

Two years on: Messages and stories of young women under the Taliban rule.

2nd Edition

Introduction

On August 15th, 2023, Afghanistan marked the second anniversary of Taliban rule, which has drastically impacted the lives of Afghan women. They face severe restrictions on work, education, freedom of movement, and societal participation, including bans on NGO employment, park and gym visits, and strict dress codes when leaving their homes.

Currently millions of Afghan women endure oppressive conditions, with limited media coverage due to censorship, making it challenging to grasp the full extent of their situation. Therefore, the purpose of this message collection is to shed light on the human rights violations they face, providing insights into their daily lives.

In these circumstances, it's crucial to listen to the voices of Afghan girls and women enduring these hardships. APT is proud to release the second collection of the documented messages from young women in different parts of Afghanistan. This booklet compiles messages and stories from young women across the country, offering a glimpse into their experiences during the past two years under the Taliban regime. Our aim is to amplify their voices and draw attention to their dire circumstances.

Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT)

Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) is a youth-led nonprofit organization in Afghanistan that actively addresses human rights crises, with a specific focus on women's rights, while simultaneously promoting girls' access to education through creative and impactful initiatives.

APT focuses on several key areas, including Educational Opportunities for Girls and Young Women, Networking and Advocacy, Trauma Healing and Coping, and Writing and Public Speaking Skills. Through these initiatives, APT connects female university students in Afghanistan with mentors abroad, facilitates networking opportunities for youth both inside and outside of Afghanistan to encourage open dialogue, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas and experiences. APT is also preparing to train a team of 10 young women in the "Internal Family System (IFS)" trauma healing technique, enabling them to provide training to others and create healing spaces for family members. Additionally, APT provides a platform for young women to write and publish their stories under Taliban rule.

Over its 13 years of operation, APT has facilitated meaningful engagement for young men and women, fostering discussions and dialogues with their peers both within and outside the country. These conversations revolve around crucial topics, aimed at proposing solutions for a better Afghanistan and a better world. Through this, they have played a pivotal role in influencing policies on both national and global scales, thanks to the development of their leadership and critical thinking skills.

Since its inception in 2010, APT activities have impacted and inspired over 60,000 youth and children to build a vision for a just and inclusive society.

You may read more about APT at: www.aptyouth.org

Masseges

As a young girl in a traditional society, I have constantly faced discrimination, limitations, and threats at various stages of my life. Despite society's attempts to confine me to home, I have remained steadfast in my determination to pursue education and follow my dreams. In 2018, I succeeded in obtaining a place to study engineering at a state university. Despite encountering various challenges, I managed to maintain a GPA of over 90 until my third year. Unfortunately, in 2023, girls were no longer allowed to pursue higher education opportunities, and this has left my future suspended in uncertainty.

Despite these difficulties, my will remains unaffected by the current circumstances, and I am currently immersed in intensive online English language studies offered by the university. In doing so, I aim to acquire the necessary skills to succeed in the TOEFL exam and consequently secure scholarship opportunities abroad. Upon completing my studies, I aspire to become an influential leader and engineer. My vision includes creating a work environment that allows every young woman to earn sufficient income to support her education and aspirations.

To address the challenges posed by the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, it is essential for the international community, in collaboration with local governments, to establish quality education rights and job opportunities for Afghan women and girls.



- Sunbul: University Student

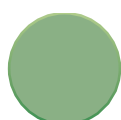
It was Sunday, 15 August 2021. When I woke up, I left my house and heard from a shopkeeper that the Taliban had taken over Kabul. All the residents of Kabul were very worried. There was sadness on every face, and everyone was in hurry to get home. Seeing people so upset was heart-wrenching. I went home and felt hopeless and sad. I cried a lot because I knew that all my hopes and dreams were shattered. We moved to our village in Dara-E-Pech Kunar Afghanistan with a sense of hopelessness and sadness.

