the Taliban's removal from power in 2001 to advance gender equality in Afghanistan. Despite claims that the US invasion was meant to protect women's rights, the US allied itself with warlords with abysmal human rights records, poured almost 1,000 times more money into military expenditures than into women's rights funding, and allowed women to be excluded from peace processes. Women have nonetheless spurred important advances in access to justice, education, employment, and political participation for women and girls.

Like countless Afghan women human rights defenders, many women pictured in this book were forced to flee Afghanistan after the Taliban seized power again in 2021. They left with few resources, many making harrowing trips with children and other relatives. While many are now stuck in limbo, unable to work and uncertain of their future, the threats to their lives and wellbeing left them little choice but to escape Afghanistan.

The Taliban remains committed to its old oppressive policies. Its members have attacked human rights

defenders and journalists, denied women and girls access to education and other rights, imposed dress codes and male guardians, and eliminated services and protections for gender violence victims. It has enforced its policies through murder, enforced disappearance, torture including sexual violence, and other inhumane acts on the basis of gender, sexual orientation and gender identity or expression.

This book is being released after the 22nd anniversary of the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 regarding women, peace and security, which commits governments to ensure women's meaningful participation in all efforts to maintain and promote peace and security. The women featured in this book are just a small number of the countless Afghan women who are dedicated to uplifting women and girls in Afghanistan, struggling against gender violence, establishing peace, and securing civil, political, economic and social rights. They continue in these movements because they know that efforts to address Afghanistan's ongoing humanitarian crisis and to ensure human rights will only succeed with their participation.

Afghan women have called on governments, civil society organizations, international agencies and Afghan society, not only to stand with them in defense of women and girls' human rights, but to ensure their rightful place at the table in decisions and mechanisms addressing Afghanistan. Despite enormous challenges, they are determined to assert their rights to meaningful political participation. Given the massive impact of foreign militarism on Afghanistan, it is only just for governments and international agencies to listen to Afghan women now and to allow them to guide the policies that impact their lives. ■



Rabia

Rabia is an Afghan women's human rights defender, media personality, and gender specialist committed to education and safety for women and girls. She grew up in a village in Ghor province, where schooling was rare and primary school was held outside in a field. Some in her community were strictly opposed to women's education and shamed girls for attending school. While in primary school, Rabia remembers seeing a campaign poster for a woman presidential candidate, Masouda Jalal. Witnessing a woman run for president inspired her to continue to study.

During twelfth grade, Rabia began working with Voice of Women in Ghor province. Voice of Women ran a shelter for women and girl survivors of violence or sexual assault. While there, she saw that in many instances women's and girls' families turned on them when they suffered domestic abuse.

"I witnessed the case of a woman who was twenty and married to a sixty-year-old man ... because the man paid her parents. It was a hard life for her. At age thirty, she learned of Voice of Women and explained that her husband was aggressive, cruel, and abusive. The girl's family criticized her for filing a complaint," Rabia says. "If you complain, you take a big risk, maybe even risking your life. Her case went to court, and they decided on behalf of the woman that her husband must grant a divorce. But when she got divorced, she had to live in the shelter for a long time because her family would not allow her in their home." Witnessing this type of violence and

discrimination against women fueled Rabia's desire to study law in order to work for women's rights.

After secondary school, she had the opportunity to move to Kabul for higher education. This experience was challenging; her extended family disapproved of education for girls beyond high school. People from her hometown criticized her family and spread disparaging rumors about her. Her brother convinced her mother to allow her to continue to learn and bring skills back into their home.

Rabia's determination and personal struggle had important impacts in her community. Her family would come to feel proud that their daughter was sought out to provide guidance to other women and girls who went to Kabul from Ghor province to study. They were also impressed with her continuous efforts for women's rights. Rabia is proud that her achievements encouraged other families in Ghor Province to support their daughters' education.

In Kabul, Rabia was an outspoken human rights advocate. Once, the Taliban killed two university students who were traveling from Kabul to Ghor province. After the murders, activists planned a protest, and Rabia was the only woman participant. She chose to break patriarchal social taboos because "women should come out and protest for our rights, we need to go out and raise our voices and fight for our rights." Rabia appeared on many different television programs to draw local and international authorities' attention to the women's struggles in

Ghor province. Rabia's work also caught the attention of the Taliban, who began to threaten her for her activities on behalf of Afghan women.

In August 2021, Rabia was working in the gender section of the Afghan government at the Supreme Council of Reconciliation, an office set up for peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government in Doha. Rabia was halfway through her work day when she heard news of the Taliban's seizure of Kabul. She returned to her house on foot in heels. Rabia remembers the fear that consumed her as she wondered if the Taliban would kill her on her way home because of her hairstyle and clothes that

Arriving in Pakistan did not end their challenges. Refugees must renew their visas every sixty days by leaving and returning to Pakistan. With no other countries willing to accept them, often Afghan refugees' only option is to return to Afghanistan. When Rabia and her spouse crossed the border, the Taliban border guards were aggressive and brutal. They denied refugees the opportunity to use the restroom and hit people with pipes and sticks. Often, refugees have to pay bribes to Afghan and Pakistani officers to process their visas. This situation makes it incredibly difficult for Afghan refugees in Pakistan to rebuild their lives.

