

A blue pleated garment, possibly a shawl or a piece of clothing, hangs vertically against a weathered, brownish-gold wall. The wall is covered in faint, white graffiti, including symbols like "> 6 9" and "310150". The garment has a decorative, embroidered cuff at the top. The lighting is dramatic, casting shadows on the wall.

**WOMEN
WITHOUT
BORDERS**

CHANGE THE WORLD

HOPE AND BETRAYAL

Afghan Women as Targets of Terror

IMPRINT

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HOPE AND BETRAYAL

Afghan Women as Targets of Terror

Content

5

Preface

9

Hanifa Haqani "In fact, the whole population should be taking to the streets."

15

Marian "At 15, a girl in Afghanistan no longer has any hope left."

23

Amira "I miss my home: the air, greenery, mountains, sleeping on the roof, and gazing at the stars."

33

Soraya "The Taliban takeover – hell on earth."

39

Laleh "It's like when the ashes beneath a fire begin to crackle – that's the women starting to speak up."

47

Mirwais "There's no hope left in Afghanistan. People came and went."

55

Malika "They came and killed people; they're like savages."

63

Rahila "Those 20 years were very good. Women were free."

71

Bahar "I wanted to be free."

81

Closing words

Preface

Afghanistan, a distant land in the shadows of the Hindu Kush mountain range; a country with an impressive history and culture. Over the centuries, this culture has been destroyed time and again – both from within and from without. History has been rewritten following government overthrows, bloody wars, and uprisings.

Women have had to find ways to maintain some kind of normalcy during the darkest of times. The take-over of the country by radical Taliban forces in the 1990s was a turning point for the way the world perceived the country. Women positioned themselves at the front lines of the resistance; but they did not do so as traditional resistance fighters. They did not arm themselves with guns and go into the mountains to ambush their enemies. No, instead they hid video cameras under the burqas imposed upon them, secretly filming the executions of women in public places. Risking their lives, they smuggled these recordings out of the country, and, in so doing, unleashed an unprecedented world-wide wave of solidarity. Western governments, civil society, and even Hollywood all stood up against the inhumane treatment that women in Afghanistan were made to suffer.

9/11 was a more recent pivotal point in Afghanistan's turbulent history; the beginning of a new global era. Afghanistan was liberated. The Western Alliance entered the country and ousted the Taliban, with the noble justification of freeing women from bondage and bringing the country into the twenty-first century. Justice, democracy, human rights, women's rights, education, and prosperity – these were the promises projected in cinema-scope around the world. Afghan women were flown to Western metropolises to stand before an audience and be celebrated at festive galas featuring opening remarks by heads of state, their wives, and the global feminist elite. Their efforts to preserve education for girls and medical care during the dark Taliban years – and to do so

underground – were commended around the world. The courageous women of Afghanistan formed the basis for a new era in politics, education, and culture.

The road to building a new society is fraught with many hurdles: enduring patriarchal doctrines, corruption, a fear of change – and the list goes on. Terror had not disappeared, however. Modern images of gender equality and justice inspired both enthusiasm and fear in equal measure. Even so, the people have begun their gradual journey in the right direction. A window has been opened; a hopeful glimpse of the future. Yet violence remained a constant companion of daily life. Women did as they have always done, bravely helping to build a new society. They entered parliament, schools, and universities with great energy and zest. However, they and their families often paid a high price. They did everything they could to change their lives and contribute to the new Afghanistan – but they were not always able to succeed. Time and again they would be confronted by a wall of tradition and terror, and many had to leave their beloved country behind. They now live with us in the West, in Germany. Many are isolated, disoriented, and traumatized. Once again it is they who hold the family together, who have to rebuild the future against all odds, and who really want to do so.

In this booklet you will meet some of these women. They have participated in our MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace program in Hesse, Germany. MotherSchools are gathering places where women can build up their self-confidence, where they consciously learn to strengthen their function as role models for their children once more. With MotherSchools they have a common platform to openly discuss the highly stigmatized topics of terror and violence with their children, thus shielding them from susceptibility to extremist ideology.

These women share the enduring hope that a window to a new world will open up. In each one of these stories it becomes clear that the window they once saw was quickly closed again. For some sooner, but for most – temporarily and hopefully not permanently – with the Taliban's invasion of Kabul in August of 2021.

With a courage fuelled by despair, these women have raised their voices and it is imperative that we hear them. That is their right and our obligation. On the following pages they speak to us and share their stories. They are in no way asking for pity or sympathy. They want the world to know that they had to leave their homeland, their

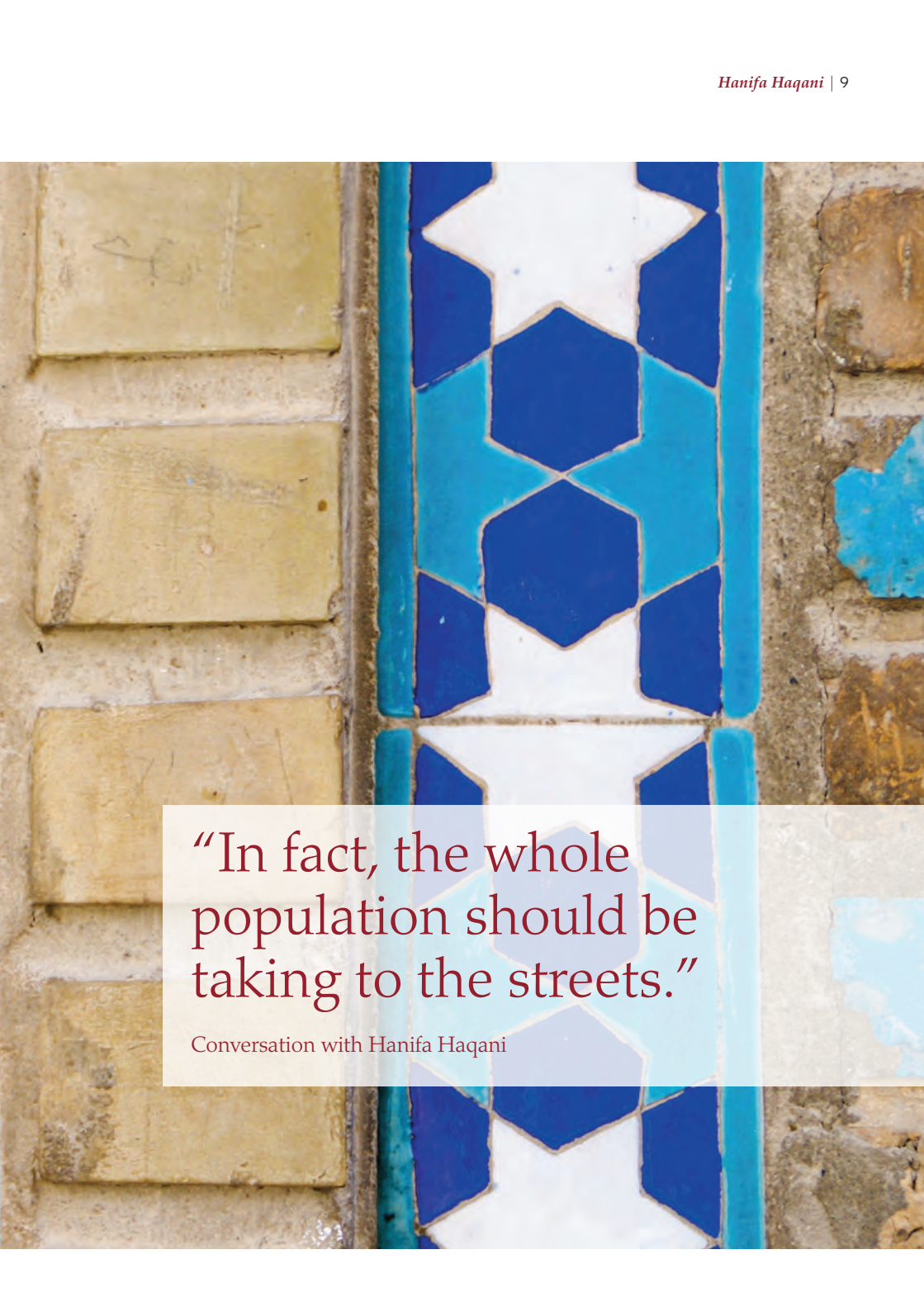
families, their whole world behind. Not to chase prosperity in the West, but to bring themselves and their children to safety. They had to leave behind all that was near and dear to them: their cities, villages, and the familiar landscapes. The women of Afghanistan became the pawns of global players with geopolitical interests in the region.

Our opportunity and our challenge is to launch a global dialogue. We now live together and must strive for peaceful coexistence. Let us take this situation as a step-by-step opportunity and a challenge to develop a new, global dialogue. What should be the aim of such a dialogue? The emphasis ought to rest on building an equitable world based on democratic principles, the rule of law, and human rights. The women of Afghanistan have their sights set on building and living in an open society. They see how their families and country at large would benefit. Diametrically opposed to their dreams and aspirations are autocratic structures and extremist ideologies. Despots, extremists, and their henchmen target and oppose democratic movements that favour the participation of the population, equal rights for women, and reconciliation efforts with warring factions. Fending off the allure of extremism is only possible where individuals are resilient enough to see through false promises and propaganda. To persevere in the face of terror demands that the voices of dissent do not go unheard; that the contributions of 'upstanders' are being valued and not falling on deaf ears.

The women whose stories fill the following pages are contemporary witnesses. They are the women of Afghanistan. They are the face of a country that has been defined by cycles of tyranny over the centuries. Women were the target throughout, and superimposed patriarchal expectations and values have shaped their lives to this day. For many women, however, this climate of repression has not led to wilful subordination; rather, it has fostered resistance in various forms. The women you are about to meet have come to understand that male dominance is not a safe refuge. Each of these women in their individual ways have stood up to a system stacked against them, a system based on and rooted in gender discrimination. Their stories of resilience are lessons to current and future generations. They are Afghanistan's witnesses of history and the harbingers of a peaceful tomorrow.

Edit Schlaffer
March 2022





“In fact, the whole population should be taking to the streets.”

Conversation with Hanifa Haqani

Hanifa Haqani founded the Rumi imPuls association, which cooperates with Women without Borders to implement WwB's 'MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace' programme in Hessen. Hanifa was born in Afghanistan and came to Germany in the early 1980s.

You fled to Germany more than 40 years ago. How did that happen?

We had to flee because my grandfather was the Shah's Defence Minister. When the communists came to power, he was put under house arrest after he refused to cooperate. My father deserted because he did not want to fight against his own people. He first hid in our cellar and finally fled to France on a forged passport. I can remember my father's stories well – he talked about how terrified he was of getting on a plane with fake papers. His older brother had already finished studying Law in Nice.

And how did your family's story continue to unfold?

