



Afghans
For Progressive
Thinking (APT)



CIVIL SOCIETY
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JUST
FUTURE

Creative Writing

BOOKLET

Through Their Pen:
Non-Fiction Narratives of Girls in Afghanistan

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Introduction:

With the return of the Taliban in August 2021, Afghanistan has become a place that extinguishes the dreams of Afghan girls and women. They are no longer allowed to go to schools and universities, and are excluded from public life. In the face of this exclusion, writing has become an act of resistance and hope, a way to stand against discrimination and make their voices heard.

Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) launched a four-month Creative Writing Program for 25 Afghan young women, focusing on writing and storytelling as tools for advocacy and raising awareness about violations of basic rights. Throughout the program, they learned to write letters, short stories, poems, journals, and non-fiction pieces. In this booklet, they reclaim their narratives, lay bare their pain, and assert their right to dream of a better future.

The program provided a safe space for participants, a place to write without fear and shape their struggles into stories that cannot be ignored. This collection highlights the unprecedented challenges Afghan women live with daily. By publishing these works, APT seeks to amplify Afghan women's voices and raise awareness about the reality of everyday life in Afghanistan.

APT extends its sincere gratitude to the Just Future programme, and to its partners CSPPS and Cordaid, whose support made this Creative Writing Program possible. Their commitment to amplifying Afghan women's voices has been essential in bringing this publication to life.

APT also thanks the young women who bravely shared their stories and the facilitators Caitlyn O'Flaherty and Sara Rahimi, who guided and edited their writings. This publication would not have been possible without the leadership of Ajmal Ramyar, Head Executive of APT; Abdul Rahman Jalil, Program Manager; Boshra Moheb, Project Assistant; and Yazdan Mirdad and Mursal, who designed our posters and booklet.

About Us:

Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) is a youth-led non-profit organization founded in 2010 that works to advance human rights in Afghanistan. The organization's main focus is on protecting Afghan youth, especially women's and girls' rights, through access to education and empowerment. APT is committed to establishing a space for young girls to develop their skills in leadership, social engagement, and raising their voices by providing creative, educational, and advocacy-based programs. Since its establishment, APT has inspired and supported more than 60,000 youth to develop their skills practically and enhance their vision to take part in the establishment and development of an inclusive society, despite existing political and social challenges.

APT's activities concentrate on expanding educational opportunities for girls and young women. Writing, public speaking, and creative expression programs, alongside networking, leadership development, and programs supporting mental health and trauma healing, have helped APT's beneficiaries become their own advocates and engage in society.

Moreover, at the international level, APT has played a meaningful role in youth-led advocacy. Between 2013 and 2015, APT's contributions led to the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security, which is considered a milestone among APT's achievements. Building on this milestone, the organization launched the Afghan Youth Representative to the United Nations Program in 2018, creating pathways for Afghan youth voices to be heard in global policy discussions.

APT believes that empowered youth are key actors in peacebuilding, social justice, and long-term stability in Afghanistan. It is committed to standing with young people and families to amplify their voices and expand opportunities for meaningful participation in society.

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

Short Stories (II)

These non-fiction pieces show the daily lives of Afghan women under the Taliban. They tell of sudden bans from schools and work, the loss of freedoms, and the uncertainty of the future.

Banned from Work

It was a sad day and one I will never forget. On 24 December 2022, I received a phone call from my colleague in the national office. He said, “Please inform the female staff that they are not allowed to come to the office until further notice.” This was due to a newly approved letter by the Taliban government in Afghanistan, banning women from working in offices. As soon as the call ended, our safety staff called and repeated the same message.

Alas! That night felt darker than ever—not just for me but for my sisters and mother as well. This was a shared pain.

We all sat in silence, feeling hopeless and disappointed, especially my mother, she was full of concerns and sorrow about rent, electricity bills, and other life expenses. After deep thinking my mother broke the silence and said, “It’s okay. Calm down and don’t worry too much. God is great. We all will find a way. Let’s pray and ask God for help and guidance. Then, we’ll start working, you are both educated, you must stay strong and find other solutions such as searching online job opportunities.”