“When I went to different government administrative offices, there were only men in every sector, there were no women. When there was a challenge concerning the rights of women, it was always considered by men, who would just ignore it. They were not interested in the rights of women. That’s when I decided; I will start studying law.”

Rabia, June 21, 2022

day. She said, “everyone was running this way and that way, looking for somewhere to hide, it was like a doomsday.” She felt lost and numb.

She and her husband were married soon after the Taliban takeover. Because all venues in the country were closed, they celebrated their wedding at home. They assumed no one could hear the quiet music they played, but Taliban members stopped by the wedding and threatened to kill them if they played music again. Because of Rabia's history of dedicated activism, she and her family ultimately had to go into hiding, spending several months on the run before being able to escape to Pakistan.

As someone passionate about education, Rabia is especially disturbed by the Taliban's ban on secondary schooling for girls. She hopes the international community continues to withhold recognition of the Taliban as Afghanistan's official government. She is critical of international policies that have permitted Taliban members to travel abroad, while they prohibit women in Afghanistan from driving. She feels the international community is failing Afghans. “Since they decided to deliver our country to the Taliban then they should also bring strategies to deal with them and pressure them.” ■

Habiba

Habiba is a women's human rights defender from Kunduz Province in Afghanistan. She has had to flee the country twice during her lifetime, most recently to Pakistan after the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan in 2021.

To escape Taliban rule in the 1990s, Habiba's family fled to Iran as refugees. They lived in a refugee camp with conditions ripe for parasitic and other diseases. Habiba and her siblings had access to very basic healthcare and to education up to grade twelve. She proudly remembers that despite facing poverty and lack of encouragement at school, she obtained excellent grades.

These experiences instilled in her the desire to advocate for women's and girls' right to education in Afghanistan. “There is a desperate flow in the heart of every Afghan girl to achieve growth and excellence,” she says. While in Iran, she and her family followed news of the Taliban's oppression of women in Afghanistan. When her family returned home in 2004, after the Taliban lost power, Habiba was even more determined to fight for women's and girls' rights.

In Iran, Habiba had learned the art and craft of weaving rugs. At 19 years old, the Afghan Ministry of Public Affairs asked her to lead women in a rug-making workshop to stimulate their economic development. Habiba felt hesitant about her capacity to lead the women, many of whom were twice her age, yet she excelled as a trainer.

An experience at the training facility further impressed upon her the importance of advocacy for women's and girls' rights. “An older male guard assaulted the seven-year-old daughter of a woman in our training. The woman whose daughter was attacked had to continue working there after this because of a difficult economic situation,” she said. “The man deserved to be terminated. After that, I understood that if this man could attack this small girl, there are a lot of women and girls suffering from sexual assault who need justice.”

“When I saw how women were suffering under the Taliban, I thought I should go back to Afghanistan and advocate for women’s rights.”

Habiba, June 2022

In 2010, Habiba joined the Empowerment Center for Women, where she worked as a human rights defender. She launched a training series on women's human rights in Islam and on how women can promote and defend their rights. Habiba's leadership skills increased as she gained knowledge working among many different women's human rights advocacy groups. As part of this formative

experience, she visited women and girls in rural villages and fostered their motivation to learn and stand up for their rights. She is proud that as a result of her team's activities, many girls attended grade school and universities, and took a stand against domestic and other forms of gender violence.

The following year, Habiba became a community organizer with the Afghan Civil Society Forum Organization, where she built networks and mechanisms for women and girls to report violence against them to authorities. Despite corruption among the police, the project managed to garner help for a number of women survivors of violence.

Starting in 2015, Habiba served as a province coordinator for Kunduz province with Equality for Peace and Democracy. She monitored peace and security in Kunduz with a network of women activists, students, teachers and other professionals. The network documented cases of women facing violence or discrimination and developed legal and political advocacy campaigns on their behalf. Habiba worked to transfer rights trainings and advocacy skills to local women from smaller villages. This project eventually became its own organization, called the Kunduz First District Women's Social Association.

Habiba also worked with the Women and Peace Studies Organization in Afghanistan as a focal point in Kunduz, elevating the concerns of women in Kunduz to the Doha peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. She found the effort frustrating because "women representatives were invited to participate but not given any power there."

Because of her activism for women's human rights, Habiba received many threats. One night, armed men stormed her house while she and her children were not there and beat her husband. They told her husband that they were looking for Habiba, and they didn't take money or possessions. After this,

Habiba had to move frequently within the region and change dress in order to hide her identity. On a couple occasions, she was chased by cars with dark windows on her way to work.

