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Girls in Exile

What if you had to run from the home you knew or lie to the people you love just so you could go to school? Meet four Afghan refugee girls fighting for their right to be educated.

Third-Class Citizens

The Ferdausy Middle School isn't all that different from the school that Rahima, 15, once went to in Afghanistan. The subjects are the same—grammar, math, science and Islamic studies (nearly all Afghans are Muslim)—as are the uniforms (long black chador, or body scarf, worn over tunics and baggy pants). The teachers are all from Afghanistan, and everyone speaks Dari, the language Rahima's native tongue. The only major difference between this school, which is in the Pakistani border city of Quetta and the one back home is that Rahima—a girl—is allowed to attend.

Back in her home town of Ghazni, 250 miles away—as in most of Afghanistan—girls have been banned from schools since 1994, when the Taliban, a militia of mostly young, extremist Muslim fundamentalist soldiers, began taking over the country and instituting superharsh strictures. “When the Taliban invaded Ghazni, Rahima was forbidden to leave her house without a relative and forced by law to wear a burqa, a full-body robe covering her from head to toe, face and all, when she was outside her home. Women in general were not allowed to work.

“The Taliban destroyed everything. They destroyed our house. They killed my cousins and my uncles,” Rahima says. “They beat my father.

They arrested young girls and forced them get married.” Last year, fearing the Taliban would abduct Rahima and force her to marry, her family fled to Pakistan.

Rahima is a beautiful girl, with a round face, almond-shaped eyes and perfect skin. Sitting inside the principal's office along with four of her classmates, she describes how life changed under the Taliban. Her friends nod knowingly as Rahima explains how her family once had their own home; her father owned a secondhand store. Today, they live hand-to-mouth in a rented apartment, scraping by on her father's wages as a day laborer, which Rahima supplements by spinning wool for eight hours each day.

Rahima's story isn't unique. Afghanistan, a landlocked nation in Central Asia has been plagued by brutality for years. Since 1979, a series of devastating events—massive invasion by Soviet troops, civil war, drought, famine—has killed more than 1.5 million people (including 300,000 children) and caused more than 5 million people to flee elsewhere. Many, like Rahima's family, gave up stable lives for poverty in Pakistan. “It is difficult but we pray,” says Rahima. And it's not as if there are options in Afghanistan for girls. As one refugee put it, “Girls don't count.”

Unfortunately, in places all over the globe, girls don't count—or they count way less than boys. In many nations, girls aren't seen as worth education. According to UNICEF, 115 million children worldwide—the vast majority of them girls—are denied the right to go to school. In Afghanistan, 15 percent of Afghan females can read (versus 47 percent of males). That's not all the Taliban's doing. Even before the Talibs, which, ironically, translates as “students,” closed thousands of schools, there were sexist attitudes about women. Many people believe that women are meant to clean house, have kids and obey men, explains Sima Samar, M.D., director of the Shuhada Organization, which provides medical care and schooling for Afghans both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. “Many Afghan people still count women and children as nothing more than animals.”

The Art of Negotiation

Like Rahima, Kadijah*, 12, is a refugee, although Kadijah was born in Pakistan. Her family fled in the early 1980s after Soviet troops invaded. They ended up in the New Saranan refugee village, not far from Quetta. If Kadijah had been born in Afghanistan, it's doubtful she would've ever seen the inside of a school. Her rural Pashtun family is very traditional and religiously conservative—not used to girls going to school. But the camp has organizations like Save the Children to lobby on behalf of a girl's right to hit the books.

To go to school, however, Kadijah has to play a complicated game of deception and negotiation. Her father is a mullah, who believes it is against Islam for girls to get an education, so Kadijah can only attend when he is away. Because her uneducated mother doesn't quite get why Kadijah should be in school, Kadijah must constantly haggle for her right to attend.

Every few months, soldiers or mullahs from the Taliban come to the village and intimidate families, telling them that they are breaking God's law by allowing their daughters to be educated. When that happens, enrollment drops, and life gets tougher for Kadijah. Her uncles and cousins do what they can to keep her out of school. “Whenever the Taliban come, I get beat up,” she says. Kadijah's teacher is Lalima*, who sports a short haircut, no headscarf and a green shalwar kameez that matches her eyes. “The last time the Taliban came, all schools shut down,” Lalima says during a class break. “But my father is head of this camp and he told the Talibs, ‘Don't tell people what to do. If you think that by going to school, these are bad Muslims, leave the bad Muslims to me.’”

