Afghan Youth: A Study of Identity, Hope, and Resilience

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty

of

The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy

By

Lima Halima-Khalil

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2025

© 2025 Lima Halima-Khalil

Dissertation Committee

Dyan Mazurana, Chair

Bridget Conley

Halima Kazem

Abstract

This dissertation explores how Afghan youth navigate identity, hope, and resilience in the context of conflict, displacement, and systemic marginalization. The study focuses on youth aged 18 to 35 from diverse ethnic, gender, class, and regional backgrounds, including those living within Afghanistan and in exile. It examines how personal and collective identities are shaped and reshaped over time, how hope is cultivated and sustained amid betrayal and violence, and how resilience emerges as an everyday, gendered, and socially embedded practice.

Methodologically, this research employs a life history approach, grounded in feminist and emic epistemologies. It draws on fifteen in-depth life histories and two focus group discussions with Afghan youth, complemented by participatory arts-based methods and autoethnographic reflection. The analytical framework is informed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and feminist theories of care, agency, and relational ethics. This approach enables a multi-layered analysis of how youth's lived experiences are shaped by and respond to micro-level family dynamics, meso-level institutions, and macro-level political and historical structures.

The materials used include narrative testimonies, creative expressions, and oral histories that center the voices of youth, many of whom have lived through war, regime change, displacement, intergenerational trauma, and ongoing gender apartheid. The study also draws from fieldnotes, cultural memory, and diasporic reflections to maintain narrative integrity.

Substantively, the dissertation finds that Afghan youth in this study construct their identity through practices of storytelling, cultural memory, gendered responsibilities, and moral obligation. Hope is defined not as naïve optimism, but as a deliberate act of resistance, rooted in familial lineage, imagination, and a refusal to be erased. Resilience is neither a fixed trait nor solely an individual process; rather, it evolves across life stages, from silent endurance in childhood to relational caregiving in adolescence and political resistance in adulthood.

The study concludes that Afghan youth are not merely shaped by conflict but are actively shaping their futures through ethical responsibility, creative resistance, and acts of everyday survival. This research contributes to critical debates on youth, conflict, identity, and agency by offering a grounded, decolonial, and feminist account of life in and beyond war.

Key words: Afghan youth, Identity, Hope, Resilience, Armed Conflict, Role of Family, Ecology System Theory, Responsibility. Memory. Moral Obligation, Imagination.

Author: Lima Halima-Khalil

To Natasha (Fatima) Khalil,
my sister, my mirror, my heartbreak, my courage,
and to the women of Afghanistan,
Who carry the nation on their shoulders, quietly and fiercely.

Acknowledgments

I would like to start with the acknowledgment of the fifteen beautiful young Afghans who signed up to make us all see Afghan lives for what they are, by allowing me and the world to peek into their lives. This dissertation is not mine alone. It belongs to these Afghan youth who entrusted me with their stories and became co-creators of this work. Before starting this study, I told them what it meant to me. I requested them to walk this path with me, not as research participants, but as partners. Every word that follows is rooted in the courage, generosity, and moral clarity they shared with me. Your voices, your silences, your laughter, and your grief echo throughout these pages. You are the authors of this knowledge, and I am deeply honored to have been its witness.

To my father, Khalil Ahmad Khalil, who has never let me give up on this study, even when I no longer felt like pursuing this study after the killing of my sister Natasha by the Taliban, thank you Baba Jana for being my unwavering compass. And to my Mana, my mother Halima Sarwar, who gave her entire daily life for mine: since November 2022, you have cared for our Hasti every single day so that I could write, think, breathe, and survive this journey. Without your love, presence, and patience, this dissertation would have remained a dream. Your daily acts of care were not just support; they were a feminist ethic, a radical infrastructure that made this labor of research possible.

To Omaid, my partner in every battle and joy, thank you for holding me through every unraveling and every rebirth. You lived with the blurring of life and work, as I became the story I was trying to tell. You stood beside me when I could no longer see the boundaries between analysis and grief, between memory and writing. You sustained me.

To Kabir, the quiet brilliance behind so many of my realizations. Thank you for being a tireless, generative listener. You have the rare gift of turning confusion into clarity, of redirecting pain into purpose.

To Zari (Zarifa Adiba), my research assistant and soul-sister in this journey, we didn't just transcribe together; we felt every story in our bones. We laughed, cried, argued, and dreamed side by side. You walked into the heart of this research with me, and you never left. This study carries your imprint in every corner.

To my friends who carried me across time zones and breakdowns, Salma Alokozai, Lida Nadery Hedayat, Mina Sharif, Adela Raz, Najlla Habibyar, Ishan Khokar, Courtney Hulse, Jared Miller, Kinsey Spares, Dipali Anumol, and Lauren Bonn, thank you for your faith in me, your reminders to breathe, and your relentless insistence that I finish what I started. You reminded me that survival is not enough; we must also laugh, rage, and dance.

To my PhD advisors, Dr. Bridget Conley, Dr. Lacy Gale, and Dr. Halima Kazem, your scholarship and friendship created the intellectual soil in which this study took root. You never reduced me to a researcher; you saw my whole being.

And to my dissertation chair, Professor Dyan Mazurana, what can I possibly say? I started almost every day by messaging you ("Hi, my friend") for the past seven years. This journey began with you in 2019, when I didn't know where I was going or if I had the strength to get there. You kept me motivated when I completely gave up after June 2020. You held the vision for this work even when I lost sight of it. You refused to let me settle. You called forth my excellence. You kept me alive, in more ways than one. This study, and who Lima is today, is your contribution to academia and to the world in many ways.

To my siblings and family, thank you for your chaotic, noisy, often aggressively motivational presence. Your teasing, your belief that "a PhD is no big deal," and your love, all of it pushed me to complete this work. You reminded me that excellence was not only expected, it was demanded.

To my professors, Richard Shultz, Ellen Babbitt, and Ian Johnstone, thank you for your mentorship, encouragement, and the intellectual tools you gave me to carry this work forward. I would also like to thank Jessica Daniels. As you say, "Lima and I go back to 2013", yes, you have been my steadfast ally and support since then. Thank you for your patience, your guidance, and for always keeping me on track.

To my Hasti, my little lady, you came into my life when I was already deep into this Ph.D. journey. Before your arrival, I tried to control every step of my life and this study, mapping it out with precision. But once you were here, everything became more organic, more alive. You softened me and sharpened me all at once. Through your essence, I felt more, understood more, and saw the childhoods of my study participants with new eyes. You have seen me cry, laugh, dance, and collapse, and somehow, you always pulled me back together. You helped me take stands on issues I may not have had the courage to face before. Witnessing your strength at such a young age reminded me, every single day, of how powerful women are.

This study is inspired by the unwavering power of Afghan women, those displaced and scattered across the world, still searching for home but still fighting for their homeland and their right to existence, and those imprisoned within Afghanistan by the Taliban, who still rise each day and refuse to give up on their power, their voice, and their existence. As I write in this dissertation, resilience is not simply a trait; it is a labor, a form of care work and resistance performed daily in silence, in struggle, in survival. It is gendered, relational, and political. You, Hasti, have taught me that motherhood, too, is resistance, a space where ethics, emotion, and power intersect. You are part of this lineage of feminist resilience. This work is, in many ways, for you.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my sister, Natasha (Fatima) Khalil. You were the seed of this study. Your life, your loss, your fierce spirit, everything I write is still a conversation with you. When I doubted if I could finish, I remembered you. You taught me that remembrance is resistance, and that love is not erased by war, time, or death. This dissertation is my love letter to you, and to every Afghan youth whose voice has been silenced. You live on every page.

Table of Contents

Afghan Youth: A Study of Identity, Hope, and Resilience i
Abstract 2
Acknowledgments 4
Table of Contents 6
Chapter One: Introduction 10
1. Introduction 10
2. The Importance of Centering Afghan Youth 12
a. **Significance of the Study** 13
b. Framing Youth in the Afghan Context 14
c. Defining Youth in Afghanistan: Legal, Linguistic, and Cultural Perspectives 14
d. Gender and Youth 16
e. Youth and Conflict in Afghanistan 20
f. My Analysis of Youth in the Afghan Context 22
g. Youth as a Socially Constructed Category 22
h. Structure and Chapter Overviews 24
Chapter Five: Between Survival and Transformation – Hope as Refuge, Resistance, and Vision. 25
Chapter Six: Against All Odds – Afghan Youth and the Labor of Resilience. 25
Chapter 2: Methodology 27
1. Introduction 27
a. Research design and Phase 1 Research Methods 28
b. Phase 2 Data collection methods 38
c. Analytical framework 41
d. Validity: Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity 42
e. About the author 43
f. Challenges: Mental health and self-care for participants and the researcher during the research 46
Chapter Three: Afghan Youth and the Tides of History 48
1. Introduction 48
a. King Amanullah Era: The Tension Between Modernism and Tradition 50
b. 1929-1933: Turbulence and Transition After the Fall of the Young Monarchs ... 56

c. 1933 to 1973: Long, Slow Period of Monarchy - Zahir Shah 59
d. Daud Khan's Republic (1973-1978): The Rise and Fall of Afghanistan's First Republic 69
e. 1978-1992 Socialism-Communist Era - Taraki, Amin, Karmal, Najib 81
f. 1992 to 2001 Civil War and Taliban First Era – Rabani and Mullah Omar 86
g. 2001 to 2021 The Afghan Republic 94
h. Conclusion 106
Chapter 4: Sense of Self 109
1. Introduction 109
2. Identity Theory, Youth, and Conflict 111
a. Key Debates in Identity Theories 117
b. Gaps in the Theory 124
c. My study 127
d. Defining Identity by Afghan Youth 128
e. Data Analysis 131
3. Identity in Afghanistan 132
4. Early Childhood in Afghanistan 133
a. Inheriting Identity: Learning Who They Are Through Stories Across Generations 134
b. Faith and Traditions in the Life of an Afghan Child 147
c. Learning Us and Them: How Ethnic Divides Are Passed Down in Childhood .. 155
5. Situational Adulthood: Gendered Experiences 165
a. Coming of Age, Worlds Apart: Gendered Paths to Adulthood in Afghanistan . 167
b. Influence of Friends 177
c. Crossing Lines: Education, Responsibility, and the Challenging Identity Through Exposure 184
6. Becoming: Adulthood and the Choice 192
a. Through the Eyes of Others: Exposure and the Making of Identity 193
b. What it Means to be Afghan 200
c. Being Afghan in Exile 206
7. Conclusion 212
8. Academic Contribution 214
Chapter Five: Between Survival and Transformation: Hope as Refuge, Resistance, and Vision 219
1. Introduction 219

a. Hope Theory, Youth, and Conflict 220
b. Gaps in the Theory 226
c. Definition of Hope by Afghan Youth. 227
d. Data Analysis 234
2. Inherited Hope: How the Dreams, Survival, and Expectations of Others Shape Afghan Youth 234
3. Seeds of Hope: Nurturing Hope in Childhood 245
a. Hope Through Small Moments of Joy 246
b. Hope Through Family Bonds 254
c. Hope Through Acts of Kindness & Giving Back 260
d. Hope Through Education & Self-Improvement 263
4. From Childhood to Adulthood: Challenges, Dreams, and Realities 269
a. Personal Struggles and Family Responsibilities as Motivation 270
b. The Power of Imagination: Hope Through Dreams and Aspirations 275
5. Carrying Hope into Adulthood: The Evolving Landscape of Hope 281
a. We Feel Everything, Yet We Survive 284
b. Between Fate and Good Deeds 299
c. Dreams for Afghanistan and Personal Aspirations 306
6. Conclusion 312
7. Academic Contributions 315
Chapter Six: Against All Odds: Afghan Youth and the Labor of Resilience 319
1. Introduction 319
a. Resilience 320
b. Resilience in Youth Studies 321
c. Resilience in Conflict Settings 322
d. Key Debates 324
e. Gaps in the Resilience Theories 328
f. My Study 332
g. My Theoretical Framework 333
h. Definition 334
2. Afghan Youth and the Power of Resilience 336
3. When You Don't Know Why or How: The Quiet Strength of Childhood Resilience 337
a. The Lasting Scars of War and Violence in Childhood 347
b. War-Touched Lives: How Conflict Shapes the Role of Family 352

c. Childhood Betrayed: The Scars of Sexual Exploitation 363
d. **Glorification of Struggles with Gratitude** 370
4. Between Dreams and Losses: The Journey of Growing Up 377
a. Cultural Pathways to Resilience: Navigating Adversity Through Tradition and Practice 388
b. The Responsibility to Live, Survive, Provide, and Fix 397
5. Resilience in Adulthood: Navigating Life's Turning Points 401
a. Finding Meaning in Resistance: Dreams, Work, and the Will to Continue 404
b. Collective Loss 412
c. Between Homeland and Elsewhere 419
d. A Nation in Waiting: The Tragedy of Unfulfilled Dreams 425
e. Conclusion 432
6. Theoretical Contribution 434
Chapter Seven: Conclusion 439
1. Introduction 439
Figure 3: Core and Recursive Flow Between Identity, Hope, and Resilience 441
Core and Recursive Flow Between Identity, Hope, and Resilience 441
Cross-Recursive and Feedback Arrows: 442
The Outer Ring: Navigating Between Agency and Determinacy 442
a. Childhood: Learning Identity, Inheriting Hope, Cultivating Early Resilience .. 444
b. Adolescence: Disruption, Negotiation, and Emergent Interdependence 445
c. Adulthood: Reclaiming Identity, Sustaining Hope, Enacting Political Resilience 446
d. Conceptual Integration Across Identity, Hope, and Resilience 447
e. Theoretical and Conceptual Contributions 448
2. Final Reflections 450
3. Bibliography 453

Chapter One: Introduction

1. Introduction

In 2021, the world watched as Afghanistan once again fell into the hands of the Taliban. Amid chaotic airport evacuation, suicide bombings, and the forced exodus of thousands of Afghans, the voices most absent from global discourse were those of the young people whose lives were suspended, futures imperiled, and identities fractured. This dissertation centers those voices. It is a study of Afghan youth who have grown up in the shadows of war yet continue to resist despair through the cultivation of hope, the assertion of identity, and the exercise of resilience.

