https://www.smdailyjournal.com/news/local/the-smartest-of-the-smartest-in-the-us-afghans-face-the-strictest-scrutiny-of-almost/article_aaa9f8f6-e9b4-407a-a429-820cc3e4cb89.html

FEATURED

‘The smartest of the smartest’: In the US, Afghans face the strictest scrutiny of almost any immigrant group, including women hoping to escape Taliban rule

By Alyse DiNapoli, Daily Journal staff
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A GoFundMe has been established at https://gofund.me/ff3fe392f.

MORE INFORMATION

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2 years ago, the Taliban banned girls from school. It's a worsening crisis for all Afghans

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The Taliban believe their rule is open-ended and don't plan to lift the ban on female education

The Taliban are entrenched in Afghanistan after 2 years of rule. Women and girls pay the price

Sahar Naseri has a predictable schedule. During the week, she attends general education classes at the University of San Francisco. On Friday evenings, she gets a ride back to her home in Moss Beach for the weekend, where she spends the next couple days with her host parents and sisters.

On Monday mornings, she is dropped off in Daly City and takes the 28 bus route back into the city, ready to begin classes for the week.

Naseri, just 19 years old, likes the stability of her routine, one she can shape and mold herself. It wasn't too long ago that predictability was a luxury, when the Taliban took over her native Afghanistan, and she had to abruptly stop her education, fleeing to Pakistan and chasing internet connections so she could continue learning via YouTube.

"When the Taliban took over was one of the worst days of my life," she said. "It was 8 a.m., and our principal came and said that for all the girls, he was very worried. He said, 'You should all leave now because if the Taliban finds out there are girls in this school they'll kill all of us.'"

Before that, for the first 14 years of her life, she led a well-regimented life in her hometown of Kabul. She'd wake up early in the morning to begin her prayers, eat breakfast — usually sweet black tea and naan-o-paneer — then head to school, which started promptly at 7 a.m. Afterwards, she'd help her mother with housework, do afternoon prayers and then start homework.

It was a routine she maintained for years, until 2021.

Roqaia Faramarz, a poised college student originally from the mountainous Ghor Province, also had a similar schedule growing up. For years, before the Taliban took over again,

she attended school and often passed by Americans, usually NGO and nonprofit workers, sparking her intrigue with the English language.

“I would see them and they would talk to some people in English or Persian and hearing the sounds were really interesting to me,” Faramarz said. “They were all really nice.”

There were many new things both Naseri and Faramarz had to adjust to when they arrived in the United States a little over a year ago and began living with their host families in San Mateo County. They tried new food like shrimp and avocado and got overwhelmed by myriad choices for water, yogurt and other basic goods at the grocery store.

Naseri also noticed that Americans don’t revere the English language like Afghans revere their native tongue. In Kabul, a collective linguistic passion infused so many aspects of daily life, often expressed through poetry, perhaps the country’s most beloved form of art.

“In Afghanistan, we love poems and memorize a lot of them. Even in simple conversations, they bring up poems,” she said. “[Afghans] will say, ‘I love Dari.’ They have strong connections with their language.”

But since the Taliban came back to power, most creative expression is prohibited, as the government has banned most forms of art for both men and women, like drawing, playing music and poetry.

All rights were immediately stripped from women. Not only is their education illegal but leaving the house without a man is also banned, or at least heavily restricted, and some places are fully off limits to women. Naseri’s mother, for instance, can’t visit their nearby park, even with her husband, and Faramarz’s mother and sisters aren’t allowed

to speak when they walk outside in the street. Women can be publicly beaten if they are not properly covered, and Faramarz's family has increasingly witnessed young girls forced to marry Taliban members.

"Life for them is really challenging," Faramarz said.

The girls are also Hazara, a mostly Shia Muslim ethnic minority that has historically faced discrimination and persecution by the Taliban and other governments in the majority Sunni country. Anyone who has worked in the previous government, including several of Naseri's family members, is also a target. Naseri's uncle, a former government employee, was murdered, and her father fled temporarily for fear of a similar fate.

"My family was very scared. They burned uniforms and pictures," she said.

A chaotic withdrawal and humanitarian surge

The San Francisco Bay Area is home to the third largest Afghanistan-born population out of all metro areas in the country, right behind Washington and Sacramento, according to Migration Policy Institute data between 2018-22.

The numbers soared after the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from the country in 2021, which allowed for a full-blown Taliban takeover — just two decades since the fundamentalist regime had last been in power. Images and videos quickly spread across front pages and social media feeds of Afghans hoping to make it out of the country, some passing their babies to service members in the midst of evacuation.