My grandmother organised everything to save her children and grandchildren. She first sent my mother and my youngest uncle to Pakistan. She herself travelled to Mumbai with my grandfather. The family eventually came together in India, from where we flew to Germany. The journey from Afghanistan to Pakistan took us over the Khyber Pass by truck, which was quite intense; though it doesn't compare with the escape routes used today. We were a well-off family, so things were very different. We were a total of nine people on the road.

Your parents and grandparents left everything behind. A secure life, their contributions to society ...

Yes, especially my grandmother. She ran a large household and had visitors every day. She made a name for herself and even had a chauffeur. I cannot remember much though because I was only four years old.

Did you ever go back to your old home?

No. And I really regret it now; but I didn't dare. I thought to myself: "I couldn't stand wearing a headscarf. And besides, people there are socialised very differently to myself." I was afraid that I might be too provocative.

You founded the Rumi imPuls association and now work closely with Afghan families.

I've been working with Afghan people in Germany for 20 years. With the great wave of refugees in 2015, I noticed that among the youth who arrived there were countless who were deeply disturbed. Many who came to us had contact with the Taliban and had even worked with them. I joined forces with others who felt that these youngsters, who had been so extremely de-socialized, who were struggling with incredible trauma, needed our acknowledgement – but also education and work.

So you have dealt with youths who cooperated with the Taliban. How is this to be understood?

These young people were born and raised in a country run by radicals. When there are no other prospects, it can even prompt them to become child soldiers for the Taliban. Radicalised groups then go to refugee camps and find children there for their wars. The Revolutionary Guard in Iran is doing the same thing. They gather Afghan youngsters and make promises to them and their families. The Al-Shabab in Somalia use the same tactic. It is their recruitment method.

Once they arrive here, what do young people need to overcome all this?

Parents were already aware of where things were headed back in their home countries. They sent their children to seek asylum elsewhere, with the promise that they did not have to die now, that they could have a new life, that they could have everything. Then they come here and, of course, they don't get everything.

What does Rumi imPuls try to offer them?

We do political and social education workshops, including topics such as equal rights. Many of the boys have never had any contact with women. They come here with different convictions, such as, "I resolve conflicts with violence." We try to teach them that conflicts can also be resolved without violence. Our work is very needs-oriented.

You don't only work with Afghan groups ...

We have a variety of groups. When I think of the Afghan youth who come from the Revolutionary Guard, they are anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli, and that results in other needs. Then we have the Syrian Palestinians who come from refugee camps in Syria and are also against the Israelis. The most important thing in their case is that they have what I call "deep heritage pain". They have inherited the pain of their great-grandfathers and grandfathers. In their upbringing, they were taught that they must restore their great-grandfather's honour. This is harmful to these children because they can't actually live their own lives. They can't express their own individuality. Instead, they have to accept the fact that they will have to return to restore their grandfather's honour. This is reflected in their entire being.

This is a tall order for these youngsters, but also a challenge for our society.

A very pressing concern currently is that the boys are being blackmailed into returning – otherwise their family members will be killed. We already had one young man who wanted to fly back.

How does this play out? How do the families find out?

It's extremely multifaceted, but here's an example: the Taliban know who has worked with them, who had dealings with them, and who went to their schools. These young people are tracked down, and if they can't be found, then their families are pressured into giving up a phone number. If they refuse, they kidnap younger siblings, for example, and torture them. If they can get a hold of a mobile phone, they sometimes succeed in locating whom they are looking for. Then they send them messages to say they should come back to Afghanistan immediately or their family will be killed. The Taliban want the youth who they have already trained and invested in to return.

That's all so brutal.

Yes, that's war.

Strengthening mothers who are here with their families and giving them support is very important.

Exactly. Working with them in the first place is important. It is also key that these teenagers have respect for women. Their mothers are the first women who must demand it.

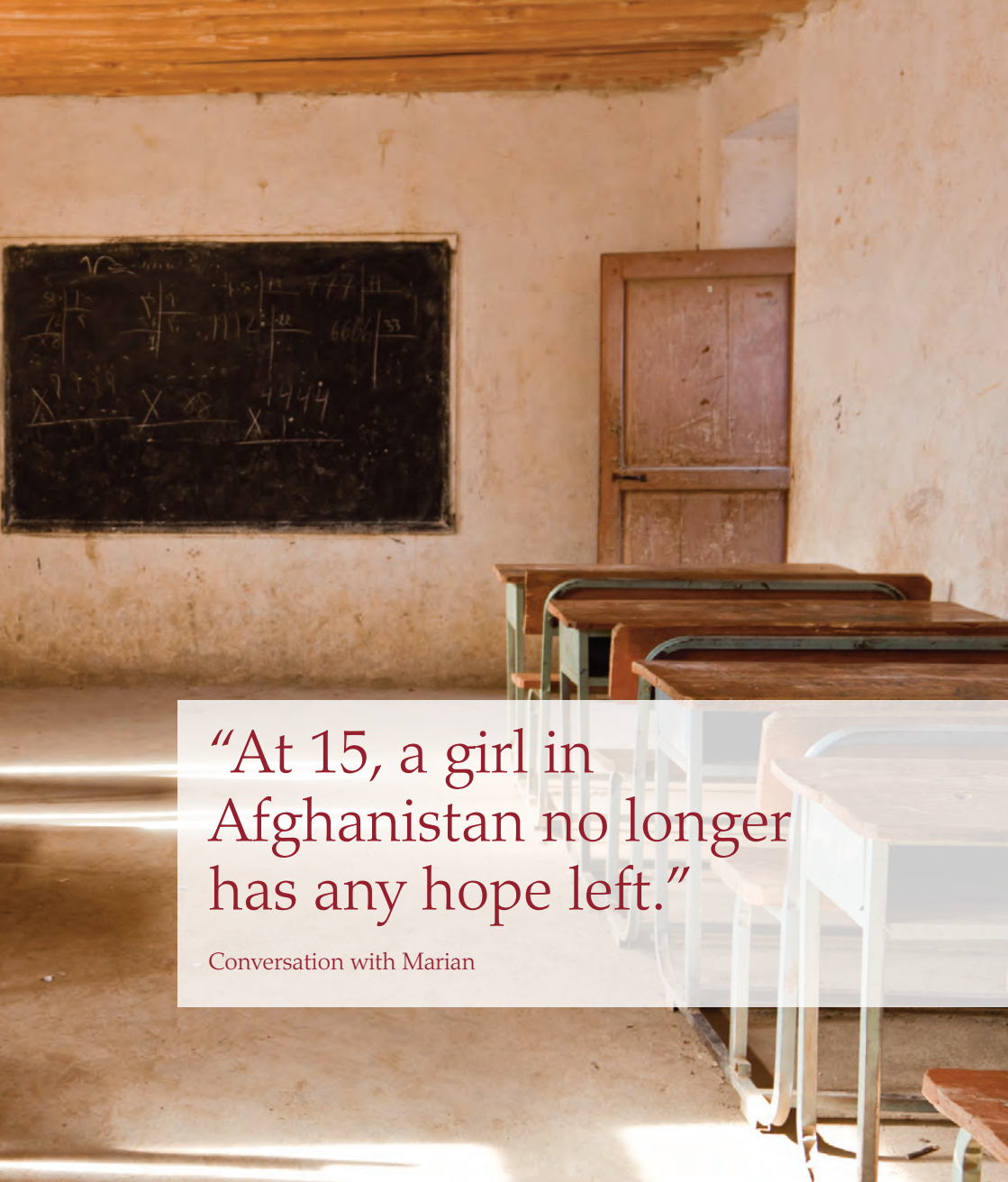
How do you view the current women-led street protest movements across Afghanistan?

I think it's good. In fact, the whole population should be taking to the streets. What are they going to do... murder everyone? Essentially, everybody should be protesting. But the problem is that people are starving right now, and there is no energy for anything else. That's what's going on right now.

But women, of course, are taking to the streets, and that's a good thing. They're thinking about the future, because it's really about their future.







“At 15, a girl in Afghanistan no longer has any hope left.”

Conversation with Marian

Marian is 53 years old and has five children. Her three sons live with her in Germany, while her two daughters are in Iran. She has been a single parent for 21 years. Her husband was murdered by the Taliban. She has been living in shared accommodations for four years and is waiting for her asylum request to be granted.

Before we began this conversation, you told me that your mother died in Afghanistan a few weeks ago. What memories do you have of your mother – would you like to talk about it?

It's very, very difficult to talk about it. To me, the worst thing is that I was not with her. She lived to be 80 years old. We talked on the phone every day.

Your mother had a long life and saw several regimes come and go in her time. What was the return of the Taliban like for your mother?

When the Taliban invaded in August 2021, my mother was not happy about it. No one was allowed to work any more; children had to stay at home, and my sister as well.

And how did you grow up?

With four sisters and a mother who was very much in support of us going to school. Even when it was no longer allowed, everything was tried to ensure that we were able to attend. I also had half-sisters and we were 13 girls in total. My father had three wives.

What's it like growing up with two additional mothers?

We all lived together in one house. My mother, and also my other mother, breastfed me. My father had a kind of restaurant and he used to give us money so we could buy ourselves something. He died about 11 years ago.

When you think back and remember yourself as a little girl in Afghanistan, what do you think of? What images come to mind?

I can no longer remember very well. I was married off when I was 15. I do, however, remember my third mother very clearly; she was very young.

There were some little spats and discussions between us, because she was so young.

That probably wasn't always easy.

No, not for me nor for my mother. It's difficult when two additional wives come along.

What made the situation so challenging?

My father had to do everything on his own. He had to earn a living for us all, had to be our sole provider, because we were all women. Women were not allowed to work. Sure, we cooked and helped out in the restaurant, but he ultimately had to provide for us all by himself. It was also difficult for me, growing up with three mothers and a very large family.

You were married at 15. What was that like?

All my sisters got married at 15. I wasn't allowed to decide anything, I was very young after all, so my parents made the decision. My husband comes from a distant branch of the family. One of my sisters was already married into that family. Then they came along and also wanted to ask for my hand in marriage.

Were you aware of what was going on?

I did know what was going on. I wasn't pleased at first, because my sister was not doing well in the family she married into. Her husband was always ... well, he wasn't nice and was always in a very bad mood. I cried and actually didn't want to be married into that family. I was told, "No, he's very different, he's definitely sweet." So then yes, I accepted it.

At 15 a girl has many dreams. What were your dreams?

At 15, a girl in Afghanistan no longer has any hope left. You couldn't even go to the Qur'anic school or mosque to study. At 15, you were supposed to get married. The only hope was to get into a halfway decent marriage. You couldn't know what kind of person the man would be.

How were the first years with your husband?

He was a good man, eight years older than me. He worked in the government at the time the Soviets were in power. He remained a government employee until the Taliban took over in the early nineties.

Was that a good time for you as a family?

