

IN HER WORDS

Lost Between Borders': Afghan Women on the Lives They Left Behind

Four Afghan women who sought refuge in America talk about their lives now and everything they gave up.

By Alisha Haridasani Gupta and Francesca Donner Photographs by Valerie Plesch

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“In Afghanistan, women are all heroes. They are dying every day, but they are never giving up.”

— *Laila, who moved to the U.S. in 2016*

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Since the United States and its allies toppled the Taliban in 2001, the rights of Afghan women have animated much of the global narrative around the war. Even amid the devastation, there were recognizable signs of progress: Afghan girls going to school and Afghan women getting college degrees, taking jobs and participating more in public life. Burqas came off, billboards for beauty salons went up. Female journalists fearlessly questioned Taliban leaders on T.V. Other women became mayors and ambassadors. Bit by bit, slowly, steadily, women — though mostly in urban areas — wriggled out from under the Taliban’s conservative, theocratic thumb.

It took just days for much of that progress to come crashing down. Since the Taliban took back control of Afghanistan in August, each new day has brought new restrictions on women — now they can’t play sports and college classes will be segregated by gender — raising concerns that the country is rapidly regressing to a repressive past.

Today, it is precisely those women who broke from the traditional path who are most endangered. Many have gone into hiding. Hundreds have taken to the streets, protesting the regime, only to be met by the brute force of rifle butts and sticks. Others fled.

But to flee was nothing new. Afghan women and their families have long sought refuge in other parts of the world. Those who have fled have found themselves split between an unfamiliar future in an unfamiliar place and a past in a beloved country where career, family and community are left behind, out of reach.

The Times spoke with four women who have sought refuge in America. All four fled — some recently, some not — because they were endangered back home. The heartbreak is heavy, but they are not surprised: They knew the space that they had carefully carved out for themselves in society would quickly be eroded. They had warned of it all along.

The women’s last names and other identifying details are being withheld because they fear for the safety of their relatives still in Afghanistan. Conversations have been edited for clarity and length.

Farahnaz, 28

Arrived in the U.S. in February



Farahnaz looks at her clothes her friend brought back from Kabul. Valerie Plesch for The New York Times

As a TV journalist, I went to cover the peace negotiations with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, last October. When I was there, I interviewed Suhail Shaheen, the spokesman for the Taliban. I spoke to him without covering my hair and he was very uncomfortable — it was unintentional but that encounter became big news.

After the peace talks, the Taliban started targeting and assassinating journalists. A couple of my colleagues were killed, and I was told that I was also on the Taliban's hit list. Security forces told me to stay at home and stay low. Those few days hiding in Kabul were the most difficult days of my life. I have never felt fear like that. When it was a little safer, I went to the French Embassy to get a visa and left Kabul immediately.



Before the Taliban takeover, Farahnaz asked her mother to pack her clothes and jewelry that she was not able to bring with her when she fled Afghanistan. Valerie Plesch for The New York Times

The day that Kabul fell to the Taliban, I shaved off all my hair. I was at my friend's house watching the news and I was just heartbroken and needed to do something. I watched the Taliban go to the Tolo TV studio, and I couldn't help but think that the same people who killed so many of my colleagues were sitting in the same studio where I used to work every day with my colleagues. Now the Taliban have taken over the streets of Kabul — the same streets where we, my generation, worked, protested and made music and art.



Farahnaz shaved her head the day the Taliban took over Afghanistan. Valerie Plesch for The New York Times

A woman's life in Afghanistan has never been easy — not even during the last 20 years. The difference now is that their lives will become more difficult. Everyone sympathizes with the women of Afghanistan, but it's time now to change your perception. The women of Afghanistan don't need your sympathy, they need the world to take responsibility for the mess it created.

Hadia, 25

Arrived in the U.S. in December



Hadia took the mic at a demonstration outside the White House for the Hazara people earlier this year. Valerie Plesch

The Taliban killed two of my brothers because we are Shiite Hazara. When the Taliban took over Mazar-i-Sharif back in 1998, I was only 3 years old, and that's when they killed my brother, who was only 13. They shot him in the chest and the leg and left him on the street. We were not even allowed to collect his body. Then my second brother was killed in Takhar Province in 2001. My father couldn't take it, it was too much for him, and he just passed away by heart attack.

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Something like that just destroys your whole vision of humanity. It destroys your whole childhood.

Last November, I started receiving anonymous phone calls constantly. At first, I thought it wasn't serious. But then, a couple of days later, I saw a car outside the building where I used to live, which was strange because the building had a garage in the basement and parking wasn't allowed in front of the building. When I started walking, the car started moving, following me. Later that day, after I was done with work and leaving my office, I saw the car again. Then it happened again the next day. A few days after that, at 3:20 a.m., someone knocked on my apartment door. That's when I got scared. I told my boss and my mum. And my mum told me, "I don't want to lose another child, you have to leave."