In the 20 years the United States was in Afghanistan, rampant corruption led to an increasingly weak government and military, as the Taliban simultaneously strengthened. Many Afghans still thought positively of Americans, however, it wasn't until withdrawal was imminent that sentiment began shifting, Ghulam Feda, CEO of the nonprofit Afghan Education for a Better Tomorrow, said.

"There was a good feeling about Americans during the 20 years they were there. It was a relief after an unbelievably dark age," Feda said, who is based in the Sacramento area. "But all of a sudden, the way the Americans left, they left everybody there for nothing. Not saying they should stay there forever, but there should have been some sort of policy to transition to a progressive type of government, not to give it right back to Taliban."

About 76,000 Afghans were allowed into the United States on humanitarian parole after the withdrawal, a temporary status that could buy them time while applying for asylum and forging a potential path for long-term residency. A smaller percentage received temporary protection status, and an even smaller percentage were allowed in on Special Immigrant Visas, granted to those employed by the U.S. government.

Naseri and Faramarz arrived just last year on student visas, which they were lucky enough to secure through a New Mexico-based nonprofit Afghan Scout Relief Fund, a small operation started by Steve Gates, a longtime Scouting America leader, and his family, who remained connected with Afghan Scout members they previously worked with in Kabul.

"They were calling and saying, 'I have to get out of here,'" Gates said when the Taliban was taking over in 2021. "There was no real immigration pathway, but we thought maybe we could do a student visa, but that was a big 'if.'"

The organization is small and operates on a shoestring budget — with funds mostly coming from family and friends — but Gates has managed to connect about 36 Afghan girls, including Naseri and Faramarz, with scholarships to private high schools in the United States.

But there haven't been any new students coming in since mid-2025, when the administration enacted a full travel ban for 12 countries, including Afghanistan. It is also cracking down on Afghan immigrants in the United States, even those who already secured legal status and hoped to escape a country with perhaps the worst human rights abuses against women in the world.

Complicated relationships and life-changing opportunities

U.S. presence in Afghanistan has gone through whiplash-inducing twists and turns over the last few decades, from funding the Islamic fundamentalist Mujahideen in the 1980s to toppling the first Taliban government in the early 2000s — only to see the same group return 20 years later and enter negotiations with the United States, finalizing the fateful Doha Agreement in 2020. A chaotic withdrawal ensued in 2021, and then everything changed.

"Life for me was really normal," Faramarz said. "Then when I was in 10th grade, in August 2021, everything changed in a very unpredictable way."

To Naseri and Roqaia, getting the opportunity to come to the United States and receive an education felt like hitting the lottery — except it didn't happen through pure luck. Both of them temporarily fled to Pakistan, continuing their education with near-obsessive YouTube watching sessions and teaching English to get by. Naseri pressed anyone she could find about how to secure a scholarship in the United States or Canada. Sometimes a potential opportunity would arise, but even paying application fees or partial tuition was

out of the question for families like hers and Faramarz's, with very modest financial means. Eventually, they were connected with Gates' organization, which helped them secure a full ride to the Waldorf School in San Francisco. After obtaining student visas, they were connected to two host families in San Mateo County — the Balsitis and Cruz families, Moss Beach residents that lived one house down from one another.

"We were at a community group from a church in San Mateo, and [Afghan Scout Relief] had just sent an email to a lot of nonprofits and churches, with this story about an opportunity for these young women, and if they could find host families," Miracle Balsitis said. "But it said that we have to get them here really quickly because there is going to be a ban on Afghans coming to the U.S., so it was now or never."

On one hand, the decision to leave their lives behind was a no-brainer, not just for Naseri and Faramarz but also for their families, who had largely embraced Western values, like education and basic rights for women. Both girls said the majority of residents in Kabul and in Ghor were also supportive of women's education before the Taliban took over again.

The opportunity seemed like it could be a once-in-a-lifetime chance to receive an education. In mid-March 2025, the girls were picked up from the airport and explored San Francisco tourist spots, ending the day at Fisherman's Wharf for dinner, getting to know their host families and hoping to fight jet lag.

The girls, along with a couple others placed with families in Palo Alto and Berkeley, were one of the last cohorts to secure U.S. scholarships before the travel ban went into effect.

“We knew the ban was coming, so this was really their last chance to leave and get an education here,” Balsitis said. “It was really emotional for them.”

Everyone — Naseri, Faramarz, the Gateses and host families — had just finished breathing a sigh of relief upon their successful arrival and school enrollment when they were hit with their next immigration challenge.

The administration indicated plans to increase the frequency of student visa reviews and renewals. The chances of renewal could be lower for anyone from one of the countries deemed “high risk” by the administration, like Afghanistan. In a last-minute scramble, they managed to obtain new four-year student visas in time for college in January, before the change would go into effect.