We lived with my brother-in-law, who was much older than my husband. He was in charge of the household. When he loved his wives or did good things for them, my husband was good to me as well; if he beat his wives, my husband would beat me too. My husband couldn't even give me permission to visit my parents for a single night. It was my brother-in-law who had to give me permission. This went on for about 20 years, then we fled to Iran and we parted ways.

Do you have memories from the time when the Soviets were in Afghanistan? What was the situation like for women back then?

“The Taliban entered the school at night and wrote on the blackboard: ‘For every girl who comes to our school, we will kill mother and father.’”

I was six or seven years old. I went to school and it meant freedom for us. Women were very free, but the population was divided: some were in favour of the regime; others were against it. And so the Mujahideen emerged, and the war began.

You also experienced Taliban rule when you were a child.

Life under the Taliban was incredibly difficult. My parents sent me to school anyway, but I could only go for six years. They burned down my school.

That must have been an incredible shock.

The Taliban kept threatening that they would kill mothers and fathers who sent their children to school. They went to my school at night and wrote on the blackboard: “For every girl who comes to our school, we will kill mother and father.” We read that in the morning and got extremely scared.

It was brave of parents to continue sending their children to school.

Yes, that's why we all had guns at home. My parents said, “They can't do that; they can't kill us.” We went to school until they set it on fire. I was 12 or 13 years old at the time.

Politics have had a very big influence on your life.

I've had no peace since I was six years old.

When did you and your husband decide to leave the country?

We had to flee when the Taliban came and seized power, because my husband worked in the former government. We didn't even have passports. We fled to Iran.

Was it difficult for you to leave Afghanistan and your family?

Yes, it was a very difficult time. Two of my brothers-in-law also worked for the government. When the Taliban arrived, they killed them both. They simply removed them from the family, killed them, and threw them into the river. After that, we fled. It all happened very quickly. We escaped over the mountains on horseback. I had my three little children with me. We got separated from my brother-in-law.

Your husband returned to Afghanistan a few years later.

The Iranian government put pressure on us, saying, "Either you go, or your whole family will be deported with you."

And then your husband died fighting?

It so happened that the Taliban were waiting at the border to Iran. We don't know who gave them the information that a group of 31 men would be arriving. The Taliban were waiting and there was a fight. They killed everyone, including my husband. We don't even know where he is buried. They were betrayed.

So you were a single mother with six children?

It was hard for me. Women were not allowed to work outside the home. Clothing items were brought to us, and my daughters and I worked in the apartment, embellishing them with beads or little mirrors. That's how we financed ourselves.

Why did you decide to leave Iran after 10 years and go to Germany?

When my boys got their ID cards at 16, we were all called to a government office, where they said that my children should return to Afghanistan to spy for Iran. They told me, "You won't have to work any more. We'll give you money in exchange for your sons going back." So I called my sister-in-law in Germany and she told us to pack up. Then we fled. They would certainly have ended up the same way as my husband.

That was the second time you fled: this time from Iran to Germany.

We went to Greece first, then on to Serbia. We walked with smugglers for two days and two nights. We were officially accepted in Hungary; yet still we continued on to Germany.

Do you talk with your children about your flight?

No, we don't talk about it. My children are well integrated here. They go to university and have jobs. We've left all of that behind us. It's unimaginable how it would have been if my sons had gone to the Taliban – if they had had to fulfil that mission for Iran. But we've left that all behind. We arrived and now we are living in peace.

“If you don't have a mother and you don't have a homeland, then you have nothing any more. I'd like to tell the world that we're homeless.”

The situation in Afghanistan is currently very dramatic. What news do you get from Afghanistan?

Families have to sell their own children because of hunger. I was in touch with my mother by phone until she died. My sister now has that phone and she calls me. Every day.

Of course, the situation is particularly dramatic for women. They have lost everything.

Yes, the women of Afghanistan have become nobodies.

Do you have the feeling the world is looking away?

I hope that people will look at Afghanistan again. Those who still have something can afford a bit more; but those who have nothing will surely die.

Where do you see yourself in five years' time? What hopes do you have for yourself?

In five years' time I would first of all like my stay here to be approved, so that I can live here. Then I would just like to get a little job that allows me to get out, because my children are already grown up.

You still have a long life ahead of you, after all.


I am old. I am 53.

That's still young.


If I had been born and raised in Germany, then I wouldn't even look old if I were a hundred.

My last question: do you have a message for the world?

I'd like to tell the world that we're homeless. We have no homeland any more. It's often said: just ten more years and everything will calm down. If you don't have a mother and you don't have a homeland, then you have nothing. It's all over. I hope that my children will go their own ways; otherwise, with the way things are looking now in Afghanistan, it's all over. One thing I'd still like to do is go to Mecca; I want to do the Hadj.







“I miss my home: the air,
greenery, mountains,
sleeping on the roof, and
gazing at the stars.”

Conversation with Amira

Amira is 26 years old and has three children. Terror and violence have defined her life. She had never experienced security; not even in her home and family. Through strength and resolve, she managed to save herself and her children.

Please tell me about your childhood memories in Afghanistan.

I lived in Afghanistan until I was seven, then we went to Iran. My father died there and we returned to Afghanistan with my mother. When I was about 15, I was married off. That's a little over ten years ago now. I can hardly remember anything; I was so small. We came from Kunduz but weren't safe there, that's why we left our home.

What was life like in your parental home?

My father was a very kind person, and so was my mother. They already had problems between themselves because my father had a second wife. There were always disputes and complications between my mother and the other woman. Apart from that we had a normal life.

Can you remember what the points of contention were?

My mother of course got jealous when my father was with his other wife. This stuck with me. In Afghanistan, you don't ask your mother, "What's bothering you – what's wrong?" I could only see that she wasn't doing well, and that she was jealous.

Your mother was probably very young when she married.

I don't even know which regime was in place at the time. I only know that my uncle and grandfather were taken from the house at night and killed. I think it was under the Russians. My father actually wanted to marry my mother; but then my uncle's wife then became a widow, and in Afghanistan a man marries a widowed sister-in-law, so that she doesn't remain alone. Then my mother became his second wife.

How many siblings do you have?

We are five sisters and one brother. We were doing well. Then, after my father died, I tried to play the part of the head of the family. I wanted to support my mother and give her strength.

How old were you when that happened?

I think I was ten or eleven.

What motivated you to take on the male role as head of the family?

I took on the role because I was the eldest and my brother one of the youngest. My mother had to lug heavy sacks of flour around, so I did that for her.

There were times when I wished I could just wear my brother's clothes, and I even said to my mother, "Buy me boy's clothes." That way I would have been able to go outside.

"My father died when I was around ten or eleven, so I tried to play the part of the head of the family. I wanted to support my mother and give her strength."

So being able to leave the house was not a given for a girl?

When I lived there it was extremely unsafe. You could play in your neighbourhood, but any further away was too dangerous for a girl.

Which regime was in power at the time?

Karzai had just become President. I was so happy that I was allowed to go back to school. That wasn't possible in Iran, because I didn't have an ID card, I didn't have a passport. So, for four years I sat at home all day. However, it was unsafe in our district; it was dangerous. Even so, I went to school from the fourth to seventh grades. Then I got engaged and they wouldn't let me continue. I had to stay at home again.

Although this was also at a time of a certain degree of liberalisation – when the Americans and other countries came to Afghanistan?

Well, we observed the Europeans and Americans from afar. They built a hospital near us, but we also heard a lot of bad things – a lot of conspiracies. We were so narrow-minded that we believed them. We were told that the Westerners would throw acid in our faces if we went outside. And it's not like here in Germany; kids don't keep asking until they get an answer. We just stopped asking.

“Those words, ‘You have to have a man with you’ are still etched into my mind.”

Even so, your school years were a carefree time.

That was the best time for me. Even though I had a lot of difficulties, because I didn't start until fourth grade and had to catch up with everything. No one at home could help me; they didn't quite understand. But it was still nice.

When I wanted to start eighth grade, I became pregnant and then I was no longer able to walk the long distance to school.

I suspect you knew that you were going to be married off. What did that trigger in you?

I knew, but I didn't want it. I resisted it. And when I got pregnant, I cried a lot. At school, the others would always touch my belly and say, “Your baby is coming soon!” I always thought to myself, “Why do I have to experience this? Why did I have to get pregnant now?”

Did you try to talk to your mother about postponing your marriage?

The situation in Afghanistan was such that no woman was allowed to leave the house alone. Those words, “You have to have a man with you” are still etched into my mind. Time and again I asked, “Why did my father die?” The man of the house was missing. The situation was simply that the Taliban who held our city did not allow us any freedom of movement. And so, I got married – even though I didn't want to. My husband was a

commander, his father was a commander. I also heard that these men were very difficult men in the family.

What were your first years of marriage like?

He was very narrow-minded and didn't let me do much. He held me back. With that kind of a husband, you aren't even allowed to visit your own family. My husband was the commander of our district.

At night I lived in the fear that the Taliban would come – that they would take us from our home and abduct us. Once I got to Germany, I could finally say, “I can sleep peacefully”. But even here, I still have nightmares about the Taliban coming to abduct me from my apartment.

“But even here in Germany, I still have nightmares about the Taliban coming to abduct me from my apartment.”

It sounds like you were always under a lot of pressure.

Yes, this started when I was eleven. I didn't even have my period yet when they started coming over to ask me to get married. I was allowed to talk with him in the house. That was the first time I had ever been alone with a boy. I was scared, because in Afghanistan you are not allowed to meet a boy alone. He always pressured and frightened me. He continued to be like that when we were married. Whenever I went to visit my aunt, he would always ask, “Why again, and what for?” As such, the nice day I was meant to have was over before it had even begun.

Did you worry that he would use violence to get what he wanted?

I knew from his sisters that he was bad – that he forbade them things and treated them harshly. When we got married, we all lived in one house. When I had to fulfil my marital duties, I felt so ashamed that I needed to take a shower afterwards. And if I didn't feel like it, he would threaten me. I was ashamed when I saw my in-laws the next day; how could I look at them? They knew what I had done at night. He threatened me with his

gun if I didn't want to have sex. He threatened that he would throw grenades at me. I remember one night when he took a grenade, held it to my foot, and said, "If you don't have sex with me now, I'm going to open this." I was very scared. And every time he threatened me, I said, "Okay, it's fine, I'll have sex with you, I'll sleep with you."

There was clearly no way out for you.

I always hoped that he would get better. I was also very afraid that he would be kidnapped at some point, because of his job. Then my children wouldn't have a father either, just as I had had no father. It was also hard to watch how he would treat the female members of the family. And every time something went wrong in the family, I was told that it was my fault – when really it was he who was behaving badly. I always made an effort to get everyone together. I had a closer relationship with his sisters than he did.

All this must have been a huge challenge for you as a young woman – essentially still a girl.

