

# BETWEEN LANDS AND LIVES:

Testimonies of Afghan  
Women and Men Refugees  
in Central Asia



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### **About the OSCE Gender Issues Programme**

The Gender Issues Programme (GIP) in the OSCE Secretariat works towards the implementation of the 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality, as well as relevant Ministerial Council decisions. It supports systematic efforts to mainstream gender equality across the Organization in all its policies, programmes, projects and activities and its three dimensions of comprehensive security, namely the politico-military, economic and environmental, and human.

Under its multi-year, comprehensive project WIN—Women and Men Innovating and Networking for Gender Equality, the GIP is striving to advance gender equality as a prerequisite for achieving and maintaining stable, prosperous and peaceful societies in the OSCE area, in line with the 2004 Action Plan and other OSCE commitments.

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**The information, views, opinions and conclusions presented in this document are not provided nor necessarily endorsed by the OSCE, unless explicitly stated otherwise.**

***\*The interviews contained in this publication have been edited for brevity and understanding, and some names and locations have been changed or omitted for security reasons.***

# MESSAGE FROM THE TEAM BEHIND THIS PUBLICATION



We, as a team, are very proud to have been able to put together this publication. It contains not only stories of individuals who left Afghanistan but reflects the journeys they had to make to get to safety, receive an education and have opportunities. By shedding light on these individual lives, our main goal is to highlight the positive contributions Afghan refugees make in their host countries in Central Asia, and also their resilience and their agency. These stories not only showcase the challenges faced by Afghan refugees but also the many meaningful ways in which they enrich their host communities.

We also want to thank the women and men who have shared their life stories with us. It takes bravery to talk about one's personal life, and even more so when one has gone through suffering and trauma. This project would not have been possible without these brave people and we have done our utmost to treat their stories with respect and dignity.

It is worth noting that the early stages of this initiative were fraught with significant challenges. What was initially conceived as a capacity-building programme to cultivate the leadership potential of Afghan refugees through a mental wellness programme, needed to be adapted and reshaped to a storytelling project, owing to a number of political barriers and safety concerns we encountered. What you see before you is the net result of these efforts.

Ultimately, however, we learned that projects like this one have their own value, by giving a voice to Afghan refugees whose stories otherwise would not be known by a broader public. We hope that similar initiatives will be able to come to life and receive greater support, allowing Afghan refugees living in different regions to tell their stories and illustrate the positive impact they are making. They are talented, resilient and passionate people, and true assets to the communities that welcome them.



# INTRODUCTION

Migration from Afghanistan, especially since the Taliban takeover in 2021, has been driven by protracted conflict, political instability, economic precarity and deeply entrenched gender inequalities. For many Afghans, leaving home is not a choice but a necessity to seek safety, dignity and the chance to rebuild their lives. For Afghan women, mobility is both a survival strategy and a pathway to autonomy. Yet, in several mainstream narratives once they have crossed the Afghanistan border, their stories are reduced to mere numbers or viewed solely through the prism of vulnerability. Rarely are they recognized as agents of change, contributing skills, knowledge and resilience to the communities that host them.

In addition to these challenges, Afghan refugees often face stigma and discrimination due to a combination of social, economic and political factors. Negative stereotypes and misconceptions about Afghan culture, religion or traditions can lead to prejudice and social exclusion. Competition over limited jobs, housing and public services may fuel resentment among local populations, framing refugees as economic burdens. Political narratives and media portrayals that link refugees to insecurity, instability or dependency further reinforce discriminatory attitudes. Cultural and

language differences also often create barriers to integration, making refugees more visible as 'outsiders' and heightening social marginalization.

This publication seeks to shift that narrative. Through a human-centred and participatory approach, our project amplifies the voices of Afghan refugees in Central Asia. By documenting their stories, it foregrounds the experiences of those navigating displacement at the intersection of gender, migration and social exclusion. Their narratives reveal both structural challenges, such as limited access to resources, legal uncertainty and cultural barriers, and the subtle, often overlooked forms of contribution they make.

In the following stories, you will find personal testimonies that capture both struggle and strength. They illuminate the gendered realities of displacement while showcasing everyday acts of care, creativity and resilience that foster social cohesion, integration and peacebuilding. By centring the voices of women, so often overlooked in migration and peace discourses, this project affirms that Afghan refugees are not passive recipients of aid but vital actors who shape their own futures as well as those of the communities they join.