Such words reopened the schools but did little to persuade Kadijah's father. Nevertheless, on a warm spring day, Kadijah is sitting barefoot on a mat, her head wrapped in white scarves, practicing her writing in a small composition book. The school is basic—mud huts around a dirt courtyard—but it might as well be Harvard for how psyched Kadijah is to be there. “I love school,” she says. “People say we won't get anything out of an education. They think we'll become pagans. They think it's against Islam. But Islam doesn't say girls don't get an education. It's only the uneducated people who are against girls going to school.”

Kadijah is actually on to something. As Belquis Ahmadi, a fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based International Human Rights Law Group, points out, nowhere does the Koran (the Muslim holy book), mandate girl-free schools (single-sex schools are another story, as Islam does recommend separation of the sexes). But most young men in the Taliban might not know that because they can't even read the Koran. The Talibs are mostly poor and uneducated boys

whose parents sent them to religious schools, known as madrasah. It wasn't by choice, says Dr. Samar. "Parents had no options. They couldn't feed their children, so they sent them to the madrasah, where there was much abuse, sexual and otherwise," she says. Isolated and mistreated, the madrasah boys were taught a very rigid interpretation of Islam, and were then told to out and fight for their cause.

It doesn't help that there has never been much of a tradition of education for girls or boys in Afghanistan, let alone among the rural Pash-tun—which is why girls like Kadijah and Rabia are such unlikely trailblazers. Rabia, who's 17, lives a refugee village near Kadijah's. Her parents wouldn't allow her to go to a regular girls' school, because to do so, she'd have to travel in public and be seen by men outside the family. So Rabia goes to one of 52 home-based girls' schools that Save the Children has set up in the refugee camps around Quetta. Within the walls of a private home, she is taught the same subjects as Kadijah.

Rabia might never have set foot in school in the first place were it not for a bribe. Save the Children offered families cooking oil in exchange for girls' school enrollment (boys don't get oil.) Five years later, things are looking dicey for Rabia. The oil exchange has ended and with it, the incentive to send her to school. And two years ago, her parents betrothed her to a local boy. "My in-laws asked 'Why is she going to school?' When I heard this, I knew that they were ignorant people," she says. "My fiancé, he is a shepherd. He doesn't know what a school is. What will happen to me when I got live with him?"

At the in-laws' insistence, Rabia's father told her she would have to quit school. But she still goes—behind his back. Relatively speaking, Rabia

is lucky. One of her little sisters was promised in marriage since birth, so she is subject to purdah (separation from all men, except close relatives). She'll never go to school. But Rabia doesn't feel lucky. "I'm sad that if I get married, I can't be a teacher," she says.

End of the Road

It seems like a cruel trick to give these parched girls a sip of education and then to yank away the cup, something that Nayyar Iqbal, a program manager with Save the Children, acknowledges that: "It creates some confusion but our hope is that the experience that they love so much themselves, will influence them when they are mothers to let their own daughters be educated." Save the Children says that an educated woman is 40 percent more likely to enroll her own daughter in school. (She's also more likely to get a job and have fewer children). But this doesn't help first-generation schoolgirls like Rabia and Kadijah, who've gotten just about as far as they're likely to go.

Back in Quetta, at Noor High School, a group of Hazara (a minority tribe in Afghanistan) teenagers are dealing with a different kind of frustration: They're all dressed up with nowhere to go. These girls, ranging in age from 15-19, are light years ahead of Kadijah and Rabia in terms of their education, political awareness and sophistication. Many are grade-12 students (the refugee village schools only go to grade 10 because by the time girls have gotten that far, they're usually forced to drop out) and have been in school since they were little. Like Rahima, their families were harassed, attacked and even killed by the Taliban, which prompted their flight. They were lucky to land in good refugee schools in Quetta, but now that they're graduating, they've hit a ceiling. Afghan refugees live in limbo in Pakistan: They don't get

residency, few get work permits, and they can't go home either.

This Catch-22 angers many young women like Gina, a beautiful, bright and passionate 18-year-old, stylishly decked out in a gold embroidered black head shawl and high-heeled shoes. Gina's nearly done with her studies at Noor, and she'd love to go on to college, but she can't attend Pakistani colleges; the only Afghan university in Pakistan is very expensive and not accredited. "I have an education but it doesn't help me to get a job or a salary," she says. The only work she can do is to teach fellow refugees. She is equal parts angry, stoic and optimistic about her future. She believes, as do so many of her peers, that one day peace will arrive in Afghanistan—and the Taliban will disband. At that point, there will be a huge need for teachers, doctors, engineers, clerks and other professionals. "If you want to ruin a country, take away the women," Gina says, her voice rising in anger. "But if you want a strong country, you give the women power. I am getting an education so when our country has peace, I can help rebuild it."

*Names have been changed