Habiba was living in Kunduz when the province fell to the Taliban in 2021. She hid in a basement for days, surrounded by the sounds of rockets and bullets outside. Eventually, she and her husband were able to flee to Kabul and later Pakistan. As they made their way through multiple checkpoints along the journey, Habiba feared that someone would recognize her as a women's human rights defender. She has lost friends and family to the Taliban.

Habiba continues today to advocate for Afghan women and girls' rights. "With the Taliban in control, everyone is suffering, but especially women. We don't have the right to live or work. There are no rights for me. This is very painful for us. I feel lost... Still, as a local leader for women in Afghanistan, it is my duty to work as a human rights defender, I must continue to work and serve them." Habiba works with the Women and Peace Studies Organization documenting human rights violations reported from her connections in Afghanistan. "There are thousands still waiting in Afghanistan and in Pakistan to be evacuated, and sometimes I feel that I am suffering from depression. Everyone is suffering."

As a refugee once again, Habiba continues to worry about her and her family's safety. She worries about her own daughter growing up in this context and hopes that the international community of women will support Afghan women and others who had to flee. She calls on the international community to use non-military means to pressure the Taliban to recognize and respect women's rights. ■





Jamila

Jamila is an Afghan educator and women's human rights defender. She promotes women's and girls' literacy and works to disseminate interpretations of Islam that support women's and girls' rights.

She grew up in a privileged, patriarchal family. Her father considered it shameful to educate girls. Jamila, who walks with the aid of two crutches, feels her disability allowed her to access education. Her father agreed to enroll her after a physician recommended she attend school, given that she couldn't engage in most activities with other kids. Jamila was a hardworking student and excelled in school, but this didn't change patriarchal dynamics in her family. Her cognitive dissonance grew as she experienced the encouraging environment of her school while at home her parents devoted more attention to their sons. "In my family, the mindset was that women are weak, girls are weak, they are subordinate to boys," she says. "Feminism was boiling inside my body from the beginning."

In 1976, her family moved to Pakistan where she was able to pursue her secondary education. Despite her father and brothers' opposition, Jamila also managed to attend higher education with the support of her sisters-in-law. "I learned how, with the support of women, we can do much more." Jamila ultimately graduated from Peshawar University with a master's

degree in International Relations. Her close study of Afghanistan's political situation fueled her desire to do something for her home country. During her last year of study, the Taliban took over Afghanistan for the first time.

"Already feminism was ripe in my body. Then I was ready to start fighting for women's rights. My own life was an example for myself—with a disability and with a very conservative family, education empowered me to stand for my rights, and I wanted to do the same for other girls and women. Although my father and brother were totally against me, I started working with a group of sisters."

"Feminism was boiling inside my body from the beginning."

Jamila, May 2nd, 2022

Jamila founded the Noor Educational Center, which worked in refugee camps providing emergency support, literacy, and other educational activities guided by women in the camps. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Jamila returned to her home country. She remembers being startled by the state of Kabul when she returned. "All

the windows were broken. All the houses were damaged because of the civil war.” She started literacy programs, including home-based “catch-up programs,” enabling young women and girls who had missed four years of education under the Taliban rule to catch up in two years. With support from Relief International, Noor Educational Center’s staff expanded to 50,000 teachers, all of whom were women.

In 2008, Jamila attended a conference in Malaysia held by Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE). The conference convened women Islamic scholars focused on demonstrating the fallacy of misogynist interpretations of Islam. This experience inspired Jamila to start a feminist sharia interpretation project in Afghanistan. Initially focusing on twenty Imams from large mosques, Jamila arranged meetings to change religious interpretations. Her husband, also an Islamic scholar, used connections to help her bring the initial group together. At first, the Imams were resistant to being taught by a woman, but Jamila reached them by asking their advice on problems women and girls faced. She helped them understand how those problems resulted from systemic discrimination and impacted their own female relatives. Jamila focused on changing Imams’ attitudes and promoting women’s and girls’ rights to education, to own property, to marry whom they wish, to receive equal inheritance, and to socio-political participation.

Her patient work paid off. She produced a manual on women’s rights under Islam and won support for it from the Imams, who agreed to teach it within their mosques. She organized youth to help monitor the Friday worship services to determine if the Imams were adhering to the manual. The initial twenty Imams she trained helped to train others, leading to an estimated 6,000 Imams in 22 provinces being trained within the program, a significant number considering the risks moderate

Imams faced. Jamila knew of twelve who were killed in attacks by extremists.

Jamila’s status as a women’s human rights defender meant that she and her family had to flee when the Taliban took over Kabul in 2021. Jamila faced the added difficulty of trying to navigate the crowds that swarmed the airport with a physical disability. Her first attempts failed. On August 25th, she and her family managed to make it onto a flight out of the country the day before the ISIS-K bombing at the airport that killed 183 people on August 26, 2021. They wound up in Norway, where she was safe but felt disconnected from her community.