Before the Taliban arrived in Kabul, I had so many things planned. We had just celebrated our traditional New Year and we hoped for a better life in the upcoming

year. The year that came was totally unexpected. I had applied for a Master's course in Project Management at two different universities, one private and the other public. I was able to start the first semester at the private university, but I wished to attend the public one. Unfortunately, I was ultimately able to attend neither, and couldn't follow my dreams. I was also working for a nongovernmental organization (NGO) as Project Team Leader in the elimination of violence against women in the eastern zone of Afghanistan – in the end, I lost my job and couldn't start any other job again.

The Taliban have intimidated journalists and restricted press freedoms, banned schools and universities. Their government has violently cracked down on demonstrations and protesters, and activists have been monitored and forcibly disappeared. The Taliban also re-established their Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice which, under their previous rule, enforced prohibitions on behaviour deemed un-Islamic. In December 2022, the group prohibited women from working at local and international NGOs.

The ongoing crisis has disheartened me a lot because I was not able to proceed with my education, and I couldn't find a job. I try to remember that nothing is permanent in life and all will be okay one day, and that day is very near. We will stand again, and we will be able to proceed with our education, and we will have jobs with full freedom. We will be able to make our future brighter and our country stronger.



- Anonymous

After completing high school in 2019 and passing the university entrance exam, I started studying engineering at Kabul Polytechnic University. I was also busy learning English at the university. During my time at university, I completed several useful courses for my profession, earning several certificates of appreciation from the university. I was also scheduled to undertake an internship at one of the Afghan ministries as part of my studies.

After the Taliban took over the country, all women's rights and activities in

Afghanistan were trampled upon and stopped. The Taliban prevented girls from going to schools and imposed strict rules on them. The situation for girls in the city and marketplaces worsened, and after a year of Taliban occupation, universities and courses were also closed to Afghan women. Currently, all girls, including me, are isolated in society and deprived of all our civil and human rights. The Taliban has harmed the lives of women and girls by stopping us from all educational and civil activities, leaving us in a state of despair.

Currently, my suggestion for the global community and powerful countries is that they must exert the necessary pressure on the Taliban to uphold the rights of Afghan women and girls and not recognize their illegitimate and discriminatory rule. They should also provide educational opportunities for young people, especially Afghan girls, in foreign countries and not let darkness prevail over light.



- Hela: APT Leadership Program Participant

I graduated from the Kabul University Faculty of Economic with a BBA (Finance and Human Resources). During my educational journey, I have acquired knowledge of managing employee performance, behaviour, and attitude through Rokyan Management Consultancy, and developed skills in effective communication, time management, leadership, team building, teaching methodology, entrepreneurship, and goal setting at Blossom Hill Foundation. More recently, I have been working for a Swiss child welfare organization based in Kabul, while studying English and undertaking an online dream builder program which is run by SDROA. I am hoping to pursue my Master's degree in the near future so I can help other people in my community in terms of education and capacity building.

The challenges we have faced during these past two years have been immense, and the current situation under Taliban rule has further increased the struggles. The most significant challenge has been not participating in public life, education, and employment, and I was prohibited from working alongside male colleagues. Access to education has been severely affected as well, which denies young girls

the opportunity to pursue an education and hampers their prospects. Women are now required to adhere to a strict dress code, limiting their freedom of expression and individuality. Efforts by international organizations to provide support to Afghan women during this challenging time (for instance, providing girls with online education and some capacity building programs) have been much appreciated.

My recommendation is to improve access to education, enhance vocational training programs, promote entrepreneurship, and expand digital connectivity – for example, by investing in internet infrastructure across the country, making it more accessible and affordable for all youth. This will enable them to access online educational resources and job opportunities, and connect with a global network of peers. We must never give up and not lose hope for bright future.



- Horia: APT Mentorship Program Participant

I am 22 years old. I graduated from school but I was not allowed to continue my education. Everyone wants to continue their education; everyone hopes to make their future bright, but we cannot. Why? Because every day there was a bomb explosion in academic places such as schools and universities.

We were not safe anywhere and were losing our young generation every day due to this situation. I lost my father who worked in the government as a driver of police cars. He was killed by the Taliban, the enemies of our country, on 13 July 2021 when he was on his way to work. Then we were afraid of living in Afghanistan and also afraid of losing another family member or being taken for forced marriage to a member of the Taliban.

