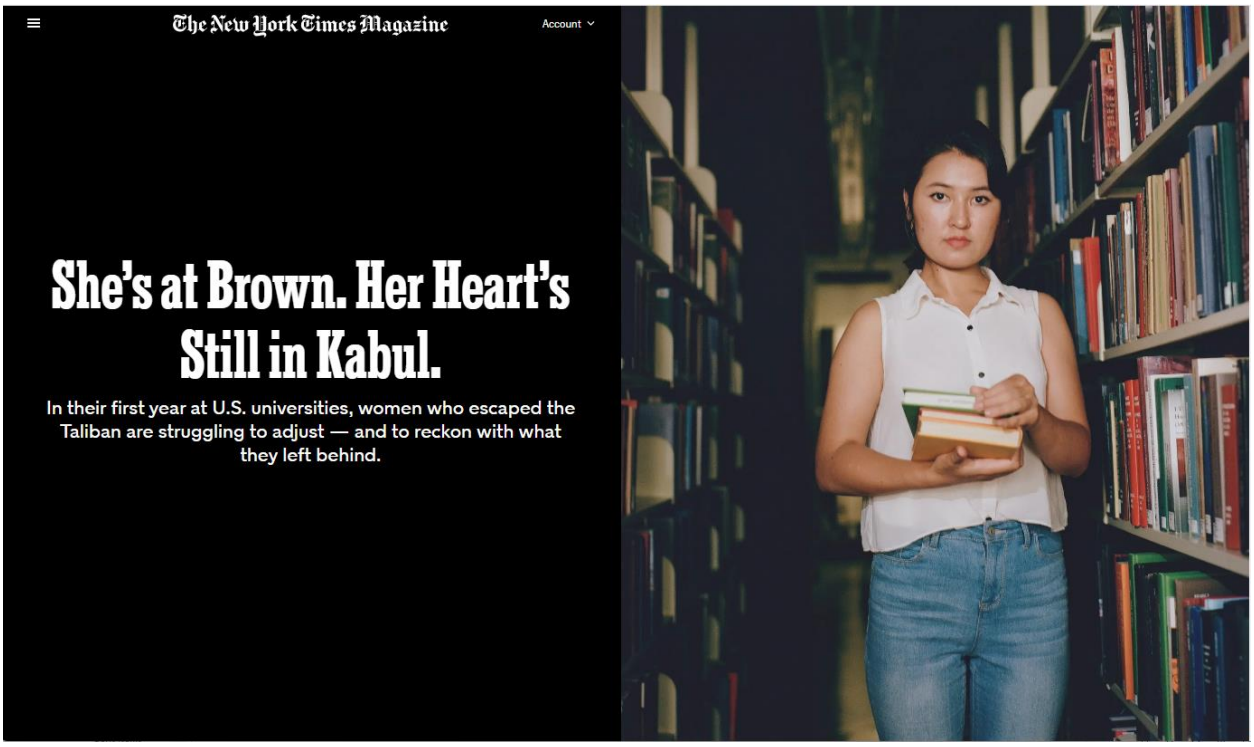


Suhaila Hashimi at Brown.Credit...Sabiha Çimen/Magnum, for The New York Times

By Maddy Crowell
Aug. 9, 2022

https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/09/magazine/afghan-refugees-american-universities.html

It was late February when Suhaila Hashimi slid into one of the last available seats in the front row of her philosophy class, "The Place of Persons," an intro-level course at Brown University about the moral and metaphysical status of personhood. Even though she was 23, and this was a class mostly for students who were several years younger, Hashimi fit in with them, her dark brown hair pulled into a messy ponytail, eyeliner darkening her lower lids, an oversize hoodie with Brown's emblem on the front, black jeans tucked into black combat boots.

"Agent-Causation," she wrote methodically in her notebook, trying to capture what the professor said as he lectured. Sometimes she struggled to understand certain English words; she would look them up later. The lecture was about free will and determinism. Are we, as free agents, in control of our actions? the professor was asking. Or are our actions determined by a previous chain of events and therefore not in our control? Hashimi crossed her legs and shook her foot up and down as she listened intently. And, if we are not responsible for our actions, how can we live in a just and moral society?