Jamila’s organizations have continued operating and holding press conferences in Afghanistan to push the Taliban to resume education for women and girls. She says that the Taliban uses people’s ignorance and poverty for political benefit. However, “we’ve implemented seeds everywhere in the country. Twenty years back, there were 100 Jamila-type women, and now there are 20,000. So the Taliban understand it’s not easy to keep us down.”

Jamila remains actively engaged in the struggle for Afghan women’s rights, organizing and lobbying together with women in Afghanistan and the diaspora. She is deeply concerned about the loss of educational access for many women and girls, the thousands of female teachers who became jobless, and the halt to justice and services for domestic violence, which has caused many survivors to be sent back to their abusers. She insists that solutions must come from within Afghanistan rather than be imposed from outside. She urges the international community to avoid investing money in fighting, which she says will cause civil war, and to reconsider sanctions that are only benefiting the Taliban while leaving the Afghan people to suffer. ■

Nafisa

Nafisa is an Afghan researcher, database officer, civil society activist, women’s rights activist, and leader in the Women & Peace Studies Organization. She has dedicated herself to equipping Afghan women with the resources and networks they need to succeed professionally. Nafisa was born in Kabul and raised within a progressive, intellectual family. After graduating from high school, Nafisa continued her studies at Kabul Education University, where she specialized in English literature.

interviewed many women and girls. In Paktia, a rural, conservative province, Nafisa came to more deeply understand the challenges girls in rural areas face within their families and communities. In Paktia, the research unit was not allowed to meet with girls face-to-face and instead met with a curtain between them. Nafisa and her colleagues were fearful because many families had weapons visible around them. They were able to build rapport with the girls they interviewed in other provinces,

“There is starvation and disaster in Afghanistan because women, who were journalists, human rights activists, and professionals, are deprived of all activities. Women must sit at home, they cannot even participate in social activities.”

Nafisa, June 2022

Nafisa has worked as a researcher for different organizations and companies. In her position at the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Nafisa investigated the challenges girls and young women faced trying to get an education in Afghanistan. For this work, she traveled to five provinces: Herat, Kabul, Paktia, Jalalabad, and Parwan and

however, and many of the girls thanked Nafisa and her colleagues for coming and gave them gifts to show their appreciation.

Nafisa also worked with the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in Afghanistan as a computer operator; she was responsible for providing administrative support and managing projects with various clients and

organizations. She excelled at administrative work but felt compelled towards more on-the-ground work for women's rights. Nafisa began to volunteer at the Women's Voice Organization in their division on Freedom of Press and Women's Rights/Violence Against Women. She also worked with another section of the organization, called the Peace Activist Network, connecting Afghan women with attorneys to advocate for them in peace talks and elevate their concerns to the international community. With the Peace Activist Network, Nafisa also placed women in teaching positions at various schools.

Nafisa was working with a website developer called Netlinks at the time of the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021, which was "one of the most difficult and challenging days of my life." Netlink's contract with the Afghan Ministry of Defense meant that Nafisa and her colleagues were directly exposed to violence. The Netlinks office was the target of an attempted bombing. No attackers were able to enter the office, but people outside were killed and injured. Nafisa eventually had to flee with her family to Pakistan, facing uncertainty about her future.

The Taliban's oppression of women means that "there is starvation and disaster happening in Afghanistan because the women who were journalists, human rights activists, and professionals, are deprived of all activities." Nafisa urges the international human rights community to advocate for women whose loss of work opportunities has led families into starvation. She urges the international community to make peace in Afghanistan a priority and to pay serious attention to the values and freedoms of women in intra-Afghan dialogues. She asserts that women must be present in peace-making discussions. ■





Najiba

Najiba is a mother of five children and a human rights defender who grew up in Kabul and Pakistan. In 2021, she fled Afghanistan and is currently living in Sweden where she continues to fight for justice in Afghanistan.

Najiba was motivated to be a human rights defender by the experience of being female in Afghanistan. “Every woman in Afghanistan is a defender because the hardship that we face starts from the moment of childhood,” she says. “You are never part of the family because there are expectations that daughters will leave the family ... This is how parents gauge their feelings.” During her childhood she saw that parents invested more in sons, believing they would continue their bloodline and care for them when they were older. Najiba feels that the leadership role she played in her family when they were refugees in Pakistan helped to change their perception of girls.

In 1992, her family had to leave Afghanistan as rival guerrilla fighters battled for power. “I was the one who really took care of the family, and I changed that culture. So I just wanted to show that no, it is not only the boys and men who can do it. That we also can do this.” Najiba feels lucky she was able to go to school, despite having to struggle to pay for it. “I was working at the same time I was studying. When I was in grade 4, I started working because I had to start to pay for my school’s institution fee.”

In 2001, her family returned to Afghanistan. Upon her return, Najiba obtained a scholarship to study in Kyrgyzstan. In 2009, she completed an MBA after having received a BA in international and

comparative politics with a minor in print journalism. In Kyrgyzstan, Najiba met people her age engaged in social change advocacy in their communities. Their activism inspired her to apply new strategies for enacting change back in Afghanistan.