Our life was in serious danger, so we immigrated to Pakistan. We also faced many problems when moving, and they were saying Hazara people are not allowed to come to Pakistan now. Living in Pakistan is so hard and challenging – we have different problems here such as a different culture and different language, and everything is expensive here. But we have to tolerate it here.

The world owes us our youth. I wish one day our country will get independence from the Taliban and all of the refugees go back to their countries again.



- Sahar: APT Leadership Program Participant

I graduated from school in 2018 and started university in 2019. Now I am a final year law and political science student at Kabul University.

Today, two years have passed since the ban on girls' education in Afghanistan, and if this situation continues, my hopes (and those of millions of Afghan girls like me) will be shattered. The closure of schools and universities in Afghanistan and the unfavourable economic conditions are painful and I have faced many challenges in my struggle for access to education. In the republic period, during my studies, I started a series of new activities and courses to develop my abilities and skills. Those programs and activities are closed now. I also had many short-term and long-term plans to continue my education. Unfortunately, with the closing of the universities, I fell behind schedule. This has caused me depression and despair, and the prohibition of education has led to underage and forced marriages in Afghanistan.

The most effective way to solve this challenge is to ask the current government to open schools and universities for Afghan girls, remove the restrictions on education and work imposed on women, implement women's rights, and provide a working environment for women.



- Yalda: Student at Kabul University

I am an Afghan girl and currently reside in Afghanistan. I graduated from Zarghona High School in 2017. When I was in high school, I was the class representative for three consecutive years. I provided support to my classmates who

were socially in need and offered guidance to the ones who had difficulty learning the lessons. My responsibility as class-head taught me how to work in a team with people who are culturally or ideologically different from me, and it also taught me the skills needed to be a good leader. I graduated from school with a score of 99.59% which was my best achievement.

In 2022, I graduated from Kabul University in the field of Law and Political Science. I participated in different on-campus projects enhancing awareness of Covid-19 among the students, and completed the six-month-long legal education course conducted by the Women for Justice Organization (WJO) with a very good grade. This program was designed to strengthen legal knowledge and legal skills. I also participated in the Afghanistan Centre for Commercial Dispute Resolution (ACDR) program for three months, attended the Digital Skills Elevator program held by the Student Initiative Development Program at the American University of Central Asia and completed the course 'Elevate English: Language and Literature'. I'm an active member of Generation of Thinkers, and an active member of the Kabul University Association and the Kabul University Debate Club.

Since August 2021 – which saw the withdrawal of international troops, the fall of the Afghan government, and the Taliban's takeover of the country the Taliban has rapidly gained control, leading to significant changes in the lives of Afghans. The fall of Afghanistan has led to both political disruption and security and human rights concerns. The Taliban's takeover resulted in the collapse of the Afghan government and institutions, leading to a period of political uncertainty and a loss of democratic governance.

The return of the Taliban also raises concerns about the protection of human rights, particularly for women, minorities, and individuals who worked with international forces or supported the previous government. There have been reports of an increase in human rights abuses, restrictions on freedom of expression, and limited access to education, and healthcare. It has also resulted in a refugee crisis and economic challenges.



- Anonymous

I was born in 2003 in Kabul, Afghanistan, into a scholarly family. I started my elementary studies in Kabul and finished high school in 2019. After passing the entrance exam, I began a two-year course at the Accounting Institute. However, the lessons were postponed, and in 2022 when the Taliban came to power, the Institute was closed. Finally, I decided to go to a private university and start an economics course at the BBA facility at Karwan University because the private universities were still open. I was completing my second semester when the Taliban banned private universities for us as well. I am currently working at home with many organizations: I am an English instructor at GO CC and a math instructor at Omid Online School for Women and Girls. I also work with ILSO, the Crisis Women's Network, the Women's Health and Welfare Institute, and the IR Committee.