The story of Afghanistan is often narrated through the lenses of geopolitics, state collapse, terrorism, or humanitarian crisis. In contrast, this dissertation tells it from the ground up: through the lived experiences of fifteen Afghans aged 18 to 35, born into conflict, shaped by dislocation, and now scattered across countries, still imagining, still hoping, and still claiming belonging to a homeland in ruins. Drawing from feminist approaches, hope theories, and Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model, this study explores how young Afghans make sense of themselves and their futures across three stages of life: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

This work is both personal and political. Rooted in my own journey as an Afghan woman, a former refugee kid who lived through the Soviet invasion, civil war, the Taliban's first regime, American intervention, two decades of rebuilding, and the Taliban's return, this

dissertation is also a labor of memory, mourning, and political engagement. As a sister to Natasha Khalil[1], a brilliant young woman whose life was cut short by violence, my commitment to honoring Afghan youth is deeply personal. However, more importantly, this study seeks to disrupt dominant paradigms of conflict analysis that obscure the everyday meanings, dreams, and struggles of youth in conflict settings.

The primary question that drives this research is: *How do Afghan war-affected youth of all genders remain resilient, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and psychosocially, in the face of years of armed political and criminal violence?*

This overarching question is supported by two sub-questions:

1. *How do Afghan youth nurture hope as they build their lives in the sociopolitical context they inhabit?*
2. *How does exposure to violence, displacement, and systemic marginalization shape their individual and collective identities?*

To answer these questions, I conducted a multi-method qualitative study consisting of 15 in-depth life history interviews, two focus group discussions, and participatory art-based sessions with Afghan youth between the ages of 18 and 35. These participants came from diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds, both from within Afghanistan and from resettled communities in the diaspora. Their life stories provide an intimate and complex understanding of

[1] Fatima (Natasha) Khalil, a 24-year-old human rights activist, was killed in June 2020 by an improvised explosive device (IED) attached to her car in Kabul. See Mujib Mashal, "She Was Killed for Serving Afghanistan. Her Family Wants Justice, " *The New York Times*, June 29, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/world/asia/afghanistan-women-human-rights.html.

how Afghan youth build and sustain resilience, redefine identity, and cultivate hope within contexts of protracted conflict, exile, and intergenerational trauma.

2. The Importance of Centering Afghan Youth

Afghanistan is a youthful nation. Most of Afghanistan's population aged 25 and under is over 65% (PopulationPyramid.net 2022). Afghan youth hold demographic significance but remain excluded from policy-making, peace processes, and academic analysis. Much of the literature that does exist about Afghan youth is framed through securitized discourses that either portray them as radicalized threats or as helpless victims (Ahmadi 2015; Darden 2019; Grover 2011). These narratives flatten the complexity of their lives and obscure their agency. My dissertation challenges these reductive representations by documenting the lived experiences, evolving identities, aspirations, and strategies of Afghan youth as they navigate a world of structural violence and limited opportunity.

At the heart of this study is the question of identity: how young Afghans make sense of who they are amid shifting cultural, gendered, and political landscapes. In this context, identity is not fixed or solely self-defined, it is negotiated through intergenerational memory, social expectations, and experiences of displacement and loss (Christiansen et al., 2006; Sommers, 2012). Afghan youth often occupy liminal spaces, at once insiders to their communities and outsiders to dominant narratives of nationhood. Their stories reveal how identity is both fractured and reassembled through war, exile, return, and resistance.

Similarly, hope is not a passive state of optimism but an active stance of resistance and survival. It is created and sustained through relationships, cultural memory, and acts of imagination (Freire 1994; Snyder 2002; Webb 2013). The concept of resilience is often romanticized in development and humanitarian discourse, presented as a personal attribute divorced from political and historical context, and especially ignoring the lived experiences of the population under analysis. I argue that resilience, in the case of Afghan youth, must be understood as a relational and contextual process that is gendered, communal, and often political (Masten 2014; Betancourt and Khan 2008; Mazurana 2019). By drawing on feminist theories of care and relationality, I position identity, hope, and resilience not as individual traits but as social and political practices shaped by family, community, and structural forces (Mazurana, Akesson, and Myriam 2022; Curnow 2022; Hadley 2017).

a. Significance of the Study

This research is significant for three key reasons. First, it challenges dominant security and humanitarian discourses that render Afghan youth either invisible or hyper-visible as threats. Second, it contributes to theoretical debates on identity, hope, and resilience by drawing from indigenous, emic, and feminist approaches. Third, it seeks to inform policy and practice by foregrounding the lived experiences, language, and insights of youth themselves, offering a grounded understanding of what support, safety, and transformation could mean in their own terms.

b. Framing Youth in the Afghan Context

Youth is not a static, biologically determined stage of life; rather, it is a deeply social, gendered, and contextual category. In Afghanistan, "youth" cannot be neatly confined within Western-defined age brackets. As articulated by my study participants, youth is relational, it is shaped by cultural expectations, gender norms, economic responsibilities, and historical disruptions. It is both a time of being pushed into adult responsibilities and of being denied the full autonomy of adulthood. Youth in Afghanistan is defined through duty, sacrifice, and a struggle for agency. The very word "Jawan" in Dari language carries with it a host of meanings, from opportunity and vitality to obligation and anxiety.

c. Defining Youth in Afghanistan: Legal, Linguistic, and Cultural Perspectives

The concept of *youth* is defined in multiple ways across institutional, cultural, and academic contexts, reflecting both age-based categories and socially constructed roles. The United Nations (UN) defines youth as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24, focusing on this age group for statistical and developmental purposes, and framing youth as a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood (United Nations 1981). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) does not define youth; it identifies a child as anyone under 18 years old, thereby overlapping with early stages of youth and emphasizing the need for protection and developmental support (CRC 1989). However, anthropological and sociological perspectives challenge the notion of fixed age-based categories. Lancy (2015) conceptualizes youth as a social category, shaped by roles and responsibilities such as contributing to family labor, engaging in community life, and preparing for marriage, emphasizing that youth is defined more by social recognition than by chronological age.

Expanding on this idea, Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh (2006) describe youth as a liminal phase, a state of being "in-between" childhood and adulthood, often prolonged in contexts of poverty, conflict, and unstable economies where access to employment, marriage, and independent adulthood is limited. In the Indian context, Jeffrey (2010) introduces the term "waithood" to capture how youth is shaped by long periods of waiting and uncertainty, especially for young men facing structural inequalities that prevent them from achieving adult roles. Additionally, Durham (2000) frames youth as a relational concept, defined by the ways in which societies position young people relative to both adults and children, with an emphasis on negotiating status, power, and belonging. Collectively, these definitions demonstrate that youth is not a universally fixed category but a context-dependent and dynamic phase of life, influenced by cultural norms, social expectations, and structural conditions.

There is no single, universally accepted definition of youth in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan National Youth Policy (ANYP) officially defines youth as individuals between the ages of 18 and 35, with additional guidelines for adolescents aged 12 to 18 (ANYP, 2014). However, Afghan civil law considers individuals legally adult at 16 for girls and 18 for boys. Beyond legal frameworks, the meaning of youth in Afghanistan is highly contextual and shaped by language, cultural expectations, and social positioning.

In Persian (Dari), the word for youth is *Jawan* (singular) and *Jawanan* (plural), derived from *Pahlawi*[2], meaning the period between childhood and maturity, vitality, or early

[2] Pahlavi, or Middle Persian. The term "Middle" refers to the language's historical position between Old Persian, used during the Achaemenid Empire (~600–300 BCE), and Modern Persian, spoken today as Farsi, Dari, and Tajik. Middle Persian, used during the Sassanian Empire (224–651 CE), served as the formal language of administration and Zoroastrian texts. From this foundation, *jawan* emerged to describe the transitional period between childhood and maturity, often associated with vitality, early development, and potential. Understanding this etymological and historical background helps frame how Afghan youth are culturally and linguistically situated in broader temporal narratives (Persian-English Dictionary, 2022).

development (Persian-English Dictionary, 2022). In Pashto, the equivalent terms are *Zalmai* (singular) and *Zalmian* (plural), which denote youthfulness, freshness, and newness. However, these terms are largely gendered. In Pashto, "youth" almost exclusively refers to men, while *Jawan* in Persian, though technically gender-neutral, often requires an additional specification for women, such as *Jawan Dukhtar* (youth girl). In Pashto, unmarried young women are often referred to as *Peghla*, a term that emphasizes marital status more than age or youthfulness. Culturally, *Pegheltoob* evokes a broader meaning, capturing a stage of life marked by carefree innocence and, for many women, a sense of youthful naivety. In some parts of southern Afghanistan, Pashto speakers use *Zewan* for young men and *Zewana* for young women. Pashto and Dari are the two main languages spoken by the majority of Afghans and are two of the national languages. These layered meanings reflect how social expectations and lived experiences shape the understanding of youth among Afghans.

d. Gender and Youth

These linguistic nuances highlight how gender shapes the concept of youth in Afghanistan. The absence of a direct, ungendered term for "youth" in Pashto for women underscores the patriarchal nature of societal structures, where male youthhood is celebrated and discussed, while female youthhood is closely linked to marital expectations and domestic roles. For many Afghan girls and women, youth is not an open-ended period of self-exploration and autonomy but a brief transitional phase leading directly to marriage and motherhood.

The concept of youth, as articulated by this study's young participants, is deeply layered, reflecting themes of independence, responsibility, energy, societal pressure, and structural limitations. While many initially define youth as a time of autonomy, "Youth means

independent; I think we never were independent, " a young man stated, their reflections reveal how social expectations constrain this independence, particularly for young people in Afghanistan.

Gender plays a crucial role in shaping these experiences. Women often associate youth with restrictive social norms, while men discuss it in terms of duty and responsibility. Several female participants describe "youth" as a source of immense pressure, particularly regarding marriage and bodily surveillance. One young woman explained, "Whenever I heard Jawan (Youth) at home, it was always connected to marriage and engagement, and I hated that." Another described the way her family controlled her physical appearance: "My mom used to tell me that if I curled my hair or changed my hairstyle in a certain way, I would be punished because when you are a young woman and push to have agency over your appearance, it is believed there must be some evil intention behind it."

The expectation that young women should be prepared for marriage rather than independence was particularly suffocating for some. One female participant stated, "Whenever someone would say she is now Jawan, I felt like I was expected to get married and bear children. I hated that idea because it felt like my childhood was taken away before I was ready." Some expressed deep discomfort with the way their developing bodies became objects of scrutiny within the home: "They would tell me, 'Oh, take care of your boobs, they are just in front of our faces.' They said it in a way that felt dirty."

For many young women, youth was not defined by freedom or possibility, but by the sudden imposition of expectations they did not choose. Some participants also grappled with the fleeting nature of youth and the burden of expectations. One female participant described feeling

immense pressure whenever the word "youth" was mentioned: "There was a terrifying stress that attacked me. Whenever people said `Jawan, ' I felt I was responsible for fixing everything; I told myself that I had to become a doctor, police officer, engineer, or all of them. I wanted to build the entire country. But at home, it was different. At home, when I heard this word, it meant they wanted me to get married and bear children." The contrast between societal expectations and personal desires created anxiety for many. Another female youth participant put it succinctly: "I felt like a hero because I was supposed to do everything, to be responsible for our lives, to fix everything, to sustain everything."

Another female participant lamented that youth was framed as a "rush stage, " where failing to accomplish certain milestones, especially marriage, meant losing one's chance forever: "It's a pressure. If that stage passes, I will lose the chance. When you're young, people believe you don’t have a brain, that you lack the capability to calculate your possibilities for life." This belief that youth is defined by limitation rather than possibility was a recurring theme among my participants.

