



Afghans
For Progressive
Thinking (APT)



CIVIL SOCIETY
PLATFORM

Cordaid



JUST
FUTURE

Creative Writing

BOOKLET

Through Their Pen:
Poem & Letters from 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

Letters

These letters carry the voices of Afghan women who have written to themselves, to loved ones, and to their country, a way of holding on to hope when so much has been taken away. Each letter shows both the pain of daily life and the courage to keep speaking, even in silence.

A Letter Found After the Death of a Mother

Dear sister,

In the name of the Creator who witnesses the weight on my breath and the silence forced upon my voice. I write to you from a world where women will one day raise a resurrection.

We cheer for our womanhood with all our strength. I know that no one is truly well. They bury girls and women with their black hair, those from whose flesh and skin we were made. These days, the muscles of women's souls have been whipped, and women resemble those already gone.

She loved poetry, read Siamak Harawi, and fell asleep with the poems of Parvin E'tesami.

In the name of the Creator of this rope around my neck. Women will raise a resurrection. I write this to you with all the strength of my womanhood. I know that no one is truly well. Every day, girls and women are buried with their black hair, women whose flesh and skin are the source of our own lives. Women are alive, but their souls have been buried. Their pain is not always visible, yet it lives inside them every moment.

I am writing because I want you to know what I see, what I hear, and what I carry within me as a woman in this land. I know better than anyone that these days they have whipped the muscles of women's souls, and women look like the dead who have not yet been buried.

Today I saw a little girl being forced into marriage. I hear with my own ears when they say, "She is loose."

Do you think a woman is a toy? Do you think her pain is not real?

Have you ever thought about the day when warmth disappears from a home? When there is no smell of fresh bread,?

What happens when a mother gives everything to her child, yet must carry her pain alone? What happens when her tears are ignored?

I ask you these questions because this is our daily reality.

Write back, my dear.

But know this:

Do not think that I have become silent. Every night, I whisper the poems of Rabia Balkhi into my daughters' ears. Every morning, my prayer is written in the words of women.

I believe that on the day of the red rose, hand in hand with you, we will read the poem of Mulla Mohammad-Jan.

We will not be silent.

- Madina Qati Musadiq

A letter to Myself

Dear me,

A strong girl who always finds her way back. Life has never promised ease, but it has promised meaning. It has gifted me surprises—some gentle as sunshine, others sharp as shards of broken glass—but each had lessons only for me.

I have lived moments of laughter so deep that my heart felt weightless and moments of pain so intense I wondered if I could stand again. But look at me now. I stood. I rose.

I am still rising. Each sunrise becomes a reminder that I survived yesterday. Each sunset is proof that even my difficult days carry hope. There were times I stumbled, times I hypothesized the world was too heavy for my shoulders. But I rose again. I learned to bloom after storms, even when the rain felt endless.

I have learned that God never left me empty, in-fact, he gives me light enough to take more steps, to breathe one more time, to believe once again. There are days when I fall silent, when I select my own company over jam-packed places. When the world feels too loud, my soul seeks peace. In these quiet moments, hold my heart gently. I talk to myself with kindness. I heal in silence and return to a stronger girl. I wipe my own tears. I lift myself up. I become my own safe place.

I am my friend, my comfort zone, and my strength. I am my own hero, not because I never fall, but because I stand again and again. I have broken and healed. I cried and smiled. I have failed and succeeded; nevertheless, I never stop dreaming. My dreams are the fire that keeps me alive, makes me trust in tomorrow. So I recall to myself “value who you are.”

Do not wait for others to see your worth. Value is born within you. You were born in this world worthy. Worth was born within you. You were born in this universe already adequate. Love yourself, respect yourself, walk the way. Your heart is bright even when you walk alone. I will always rise again.