Then, last November, there was the shooting of two members of the National Guard by the alleged suspect Rahmanullah Lakanwal, an Afghan national who had previously worked alongside U.S. troops in a CIA-backed counterterrorism unit, and arrived in the States under humanitarian parole.

Soon after that, the Department of Homeland Security said it would stop processing pending cases for all Afghans — including visa and asylum cases — and that even those who had already been granted legal status would be reevaluated.

“Anybody from Afghanistan who had been granted [temporary protection status] or asylum or a green card or Special Immigrant Visas or anything, they are supposedly revisiting all of those applications,” Julia Gelatt, associate director of U.S. Immigration Policy at the Migration Policy Institute, said. “Now they’re being told it might be taken away, and there hasn’t been a lot of transparency as to what that revetting includes or where the process stands.”

While a recent federal court decision compels the government to move ahead with certain asylum cases, it remains uncertain if and how they'll be evaluated. Many have also advocated for the government to make exceptions for girls and women. Gates recently went to Washington with a few students to make his case.

"They have to be really smart to be accepted in the program. They're the smartest of the smartest, and it's all privately funded and merit-based," he said. "It's insane that we are not letting Afghan women come to school."

Balsitis said she had to frequently check on Faramarz to make sure she got enough sleep in high school, often finding her studying at 3 a.m.

Figuring out what's next

Now that they can't bring more students to the United States, the Gates are trying to place them in whichever countries will take them, like Malaysia. There's fear over increased agreements with other countries to accept deportees, and recent reports have also revealed that the United States is in talks with the Democratic Republic of Congo to send more than 1,000 Afghans — who've been stuck at American processing centers in Qatar for years, many of whom worked alongside the United States — to the African country, which is facing its own humanitarian crisis.

"We built them schools, paid teachers, told them to work hard, and they did that for 20 years, and then we just took off and left them," Gates said.

The uncertain immigration environment is unsettling, not just psychologically but also financially. The Cruz family has not only put forward their own personal donations but have solicited funds from family, friends and their community to help keep up with university tuition and living expenses.

“Their high school gave them full-tuition scholarships, but college is a totally new equation,” Nate Cruz said. “As host families, we could barely figure all this out, but we can still navigate it a lot more effectively than she can.”

If all the current rules and regulations are still in place in three years, neither of them would be allowed to stay in the country, Gates said.

In the meantime, both Naseri and Faramarz are enjoying “being American,” taking on fun and challenging classes during their first semester in college and meeting new friends. Naseri is taking computer science, public speaking, drawing and 19th- and 20th-century women’s literature. A natural performer, she thrives being on stage, which she hopes will earn her a top grade in the public speaking course. In her literature class, she finds many female authors’ struggles personally relatable.

“I feel a lot of connections with them, especially Virginia Woolf,” she said.

Faramarz enjoys being a student at Whitworth University in Washington, coming back to San Mateo County during school breaks. She hopes to eventually work as a lawyer.

“I am optimistic about my future. After graduating from college, I would like to go to law school and pursue my master’s degree,” she said.

Both of them are intent on continuing advocating for women’s rights in Afghanistan and elsewhere in whatever capacity they can.

“I’m hoping that people don’t forget about Afghan women and Afghan girls,” she said. “I always want to continue to support other girls and women. It doesn’t matter their nationality.”

Grief, family and uncertainty

Even if the girls secure another visa or long-term residency in the States, they also sit with the emotional toll of not knowing when they'll see their families again, as visiting is not an option, and their families certainly can't emigrate.

They still talk to their parents regularly, chatting over the phone on weekends and sending voice notes throughout the week. The conversations help Faramarz stay connected to her parents and many siblings, but sometimes it's more bitter than sweet.

"It is too much to think about it, too much to accept, that I cannot see them," she said, holding back tears. "Sometimes when I see other students go home to their families, I really deeply wish I had that."

One of the most difficult periods was last spring when the Taliban cut off the internet nationwide for several days, and she had no way to contact them.

"The grief was tremendous," Balsitis said.

Rather than run the risk of worrying her parents during their phone calls, Faramarz takes out a pen and paper and writes down how much she misses them or writes prayers like "I'm putting laughter in your heart" and leaves them on her table.

"It might be too much for her to hear those things. I just want her to know that I'm doing well in my education," she said of her mother, who is also battling health issues.

Despite everything, she maintains hope she can visit again one day.

"Even with everything, it is still a beautiful place," Faramarz said. "It is still my home."

A GoFundMe has been established at https://gofund.me/ff3fe392f.

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