

Local, national and global affairs

2 years after arriving, Afghan women flourishing at ASU

Despite separation from families, students are part of the Arizona community



By [Mary Beth Faller](#) | 

December 22, 2023

arrived at Arizona State University after fleeing violence, oppression and turmoil in their native country of Afghanistan.

Sixty-nine + young women [started new lives](#) as Sun Devils in a unique refugee resettlement that was co-sponsored by the International Rescue Committee and ASU, which provided scholarships and housing. They had been students at the Asian University for Women in Bangladesh when the Taliban took over the Afghan government in spring 2021.

Over the past two years, the women have succeeded academically even as they have [endured uncertainty](#) over the fate of their families in Afghanistan. They've worked at jobs to support their relatives, joined student clubs and [become part of the community](#). Many have [spoken out](#) about their harrowing escape.

"I think ASU has turned out to be a good home," said Pamela DeLargy, executive director of [Education for Humanity](#) at ASU. She and others at ASU spent weeks in the summer and fall of 2021 managing the details of the women's arrival, including chartering a flight from Wisconsin, where they were among 13,000 Afghan refugees being processed at a military base for resettlement.

After arriving in December, one young woman immediately started taking classes while the rest joined [Global Launch](#) at ASU to improve their English and began pursuing undergraduate or graduate degrees in fall 2022.

"They've proven to be very diligent students," DeLargy said, estimating that about a third have grade-point averages high enough to place them on the Dean's List. One has graduated, and the rest are expected to earn their degrees in 2024 or 2025.

The women are dispersed among all four ASU campuses and in a variety of majors — although many have chosen to study cybersecurity or computer science in hopes of securing a well-paying job, DeLargy said.

"We have a great writer who's interested in being an actress, one in fashion design and a student in the aviation program who will start flight school in the spring," she said.

"They're starting to follow their dreams and their hearts."

Ramping up to help

arriving at once — that’s what was different,” she said.

Campus housing and food were among the first priorities.

“The data is compelling on international students — those who live with us do better because we have supports in place,” she said.

“It was important that they were nearby so we could help them navigate their environment.”



A young woman takes a cellphone photo during the welcome gathering for more than 60 young women from Afghanistan in December 2021. Photo by Samantha Chow/ASU News

ASU worked with Aramark, its food-service vendor, on adjusting its halal offerings for the newcomers, Vogel said.

“When you have students with you over break, you have to have food available too. We know the importance of food for comfort and meaningfulness.”

Troy Campbell, associate director for the advancement of student initiatives, worked directly with the young women.

Last summer, he gave a presentation at a conference held at ASU titled “Reimagining Refugee Services in the United States,” funded

was very impactful when they first arrived,” Campbell said.

“They were still in that cohort model, taking classes every day in the same classroom together.”

The ASU team taught the women how to navigate campus, learn about mass transit, deal with American money, find student clubs and organizations, and apply for health insurance.

DeLargy said that Global Launch, along with other ASU services, adopted a “trauma-informed care” approach — ensuring that the Afghan students’ emotional safety was a priority.

Campbell said other universities don’t have the infrastructure to help refugee students, such as the ability to provide dining services during breaks. Some universities have had to use translation services between counselors and refugee students.

“ASU Counseling Services did an amazing job providing counselors fluent in their home language,” he said.

“That’s a point of pride for us.”

DeLargy said the women’s resettlement could not have happened without help from the greater community. In the first few days, the Islamic Council of North America and St. Vincent de Paul brought meals.

“A synagogue in Scottsdale mobilized to provide almost any kind of clothing and hygiene supply they needed,” she said.

Host families have stepped up to be with the women on holidays and breaks.

“We have so many individual donors who have contributed \$500 or \$1,000 or \$2,000 to support their needs,” DeLargy said.

“We couldn’t do it without that.”

One important donor has been The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which provided \$195,000 in 2023 for the students to receive dental care. The grant was awarded after a professor noticed that some of the young women were missing class because of dental problems, according to Ted Cross, executive director of the Office of University Affairs at ASU.

Supporting their families

Even with enormous amounts of support, resettling is always difficult for refugees. And it's compounded for the women because of the continued oppression and chaos in Afghanistan.

"The one thing I know about these students is that so many of them really remain a primary source of support for their families back in Afghanistan, and that entails a lot of financial pressure, psychological pressure and pressure to try to help get siblings out — especially sisters," DeLargy said.

DeLargy said that once, she visited a kebab shop near campus and all four employees in the shop were from the group who arrived in December 2021.

"And I have to give a shoutout to the Sheraton in Phoenix, whose head of human resources has really reached out to the refugee community in Maricopa County for training and employment," she said.

Several of the young Afghan women who study at the Downtown Phoenix campus work there.

Another group is in a new initiative called the [Technical Upskilling Program](#), offered through ASU Enterprise Technology and Arista, a company that creates new pathways to enter the technology workforce.

The eight students will be paid to train for a year, eventually achieving the certification required for a job as a network engineer in the male-dominated tech field, according to Todd Simmons, director of network programs for ASU Enterprise Technology and lead trainer for the program.

"What makes this cohort special is that it's all women," Simmons said. "And, more importantly, it's all women whose government did not value them enough to understand how incredibly intelligent and how much ability they have because of their gender."

'I came here to work for them'

"It was really hard."

“It was really hard to figure out how you should behave and how to talk.”

Walizada came to Arizona with her sister, Farahnaz Walizada. They lived together for a few months until Farahnaz started at the Thunderbird School of Global Management at the Downtown Phoenix campus. Shiba requested American roommates so she could work on her English.

“It was good for me,” she said. “I didn’t know (the meaning of) ‘piece of cake,’ but then I knew.”

She even interviewed in English for her spot in the Technical Upskilling Program.

“I was honest and shared everything with them, and that I don’t have any experience in computer science but I had interest when I selected this major,” she said.

She has already learned a lot about computer networks.

“Many people think it’s easy, but they don’t know that behind every word is so much code.”

The sisters worry constantly about their family, though they did manage to get another sister to Arizona.

Walizada laments the fate of women and girls in Afghanistan, who are prevented from going to school or working by the Taliban.

“It’s really sad when I see my friends the same age as me and now stuck at home. I wish they were also able to come here and have the same opportunities I have.

“They are suffering.”

But not forgotten.

“One day I will do something for them. I came here to work for them and bring them a situation that is better,” she said.

And Walizada is grateful for all the support she and her peers received at ASU.

“Everyone came together and helped us. They gave us information and held events and meetings and introduced us to everyone.

Afghanistan have made the ASU community better.

“This is expanding all our students’ experiences, to see what it means to be a refugee and what they’re leaving behind,” she said.

“It’s a powerful learning tool for our students who have never experienced this in their lives.”

DeLargy agreed.

“Every day that these students are on campus interacting with other students and staff and faculty, they challenge a stereotype and make people more aware of our shared humanity.”

Top image: Shiba Walizada came to ASU in December 2021 as part of a group of more than 60 women from Afghanistan. She is now part of the Technical Upskilling Program at ASU, where she is training for a career in technology. Photo by Michael Sanchez/ASU Enterprise Technology

Stephanie King of ASU Enterprise Technology contributed to this story.



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