The Teacher defying the Taliban on girls’ education.

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Firouzeh Akbarian

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Angela Ghayour.

When the Taliban took power in Afghanistan, they instructed girls and young women to stay at home and away from school. With no resolution in sight, one member of the Afghanistan Diaspora decided to act. Angela Ghayour’s online school now has almost 1000 students and more than 500 volunteer tutors.

Angela was just 8 years old when civil war broke out across Afghanistan in 1992. Her family fled their home in Herat in the west of the country to go to Iran and for the following 5 years Angela was unable to go to school. She was ineligible because of the family’s temporary visa status. It was quite common at that time that Afghan children who fled to Iran could not go to school because they did not have the correct documentation.

After 5 years, Angela’s father finally sourced the correct documentation and she was able to go to school in Iran. Aged just 13 years she realized that she had a calling.

Every day after school,Angela would return home and teach 14 other Afghan children, all unable to go to school. Angela’s father was a gardener in Iran, and she would gather her small class in his well-tended garden and teach them everything that she had learnt that day including Reading, Writing and Maths.

Years later after the Taliban were removed from power, Angela returned to Afghanistan and qualified as a secondary school teacher, before moving to the Netherlands and then the UK.

Like many members of the Afghanistan diaspora Angela felt paralysed watching the recent events unfolding in her home country. As the US withdrew the last of their troops, after 20 years of war the Taliban swept back into power.

In what seems like an instant, two decades of progress in women’s education was placed in jeopardy. The Taliban claim that their restrictions on women working and girls struggling are “temporary”, only in place to ensure that all workplaces and learning environments are safe for them

But the thought of girls once again being deprived of education like she had been for her first 5 years in Iran made her miserable. After three months, with no indication from the Taliban that restrictions would be relaxed, she decided to act.

Angela founded the “Online Herat School and Education Resource for Afghan Women and Girls”. She posted on Instagram, asking for help from any experienced teachers; since that post nearly 500 volunteers have joined the programme. Via telegram or Skype they offer more than 170 different classes in anything from maths to music, cooking to painting. Most of these volunteer teachers are from Iran and they work between 2 and 8 hours a day.

The school motto is “The pen instead of the gun!”

The volunteers support nearly 1000 students. One of these students is Nasrin a 13-year-old who lives in Kabul with her 4 sisters; they have all had to forfeit school or university.

The girls have been doing their best to keep up with their studying at home, but it has been especially difficult for her 2 eldest sisters who were both at university studying medicine and engineering.

“All my dreams have been ruined; even if the schools reopen it won’t be the same” Nasrin said in interview. “I wanted to be a pilot and now that can never happen as the Taliban would never let girls be pilots”. But the girls now have a small ray of hope in the form of Angela’s online school.

Nasrin is now studying Turkish with one of the volunteer teachers and would love to live in Istanbul one day. She said “the lessons have allowed me to dream again”.

In more recent weeks there has been some positive news for the female students in the north of the country, where girls are returning to secondary schools in 5 of the country’s 34 provinces. Young women in private universities, but NOT state-run facilities, have also been allowed to return. But for Nasrin and her sisters in Kabul, along with a large majority of female students across the country, there is still a blanket ban on their return to school.

Female teachers like Nasrin’s mother have also been told to stay at home, and the Taliban have offered no plan as to when they will be allowed to return.

According to United Nation estimates, 70% of all qualified teachers in Kabul are women; so, for boys and young men whose schooling does continue, there is likely to be a significant shortage of teaching staff to support them. Long before the resurgence of the Talban, and according to the Ministry of Education, Afghanistan was already struggling with an entrenched lack of access to education, with over 30% of 15-year-olds illiterate.

With the large majority of girls now stuck at home, this unfortunate statistic is only likely to rise.

Approx. 5 mins