

AFGHAN WOMEN'S FUND

Courage, Compassion, Change

A. Lucksted, Editor

Fall 2023

A Word from Our Director

Dear Friends and supporters,
It is hard to believe that another year has passed and it is time to send our yearly report of successes and challenges. We have been very busy working on the ground in Afghanistan despite many difficulties, while also trying to help those who left the country and are struggling to find safety. Every year, we ask for your help, and every year, you generously give. Your support and trust mean the world to me, to us, and to all those who are struggling. Without your help, they won't be able to succeed. Thank you for your love, generosity, and your dedication to humanity. — Fahima

School on a Thumb-drive

As you know, the Taliban closed all schools for girls past elementary grades. Yet we and many others continue to work around and through their edicts to educate girls and women, although it is perilous and difficult. Volunteers operate some clandestine schools and classes, but it is not nearly enough. Therefore, starting in late 2022 we developed another tool, the “school on a thumb drive.” These are complete self-guided curricula in various topics (and languages), created by accomplished Afghan educators, on a memory stick with 4 connectors to fit any available cell phone, tablet, laptop, or desktop. Copies of the drives allow girls and women (and boys & men) to study without relying on internet access which is nonexistent, unreliable, or prohibitively expensive for most Afghans. The drives are distributed to girls, families, and whole villages and are used in several different ways depending on local circumstances. This newsletter focuses on some of those stories.

This project has been very successful so far, and challenging. We had hoped to reach all of Afghanistan in local languages by the end of 2023, but have faced many obstacles. Our studio for creating and recording lessons is small and can record just two classes at a time. We must be extremely careful not to draw attention, such as

having many people in and out, for fear of being raided by the Taliban. And of course it can be dangerous for educators and others to travel to the studio. So recording must proceed slowly — but we are persistent. And, distribution takes resources and great care. But our most limiting obstacle has been insufficient funds. We are enormously grateful for the support you and others have contributed, but circumstances are so difficult. As you read the specific reports and stories in this newsletter, please contact us if you can help in any way.

Baghlan Province

With the help of several AWF teachers, a dedicated volunteer in the northeast province of Baghlan coordinates classes for over 200 young girls in rooms that AWF rents and with supplies AWF provides. This past year he also travelled to Kabul to get the new educational thumb drives and made many copies. Now he and the other teachers provide them to middle and high school-aged girls who cannot come to school, so they can learn at home. The teachers also provide them with periodic support and encouragement.

However, many families do not have electricity or a device that their girls can consistently use. In these cases, a teacher, educational aid, or any adult can oversee a small group of students using the thumb-drive curricula to complete self-paced lessons in a central (covert) location that does. This expands education access in areas where fully trained teachers are not available, avoids the need for bulky school supplies that can draw attention, and provides social connections for the students. Others have taken thumb drive copies to families educating girls



at home, particularly in Puli Khumrī (the Provincial capitol) and Khost-o-Fereng in eastern Baghlan.

Within this network there is a group of artistically talented young women. Before the Taliban retook control of the country, some were selling their work publicly. While that is impossible now, they have devoted themselves to teaching drawing and painting to others, with remarkably expressive and skilled results.



AWF volunteers also lead sewing and tailoring classes for girls and women in Baghlan,

which are tolerated by the local Taliban, and were able to deliver AWF-sponsored emergency food to about 20 desperate families. We wish we could do more.

Badakhshan Province

Dedicated volunteers also operate clandestine classes and other programs across Badakhshan Province. They have been distributing the thumb drives and other educational materials to hundreds of girls and families, especially in the Faizabad and Shaghonon areas, always working to reach more. The community library we featured in last year's newsletter is still operating, under a special permit from the local Taliban.

Since most women are not allowed to work, and the economy is in tatters for everyone, poverty has dug deeper and deeper. We help wherever we are able – this past year with school supplies for over 300 students so they can attend elementary school and survival supplies for 20 desperate families in Shaghonon.

Kunduz Province

In Kunduz we are proud to work with a long-time AWF teacher, women's shura (cooperative) leader, vocational trainer, and activist (who we cannot name for safety rea-

sons). When the Taliban closed high schools in 2023 (they were allowed to operate in 2021-22 in Kunduz and some other northern provinces), she channeled her anger and grief to mobilize her contacts with girls' schools and women in the region to continue girls' education. To date, she has distributed our educational drive and materials to more than 6,700 students. She began by going to students' homes that she knew, quietly teamed up with principals and other teachers, and nurtured a network that continues to expand and distribute education alongside encouragement, strength, and hope.

Ghazni Province

We have worked in Ghazni, southeast Afghanistan, for years, organizing and supporting literacy and vocational classes (jewelry making, sewing, tailoring). As elsewhere, girls, families, and teachers have been contacting us for help since the Taliban banned girls' high school education. Among these efforts, a young man new to AWF volunteered to distribute the school thumb drives. We provided him with copies and he is travelling from village to village to deliver them in person and help the girls and local education supporters. We hope to make further expansion in Ghazni a milestone of our 2024 efforts.