For male participants, youth was often equated with responsibility, sometimes to an overwhelming extent. One male participant who lost his father at age 10 explained how he was forced into an adult role prematurely: "The moment my father died, I grew up. I became responsible for taking care of my family. I know how to be a father because I raised my siblings. I know what the responsibilities of a father are because I took care of all of them." In this way, youth was not necessarily a time of exploration or energy but of survival. Another male participant expanded on this idea, emphasizing that youth is not just about age but about resilience: "My definition of a youth is somebody who falls but gets up, somebody who is

injured but does not allow the pain to destroy him, somebody who is pushed back but always tries to move forward, somebody who has faced many obstacles but has not given up."

While many young men embraced their roles as protectors, others were skeptical of how young people were used as a political tool. A female participant reflected on the way politicians leveraged youth, particularly young men, for their purposes: "I felt like the young population of a country is its spine because they are the biggest resource a country has, that's why they can be utilized in any way the leadership wants." She further explained that in Afghanistan, young people have little agency, which diminishes their ability to fulfill this role: "In our country, young people don't have authority. Their agency is taken away, so they cannot be the spine of the country because they lack access to resources and power over decision-making."

Despite these hardships, some participants maintained a vision of youth as a time of change and potential. "For me, youth is not about age; it is about bringing change, " one participant stated. Another echoed this idea: "Jawan, for me, is when one can achieve everything they want. Someone who has the opportunity to work. Someone hopeful to live. Someone who lives for happiness." However, not everyone felt they had lived their youth fully: "I have not done Jawani. I haven't lived my youth. I have been busy with life, and life has been unfair." The contradiction of youth as both an asset and a limitation were reflected in how many participants viewed their country's young population. One participant remarked, "When I hear the word youth, I imagine a beautiful future for society. Youth are the energy of a society. If we take away youth, that society will disappear." Yet another described the reality of Afghan youth in a more sobering way: "At the same time, it gives me two feelings, first, we have a lot of work and labor resources, but with many limitations and obstacles, making it a contradictory situation."

Overall, the narratives from these young participants paint a picture of youth as a stage filled with contradictions, defined by energy and possibility yet restrained by societal and structural barriers. Gendered experiences deeply shape the perception of youth, with young women associating it with restrictions and bodily control, while young men see it as a period of overwhelming responsibility. Both, however, share a sense of lost potential, of a youth not fully lived, and of the need for greater agency and opportunities. As one young woman participant poignantly summed up, "I just feel I haven't seen or experienced being young. I think this world owes us the chance to be youth."

e. Youth and Conflict in Afghanistan

The concept of youth in Afghanistan is deeply influenced by conflict and war. During periods of war and instability, traditional age-related milestones shift. As Boyden (2003) argues, war often forces children and youth into adult roles prematurely, turning them into providers, soldiers, or caregivers. Similarly, Hart (2008) shows that for Palestinian youth, political violence and displacement accelerate the expectation to take on adult responsibilities, while delaying other markers like stable employment or education. In studying Sierra Leone, Shepler (2005) highlights how war disrupts normal rites of passage, leaving many young people, including former child soldiers, without access to schooling or traditional pathways to adulthood. Working throughout sub-Saharan Africa, Honwana (2012) finds that even in post-conflict societies, youth experience "waithood, " where structural inequalities delay the transition to adulthood, showing that both war and its aftermath reshape what it means to be young. In Afghanistan, boys are expected to contribute financially to their families for survival, while young girls often face accelerated transitions into marriage as a form of protection. One participant reflected on this reality:

> "I don't remember if I was a kid after that. I tell my friends that I don't remember if I was ever a teenager because the moment my father died, I grew up and became a person who was responsible for taking care of my family." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

For girls, war accelerates their transition to adulthood in different ways. Families see early marriage as a form of protection against the instability of war, fearing that if their daughters remain unmarried, they may be left vulnerable to exploitation, displacement, or violence. One participant recounted:

> "My sister was really young when my father died, so my mother made sure she got married. She got married at a really young age. And I am sure 100% she was married because my father was not there anymore. My mom was scared to have a young daughter at home without a man to protect her." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

As a result, cultural understandings of youth fluctuate between wartime and peacetime. In my study, I avoided using rigid age structures commonly accepted in Western definitions, as they fail to capture the gendered, culturally constructed and historically influenced understanding of youth in Afghanistan. Although I worked with a specific range of ages, I adopted a locally grounded understanding. Therefore, I was able to engage better with my study participants and explore how war and societal expectations shape their self-perception. These culturally rooted expressions reflect the ways Afghan youth conceptualize key values, which I use as primary sources of interpretation in this dissertation.

f. My Analysis of Youth in the Afghan Context

The concept of youth in Afghanistan is complex and deeply embedded in sociocultural, economic, and historical contexts. My work with young people in Afghanistan since 2013 has revealed a critical gap in understanding their lived experiences. Internationally funded programs and policies implemented in Afghanistan over the past two decades have often relied on borrowed frameworks from other contexts, overlooking the diversity and depth of Afghan youth experiences.

Through my interactions with young Afghans, particularly in trauma healing sessions, leadership programs, and youth conferences it has become evident that youth cannot be solely defined through Western or policy-driven categorizations. More significantly, my findings challenge the prevailing assumption that economically disenfranchised and frustrated youth in Afghanistan are naturally prone to radicalization and violence. Instead, despite living through decades of war and instability, many Afghans youth exhibit remarkable hope, resilience, and a drive for a better future.

g. Youth as a Socially Constructed Category

In Afghanistan, youth is not solely defined by age but rather by physical characteristics, cultural roles, and social responsibilities. Three major aspects shape the perception of youth in Afghan society. First was physical youthfulness. Terms such as fresh, new, energetic, innocent, beautiful, fit, and lively are often used to describe youthfulness. Unlike Western contexts, where youth is primarily an age bracket, in Afghanistan, it is a fluid characteristic. Someone in their late 30s or 40s may still be considered *Jawan* if they appear youthful, energetic, or physically fit.

Second are generational hierarchies and social expectations. Youth is a relational position within generational hierarchies. A 40-year-old may still be considered a youth by their elders, who perceive them as having less experience and knowledge. Within this framework, youth are expected to defer to their elders, whose knowledge is regarded as superior. Their opinions may be acknowledged but are rarely considered authoritative. One of my study participants described this dynamic:

> "So when you're young, people believe you don't have a brain, you don't have the capability of calculating your possibilities for your life. Your emotions are not validated because they think it's the emotions of a youth, somebody who is not yet capable of doing things." *(Male, 24, Badakhshan)*

Third was social position and economic responsibilities. Youth is also associated with societal roles such as generosity, bravery, and the willingness to undertake difficult tasks for others. For instance, if someone is consistently generous and always ready to serve others, they are described as "*Bisyaar kaka and jawan ast [someone very generous and young]*", a phrase that conveys admiration for their selflessness and strong sense of responsibility. Economic factors significantly influence youth status. A boy as young as 12 may be considered a Jawan and an adult if he earns money to support his family, while a girl of the same age may be considered a Jawan if she receives marriage proposals. This reflects economic necessity and gendered social expectations.

Finally, cultural understandings of youth shift significantly between wartime and peacetime. For instance, girls are often married at a younger age in war time due to the absence of educational opportunities, while boys may be regarded as *jawan* much earlier as they are

expected to assume the roles of providers following the loss of adult family members. Establishing this conceptualization of youth is essential for readers to engage with the following chapters, as it provides a framework for understanding the definitions and lived experiences of Afghan youth throughout the dissertation.

h. Structure and Chapter Overviews

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. Each chapter builds upon my participants' narratives and reflections to explore how Afghan youth experience violence, question their identities, cultivate hope, and practice resilience across different stages of life. Below is a brief overview of each chapter:

Chapter Two: Methodology. This chapter outlines the research design and methodological approach, including life history interviews, focus group discussions, participatory art-based activities, and autoethnography. It details how feminist ethics, reflexivity, and positionality informed the data collection and interpretation processes. It also provides a detailed account of how I adapted Bronfenbrenner's framework to analyze youth experiences across the micro, meso, and macro levels of Afghan society.

Chapter Three: Afghan Youth and the Tides of History. This historical chapter examines the political participation of Afghan youth from 1919 to 2021, highlighting how youth have been agents of resistance, reform, and revolution across various regimes. Drawing on archival research, oral histories, and existing scholarship, it reconstructs a counter-narrative that centers youth, especially women, whose roles have been erased from dominant histories. This chapter provides the historical context around protracted conflict necessary to understand the structural conditions shaping contemporary youth experiences.

Chapter Four: Sense of Self. Focusing on identity formation, this chapter explores how gender, ethnicity, family, religion, and displacement shape Afghan youth identities. Through life stages, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, it shows identity as an evolving process negotiated across micro (family), meso (peer/school), and macro (political) systems, challenging static notions of Afghan identity.

Chapter Five: Between Survival and Transformation – Hope as Refuge, Resistance, and Vision.

This chapter delves into how Afghan youth define and sustain hope across different life stages. Hope is shown not as abstract optimism but as a relational, political, and moral force tied to family, faith, education, and resistance. The chapter analyzes forms of hope such as critical hope, false hope, and projected hope, within conflict settings

Chapter Six: Against All Odds – Afghan Youth and the Labor of Resilience.

This chapter examines the nuanced and context-specific ways Afghan youth build resilience amid war, systemic violence, and displacement. It critiques the romanticization of resilience and instead presents it as a dynamic process involving care work, imagination, and defiance. Grounded in ecological systems theory, the chapter challenges trauma-centric views and centers youth agency.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion. Chapter Seven brings together the major findings of the dissertation, highlighting how Afghan youth navigate identity, hope, and resilience across different stages of life amid systemic violence and displacement. It reflects on how their lived experiences challenge dominant narratives that portray them as passive victims or threats. The chapter revisits the research questions, summarizes the key theoretical contributions, particularly

around relational hope, contextual resilience, and identity formation, and discusses the broader implications for policy, scholarship, and practice. It closes with reflections on the researcher's personal journey, the ethical dimensions of studying conflict-affected communities, and possibilities for future research centered on youth agency in conflict settings.

Chapter 2: Methodology

1. Introduction

My research investigates individual and collective identities, hope, and resilience through the lived experiences of Afghan youth, male and female, aged 18 to 35, who have lived through decades of political and armed violence. This age group comprises most of Afghanistan's population (CIA Fact Book 2022) and has experienced violence across three distinct historical waves: the civil war of 1992–1996, the rise of the Taliban's first regime 1996–2001, and the American invasion and the years of the Republic period from 2001–2021. These three periods are marked by widespread violence, mass migration, and deliberate radicalization efforts targeting youth, first by the Mujahideen and then by the Taliban. My study investigates how young Afghans navigated their lives and created their identities in these overwhelmingly challenging conditions, fostering hope and resilience amidst adversity.

My primary research question asks: How do Afghan war-affected youth of all genders remain resilient - physically, emotionally, spiritually, and psychosocially - in the face of years of armed political and criminal violence?

A. Sub-question: How does exposure to violence and crime and their attempts to maintain hope and well-being in their lives shape their view of their individual and collective identity?
B. Sub-question: How do they nurture hope as they build their lives in the context in which they live?

a. Research design and Phase 1 Research Methods

Initial Exploratory Study: During the initial exploratory phase of this research, I conducted extensive participant observations and informal discussions with Afghan youth in Afghanistan and several resettled communities outside Afghanistan to develop a thematic framework that I used to inform my subsequent methods. I visited Afghan refugee communities and met with Afghan youth in northern Virginia, USA; Toronto, Canada; Lezhë, Albania; Turin, Italy; Paris and Lille, France; and Istanbul, Turkey. In northern Virginia, which hosts a significant Afghan refugee population, I talked with Afghan youth who had worked in U.S. operations in Afghanistan, to gain insights into their resettlement experiences. In Toronto, Lezhe, and Istanbul, Turkey, I explored the experiences of Afghan youth from broader socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. In Paris and Lille, I interacted with Afghan youth artists who were resettled as refugees in France after their evacuation in 2021-2022. In all the locations where I worked, I carried out participant observation with Afghan youth in various meetings, art activities, and youth-led events to better understand their lived realities.

For this study, I used snowball sampling to identify participants through community networks, which proved particularly effective for engaging with a displaced population with shared yet varied experiences. These efforts provided critical thematic insights into identity formation, hope, and resilience among Afghan youth and helped me to identify participants for focus group discussions and in-depth interviews.

I selected participants using purposive or specific sampling, based on their demographic characteristics (age, gender, sex, ethnicity, education, income, geographic location), knowledge, experiences, and ability to reach them by WhatsApp or through Zoom. Because my study

focuses on Afghan youth, my participants had to be between the ages of 18 and 35, born to Afghan families, and raised in Afghanistan. I also purposefully sought out participants from a range of voices and experiences, including male and female youth from Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Baloch ethnicities. I also selected youth with a range of education levels, from having completed secondary school through university graduate degrees. I selected youth that attended school and who lived in regional city centers and those who grew up in rural areas in different provinces. My study participants gender, sex, ethnic, education, socioeconomic, and geographic diversity enriched the research by adding diverse cultural, social, and historical perspectives, allowing for deep thematic insights into identity formation, hope, and resilience in the context of when, where and how they grew up. These periods included times of `not-war-not-peace', armed conflict, invasion, state building, an opening of Afghanistan to the outside world through the widespread use of the internet and foreign presence in `rebuilding' the country, insurgency, betrayal, and return to war, and displacement or life under the second Taliban regime.