*\*The following interviews have been edited for brevity and understanding, and some names have been changed for security reasons.*



## HOMAIRA'S JOURNEY—FROM SILENCE IN KABUL TO A VOICE IN THE CLASSROOM

Homaira was in her final year at university in Afghanistan when everything changed. The Taliban takeover overturned her life in an instant. *“Life for women was completely destroyed,”* she says. *“All the wishes we had, all the dreams... suddenly turned upside down.”*

Together with her family, she had secured visas to a Central Asian country months earlier, but once the Taliban had taken over, escape became impossible. *“The airport was chaotic. The host country had closed its borders. Neither through air nor through land could we leave,”* she remembers. For nearly three months, they lived in fear and uncertainty. Eventually, after a difficult journey via Iran and Dubai, they reached their country of destination—with only two days left on their visa.

The hardest part, Homaira says, wasn't the travel or the uncertainty. *“It was burying everything. All the hopes and the work I had done in Afghanistan. Starting from zero, in a new country, not knowing anyone. I didn't see any opportunity for myself to grow.”* With no access to university, she turned to what she could control: language. *“The only way out I had was to learn English.”* She studied hard, passed the TOEFL\* with a score of 100 and began teaching Afghan refugees, preparing them for life abroad. *“We helped them understand culture shock, so they wouldn't be completely lost when they arrived in third countries.”*

Later, she began teaching in her host country's capital, including classes for government employees. *“As an Afghan girl, teaching in a place like that... I was proud,”* she says. Her work caught the attention of her British supervisor, who helped her land a job at an international school. There, she worked alongside teachers from the US, Nigeria



*I want Afghan girls to have choices—to be able to say: I am a human being, and I decide for myself.”*

**Homaira**

and Great Britain. *“I was holding the same position, standing at the same level,”* she says. *“The respect I received, especially when I introduced myself as Afghan—it meant everything.”*

Recently, amid fear of deportation, Homaira sat for the IELTS\*\* exam with only one night of preparation. At present, she is waiting for her results. Her long-term dream is to become a psychologist and support women.

Homaira's story is not just one of escape—it is a story of rebuilding, of reclaiming power through education, and of choosing hope over fear.

\*Test of English as a Foreign Language

\*\*International English Language Testing System



## AN AFGHAN DOCTOR REBUILDS HER LIFE

The story of Dr. Laila, a medical doctor with thirty years of experience in Afghanistan, is one that reveals both the harsh realities of displacement and the resilience of the human spirit. Confronting daily the fear of deportation, and having to support her children as well as her husband, she serves her host country as a psychologist, helping members of both the host and Afghan community cope with trauma and mental health challenges.

Finding purpose through her profession became crucial to her sense of identity and healing after having had to flee her home. At first, she volunteered at a women's organization and delivered mental health workshops. Later, she connected with an international organization that supports Afghan refugees and other groups in vulnerable situations. This new partnership opened doors for her, leading to her current role providing psychological support to refugees and locals alike—work that has become her anchor in uncertain times.

However, this professional fulfillment is always mixed with the constant fear of deportation from her host country, even though Dr. Laila and her family hold the required legal documentation. Added to this is the fact that her husband, a highly qualified civil engineer, cannot practice in his field of work. This is a common situation for refugees who are forced to take on any work, despite often having advanced skills and expertise in areas that could significantly benefit their host community.

But it is mainly the fear of deportation that hovers over the family daily, confining both Dr. Laila's husband and children to their home. This uncertainty prevents them from building stable lives and makes living difficult: *"It is really hard to have a teenager kept at home for months,"* Dr. Laila says.



*I hope that boys and girls in Afghanistan will once again be able to go to school together and study."*

**Dr. Laila**

Looking toward the future, her greatest hope remains education—both for her children and for all Afghan youth. *"My highest hopes are for my children to be educated and, like me, able to serve society. It was because of this hope that I left Afghanistan."*

Dr. Laila's dedication to service, regardless of nationality, runs like a thread through the conversation. "To a doctor," she concludes, "it is of no importance whether patients are from this country or Afghan. When you can serve them and they can truly benefit from the service, it fulfills you."



## SORAYA'S VIEW: MINDSET AND VISION

Soraya belongs to Afghanistan's Hazara ethnic group, a community that has long been the subject of persecution in Afghanistan. She knew the dangers they could face if they stayed in the country, especially as Hazaras: their chances of suffering under the Taliban were high.