The professor asked whether it was acceptable to blame and punish people when their actions were determined by events beyond their control. Yes, some in the class said, because punishment could serve as a social deterrent. The professor, as part of a

discussion about an article by the British philosopher P.F. Strawson, countered with an example showing why that might be problematic: “Suppose that a sheriff in a crime-ridden town frames an innocent man for some crimes and punishes him publicly, so as to deter others from committing crimes. This would seem to promote social utility. But it seems unjust, right?”

Hashimi’s face felt warm. Was this example about the Taliban? Sometimes it seemed as if her professors were speaking to her directly: The Taliban, she believed, were the sheriffs now, ruling by an arbitrary and immoral set of principles, an entire country’s population at their mercy.

Almost seven months earlier, on Aug. 15, 2021, Hashimi was sitting on her bed in her family’s small apartment in Kabul, too afraid to go outside, instead scrolling through Facebook and watching videos of the Taliban’s advances, when her mother entered her room to confirm her worst fears: The city had just fallen. At the time, she had two semesters left to complete her undergraduate degree. Instead, she would soon be smuggled out of the country with 147 other young Afghan women. They had been told they would be able to continue their studies at the Asian University for Women, an experimental liberal arts college in Chittagong, Bangladesh, whose supporters have included Hillary Clinton, Cherie Blair, Laura Bush and former Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen of Denmark. Some of the women were alumnae of A.U.W., while others were still enrolled there but had been studying remotely in Kabul.

The women never made it to Bangladesh. After a circuitous and difficult journey, they ended up at an Army base in the American Midwest. There, they joined thousands of other Afghan refugees, desperately awaiting updates from families back home while at the same time preparing to continue (or in some cases restart from scratch) their studies on American campuses. And once they found places at schools, uncertainty remained about both their immigration status — they would be on “humanitarian parole,” with two years from the time they entered the United States to apply for asylum — and whether they would be able to stay through graduation. The women knew how much they were leaving behind: their country, their families, their hopes for their futures. They also knew, as so many Afghans were not being allowed into the United States or other countries, that they were the lucky ones.

But Hashimi did not feel exalted to be here in America. She spent her days pinballing among exhaustion, despair and a sort of cautious optimism. She knew that other Afghan girls dreamed of getting an opportunity to study at an Ivy League college. “But I was scared to start all over again,” she says. Her experience, like those of most of the 148 women, was not going to resemble that of the stereotypical college freshman — no drinking games, fraternity parties or class schedules that revolved around going somewhere for spring break.

“I wish I could freely walk with my family here, or somewhere we could all be safe,” Hashimi told me during my visit to the Brown campus in February. Her family was Hazara, a persecuted ethnic minority in Afghanistan; some of her eight siblings had managed to escape the country, but her parents were still stuck in Kabul. “All the moms

and dads drop their kids from school, hug them, wish them off. But between me and my mom is a 10-hour difference, and when I need her the most, I want to call her, but she is asleep."

When the philosophy class ended, students toting backpacks spilled onto the narrow concrete paths winding around the red brick buildings, heading to lunch or the library. Hashimi had one more meeting with a professor to discuss an essay before she was done for the day and could return to her dorm and call her parents before they went to bed. She worried about their safety all the time. Everyone told her that she was free now, that her life was her own. But, she told me as we walked through campus, "Right now, I'm struggling, like, how to survive here?" She seemed tired. "I guess freedom and free will is something humans create for themselves. Even if they're inside a cage, if they have the desire to fly, they can create their own freedom." She paused. "I guess I'm creating freedom for myself?"

Fariba Sarwary, right, with her sister and friends in Boston.Credit...Sabiha Çimen/Magnum, for The New York Times

Kamal Ahmad, the founder of the Asian University for Women, was at his home in Boston when Afghanistan fell. A friendly, bookish man whose smile seems to express an inexhaustible optimism, Ahmad was, for once, feeling defeated. He had been planning for months to travel to Afghanistan to oversee the evacuation of A.U.W. students there, but that was no longer possible by Aug. 15. He spent the nights leading up to that day sleeping little, constantly reaching out to his Afghan students and alumnae trapped in the country. He felt personally responsible for their safety. He had opened A.U.W. in Chittagong, his hometown, in 2008 for young women from Asia and the Middle East who were, as he put it to me, "typically bypassed by the education system." He himself moved to the United States when he was 15 to attend Phillips Exeter Academy, after which he went on to Harvard. He did not want A.U.W. to be "socially elite," he says. "The approach was, a lot of flexibility at entrance, no flexibility at exit. We wanted to find these young women and prepare them for the world." Afghanistan was a major locus of A.U.W.'s recruiting efforts.