In 2010, Najiba moved to her husband’s home province of Takhar in Afghanistan. Despite the region’s conservatism, she found an active civil society there. Najiba joined a community of human rights advocates focused on Afghanistan’s northeast region. She helped establish a network organization called Afghan Youth for Peace, which developed youth leaders in the women’s rights and human rights movement in Afghanistan. She developed a six-month course where participants enhanced their self-awareness, self-esteem, and critical thinking about human rights issues like gender equality. She developed a peer-teaching structure for the course, and the young participants began to coach and mentor others.

Najiba recognized the link between economic dependence and gender oppression. “One of the reasons that women in Afghanistan are always oppressed, why they’re always experiencing violence, it is because they are dependent on their families, on their male member of the family. They don’t have any economic independence to say ‘no’ to violence that they face.” She began to work with the Aga Khan Foundation to promote rural women’s economic empowerment. Najiba performed a market survey of Balochi needlework and found demand for it in the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and Iran. She

built a needlework skills program and organized textile workers into a women's business association. Through this program, women from both rural and urban areas without formal education learned business skills and were able to work from their homes in order to make and save money.

When the Taliban began taking over parts of Afghanistan in 2021, Najiba was working with the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, leading two large offices and overseeing almost 1,500 staff, including directly supervising 11 men. Najiba was a well-known figure in the community. She spoke frequently on the radio and TV. As a result of her prominence and her support for women's and girls' rights, she received threats from the Taliban and had to move around for

In Sweden, Najiba continues her human rights work with the Urgent Action Fund: "I am in contact with Afghanistan every day." She hears from Afghan women about what it is like to live under the current Taliban regime, including the increasing daily restrictions and ongoing human rights violations. For her, human rights work is not a decision or choice but rather a commitment and a moral responsibility, especially as someone who was able to flee. "People inside Afghanistan... face fear and security issues. But we outside the country, when we are protected, and we are safe, we have to raise our voice. We cannot just sit doing nothing."

When she isn't fighting for human rights or caring for her family, Najiba likes to run. In Afghanistan,

"This feminism grew up in childhood, inside of me. (...) This is not my history; this is the history of millions of women in Afghanistan."

Najiba. May 9, 2022

her safety. She ultimately had to flee to Pakistan with just the clothes she had on and eventually was able to move to Sweden.

Najiba remains committed to supporting those who remain in Afghanistan. "Inside Afghanistan, people are suffering. Women are again prohibited to go to school. Women are not working, they are unemployed and the situation is terrible. There are no economic opportunities, and people are suffering. Families are forced to sell their children because they need to feed the rest of the families. They are selling their kidneys, and it is just a disaster. But still, we have so many of those young generations still inside Afghanistan and still, they are working and supporting each other, and they are reporting and protecting in a different way."

as a woman, she was not allowed to run outside, even prior to the Taliban takeover. Whether on a treadmill or on the streets of a small town in Sweden, she runs to fly. Running provides her with the feeling of liberty that she says "most Afghan women consider an illusion."

Najiba urges the international community to join her in calling attention to the human rights crisis in Afghanistan. "I as an individual and one organization as a single organization cannot change anything. We have to stay together. And then we can put pressure on governments and ... advocate for the rights of people in Afghanistan." ■

Mahbouba

Mahbouba is the Executive Director of the Afghan Women Skills Development Center and the Board President of the Afghan Women Network. She operates safehouses for internally displaced families and domestic violence survivors in Kabul. The safehouse she currently runs is one of the only ones still operating following the Taliban's 2021 takeover. She has chosen to stay in her country despite grave risks. "There is such beauty in my people, the Afghans. Such resilience from men and women—especially the women. They are so hardworking," she says.

Mahbouba views the Taliban's seizure of power as devastating for human rights, while also revealing of weakness and corruption in the Afghan political system in the years prior. "On August 15, 2021, I saw democracy die," she says. "If it is built on nothing, it can turn into nothing, just like that."

Mahbouba grew up in Kabul. Mahbouba's father was a doctor. She credits her mother with planting the spirit of a human rights defender within her. Her mother supported neighbors and extended family with emotional and financial issues, including helping domestic violence victims. Mahbouba was a caregiver in her youth. She would bring her father's medical bag to tend to children's wounds if there was an accident in the neighborhood. "I was a dreamer, and I still am. I believe in humanity," she says.

Mahbouba fled Afghanistan during the Russian occupation in 1978. She and her husband moved to the United States. When she returned to Afghanistan

in 2003, she began to volunteer teaching English and International Relations courses. Mahbouba's teaching extended beyond traditional book work. She taught students how to interact in mixed-gender workplaces, she instructed her students that women's clothing and behaviors were never an invitation for harassment, and she imbued her students with values of gender equality.