The Taliban surprised the world when they captured Kabul on 15 August 2021, having faced little or no resistance from forces under the command of former President Ashraf Ghani. The extremist religious group whose political regime was successfully overthrown by the United States in 2001 had returned to power and caused many problems in the lives of the people and society. However, few expected Afghanistan to be captured by the Taliban so quickly. Since taking power, the Taliban have pressured the international community to recognize them as Afghanistan's legal rulers. Aside from the geopolitical impact of the Taliban's return to power, the lives of ordinary Afghans have changed dramatically since then and have been largely worse. With the United Nations warning of a humanitarian catastrophe in that country, the Afghan economy is now in freefall.

I think we deserve more than we have today. I can only emphasize that the situation is not satisfactory for our youth; the government must listen to the youth. Young people in this country face psychological, social, political, and cultural challenges, and are divided by ethnic and linguistic differences. Unemployment, lack of hope for the future, drug addiction, forced marriages, poverty, and identity crises are other challenges that have overshadowed the lives of young people in Afghanistan. However, we expect the national government, along with all domestic and foreign institutions that work for the growth and development of young people, to take steps as soon as possible to reduce the problems faced by the youth, increase the capacity of this group and provide work and education in the country so that tomorrow is better than today.

Access to information in Afghanistan has its own difficulties – especially if you are young. So far, a large number of young journalists have been threatened by some powerful people due to their reporting, and in some cases have lost their lives. The government has failed to catch the perpetrators of this violence and has not yet been able to identify these people and bring them to justice.

The only thing I want is for the government and the international community to root out and try to solve all the problems and challenges facing the youth of Afghanistan. In my opinion, it is time to leave the key to the solutions to these problems in the hands of the youth themselves.



- Sona: University Student

August 2021 had a huge impact on every Afghan's life, especially on Afghan girls and women who are most vulnerable. Like other girls and women, I was deprived of my most fundamental right to continue my higher education and participate in the labour force, and I was condemned to unreasonable oppression. Women and girls are paying for decisions made behind closed doors that they are never involved with. Currently, there are millions of girls in Afghanistan who cannot go to school or university and there are lots of girls and women who lost their jobs. The education system is the backbone of a society and can act as a critical factor in the future development of a nation, and half of the country's population is prevented from joining the educational centres in Afghanistan. As a result, this could have a huge negative impact on future generations and the economic well-being of Afghanistan in the long term.

After the Taliban regime took power, a massive transformation occurred in the educational system of Afghanistan, and girls in Afghanistan were deprived of higher education. By April 2022, 80% of girls were prevented from continuing their secondary education (UN Women, 2020), and currently, none of the Afghan girls can attend secondary and higher education. Moreover, the International Labour Organization (ILO) revealed a 16% decrease in women's employment in the third

quarter of 2021 (International Labour Organization, 2022).

To conclude, as a solution to the current condition of Afghanistan, the most important thing is to raise youths' awareness of their rights in society. It is essential to support youth awareness by launching different programs to inform them of their rights and teach them how to chase their goals. Educational centres, schools, and universities should be reopened for all youths to provide them with a supportive learning environment in order to prevent the brightest students from leaving the country.



- Sima: APT Mentorship Program Participant

I was born in Ghazni province, finished high school, then successfully passed the Kankor Exit Exam and was accepted as a student of Russian literature at Kabul University. I can speak English, Russian, and Dari. I studied the DEL System at Hood English Language Centre and studied the DIT System at Faham Institute. I am confident in using computer programs, Word, Excel, Access, PowerPoint, Photoshop, HTML, network, and the internet. I successfully completed the AEESO's DEL online course with excellent performance in one year; I also passed the Special Grammar course at the Faculty of Agriculture at Kabul University. I passed several short courses about leadership and management offered by AEESO and I have participated in many social events and volunteering programs including personality building at Kabul University; the Help Desk Support program at Google Academy; and soft skills training at Students' Affairs Head Office of Kabul University.

I have also been studying free online short courses, including with Future Learn (English language teaching and project management), Sylar Academy (management leadership), Alison (introduction to database concepts, cloud computing-database technologies and services, foundations of Java Hibernate ORM, and SQL for Beginner), ACEM (Microsoft Excel Advanced, Project Management, and Early Childhood Educators), and APT Organization (Leadership program).