Soraya's sister and brother still were of school age and Soraya had to drop them off at school and pick them up every day, which made her life even more difficult. She only wanted a peaceful place to live, where her family could be safe and her siblings could continue their education.

Finally, two months after the Taliban takeover, the family managed to leave Kabul and flee to a country in Central Asia, despite the many risks involved and the high costs of visas and tickets for eight family members.

When Soraya's family decided to move, they knew almost nothing about their host country. Upon arrival, they had to face the challenge of adapting to a new language and a different culture. They had to find a place they could call home. They had to apply for refugee status to secure their stay. And they had to begin another migration process so they could move to a third country.



*I was able to give something that my host country or the people here could benefit from, and that makes me extremely happy."*

**Soraya**

Finding housing was particularly difficult since the Taliban takeover had resulted in a large refugee flow and housing for newcomers had become scarce. Soraya's family faced many hardships in the first months after their arrival. However, they made efforts to understand the local language by watching movies and drama series. Soraya tried to make new friends.

Soraya was always a positive and resilient person. When she left Afghanistan, she felt more secure, despite the many challenges she still faced, and especially as a woman navigating the host country's health services. This motivated her to become more health-conscious, adopting a healthier diet and exercising regularly. She believes that success does not depend on location but on mindset and vision. Despite all the challenges, she is extremely happy to have moved to her host country.

## KNOWLEDGE-SHARING AND EDUCATION AS KEY TO SUCCESS

Over the past four years, Soraya has served her community using the knowledge and experience she brought from Afghanistan. She has shown great dedication to learning and developing her skills. Through the organizations she worked with, especially educational-oriented ones, she participated in leadership and educational programmes for Afghan youth and organized summer camps.

Soraya has always loved serving her community through education, and she hopes that one day schools and universities in Afghanistan will reopen to female students. In the meantime, she strives

to improve people's perspectives and well-being, encouraging everyone she works with—students, colleagues and others—to think positively, giving hope, and helping them feel better.

Her actions, however, are not limited to the people she meets every day. Soraya shares her values also with a broader community, using social media to raise awareness so Afghans and members of the host community can all benefit. It is a way of giving back: as an Afghan, being able to positively impact people in her host country gives Soraya immense satisfaction.



## MEENA, A BEACON OF HOPE

Meena's story is that of a migrant not of a refugee. She left Afghanistan already before the Taliban takeover. Despite this, she experienced much of the same emotional turmoil and challenges that refugees had to go through. It was very difficult for her to leave Afghanistan and leave behind her memories, her friends and her life. Not everyone chooses to be a migrant willingly, but sometimes life leaves no other option.

When Meena arrived in her host country, she was determined to not give up on her studies. Back in Afghanistan, she had been in 12th grade and was preparing for the university admission exam. Leaving the country meant that she could not graduate. Resolved to finish her schooling, Meena searched for a school where she could take the exams and, after much effort, finally succeeded and graduated from high school.

However, after graduation Meena felt lost. There were very few opportunities available to her, and her family did not allow her to move to another city for further studies because they felt it was unsafe. This made her situation even more difficult. For some time, she felt stuck and uncertain about her future.



*I am truly hopeful that one day I can return to Afghanistan, and that day, when I return, be someone who can do something for her people."*

**Meena**

## CONFIDENCE THROUGH ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Eventually, Meena decided to take charge of her life. She joined English courses organized by Afghan immigrants and, over time, regained her confidence. Meena showed great talent and dedication, and this motivated the coaching centre to offer her a teaching position. Although her family initially resisted this move because she was so young, Meena insisted and began working as a volunteer teacher.

She continued teaching and soon grew more comfortable in her role. She applied for a teacher training programme organized by the US Embassy in the host country and, out of 500 applicants, was selected. She began working as a teaching assistant. Her instructor at the teaching institution greatly influenced her work, inspiring her further.

At present, Meena is exploring opportunities to begin her bachelor studies. Having worked hard to establish herself in the small Afghan community in her host country—an accomplishment that made her exceedingly proud—she wants to be a beacon of hope for Afghan girls.

Meena is a positive and resilient young woman. She says that she always relies on God and her own abilities. She dreams of returning to her homeland one day and completing her bachelor's degree. Her journey reflects her dedication, strength and unwavering hope for a brighter future.