I identified youth for my study by using my contacts to meet Afghan youth who fled the Taliban takeover of August 2021 and who arrived in northern Virginia, Toronto, Albania, Italy, France, or Turkey. I also reached out through contacts to youth who still reside in Afghanistan living under the rule of the Taliban. I also connected with potential participants through my contacts from youth conferences that I attended and helped facilitate in Kabul and other provinces of Afghanistan between 2014 and 2020. These youth conferences allowed me to connect with individuals from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. All together, this process enabled me to identify participants for focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, ensuring diverse participants across different ethnic and cultural groups and laying the groundwork for the subsequent phases of the research.

Using this purposive sampling strategy, I selected 15 participants, ensuring at least one male and one female from each of the Pashtun, Tajik, and Hazara ethnicities. I also strived to maintain gender balance by choosing an equal number of male and female participants for the study. At the time I interviewed my participants, they ranged in age from 18 to 32 years old. These participants grew up in a diverse range of provinces, including Kabul, Ghazni, Kandahar, Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat, Laghman, Nangarhar, Helmand, Badakhshan, and Bamyan.

The goal of my study is not to generalize these stories as representative of the experiences of all Afghan youth. Rather, I seek to provide an access point to the lives of diverse individual Afghan youth and capture their personal narratives and life histories to document and analyze the nuances and complexities of their identity formation, hope, and resilience against the backdrop of prolonged conflict and displacement.

Semi-structured Interviews: I conducted preliminary, semi-structured interviews with the 15 participants to establish rapport, introduce and discuss the study, and obtain consent. Each participant was contacted for a one-hour preliminary interview to ensure they fully understood the study's scope and objectives and to explain the consent process. I emphasized the participants' agency in giving their consent and, later in the study, their ability to review and comment on how I interpreted their stories. This collaborative approach fostered engagement and transparency, encouraging participants to feel invested in the study.

During these interviews, at times and as appropriate, I shared my own experiences of growing up in Afghanistan, which I found helped build trust with my participants and created a safe, comfortable environment. This trust-building process allowed participants to ask questions and address concerns about the study throughout the interview sessions. While many participants

had previously met me at conferences, refugee camps, or other settings in Afghanistan, these preliminary interviews provided an opportunity to strengthen the connection and deepen mutual understanding.

Key areas of our early discussions included the participants' experiences of living in Afghanistan during the last 20 years, the regions they resided in, their preferred language of communication, and any topics they did not wish to discuss during the study. We also explored participants' perspectives on the study's relevance and their personal interest in contributing. These preliminary interviews laid the groundwork for my design of a life history questionnaire and helped ensure that the research would be both meaningful to participants and aligned with their comfort and preferences.

Life History Methodology: For one and a half years, I conducted detailed life history interviews with15 purposefully selected participants. Because participants were in four different countries, I used Zoom or WhatsApp to interview them. I virtually interviewed each participant for a total of 6 to 10 hours. These interviews were spread across several sessions to allow for a comprehensive exploration of their life stories and not to physically or emotionally exhaust the participants.

The life history methodology employed the "Portal" approach (Tierney & Lanford 2019), which connects individual narratives to broader socio-historical contexts. My interviews with the participants covered their experiences from early childhood memories to their current lives, delving into key aspects such as family dynamics, education (from primary school to university), social life, experiences of war, displacement, personal successes, and emotional well-being. The interviews also explored their struggles, hopes, and evolving identities within the context of

Afghanistan's complex sociopolitical landscape and later in other countries for those who fled the second Taliban regime.

Through these in-depth and conversational interviews, I captured rich narratives that reflected not only the hope, resilience, and adaptive strategies of Afghan youth but also the profound impact of decades of conflict and displacement on their lives. These stories contextualize individual experiences within the broader historical and social realities of Afghanistan, offering a deeper understanding of youth identity, hope, and resilience in a time of extraordinary challenges and change. The resulting life histories are an important contribution to understanding how Afghan youth navigate their identities and aspirations in the face of significant upheaval, change, and adversity.

Participatory Art-based Methods and Body Mapping: As a co-founder of an activist visual arts group called ArtLords in 2014, I helped create a movement where artists and activists used unconventional methods to address societal issues in Afghanistan. ArtLords became a leading agent for social change in Afghanistan, empowering artists to express resistance through art and providing activists with nontraditional tools for free expression in a highly controlled society. I played a key role in art campaigns like *I See You* and anti-corruption efforts, leading workshops across provinces on gender discrimination, rule of law, youth political participation, and violence. In 2017 and 2020, I co-facilitated youth conferences in Kabul, fostering cultural exchange, political debates, and grievance-sharing among Afghan and South Asian youth. After Afghanistan’s fall in 2021, I traveled with ArtLords partners to support evacuated Afghans, organizing gatherings where young refugees expressed their experiences through both painting and words.

Having experience with art as tool of expression, during my research process, I facilitated participatory art-based data collection sessions with Afghan youth refugees in Virginia, Toronto, and Paris. Participants gave their consent to engage in these sessions prior to attending. These sessions lasted two to three hours each, with breaks in between, and were conducted in private, secure settings with 15 to 20 participants in each session. These sessions were attended by some but not all my life history participants. Other participants were Afghan refugee young men and women evacuated between 2021 and 2022 from Afghanistan. These participants also came from different economic, social, and ethnic backgrounds. These sessions aimed to provide an avenue for these Afghan youth refugees to connect and talk about their shared experiences of life and exile.

The purpose of these sessions was to provide a creative avenue for participants to express their feelings and lived experiences. The art-based activities guided participants through structured exercises to help them visually explore and articulate themes such as identity, hope, resilience, and their physical and emotional journeys. I wanted to understand how these young people define concepts such as identity, hope, resilience, happiness, responsibility, and family to understand the more localized and contextual meaning of these concepts from Afghan youth. These concepts were foundational for my research and my goal was to use their definitions to help inform my analysis of the life history data collected later in the study, ensuring that the concepts better reflected Afghan youth's cultural and lived realities rather than relying on definitions rooted in Western academic frameworks.

The art sessions also encouraged participants to reflect on their lives in Afghanistan, the challenges they faced during their displacement, and their efforts to adapt and integrate into their

new communities. Through body mapping and other visual art techniques, participants created expressive works that conveyed their personal stories and emotions in ways that complemented the verbal narratives they shared during our interviews.

Following the art-making process, I led guided discussions to contextualize the visual narratives, enabling participants to share insights about their artwork and discuss the experiences and emotions represented. These sessions provided not only valuable visual data to enrich the study area focus on resilience, identity and hope, but also offered benefits to the participants by fostering reflection and connection in a supportive environment. The resulting visual narratives provided unique perspectives on the participants' identity formation, hope, and resilience, offering a powerful complement to textual narratives and further deepening my study's exploration of Afghan youth experiences amidst displacement and adversity.

Focus Group Discussions: Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in northern Virginia and Toronto with 15[3] participants in each group, comprised of newly arrived Afghan youth refugees in these locations. The purpose of these focus group discussions was to have more exploration into key concepts that came up during the life history interviews and body mapping exercises. These concepts were family, responsibility, hope, resilience, success, happiness, and youth. I wanted to more fully understand these concepts from the perspectives of

[1] In addition to the life history interviews, this study includes insights from two focus group discussions conducted with thirty young Afghans, ages 18 to 35, currently residing in Virginia, USA, and Toronto, Canada. All participants were selected based on a shared experience of forced displacement following the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban in August 2021. Their professional and personal trajectories vary widely, reflecting the realities of resettlement. Among them are university students, former journalists, Uber drivers, supermarket employees, development NGO workers, individuals engaged in the entertainment industry, and others still navigating their paths in unfamiliar settings. Despite the diversity in their current roles, their collective reflections offer valuable perspectives on identity, loss, adaptation, and hope in the aftermath of abrupt exile.

Afghan youth, before starting analysis of my collected data from life history interviews and participants' observations. I did not want my life history participants' life stories to be interpreted with concepts that are not understood by their peers and their generation of Afghans. These participants gave their consent to participate in the focus groups, artistic work, and body mapping. The young participants were the new Afghan refugees arriving in Northern Virginia, USA, and Toronto, Canada, and two of my life history participants also participated in these focus group discussions. Before I started the guided discussions, all participants engaged in artistic exercises designed to help them spend time with themselves and express their feelings through creative means. Activities such as body mapping with colors allowed participants to visually articulate their emotions, experiences, and identities. This exercise served as a calming and reflective prelude to the discussions, fostering a sense of comfort and connection among the participants.

I designed the focus group discussions to encourage collaborative and in-depth dialogue among participants. Guided discussions allowed participants to share their perspectives and interpretations of these concepts, fostering an understanding of how a diverse group of Afghan youth perceive and experience the concepts. During the sessions, participants engaged in intentionally open-ended conversations to capture the richness of their thoughts and experiences. The questions I posed to shape the discussions drew inspiration from resilience frameworks (e.g., Masten, 2014), while being tailored to resonate with the participants' cultural and contextual experiences.

These discussions provided nuanced, participant-driven insights into the meanings of youth, identity, hope, and resilience and related constructs, offering a crucial foundation for me

to use in interpreting the life history data. By centering the voices of Afghan youth, the focus groups helped ensure that the study was grounded in their lived realities and perspectives, adding cultural depth and relevance to the analysis of identity, hope, resilience, and adaptation in the context of displacement and conflict.

Autoethnography and Feminist Analysis: Throughout the research process and analysis, I used an autoethnographic approach and a feminist lens to integrate my positionality and lived experiences. I am from Afghanistan and lived through the same time period and socio-political upheavals as my participants. As part of this study, I recorded my own experiences of those life stages to complement my study particants' narratives. This dual approach allowed me to situate my insights within the broader narrative, enriching the study by incorporating a deeply personal and reflective understanding of the shared historical and cultural context. I used reflective journaling throughout my research process. I systematically documented my thoughts, emotions, and reflections during each research phase, ensuring that my positionality as a researcher was transparent and that my interpretations were critically self-aware. These reflections were not only a way to track my evolving perspective but also a tool to examine how my identity and experiences influenced the research process.

In analyzing the life history data and developing the questionnaires, I applied a gender lens to ensure that the narratives captured the complexities of gender expectations and roles within the Afghan context. By critically examining the gendered dimensions of identity, hope, and resilience through my participants' lived experiences, I aimed to highlight how gendered sociocultural norms and expectations influenced and shaped my participants' realities. This lens was critical in understanding the intersectional challenges faced by Afghan youth, both women

and men, in navigating their identities and aspirations in a deeply patriarchal, traditional, and conflict-ridden society.

This approach allowed for a comparative analysis of my experiences alongside those of the participants, providing a deeper intersectional understanding of how ethnicity, history, gender, education, socioeconomics, and socio-political contexts influenced identity formation, hope, and resilience. By embedding my insights into the broader narrative, I critically engaged with the data while maintaining the authenticity and integrity of the participants' stories. This method ensured that the study was reflective and grounded in the lived realities of Afghan youth, offering a nuanced perspective on resilience and adaptation in the face of adversity.

The initial exploratory study provided a foundation for concepts I used to explore the lived experiences and resilience of Afghan youth who endured decades of armed conflict and displacement. It also enabled me to successfully identify 15 participants for the life history phase of my research. Since I was looking for a small number of participants, my primary goal was to select individuals who demonstrated genuine interest in the study and were willing to contribute actively to the research process. Additionally, I ensured diversity among participants by including both male and female individuals from three of Afghanistan's major ethnic groups: Tajik, Hazara, and Pashtun. This approach allowed for a more diverse and nuanced exploration of resilience and identity across different cultural and social contexts.

b. Phase 2 Data collection methods

Having selected my participants, I chose life history interviews as the primary data collection method for capturing detailed personal narratives of 15[4] Afghan youth who lived through significant socio-political upheavals. Over a year and a half, I conducted virtual interviews with these participants, each lasting between six to ten hours across multiple sessions. These interviews explored participants' life stories from their earliest memories to their current lives, delving into key themes such as family dynamics, education, social life, experiences of war, displacement, and personal successes. Participants reflected on their emotional well-being, evolving identity, hope, and struggles, offering a rich tapestry of perspectives and live shaped by Afghanistan's complex and turbulent history.

