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Afghan Women Activist Stories

Part II: Courage and Resistance – Voices from Afghanistan

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Susanne Schmeidl is a critical peace researcher and practitioner with over two decades of experience in research on forced displacement, conflict prevention and participatory peacebuilding. With a PhD in Sociology from Ohio State University she has worked at the intersection of academia, policy and practice, including with UNSW Sydney, the UN Refugee Agency, the Swiss Peace Foundation, Saferworld and as co-founder of two grass-roots organisation in Afghanistan: The Afghan Civil Society Forum and The Liaison Office. Her work has long centred on locally led responses to violence and the importance of citizen voices in peace processes. Through sustained engagement with Afghan civil society, she has sought to amplify voices often sidelined in both national and international arenas. Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Schmeidl has become increasingly concerned with the systematic silencing of Afghan women and the urgent need to preserve and elevate their perspectives. Motivated by this conviction, she encouraged the women featured in this Current Debates section to document and share their stories. This collection is both a response to erasure and a form of resistance – foregrounding the lived experiences, insights and agency of Afghan women in shaping the country's future.

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Since the spring of 2024, I have returned to Afghanistan four times to better understand the evolving situation under Taliban rule and the practical impact of new restrictions on daily life, particularly for women. During this work, I met women engaged in development, humanitarian, and community initiatives, whose approaches to navigating changing regulatory and social conditions offered important insights into both the constraints they encounter and the strategies they use to continue their activities (Schmeidl et al. 2024).

When preparing this journal, most prospective contributors were based in exile, where writing and public reflection remain possible. Similarly, the activist narratives in the first part of this special edition were authored by women living outside Afghanistan. It was nevertheless important to include contributions from women who remain in the country and are working within the current environment. The objective was not to downplay the restrictions they face, but to ensure that their perspectives and analyses could be represented directly.

The contributions in this section emerged from a series of conversations, both face to face and online. Authors drafted their texts in Dari or English, and I supported the editorial process – at times with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools – while preserving the substance and intent of their accounts. In all cases, the final text reflects the authors' voice, intent, and meaning. For security reasons, all contributors use pseudonyms of their own choosing, and potentially identifying details within their stories have been removed to ensure their safety. This approach prioritises protection while maintaining a coherent narrative voice for each contribution.

The accounts that follow describe women's everyday realities under a system that limits their mobility, participation, and institutional visibility. They demonstrate how individuals continue to engage, adapt, and make decisions within these constraints, highlighting forms of agency that persist in highly restricted settings. Across the narratives, family support appears as a recurring factor, though expressed in different ways. Mothers provide guidance that helps their daughters remain focused on their goals, while fathers and brothers often create practical opportunities for study, work, or mobility within existing restrictions. Alongside female solidarity and family support, such forms of support by men, though seldom emphasised in broader discussions, play a meaningful role in sustaining women's educational and professional trajectories, a dynamic that has been described as male allyship (Yousaf / Peacock 2023).

Women's horizontal networks also emerge as an important element. In a context where public space is limited and formal support systems have weakened; women rely on informal relationships for practical and emotional support. These trusted networks – formed through study groups, professional connections, or long-standing friendships – offer spaces where challenges can be discussed, information exchanged, and decisions considered collectively. It is through these

solidarities that women remind each other not only of what has been lost, but also of what still might be reclaimed.

Taken together, these narratives offer a counterpoint to representations that portray Afghan women solely through the lens of victimhood. They show instead how women continue to act, make choices, and pursue objectives even within a highly constrained environment; holding fast to dreams that are, as one author put it, "larger than their lives." All authors belong to what I consider a new generation of women's activists. They are in their thirties and have stepped into the void left by women leaders who were evacuated, and I deeply admire – and am humbled by – their courage, strength, and resilience. They give many hope, and I hope their stories will inspire others.

Dreams larger than my life

Raya Balkhi

I have always felt I was not like other children. From the moment I opened my eyes to this world, I carried dreams – big dreams – while others carried toys. When children played, I thought about who I wanted to become. When I entered school, I loved studying with a hunger that surprised even me. I wanted to be educated, to be respected, to walk proudly in the world.

Then the Taliban came to our town for the first time, in 1997. I was very small, but the fear around me was enormous. The streets were filled with dead bodies; even the air felt frightened. I was not allowed to go outside alone. Every evening, my father returned from the road and told my mother stories. Stories of destroyed houses, widowed women, and orphaned children. To me, these stories passed like scenes from a film. I was too young to understand the depth of people's grief.