## FINDING A VOICE—AHMAD'S JOURNEY AFTER KABUL

Ahmad and his family left Afghanistan for the first time ever in the summer of 2021, two months before the Taliban takeover. *“Even during the civil wars, we never left our country,”* he recalls. *“But every era comes with its own circumstances.”* They flew directly to their host country, hoping to find safety—however, what they found was something much more profound.

Their early days were lonely. Far from the familiarity of home, Ahmad felt out of place. “I went to the market near our house, and I tried to greet people like we did back home. But no one replied. It was like my voice had disappeared.” That night he told his mother, *“Maybe we won’t be able to stay here.”* Back in Afghanistan, Ahmad had been an active part of his community, working, studying and connecting with others. In his current location, the silence was suffocating. “For months, we just walked from one corner of the house to the other. No purpose, no direction.”

But slowly, things began to change. Ahmad joined a local language course to keep himself busy. *“That’s when everything shifted. I met people, started learning again and, little by little, found my place.”* Not long after that, he began volunteering as a maths teacher. At first, he was hesitant: *“I kept thinking, how can I work in a country where I don’t even know the rules?”*

However, he found support, and soon he wasn’t just a teacher—he was part of the community. His siblings joined, too: his brother became an English teacher, his sister taught drawing. Ahmad was promoted to the management team of the centre that employs him and over the next three years,

he led classes, trained teachers, helped organize cultural events, and managed legal guidance sessions that supported over 600 Afghan families. He remembers receiving free health care at a local hospital. *“I even had surgery there. Everything was either free or came with huge discounts. And I made sure to tell my community—if I could access this, so could they.”*



*I wasn’t just working in the shadows. I had actually made a difference.”*

**Ahmad**

In March 2024, Ahmad was invited to a ceremony hosted by the US Embassy to recognize the efforts of people who are active in their community. *“Suddenly they called my name. I walked up and realized—I wasn’t just working in the shadows. I had actually made a difference.”*

By the end of 2024, Ahmad had become a legal advisor, helping not only Afghans but also the host community understand their rights and access to services.

Through hardship and doubt, Ahmad carved out a new life—not just for himself, but for many others. *“Hope means believing that no matter where you are, you can still make a difference,”* he says.



## BETWEEN RESPONSIBILITY AND HOPE

When Dr. Marwa first left Afghanistan, she thought it was only for a visit. But then the situation at home worsened, and the country she travelled to became her and her family's host country—they had no choice but to stay. Being forced into exile was painful. Dr. Marwa was a young woman who loved her homeland deeply. She recalled how difficult it was to leave everything behind—her studies, her family circle, her culture and, above all, the freedoms she once enjoyed as a girl before the Taliban takeover.

Although travelling with her family gave her strength, adjusting to a new country brought new burdens. In Afghanistan, she had lived under the protection of her parents and focused solely on her studies. In exile, she suddenly carried the weight of responsibility. *“As the eldest of the family, almost like a father or mother of the family, I started life,”* she says.

The early years were especially difficult. Not knowing the language of her host country, she could not find work or continue her medical studies. To make ends meet, she started to work as a cook in a restaurant, an entirely new role for her. This, however, came with benefits beyond a steady income: she quickly learned the language and thereby gained more confidence. Over time, she found her way back to education, enrolling in university, where she at present studies psychology. She also started working in a hospital as a doctor's assistant.

Despite the challenges Dr. Marwa had to face, she has spent much time to contribute to both Afghan and local communities, by teaching English to children, assisting patients, and supporting her own family. For her, the greatest source of pride is the trust and respect she has earned: *“It brings me joy that whenever my family faces any problems, if they just mention my name, everything becomes easier for them.”*



*This is my hope, for peace, stability, goodness and happiness for the people of Afghanistan.”*

**Dr. Marwa**

Her hopes remain deeply tied to her profession and her homeland. She dreams of one day becoming a surgeon and establishing a cost-free well-equipped hospital in Afghanistan: *“This has always been my dream, since childhood.”*

Relying on her resilience and sense of responsibility, Dr. Marwa carries both her family through hardship as she does her vision of a better future for Afghan women and for her country.



## A LIGHT BEYOND THE WALLS FOR A GIRL STUDENT

At just twenty years old, Leena's story is one of determination, resilience and hope. Born and raised in Kabul, she has been living in her host country for the last two years. At present, she studies economics at the university there. Her journey was anything but simple. Unlike male students who could travel directly from Kabul, she was required to first obtain a visa through a third country. *"I had to travel with my father so the Taliban would allow it,"* she recalls—women in Afghanistan are forbidden from travelling without a male guardian.

