

Hope and Grief

An Afghan Woman Navigates Two Worlds

Sahar

BEFORE YOU READ: Read the title, subtitle, and headings in the article. What do you think this article will be about? Why?

Everything Looked Like a Dream

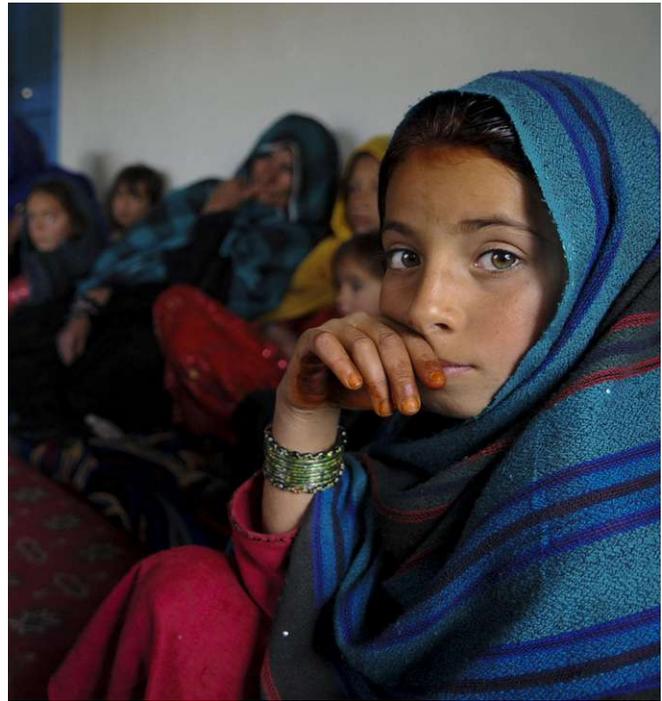
I arrived in the U.S. at night. I was happy and excited. I had spent hard days and nights in my homeland, and I had come to the United States to start a new life. I am from Afghanistan, where the Taliban has taken power, and women and girls lost all their fundamental rights.¹

In the morning when I woke up, I saw many beautiful things: green trees, colorful flowers, nice houses, blue sky, and birds singing in the trees. People were walking on the streets in the early morning. There were chairs and tables on the streets so people could sit together and drink coffee and have conversation, which was amazing to me. Everything looked like a dream. A peaceful feeling came to my mind and soul. There I was: a woman walking on the Cambridge streets without fear and judgment by society.

But There Was a Deep Hole in My Heart

I soon realized, however, that not all things in the U.S. are the way I found them in those first hours. Life in the U.S. is different from my country. I felt a deep hole in my heart which was painful. I was not related to this society. I was homesick, and I experienced culture shock.

Sometimes I felt that I was watching a Hollywood movie in high definition; the people were all actors and actresses. Men and women were talking and laughing loudly, hugging each other, and dressing differently, which was not common in my culture. They were so happy without thinking or caring about what was going on around the world.



An Afghan girl in the Urgan District of Afghanistan. Public domain photo by: Defense Visual Information Distribution Service <https://www.dvidshub.net/>

In my country, women and girls could not go to restaurants, parks, or even schools during the Taliban rule.² So, I thought I am not a part of this community: I am separate from everyone and everything.

Sadness and Loneliness

Besides culture shock, I felt so lonely, and nothing was familiar or known to me. I had many friends in my country that I lost after coming here. I had a few friends in the U.S., and they were the sky, trees, and birds that were like nature in my homeland. But the Charles River was not my friend because I had never seen a beautiful and calm river in my country. I missed my family,

friends, and memories. Thinking about them caused me to feel deeply alone. Also, in my country, I lived with my parents and five siblings, but here I lived alone in my apartment.

Trauma in Afghanistan Is Personal to Me

I also endured deep sadness because after living in the United States for a month, I read on social media about a suicide attack at a school in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. My cousin, who was 18 years old, was killed by the Taliban with more than 49 girls from the Hazara minority group.³ It was a heavy burden that I bore alone.

Meanwhile, being a young immigrant woman is challenging. I work as a visiting scholar at Harvard University. I work on research about girls' education in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Those first days when I did my research, watched the news, and read the articles, I cried and wrote or I wrote and then cried. This is personal to me. My younger sister can't go to school. Any time she comes to my mind, I imagine what she is experiencing. Not just for her, but for so many girls, going to school is impossible.

I Remember My Goals

The hardest part of my life so far has been coming to the U.S. where I had to merge myself with a new environment. At the same time, my past life did not go away from my mind. I can't forget the people I left behind. This journey in my life has given me a chance to grow and be strong, alongside experiencing depression and trauma and having many hard days and nights.

One way I survive the hard times is I remember my goals. My goals are to continue my education, write articles about my experience under the Taliban, and raise support for Afghan women's rights and girls' education.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. Cite excerpts from the text that offer evidence that Sahar is "navigating two worlds."
2. Click on the endnotes and read further.



Sahar is a student at the Community Learning Center in Cambridge, MA. She worked for more than five years as a lawyer with the justice system of Afghanistan and international donors. She traveled to India, Japan, and Bhutan to participate in capacity-building for women's rights programs. She has written articles about women's rights and violence against women in Afghanistan. After the Taliban took power, she lost her job and all fundamental rights like all Afghan women and girls. In August 2022, she came to the U.S. She is from the Hazara minority group. This ethnic minority has experienced genocide in Afghanistan. She reads motivational books and novels, and she likes hiking and nature photography.

Endnotes:

1. <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/futures-in-the-balance-taking-action-to-ensure-afghan-womens-and-girls-rights-under-taliban-rule/>
2. <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-afghanistan-women-families-banned-gardens/32357294.html>
3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-63526483>