School closed. My sisters and I stayed home, helping our mother, feeling time slip away. I suffered quietly, thinking, "I was born to study. Why is this my fate?" Four years passed like this. When the first Taliban regime fell in 2001 and schools reopened in 2002, joy returned to us. My sister and I took placement exams and entered seventh grade. Every day, we walked an hour under the burning sun to reach our school. My older sister married; I continued alone. I completed twelve years of schooling in eight.

My family encouraged me to become a doctor. I loved medicine and studied hard, even through snow and cold, taking the entrance exam with hope. When I was placed in a field I did not want, my father ignored those who said, "Why spend so much on a daughter? A girl belongs to another home." Undeterred, he enrolled me in a private university anyway. His trust was the wind behind

me. I studied for seven years until graduation, the happiest day of my life. Then came more exams, more travel, more effort. I passed my specialty exam, but corruption blocked me because I refused to pay bribes. I was heartbroken. I thought, "Why was I born in a country that cannot see my worth?"

Then another door opened: a call telling me I had been selected for a Master's scholarship in a regional country. I was thrilled. After months of paperwork and passing the English exam, I left Afghanistan for the first time in 2018. Slowly, I adjusted, studied hard, graduated, and returned home in 2020. Work followed. Recognition followed. Then the Taliban returned, and once again I felt the world freeze around me. I cried for days, feeling that all the paths I had walked were closing again. My mother finally said, "You have two paths, my daughter: stay home and cry, or stand and continue your work." With my family beside me – especially my father, who has always believed in me – I chose to continue. I chose to keep moving forward.

I began working with a non-governmental organisation. I even moved to Kabul for this job, taking the risk of living there without my family, though my father made sure I was safely settled in an apartment. I loved the work and was quite successful. In 2024, I received even more recognition: an invitation to speak at a Women, Peace and Security conference in Europe. I prepared with joy, imagining the honour of representing Afghan women. But at Kabul airport, three hours early for our flight, the Taliban stopped all of us women because we had no mahram [male guardian]. The men travelled on. We were forced to stay behind.

My pain that day was not only about the missed trip. It was the sharp reminder that after everything I had learned and overcome, after every door I had pushed open with my own hands, I could still be stopped simply for being a woman. Yet even now, I carry the dreams I was born with. I will not let them go. I will continue working, and I am grateful for my family's support, especially my father, who still accompanies me on many field trips. What else are we to do, but push forward and chase our dreams, even when they seem impossible?

Armed with knowledge: A woman's journey of quiet resistance

Roqia Noor

When the Taliban seized Afghanistan on 15 August 2021, my life – like the lives of millions of Afghans – changed overnight in ways I could never have imagined. I was a 30-year-old woman trained as a teacher, with a master's degree in sciences and a doctorate in veterinary medicine, continuing postgraduate

studies while working as a freelance translator to support my family. Yet despite all my education, I felt completely powerless. The sudden collapse of institutions, routines, and hopes left me emotionally paralysed. I shut down. It felt as though I had lost everything that had once given my days meaning and structure. I spent my days sitting at home, staring at the walls, worrying about a future that suddenly felt impossible. Friends told me to read books and keep myself busy, but despair consumed me. At that stage, survival itself felt like an achievement. All I could do was take medication and sleep.

This was a stark contrast to the life I had been living only weeks earlier. Before the Taliban's return, I was busy, productive, and fulfilled. I began work at 8 a.m. every morning, went to university to continue my postgraduate studies, and spent my evenings translating for educational institutes. Juggling so many responsibilities was exhausting, but I loved my work, and my income helped support my mother and my two younger brothers. Like many Afghan women, I believed that education and service were my paths to dignity, independence, and a sense of shared purpose.

Then, in December 2022, the Taliban announced a ban on women's employment. The news crushed me. This decision did not simply repeat earlier losses; it erased the last remaining hope that my education could protect my family's future. The ban marked the end of my ability to earn, to plan, and to contribute financially to my household. It was the moment when a long-held belief – that knowledge could secure stability – quietly collapsed. I felt the strength drain from my body. I could not read, could not work, could not even think clearly. For months, I remained like that, suspended in fear, anger, and disappointment. The silence imposed on women was as heavy as the restrictions themselves.

Four months later, a friend told me about a translation project. He practically forced me to accept it, and I am grateful he did. Working on this project reawakened an old dream: to make knowledge available in Pashto. As an undergraduate, my English was weak, and whenever my supervisors assigned coursework, I struggled to find reliable materials in my own language. I used to imagine a world in which knowledge existed in Pashto, where a girl like me did not have to fight for every page she read. That dream, once distant, began to feel possible again. Using my mind reminded me that it needed challenge, depth, and purpose – and that I was not meant to disappear into silence.