Ten days after the Taliban entered Kabul, Ahmad had managed to secure seven rusty buses to transport "the 148," as he calls them, to the city's airport. It took three separate attempts to get them out. The buses were stopped and shot at by the Taliban multiple times, and at one point a suicide bombing occurred only a few hundred meters away, killing more than 180 people. The women were dehydrated and hungry and had no access to a toilet. One was pregnant. "I'm dying — I don't want to live anymore," another messaged Ahmad from the bus over WhatsApp. "Why have you put us through this?"

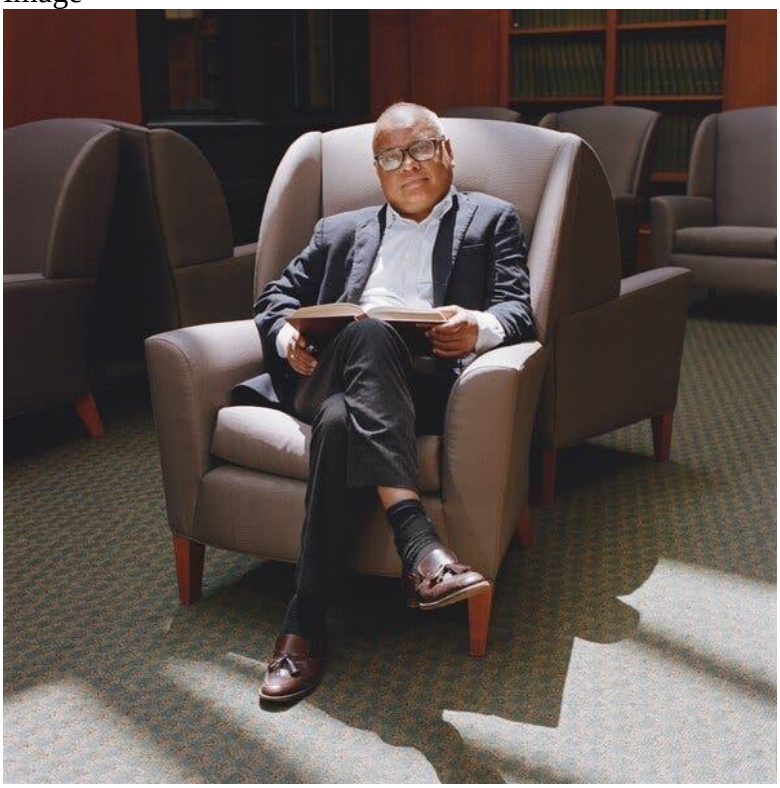
Ahmad's attempts to secure a private jet had failed, so the women's only way out of the country was on a U.S. military jet — which took them not to Bangladesh but to U.S. bases, first in Saudi Arabia, then in Spain. Unknown to them, Ahmad faced a difficult choice while they were in Spain: either request that they be taken to Bangladesh — his original plan — or let them be transferred to a refugee camp in the United States and hope that they would be able to study there instead. In the end, the decision came down to "simple arithmetic," Ahmad told me. "If I moved 150 to the U.S., then I'd have 150 beds open in Bangladesh, and the opportunity to get more out of Afghanistan." Seventeen days after the Taliban took over Kabul, the women began arriving at the Fort McCoy U.S. Army base in southwestern Wisconsin.

Nearly 13,000 other Afghan refugees were already living there, part of an emergency evacuation by the U.S. government on a scale not seen since the Vietnam War. Of the 700,000 or so Afghans who were forcibly displaced from their homes by the Taliban last year, more than 11 percent of them ended up in America. The effort, called Operation Allies Welcome, resulted from an emergency action ordered by the Biden administration and overseen by the Department of Homeland Security to "support vulnerable Afghans," including those who worked alongside the Americans during the past two decades and now faced Taliban reprisals. Rather than pass through the usual, drawn-out refugee process, always backlogged with applications, a vast majority of incoming Afghans were granted humanitarian parole, a temporary authorization that allowed them to stay in the United States for two years. This sort of parole is given only rarely for groups en masse — in 1975, for example, when the United States evacuated more than 120,000

Vietnamese just before the fall of Saigon, or in 1996, when 6,600 Kurds were evacuated from Iraq.