Logar Province

Our three long-standing schools in Logar (Malalai, Sher Mohammad Khan, and Mir Taqi Shah) now operate as elementary schools. In 2022 we tried providing internet-based classes in this area but quickly saw that the economic collapse, unreliable electricity and internet, and lack of (and risk to) teachers all made them frustrating and ultimately impossible. This experience was one impetus for our developing the thumb drives instead. Currently, most older students use them to study at home. Some who don't have electricity or devices take the risk of gathering in small groups to learn together with the thumb drives.



Kabul Province

Mir Bacha Kot: AWF continues to provide school supplies to Mir Bacha Kot schools, in response to ardent requests from mothers who are the family's only breadwinner yet are prohibited from work. We also provided uniforms for 300 young girls in 2023, employing local female tailors, and we gave emergency aid to some 30 families this past year. We have continued a few vocational training classes to help such families longer-term. The older girls, banned from school, gladly use our thumb drives to study at home. In one recent distribution event, we made 780 copies in 4 hours to meet demand, and everyone promised to share with friends and family.



Mushwani: We are happy to report that the Mushwani Clinic we built in 2012, recently a vaccination-only clinic under the local Health Ministry, has been expanded by the international organization PU-AMI (Première Urgence Internationale) and now provides a much broader range of health services. The primary school students who studied in one side of the clinic have moved to the local elementary school, which AWF helps to support.

Nangarhar Province

In this region, an enterprising AWF volunteer developed a different method for distributing our thumb-drives. Computers and smartphones are allowed under the Taliban, so stores and kiosks selling and repairing them are common, although many Afghans can't afford them. The volunteer brought our educational thumb drives to Nangarhar Province and personally visited every such shop he could locate. Most agreed to make copies and to give them away to whoever walks in, indefinitely.

Here, and elsewhere, many local Taliban are not against education but they have to obey their supreme leader. So far the order is that *gatherings* of high school and university girls/women are forbidden but there are no edicts

against studying at home, thumb drives, or even online education; people do whatever they can to educate girls. Therefore, this volunteer, like others in other locations, met with local teachers and school principals to facilitate thumb drive distribution to older students studying at home. These older girls occasionally visit their previous teachers and principals, keeping in touch and benefitting from the teachers' volunteer help.

Bamyan Province

Our "thumb-drive school" network has been especially active in the central province of Bamyan, reaching thousands of people via a hub-and-spoke system. Education-dedicated parents, students, and village leaders travel for miles (often walking, even in the snow) to central villages to get copies of the drives, mindful of the dangers of travel and the need for discretion. They then make copies and continue to spread them to others as they are able.

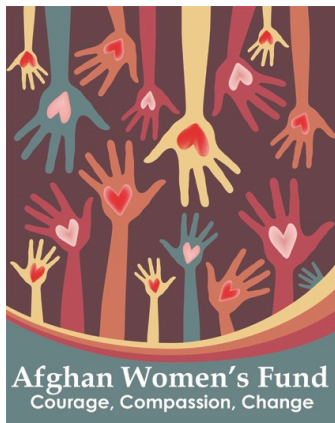
Western Provinces

In western Afghanistan we continue to work with a long-standing like-minded organization that has been forced underground by the Taliban oppression but persists with determination. Their networks have allowed us to distribute the thumb drives through Herat, Ghor, Farah, and Badghis provinces.

Concluding Thoughts

Wherever there is oppression there is resistance and creative determination to survive. Nowhere is this more true than Afghanistan. In recent years AWF volunteers in Afghanistan have been killed, jailed, and tortured by the Taliban. Some must now move frequently or live in hiding. A few have been forced to leave the country; some of these remain in limbo seeking asylum. Yet all strive to further education and liberation however they can, including by trying to survive to be active in the future. In addition, precious new people have joined our efforts, dedicated to our





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mission and devising ways to work around these impossibly difficult circumstances.

Their resourcefulness and determination are unmatched even as the repression, danger, and deprivation are daunting. We each help as much as we can. For example, a dear American friend, Tom, has been providing monthly funds to a family forced into hiding because of their AWF activism. Without his help they literally would not have food to eat. Thank you, Tom. If those reading this can help in similar —or different— ways, please contact us.

We are grateful to work alongside others to foster hope even where all doors seem closed. We need funds to continue and expand the projects described here.

Please help however you can.

And thank you for your love and support!



AWF is 100% volunteer organization committed to helping the people, especially women and girls, of Afghanistan forge a better future. This is a huge task and is not possible without your support, for which we are so grateful. Thank you for your help and trust these many years, and into the future.

COURAGE
COMPASSION
CHANGE

Courage to create a new and peaceful society.
Compassion for the women, children and all those who suffer in these times. Change through education, healthcare and sustainable employment.

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