To structure the life history interviews, I framed my open-ended questions using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory and framework (Bronfenbrenner 1979), focusing on the micro-, meso-, and macro-systems that influence individuals' lives (Figure 2.1). This framework allowed me to examine each stage of my participants' lives through various lenses, including family dynamics and upbringing (micro-system), school and peer influences (meso-system), and the broader political and socio-cultural environment of Afghanistan (macro-system). Additionally, I considered the participants' unique personal characteristics and their role in building resilience amidst these multifaceted dynamics.

[2] This study draws on the life histories of fifteen Afghan youths between the ages of 18 and 35, spanning 2 years, as each navigates the intersecting challenges of conflict, displacement, and systemic violence. To protect their safety, particularly for those still residing in Afghanistan, identifying details have been deliberately withheld. The participants represent a broad spectrum of backgrounds, including civil society activists, musicians, a journalist, girls' education advocates, a muralist, humanitarian worker, homemakers, a government employee, UN-affiliated worker, a daughter of high-ranking political leader, and individuals pursuing studies in law and economics both within Afghanistan and abroad. While their trajectories differ, they are united by a shared conviction: that their experiences carry meaning and that their voices, often silenced or marginalized, must be heard.

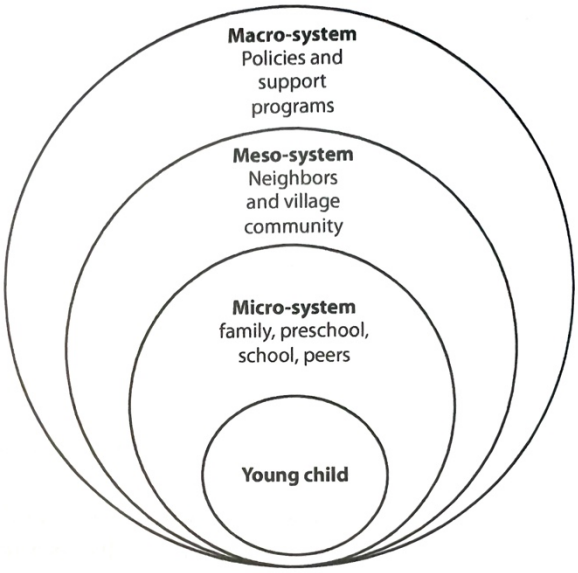

FIGURE 2.1 The socioecology of a young child (adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Importantly, I adapted and modified Bronfenbrenner's Socioecology diagram to contextualize the environment of a child that grows up in Afghan society. Therefore, Figure 2.2. is how I analyzed my 15 participants' life histories, looking at the mentioned factors in each of the three systems.

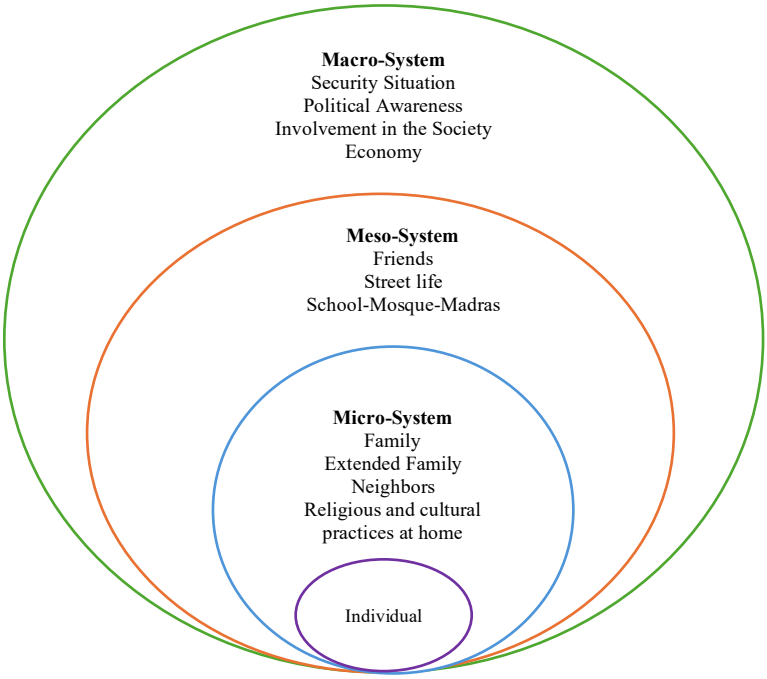

Figure 2.2 My adaptation of The Socioecology of a Youth (adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1994)

As a researcher who has lived through similar times and spaces, I also documented my own experiences alongside those of the participants to create my own narrative and deepen the context of the study. My approach illuminated not only individual resilience but also the shared challenges and adaptive strategies that characterize the Afghan youth experience. The ecological systems framework and my modification for the Afghan youth significantly enriched my data collection and analysis, offering a more holistic view of how identity, hope and resilience are shaped across different layers of influence.

I conducted all interviews in Pashto and Dari, depending on my participants' preferred language. The interviews resulted in a total of 83 hours of recorded in-depth conversations. I then meticulously translated and transcribed these recordings into English to ensure accuracy and preserve the participants' narratives. The final set of transcripts comprises 613 single-spaced

pages of detailed documentation, capturing the rich and nuanced stories shared by the participants. This extensive dataset served as my primary data source for analyzing the lived experiences, identity formation, hope, and resilience of Afghan youth.

c. Analytical framework

Once I had collected and transcribed all interview data, I used NVivo software to code and systematically analyze the 613-page dataset. The analysis followed three distinct stages of coding. First, I employed three deductive codes/themes derived from my initial research areas: identity, hope, and resilience (Masten 2014). In the second stage, I categorized the data using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, organizing the content into micro-, meso-, and macro-systems to explore how various layers of influence shaped the participants' experiences (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Finally, I applied Kathy Charmaz's grounded theory approach for inductive coding, which allowed themes and codes to emerge organically from the dataset (Charmaz 2006). By thoroughly examining each participant's story, I identified recurring and unique themes directly from the data.

Throughout the coding process, I maintained a rigorous practice of memo writing and personal reflection, as suggested by Maxwell (2010), to document my thoughts, interpretations, and emotional responses, ensuring a reflective and transparent analytical approach. After completing the coding, I wrote a narrative account of each participant's life story. These narratives were anonymized to protect participants' identities, with identifiers removed. Because the original interviews were conducted by me in Pashto and Dari and translated into English, in translating the stories of the participants told me into English, I sometimes had to use my interpretation of the meaning of their words. The emotional depth of these narratives reflects the

participants' experiences and how I, as the researcher, understood the `heart' of their stories during the interviews.

The analysis resulted in 15 detailed life stories of Afghan youth, accompanied by 1, 579 codes and 36 themes that were systematically developed through the coding process. These themes and insights, grounded in the participants' narratives, form the foundation of my analysis presented in this dissertation. They provide a profound and rich understanding of identity formation, hope, and resilience as experienced and defined by Afghan youth within the context of prolonged conflict and displacement.

d. Validity: Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

In conducting a robust qualitative study with multiple data collection techniques, I have been mindful of both external and internal validity concerns throughout the research process. Through the lived experiences of a diverse group of Afghan youth, my study aims to understand how they understand and experience individual and collective identity formation, hope, and resilience as perceived through significant events in their lives. To ensure internal validity, I have transparently disclosed my methodology and engaged in continuous reflexivity. Following Maxwell's (2010) guidance in *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, I adopted memo-writing practices to reflect on my influence during data collection and analysis. This reflexive approach provided both me and my readers with a detailed and transparent account of the research process and the factors that may have shaped the study's findings.

To further enhance validity and accuracy, I implemented a peer-review process that involved confirming the overall narrative accounts with study participants and verifying specific life events and details with them. After drafting each participant's narrative, I shared it with the

respective participants to gather their feedback and comments. This iterative process ensured that the narratives accurately represented the participants' lived experiences and respected their voices and perspectives.

This qualitative research offers a thickly descriptive and deeply nuanced account of the perspectives and experiences of 15 Afghan youth. These rich accounts provide a dynamic lens into the lives of young people who have endured prolonged conflict and displacement. The emerging themes contribute valuable insights, offering a foundation for future research and enriching our understanding of identity formation, hope, and resilience in conflict-affected youth.

e. About the author

My name is Lima, meaning the pupil of an eye in Pashto. I was born in 1986, second among the seven children in my family in Helmand province, in the Pashtun ethnic group. My parents come from different tribes within the Pashtun community. My mother is from Helmand, and my father is from Kandahar. From an early age as a girl, I was exposed to the complexities of ethnic and cultural diversity within my own home, which equipped me with a nuanced understanding of language, culture, and the dynamics of identity in Afghanistan.

In 1995, at age 9, I became a refugee with my family in Quetta, Pakistan. Like many other refugee children, I couldn’t attend school for several years due to financial difficulties and the lack of schools for refugee kids. My siblings and I worked from a young age to help support our parents and provide for the family. Over time, we managed to send each other to school, one by one. I was the last among my siblings to finally get the chance to study. Despite all the challenges, our parents ensured we were homeschooled as much as possible with our limited resources. They taught us to read and write in Pashto and Dari and made sure we learned basic

mathematics because both my parents had been teachers in Afghanistan. In 2002, I returned to Afghanistan for what I thought would be just a visit, but I never returned. Afghanistan became home.

When I was 23 years of age, I fell in love and married to a young man of Tajik ethnicity, which further broadened my cultural perspective and understanding of inter-ethnic relations. My ability to fluently speak Pashtun, Dari, and English and my exposure to diverse cultural nuances through extensive travel across Afghanistan give me the confidence and cultural insight needed to undertake this research.

In addition to my personal background, I bring significant professional experience to this project. As the founder of Paywand Afghanan Association, a nonprofit organization focused on women's rights, I conducted groundbreaking research in five female prisons in Afghanistan. This work led to a campaign for reforming the country's legal and penal systems, resulting in the establishment of a special court system in all 34 provinces to review cases of female inmates who lacked access to legal resources.

In 2014, I co-founded ArtLords, a collective of artists and activists in Afghanistan that use art as a platform for expressing the unspoken issues of society. The idea for ArtLords took shape in 2013 when I began traveling to different provinces across Afghanistan to facilitate workshops for youth on topics such as gender, ethnicity, violence, and youth political participation. Together with my colleagues, who later became the co-founders of ArtLords, we realized that many young people, both women and men, had never been given the opportunity to express their grievances, feelings, and perspectives in a healthy and creative way. Through these workshops, as we introduced art, especially painting, as a form of expression, the youth found

the courage to engage in conversations about sensitive and often silenced issues. This experience inspired us to create ArtLords, an initiative born from the belief that art can be a powerful tool for dialogue, healing, and social change.

Later on during my tenure as Monitoring and Evaluation Director with the Administrative Office of the President of Afghanistan, I worked on system development and reforms to ensure institutional accountability. My leadership in the development of the National Monitoring and Evaluation Policy, which was approved by the cabinet of the Republic of Afghanistan, gave me access to government institutions and tribal leaders across different ethnic groups. My position, combined with my experience in gender mainstreaming, youth political mobilization, and social movements, provided me with extensive connections at both grassroots and institutional levels.

I am acutely aware that my professional background and previous official positions in Afghanistan may have created a power dynamic with my participants. Many of them, while I may not have known them personally, were familiar with my name or had read about my work. My identity could have influenced how participants perceived me and shaped the information they chose to share. Recognizing this, I took extra time with each participant to build trust, share my own vulnerabilities and challenges, and reflect on my personal experiences during the interviews. By openly recounting my struggles, losses, and moments of resilience, I aimed to position myself not as an authoritative figure but as a peer who was genuinely interested in learning about them and who would not judge their life events or choices.

As a former refugee and displaced person following the 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the violent takeover of the country by the Taliban, I shared the pain of losing my home, flag, and access to my country. My experiences as a youth living through conflict and

displacement allowed me to connect with participants on a deeply personal level. Throughout this study, I maintained an autoethnographic account of my reflections and interactions, integrating a feminist lens (Mazurana & Proctor, 2013; Cohn, 2013) to critically analyze how gender, identity, education, class, ethnicity, geography, and socio-political contexts intersected in both my experiences and those of my participants.

By combining my personal insights with the narratives of my participants, I have sought to create a study that is both empathetic and critical, capturing the complexities of Afghan youth experiences while acknowledging the potential influences of my positionality. This reflexive approach ensures that the research is grounded in authenticity and respect for the voices of those I engage with.

f. Challenges: Mental health and self-care for participants and the researcher during the research

Throughout this research, I encountered several challenges that required me to pause, reflect, and adapt my methodologies. Working with life histories, particularly from a war-torn and conflict-ridden country like Afghanistan, exposed me to vicarious trauma. I was aware of this risk from the outset and took deliberate measures to manage its impact on myself and my participants. I ensured the interviews were conducted in a well-paced manner and created a safe space for participants, constantly checking in with them to see if revisiting their experiences triggered any reemergence of trauma. When sensitive or traumatic events were shared, I often used a pause method, asking participants to reflect on why sharing that specific event might help tell their story. I also identified and shared mental health resources with participants to ensure they could access professional support as needed.