The fact that the women from A.U.W. had been university students working on their undergraduate or master's degrees back home in Afghanistan afforded them no special status at Fort McCoy. "There are very few clear, practical and durable pathways for refugee and displaced students to come to the U.S. to study and stay," Miriam Feldblum, executive director of the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, told me. "We can and should do much more." While thousands of Afghan children were entitled to enroll in K-through-12 classes at U.S. public schools — a 1982 Supreme Court ruling, Plyler v. Doe, holds that states cannot deny students a free public education on account of their immigration status — the status of the A.U.W. students was different. "Being classified as a refugee student at a university doesn't let you cut the visa line, basically," says Adilene Nuñez Huang, co-director of client advocacy at Tahirih Justice Center in Washington, one of several organizations that is involved in helping the A.U.W. women file for asylum. This meant these women, for whom education had been a lifelong priority, faced a difficult question: How would they be able to continue their studies?

Image



Kamal Ahmad at Harvard, where he attended college.Credit...Sabiha Çimen/Magnum, for The New York Times

An unexpected loophole presented itself: the university as temporary refuge. In 2018, Arien Mack, then a professor of psychology at the New School for Social Research in New York, founded the New University in Exile Consortium, a group of nearly 60

universities around the world that agreed to host displaced scholars from countries where their lives were in danger. The goal, Mack explained to me, was to create a sense of community for persecuted academics so that their exile didn't become "a second exile on campus itself." After the Taliban returned to power, Mack was contacted by someone from a member university who had heard about the Afghan women from Ahmad and wanted to know whether the consortium could help place them in schools. The situation of the A.U.W. women exposed a gap in the system: The women were too old to be placed in public schools, but they were too young to be considered scholars or professors, the sorts of figures that the New University in Exile Consortium focused on. "This was the first time we got into the business, so to speak, of rescuing," Mack says. "So, we expanded our mission."

Not long after the women arrived at Fort McCoy, the consortium contacted two associate provosts at Brown University, Jay Rowan and Asabe Poloma: Would Brown be able to take some of the women this fall? "We didn't know all that much at the time about the Asian University for Women," Poloma, Brown's associate provost for global engagement, told me, "but the philosophy behind the liberal arts curriculum really resonated for us." Similar conversations were underway elsewhere, with different schools interested in different aptitudes. Cornell, for example, preferred students who could work in various labs there, in both the hard sciences and other disciplines, and become "adapted to life in the U.S. prior to seeking admission to Cornell," as Nishi Dhupa, Cornell's associate vice provost for international affairs, put it. The University of North Texas had a specialized English-training program for the younger women who were still becoming fluent in English. Brown was interested in students who demonstrated a strong academic record and intellectual curiosity. Ahmad asked his three-person administrative staff at A.U.W. to put together portfolios for each of the women that included brief biographies and their transcripts.

Whenever a school agreed verbally to admit one of the women, Charles Hallab, a lawyer and founder of the Washington advisory firm Barrington Global, who was providing help pro bono, worked on memorandums of understanding stating that the woman would be hosted as a degree-earning student for the duration of an undergraduate degree, or in some cases a graduate degree — a condition to which some of the schools would end up agreeing. A few universities, like Arizona State, signed right away; others, like Brown, were reluctant to commit to anything binding. "The priority was to make sure these girls had the best shot humanly possible to succeed," Hallab told me. "At the very least, the M.O.U. created a moral obligation to commit to them."

At Fort McCoy, Hashimi had heard the rumors that she and her cohort would be transferring into American universities, but she was skeptical it would happen. "I was worried the schools wouldn't trust Afghan girls," she says. (A few of the women declined to continue their studies, opting to find jobs instead.) But, in fact, 10 universities were interested in taking them in: Arizona State, Brown, Cornell, Delaware, DePaul, Georgia State, North Texas, Suffolk, Wisconsin-Milwaukee and West Virginia. Some of them offered immediate acceptance, while others required more extensive applications. In November, Hashimi, to her surprise, received an email from Brown requesting that she write separate essays about her personal story, her academic interests and her goals and

dreams. She had no computer, so she drafted her essays on her cellphone. After that, she says, she checked her email “every second.”