One winter day, Mahbouba encountered a man dragging himself across snowy ground. She asked how she could help him, and he said that he needed a wheelchair. Mahbouba offered to help him procure one. This experience prompted her to think more deeply about the complex, harmful impacts decades of war has had on the physical and mental health of people in Afghanistan. She began coordinating with business professionals in Afghanistan to provide wheelchairs for Afghans who had lost limbs in the war.

Mahbouba also worked with an organization called Equal Access. They traveled to different provinces, spoke to women about the challenges in their lives, and distributed information on health and women's rights, along with solar panels and radios. This work began in Bamyan province and continued in Badakhshan, Kabul, Parwan, Kapisa, Panshir, and Herat, among other places. Out of this project grew a radio show that Mahbouba hosted, called "Our Beloved Afghanistan by Mahbouba." Mahbouba means 'beloved,' and the title of her radio show is

a play on her name that also captures her love of Afghanistan. The radio show used popular education methods to advance people's understanding of the importance of women's and girls' rights and health.

Mahbouba has long been concerned about domestic violence. She became involved with the Afghan Women's Network, AWN, which she describes as one of the first platforms uniting Afghan women to raise their human rights concerns before the male-dominated government. One of their primary concerns was to support women survivors of violence in Afghanistan and build systems to protect abuse victims. As a leader within the organization, Mahbouba had a prominent role in ensuring its continued existence, through principled leadership emphasizing women's participation in transparent decisions, elections, and activities.

At the end of 2019, she began working with the Afghan Women Skills Development Center (AWSDC) to run safehouses or shelters in Kabul. Since 2021, many domestic violence shelters have been shut down by the Taliban. Mahbouba managed to advocate for the AWSDC shelters to stay open, by explaining that shelters are necessary in any society as safe places for women and survivors.

Mahbouba was also involved with supporting the first women members of the parliament starting in 2005. Mahbouba connected a network of women parliamentarians with leadership training, including lessons on campaigning, fundraising, working with constituencies, and working with other parliamentarians. Initially, she says, men chose the women who joined the Afghan parliament, bolstering their individual political power by placing women who would support them. By working with women politicians, Mahbouba hoped to encourage them to work independently and develop their own agendas.

Describing the 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, Mahbouba says, "As soon as democracy in

Afghanistan went out the window, my twenty years of effort went out the window as well." Despite the danger Mahbouba faces in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan as a prominent women's human rights defender, she chose to remain in the country following the takeover. "Afghanistan is really my weak spot, the history is tied to every drop of my blood and every bone in my body. I have an honest love and honest affection for the children, women, and men of Afghanistan. I think it is the most amazing patchwork of a beautiful quilt that was sewn together by so many people, especially the women... There will be women in this country who will need me. We can cry and laugh and listen to one another."

Mahbouba is particularly concerned about the increasing unreported domestic violence occurring in Afghanistan. While the systems and services were not perfect, before the Taliban's takeover, women had avenues for fleeing violence, and for seeking shelter and legal assistance. Now, women face Taliban's restrictions on their movements and have almost nowhere to turn, condemning many to remain at home with abusers.

Mahbouba advocates for relevant international mechanisms to center Afghan women's participation and human rights. She encourages the international community to take responsibility for human rights violations in Afghanistan. As she told a Vice News television reporter, "the international community left Afghan women the same way they left Afghanistan. Like a hot potato. They burnt their hands, they dropped it. We've been abandoned. They couldn't care less about Afghan women, they couldn't care less about Afghanistan. But I am counting on humanity. I am counting on women." ■





Tahseen

Tahseen is a journalist, poet, and storyteller who prioritizes advocacy for women's human rights and community empowerment in all her activities. She has brought women and children's health to the forefront of radio programming in Afghanistan, trained young journalists, and written books and stories about the lived experiences of women and youth in Afghanistan.

In 2003, at the start of her career in media, Tahseen worked with a radio program called Life and Health. Radio is an accessible form of communication, especially for people in rural communities. Tahseen used radio as a tool for gathering and disseminating resources for women's health. She met with women in many different villages and spoke with them about

“When I became a journalist, I achieved leadership early in my career, but it was not easy for me. I tried very hard to reach that position. I proved that I could work like a man; anything a man could do, I could also do.”

Tahseen, June 24 2022

Tahseen grew up in Kabul in an open-minded family with a house full of books. As a child, she knew she wanted to work for human rights and women's rights. While in university, she began to write poems and stories based on the experiences of her peers with issues of gender and political oppression. After school, Tahseen began working as a journalist. She worked with BBC until 2016.

health concerns. She would take these concerns back to medical professionals, who would share their solutions and suggestions on the radio. She says this program still exists and remains one of the most effective ways to disseminate health information to rural women.

Tahseen also wrote and narrated children's stories on BBC radio. Like her stories from university, the radio stories were about educating and advocating

for human rights, specifically the rights of children. Her 2005 story “The Rug That Wasn’t Finished” is about the custom of child labor in the Afghan textile industry. Children do very difficult labor, in rooms that are poorly lit, and face health problems such as tuberculosis as a result of their conditions. Tahseen’s story “A Tent in the Rain” tells of the support neighbors offered a refugee child living in a tent. A child in Helmand province told Tahseen that they heard the story and felt motivated to help their displaced neighbor by getting their parents to give them an extra tent.