After the Taliban came and took control of the Afghan government, all

educational and educational opportunities were closed for Afghan girls. I am one of those unfortunate Afghan girls who had no way to continue their education. After some time, some organizations started holding online programs for Afghan girls. The increasing restrictions, the decrease in my family's income, and the fact that the universities were still closed to me and other Afghan girls caused severe stress, which led to depression, isolation, and a fear of leaving home and facing men. After I lost my mother and plunged into deep darkness, going to university was a good medicine for me. In fact, being involved with books and sitting in classrooms was a way for me not to feel pain and loneliness, an outlet which I unfortunately lost since the Taliban came.

But still, despite all this, I tried not to give up on my goal. And I know that war is dangerous for everyone, not only for me, so if you want to change the world, you must first find a way to live yourself. I am of the opinion that success doesn't have a full stop at the end, it has a comma. A world that revolves around success is the same world that is ready to crush those who fail. Life is a long road, and we seek to reduce the distance and run fast. The world only remembers the fastest runners. But everyone has their own way of succeeding; success is not a destination, it is a journey. I want to serve as a leader.

In my opinion, the best way for Afghan girls is to research technology, learn how it works, and innovate with it. It can help them get acquainted with a new world and it is an easy and safe way for them to progress. The best sentence that always motivated me is: "Everyone, anything, if it gets in your way and hinders your progress, it means that you are on the right path. And if you continue, you will make significant progress".



- Tamana: APT Mentorship Program Participant

I graduated with law and political science from Jilal-Abad University. I have volunteered with several organizations, worked as an intern in a law firm, and attended various programs as well. After the Taliban took over, I was forced to leave my job and the firm I worked with collapsed because of the new regime. I have been at home since that day and attending programs online because everything is

closed for girls. Countries must take proactive measures to support Afghan women to engage in decision-making processes in Afghanistan. They must increase support to Afghan women so that they can resume employment, access aid, education, and health care, and have an adequate standard of living.



- Saliha: Law Graduate

I am from the Kabul province of Afghanistan. I graduated from Sooria High School and completed an English course at The TOEFL House. Today, it has been two years since I was deprived of education and work. We are limited as to what we can do at home and our future is dark and uncertain. Every day is a challenge for us. All Afghan girls, including me, were depressed and dejected when we couldn't find a way to achieve our goals.

Joining APT's online training is the only effective way for us to improve. APT's program is like a guiding light and has helped us enhance our capability, uncover our strengths, and develop our communication skills. I have noticed a significant improvement in myself by being a member of this community. Through the APT platform, I was able to share my ideas and learn important information and essential skills to be a good leader. I am grateful and honoured to be part of APT.



- Homa: APT Leadership Program Participant

I'm a graduate of Lama-e-Shahid High School, and I completed my Bachelor's degree in urban planning and design at Kabul University in 2022. As a Planning and Development Consultant for 77 International Group of Companies, USA Corp construction Company, I gained two years of valuable experience. Additionally, I interned at Kabul municipality for six months, further enhancing my skills in urban planning.

Ever since the Taliban assumed control in 2021, life for Afghan girls has changed extensively, with profound effects felt by many, including myself. In the aftermath of the Taliban's takeover, my ability to engage in social activities or simply visit a park has been abruptly curtailed. The mere fact of being a girl hindered my access to workplaces, and I was stripped of the freedom to dress in accordance with my personal preferences. The extent of our suffering knows no bounds; tranquillity and serenity have become distant notions, leaving us all trapped between being alive and leading lives devoid of true vitality.