Despite these precautions, I was not immune to the emotional toll of vicarious trauma. During the life history interviews, I often learned unexpected, deeply personal, and sometimes unsettling information that I had not anticipated or planned for. This led to moments where I struggled to "unlearn" or detach from these stories. At times, the balance between my personal life and the narratives of my participants blurred, affecting my mental and physical well-being. I experienced significant weight gain and sleep disturbances during several months of the study. However, I was fortunate to have an advising committee comprised of experienced researchers who had worked with traumatized populations and were familiar with methodologies to cope with such challenges. Their guidance and support were invaluable in navigating these difficulties.

In addition to seeking professional support, I prioritized my own self-care by maintaining physical activity and taking regular breaks to focus on my health and family. These moments allowed me to recharge and maintain a sense of balance amidst the emotional intensity of the research. From my participants, I received consistent feedback that speaking to me was an important and empowering experience for them. Many expressed that this was the first time they could share their stories in their own languages, which brought them comfort and a sense of being understood. They explained that narrating their life stories often became a source of relief and healing for them. This feedback reinforced the importance of creating a compassionate and empathetic research environment, both for my participants and for myself.

Chapter Three: Afghan Youth and the Tides of History

1. Introduction

Afghanistan's human history stretches back over 50, 000 years, yet its rich and complex past remains underexplored by historians. Strategically located at the crossroads of civilizations and the ancient Silk Road, the country's history has often been narrated through the lens of foreign invasions, imperial ambitions, and elite politics. Much of the historical literature focuses on political transitions, military engagements, and external interventions, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of everyday life, cultural change, and the roles of marginalized groups.

Foundational works like Mir Ghulam Muhammad Ghobar's *Afghanistan dar Maseer-e-Tarikh* (1967) provide a nationalist perspective, emphasizing Afghan resistance to foreign rule. Louis Dupree's *Afghanistan* (1973) remains a cornerstone for understanding the country's anthropology and early political development. Martin Ewans (2002) offers a concise political history, while Thomas Barfield (2010) focuses on tribal governance and foreign influence. William Dalrymple's *Return of a King* (2013) offers a micro-history of imperial conflict through the First Anglo-Afghan War. Collectively, these works provide valuable insight into Afghanistan's political structures, foreign entanglements, and governance challenges.

Other scholars have contributed more specialized analyses. Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazara's *Siraj al-Tawarikh*documents court history in the late 19th and early 20th centuries but reflects elite male perspectives, often omitting women and ethnic minorities. Hassan Kakar's

extensive scholarship (1979, 1995, 2006) investigates state formation, the reign of Abdur Rahman Khan, and responses to Soviet occupation. More recently, Robert Crews (2015) reconceptualizes Afghanistan as a globally connected society, challenging the image of isolation. Jonathan Lee (2018) and Ali Ahmad Jalali (2017) offer expansive narratives on political and military developments across centuries.

Despite this substantial body of work, major limitations remain. Women's roles have been largely marginalized in historical accounts, and the contributions of Afghan youth have rarely been explored as a distinct analytical category. One major corrective is Halima Kazem-Stojanovic's dissertation *Resisting Erasure* (2022), which reconstructs the political history of elite and middle-class Afghan women from 1919 to 2021. Drawing on archival sources, oral histories, and cultural texts, Kazem-Stojanovic illuminates eight feminist waves and the complex ways imperialism, nationalism, and patriarchy shaped gender politics. Her feminist historiography highlights Afghan women as active political actors and resists dominant erasures that reduce them to passive subjects.

However, the historical role of Afghan youth, particularly in shaping political and social change, remains under-theorized. Scholars such as Kakar (1995) and Jalali (2017) acknowledge youth participation in armed conflict but do not extend their analysis to youth as agents in broader societal transformations. Barfield (2010) and Lee (2018) recognize generational tensions but do not treat youth as a sociopolitical category in their own right. Crews (2015) gestures toward the modernizing aspirations of Afghan society but stops short of analyzing youth movements, activism, or agency.

This absence limits our understanding of how young Afghans, male and female, have shaped Afghanistan's political, cultural, and social landscape. Youth have played critical roles in movements for reform, revolution, resistance, and rebuilding, yet their presence is often backgrounded in favor of elite or foreign-centered narratives. To redress this, my dissertation focuses on the period from 1919 to 2021, a century marked by independence, monarchy, communism, foreign occupation, civil war, republic, and the resurgence of the Islamic Emirate. This chapter offers a brief historical overview of youth participation during these regimes, drawing on interviews and oral testimonies to help reconstruct understudied aspects of youth agency and resistance.

While the broader history of Afghanistan spans several millennia, the modern state is roughly 250–300 years old. This dissertation does not aim to recount the full sweep of Afghan history, but rather to provide the necessary sociopolitical context for understanding how the lives of my participants, young Afghans between the ages of 18 and 35, have been shaped. When referring to youth participation in each regime, I primarily refer to young men, since the documentation on young women's involvement, particularly those outside elite urban families, remains limited. However, when their contributions are visible, they are explicitly acknowledged. This chapter seeks to foreground youth not just as subjects of war or recipients of aid, but as historical actors engaged in shaping the trajectory of their society.

a. King Amanullah Era: The Tension Between Modernism and Tradition

Before I start with the so-called golden era of King Amanullah and Queen Soraya, it is important to mention what led to Amanullah Khan becoming a young King in 1919. The current

Afghan state was consolidated during Abdur Rahman Khan's reign from (1844–1901). He was also known as the "Iron Amir, " and was crucial in consolidating the Afghan state. His foreign policy focused on securing Afghan sovereignty through diplomacy with the British and the Russian Empires, particularly after the Second Anglo-Afghan War. His efforts culminated in the Treaty of Gandamak (1879), which, while under British influence, allowed Afghanistan to maintain some independence (Hazara 1982, 112).

Through his policies to undercut tribal leaders and local authorities, Abdur Rahman established a more unified central government alongside a modern military force (Hazara, 58). His policies also involved the marginalization of minorities, particularly the Hazaras, whom he targeted through mass executions and land confiscation, aiming to suppress their potential resistance (Kakar 1991, 39). During his rule, the Durand Line Agreement of 1893 determined Afghanistan's southern border with British India (Elphinstone, 102). The period of Abdur Rahman's rule established Afghanistan's modern political geography by consolidating state borders (Dupree 1973, 212). Upon his death in 1901, he passed power to his son, Habibullah Khan, ensuring the continuation of his centralized state model (Kakar1991, 41).

Habibullah Khan (1872–1919) succeeded his father, Abdur Rahman Khan, in 1901 and ruled Afghanistan until his assassination in 1919. Unlike his father, Habibullah pursued a more moderate and reformist approach, focusing on the gradual modernization of Afghanistan rather than the harsh authoritarianism of his father's reign (Kakar 1991, 47). Habibullah emphasized infrastructure development, including the construction of roads and the introduction of new communication systems, which helped modernize the country's infrastructure (Kakar 1991, 46). He also opened the country to a degree of intellectual freedom,

allowing exiled political figures like Mahmud Tarzi to return. Tarzi, a prominent intellectual and advocate of modernization, became influential during King Amanullah Khan's era, contributing to the reformist movements that followed (Hazara 1982, 185).

Habibullah maintained a more balanced foreign policy, striving to preserve Afghanistan's sovereignty while avoiding direct conflict with the British and Russian Empires. Despite these reforms, Habibullah did not move toward political freedom or democratic governance and retained strict control over Afghanistan's political structure (Dupree 1973, 221). His reign set the stage for the radical reforms that would come under his son, Amanullah Khan, but even his policies remained cautious and focused on gradual change (Kakar 1991, 47).

Two note-worthy movements were established during King Habibullah Khan. The first was the constitutional movement of the early 1900s, which was crushed by King Habibullah Khan, who feared losing his power. The second was founded by Mahmud Tarzi, called the Young Afghan Movement, in the early 1900s, after he returned to Afghanistan following years of exile. Tarzi's formation of the Young Afghan Movement was part of his effort to promote nationalism, independence, progress, and women's rights. He used his newspaper, *Siraj al-Akhbar*, to spread these ideas, which were influenced by the European reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Tarzi 26). Tarzi's Young Afghan Movement aimed to modernize Afghanistan through Pashtun-centered nationalism, but it faced challenges due to a lack of institutional support and a coalition of reform-minded elites (Tarzi, 26-30).

Amanullah Khan, the eldest son of King Habibullah, was a protégé of Mahmud Tarzi (Tarzi, 26-30) and later married Tarzi's daughter, Soraya Tarzi, in 1913. Amanullah Khan succeeded his father, King Habibullah Khan, in 1919 after his father was assassinated

(Kakar 1991, 65). Amanullah Khan became king at the age of 27. Queen Soraya Tarzi supported her husband's development initiatives as an equal partner. During his 1919 to 1929 rule, King Amanullah Khan worked to build Afghanistan through major changes while facing significant difficulties. King Amanullah aimed to make Afghanistan more modern by establishing Afghanistan's first constitution and established a secular education system, while also pushing for women's education and community involvement. He planned to bring Afghanistan up to date with international progress through his reform programs. The traditional leaders and religious authorities strongly opposed Amanullah's changes because they wanted to protect their established power and cultural traditions (Ghobar 1973).

Queen Soraya who promoted women's rights and worked alongside King Amanullah to bring social improvements to the nation. She married King Amanullah at 19 years old and emerged as a prominent figure in his modernization campaign. Queen Soraya and King Amanullah Khan started Afghanistan's first feminist movement through their radical reforms and policies aimed at raising the status of women (Kazem 142, 2022). Queen Soraya played a pivotal role in advancing women's rights during her time as Queen of Afghanistan. In 1920, she opened Masturat, the first girls' school in Kabul, which sought to educate girls beyond traditional domestic roles and empower them with broader knowledge (Kazem, 107, 2022). Soraya also initiated the establishment of the first women's hospital in the country, signaling a major step forward in advancing girls' and women's health and education (Kazem, 107, 2022). Additionally, Soraya supported the publication of the first women's journal, *Irshad-e-Naswan*, which advocated for female emancipation and gender equality. She worked tirelessly to empower Afghan women, encouraging them to pursue education and take active roles in public life, which represented a bold shift toward a more inclusive and progressive Afghan society (Kazem 2022).

King Amanullah Khan drew inspiration from Turkey's Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the Ottoman Empire reforms to develop his modernization plans. Afghanistan's slow social and political development made it less prepared for changes than Turkey, which had already implemented reforms during Tanzimat (Yavuz 2020, Tarzi .n.d). King Amanullah's modernization attempts suffered due to the different conditions between his nation and Turkey's past reforms. Under Amanullah's leadership, Afghanistan adopted Atatürk's reform model by updating education methods and creating secular laws while strengthening national independence. Atatürk accomplished his reforms in Turkey because he built upon existing reforms while facing limited resistance. However, King Amanullah met strong opposition from religious and tribal groups in Afghanistan, which made his reforms harder to implement (Bayraktar, 2018).

Role of Afghan Youth

The youth population of Afghanistan actively participated in securing independence from British rule during the Third Anglo-Afghan War of 1919. Youth joined King Amanullah's fight against British control to defend their territory. Their participation in the war showed their dedication to the King's leadership and determination to protect Afghanistan's independence (Kakar, 1997). Habibullah Kalakani, also known as Bacha-e Saqaw ("son of the water carrier"), was of Tajik ethnicity, and joined the Afghan National Army at a young age. He fought in Amanullah's army, participating in the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919. This conflict was pivotal for Afghanistan, leading to its independence from Britian. Later, in 1924, this young military officer was involved in the Khost rebellion, an uprising against King Amanullah Khan's

modernization efforts, which many conservative factions viewed as contrary to Islamic and traditional values.

The Treaty of Rawalpindi brought peace to Afghanistan and made younger citizens feel proud to create their nation's future. Mohammad Ibrahim Attayee explains in his book *Afghanistan in the Twentieth Century* (*Afghanistan dar Qarn-i-Bishtum*) that King Amanullah's reforms needed the active support of young people. Following the independence, young people in Afghanistan took active roles both in helping and blocking Amanullah's reform efforts. At this time, the debate of modernization and tradition and religion was taking shape among the masses. The king established new educational facilities and required students to study science, technology, and foreign languages instead of traditional religious subjects (Ghobar, 1973). The new system sought to equip young people with skills and knowledge to lead Afghanistan toward modernization.

The historian Attayee believes young people led progress by embracing modern ideas and backing Afghanistan's independence movement (Attayee, 1973). King Amanullah's reforms, especially his efforts to empower women and create a secular nation, met resistance from the religious and traditional leaders. Ghobar (1973) explains that educated urban men and women favored Amanullah's changes, but traditional rural populations, mostly men, strongly opposed them. The gap between progress and tradition grew until it reached open conflict in 1929. Under pressure from traditionalists and other youth figures, Amanullah Khan was forced to abdicate the throne (Ghobar, 1973). During Amanullah Khan's rule, the Afghan youth, both male and female, were divided in their support of reforms and in opposing new changes. Their support for modernization and independence reflected both the progress Afghanistan made and the profound

social conflicts that ended Amanullah Khan's rule. The community's support shows how difficult it is to make fast changes in a country that follows traditional ways of life.