- Asma Alizada

Letter from a School Girl to the Taliban Leader

Did you ever know that one day a letter with this title might reach you? You may not know a girl like me exists. I imagine meeting you, not to fight, not to judge, but to tell a story. A story that she just wanted someone to hear so she could feel a little better. And maybe she thought it might help you understand her for a moment. There was a girl with big dreams. When she thought about her dreams, she usually felt happy. She dreamed of teaching other girls. Every morning she woke up at five, smiled at the world, made her tea, and said, "Today I will finish the house work, study my lessons, and go to the place that brings me closer to my dream: school."

For her, school was something she really loved. It was the place where she could forget her sadness and problems. She was the top student, she studied with excitement. She was kind to her classmates, and all her teachers liked her work. She never told anyone about her dream, but she believed that one day she would reach it and build a better life for herself and her family.

But soon everything ended. Suddenly, her dreams were stopped, and school was closed. She did not know why. In Afghanistan, having dreams as a girl became a mistake that should be avoided. A place where girls often lose their dreams before they can follow them.

She no longer knew whether to smile or cry. She felt as if her life stopped before she even had the chance to start it. She was no longer the girl who woke up smiling and rushed to get ready for school. If I could meet you one day, I would ask only one question:

Did she really do anything wrong?

Even if you never read this letter, I want my words to exist. I write because it makes me feel like I at least tried to express myself. I want you to know that this is only one story. There are many Afghan girls who also have stories like hers, but most of them are never heard.

I do not know what your answer would be. But I want you to know that there are so many stories from Afghan girls that haven't yet been told. Lives that haven't been lived. Dreams that haven't been dreamed.

- Mozhda khaksar

Dear Homeland

For a long time, words have been gathering in my heart to call out to you...

For years, you have not tasted freedom; for years, your people have been displaced and refugees; for years, the whispers of birds no longer circle in your skies. Families have been forced to leave their villages, searching for safety far from home. The people of this land have long lost their passion for culture and homeland.

It seems as if silence has taken over everywhere, and no one has enthusiasm for anything anymore. The daughters of the homeland are no longer allowed to go to school; women and girls, the adornment and light of the homeland, are now confined to their homes, and the sound of the school bell has not echoed in ears for a long time. The city is enveloped in silence, as if hearts are full of pain and grief, yet no one can raise their voice and cry out the lament of old Afghanistan.

Foreign people have entered this land, erasing its history and culture. The joy of Nowruz and Eid is no longer present; in the past, people would gather, share meals, dance, and celebrate together. But now, music and celebration are considered heresy. They speak of Islam as if they have imprisoned it for the people.

True Islam values knowledge for all. Does Islam say that girls have no right to education?

Education aside, in the minds of these corrupt people, women are not even allowed to leave their homes. They have no right to live freely. They have no human rights.

The true men of this land feel that a society is incomplete without women; women are symbols of light, a light that finds its way even in the darkest days.

Women are symbols of the nation's courage.

But no more...

Afghanistan and its women have been dragged backward for years. Few can be seen speaking of freedom. No one dares to raise their voice or defend women's rights anymore.

Women's voices are considered a disgrace, a shame to which their corrupt hearts are steeped. They mock Islam and present it as something else entirely.

Let me tell you about history and culture...

Those historical sites are no longer as they once were. The Great Buddha statue, magnificent and grand, has been destroyed. Ignorant people, who know not what history is, have destroyed hundreds of historical sites in such a manner. Destroying history means destroying our identity, because our past shapes who we are and what we can become.

Afghanistan is now nothing but ruins. Its people are imprisoned and controlled by the words of the ignorant. Yet, the daughters of the homeland have not given up.

They strive to reach high peaks for their country and make Afghanistan flourish once again.

And to show the world that freedom is our right, and no one can take it from us.

Even the world, which remains silent before these foreigners and claims not to know what is happening behind the scenes. We will shout our silence to the world so that they know Afghanistan is a land of brave and courageous people, with hearts full of love for their homeland. Hoping to see Afghanistan prosperous and free.

The daughter of this land, heir to ancient roots:

- Sadaf Safi

Letter to My Mom

Dear Mom, you mean so much to me, not only as my mother but as the person who inspires me to grow. You have always been my biggest supporter, the one who never stopped believing in me, and the one who was and is always with me in every situation.