Many Afghan women like me are still willing to work under near-impossible conditions. I dedicated around three hours each day to translation, usually at night in my bedroom, because daytime hours were often filled with fear, interruptions, and the emotional weight of restrictions. Sometimes I worked with music; at other times, especially when the text was difficult, I sat in complete silence. This quiet labour became both an act of learning and a form of healing.

I was deeply grateful for the opportunity, as it pushed me to search for the few remaining spaces where women could still think, work, and contribute.

Later, I was able to join an international organisation, where I could continue contributing to knowledge and awareness while also helping to empower other women. I no longer worked only from home; I gained the opportunity to come into an office, surrounded by other women. In a context where movement, gathering, and social interaction are severely restricted, this space meant far more than employment. At a time when most forms of community were disappearing, simply working alongside other women – speaking, listening, and learning together – felt like a rare and fragile privilege. It was a small freedom, but a meaningful one.

Joining the international organisation, however, did not mean that my work suddenly became easy. In practice, I faced multiple restrictions imposed not only through official decrees, but also through the attitudes and decisions of educated Afghan men in leadership positions. In many instances, these internal limitations were enforced more strictly than the rules themselves. I regularly experienced discrimination because of my gender, sometimes even from individuals who publicly claimed to advocate for Afghan women and presented themselves as our allies.

I was asked to work from home, denied access to benefits available to other employees, and permitted to visit the office only to collect my salary. I was not allowed to use office transportation, because there were concerns that if I were stopped at a checkpoint, the organisation, or the person in charge, would be held responsible, a risk treated as more important than my own safety. I was also required to have a designated *mahram* [male companion], further limiting my independence and mobility. Despite this, I chose to respond with patience and quiet resistance, continuing my work to the best of my ability.

This situation began to change with a shift in leadership. A strong, kind, and principled woman assumed a leadership role within the organisation. She was deeply supportive of my goals, and we shared a common vision: supporting women through meaningful, sustainable work. While my treatment by some male colleagues remained distant and restrictive, the trust and encouragement I received from female leadership sustained me. At the leadership level, she relied on me heavily. I handled external engagement and communication, and in some cases, she directly involved me in communication with authorities.

At first, this was extremely challenging. Engaging with authorities carried fear and emotional strain, but her trust in me, and the example she set, gave me the confidence to confront these realities and the risks inherent in our work. In many situations, I encountered discrimination based on both my nationality and my gender. I was told that, as an Afghan woman, I was not permitted to enter ministry compounds or engage directly with officials. Experiencing such

exclusion in my own country, for reasons I had no role in choosing, was deeply painful.

Over time, however, I learned to ground myself differently. I reminded myself that my values live within me, not in how others treat me. I do not need external validation, nor do I need to carry the weight of others' judgments. Their actions reflect their own values, not my worth. I know who I am. I know the strength of my spiritual connection with Allah. I do not need to prove myself to anyone. I remain committed to my hopes, my dreams, and my purpose – especially my goal of supporting other women to continue, learn, and contribute despite all constraints.

Our work was not always safe. One evening, our office was raided by authorities. We were forced to stand for hours in the cold courtyard. I could not even call my mother to tell her where I was. After endless questioning, we were finally allowed to go home. I felt numb, barely able to walk. It was a terrifying experience – one that many working Afghan women quietly endure – but I returned to work the next day. Fear did not erase the sense of responsibility I felt toward my work and my colleagues.

I know our work matters. I believe we must hold on to the small openings that still exist, the tiny cracks in the system where women can still breathe, still learn, still contribute. Even when those spaces are closed, new informal paths often emerge through solidarity, persistence, and quiet resilience. What gives me comfort is that I am not alone. I have my colleagues. I have my friends. And above all, I have my family, who stand beside me. My brother walks with me when I need support. In a society under immense pressure, family becomes both refuge and strength. They look after me.

I am inspired by Nelson Mandela's words: "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." For me, education is not a slogan, it is a responsibility and a form of peaceful resistance. This is the path I choose. This is how I continue. I choose knowledge, learning, and contribution in a time when many doors are closed. I dream of a peaceful, modern, and inclusive Afghanistan – and as an Afghan woman and an Afghan citizen, I will keep working with everything I have to help make that dream a reality. Not loudly, but persistently. Not alone, but together with others who believe in the same future.

Claiming my presence: Refusing to fade

Zindagi Noor

Just days before the December 2022 ban on Afghan women working in humanitarian and development organisations in Afghanistan, I found myself in one of the most defining moments of my career. As the person covering the responsibilities of Country Director at the time, I was scheduled to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with a government ministry.