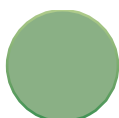
In order to support the education of Afghan girls, NGOs and international agencies should collaborate with local communities to create safe spaces for learning and ensure access to quality education for Afghan girls. To empower Afghan women economically, vocational training programs and microfinance initiatives should be introduced which could provide skills training and access to small loans, enabling them to start their own businesses or contribute to the workforce. Efforts should also be made to remove legal barriers and create an inclusive and supportive environment for women in the job market. Furthermore, international partnerships should be strengthened to provide scholarships and opportunities for Afghan girls and women to continue their education and pursue higher studies abroad. Overall, a comprehensive approach involving diplomatic pressure, community engagement, alternative learning methods, and economic empowerment is crucial to address the restrictions faced by Afghan girls under Taliban rule.



- Mursal: APT Mentorship Program Participant

I am a student at the Faculty of General Psychology at Kabul Education University. I obtained my diploma in English language and I am one of the members of the Kabul Education University Debate Club. Furthermore, I was one of the participants in the Leadership development program in my personal and professional life which was organized by APT-ANAHO.

When the Taliban came to Afghanistan, many things changed. Some of the biggest changes target half of the population: girls and women. They changed our life, our destiny, and our future. With their new rules, the Taliban stole the future of Afghan girls. Although we tried to study and to enter university, the Taliban came and destroyed our future. When I see boys on the street who are going to university, I wish I also could go to university.



- Asma: APT Debate Club Member

I am a girl from an occupied country, Afghanistan. I studied for my Bachelor's degree in Economics at Samangan University. Right now, I am in my second year of studying computer science at the University of the People. I am a teacher at a women's online university, and I am also the team leader of the Samangan University Debate Club in APT. Since 2020, I have been a debater in the Samangan University Debate Club.

After the Taliban came, I studied my last three semesters at university. People say that I was lucky because I finished university, and it wasn't until after my graduation that the Taliban banned girls from attending university, but I do not feel lucky. Graduating from university wasn't my main aim; it was only a step that helped me get closer to my goal, which is to study for my Master's degree in a developed country. Every day, achieving my goal becomes harder for me, for two reasons. First, it has been more than 8 months since I graduated from university, but I still can't get my diploma because girls are not allowed to go to the university. Secondly, girls are not allowed to travel alone without their mahram [chaperone]. This has had a bad impact on my life. Every day that passes, I feel so bad. If this continues, I will be depressed. I hope that this dark period for girls ends and that every girl can go to school, attend university, and get a job, and that I can be allowed to go to another country to study for my Master's degree.



- Adiba: APT Debate Club Member

I was a student at a public school before the Taliban's takeover. Currently, I am studying graphic design with the support of an Iranian organization and learning programming through the She Codes Foundation. Since May 2023, I have been working as an OEWG Mentor in CBA. Additionally, I am involved in a project that empowers Afghan girls by providing free English-language classes. My mission is to make a positive impact on the lives of Afghan girls through education and skill development.

Since the Taliban came to power, Afghanistan has become a place where dreams are buried, a place where the word 'freedom' is no longer part of our lexicon, a place where we have forgotten what it is like to be free, to be able to study, to be able to take a walk in a park, and so on. Afghan girls yearn for education – to go to school, to work, and to university. We dream of becoming doctors, engineers, journalists, and so much more. Our dreams are not just for ourselves but for our families, our communities, our country, and our world. For me, as an Afghan girl, every difficulty that I have and every roadblock that comes my way cannot stop me. I hope one day to give the Afghan people hope, and I'm trying my absolute best to do it.

We Afghan girls are human beings who deserve to study and to work, and most importantly, to be free from the chains of oppression and violence that have held us back for far too long. We should all join as one voice for Afghan women; we need you to stand with us and fight for our right to be free, to support Afghan girls in their journey towards education and empowerment, and to create a brighter future for all, where we can dream big and make a statement. Together, we can break down these walls and show the world that girls can conquer them. We will rise up and make our voices heard.



- Muzhda: APT Leadership Program Participant

I am 41 years old. I got married at the age of 20. My husband is a worker, and we have three children. Our eldest is a boy who is 18 years old, and we also have two young girls named Narges and Nahid. Narges is 9 years old, and Nahid is 6 years old. I graduated from Herat University in 2013 majoring in English. During

that time, I also worked as an English teacher in a government school in Herat. Additionally, I taught English language courses at the AIL organization for four years. I have also worked with the CRS organization in Herat and participated in British Council courses. I had the opportunity to work as an English teacher with UNICEF as well.