After the Taliban takeover, her world collapsed and shrunk into the four walls of her home. Football with friends, school lessons, even the simple joy of walking in the park—all disappeared overnight. *"When you cannot study, cannot have entertainment, what is the point of going out? The only thing to see outside was an empty street."* For her, the chance to leave Afghanistan was not just about her studies, it was about reclaiming her right to live.

Her journey was exhausting, full of obstacles that constantly reminded her of how different life is for Afghan girls. She recalls travelling across borders under strict conditions, waiting weeks for approvals, and enduring the fear of judgment if she failed. *"The chain of traditions has always been like shackles on the hands and feet of girls,"* she says. *"You have to prove yourself again and again, just to be allowed to dream."*

In her host country, she faced new challenges, including language barriers, lack of institutional support and financial hardship. Yet, she learned to turn these struggles into ways of contributing to the community. When new Afghan students arrived, she welcomed them, guided them through their first

days, and even opened her home to help them feel safe. *"I remembered how my friend supported me when I first came, and I told myself if someone else ever needs the same, I will be ready."*



*Your story is never truly over, as long as hope still lives within your smile."*

**Leena**

She has also found ways to engage with the host community. From learning the language to communicating with taxi drivers and landlords, to attending workshops and building friendships, she sees herself as part of the host country's social fabric. *"It makes me happy when people understand me even in broken language. It shows that kindness can go beyond words,"* she says. Her experience has not only strengthened her own skills but also given her the tools to connect across cultures and contribute meaningfully where she lives.

Looking ahead, her hopes remain rooted in Afghanistan. *"For my homeland, I wish for the healing of its wounds,"* she says softly. *"People are in pain, and without healing, they cannot truly connect with one another. Emotional healing could be the first step toward the country itself being healed."*

At the same time, her personal outlook is guided by resilience and optimism. *"Hope is the only reason to stay alive in this world. Life will keep going, whether we face tragedy or laughter."*



## VOICES OF CHANGE: HOW AN AFGHAN REFUGEE EMPOWERS WOMEN

Sara has lived in her host country for a decade, carrying with her both the wounds of displacement and the strength to transform them into service for others.

“

*I want to stand for women's freedom and speak on behalf of those who cannot yet raise their own voices. We women are capable of anything; we possess incredible power.”*

Sara

As for so many, her journey began with fear. Leaving Afghanistan with her family meant stepping into the unknown, bearing the weight of insecurity, uncertainty and judgment. *“On the path of migration, you don't know what lies at the end. It is deeply painful,”* she says, adding solemnly: *“But still, I endured.”*

Arriving in a new country brought many challenges—not only language barriers and economic struggles but also the constant feeling of being treated as an outsider. Yet, Sara refused to let these obstacles silence her. *“I told myself I had to build my own path.”*

Over time, she adapted to her situation and even began treading a new path: creating opportunities for others. After learning the local language, she volunteered as an English teacher and, later, joined a non-profit organization. There, she turned her vision into reality: a project designed specifically for Afghan women who had spent years confined at home. With courage and persistence, she led training courses in tailoring and English, all free of charge and open

to Afghans and locals alike. *“We trained around sixty Afghan women in tailoring. Every day, when I saw their faces so eager, so determined, it gave me strength. Their smiles gave me peace.”*

For her, these projects were more than skills training; they were acts of liberation. She watched Afghan women find confidence, step outside their homes, and begin to imagine new futures for themselves and their families. *“I felt proud because I realized that we women are capable of anything, that we possess incredible power.”*

Her own skills grew alongside her community work. From learning cosmetology to managing skill-training programmes for women, she has built a career that serves both Afghans and the local community, weaving her contributions into the fabric of the country's community. *“My goal is always to be useful, for Afghan girls and youth, but also for the people of this country where I live. If I can create opportunities, whether technical or educational, I know I have done something meaningful.”*

Looking back, she sees strength in the hardships she endured. *“The challenges made me who I am. They taught me to believe in myself and to serve my people.”* Looking forward, her vision is simple yet powerful: an Afghanistan at peace, and a world where women can speak their truths freely. *“One day, I hope we can say with pride, with honour: we are Afghan. And I hope for women everywhere to live with freedom, to bravely say the words that have long been locked in their hearts.”*



## A MOTHER'S PATH TO PEACE

*"I endured everything for the sake of my children."*

After this introduction, Farah, an Afghan mother of four, begins to share her journey. Married young, she carried the responsibilities of adulthood long before her age. When insecurity and fear made life in Afghanistan unbearable, she made the most difficult decision of her life: to leave her country and begin again.

