Her Study Center Was Bombed. She Still Topped Afghanistan's National University Exam.

Shamsea Alizada's story of persistence is a reminder of advances in girls' education in Afghanistan — and their vulnerability as the government negotiates with the Taliban.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Shamsea Alizada's story could so easily have ended when she was just 15.

A coal miner's daughter whose family had moved all around Afghanistan seeking safety and the chance for her and her siblings to get a good education, Ms. Alizada was among the lucky who evaded the suicide bombing that killed dozens of her fellow students at a Kabul tutoring center two years ago.

But if it was luck that saved Ms. Alizada, now 17, it was resilience and hard work that made her a national inspiration, when it was announced on television on Thursday that she had achieved the highest score out of nearly 200,000 students on Afghanistan's national university entrance exam. Her mother saw it and gave her the happy news personally.

"I thought she was kidding. But when I entered the room, I saw the brightest smile on my mother's face," Ms. Alizada said in an interview. "I have seen her smiling, but yesterday's smile was something else. Her smile was a gift and made my day; it was better than gaining the highest score in the country."

A generation ago, she would probably never have gotten the chance. Under Taliban rule, girls were prevented from going to school. It is the success of Ms. Alizada and young Afghans like her that have provided one of the few bright spots in the decades of war and unrealized Western goals since: More girls are not only going to school, they are also starting to translate that into social mobility.

It is not lost on her or her family that their joyful moment is also a critical one for their country. Negotiators for the Afghan government and the Taliban are engaged in talks seeking an end to the war, trying to shape a power-sharing government that can keep peace.

Around the country, Afghan women are worried that it could also mean a return to repression.

"We have been through a lot," Ms. Alizada said. "I hope the Taliban let the Afghan women live their dreams. We don't want to be limited."

Ms. Alizada was a junior student at a tutoring center that prepared underprivileged Afghans for the country's competitive university entrance exam when a suicide bomber walked into a lecture hall packed with more than 200 older students and detonated his explosive vest.

Half of the students in the room were killed or wounded, and Ms. Alizada lost friends and young women she looked up to. A center that incubated a universal dream — a good education as the ticket out of poverty and oppression — was turned into a scene of carnage, the algebra equations on the whiteboard covered in blood.

That kind of violence keeps ending young, hopeful Afghan lives every day, curtailing the dreams of women and minorities even before the Taliban can start imposing terms. Extremists in Afghanistan, in essence, control both sides of that equation — keeping up the violence to help their position in talks now, while holding to their goal of a return to an unbending Islamic rule later.

The tutoring center where Ms. Alizada studied was attacked by a suicide bomber in 2018. Mujib Mashal/The New York Times

The Taliban's negotiators have remained vague on where exactly they stand on women's education now, offering little detail but to say that they respect women's right to education and work "according to Islamic Shariah" — a caveat many women fear leaves their gains vulnerable.

The United States, although touting the improvement in the status of girls as a major success of its presence in Afghanistan, made no mention of their protection in the deal it signed with the Taliban over withdrawing American troops. Such issues are left for negotiating between the Afghan sides.

The U.S. government, however, has made clear it will continue to use its billions of dollars in aid to Afghanistan, which depends on foreign assistance for roughly 75 percent of its spending, as leverage to push the sides to respect gains in civil liberties.

"I hope both sides fulfill their promise — I hope no one gets killed in Afghanistan anymore," Ms. Alizada said.

The expansion of education opportunities has been a happy story of the chaotic, two-decade intervention in Afghanistan by the United States and its allies.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

When the Taliban were toppled in 2001, there were just about 1 million students in schools, almost all male. The infrastructure, already weak because of poverty, was badly damaged by decades of conflict.

Twenty years of investment increased enrollment up to ninefold. Private universities have popped up across the country's urban centers.

But like many other things, the education effort has been marred by deep corruption, and the official numbers have often come into question. In recent years, violence has also taken a deep toll, with more than 1,000 schools shut because of attacks. According to UNICEF, a third of all school-aged children remain out of school.

The bombing at Mawoud Academy in Kabul, which Ms. Alizada attended, was claimed by an offshoot of the Islamic State that has exploited the complicated battlefield in Afghanistan, attacking soft targets like mosques, schools and hospitals. The lecture hall had been so packed, and the explosion so powerful, that at least 40 people were killed and more than 60 others wounded.

Most of the victims were underprivileged children from small villages in central Afghanistan, a largely ethnic Hazara part of the country. Many stayed in Kabul, the capital, at $15-a-month hostels away from their families in order to pursue their educations. Some of their coffins made it back to the villages. Others, including a pair holding 19-year-old twins, ended up buried on a Kabul hilltop.

Ms. Alizada, who is Hazara, is originally from the Jaghori district of Ghazni Province, but her family of five has been on the move in search of a better life since she was an infant. Her family lived in western Herat Province before moving to Kabul. In Herat, Ms. Alizada took free martial arts classes, but she had to give up her training in Kabul, as the lessons there were too expensive.

Her father is a coal miner in northern Afghanistan, making it home only every six months.

“The phone connection in Samangan is really bad,” Ms. Alizada said, referring to the northern province where her father works. “Last night at 8 p.m., I finally managed to talk to my father. He was so happy he was in tears.”

Mourners carried the body of a young student killed in the 2018 attack during a ceremony in Kabul, Afghanistan. Omar Sobhani/Reuters

Fatima Faizi reported from Kabul, Afghanistan, and Mujib Mashal from Doha, Qatar.