At that time, I wanted to go to school so badly: to become independent, to read a newspaper, to read a book. None of that worked out. Even when I was very pregnant, I still had to bake bread for the whole family. My father-in-law said, "You have to learn to run the household, you are the oldest daughter-in-law." I tried to do the easier chores, so I could also have time for my son. I swept the yards and cooked.

What happened next in your life?

When the Taliban took Kunduz in 2015, we had to flee. They took all our possessions; we only had a small plot of land left and were no longer allowed to leave the house. My daughter was born on the road. My son was only 11 months old. We arrived in Germany on 14 February 2016. I was happy that we finally left. I always said, "Let's leave and start a new life." We had a lot of enemies.

Do you want to talk about your escape from Afghanistan?

It was a tough journey. I remember the truck in which we had to sit with so many people. The smuggler suddenly wanted more money and my husband got into a fight with him. The man pulled a gun on my husband. My daughter was only two weeks old. From Iran we went by car to the Turkish border, and from there we had to cross the mountains on foot. A young man helped me carry my daughter. The mountains we

crossed were very high. From Istanbul we headed to Greece by boat – there were so many people on it. We were even on YouTube. The Turkish coast guard came so close to us that we thought our boat would capsize.

You must have been incredibly scared.

My son's limbs were blue from the cold and his eyes looked strange. My daughter was wrapped in a garbage bag and we kept lifting her up to show that there were children on board. I've put all that behind me. There is only one person who kept getting in my way.

*“Whenever I complained,
my husband’s family
laughed and said, ‘Look at
how strong he is – even in
Germany he beats his
wife.’”*

Who?

My husband.

Do you remember what it was like when you finally arrived in Germany?

When I arrived, it was raining, and I love the rain. Everyone had a seat on the bus and all the people were nice, even to the children. That was very, very nice.

What was particularly challenging for you and your family in the beginning?

My husband. He had always been very aggressive. Even towards his own sister. She studied in Afghanistan and exhibited some independence – he wouldn't accept that. In the camp here, he beat me up over little things. This had been going on since we got married.

Did his family know about it?

Yes, of course. Whenever I complained, my husband's family laughed and said, “Look at how strong he is – even in Germany he beats his wife.” He also forbade me to go to German classes.

When he had to go to the hospital because of his hand, the situation escalated. He kept accusing me and asking, “Who are you having sex with? Who is at your house?” He

threatened me with a knife, as he didn't believe me. One night, he got me out of bed and stabbed me three times.

Did you seek help?

I ran out and up the stairwell and knocked on a door, but the woman who answered got so afraid that she slammed the door and locked it. A Somali neighbour called an ambulance, and the police also came. I was in hospital for two weeks. In the meantime, my children were taken into care by the child welfare services. He has been at a psychiatric clinic ever since, and I've been divorced for two years.

“I went to the MotherSchools. I really wanted to know how to provide my children with some answers.”

Now you're living a new kind of normality.

Yes, I'm learning German. My cousin and sister have also come to Germany, and I have my passport. I want to learn to read and write, and to become an independent woman.

You are well on your way.

Well, I also went to the Mother Schools. I really wanted to know how to provide my children with some answers. I used to think they would simply grow up – but now, after the MotherSchools, I know I carry a lot of responsibility.

The opportunities for and expectations of women are quite different in Germany. What do you think about that?

When I saw the women here, I thought to myself, “Wow, they drive cars.” And when my son started daycare, I thought, “I'll work and then when I have money, when I'm a bit rich, I'll open a daycare in my neighbourhood in Afghanistan.”

You would like to go back?


I would like to, but it isn't possible because of my in-laws and the Taliban. I miss my home: the air, greenery, mountains, sleeping on the roof, and gazing at the stars.

Now is a dark time. How do you see this once again new yet old Afghanistan?

Afghanistan is a mess. Some of my family members in Kunduz died in an explosion. When I lived there, we weren't allowed to do much either, but it was different. Now there is no hope left at all. If there is no hope for young men, then how can there be any hope for women?

Do you have a message for the world?

I've shared everything now. I'm very grateful that the women in Afghanistan are not being forgotten, and that they want to tell their stories.







“The Taliban takeover –
hell on earth.”

Conversation with Soraya

Soraya is 38 years old and a single mother of four children. The Taliban not only took her prospects of an education; they also took her husband – whom they murdered. Today, she lives in Germany with her children who “no longer have Afghanistan on their mind”.

What was your life in Afghanistan like as a girl?

We are five sisters. My father was a farmer. We lived as an extended family in the countryside until my older sisters went to school in Kabul. When the Soviets began bombing villages, my parents sent me to Kabul to my uncle's house. My oldest sister finished school but could not study because she had to work to feed us – her siblings.

That was very brave.

She was so strong that she didn't even feel like a woman; she was on the same level as men. She worked at the Ministry for Women's Affairs and was very much respected by men.

So there were different worlds for women in Afghanistan: traditional and progressive.

That's true. But even in Kabul, many women stayed at home and lived traditionally. Some families didn't let their daughters go to school beyond the eighth grade. Then it was over. In my family some girls went to study in Russia, but they never came back and are now scattered all over the world.

What did your life look like?

I'm the youngest and went to school for three years. Then the regime change happened. With Najibullah, everything became more difficult. There were constant rocket attacks and we couldn't go to school any longer. We had to return to the farm out in the countryside, to Jalalabad.

So you were back with your mum?

I stayed at home and was eventually married off to a man from the family. I didn't go

to school anymore. My big sister went to Russia with her husband. There was no hope to go back to Kabul, as we had no one there. And my father said, "What would a girl do all alone in Kabul?"

Politics has played a big role in your life. Was that an issue at home?

Yes, even though my father was just a farmer, he talked a lot about politics. We didn't support the Mujahideen. Instead, we cooperated with the new government. Back then they kept taking my father away and beating him up. They wanted money because they knew that our family was working for the government.

"When I talk with women in Afghanistan now, they say, 'The world has betrayed us.'"

You also experienced the Taliban takeover in the 1990s.

Yes, I got married during that time. My family was no longer allowed to work, and life changed dramatically very quickly. Schools were closed; women had to give up their jobs. I even had to take my husband to the doctor with me, as I wasn't allowed to go out alone. They kept close registers with the names of all the men to check whether they were going to the mosque five times a day.

It was like you were caught up in a bad storm.

It was worse than a storm, it was hell on earth. The banks were closed, there was nothing left, and everyone was without a job. They also took the men, especially those who worked in the government, and you never knew, "Will my husband be coming home?" Fingers were cut off; hands were chopped off.

What was everyday life like back then under the Taliban?

Many underground schools were set up in homes. It was dangerous, but children would just pretend that they were meeting up to study the Qur'an.

“As soon as you’re a widow, you have no say in the family anymore. You don’t even have the right to raise a child any longer; everything gets taken over and away. A brother-in-law has the responsibility to marry the widow.”

What was the atmosphere like when the Taliban were overthrown?

People got their freedom back. Schools reopened and people could go back to work. You must remember that women hadn't gone to school there for five years; and then they were allowed to go again. That was in 2001, the year my husband was killed. By then I had two little sons.

What happened?

My husband was a commander and was on duty at a checkpoint with fifteen other soldiers. It seems that one of them had been bribed by the Mujahideen – he probably got money and told them when my husband would be alone. And then he was killed. As soon as you're a widow, you have no say in the family anymore. You don't even have the right to raise a child any longer; everything is taken over and away. A brother-in-law has the responsibility to marry the widow. My sister contacted us from Germany and helped us so that we were able to come here.

How did your escape go?

My children were 12, 11, 8, and 1 at the time. Smugglers got us to Germany via Pakistan.

The Taliban are now back. Is this the end of the road for hope, especially for women?

Women are thinking, “We're dead now.” And at any time the men who worked for the government can be grabbed and taken from their homes at night.

How do you view the withdrawal of the Western powers?

The Americans and Europeans paved the way for the Taliban and even gave them hope. When I talk with women in Afghanistan now, they say, “The world has betrayed us.” Even our President has left. They just abandoned the people and left.

What do you believe will happen next in Afghanistan?

In five or six years, a new regime could take over, and the people would either have their freedom again, or it would be worse than under the Taliban. It could be IS that comes; there's talk about that.

And what's the next step in your life now?

My children won't have any future in Afghanistan. They don't want to relive what they went through there. My mother is still there and she's not well. That worries me. My children have integrated well, they don't think about Afghanistan anymore. I don't put any pressure on them. The girls don't have to wear headscarves either. They should define their own path. My children don't have too hard a time in Germany: they are part of a soccer club, go to birthday parties, and feel very comfortable. As a mother, you share your children's lives.

You also went to the MotherSchools.

That's where I learned about parenting, and my thinking has changed. We could talk about our past and we were asked about our concerns. There was someone there who asked us, and that was already so good. I also noticed that I had only ever looked out for my children. Through the MotherSchools, I realised that I also have to take care of myself. This is very important to me now.

Do you talk to your mother regularly over the phone?

We talk over video; she can't hear so well anymore. When President Ashraf Ghani left, she cried a lot. A week ago, she had a heart attack.

What do you hear from your relatives and friends in Afghanistan?

They have no hope left in them.

“Through the Mother Schools my thinking has changed. I was always only ever looking out for my children, and now I realise that I also have to take care of myself.”





“It's like when the ashes beneath a fire begin to crackle – that's the women starting to speak up.”

Conversation with Laleh

Laleh studied Dari, taught at Kabul University, and was active in a women's rights organization. Whereas her husband disappeared in the wake of the Taliban invasion in August 2021, she was evacuated to Germany with her children, as she was deemed to be at heightened risk of being abducted or killed by the Taliban.

You worked for the local authorities before being evacuated to Germany in the fall of 2021?

Yes, we built schools, supplied medical institutions, and dug wells.

And you made important contributions to the reconstruction of the country. It must have been a shock to realise that there was no way forward.

Yes, a terrible shock, and it still is. Now my hands are tied, I can't do anything!

It's like being trapped.

I still wake up in the morning and think to myself, "It's time to go to work". And when I'm fully awake, I remember that this is no longer possible.

You're also in contact with your family in Afghanistan.

I always think about the people who stayed behind. Even when I drink a glass of water, I think to myself, "What do they have at home?" Nothing.

You're now over 50 years old and have witnessed several regimes. You grew up in an educated, enlightened family. What was it like to be a girl in your family?

I can't help but think of my father. He always had a book in his hand. My brother and I were the same way. I had everything. We never thought we needed a better apartment or more. We only thought about learning, achieving, and getting good grades. I grew up in a 'family of light'.

That's a very lovely way of describing it.

In Afghan, 'light' means that education has value – that a woman can choose her

husband, that she can decide what to wear. It means that women and girls can make their own decisions.

How did you meet your husband?

He had a leading position at the University; that's where we met.