In addition to her work as a journalist, Tahseen provided training in TV and radio through a BBC program in Afghanistan. She trained many young journalists, including Raouf Ajmal, who became a successful journalist. Tahseen also writes poetry and has published several books. Recently, she published a book called After Baarish, which weaves the story of her personal life and personal pain into the story of the pain of all women in Afghanistan.

When the Taliban took over in August 2021, Tahseen worked as a station manager for Killid Radio. Despite restrictions on the media following the takeover, Tahseen continued to work at the station for seven months. Across Afghanistan, salaries of professionals decreased when the Taliban came into power. Tahseen’s income fell to 34,000 Afs, less than 300 USD a month.

Tahseen and her colleagues continued to build solidarity and celebrate each other for their bravery in continuing to work under the Taliban regime. She was a member of an organization supporting women journalists working in challenging situations. On March 17, 2022, Journalist Day in Kabul, Tahseen gave a speech to honor the journalist Bahram Aman, a presenter at TOLONews. That night, the Taliban arrested

Aman and sent threats to the whole journalist’s federation, including Tahsseen personally. Tahseen felt that she and her family were at risk. On March 21, 2022, Tahseen made the decision to leave her home and flee to Pakistan with her children, mother, and sister.

Tahseen and her family could not afford to fly to Pakistan. They fled by land and escaped to Islamabad. The cost of living in Islamabad is very high for refugees without income. Tahseen and her family of seven live in an apartment with three rooms. The apartment has no running water or reliable electricity.

Tahseen is in contact with her friends and colleagues in Afghanistan. As of June 2022, some women still worked at her radio station but were obligated to wear the hijab, work in a segregated office, and censor their reporting to reflect the views of the Taliban. In addition, most Afghan women journalists have experienced pay cuts that affect their ability to provide for their children. As a journalist, Tahseen is determined to not remain silent; she wants people to know what life is like for her as a refugee and for her colleagues and friends back in Afghanistan.

Tahseen recognizes that the lack of respect for women’s and children’s rights in Afghanistan predates the Taliban’s most recent takeover. She urges the international community to develop new mechanisms for monitoring human rights violations in Afghanistan, particularly violations of women and girls’ rights.

Maybe, after two thousand years

When butterflies fly from flowers of my eyelashes' thorn

And dreams give its sweet smile as a gift to my eyes' calm bed

My body becomes calm

And my tired spirit

Flying like Kiomar's smile, is the calmative of internal pains

Takes me with itself

I feel

I experience being alive on nice hairs of Rodaba

And Sawgand and Samim give me the strength when I can't smile to the mountain

My mind worn out

And gives the swift smell of old and outdated memoirs

Acacia close to the wall

Fills his nose

When an unkempt child

Rolls up his sleeve and wants to carry my memoir

Sometimes I think

This life is crazy

It is used to stoning and calling down

Who knows?

Maybe after two thousand years

He will come

The one whom my heart waits for

Gives the smell of hot popcorn

That the wild child of time

Every moment wants to chew it

Sometimes I think

If I did not exist

Who would be experienced by Allah?

And who would be examined historically

The stigma which grows from its heart

What is the color of it and it heals which broken link

The feeling which is flowing from his/its eyes

Quenches the thirst of which thirsty soul, of which impatient lake

And the evening of gloomy thoughts

Covers which window and shows sad paintings

The unknown odor of his body

Which poet's big conjuring books?

It agitates

I wish you would

Recognize the elements which I am made of

And know

The reason that why the gold is not destroyed in the dust

Crazies of poet

Saying that I am from soft elements

Time saw and examined me with his whip

That how hard I am

Harder than granite

Harder than the heart of my country

That century that tolerates adversity

Without crying and yelling

No one knows

What is my space?

North, south, east and west

Has no room for the geography of my soul

The life hangs on my hair

And his heart is beating 1001 times and trembling that I should not throw it out ■

Zohra

Zohra is a women's human rights defender, community organizer, and small business owner from Afghanistan. Zohra is the founder of the organization Islamabad Petitioners and a member of the leadership of Afghan Immigrants Petitioners living in Islamabad. Her critical role in the 2021 and 2022 protests against the Taliban takeover made Zohra and her family targets for persecution, forcing them to flee to Pakistan.

emergency funding for themselves or their children. In 2018, Zohra began working with the Ministry of Justice in the Department of Cohesion, where she gathered young Afghans for cultural and social activities. She also joined an activist group called the Youth Convergence Organization. With these groups, she continued to fight against state corruption and work for women's rights. She and her colleagues demonstrated against violence against women,

“I don't know when these problems will end, when my children will go back to school, or when we will live in a house and get some sleep. Our lives are destroyed now. My eldest daughter wanted to become a doctor.”