The acceptances for the A.U.W. women arrived by December. Fourteen women ended up at Brown; nine at Cornell; 67 at Arizona State; 15 at the University of Delaware. All of them would be on full scholarships, covered by donations raised by the universities; A.U.W. estimated the total need would be $32 million. Each school had a different arrangement: At Arizona State University, the women were invited to enroll for up to eight semesters; some who already had credits from A.U.W. got to enter as juniors or seniors. DePaul’s 10 students were invited to stay until they completed their undergraduate degrees, so long as they didn’t interrupt their studies and completed their degrees in five years.

Other schools offered a more precarious arrangement: At Cornell, the women were let in as “visiting interns” for the school year; at Brown, the 14 women were considered “nondegree special students for the 2021-2022 academic year.” Nobody there was sure what would happen after May.

When Frough Tahiry, a 23-year-old A.U.W. graduate, found out that she would be going to Arizona State University, she spent her last few weeks at Fort McCoy obsessively looking up “Arizona” on Google. The resulting pictures of red deserts, cactuses and scorpions made it seem like the end of the earth. But when she landed in the state, she was surprised by the labyrinth of highways and glassy buildings. How, she wondered, did I end up here?

Just that summer, she had been showing her 10-year-old brother a map of Afghanistan, pointing to the provinces that had fallen, like dominoes, to the Taliban. Her father, who ran an NGO dedicated to women’s empowerment, had been threatened by the Taliban in the past, and he was almost certainly considered one of their targets. The morning they took over, Tahiry’s father rushed home, shaken. “Everything has failed,” he told his family. “They’ve taken over the city center.” Tahiry had never seen him look so broken. “It just felt like the last days of freedom, of being able to choose your lifestyle,” she told me.

Soon after they got to the Arizona State campus, the women from A.U.W. were ushered into an orientation session organized by the International Rescue Committee, which was co-sponsoring the group and helping to oversee their resettlement. In a lofty, air-conditioned lecture hall, Shana Bell, an education specialist with the I.R.C., gave them a three-day “cultural orientation”; her PowerPoint presentation began with a singalong to Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land.” Then Bell began explaining “typical American” behavior: smile, be polite, be on time, be self-reliant. A line on a graph that evoked an EKG showed them that their adjustment period as they acclimated to American life could take two to five years and go through “four phases” of integration: a honeymoon period of relief, then the culture shock (which includes anger and grief), then the recovery and, finally, somewhat ambiguously, the “adjustment,” described as the time when “you feel like the U.S. is your home and feel confident solving your own problems, making your own decisions and future for yourself.”

Bell assured the women that their rights were equal to those of the men in America. She told them they enjoyed freedom of speech and the right to voice their opinion, “just as everyone else does, including the president of the United States.” Some of the women stood up to clap. The rhetoric was familiar from the Western influences in Afghanistan during the last two decades. At the same time, it was hard to believe they could have a right equal to that of any American president after their own lives had been upended by the whims of American presidents for decades; in some ways, they had never been less in control of their futures.

The women spent their first days in Arizona trying to find their way around the maze of buildings and manicured green lawns; they often needed the GPS on their phones to find their way back to their housing, a modern hotel adjacent to the A.S.U. campus. They had never seen such a sprawling campus: A.U.W. in Bangladesh consisted of a single dorm, a cafeteria and a building for their classes, along with a handful of other buildings surrounding a small lawn.

Image

Frough Tahiry on the balcony of her dorm at Arizona State University. Credit...Sabiha Çimen/Magnum, for The New York Times

When Arizona State filled again after winter break, the low pulsing bass of music spilled from the windows of dorm rooms — especially on weekends, from parties that the

Afghan women were not invited to. In class, the professors spoke fast, complicated English. The American students always seemed busy; they showed little interest in Afghanistan or its politics. “I think the whole Afghan cohort, they’re kind of excluded,” Tahiry told me one evening as we sat on the terrace of the hotel serving as their dorm. She wore jeans tucked into brown Ugg boots and a cable-knit pink sweater. “U.S. life is so busy,” she said. “It’s so hard to catch up. If I’m following Ukraine, they are talking about senators. If I’m following senators, they’re talking about Congress. It’s clearly not at a point of, like, mutual conversation.”
Tahiry had always been ambitious about her future, and she was excited by the prospect of being able to learn more about computer engineering — a field, she had heard, in which the job prospects were good. But at times she also found it difficult to focus on the future when the past was constantly on her mind. On one wall of her room, she had written “Memory Wall” and taped dozens of printed, grainy photos of her parents, her six siblings, her friends from home. Some mornings, when she woke up feeling “so demotivated,” she would look at the photos and think, I have to keep going.