Several other young people were instrumental in supporting the king's reformist agenda. Shah Wali Khan, born in 1901, was a prominent young political figure who actively contributed to the intellectual currents of the time. As an advocate for modernization, Shah Wali Khan was involved in promoting educational reforms and the push for a more centralized state, aligning with Amanullah's vision of a progressive Afghanistan. He was known for his engagement in the political debates surrounding Afghanistan's modernization, particularly in areas such as nationalism and social change (Hazara 1982).

Similarly, Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan, born in 1909, played a significant role as a military officer and a political figure closely associated with Amanullah's reforms. Daoud Khan was a proponent of military modernization and state centralization, working to strengthen the authority of the monarchy. His early involvement in state affairs, particularly in the military, would later be foundational in his rise to power, culminating in his role as Afghanistan's first President after the 1973 coup (Kakar 1991). Together, Shah Wali Khan and Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan were key figures in pushing the reformist agenda forward during the early years of King Amanullah's reign.

b. 1929-1933: Turbulence and Transition After the Fall of the Young Monarchs

King Amanullah Khan and his Queen Soraya Tarzi were exiled in 1929 following the rebellion against his reforms, led by Habibullah Kalakani, (who once fought in Amanullah's army) and backed by the British. Kalakani was the first Tajik ruler who took over Afghan

Kingdom in 1929; before that, every Afghan king was Pashtun. Habibullah Kalakani was born in 1890 and rose to prominence during the political turmoil of 1929. Kalakani's rule lasted just nine months, yet during that brief period, his actions created an atmosphere of fear and restriction, particularly for women and girls, as he reinstated traditional practices.

Under Kalakani's rule, the rights of women in Afghanistan significantly regressed. As Kazem (2022) notes, the regime closed all modern schools, including Masturat**,** the first girls' school founded by Amanullah and Soraya in 1921. Kalakani's forces specifically targeted the families of girls who had attended these schools, even ordering that the names of female students from Masturat be handed over so that they could be forced into marriages with men described as Khustani or Kuhdamani brigands (Kazem 2022). Additionally, the Irshad-e Naswan, the only newspaper dedicated to women's education, was banned, and 15 women returning from studies abroad were arrested and imprisoned. The closure of libraries, laboratories, and the Royal Museum further reinforced the oppressive atmosphere. Kalakani's decree requiring the full veiling of women and the general sense of insecurity created an environment that isolated women from public life, marking a dramatic setback in their rights and freedoms, even surpassing the restrictions of previous regimes (Kazem 2022).

He was captured and executed by Nadir Shah in 1930 at the age of 39 (Kazem 2022). The mention of his age is significant because it underscores the role of young people in the political movements of the era. While much of Afghanistan's history, particularly that of ordinary people, remains undocumented, the active involvement of young figures like Kalakani in shaping the political landscape during this period illustrates that the youth played a crucial role in the country's political transformations.

After killing Kalakani, Mohammad Nadir Khan assumed power. Nadir Khan was a member of the Musahiban branch of the royal family. The Musahiban refers to a prominent Afghan royal family branch descended from Sardar Sultan Mohammad Khan (known as the Musahib), a brother of Emir Dost Mohammad Khan, the founder of the Barakzai dynasty. Nadir Khan had been a prominent military leader and had served as Afghanistan's Minister of War. His military career, especially during the Third Anglo-Afghan War, established him as a key figure in Afghanistan, even if he had opposed some of Amanullah's rapid reforms (Barfield, 2010).

Nadir Khan returned to Afghanistan in 1929 amid the political instability caused by Amanullah's abdication. After the uprising led by the forces of Habibullah Kalakani and his seizure of Kabul, Nadir Khan successfully overthrew Kalakani's regime. This revolt resulted in Nadir Khan being crowned King of Afghanistan on October 13, 1929. His ascent to the throne was welcomed by conservative factions within Afghan society, who sought a return to traditional structures of power (Kakar, 1997).

Nadir Khan's reign marked a shift from the radical reforms of Amanullah Khan. As the King, he focused on stabilizing Afghanistan, restoring the power of tribal leaders, and easing the tensions created by the earlier reforms. His policies were characterized by cautious modernization, avoiding the aggressive secularism and rapid changes that had provoked resistance during Amanullah's time.

Afghanistan's first formal parliament was established in 1931 under King Nadir Shah, following the 1931 Constitution, which introduced a bicameral National Assembly consisting of the Wolesi Jirga (House of the People) and the Meshrano Jirga (House of Elders) (Dupree 1973, 456). While this parliamentary system marked a step toward structured governance, real power

remained with the monarchy, limiting its legislative authority (Rubin 2002, 78). The parliament primarily functioned as an advisory body rather than an independent legislative institution (Barfield 2010, 132). However, this framework laid the foundation for later political reforms, including the more democratic 1964 Constitution, which aimed to establish a constitutional monarchy with a clearer separation of powers (Gregorian 1969, 289).

However, Nadir Shah's rule was cut short when he was assassinated on November 8, 1933 (Kakar, 1997) during a high school award ceremony by Abdul Khaliq, a 17-year-old Hazara student born in 1916 in the Chindawol district of Kabul. Khaliq's motives are believed to have stemmed from frustration over Nadir Shah's systematic persecution and execution of loyalists to the former King Amanullah Khan, including the execution of Ghulam Nabi Charkhi, a prominent supporter of Amanullah. In the aftermath of the assassination, Shah Mahmud Khan, the brother of King Nadir Shah, ordered the arrest of over 400 students from Nejat High School and initially decreed their execution. However, this decision was later rescinded, and instead, Abdul Khaliq, along with his family members and associates, were executed.

c. 1933 to 1973: Long, Slow Period of Monarchy - Zahir Shah

When King Nadir Khan was assassinated in 1933, his son Mohammad Zahir Shah ascended to the throne of Afghanistan. Zahir Shah was just 19 years old at the time of his father's death when he took the throne. His reign lasted from 1933 until 1973, making him the longest-reigning monarch in Afghan history. During his early years as King, Zahir Shah was mainly under the influence of his uncles Hashim Khan and Shah Mahmud Khan and other members of the royal family due to his young age. Over time, however, he gradually took on

more authority, and his reign saw efforts at modernization and attempts to navigate Afghanistan's complex political landscape (Barfield 2010; Kakar 1997).

During his reign, he sought to modernize the country through various reforms but at a much slower pace, including infrastructure development, educational advancements, and legal reforms aimed at moving away from traditional tribal laws (Barfield 2010; Mousavi 1997). His reign is also noted for the promotion of women's rights, with efforts to increase female education and encourage women's participation in public life. In these efforts for women, he was supported by his queen, Humaira (Runion 2007; Ghobar 1977). While he maintained a policy of neutrality in foreign relations, balancing ties with the Soviet Union and Western powers, Afghanistan faced significant economic challenges. It remained reliant on foreign aid and struggled with industrial underdevelopment (Runion 2007; Misdaq 2002).

Role of Youth

Before discussing some of the active young individuals of this era, it is important to note that under oppressive regimes, both male and female youth and the general population often faced suppression. However, there were instances where certain individuals or institutions create opportunities for change, which young people either exploit or utilize. During King Zahir Shah's reign, Shah Mahmud Khan played a pivotal role in creating such an opportunity. Shah Mahmud Khan, born in 1890 and starting his political career in his early 20s, is often referred to as the "Father of Democracy" in Afghanistan. He was the uncle of King Zahir Shah, but less conservative than his brother Hashim Khan, whom he replaced as Prime Minister in 1946 (Dupree 494, 1973).

Shah Mahmud Khan's work supported modernization efforts in Afghanistan to create a constitutional monarchy that included moderate democratic governance with a parliament and civil rights protection. His work on the constitution was an attempt to introduce legal reforms, centralize power, and reduce the influence of tribal and religious leaders (Kakar, 1997). Although his tenure as Prime Minister was short-lived, his contributions to the constitutional process were seen as pivotal in the early years of Afghanistan's attempts to establish a modern political system (Barfield, 2010). It is also important to note that his wife, Safora Sultan, was the sister of King Amanullah Khan, and it is believed she influenced his political ideology towards more liberal views than his brothers, Nadir Shah and Hashim Khan (Kazem 2022).

In 1949, under Prime Minister Shah Mahmud Khan, Afghanistan's National Assembly, known as the Seventh Afghan Parliament, initiated significant political reforms encouraged by young, educated Afghans (Dupree 1973, 456). This period, often termed the "Liberal Parliament, " was marked by increased political openness and the emergence of opposition groups advocating for democratic reforms (Gregorian 1969, 289). Dupree writes that 40 to 50 parliamentarians out of 120 were reformists (Dupree 1973, 494). Notably, the parliament annulled the restrictive 1931 Electoral Law, aiming to reduce monarchical control over elections and enhance parliamentary independence (Rubin 2002, 78). This parliament also passed a law ensuring freedom of speech (Dupree 1973, 495). This period is important because young people were forming momentum to engage in political activities more freely.

During Prime Minister Shah Mahmud Khan's tenure, restrictions on women in public life were eased compared to the stricter policies under his brother, Hashim Khan. For example, during this time Mermon Parwin**,** the great-granddaughter of Bebe Halima and Abdur Rahman,

made history as the first woman to sing live on Radio Afghanistan in 1951 (Kazem 2022, 174)**.** Art and women's small-scale freedoms were facilitated through government institutions, especially in urban settings such as Kabul (Kazem 2022, 173).

This was the time when students at Kabul University formed unions and debate gatherings on a small but noticeable scale around the discussion of free elections and giving voice to students. The creation of the Afghan National Student Association (ANSA), a student body in 1949, was another pivotal moment in Afghanistan's political and social transformation. The formation of the ANSA emerged as a direct response to the growing demand for educational reform and greater political engagement among the youth. This development coincided with broader global ideological shifts following World War II and was driven both by internal desires for modernization and the influence of external political movements (Attayee 1973).

The ANSA quickly became a central force in Kabul, where young intellectuals and students began to organize and advocate for educational and political reforms. It played an important role in the national discourse on modernization, promoting the idea of a more democratic and modern Afghanistan. Despite significant opposition from conservative factions within Afghan society and strong control of the government over the opposition, the ANSA helped shape the political landscape by providing a structured platform for students to engage in social reforms and political activism (Attayee, 1973). This movement laid the groundwork for future youth-driven political movements and played a crucial role in shaping Afghanistan's path toward greater political and social change.

Ghulam Mohammad Fahad was a key figure in Afghanistan's reformist movement, particularly through his role as one of the founding members of the ANSA**.** In his early 20s, he

studied Engineering at the University of Munich, Germany, and upon return, became very involved in youth movements (Attayee, 1973). Fahad's significant contribution in the early days of the ANSA included providing an apartment for the initial members of the association, who numbered only around eight to ten members (Attayee, 1973). This apartment soon became a hub for discussion and intellectual exchange, where students gathered to discuss the political and social issues affecting Afghanistan (Attayee, 1973). As more students joined the association, it grew into a central platform for advocating for educational reforms, social justice, and greater political participation for the youth.

Fahad's intellectual contributions to the ANSA were crucial. He was an advocate for modernizing Afghanistan's educational system and believed in empowering youth to engage politically and socially. His critical stance on Afghanistan's traditional structures and his advocacy for a democratic system of governance positioned him as a progressive force within the reformist movement (Attayee, 1973). Additionally, Fahad was not only an activist but also a writer who contributed to Afghanistan's intellectual and political discourse. His critical approach to the country's entrenched systems and his calls for greater democracy and social justice resonated with many young intellectuals of the time (Attayee, 1973). Fahad's role in the ANSA and his advocacy for reform played a key role in shaping the youth-driven political movements that emerged in Afghanistan during a period of significant change.

During this period of political liberalization, letters to the editor became a powerful tool for public discourse, allowing citizens to express their views on government policies and social issues. Many of these letters were published in opposition newspapers such as *Watan* (Homeland), *Angar* (Burning Embers), and *Nida'-yi-Khalq* (Voice of the People), which had

emerged to challenge the ruling regime. These publications provided a platform for intellectuals, political activists, and ordinary citizens to engage in debates on press freedom, neutrality in foreign policy, and governance reforms (Dupree 1973, 495). The increasing engagement of the public in such discourse reflected a growing demand for greater political participation and transparency, even as the monarchy sought to maintain its control. For example, "Letters to the Editors" became famous, where anyone could have written about a social injustice to the editors and get the issue published. Several young men contributed to these publications who were also members of *Wesh Zalmian* youth movement (Dupree 1973, 496).