I went with one male colleague, and before entering the meeting we quietly agreed on one principle: if the authorities refused to recognise me, my colleague would not step in to replace me. He would not sign in my place. We would either proceed together or not at all. It was a small but intentional act of allyship, rare, but meaningful.

When we entered the meeting room, the Deputy Minister sat waiting, and the protocol was clear: each NGO representative would be called forward individually. But when it was our turn, only my colleague's name was called. My name, as the only woman in the meeting, was ignored, even though at that time I was covering the responsibilities of Country Director. My colleague and I looked at one another. He stayed seated, exactly as we had agreed. If the Deputy Minister wanted a signature, he would have to acknowledge the person entitled to give it.

I stood and addressed him directly. "I am here," I said. "I am the Acting Country Director. It is my right to sign this MoU. If you have no objection, neither do I." For a moment he looked at me, weighing the situation, perhaps surprised that I dared to speak at all. Then he nodded, reluctantly. "Fine," he said. "You can sign. But there will be no photo."[1] "That is perfectly fine," I replied. "I don't need a photo." When the document was placed in front of me, I signed my name in large, clear letters, bolder than usual. A quiet declaration: I am here. I will not vanish.

Later, reflecting on the moment, I realised that the barriers Afghan women face are not only imposed by authorities. They are upheld – quietly, passively – by a society that has long accepted women's exclusion as normal. Many speak beautifully about women's rights, but falter when courage is required. Men often override their female colleagues, taking decisions and visibility that should belong to women. But that day, my colleague did not. He honoured the agreement. He stayed silent so that I could speak. And that silence became its own form of resistance.

The struggle Afghan women face is systemic, woven through institutions and expectations. But I have learned that waiting for someone to create space for

1 Afghan government authorities often document cooperation agreements with the non-governmental sector, such as MoUs with photos.

us is not an option. We must find the small cracks that exist and step through them. Resistance does not always happen on a grand stage. Sometimes it happens in a meeting room, when you insist your name be called. Sometimes it happens when a man chooses not to overshadow a woman, even when the system invites him to. Sometimes it happens in the size of your signature. I will continue to step forward – not recklessly, but intentionally, persistently. Because each time we assert our presence, we widen the path a little more. And one day, that path will be wide enough for all Afghan women to walk it freely.

Adaptive resilience: The courage of staying

Malan Karlani

Life's rhythms shift in ways we barely notice until we pause and look back. A few years ago, I couldn't have imagined shaping my personal and professional world around rules that once felt impossibly foreign. Seven years ago, I was simply a student, moving through my days freely, without anyone telling me what to wear, or when or how to return home.

But the past four years have unfolded under a different reality, and everything carries a new weight, a new texture. I remember when they first said, "You must wear *hijab*"[2], my instinct was to resist. I told myself I would never allow something so externally imposed to become part of my everyday life. Yet here I am, years later, slipping it on without thinking. Not out of obedience, but because it has turned into a kind of armour, a way to move safely through a world that keeps shifting around me.

My life now feels like a continuous act of adaptation. Each new restriction isn't something we linger on; it becomes something we quietly absorb, something that reshapes the patterns of our days. Even my household adjusts in its own way, not out of choice, but out of necessity. And within that constant adjustment lies a muted resilience, a strength that grows in silence. We learn to carry the new normal with us, navigating it with a depth of emotion that only those living through these changes can fully understand.

As I reflect on these changes, I realise how fortunate I am to still hold a role that gives my life structure and meaning. Even as the world around me has narrowed, I have been able to continue working, and in that work I have found a quiet kind of freedom. It's not the freedom I once knew, but it is one I do not take for granted. Yet when I look beyond my own experience, the contrast is stark. My sister is now confined to online classes, her future tied to limitations she never chose. Friends speak of their sisters who can no longer attend school,

2 Under the Taliban, the general term *hijab* now refers to wearing a headscarf together with an *abaya*, a loose, full-length robe worn over clothing, leaving the face and hands visible.

young women whose dreams have been paused indefinitely. A colleague recently shared how her own sister, once bright with ambition and confidence, is now withdrawn and unsure of herself – the loss of her education slowly eroding her sense of direction.

What wounds them is not only the formal restrictions; often it is the echoes inside their own homes. Families, unintentionally, remind them of the opportunities that have slipped away. Words that were meant to comfort end up deepening the ache. Seeing this, I understand my own position differently. I see how blessed I am to still have a path to walk, even if it is a narrower one than before. I can adapt and continue, finding small spaces of possibility within the constraints. But for so many others, the path itself has faded, and their light has been dimmed before it even had the chance to burn fully.