You got married and quickly had children.

Yes, our first child was born in the middle of my final exams. But my husband was the one who encouraged me to work again: "You've studied so much; I don't want you to stay at home. Why don't you go to work?"

Your country has a long history of turmoil.

When I think about my grandparents, they saw two kings in Afghanistan. There were many regime changes for my generation. That's how it was when we were young; and now we are older and it's still the same.

"I still wake up in the morning and think to myself, 'It's time to go to work.' And when I'm fully awake, I remember that this is no longer possible."

How did you experience the Taliban invasion of Kabul in August 2021?

I was told that the Taliban had invaded when I came home from school. I immediately phoned my husband; just then he was in his hometown in the province. He said, "Everything's quiet here, there's nothing going on here." Then we hung up. I haven't heard from him since.

He's disappeared?

Yes, he has disappeared.

Have investigators found any sign of life?

I have hope. It's said that when they kill someone, they throw the body in a public place. My hope is that he's still alive.

We are in contact with the young women who are opposing the Taliban. Will these protests make a difference – can they shake up the world?

Yes, absolutely. During the first Taliban regime, they ordered women to “put on the burqas”. But young women today are different. They're taking to the streets and rebelling. The Taliban have noticed this too. It's like when the ashes beneath a fire begin to crackle – that's the women starting to speak up. They're not going to give up, they're not going to retreat. When they have the opportunity to meet, they'll get together somewhere or gather in private to raise their voices.

“During the first Taliban regime, they ordered women to ‘put on the burqas.’ But young women today are different. They’re taking to the streets and rebelling.”

So much was built up only to be destroyed again. For sure, people haven't forgotten, and the current rulers will have to expect a lot of resistance.

The problem is that so many are leaving Afghanistan, and the country is now being handed over to people who are terrorists.

Do you think that the Western Allies left too hastily?

In my opinion, they left without thinking. It's like baiting someone

with a piece of meat and then immediately running away. The Taliban are busy with the bait.

Who is the bait in this scenario?

The bait, that's the Afghan people who they threw to the Taliban. It's like you're drowning and you're trying to get out. You're screaming, but everyone's watching and nobody's helping.

Now there's an effort to mobilise humanitarian aid. Will the Taliban respect women's rights if they get support from the West?

I don't think they will. The Taliban are on their own path, and the first talks with the West only strengthened their resolve.

Do you have a message to the world?

The Afghan people are hostage to the Taliban. I ask you to help the population. It's important not to be silent.

So ... the Taliban have not changed.

When I think back to the first Taliban era, I think of the pressure we all faced. My son was five and boys had to wear a turban when they went to school. The turban kept falling off his head, and then he was berated and beaten. I sewed him a hat that looked like a turban so he wouldn't get in trouble anymore.

What does your family tell you about the current situation?

My brother and sister-in-law are teachers. They haven't received a salary in months. Everything I hear from them really worries me. My younger brother was perfectly healthy. I saw a recent photo – his hair is turning grey and his cheeks are hollow. Two of my sisters are also still in Afghanistan. Maybe I should have stayed with them.

Sometimes I think I'll get cancer because I'm under so much stress. I hear that hunger kills you. That's a death sentence already. People sell a kidney; people sell a child. Everyone has become a beggar.

“It's like you're drowning and you're trying to get out. You're screaming, but everyone's watching and nobody's helping.”

Is there any hope?

The suicide rate has become very high; educated people are killing themselves. On top of that, there are thefts, assaults, and robberies – and also the killings by the Taliban themselves, who just enter houses and take people. Death is everywhere. A gun is pointed at you and kills you. On top of that, there's the starvation, the suffering that kills you.

Have you heard about the negotiations with the Taliban in Oslo?

I don't know what to make of it. How can you invite known terrorists, fly them over with the best planes, and receive them as guests? They should actually be grabbed by the collar and told, "What you are doing is not okay."

Do many Afghans feel this way?

Yes, this is how many of them think. People have no peace – they have to change location because they are being persecuted. And then you bring these people – who are terrorists – to Europe. And you sit them down at a table and treat them with respect. I recently learned that the Taliban provided families of suicide bombers with housing and money. Their sons have been honoured. And we don't even have a little bit of food.

A huge contradiction ... and now there are negotiations about sending support to the Taliban.

No matter which government received support so far, they've always distributed it amongst themselves; never given it to the people. They will only use the money to buy weapons to strengthen themselves further.

This reminds me of what a nurse said she thinks to herself whenever a girl is born, "You're going to have a very hard life in Afghanistan. I haven't known a single happy girl in the many years I've been a midwife." What do you think of that?

It's always difficult for girls and women. They always have to conform. First to their own family, and later to their husband's. For the moment, there's no future for either women or men in Afghanistan.

We've heard a lot about the abduction of women in recent weeks.

I'm suffering with them. I'm sitting here and I can't just go out and shout and draw attention to the situation. I'm angry at myself because I can't do anything.

It's interesting that the Taliban are so afraid of educated people.

Yes, because they themselves are not intelligent. They see the danger that educated people pose.

The last Taliban regime persisted for five years. What are your current hopes or fears?

When I see the hospitality that the Taliban are experiencing ... it could happen that they will be recognised and then get to rule. First the Russians left. The Americans couldn't manage it either and left. There's no peace in Afghanistan. When I think back to the first Taliban regime, the people were so oppressed they were saying, "Somebody come and get us out of here." They couldn't handle it anymore.

What were the last 20 years after the fall of the Taliban like?

A lot happened for women, but there was never peace. When I went to work, I wasn't even sure if I would get back home alive.

Things were that dangerous?

Yes, the danger came from the suicide bombers. You didn't know if a car would drive by and explode.

IS reportedly is trying to recruit again, supposedly also in Afghanistan?

It's being said that some who oppose the Taliban are joining IS. It's out of control. Afghanistan is a danger for the whole world.

What hope do you have for yourself and your family in the coming years?

My worries go in every direction, whether for my son abroad or my family in Afghanistan. I don't have much planned for my future. I've seen a lot of suffering – a lot of wars in my lifetime. I took my children and brought them here. I think of the future of Afghan children and hope that they will get to know peace. For me, it's over.


Yes, mothers are always so determined to build a new world for their children. Oh, and we met through the MotherSchools.

From the MotherSchools I learned that there are people out there who respect us – people who make us feel that we are no longer alone.

Is there anything else you'd like to add to our conversation?

I've said a lot and I still have many more stories to tell. My brain is like a history book that's very jumbled for the moment.





“There's no hope left in
Afghanistan. People came
and went.”

Conversation with Mirwais

Mirwais fled Afghanistan because she dared to choose her own husband. She was on the run for four years before arriving in Germany. She now wants to build a new life with her family there and eventually bring her mother-in-law to Germany as well.

Growing up in Afghanistan, what was your childhood like?

We were happy and very well off.

How old are you?

I fled Afghanistan in 2017 – I was in my early 20s at the time. I don't know exactly how old I am... my papers say 27, 28, or so – but I'm honestly not sure.

**What was it like growing up in Kabul? Was it a modern life or more traditional?
How were you raised?**

It was more of a traditional life. My father restricted us, didn't allow us any freedom, nor did my brothers. I wasn't allowed to go to school. He didn't want girls to be outside.

What vision did your father have for your life?

Whatever he decided had to be followed: whom I marry; who makes the fire. Everything was his decision.

Were your brothers allowed to go to school?

Yes, my brothers were allowed to but the girls weren't.

Did you ever think about rebelling?

No, we didn't have the courage to even mention that we would like to go to school.

When you remember Afghanistan, what images come to mind?

I don't really remember Afghanistan. The memories I have are images from when we were fleeing in 2017 – we were on the road for four years – in Turkey or in Greece ... that flight. When I close my eyes, I see the pain – the suffering we endured along the way.

With whom did you flee? Was it with your parents or were you already married at the time?

I fled with my fiancé: the man I had chosen on my own. I wasn't technically allowed to choose, since that was against the will of my father, my mother, and my brothers. We'd already been living together secretly in Afghanistan for some time. My husband always came home very, very late from work, and left early in the morning, so that my father wouldn't catch him. We were afraid that my brothers would come to take me back and punish me. At that time, I also gave birth to my children at home. A midwife came to help us. I was alone with the children a lot and suffered from depression. I didn't handle the children well. I didn't handle myself well. I just wanted to die, which seemed better than living.

*“I fled with my fiancé:
the man I had chosen
on my own.”*

And so you decided to leave Afghanistan.

We fled to Iran first, but I was even more afraid there, because young men were being sent back to Afghanistan by the Iranian government. I was afraid for my husband. What would I have done alone with two infant daughters?

How long did you live in Iran?

We were there for two and a half years. My husband was arrested once. I was extremely scared. I found out where they were holding him and together with his employer was able to get him out on bail. You always hear that young Afghan men are being arrested, tortured, and sent back. It was clear that we had to leave.

Then you left for Turkey?

We fled on foot and had a pretty hard time: my daughter tumbled down a hill; my husband was beaten up by soldiers. The girls were two and one at the time. My husband was beaten up all the time, but he was not alone; the other men also got their share.

Finally, we arrived in Turkey. My mother-in-law was with us. She had broken her leg on the run.

That was a tough journey.

Yes, and we couldn't go on because her leg wasn't healing; she couldn't walk. We were told, "Send your mother-in-law back to Afghanistan – nothing will happen to her; she is an old woman after all." Again and again we tried to get to Greece by boat. I don't even remember how many times we tried. One time the boat had a hole, another time

the inflatable boat burst and the children fell into the sea – I'll never forget that. The police would always return us to shore, but eventually we made it across.

"One time our boat had a hole, another time the inflatable boat burst and the children fell into the sea – I'll never forget that."

What happened to your mother-in-law?

She is back in Afghanistan. She's hiding from my family. My father is still looking for us.

I chose my husband by myself and married him.

I am Shi'ite, my husband is Sunni.

If my father were to find my mother-in-law, he would kidnap her and use her as leverage to blackmail us. If he could, he would kill us both.

It's incredibly brave that you chose your husband under those circumstances.

We met in a shopping mall: he had his own business there. He asked me to marry him, but my father didn't want to give me to a stranger; only to a relative. Then my great uncle came and asked me to marry him. But the moment my great uncle came into the picture, my husband asked me, "Do you love me?" and I said, "Yes." And when he asked me if I wanted to run away with him, I also answered with "yes". We escaped together.

Do you ever regret taking that step?

I never even dared to say that I wanted my chosen husband. I just ran away. I didn't

have the courage to stand up and say, "I want to marry him." I left in secret instead. I had to leave Afghanistan, because I knew that if my father caught me, he would destroy me.

This probably isn't how you dreamed your life would go when you were a young girl.

Just thinking about everything I experienced when I fled to Greece ... we lived in tents, there were rats and mice. But now we are in Germany, and we are hopefully going to get our residency permit.