Inspired and motivated by her words, we started searching for online employment opportunities. Meanwhile, my eldest sister, who was living in a village, fell seriously ill. Her condition worsened quickly, and the doctors gave up. There was no hope. They told us these were her final days. Tragically, she passed away. It was a dark and painful time I will never forget in my life.

My other sister couldn’t find a paid job online. Life became more difficult day by day. Our mother’s health also started to decline. She suffered from serious headaches and could not eat. My two elder sisters and I were praying and crying.

Alas! It was a very sad and dark time.

We referred to many doctors who gave different ideas and lots of expensive medicine, but nothing was effective. Every day it was passing seemed like a year to us during those tough days. We didn't have any support from relatives or even close friends. No one seemed supportive and the ban on women working caused more economic challenges and depression for all of us.

Yet, we never lost hope. We faced countless challenges as doctors offered us no remedies and no options. We kept praying and trying, searching for doctors and specialists in Kabul. Finally, we found a hospital with talented doctors who solved my mother's medical mystery and cared for her over several weeks. Eventually, God answered our prayers.

After much sorrow and sickness, our mother slowly recovered, and all family members felt happy. My mother was able to eat and talk with us like she could before. This experience taught us resilience, faith and the importance of staying strong and relying on each other in the face of hardship.

- Ms. Aminy



The Last Candle That Went Off

The smell of coal and burnt wood had blackened the whole city. The sun, afraid of injustice, hid behind the clouds; the birds, afraid of the cold weather, took shelter inside their nests; and the girls, afraid of the government, hid themselves under black chadors. I was on my way to wintry course but that day, but an unusual wind was blowing, as if it didn't want me to continue my path. I was carrying my books under my black chadors, still believing in a brighter future, hoping to sit in class beside the other girls and to make that beautiful future together.

But we were born in the wrong place and at the wrong time. Fate didn't allow us to achieve our goals, didn't allow us to truly live our lives or continue on the path of knowledge. That day they turned our last hope into ashes, our last dream into illusion, our last smile into silence; they closed the final door of school and extinguished the last candle in our lives. When I arrived at the school, everything had changed. The girls who laughed every morning when they heard their teachers' voices were silent that day. They saw weapons, felt fear, and cried without making a sound. These were the girls who witnessed the closing of the last door of the learning center. After that day, many of them never felt the true meaning of life again.

There was no rain or thunder that day, but fear of the government and deprivation as a woman broke our hearts. It felt like the sky inside us was raining. That day, we girls, who were only fifteen years old, experienced a goodbye that still brings us tears. We said goodbye to our sweet childhood dreams, goodbye to a free life, and goodbye to all the rights we had as a woman. Our school was in a basement; cold, damp, and dark, but there I could feel and see a brighter future.

When I arrived at school I saw faces that were tired not from the hardships of path but from living as a woman in Afghanistan. Their faces dripped with sorrow, yet their faint smiles held courage. They told me that in the morning, the government had shut down the school and arrested our teachers. That sentence changed the lives of girls inside Afghanistan and wrote a dark fate for Afghan women.

The reading of it may be easy but hearing it was costly. As I walked back home, I wished death a thousand times. That day I truly understood being a woman meant being downtrodden, deprived and forced to live a life of less.

That day I buried the rubble of my own beautiful dreams, just like other girls. Life is not always simple and normal; sometimes it's like the deep dark of the sea. Until we step into it, we never know how deep it is. When people talk about hardships and darkness inside Afghanistan, some of them say "we truly know what you feel and what you endure." But no one can understand us.

Can you imagine a life lived only indoors? A life without dreams? A life where you can't wear what you'd like? A life where you look to the birds to learn about freedom?