Your encouragement, your gentle words to keep going, and your constant presence in my life have made me feel powerful, loved, and capable of doing anything.

Whenever I felt like giving up, you gave me courage, hope, and the power to struggle and resist in every hard situation. You are the one who is very compassionate, gentle and good-tempered with me. You always try to take care of your children but do not think of yourself.

I am so grateful for this kind mother I have. I am very thankful to Allah who saw to it that I deserved the best mom ever who does everything for her children. You always sacrificed yourself for us and to promote our lives.

Thank you for making me feel strong, even on my weakest days. I love you so much my everything.

With all my heart,
Your little daughter

- Samana Rezaee

Poetry

Rhymes that hold deep feelings, born of nonstop prayers and patience, become wings against the cage of restrictions. These poems are voices of hope that continue until the day of freedom.

Living Under the Shadow

I would like to write so that the suffering of this time
and the sadness of living under the shadow of the
Taliban government be taken from my heart

To be alone with my homeland, may the wound of its
heart be healed.

I would like my Kabul to be filled with laughter
may the enemies abandon us, our situation will be
better and we can fly in the sky of our dreams.
I want my words to reach the sky; Words full of hope,
messengers of freedom and carriers of peace.
Drop by drop, happiness flows and mourning will end
I would like to see freedom with my own eyes
Everyone has the same opinion; women will not be
called weak, oppression will not be imposed on them
and their voices will not be silenced in their throats

I love to endure the pain, migration and displacement
It is not a great request; O God! Let it be reduced

I would like hardships not to be hidden
Let's write lines so that history remembers more
clearly!

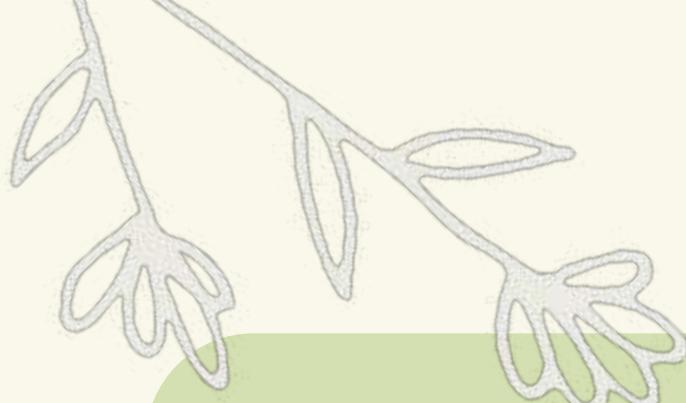
Nazi Maysam



What It Means to Be a Girl in Afghanistan

In a land where mountains stand
guard against the sky,
She dares to dream, even when the path grows dark.
Her dreams are as vast as her voice is clear.
Freedom in her steps, strength in her choice.
Yet the world around her is built on fear.
A flame of hidden hope within her.
She carries a silent strength, unnamed.
Though storms may rise, though nights grow long,
Her heart sings a stubborn song.
For the world may cage her wings with rules;
(no school, speak in whispers, covered with dreams
denied)
But she is not broken, will not be defeated.
In the dust and in the silence, she learns to flower.
Turning small spaces into living rooms of hope.
Within her chest, a dawn breaks.
A fierce reminder that the world still blooms.
And every step that she takes each day whispers softly,
I will shine anyway.