My husband goes to school, my children can write.

I am very grateful for that. I can also go to school and learn the language. And I want to work. I want to earn money. That is my hope. I'm very satisfied with life here, even if we only have one room.

"My mother-in-law gave up everything for of us. She is in hiding because of us. She's worried for us. She says, 'I'd rather he catches me than you.'"

How long have you been in Germany?

For eight months. But I'm afraid that we'll have to go back to Greece, because that is where we first arrived.

The stress is making me lose hair, and I get so angry when my children act up.

What was the hardest thing to leave behind?

My mother-in-law. She gave up everything for of us. She is in hiding because of us. She's worried for us. She says, "I'd rather he catches me than you." If I get my residency approved, I'll get her over to Germany.

An impressive woman. Was she the only one who supported you?

Yes, a truly kind and loving woman. She loves me, she loves her son. She was always there for me.

Do you also have a father-in-law?

No. When my husband was very young, his father was killed by the Taliban, because he worked for the state – for the government.

Do you talk about your escape with your children and husband?

Some evenings I do. The thought of it stresses me out, and I get very sad. But we do talk about it – it's important to. The children can't remember Afghanistan at all, but they do remember our journey from Turkey to Greece, and the camp in Greece. My older daughter mentions it from time to time.

“My father didn't care which regime was in power. Even when women were freer, allowed to go back to school, and had more rights – his was the only word that mattered.”

It must have been very traumatic for you and the children.

When they fell into the sea on our way to Greece ... that was terrifying. Their lips were blue. Someone called the police, the Turkish police, from the water. They rescued us and brought us back to shore.

Do you feel that you've pretty much settled in?

Yes. We're already settled. My little one goes to kindergarten, the big one is in preschool. My classes

haven't started yet, but I'm already learning through YouTube. In five years, I want to get my driver's license, speak German well, go to school, find an apartment, and have my residency permit.

Let's return to Afghanistan for a moment. You experienced a series of political upheavals while you were growing up. Was that a topic of discussion at home?

My father didn't care which regime was in power. Even when women were freer, allowed to go back to school, and had more rights, it made no difference – his was the only word that mattered.

The news we have been hearing since the Taliban took over in August is dramatic. I can't say much about that because I can't read. But I hear it on YouTube. This regime has taken the women and the entire country backwards. It's a regression. There's nothing left. No schools, no rights for women, no wages.

If you had the opportunity to get on a big stage and send a message to the world, what would you say?

I would say, "Afghanistan has been left without hope. People came, milked it dry, and left again."

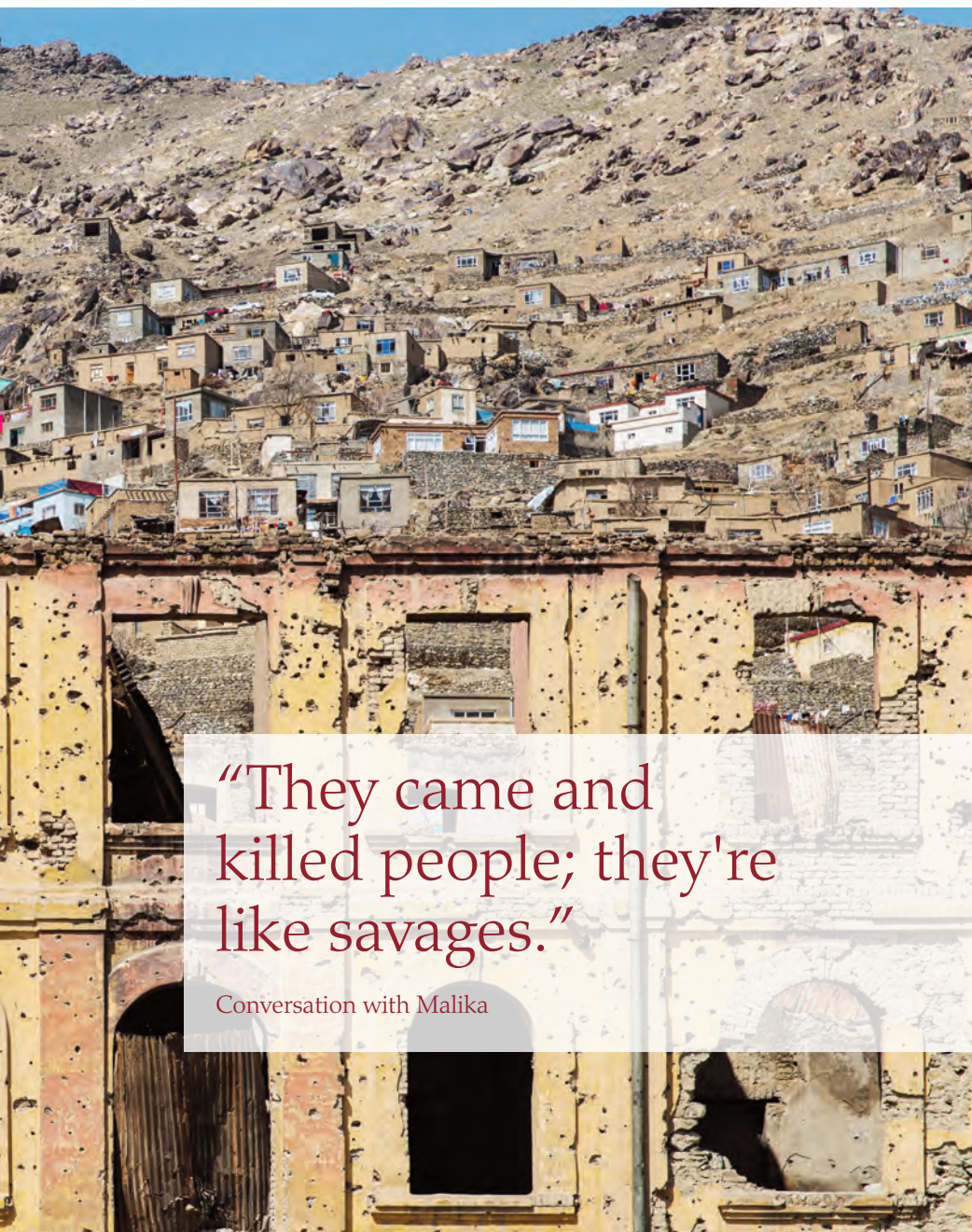
Afghanistan has been milked by many, and I hope that the Afghan people themselves will stand up for their country again; that they will do as well as the people here in Europe; that we can live in peace.

Is there anything else you would like to say to conclude?

I have shared the pain of my heart with you, and I feel a little better for it.







“They came and
killed people; they're
like savages.”

Conversation with Malika

Malika is 24 years old and grew up in Iran. She knows her homeland of Afghanistan only from funerals and family celebrations. The Taliban killed the men of her family. She was the driving force behind her family's escape.

I assume your parents fled to Iran during the first Taliban era?

My dad was a commander in Afghanistan, as was my uncle, and that's why they had to leave when the first Taliban generation took over. Our family was pressured into returning to Afghanistan, so my uncle went back. Then he was killed by the Taliban. That's ten years ago now. My father also died.

Where did your father die?

In Afghanistan.

How did he die?

We were in Afghanistan at a party. My father was in another room when men entered our house – we think it was most likely the Taliban – and murdered him.

How was that for you, as a child?

The family kept us children away from it. They said that everything is all right, that we should go to sleep, but I heard everything. We also had a pet dog, and they murdered our dog, too.

That must have been devastating. Did it cause a rupture in your family?

Yes, it's a heavy cloud that hangs over my family. My uncle had a lot of enemies and three wives with a lot of children he left behind. When he was still alive, we were fine. Even I was fine. I think if he had not been killed, we wouldn't be here. We would be fine where we were.

What was your childhood in Iran like?

It was definitely very tough. We had a lot of fields in Afghanistan that haven't been sold to this day. People are afraid to buy these fields. They're scared that something will

happen to them, too. Even I was afraid that something terrible would happen to me, because of my father's position.

What was the social climate like when you were growing up?

Everyone knows that the Iranians don't think much of the Afghans. At school, I didn't tell anyone that I was from Afghanistan; I was even afraid to mention it to my friends. I wanted so badly to have girl friends. I can't tell you why it's like that, but they feel like they are better than us. We're just refugees, and they wanted to keep everything for themselves. They would say, "You're without country, without honour."

Who looked after the family?

That was my brother. I can't say exactly what he did, but he took care of us. We had a pretty normal life. We were seven sisters and just one brother. We were all allowed to go to school, but when we reached a marriageable age it was over. If there is no money to go to university, it's better to get married.

*"I think if my uncle
had not been killed,
we wouldn't be here.
We would be fine
where we were."*

Sounds like your mother carried a heavy burden.

It was tough. But she always wanted us to be happy and tried to fulfil our wishes.

Can you give an example?

Here's an example: I was a brave girl. I once saw a blouse in a shop window, and my mother bought the blouse for me. She borrowed money from the vendor and agreed to pay them back in instalments. When she bought fruit, it wasn't all put on the table at once. Instead, it was divided up and everyone got something. She also always gave her share to us siblings.

You say that you were a brave girl. What dreams did you have?

I wanted to be a policewoman; but not because my father was a commander. I wanted

it for myself, with all my heart. But there was just one problem: the police school was far away and cost a lot. And when I was in tenth grade, my aunt came and asked me to marry her son.

You were still so young. What was your reaction?

I didn't want to, because we grew up together. He was like a brother to me. I cried and fought it. Then my mother persuaded me. "It's better if you have someone," she said. I also told him that I didn't want to.

"First, I was engaged but didn't feel like having any contact at all with my fiancé. I didn't want to."

Did you give in in the end?

Yes, my brother was just like my father: what he demanded had to be done. None of my older sisters had ever protested. One day, my brother came to me and asked, "Why don't you want to marry him?"

I didn't have a concrete reason in mind, so I simply said, "When I look at my sisters' lives, I don't want that." Then he said, "But he's a very nice boy, and he's from a good family. Would you rather be married to someone else, where you won't be

treated well? Is that what you want?" In the end, I agreed. After all, the guests were already in the house for the engagement. Everything was already set up, and they were only waiting for my answer.

Imagine if you had said no, with the engagement guests already sitting there. Would that have been conceivable?

I don't know. I can't say what would have happened. Maybe it would have been postponed for a week or something. As it happens, I had already been promised to him at birth.

It was very brave of you to even question the matter.

I am very grateful now – that I listened to my brother and mother. There was another man who wanted to ask me to marry him. I knew that if I said no, he would be next in line.

Then I would have had to take him. But when I now see the kind of a man he is, I'm glad I didn't go for him. He's no good.

How did your life go on after the wedding?