It's been about four years since our lives changed. We are the observers of silence and death, the observers of women's tears and the observers of the disappearance of dreams. But we hold onto hope to see all people happy and laughing again, one day.

- Fatima Mohammadi



A Journey I Didn't Expect

My name is Hadya, and sometimes I feel like my life changed faster than I was ready for it. I grew up with simple dreams: to study hard, go to university, and build a future where I could help other girls like me. For some years, everything was going normal. I finished school with a high score, passed the Kankor exam well, and finally entered the English Literature Faculty at Kabul University. At that time, I truly believed my life was moving in the right direction, and my future looked clear and hopeful. In December 2022, after the Taliban had already taken control of Afghanistan, they banned girls' from going to universities. This happened right after my last exam, and the unexpected news changed everything.

When I first heard, I didn't know what to think. It felt like someone suddenly closed a door that I had spent years trying to open. All my plans, my efforts, and my hopes felt meaningless in one moment. For days, I felt confused, angry, and heartbroken. The future that once felt bright now looked empty and uncertain, and I kept asking myself what I should do next.

After some time, I realized that I could not control everything happening around me, but I could still control my own choices. So, I started studying online. I took English writing and grammar courses and some other online classes. Studying online felt lonely and very different from sitting in a classroom with classmates and teachers, but it still helped me continue learning and not feel completely stuck. At the same time, I began teaching English online to a few girls. I was not a professional teacher, but teaching them gave me a strange kind of hope. I still remember one girl who smiled proudly when she finally understood a grammar rule she had struggled with. That small moment made me feel useful again and reminded me that learning can still grow, even in difficult conditions. Later, I also volunteered as a motivator in a private school. I talked to students about hope and not giving up. Sometimes, while speaking to them, I felt like I was also speaking to myself.

Through all these challenges, I learned that life does not always follow our plans. Still, we can choose to keep moving forward.



I am still studying, still teaching, and still believing that education can change lives. Many Afghan girls like me are learning to keep moving forward, even when doors are closed.

My journey may not be perfect, but it is real, and it has made me stronger than before. I hope readers will listen to our stories, because they are the voices of a generation that refuses to give up.

- Hadya Rasoli



Whispers of Silence, Echoes of Courage

It was a Sunday, and as usual I was at the university, studying intensely. Those were the days when I worked and studied economics, supporting myself financially at the same time. I believed that through hard work and determination, I could shape a better future.

Then suddenly, fear spread everywhere. The unbelievable news arrived: the Taliban had taken control of Afghanistan and Kabul. It was shocking, unimaginable, yet it became our reality. That day marked the fall of a nation and the beginning of endless suffering for Afghan women and girls.

I fearfully tried to reach home. The atmosphere was filled with terror, and for months I did not step outside. Soon, every door closed for us. Education was banned, my university journey was left unfinished, and the private school where I taught girls was shut down. Overnight, I became unemployed and stripped of my role.

Life grew harsher. Without income, family problems increased day by day, and the surrounding community began to see women as powerless and disposable. We lived in constant grief and uncertainty, struggling to maintain hope under the cruelty of the new regime. The decision to leave was not sudden; it was shaped by months of fear, restrictions, and economic pressure. With careful planning, I borrowed money and arranged a discreet escape to Pakistan, navigating checkpoints and relying on the kindness of strangers along the way.

Those nine months in Pakistan were filled with anxiety, illness, and uncertainty. Every day I wondered what would happen to me. Thankfully, my interview was successful, and I received a migration visa to Brazil. Even though the months of waiting were heavy with fear and loneliness, I held on. As a single, independent woman, and as a Hazara, I carried the fear of what my minority identity could mean for me back in Afghanistan.

Finally, I reached Brazil, determined to build a better life.

From there, I continued my journey, traveling through the United States, facing four months of challenging roads and unpredictable conditions. In each place, I encountered both kindness and obstacles, which tested my resolve but strengthened my determination. Eventually, I arrived in Canada, applied for asylum, and began learning the language. Over the following year, I gradually integrated into the community, found work, improved my skills, and started to rebuild my life step by step.