So I came to the U.S. on a tourist visa in December 2020, I had no choice. This was not something I planned and it was not something I really wanted to do. I came with a backpack with a few clothes and my laptop, that's it.



Hadia at the blooming of the cherry trees in Washington in March. Valerie Plesch

Back in Afghanistan, at this moment, my family is hiding. They left our house a day before the city of Mazar-i-Sharif fell. The last time that I spoke to my mum was around 2 a.m. that day for five minutes, and she told me that they are alive, safe and hiding somewhere and she told me not to be worried. But since then, the connection is down, the internet is down, they have no access to anything. I'm just waiting and waiting.

Every single day, I wake up with a heavy chest. I was once a role model for my generation, they saw me as someone who was helping make a difference for them. And now look where I am. I don't even have hope for myself. I am lost — lost between borders.

Laila

Moved to the U.S. in 2016



Laila at her home in Virginia. She worries about her family still in Afghanistan. Valerie Plesch for The New York Times

My father was a military general and my mother was a housewife. When I was born, there was a war in Afghanistan, so my father took us to Pakistan. I was 1 or 2 years old. I returned to Kabul when I was a teenager.

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.

At Kabul University, I studied Islamic law and I became a defense lawyer and legal adviser. I traveled to provinces in Afghanistan, and I worked with women's and children's rights.

As you know, Afghan women suffer a lot from their families and there were a lot of challenging cases for me. I worked with one woman who was sexually abused by her father-in-law while her husband was in Pakistan, and she was alone. I helped her get a divorce and his family came after me, injuring me and stabbing me twice with a knife in my thigh.

After that case, there was a lot of danger for me in Afghanistan. My husband worked with the U.S. military — he had a construction company — and we came here because he was endangered, too.

We usually go to Afghanistan once a year. But this year, because of the Taliban, I don't think we will go anymore. We talk to our family and they just say to me, "It's OK, we are fine." But in fact, because of me and my sisters — both my sisters trained as journalists — all my family's in danger.

It was this way before the Taliban also, but now it is more dangerous.

The people of Afghanistan — we were born in war and we grew up in war and we are still in war. We don't know about our future, and what happens next. Maybe it's worse.



Laila gathered with friends at the National Mall in Washington to celebrate Nowruz, the Persian new year, in April. Valerie Plesch for The New York Times

All these things are happening because many Afghan people are not educated. The terrorists, the mujahedeen, the Taliban, ISIS, their mentality is not matched with educated people. But the educated Afghans, you know, they are so open minded, so good, they want everything for everyone, for every single human being. With education, at least people know their rights.

I'm not giving up. I'm not silent. With my friends, I am organizing protests in Washington. And we have Afghans around the world, making protests in different countries. We are making new hashtags. This is the new thing.

You need to be an Afghan to understand the Afghan situation, especially the women's situation. In Afghanistan, women are all heroes. They are dying every day, but they are never giving up. And one of them is me.

Fariha, 46

Moved to the U.S. in 2016



Fariha protested in a burqa in front of the White House on Aug. 15. The burqa is the same one she was forced to wear during the 1990s when the Taliban was in power. Valerie Plesch for The New York Times

When the Taliban took over in 1996, I was 19 years old in my final year of college. In fact, they took over the day I sat for my last exam.

Right after college, I started working for an international nonprofit organization that trained midwives, and I was actually the breadwinner for my family. My father was a principal at a girls' school — but the Taliban closed down his school — and my husband was a shopkeeper. So I was supporting my family. One day on my way to work, while I was pregnant with my eldest child, the Taliban beat me up on the street — even though I was wearing the burqa. They asked me why I was out alone without a man.

Seven years ago, when I was working with another nongovernmental organization that constructs shelters for widows in rural areas, the Taliban killed four of my co-workers because they thought my team was working for foreign forces. And then I started receiving threats — the Taliban would keep calling us or they would follow us when we went to rural areas for work. The NGO I worked for told me to evacuate immediately. I went home, picked up my family and left, without packing anything. My oldest child was 12 then.

We traveled to another country where we don't speak the language and where we didn't know the culture or anything. My husband carried people's stuff — furniture, luggage, groceries, whatever — for a bit of cash. We didn't have enough food so I would carefully count every bit that I was feeding my children. We rented one room and it was extremely hot. The windows were broken. We didn't have a fridge. The ceiling was full of mold.

After two years, the U.N.H.C.R. helped me process my case and we arrived in the U.S. as refugees.

The Taliban claim to be different now. But people can't just forget or forgive all the killings. Almost every family in Afghanistan now knows of somebody or has a family member who was killed by the Taliban. The women I know — my grandmother, my nieces, my sisters-in-law and my sisters — reopened old boxes of the burqas that they had packed away 20 years ago. And just two days before the Taliban took over again, the country released the scores of the national university entrance exams. A girl got the highest score in the country. What happens to her now?

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