First, I was engaged but didn't feel like having any contact at all with my fiancé. I didn't want to. Only gradually did I soften and start talking to him. I was still able to attend school for some time, but then I got pregnant and didn't have the strength to go any more. When my child was born, we fled for Germany.

We went from Iran via Turkey to Greece and Macedonia.

From Macedonia we went on to Serbia, then to Hungary, Austria, until finally we got to Germany.

*"We came to Germany
to gain a level of respect.
I don't want my children
to be treated the way
we were when I was
growing up."*

How did you organise your escape?

We travelled with smugglers. It was winter and it was very cold. My son was barely two months old. We tried five times to get from Turkey to Greece, and each time we were picked up by the Turkish police and forced to go back.

Going through all of this as a family must have been very challenging. Did you always believe you were going to make it?

It was like this: my husband kept giving up hope and wanting to turn back.

I said, "No, we sold everything, we gave up everything, we have to keep going."

I cried and tried to talk him out of it. I gave him strength. Between Greece and North Macedonia alone, we had to try eight times before we finally made a successful crossing.

Unimaginable. Now you've escaped the violence and you've been in Germany for over four years.

I'm exhausted.

It's no surprise that you're exhausted.

We came here to gain a level of respect. We were in Iran, we were everywhere. We wanted to be treated differently here. I don't want my children to be treated like we were when I was growing up.

I immediately took a German course. I cooked lunch, went to German classes from 1 to 6 p.m. – all while breastfeeding my baby daughter on the side. I travelled an hour there and back to get to class. I took it all on myself. I learned Germany's constitutional laws. And what happened? They told us that we have to go back to Hungary.

We only found out at our hearing.

“Women had the courage to go out. But in truth, what can a woman do against these barbaric Taliban? They are savages.”

What do you think will happen next?

My daughter was born here. We received a deportation order for her, right after she was born. We got a lawyer to help us avoid deportation. That took four years. Imagine, my daughter was one week old when she was refused the right to stay. We were rather speechless at the time.

Unbelievable that the hearing only took place four years later.

Yes, that's just it. If I had had the hearing after a month and they'd said, “Go back to Hungary,” then maybe it would have been fine. Even though we were locked up in Hungary, they conducted interviews with us, and after that we were approved there. But there was no sense of respect and humanity. And now, after four years, after I have completed my schooling, my husband has a job, and my child has friends, they say, “Nope, now you've gotta leave again.” I don't understand it.

What went through your mind last summer when you saw the media images of the Taliban seizing power last? After all, your life and family have been severely impacted by the upheavals in Afghanistan.

It's the worst thing that could have happened. They came and killed people; they're like savages. The people are desperate. They have nothing left, nothing at all.

You must have seen the pictures of the young women who confronted the Taliban with banners in Herat and Kabul. What did you think?

I thought to myself: the men are sitting there among the Taliban and doing nothing. And I don't know if demonstrating will do much good if the world does nothing about the Taliban.

These women are so concerned that they are going outside. But you're right, the world is just watching.


Women had the courage to go out. But in truth, what can a woman do against these barbaric Taliban? They are savages. But these women are certainly incredibly brave.

These women have paid a high price. Many of them have been abducted and disappeared.

Yes. They will kill the women. We don't know for sure what they actually do with them. We just don't hear from them anymore – there's no news.

What is your message to the world?

There's a lot of misery in our country – a lot of bad things have happened – and nobody was looking. We don't know if the Taliban is here to stay. It could also be that they move on to other countries – that they expand. The important thing is that everybody hears about all the suffering in Afghanistan.







“Those 20 years were very good. Women were free.”

Conversation with Rahila

Rahila is part of the generation of thirty-year-olds whose parents fled from the Taliban to Iran and returned to Afghanistan when the regime ended. The man to whom she was married is a musician. Music is seen as haram by the Taliban, so they had to flee again.

How did you grow up?

We're three sisters and five brothers from my father's first marriage. My mum died in Iran, and one year later, when we returned to Afghanistan, my father remarried. With his second wife, we gained three more brothers and a sister.

It's incredibly sad that you lost your mother so early in life.

My mother was a very calm person. I was a wild child when I was little, and she was always able to calm me down. When my mother died, my sisters and I were married off. I was fifteen.

"I met my husband on my wedding night. I was in ninth grade when I was married off."

I wonder what went through your head. After all, this must have been a big change in your life.

He was my neighbour. Our fathers were classmates. I met my husband on my wedding night.

Were you prepared for this situation?

It was decided that way; I had no say in the matter. For me it was okay because my mother had died, and my father's new wife wanted nothing to do with us.

How did the relationship to your husband unfold?

My husband's family is a good family, and he always stood by me. He was in favour of my finishing school. I was in ninth grade when I was married off.

"I did my teacher training. I'm grateful that my husband stood by me and allowed me to do this."

What does your husband do?

My husband worked for the government, but he also made music.

Lovely. What instrument does he play?

Rubab – an instrument that looks like a guitar but is not a guitar.

You returned from Iran after the Taliban had left. A time of hope. Did it feel that way?

I can't really say. In any case, I did my teacher training. We all had to shape our own futures, and I'm grateful that my husband stood by me and allowed me to do this.

Staying with the political dimension: you returned to a situation where the dark veil that the Taliban had cast over Afghanistan was lifted. Was it talked about?

It was very good then. As a woman, you could go out with your child and have picnics in the park. You could organise your own free time – this wasn't the case before. We were free. You could move around freely. You also didn't have to wear the hijab anymore. That was really good.

Was the Taliban era talked about?

No, there was no need to talk about it. People didn't want to. When you were outside, having a picnic, people would say, "Oh, look how beautiful it has become! We are so free, we can sit out here freely – we couldn't do that before." Whether the Taliban had done something good or something bad was no longer discussed. People no longer felt the desire to talk about it.

Now the Taliban have returned. Looking back, how do you feel about the last 20 years? You were talking about Herat, where you lived freely and happily.

Those 20 years were very good. Women were free. We had access to education. And it was up to us whether we wanted to adopt Western values while still preserving our own.

When did you decide to leave the country?

Two years ago, things became restless in the villages around Herat. Everyday life became more dangerous: people were often robbed; there were kidnappings. People kept getting

calls: "We have your husband. You must give us money, then we will release him." We lived in fear.

My husband got threats from the Taliban because he taught music. So we decided to leave.

"By day the government was in power and at night the Taliban came."

What was the situation in the country at that time?

By day the government was in power and at night the Taliban came. They just intercepted my husband on the street. They dragged him into a car and said, "You're teaching in a school with foreign students, and that is all

haram. This is not allowed." My husband was a well-known musician – he gave concerts – and that is why he was threatened. They even threatened him with a gun, and they would have shot him.

Did you decide to leave Afghanistan quite quickly?

Yes, and it wasn't an easy journey to Germany. We were at sea for seven nights. Our boat to Italy was intercepted several times and returned to Turkey. And then we were told that we had to pay more money. "This time it's a great ship, you'll get there in one piece." We took that ship, and it was ancient.

You could hear the wood creaking as it went along. It was a ship for 35, and we were 90 people on it. You couldn't move. And all of a sudden it filled up with water, and for two days and two nights it didn't move.

We were at sea for seven days and I couldn't even think straight anymore. There was no water, no food. We lived from one day to the next.

What happened next?

We didn't make it to Italy. A rescue helicopter was sent to look for us. We were found, and a second ship was sent for us to move over to. We arrived in Italy, and nine days later we were in Germany.

What is your 'new life' in Germany like?

Four of us live here in one room. We have shared bathrooms with others. Whenever my daughter has to go to the toilet, I go with her to make sure that everything is okay.

Yesterday, for example, a young man went into the women's restroom. I pointed out that this is a women's restroom. He charged at me, as though he was about to hit me. The fear my daughter now has when she has to go to the toilet – it's really bad.

“We had a nice life in Afghanistan. A house, our professions. Now I feel really bad.”

How long have you been living at this accommodation?

It's been eight months. A long time. My two children have been going to school for a month now but we have no prospect of attending language classes yet.

What is your everyday life like?

In Afghanistan we had a nice life. A house, our professions. Now I feel really bad. I want to see a psychologist as well. My son is 15 now, and he still shares a room with us. There's a small room for one person next door. We asked if we could be given it, but that didn't work out. When I'm feeling bad, I just go to the bathroom to calm myself down. I don't have anywhere else to go. Sometimes we make music; that's our way of bringing back memories of home.

“The Taliban come to people’s doors at night – they just knock and shoot.”

So you're safe but it's still an extremely difficult situation for you, as a family. When you think of your homeland, the fears and hopes there, what goes through your mind?

It's not going to get better. It's going to get worse. Girls will maybe only be allowed to go to school until fifth grade. Girls will have to wear a burka or hijab again, like the Arabs.

How should the West behave in this situation?

Help the population. Do everything to help the population. The Americans brought in the Taliban and then they left.

I keep hearing that the quick withdrawal, without taking proper precautions, was a major disappointment.

That was actually the Americans' plan – to clear the way for the Taliban and then leave immediately. Now the people have to get by on their own. Nobody believed that the Taliban would come back again.

In your opinion, does it make sense to negotiate with the Taliban?

Yes. It's also good that women are taking to the streets. But fear is still strong.

The Taliban come to people's doors at night – they just knock and shoot. It's good that they're taking to the streets for their rights and freedom, but of course the fear remains.

Is the Taliban to be trusted, or do you think negotiations are hopeless?


I don't think it's going to work. They say that they are acting in the spirit of Islam, but where in the Qur'an does it say that girls aren't allowed to go to school?

When you now see this young generation of protestors, what are your feelings? Are you proud or do you think it's useless?

I fear for these women because no one will ask about them. When a woman disappears, people don't ask where this woman has gone. Is she still alive, or has she died? You can't know. I am afraid for them.

I share your feelings. What's happening is very scary. What is your message to the world?

I want to say that humanity matters. That it's not religion or faith that counts, but humanity. But I don't have hope anymore.







"I wanted to be free."

Conversation with Bahar

Bahar is 28 years old and studied law. She grew up in Kabul in a large family with three sisters, two brothers, an uncle, and cousins. Her rebellion against the patriarchal system left her with but one way out: an escape to Germany.

You were born into a fragile social and political situation.

Yes, I've experienced bad times. It wasn't easy for me to go to school, to study, and to work – mainly because my father had other plans for me. He used to say, "It's not good if you go outside all the time, it's not safe for you, you have to be careful." But I still went outside [laughs]. I worked, I studied.

What were your father's concerns?

He always said I had to work as a teacher, but I didn't want to be a teacher. I wanted to study Law, to work in politics. My father always countered, "You're a girl, that's not good for you. You can't go outside, and you can't speak for other women." He would have tolerated me being a teacher.

*"You are a girl.
You can't go outside, and
you can't speak for
other women."*

Did you have a difficult time during your childhood?