I did not surrender. I fought for myself, and little by little, I began to rebuild my life with my own hands. In Afghanistan, being a woman meant facing unfair judgment and being deprived of basic human rights simply for existing.

But I bravely refused to accept that fate. I chose to resist ignorance and oppression, and I never gave up, holding on to hope for a better future.

Today, I am married, and I dream of having a daughter. I want to raise her strong and brave, to show her that her mother was an Afghan woman who never surrendered. I will tell her about my struggles, the endless suffering of Afghan women, and their courage. I will remind her that, despite being among the most oppressed people in the world and denied their rights while the world often watched in silence, Afghan women fought tirelessly for education, for work, and for freedom.

My story is a message to all women: do not give up. Life continues, hardships pass, and the challenges you face today will one day become part of your story of strength and resilience. By persevering, we shape our future and inspire generations to come. We are the bridge of knowledge, the women who fight ignorance with learning, and through education, we empower the next generation of Afghanistan. Remember, even in the hardest times, your efforts matter, read, learn, and build a life that reflects the courage and determination of our people. One book you read for yourself today can become a foundation for your country's tomorrow.

- Alina Ziwar

The Lonely Afghan Woman

I want to study Afghanistan as it is today: a land that seems silent and motionless. In the heart of its cities, there is nothing but silence; it feels as though no living soul can be found, no sound can be heard, and even breathing feels impossible. The names of women have been lost in the chaos and disorder of this land, becoming like trees that stand still and quiet in the cold season. They are tall, strong, deeply rooted they are - fighting for light and space (as a tree would). They have not surrendered to the difficulties that have occurred; they are still seeking opportunities for a better life and to be part of a civil society. For years, they have lived under the shadow of devastating wars that scattered their families, forcing them to endure the pain of separation from their loved ones. Despite all these hardships, they raise their voices as much as possible. Some lose their voices permanently in this journey, while the rest continue moving forward. Some try to keep their voices alive by leaving their homeland, but this opportunity is not available to all.

But all continue fighting silently and remain seekers of their fundamental rights. The right to education and learning, which has been granted to them by Allah, has been taken away, and they have been forced to abandon it. This situation is unbearable and the harshest punishment for a woman. Their right to work and to participate in social activities—things that are essential to their lives has also been taken from them. Some women and girls lost their right to education at the very beginning of their studies; some lost it in the middle, and others were deprived of this right near the end. I am also one of the thousands who have been deprived of education, yet another victim of this ongoing tragedy. It feels as though I have lost myself; everything around me is dark. I cannot find a light to see the path ahead. But I am hopeful that I will become a source of light myself.

Afghan women and girls still believe in the future. They believe that one day, under the light of hope, they will once again be able to turn their dreams into reality.

This narrative speaks of the exhaustion of a generation that still stands, breathes, prays, and fights through hardship. They have no support, not even from the international community, which has failed to help this suffering generation. Yet these women continue to stand, with trembling feet, broken hearts, and wounded spirits, still fighting.

This is the story of thousands of Afghan women and girls. Writing it makes my heart bleed; at times I stop, discouraged. But through experiencing this pain, I return with greater determination to keep going. I write so that this voice will never be silenced completely and permanently, and so that a generation of Afghan women and girls will not fade into silence.

- Ms.Kaihan



Conclusion:

Limitations imposed on Afghan girls have restricted their access to education, employment, and participation in public life, directly shaping their future aspirations.

The non-fiction creative pieces collected in this publication are testimony to the ongoing violation of human rights, especially women's rights, in Afghanistan, written with courage, honesty, and hope. Through this publication, Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) ensures that the reality Afghan girls are experiencing is neither ignored nor forgotten. These written pieces are proof of APT's consistency in its mission to raise awareness and advocate for Afghan girls.