As I carry these reflections forward, what sustains my motivation is the journey we have undertaken and the resilience we have built along the way. Despite everything, I genuinely feel that we, as women-led organisations, have emerged stronger. Over the past few years, we have expanded our capacity, forged meaningful networks, and learned how to navigate an environment that keeps shifting beneath us. We have worked tirelessly to secure funding, sustain our programs, and build the relationships that allow us to keep moving even when the context feels heavy.

I am especially proud of the spaces we have created for Afghan women. These centres have become sanctuaries where women find assistance, support and income-generation activities, and the tools to rebuild their lives. Watching the women we work with launch small businesses, reclaim a sense of independence, and rediscover their own strength is one of the most inspiring parts of my work. And when crises arise, whether we draw on our core funding or through the support of donors who trust us, we do everything we can to respond with dignity and care.

What truly drives me is witnessing the impact on the ground and knowing that, as a women-led organisation, we continue to serve our communities in spite of the restrictions around us. It is far from easy, but each moment of support we receive – from community members, from donors who believe in our vision, and even at times from authorities who recognise the tangible benefits of our work – reassures me that we are moving in the right direction.

At the same time, I know many other women-led organisations are still fighting to secure the resources and recognition they deserve. They navigate fierce competition for funding and often must work twice as hard to be heard. Their struggle reminds me why our persistence matters. Amid all these struggles and restrictions, it is often the smallest things that keep me grounded and connected to myself. My little pockets of joy come from simple pleasures: catching a cricket match online when I can, getting lost in a good series, a movie, or even a bit of anime. These moments feel like brief windows into a world where

creativity and play still exist, reminding me that life is not defined solely by its challenges.

Music is another quiet anchor. Sometimes a single song can soften the whole day and make it more bearable. And in those rare quiet hours, I love creating small edits of everyday life in Afghanistan. Nothing dramatic, just ordinary moments captured and shared privately on a social media channel. It's my way of showing myself, and those who know me, that life here is not only hardship. It's also laughter, colour, routine, and human warmth. But beyond these personal comforts, there is something even more uplifting: the connection I find with other Afghan women walking this same difficult path. Their resilience, their stories of survival and success, ignite a spark in me. In those conversations, we remind one another that none of us is alone. We are part of a wider tapestry of women holding each other up in ways both visible and unseen.

And it is rarely about huge favours or gestures. Often, it's the smallest interactions that carry the most power: a shared lesson from experience, an encouraging message, a moment of listening without judgment. When I can offer even a sliver of support to another woman, it fills me with a sense of purpose that nothing else can replace. It reminds me why this work matters and how deeply connected we all are in our struggles and hopes.

These small acts of lifting one another, of recognising our shared strength, are profoundly human. They make me smile, even on difficult days, because they reveal just how resilient we truly are. Whether we are working from home, from an office, or navigating hybrid routines, that spirit of perseverance binds us together. And for me, that shared determination is an endless source of happiness.

People often tell me I am overly optimistic, and perhaps they are right. They say I put too much faith in Afghanistan's future, and I understand why it may look that way. It is not that I am blind to the difficulties. We're still navigating restrictions, still searching for solutions, still waiting for someone courageous enough to take the first step. But I believe deeply that progress begins with us: by acknowledging our challenges honestly, by having the difficult conversations we often avoid, and by shaping solutions rooted in our own realities. Without that sense of hope, we risk losing the very possibility of change.

My dream is simple yet profound: a day when the basics (e.g., the right to education and work, and freedom of mobility) are no longer luxuries. A day when women can study freely, walk into their workplaces without fear, and move through their country with dignity. For many, these are fundamental rights. For us, they have become aspirations we carry close to our hearts. I believe we will get there, even if the road is long and requires alternative routes.

To my fellow Afghans, and especially to Afghan women, my message is this: take ownership of your future. The solutions we seek from others can begin with us. This is our home, and we have the agency to shape its direction. I call

on the men of this country to stand as allies and protectors of their sisters, daughters, wives, and mothers. Join these conversations not only in formal spaces, but in your homes and communities. Meaningful change cannot rely solely on external actors; it requires courage and responsibility from within.

And to Afghan women: you are extraordinary. Do not let anyone convince you that you are powerless. The world may see only the restrictions placed upon us, but within each of us is a resilience that refuses to fade. Keep dreaming. Keep searching for new paths to those dreams. Speak with one another, share your experiences, and stand united. We need more empathy and less division among ourselves. Be the voice for each other, and never allow that voice to be muted.

In the end, our strength lies in our solidarity. If we continue lifting one another, supporting one another, and believing in what we can build together, a brighter future is not just possible – it is within reach. Keep faith in yourselves, in each other, and in the promise of tomorrow.

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