



'Afghan girls will never give up'

Jonathon Ryan

looks at volunteer teaching with Victory Afghanistan.

Fatana Safi was one of just three girls to enrol in her university's engineering programme, an overwhelmingly male dominated field in Afghanistan. Within a few months, the other two girls, under heavy social pressure, felt no option but to withdraw. Fatana refused. She writes: 'I challenged myself to break the stereotype and pave the way for the other girls who might dream of following me.' She proved her point by topping the class. But in 2021, her world changed.

Deniz (a pseudonym) was waiting for entry to her high school exam. It started as a whisper and then just spread like wildfire. 'They're here! Kabul has been taken over!' Amidst the panic and chaos of fleeing students and staff, Deniz hugged her best friend in a last goodbye.

Not long after, Dina Pooya, then a high school student, writes of the devastation of hearing that for girls over the age of 11

the Taliban had banned schooling. Her own parents had been 'raised without the privilege of education, so worked hard to give us this gift'. They 'shared one goal, and that was to have educated children'. Dina describes her dreams as being shattered.

For many women and girls in Afghanistan, the ban on their education in 2021 came on top of years of other disruptions, dashing their aspirations for literacy, numeracy, scientific knowledge and the English language. At that time, in cities such as Kabul and Herat, an estimated 110,000 women were studying in universities (Mohibbi & Coburn, 2022) and, despite initial assurances, have been unable to complete their studies. For these women, there remains a jarring contrast between the rich and stimulating intellectual environment of their studies and the bleakness of their banishment from centres of learning. Career and life ambitions are on hold.

But despite the odds, Fatana, Deniz and Dina are pushing ahead.

Along with hundreds of other Afghani women and girls, and with the aid of international volunteers, they continue their studies. They do so somewhat covertly and from the relative safety of home. There, they join small, online English classes taught by volunteers from countries as far flung and remote as: New Zealand; Australia; Poland; Japan; Canada; the US; the UK; Belgium; Italy; Kazakhstan; Switzerland; Sweden; and Turkey.

The organisation behind this initiative is Victory Afghanistan, which was established as recently as 2023, but has already grown to 600 active students, all based in Afghanistan and from 20 different provinces. The waiting list has grown to 1,000. The team currently includes 60 volunteer teachers across the English classes and a small range of other specialty courses. English is taught at five levels, from complete beginner to advanced. At the lower levels, where translation is required, the teachers are bilingual in English and at least one of the languages of Afghanistan. The intermediate and advanced levels are reserved for teachers from other international backgrounds.

Victory Afghanistan was established by members of the Afghani diaspora and operates entirely on a voluntary basis, with a passionate international team of supporters. The organisation has no income or any sponsors, operating entirely voluntarily and with minimal expenses, mostly related to hosting the website (<https://www.victoryafghanistan.org/>). For teacher and curriculum designer Mehria Nouri, the key motivation in joining the team was having the opportunity to give something back to the women of her community. Mehria's family had fled Afghanistan before she was born and she spent her first six years stateless and on the move before finding refugee status in Aotearoa New Zealand. Now, having graduated in social anthropology, and acknowledging her own opportunities and the security of her job in the health sector, Mehria describes her work with Victory Afghanistan as representing her calling and as being immensely rewarding.

Many of the other volunteer teachers have no direct link to Afghanistan, but have

become ardent and unwavering supporters of the programme. In contrast to the ubiquitous side-hustle culture of our times, and despite strained global economic conditions, they report thriving on the keen sense of purpose from contributing to a bigger social movement. Mehria also cites rewards from the interpersonal dimension of the teaching:

Being connected with these young women seeing their drive, their resilience . . . getting to know them one by one, knowing their names, hearing their stories during classes, hearing their different ideas, and watching them improve so dramatically over such a small span of time
– Mehria Nouri, teacher and curriculum designer

Interestingly, while English language is now the main programme, the initial motivation in establishing Victory Afghanistan was to provide mentorship sessions for young women with the goal of enabling them to continue studying their bachelor and postgraduate degrees online from home, and in some cases with a view to providing a pathway for applying for scholarships abroad. However, few of the candidates had sufficient English to immediately pursue either of these paths. At that point, English was introduced and has proved immensely popular, becoming the major activity of the team.

Joining the teaching team is mainly a matter of goodwill and the ability to commit two hours of teaching a week (plus preparation) for a full semester. A strong command of English is required but many of the team are teaching for the first time. An onboarding process is conducted to familiarise volunteers with the relevant social and political context of the teaching. Beginning this year, a standard curriculum was introduced but there is still plenty of scope for teachers to bring their own materials and interests to the class. To ensure cultural safety, and ultimately to ensure the security of the students, such materials are vetted with cultural insiders to confirm their suitability.

Part of the excitement of being part of Victory Afghanistan is the still-evolving nature of the organisation. Suggestions and insights from the teachers continue to shape the organisation in a flexible and responsive way. One example is

the recent addition of a section on the website presenting learner stories. The teacher who proposed this initiative, a psychologist by profession, had tasked her students with writing about their lives. On reading their responses, she felt compelled to share them with a wider audience, giving rise to 'Stories of Victory' (<https://www.victoryafghanistan.org/the-stories-of-victory-1>).

For Fatana, Deniz and Dina, there is conviction that one day the schools of Afghanistan will re-open for women and girls. They know that time is precious and that they need to continue building their skills and knowledge to be ready to seize the opportunity. For now, they throw their available energy into learning English as a pathway to higher qualifications, the job market and international connections.

As Hosay Zurmati writes in 'Stories of Victory', 'Afghan girls will never give up. It is something in our blood, the Afghan blood. No one is more resilient than the girls of Afghanistan'. Who could doubt that?

*More from the personal stories of Fatana, Deniz, Dina, Hosay and others can be found on the Victory Afghanistan website under the 'Stories of Victory' section.

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References

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