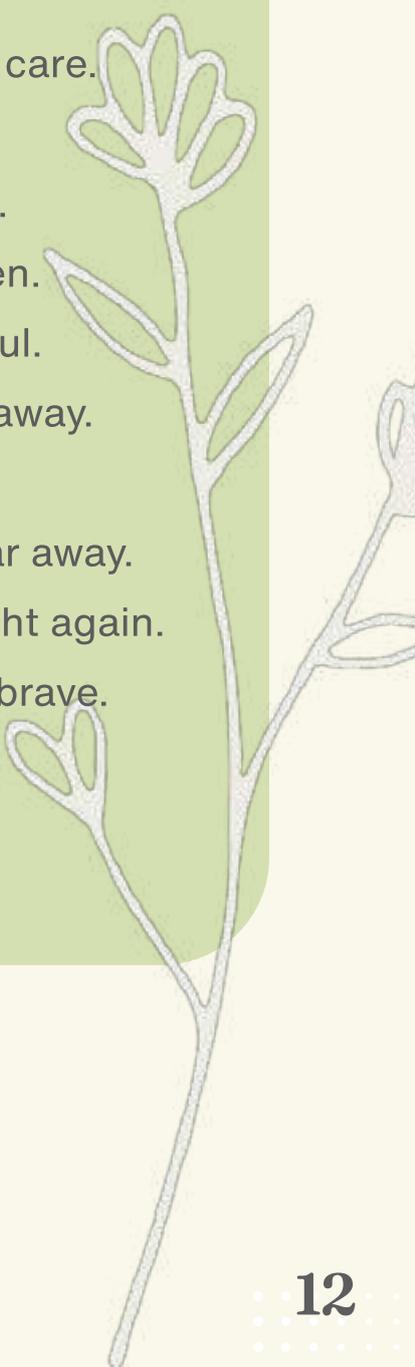
Sumaya Barakzai

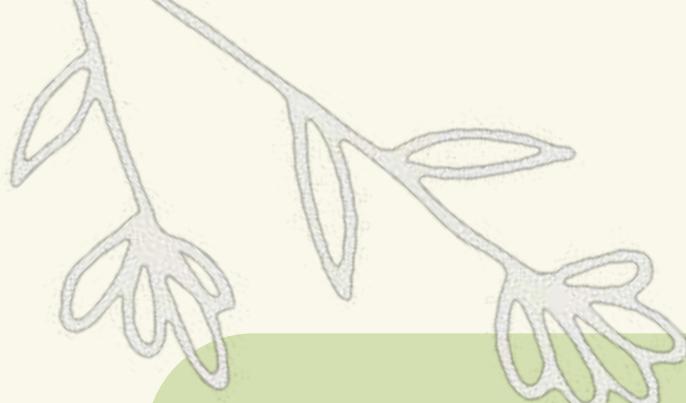


The Bird Who Breaks the Cage

You try to bind my wings.
You try to keep me behind the cage.
You try not to let me sing.
You try to take from me my courage.
But, I'm the bird who breaks the cage without care.
I'm the bird who loves to fly in the rain.
I'm the bird who brings peace and justice.
I'm the bird who heals your pain with my pen.
Oh, my mom, just believe me and be hopeful.
I'll be raining, I'll wipe your tears and wounds away.
I promise you'll see children's joy.
Turn their tears to laughter, chasing darkness far away.
The night gives way to dawn, and the girls find light again.
I'll promise school doors will open, and I'll feel brave.
Inshallah.

Tayeba





They Cannot Cage My Thoughts

I carry visions,
not always clear or spoken aloud,
but steady, persistent, and strong.

I see myself in a classroom,
listening to my teacher,
learning freely and openly,
imagining a future where my gender is no barrier.
Yet there are days when my dreams feel forbidden.

Schools have been closed,
but my mind remains open,
still reaching for knowledge in the darkness.

They say, “girls will be silenced,”
but they cannot cage my thoughts.

I will keep learning,
quietly, alone, with hope.

I am a girl from Afghanistan.
They may try to chain my dreams,
but they cannot erase them.

My dreams are real,
and they will not be destroyed.

Najiah Matin

Conclusion:

This booklet carries a collection of poetry and letters, a space where deeply personal feelings and expressions of Afghan women come together. These narrations are both audible and readable expressions of Afghan girls' silent grief, hope, memories, pain, and resistance. Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) created an environment where Afghan girls can share their emotions creatively and write about feelings that were previously hard to talk about openly. Through this platform, APT once more indicates its commitment to creating opportunities for Afghan women, even under the dark shadow of restrictions, by ensuring their voices are still heard and their stories continue to reach beyond boundaries.