During the periods of Hamed Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, there was relative stability and peace in Afghanistan. Although it was not perfect, our people were hopeful and happy. Especially for girls, there were opportunities for education and participation in various positions. There was significant development in their lives. Unfortunately, this period did not last long, as the Taliban regime returned to power. All hopes, wishes, ambitions, and motivation for the future and life disappeared.

Under the Taliban rule, the lives of the people were greatly affected. They faced terrible conditions, with women being denied even basic rights. The situation became extremely challenging for the people, and many investors left Afghanistan. Job opportunities became scarce, and the circumstances became dire. Many men had to leave the country in search of employment to provide for their families.

I believe that the problems our country faces are largely due to a lack of good leadership. Our leaders are selfish and focused on personal wealth rather than the welfare of the nation. My own life has also been impacted by the Taliban. When they took control of our country, my family and I had to immigrate to Iran, like many others, in search of a better future and life. We faced terrible conditions, with no home, no appliances, no money, and no jobs. There were very few organizations to help refugees. Initially, we stayed at my mother's small house, but it was not suitable for our needs. We faced constant pressure and conflicts due to the difficult circumstances. Eventually, my son found a job in a tailor shop, and my husband started working in a restaurant. I also started teaching English to some students at home. We managed to rent a small house, but life has been challenging. Unfortunately, things have become even harder as my husband suffers from depression and requires treatment and medication. Additionally, my eldest daughter has autism and also requires treatment and medication. Our income is very low, while the cost of living is high. We are struggling to afford basic necessities.

As a result, my son had to discontinue his education, despite his talent and potential, due to financial constraints. I am deeply worried about the future of my children, and I don't know what steps to take to improve our family's situation. I am aware that there are many Afghan families facing similar terrible conditions. It saddens me to see the state of my country and the plight of refugees around the

world.

I have a message for our leaders: Please, for the sake of God, think about our country and its suffering people. We simply want to live with dignity and be recognized as a great nation by the world.



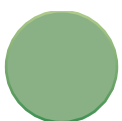
- Tayeba: APT Leadership Program Participant

A girl who wakes up and falls asleep with her books. A girl who is determined, open-minded and hardworking. A girl whose slogan was to never give up. This is me, Mawloda Koofi, who is just 19 years old with thousands of hopes.

Unfortunately, one day in August 2021, I woke up to the sound of gunfire. The Taliban had occupied my country, and the restrictions on women started soon afterwards. I was in the 12th grade when the Taliban announced that girls over the 6th grade weren't allowed to go to school anymore. It was like a nightmare. The doors of schools and education centres are closed to teenage girls – I have now been out of school for two years and counting.

But I did not give up and started studying my school subjects by myself and preparing for the national exam. After passing the Kantor exam (the national exam for university entrance) in 2022, I got admitted to the Faculty of Public Policy at Balkh University. I was very excited about starting my degree, but the Taliban then banned women from attending university. This was another big shock for me, and I lost all my motivation and courage.

I enrolled in several English language courses, and I have finished the advanced level in an online program which is funded by the US Embassy. Additionally, I joined boot camp programs at the American University of Afghanistan in July 2023. Now I am participating in the leadership program run by APT. I am keen to continue my education and be an empowered woman who is knowledgeable and skilful and can defend her and other women's rights.



- Mawloda- APT Leadership Program Participant

I am a student of Balkh University's Faculty of Administration and Public Policy. During my academic period, I worked in various fields, including the student debate club of Balkh University and Najman students, and I also worked as an official member of APT. I have completed various capacity-building programs.

Since the Taliban came, girls are locked up in the four walls of their houses and deprived of their human rights. This is unfair. Now, not having the right to education has only caused us greater mental and emotional harm. In my opinion, taking away the right to education from us is not the solution to the country's crisis; it is killing the country and seeing a regression to a time of ignorance. Bigotry in the country can only be fought with the pen and for as long as Afghan women and girls cannot access education, there will be no hope for building a modern society. Education should be open to the younger generation without any compromise.