She decided to sign up for classes in computer science, data mining, English and swimming. On the first day of her computer-science class, she panicked when she saw that her textbook would cost $120. “I thought, Either I have to drop the class or talk to the professor,” she told me. When she gathered the courage to tell the professor that she was “one of the students from Afghanistan,” he extended a fist for her to bump. “I’m so proud of you,” he said. His department gave her a scholarship for the book.

When classes started, Tahiry found herself struggling to connect with the other students. They came from “different worlds,” she said. It was a complaint I heard from many of the Afghan women, at several schools. Some told me that American students took no interest in them; others said that American students took too much interest in them, and they were tired of explaining what was happening back in Afghanistan. “It’s just like a movie for them,” one woman who ended up at Cornell, who asked not to be named for privacy reasons, told me. “People here are always watching dramas and everything.” She added, “But for me, it’s my real life.”

Tahiry marveled at the discipline with which her new classmates limited themselves to small, healthy meals (“They’re trying to, you know, boil broccoli”) and worked out. “I was feeling kind of guilty because I was not going to the gym,” she said. “Everyone every day, they’re like waking up and going to gym.” The dining halls, which had been serving Afghan food for the women when the campus was deserted, were suddenly filled with things Tahiry had never tried before — food from Mexico, Spain, China. She decided to try something labeled “Vegan.” She had trouble swallowing what she took to be a soggy-looking piece of meat. “Vegan,” she said to her friend, joking, “I don’t know what country that is.”

On the first day of swim lessons — one of her extracurricular courses — the instructor asked, “Who here already knows how to swim?” There were about 25 students, and all of them raised their hands, except Tahiry, one of her Afghan friends and a woman from Sudan. She was shocked: Why would so many students sign up for lessons when they already knew how to swim? Tahiry found herself relegated to a shallow kiddie pool,

feeling shy and exposed as the other students plunged into the deeper pool. She had a "severe water phobia," she told me, and hugged the edge of the pool or stayed where she could stand, clinging to a float while the instructor tried to teach her how to tread water. "Every day, I felt like I was drowning," she said.

During my visit to Brown, Hashimi was facing a deadline for an upcoming philosophy paper for her class "Knowledge and Reality." She was writing about Descartes' "Meditations," and she had questions about it. I went with her to meet her instructor, a graduate student whose office was in a corner of the philosophy department, a small brick building with carpeted floors and narrow corridors. "I need help with Meditations 1 and 2," she told her teacher, her voice barely above a whisper. "From his point of view, nothing is certain and everything is doubtful. So what's his argument?"

It was hard for Hashimi to always stay focused on her studies, even though the brick buildings and the campus, which is partly enclosed by a wrought-iron fence, made Brown feel like the safest place in the world for her. Her reading was regularly interrupted by disturbing calls from her family about a new person missing, or about the country's impending famine, or about another explosion. There seemed to be no end in sight for the bad news from Afghanistan. "Sometimes, my mind is saying, 'All you have are problems, only problems,'" Hashimi told me one evening. Most of her family was still trapped in Kabul, and her mother had health issues that made it difficult for her to walk. Her helplessness here ate at her constantly.

'My classmates here, they are thinking about where to go for the next vacation or holiday or weekend, and I'm thinking, How can I get a job to help my family?'