Yes, it was difficult, in the sense that as a girl you weren't allowed to leave the house at all. I had to watch my brothers go out to play, and us girls had to stay at home. My mother died when I was thirteen. After that we were raised by our grandparents.

All of a sudden, you were being raised by the older generation. What changed?

My grandmother was very strict.

She immediately started to prepare me for marriage, and to be good at household chores. My mother was always considerate of the fact that I had to study. With my grandmother, marriage preparations were added to the mix.

How did you feel about this twist of fate at such a young age?

My sisters were married off immediately when they were around 16 and 17, and they also had children very early. But I would constantly fight and argue with my father that I didn't want this.

Why do you think you were able to assert yourself, unlike your sisters?

I was clever about it, by telling my father over and over again that I would go to work. I would go to work and strengthen his name. And that's the reason my father was lenient with me.

“At school, I saw how free my teachers were. I wanted to experience that too.”

Did you have a role model?

How did such an idea get into a young girl's mind? After all, it was the time of the Taliban – of total

restriction, no freedom of movement, few opportunities.

At school, I saw how free my teachers were. I wanted to experience that too. And it wasn't just that I saw how my female teachers had some freedoms, but also one of my sisters who got married became a doctor. When I visited her, I saw how she had changed – that she put on modern clothes, made herself pretty – and that also touched me. I wanted to be free. We had a television as well, and on it I saw many things that changed me.

So your youth was defined by the Taliban. How did your family deal with that? Did you experience a degree of freedom or did you live in fear?

The effects of the Taliban's prohibitions were felt for a long time – by our parents and also in society. My parents had very bad experiences and suffered traumas. If women

spoke too loudly, they were beaten. And even in the post-Taliban period, people still followed those rules. People had become used to it. My mother was so traumatised by all the stress that she died of it. For example: she had to get food for the men and left the house to do so – in her burqa. If ever a burqa slipped and an ankle was visible, the woman was beaten. Because of these kinds of incidents, my mother became very ill. She was overwhelmed by stress.

How did your father treat women?

My father is depressed. And I do think it's because of the trauma of that time. Men couldn't go to work either, there was always war... and then all those strict rules. He was constantly terrified that we – his daughters – would be kidnapped.

Was he allowed to work during Taliban rule?

He was a police officer, and he wasn't allowed to work at the time. Neither he nor any of us were doing well.

How was it possible for you to study – how did you manage?

I graduated from high school. My father was very happy about this. I went to him with very good grades and begged, "Please let me study." He wanted me to be a Qur'an teacher for children. I didn't want that. I was a very cheeky and rebellious child.

How did it happen that you finally got your way?

I was constantly on his case. I kept going to him over and over, saying, "I'd like to apply here," and so on and so forth. He didn't budge for a week, and finally he said, "Okay, you can take this entrance exam. If you pass, you get to go study, but I don't think you will pass." So when I did actually pass the entrance exam, I went to my father and he was speechless. He didn't really want me to go study.

How come?

None of my relatives went to school. Everyone thought that girls were only there to cook, run the household, and have children. When I came home with good grades and even gave classes, however, he became increasingly proud of me. I often did my homework together with him; he was able to help me with legal questions. I could see in his face that he was very proud of me – that he adored me; he was beaming.

Did that change your life?

It was important to me to work and have my own money to buy clothes that I like. I gave the money that I earned to my father. I kept some of it for myself – for the clothes. When I went to college, I wore trousers. In my family everyone wore hijabs. I only wore a niqab because of the people.

So you financed your own studies. What did you do for work?

I took a part-time job as a teacher to respect my father's wishes. I worked in a public school where there were men as well, and I was afraid that my father would be against it. But I noticed that he had completely changed.

Were wedding plans being made for you again?

Yes. Someone was sent to me from my stepmother's family. But I didn't like the boy. We weren't on the same level; he wasn't educated.

How were you able to get out of the situation?

I told my father that he had to turn them down. He became very agitated and said that he had given me so much freedom, but that now I would have to get married. We had a lot of arguments. He put his foot down: "Whether you like it or not, you will get engaged."

How did you deal with this?

I tried to get my way by refusing food. By having a bad attitude. I stopped talking to my father. But I couldn't change his mind. Then he got me engaged to that boy. I still didn't want it.

Did he come to your house; were you able to get to know him?

Yes, but his visits always ended in fights. For example, my fiancé said, "Quit your studies, I don't want this to go on after the wedding." He was very bad to me. There was also a situation where he slapped me twice, and then I punched him in the stomach with my fist. I told him, "You have no right to hit me." He spread stories everywhere – that I have other boyfriends. My father believed everything my fiancé said and stopped me from going to university for several days.

Did he lock you up at home?

If my father said, "No one leaves the house," then no one left. If we had left the house without our father's permission, he wouldn't have let us back in.

Was it a question of honour for your father?

Yes. It was a matter of honour. Once I thought I would be killed because I didn't want to marry that young man. My father told us sisters that if I left my fiancé, we would all be kicked out of the house. In Afghanistan, you can be killed for leaving your fiancé. I argued a lot with my father. I got beatings because I kept saying, "I won't accept him, I won't accept him."

*"If we'd left
the house without our
father's permission, he
wouldn't have let
us back in."*

What happened next?

I had an operation, after which the young man began to distance himself. He said, "Maybe she isn't able to have children anymore." And then he didn't want me anymore.

However, in Afghanistan, when an engagement is broken off, the woman has to pay off the man. My family agreed: "You can buy your way out: if you buy your way out, you

can leave." My father didn't help me. I saved up, sold my cell phone, and borrowed money from my sister. After that, my father stopped talking to me.

That sounds like a terrible situation.

My father told me that it wasn't good for me to stay at home. I should leave Afghanistan and move to my brother's in Germany.

How did you react?

I loved working in Afghanistan but I had no alternative. My father made the decision. Also, my older sister had left her husband because he married another woman and beat my sister. So there were two situations in which my father had to fight for his honour. That's why I left.

So you decided to escape when you were just 20 years old.

I left with my sister and her two small children. Don't even ask how hard it was. It starts with the fact that in Afghanistan there's no visa for women travelling alone. That's why a cousin picked us up. It was the first time we had ever travelled, and all alone at that. We flew from Kabul to Tehran, and then we continued on foot. We had the phone number of a smuggler.

Of course we were afraid, because we had heard bad things about smugglers – that they use women, mistreat them.

There were many families on the move and when the smugglers asked us if we were alone, we always said, “No, no – we have family.”

When we left for Turkey, we had to go through a forest.

We were terrified. We didn't know forests in Afghanistan; everything there had been deforested by the Soviets.

*“In Afghanistan, you
can be killed for leaving
your fiancé.”*

What was going on in your mind?

The smugglers kept shouting that we had to run faster. I was running

but didn't know where I was going. There was the fear that animals could show up and eat me or hurt me, or that the smugglers might do something to us. As girls in Afghanistan, we hadn't even gone out to buy bread, and now we found ourselves in this forest.

You left an isolated existence and experienced this horrendous journey.

We were thrown out. Our father didn't care if we died out there. He was too much of a coward to kill us.

So, it was all about his honour.

He wanted his honour back, and he couldn't get it back with his daughters in the house. He sent us to our deaths, so to speak.

You made it and survived.

With a lot of luck.

Are you still in touch with your father now?

Yes, sometimes we speak. I love and respect him. I make him understand that it is also honourable to treat your daughter the way you treat your son. It's very tough for me that my father has distanced himself and sent me away. On the other hand, I wouldn't have learned to live alone; I would never have known how resourceful I am.

*“You can buy
your way out: if you buy
your way out, you can
leave.”*

**You lost your homeland, and
you lost your father. But you
found yourself at the same time.**

There are many men who don't make it on the journey that I took. But my sister, her two children and I, we did make it.

**Yes, you should be very proud
of your strength and perseverance.
When you think about your home-
land now – with Afghanistan's
return to a darker time – how do
you feel?**

We invested so much in the younger generation, and now everything's been undone. I am in touch with female friends from when I studied. They're all stuck at home. They just cook and eat – that's their day. I think the term woman – the entire concept of women – is being removed from Afghanistan. It will no longer exist.

What do you think of the women demonstrating in the streets of Herat and Kabul?

I don't think it will lead to their freedom because there's no one to listen to them. We don't have a president and we don't have anyone to help them secure their rights. Right now, people don't have food, and the teachers who taught them are sitting on the street shining shoes.

What options does the international community have?

Well, I don't think you can change the Taliban at all. They haven't changed in over 30 years, and the situation today is exactly the same as it was back then.

How do you envision your future in Germany?

I can breathe easy here. I can study here, and everything that I learn I hope to pass on to my female friends who live in Afghanistan. I would like to have my own apartment and work for a lawyer. The better my German gets, the more certain I am that I can continue my pursuits in the field of law.

"I think the term woman – the entire concept of women – is being removed from Afghanistan. It will no longer exist."

"I make him understand that it is also honourable to treat your daughter the way you treat your son."

You have been strong under the most terrible of circumstances.

This conversation with you touched me deeply and reminded me that men really are rather difficult.

And women are very strong.

You're so young and you've accomplished so much, and you have your whole life ahead of you. You really are a role model for other women.

Closing words

The patriarchal myth of women forever in need of guidance and help from men in no way reflects the realities of life and lived experience of the women whose stories fill this booklet's pages. They did not accept the role of the victim as society had foreseen it for them. Indeed, they are a broad cast of characters: some are rebels to the core, others are survivors of systematic violence, and most are both in their own way.

They all have in common a longing to leave the world of terror and despotism behind. They all have risked everything to journey into a new life and beginning in Germany, where they hope to find freedom and peace, safety for their families, and respect for themselves.

With terror and the suppression of women's rights enduring as serious threats in both Afghanistan and Germany, the young generation needs role models who embody hope and outlook. The mantra 'the personal is political' rings truest wherever injustices are greatest. And extremist recruiters know this well.

Feelings of marginalisation and suppression are often preyed upon on by extremists. Women role models are an important foundation of resilience that help to counteract threats to democratic values and gender-equitable societies.

Twenty years ago, a Women's Alliance took shape in support of the women of Afghanistan. These women have continued to fight. It is time to join them.

We must do it to ensure that 'gender equality' and 'justice for all' do not merely become catch phrases. The forgotten women of Afghanistan are a wake-up call: a test case for our value system.

**W O M E N
W I T H O U T
B O R D E R S**
CHANGE THE WORLD

THE INTERVIEWS WERE CONDUCTED BY EDIT SCHLAFFER AND
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The women portrayed in this booklet are contemporary witnesses. They are the women of Afghanistan, a country that has been defined by cycles of tyranny over the centuries. Women were the target throughout, and superimposed patriarchal expectations and values have shaped their lives to this day. For many women, however, this climate of repression has not led to wilful subordination; rather, it has fostered resistance in various forms.