The road out of Afghanistan was heavy with uncertainty. Every border crossing felt like a trial, each delay like a threat. *"I carried all the fear inside me so my children would not have to. Every border, every moment of doubt, I held it alone. I told myself, if I reach safety, they will have a life I never had."*

Once arrived in her host country, life continued to be difficult but it was freer. For a time, Farah worked in a restaurant until illness forced her to stop. Then, her teenage sons began working to support the family. Yet, she never allowed her ordeals to shake her determination. *"I went through so many hardships for the sake of my four children. Today, when I see them standing differently from others, I feel proud. All my pain was not wasted."*

Her contributions extend beyond her own household. Drawing on her nursing background and her strong connections with Afghan families, she became a guide for others. She helped new migrants register legally, explained how to access services, and advocated for Afghan women to receive language and vocational training.

*"When Afghan women needed courses, I pushed for local-language lessons alongside sewing training. I wanted them to learn, to have skills, to find confidence."* Many women went on to complete these courses and earn certificates, opening paths toward income and independence.



*"I welcomed everyone in my community, neighbors and fellow refugees alike, who came seeking help."*

**Farah**

For her, these acts of service were as important as her own survival. *"I have always tried to be positive—for myself, for the community and for my friends. When I see women learning, when I see that their voices will be heard, it makes me happy. It gives me peace."*

Her hopes remain simple but profound. *"Afghans have lived only through war; they have never seen true happiness. My dream is peace, a home, a country, where children can grow up without fear. And for myself, I only hope for a peaceful home, where I can raise my children with dignity."*



## RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF DAILY STRUGGLES: MARIAM'S STORY

Mariam is a young Afghan woman whose life has been marked by loss and the search for safety, but also by remarkable resilience. Married in early 2022, she expected to begin a new life chapter with her family in Afghanistan. However, only months later—after the Taliban takeover—she was forced to leave her loved ones behind. Raised in a traditional household where she had never spent a single night away from her mother, leaving both her parents and her husband felt like being torn away from the foundation of her life.

The feeling of isolation also marked Mariam's first months in her host country. Without a community or knowing the country's language, she struggled to adjust. Illness struck during her first winter, and without access to proper care, Mariam lost her baby. The experience plunged her into depression, leaving her feeling powerless in a foreign land. Yet slowly, she began to rebuild her life: she learned the language, made connections, and volunteered to teach English to Afghan students in online courses.

### OVERCOMING LOSS WHILE SLOWLY BUILDING A LIFE

While weathering all these hardships, Mariam also experienced moments of pride. At the university in her host country she had enrolled in, her team won third place in a competition, an achievement that unexpectedly led to her first job at a flour company trading wheat to Afghanistan. She started to earn her own income, which allowed her to send money home for her mother's treatment, supporting her even from afar.

Later, her life path led her to work for an international organization, for which she serves until this day. Each day, she meets Afghan families struggling with displacement and uncertainty, listening to their stories and helping them find solutions. This



*I'm sure, in the future, we will have the chance to go back to Afghanistan. I'm really hopeful that the situation there won't last a long time."*

**Mariam**

These small steps gave her a sense of purpose at a time when she needed it most.

However, tragedy struck again in 2023, when Mariam's mother suffered a severe neurological episode after living through months of fear and stress in Afghanistan. Mariam returned home and spent two months by her mother's side, feeding her, holding her hands and trying to bring comfort. Leaving again for her own safety was one of the hardest decisions Mariam ever had to make. In January 2025, her mother passed away. Being far from home when she died left Mariam with grief and guilt that she continues to carry with her.

experience can be painful for Mariam but also brings her fulfillment: *"At least I can do little things for them,"* she says.

Mariam's journey is one of profound loss—of her baby, her mother and her country. But it is also a story of transformation. Abroad, Mariam gained independence, strength and the belief that maturity is not tied to age, but to the storms one survives.

Mariam dreams of pursuing a master's degree and continuing to give back, both to her host country, which she now calls a second home, and—one day—to Afghanistan, when women like her are able to return and rebuild.