In her philosophy classes, she could be inconspicuous, listening to lectures and quietly taking notes. And like most of the other A.U.W. women, she spent much of her time studying in her room or in the library, keeping a low profile. But so many people on campus seemed so eager to talk. "I'd just be waiting, like, Please don't ask me where I'm from," she said. "It was a bit hard for me to tell them I'm from Afghanistan." Students often had misconceptions about what Afghan women were capable of, she felt; they frequently seemed shocked to find out that Afghan women could travel abroad, or speak English, or go to universities. She described to me one incident when she was having her regular breakfast of bagel and butter (her "buttered naan," she joked) with a few other

Afghan women at a Brown cafeteria. A group of boys sat at their table and asked where they were from. “Afghanistan,” Hashimi said. The boys got up and moved to another table. Hashimi, angry, called her mother afterward. “This is not going to be a good country for me because people are judging me,” she said. She felt depressed for almost a week, though she later acknowledged that she wasn’t sure why they switched seats. She found it difficult to relate to other students, who, by the time of my midwinter visit, were already making plans for their spring breaks. “My classmates here, they are thinking about where to go for the next vacation or holiday or weekend, and I’m thinking, How can I get a job to help my family?”

As the semester advanced, the women began getting troubling updates from back home: The Taliban were going after perceived enemies and imposing restrictions on women. According to witnesses cited in a report from Human Rights Watch, the Taliban were searching office buildings, collecting computers and tracking down women who “work for the foreigners.” Every A.U.W. student I spoke to felt a deep fear for her family back home. More than once, I spent hours interviewing someone only to have her withdraw access a few days later, fearing some unknowable consequence. Many declined to speak to me at all. One student who wished to remain anonymous told me that her sibling had been a member of Afghan intelligence. Now that sibling was in hiding, changing locations every few weeks, because the Taliban were hunting down anyone who had worked for the Afghan security forces. The woman’s father, fearing for their safety, wouldn’t let her younger sisters leave their house. “I can’t get it out of my mind,” the woman told me, fighting back tears. “I can’t find anyone to support my family. The situation in Afghanistan is so much worse.” Another student, Fariba Sarwary, a 19-year-old student at Suffolk University, told me that every night for months after she got to Boston, she lay in bed gripped with loneliness, listening to songs from Afghanistan. “I just feel so bad. Why did this happen to my country?”
Image

Sarwary studying at Suffolk University in Boston. Credit...Sabiha Çimen/Magnum, for The New York Times

For these young women who came of age in the early 2000s, in a relatively liberalized country, this was not a return to older ways of life: It was the resurrection of a dark era they knew only through stories passed down from their mothers, accounts of being beaten for dressing improperly or for leaving the house without a male escort. “When Kabul fell, I felt a part of me was taken,” Shokria Sakhi, who was studying at Brown, told me. “We thought, This is not the place we have been brought up. It’s not a country I want to live in, according to the 15th or 16th century.”

One student told me that one of her father’s neighbors had married off a daughter to a Taliban commander, and when her father went over to the neighbor’s house for dinner

one night, the Taliban husband was there and confronted her father about his daughters' leaving the country: "Where are they? America?" Her father lied and told the Taliban that they were married and had moved abroad for their husbands' jobs. For Hashimi, studying Descartes gave her a new language to navigate her split worlds. During her meeting with her philosophy teacher to go over the reading, the teacher pulled out a piece of paper and drew a map of Descartes' argument against sensory beliefs. She spoke as if she were working through a mathematical equation. "So, on the first page, he's saying, 'Oh, my gosh, everything I might believe may be called into doubt.'"

"Everything?" Hashimi asked.

"Yeah, everything. Remember? He's sitting in his armchair in his living room, and he says, 'I'm going to use the method of skepticism to call everything into doubt.'"

"Even his existence?" Hashimi asked, suppressing a laugh.

"Exactly," the teacher said. Together, they went through Descartes' method for proving his existence: All we can really know for certain, went his argument, is that we exist. "Does that make sense now?"

As we walked back to her dorm room afterward, Hashimi, still thinking about Descartes, said she believed it was silly for him to question his own existence. But sometimes she, too, felt as if she wasn't sure what was real, here on a snowy campus in Providence instead of at home with her family in Kabul. "If I close my eyes, I remember the bad things," she told me. "I experienced them. But still, I feel like it's better to think it was all a bad dream, and it never happened."

Beginning next August, the humanitarian parole will expire for many of the Afghans who fled the country a year ago, potentially stripping them of their access to health care, employment and the legal right to live in the United States. While activists have been pressuring Congress to pass an Afghan Adjustment Act — like the 1975 Vietnamese refugee act — that would put the Afghans on a fast track from parole to citizenship, there has been little legislative progress. Congress did, however, recently mandate the faster processing of their asylum applications, and until cases are resolved, the applicants can remain in the United States. The women from A.U.W. have lawyers from several large firms working pro bono on their asylum applications.