Zohra, June 25th, 2022

Zohra spent her first decade of childhood in Pakistan, where her parents fled to escape threats of earlier Taliban rule around 1995. Upon returning with her family to Afghanistan years later, Zohra discovered that many girls her age were illiterate; while she had gone to school in Pakistan, other girls had not been allowed to in Afghanistan. This injustice upset Zohra, and at fifteen years old, she established a training center in a room in her house where girls could take classes in subjects such as reading or math. Zohra went out of her way to make house visits to some girls who were not permitted to come to the training center to study.

This experience inspired Zohra to think about other skills girls and women could learn together, and she started a vocational training center for tailoring. The group would sell the dresses they made and use some of this money to support women who needed

including on behalf of Farkhunda, whose case made international news after the young woman was beaten to death by a mob. Despite facing repeated threats for her work, Zohra was committed to advocating for women's rights.

“I realized at that time that there is no voice for women and no government serving women in Afghanistan. In every street and every town ... you will see violence against women.” Zohra was disturbed at the way Afghan girls were devalued in many households. “I believe whether it's a man or a woman - they are all the same. I see equality, they all deserve respect, especially women, because women experience the most difficulties and tough times in Afghanistan. They suffer more than men.”

In 2021, Zohra lost her father and brother at the hands of the Taliban. The Taliban killed them four



months before their takeover of Kabul. Her mother was killed during the August 26, 2021 ISIS-K suicide attack on the Kabul Airport where crowds of Afghans who hoped to flee the country had gathered. That day, Zohra and her children had left the airport briefly to retrieve some belongings from their home. Upon returning, she found her mother dead from injuries from the explosion.

After the bombing, Zohra continued to protest the violence and injustices of the political regime.

Zohra participated in any protest she could find, joining once or twice a week, protesting alongside her children and other women; “We continued doing those protests, for freedom, for food, women’s rights, for education.” This positioned her as a target for the Taliban, who began to follow her.

On September 22, 2021, Zohra was summoned to a hotel in Kabul and told she would receive a visa. She and her daughter refused to enter the hotel, preferring to remain outside and record their interactions on a cell phone. After taking pictures of her documents and interrogating her, the officials informed her that she would not receive the visa. Two officers followed their taxi home. After, Zohra discovered through social media that the Taliban had killed other women who were similarly called in for investigation.

In the early weeks of January 2022, Zohra and her colleagues experienced escalating levels of threats and violence. On January 9, 2022, Zohra organized a protest at the Ministry of Women’s Affairs. At this protest, a Taliban officer hit her daughter, who was 14 at the time, with a gun for filming the protest. On January 11, the Taliban shot and killed her friend Zainab, who participated in the protests and belonged to the minority Hazara group. During these protests, the Taliban came to Zohra’s neighborhood and asked her neighbors for her location, but they kept her family’s house secure and warned Zohra and her husband. On January 19, Zohra participated

in a protest at Kabul University and was badly beaten up by the Taliban. She was unable to visit the hospital for her injuries because the Taliban were there. Two days after being assaulted, Zohra returned to the streets to protest.

The following weekend, another women’s human rights defender named Tamana was broadcasting on Facebook Live speaking out against the Taliban, when the Taliban knocked on her door. Zohra and other colleagues tried to reach Tamana, but her phone stopped working and she disappeared, along with three other women’s rights advocates.

Knowing they were in danger, Zohra and her family fled to one of their neighbors’ homes. The Taliban searched their home that night and destroyed many of the family’s possessions. They also took the sewing machine, mannequins, and destroyed the dress exhibition that women used to earn money.

From her neighbor’s house, Zohra, her husband, and her five children fled to Pakistan. They began living in an encampment of 1,500 unhoused Afghan refugees located near a major road in Islamabad. They live among other human rights defenders, journalists, reporters, engineers, professors, and teachers who fled Afghanistan. Camp residents live under tarps and in tents, their water is unfiltered and must be found off-site, and their food is scarce. Like countless other Afghan refugees, Zohra and her family have not received asylum in any other country and are afraid of being deported from Pakistan back to Afghanistan where they would face grave danger.

While in the camp in Pakistan, Zohra has continued her human rights defense work, including speaking with the media about what is happening in Afghanistan. Zohra urges women human rights defenders across the world to keep their attention on the situation of Afghan women and hopes that soon her children will soon have a home and access to education. ■



Two of Zohra’s daughters pause for a photograph in Pakistan.

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About the photographer: Maureen Drennan is a New York City-born and based photographer. Her work has been featured in major U.S. news outlets and included in exhibitions in major museums, including the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. She focuses on remote places and communities that confront vulnerabilities. She draws inspiration from her subjects and feels fortunate that people open up to her about their lives. Maureen works with photography as a lens for understanding people and teaches at LaGuardia Community College in New York City.

Please note, as some Afghan women human rights defenders wished to preserve anonymity, only first names are used throughout the book, for uniformity and security reasons.