In fact, 15 August 2021 represents the most bitter tragedy in the history of Afghanistan. With the arrival of this day, a wall of ignorance, bigotry, and discrimination was built against the window of science and knowledge. Hopefully, this will be the last year that Afghan women and girls are deprived of their right to education and my country will once again reach the peak of knowledge and development from the decline of ignorance.



- Shazia: APT Debate Club Member

On August 15 2021, Afghanistan fell into the hands of the Taliban, and all the aspirations of the Afghan people were shattered. Girls were banned from schools and universities, and obstacles were created for the presence of women in educational institutions. The Taliban is an illegitimate government that denies human rights and religious freedoms and deprives women of education. The Taliban is a mono-ethnic government and is not inclusive.

The Taliban must build a good relationship with the people. The reopening of girls' schools and universities will be the only good way for the progress of Afghanistan, and the Taliban must pay serious attention to this issue. The presence of women in public and private institutions must be one of the demands of the people of Afghanistan. The Taliban should respect people's freedom and recognise the

human rights and religious values of the Afghan people.



- Anonymous

I'm a determined individual who uses the power of art and voluntary work to shed light on the dire situation faced by women in Afghanistan. Throughout my time at Afghan Turk Girls High School and Kardan Institute, I have also worked as a volunteer. One of my most impactful experiences was being a part of the Afghan Girls Empowerment project, which was financed by the University of Central Asia. Currently, I am working as an English teacher at the Empowering Afghan Women Workshop (EAW), in which I help to provide free education for Afghan girls. I'm also working on the Cosmino Production Project, a creative art theatrical initiative that seeks to portray the reality of Afghanistan through theater and art.

My goal is to make a difference in the lives of Afghan women. I want girls in my nation to grow up dreaming of their future without fearing for their safety or worrying that their efforts will be in vain. However, the past two years under Taliban rule have been quite challenging for me. As a girl, my rights were taken away from me one by one. I couldn't finish my studies or even take the Kankor examination required for university admission. I'm often paralyzed by fear whenever I try to express myself via art, as it's taboo in Afghanistan.

It's fundamental to advocate for the preservation of freedom and human rights in order to overcome the current difficulties Afghan youths are facing. Our young generation deserves to live in a society free from fear and restrictions. Young people who have experienced trauma or stress as a result of the current situation need crucial mental health support. We can empower our youth to conquer restrictions and shape a brighter future by providing them with these essential resources and establishing safe spaces for expression.

Despite the obstacles that we confront every day, I remain committed to using my artistic abilities and activism to be an agent for change. I aim to empower Afghan women and create a future in which they can thrive fearlessly with each brushstroke of my paintbrush and every word I speak.



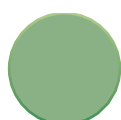
- Aqdas: APT Mentorship Program Participant

I was born in 2000 in the Kunar province of Afghanistan. I was a teenager when my family moved to Kabul; I finished high school in Kabul and was admitted into Kabul University to study Law and Political Science. I am in my final year.

Like every girl, I had many dreams in my mind, one of which was to be a famous lawyer. During my studies at the university, I was a member of the Kabul University Law Students' Union and a Facebook post writer for Chesta Bookstore, and I participated in many moot trials and worked with different organizations.

When the Taliban came to Afghanistan, I lost everything, especially my educational dreams. But I never gave up and tried to improve myself. Now, I am one of the teachers in WERA (the Women's Empowerment Research Association) teaching Afghan girls who can't go to school; a legal consultant for Afghan women at a law firm; and head of the media and communication department for AOOU (Afghanistan Open University Organisation) which offers Afghan youth free education. I completed the debate program offered by APT and now I'm one of the students in the Leadership class at APT.

The only dream that I have for me and my fellow Afghans is to ensure each Afghan youth has the opportunity to access education – especially Afghan girls – because it is a very basic human right to have access to the best educational facilities for every human.



- PariGul: APT Debate Club Member