Since last August, A.U.W. has received about 10,000 applications from young women in Afghanistan. Ahmad has already turned his focus to the women still stuck in the country. In June, he flew from Islamabad to Kabul, where a car from the Taliban waited for him on the airport tarmac. As he drove to central Kabul to meet with high-ranking Taliban leaders, the city looked much the same to him as it always had — the markets were busy, the traffic was chaotic. But at least one change was visible: He could see no women on the streets, anywhere.

Ahmad told me he went because he wanted to be "out in the open" with the Taliban about his next project: to enable 1,000 young women to leave Afghanistan in the next five years so they could continue their studies in Bangladesh. His hope was that these women could then help educate younger girls in Afghanistan, who have been prevented from attending schools, by teaching them online. When he proposed the plan to the Taliban, over tea and sweets, the immediate response, to Ahmad's relief, was not no. "It was about logistics," he says. "It was not about the central idea of girls' education." The Taliban told him that a *mahram* — a male relative that women, by mandate, must travel with in public — would have to accompany every woman who wanted to attend A.U.W. The cost was prohibitive for A.U.W. So now Ahmad is faced with the daunting question: Can he get a thousand women out of the country to study abroad alone?

And even if the women get out, there is no guarantee of stability, wherever they land. In the United States, while a majority of the A.U.W. students know what their immediate futures hold — A.S.U., Suffolk, DePaul and West Virginia, for example, committed early on to let their students stay until they complete their degrees — others face more uncertain circumstances. At Brown, the women's status as "nondegree students" was extended through the spring 2023 semester. (Three women who had already completed their undergraduate degrees from A.U.W. have been admitted as full-time, traditional master's-degree students.) But there seems to be confusion among some of the women still pursuing their undergraduate degrees over what might happen next. Hashimi told me that, as far as she knew, she had a spot at Brown as a degree-earning student this fall. Yet Rowan and Poloma, the associate provosts overseeing the women there, told me that there were no guarantees; the women who had not yet finished their undergraduate degrees were being "encouraged to apply to Brown and to apply elsewhere," Rowan said. Later, he added, "We do not guarantee admissions for any applicants."

At Arizona State, the situation was a little more settled. The women who already had undergraduate degrees, like Tahiry, were given the option of pursuing a master's; the rest were invited to stay until they completed their undergraduate degrees. Tahiry opted to get a master's: She felt ready to think, cautiously, about her career, and to "live like an adult," as she put it. She had discovered, during the semester, a love for data analytics, and she got a summer internship working remotely for a big-data firm based in California.

Not long before I left Arizona, Tahiry hosted a small gathering of friends for home-cooked Afghan food in her hotel room. Earlier in the week, she had discovered a Middle Eastern grocery store that sold bags of rice from the Afghan province her father was raised in. She was overjoyed to find it, proudly exhibiting the sack of rice to everyone in the room. One of her male Afghan friends had come over to cook, while Tahiry served me black tea. "If the Taliban sees this man cooking for a woman, they would not be happy," she said with a laugh, pointing at her friend as he swept chopped cucumbers from a cutting board into some yogurt. The music of Aryana Sayeed, a popular Afghan singer, played from her phone as we talked about why the younger generation in Afghanistan was fleeing in droves. "We grew up with the taste of freedom, and we could not go back," Tahiry explained, as we took seats on the floor next to an array of juices,

fruits and a steaming pot of chicken biryani. The Afghanistan she had known vanished the moment she got to Kabul's airport, last August.

She told me her very last memory from Kabul continued to haunt her. After she and the other women finally made it through to the airport, they were handed off to the U.S. military by a high-ranking Taliban commander, who told the U.S. lieutenant, in English, "I surrender them to you now." And then, to everyone's surprise, he began to cry. Tahiry couldn't get that tableau out of her head: the burly commander, an AK-47 slung on his back, tears on his face; the bewildered U.S. officer receiving them. What nagged at her was that she still didn't know why he had been crying. "Either it's because he did something that was against his belief — because in an ideal scenario for the Taliban we weren't supposed to travel alone like that," she said. "Or maybe it was because all the girls of Afghanistan were leaving, and it was his fault."

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https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/09/magazine/afghan-refugees-american-universities.html