In 1947**,** the Wesh Zalmian ("Awakened Youth") movement emerged in Afghanistan, marking the inception of the country's first organized youth movement. This movement was a response to the political and social changes of the time, aiming to modernize and democratize Afghan society. The Wesh Zalmian movement was inspired by pro-democratic, reformist opposition groups and played a significant role in advocating for political reforms and greater youth involvement in national affairs (Barfield, 2010; Kakar, 1997). This movement began in Kandahar. Some of the founding members include Ghulam Hassan Safi (1902–1984), a prominent Afghan politician and diplomat and Nur Mohammad Taraki (1917-), who was a prominent political figure and later became the President of Afghanistan, and Muhammad Alam Bachraki; Dr. Abdur Rahman Mahmudi (1909–early 1960s) who was an Afghan medical doctor and social activist; and several more.

One of the most prominent members of the Wesh Zalmian movement, Dr. Abdur Rahman Mahmudi**,** played a significant role in the early years of the movement, contributing to its ideological development through writing articles that were published in different journals of

that time. He was imprisoned for his activism with several other members, and died three months after his release in 1960s. Dupree writes that Wesh Zalmian posed a risk to the monarchy; therefore, many of its members were imprisoned, although several escaped to Pakistan (Dupree 1973, 497). Movements such as ANSA and Wesh Zalmian were threatening the monarchy as it began to lose control over the masses; therefore, the era of liberalization was short-lived.
By 1952, the government reversed many of its liberalization policies, leading to the suppression of opposition figures and independent media (Barfield 2010, 132). This regression culminated in the resignation of Shah Mahmud Khan in 1953, as internal pressures mounted against his liberal approach (Saikal 2004, 215).

Sardar Muhammad Daoud Khan replaced Shah Mahmud Khan as Prime Minister in 1953. Dr. Halima Kazem calls this era the "second era of women's emancipation" (Kazem 2022). Daoud Khan was a reformist who aimed for a more educated Afghanistan. During one of his official visits to Helmand province**,** my mother told me that her mother (my grandmother), her grandmother (my great-grandmother), and a few other women from their family were the first to attend his political rally without covering their faces. This event became widely known in their district, where everyone either mocked or admired the fact that the daughter-in-law of Haji Muhammad Raza Khan (my great-grandfather) removed her chadari and attended the rally without a face covering to see Daoud Khan (Sarwar, 2025).

Art flourished more during the Daoud era, especially for women artists. Mahwash was born in 1947 in Kabul, Afghanistan. She was among the first women to work as a radio announcer at Radio Kabul in the 1960s**.** During this time, Ustad Hafizullah Khalqi recognized her exceptional voice and trained her in secret. By the 1970s, Mahwash had emerged as one

of Afghanistan's most celebrated female vocalists**,** known for her mastery of ghazals, folk songs, and classical Afghan melodies**.** While details of her earliest songs remain unclear, her song "O Bacha, " released in 1977**,** became famous. This playful track humorously critiques the influence of Western culture on Afghan society, with lyrics favoring traditional Afghan dances over Western styles like the cha-cha-cha (Aramco World, 2013).

Apart from the capital, girls' schools were opening in different provinces. For example, the first girls' school in Grishk district of Helmand province (where the author's mother is from) was established in 1951 by the name of Loya Adey. Loya Adey was the mother of Wazir Fateh Khan (1777–1818) who was a prominent Afghan statesman, military commander, and kingmaker during the early 19th century. He played a crucial role in shaping the politics of Afghanistan during the decline of the Durrani Empire and the rise of the Barakzai dynasty. The land of this school was donated by the author's great-grandfather Muhammad Raza Khan, who from Mahmmandzai clan of the Pashtuns to build the school. The author's mother and all her aunts graduated from this school.

Similarly, Zarghona Ana girls' school in Kandahar was established in 1929. The author's father told her it was the first girls' school in Kandahar, and later in the early 60s, he took his young sisters who never went to school and admitted them into this school. He spoke about "Ama Jana" who was the principal of this school and a very courageous and prominent figure in Kandahar. She worked and played a crucial role in educating girls from Kandahar (Khalil 2025).

The *Sarandoy* (also known as the Afghan Scouts) youth organization was established in the 1930s and was inspired by the global Boy Scout movement. They aimed to promote discipline, education, and social service among Afghan youth. The *Sarandoy* movement played a

crucial role in youth development and public service. Later, during Daoud Khan as Prime Minister, in the 1960s, female students were allowed to join the *Sarandoy* that was functioning under the umbrella of the State education department (Seljooqi 2015). Under the government of Prime Minister Hashim Khan, the government did not allow any political ideology to be put forward by these students (Seljooqi 2015). In 1962, *Sarandoy* became a significant part of the Afghan educational and social landscape with more than two thousand girls and boys as members. They participated in international scout conferences, including the Fourth Far East Conference in 1962, and gained membership in the World Scout Committee (Seljooqi 2015).

The *Sarandoy* had a significant impact on both male and female youth, providing them with training in leadership and public service. The *Sarandoy* movement was also active in social services, assisting with disaster relief and maintaining order during national celebrations (Seljooqi 2015). Young people aged 18 to 25 who obtained honorary membership in this organization were called *Sarandoy*, while those who were active in universities or colleges were called *Palandoy*. Children under the age of 12 were referred to as *Zmark* and girls as *Sarandjuni* (Seljooqi 2015).

Participation in *Sarandoy* was voluntary, and many thousands of young people were members of this organization. While the primary focus was on educational and social development, the young members were also trained in basic military skills, including the use of weapons, particularly during the period of the 1960s and 1970s (Seljooqi 2015). This was due to the fact that the *Sarandoy* movement was part of the broader global Scout movement, which, in some countries, included some elements of physical training and survival skills that could include handling weapons.

During King Zahir Shah's reign, the country opened to the world, and more diplomatic relations were established. Young people were increasingly exposed to Western ideas and political systems. The youth of Afghanistan were generally supportive of King Zahir Shah's efforts at modernization and reform, particularly in the early years of his reign (Barfield, 2010). His plans for education, social reforms, and industrialization inspired many students and intellectuals. Youth in urban centers like Kabul were more exposed to modern ideas and Western influences, playing an active role in supporting the King's changes (Runion, 2007). However, by the 1960s and early 1970s, dissatisfaction grew among the youth, influenced by several factors. Frustration with slow reforms, economic struggles, and political restrictions began to rise (Barfield, 2010). Despite some urban development, many young people, especially in rural areas, were left out of the benefits of modernization, which contributed to growing discontent (Runion, 2007). The political conservatism of the King's monarchy was seen as stifling by some youth, who advocated for more radical political change (Barfield, 2010).

This discontent culminated in the 1973 coup led by Zahir Shah's cousin, Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan, who had previously served as prime minister. Daoud Khan capitalized on the growing dissatisfaction with the monarchy, portraying himself as a reformist who could modernize Afghanistan more rapidly and effectively than Zahir Shah (Barfield, 2010; Runion, 2007; Hakim, 1992). The coup's success was largely the result of dissatisfaction among the youth and other political factions (Barfield, 2010). Daoud Khan gained support from intellectuals, university students, and the military, all of which were dissatisfied with the King's slow pace of change (Barfield, 2010).

The youth played a key role in destabilizing the monarchy and were actively involved in the political and social movements that led to Zahir Shah's overthrow in 1973 (Runion, 2007; Mousavi, 1997). Some young people embraced more radical ideologies, including those advocated by communist factions, and their involvement contributed to the eventual overthrow of the King (Barfield, 2010; Ghobar, 1977).

d. Daud Khan's Republic (1973-1978): The Rise and Fall of Afghanistan's First Republic

In July 1973, Daoud Khan took control of the country and declared Afghanistan a Republic, bringing an end to the monarchy that had ruled for centuries. Zahir Shah was exiled to Italy (Runion, 2007; Ghobar, 1977). Following the coup, Daoud Khan established the Republic of Afghanistan and became its first President. His government initially gained popularity among young people desiring modernization and political change, though it also faced significant challenges (Mousavi, 1997; Hakim, 1992).

Born into the Afghan royal family in 1909, Daoud Khan was a Pashtun nationalist whose royal upbringing shaped his political views (Kazem, 2019). His military career played a key role in his ascent, as he held important positions, including becoming the Minister of Defense in 1953 (Barfield, 2010). As Defense Minister, he modernized Afghanistan's military and promoted Afghan sovereignty, particularly through his support for the Pashtunistan movement[5] (Kazem 2019)**,** which caused tensions with Pakistan. The tension with Pakistan gave a clear opportunity for the Cold War rivalry to burst into flames on Afghan land. The tension on the Pashtunistan

[1] The Pashtunistan movement in Afghanistan advocated for the unification of Pashtun-majority areas in Pakistan with Afghanistan, rooted in ethnic nationalism and territorial claims following the 1947 partition (Rubin 2002, 91–95).

issue resulted in the US denying support to Daoud Khan and instead siding with Pakistan. Therefore, Daoud Khan welcomed support from the Soviet Union, which was looking for a hold on Afghanistan (Kazem 2002).

During the Daoud Khan Republic, Afghanistan experienced a surge in political activism through various political parties established by young Afghans, each representing distinct ideological and ethnic interests. These parties significantly influenced the nation's political landscape, advocating for women's rights, social justice, nationalism, revolutionary movements, and political Islam.

During this time period, several important organizations that included youth emerged in the country. Apart from the Islamic political parties noted below, the rest of the organizations included young women, and women's activism was not only limited to Kabul but also around the country in big cities (Khalil 2024).

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), founded in 1977 by Meena Keshwar Kamal, emerged as an independent political and social organization dedicated to advocating for women's rights and social justice in Afghanistan. The organization sought to involve Afghan women in political and social activities and aimed for a democratic and secular government. Despite facing severe repression, especially during the Soviet occupation and the Taliban regime, RAWA remained a pivotal voice for Afghan women's struggles (RAWA 2025, para. 3).

Sholay-e Jawid (Eternal Flame) was founded in the 1960s, and became one of Afghanistan's most prominent Maoist movements. It emerged as a radical leftist group advocating a protracted people's war against feudalism and imperialism, drawing inspiration

from Chinese Communist ideology (Bezhan 2013, 933). Unlike the Soviet-aligned People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), *Sholay-e Jawid* sought an independent socialist model. Internal divisions, however, led to its fragmentation into smaller Maoist factions by the early 1970s. The Afghan Mellat Party (Afghan Social Democratic Party), was established in 1966 by Ghulam Mohammad Farhad. Afghan Mellat was a Pashtun nationalist party that combined elements of social democracy and ethnic nationalism (Bezhan 2013, 937). The party strongly advocated for the unification of Pashtun regions in Pakistan with Afghanistan, often referred to as the "Greater Afghanistan" idea. However, its ethnic-based approach limited its ability to become a national political force.

Hezb-e Islami (Islamic Party) was founded by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in 1975, initially as an Islamist student movement at Kabul University. It evolved into a major Mujahideen faction that fought against the Soviet occupation (1979–1989) and later engaged in the Afghan Civil War of the 1990s (Bezhan 2013, 935). The party maintained strong ties with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and adopted a hardline Islamist stance. In later years, it participated in peace talks with the Afghan government.

Jamiat-e Islami (Islamic Society) was founded in 1972 by Burhanuddin Rabbani, Jamiat-e Islami was one of Afghanistan's earliest Islamic political parties (Bezhan 2013, 935). It played a crucial role during the Mujahideen resistance against the Soviet invasion. With a predominantly Tajik base, it was later led by Ahmad Shah Massoud and became a key faction in the Northern Alliance, which fought against the Taliban regime in the 1990s.

Daoud Khan pursued a modernization policy, focusing on industrialization, infrastructure development, and education to create a more centralized government (Barfield, 2010; Misdaq,

2002). However, Afghanistan's economic difficulties persisted, as the country remained heavily dependent on foreign aid, and its infrastructure remained underdeveloped, with widespread unemployment and poverty among the youth (Runion, 2007; Ghobar, 1977). Although Daoud Khan's government initiated reforms, it faced growing opposition from traditional tribal leaders and communist factions. By this time, the debate between traditionalists and secular reformists was growing in strength. Kabul University was one of the main hubs where young men and women would engage in discussions, and actions would take place, such as establishing political parties. In particular, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a communist party, gained influence, eventually splitting into two factions, one led by Nur Mohammad Taraki and the other by Hafizullah Amin (Misdaq, 2002; Hakim, 1992).

By 1978, Daoud Khan's government had become increasingly unpopular. His attempts to suppress opposition and consolidate power led to growing discontent, alienating left-wing political groups and conservative factions (Barfield, 2010; Mousavi, 1997). Daoud Khan's authoritarian policies, including crackdowns on dissent and opposition, caused unrest among students, intellectuals, and various political groups (Runion, 2007; Ghobar, 1977), ultimately contributing to the downfall of his regime.

Role of Youth

Young Afghan men and women played a significant role in shaping both the support for and opposition to Daoud Khan's government. Daoud Khan's rise to power marked a dramatic shift in Afghanistan's political system, and young people, especially students and intellectuals, were key participants in this transformation. Many youth, both male and female, saw the establishment of the Republic as a step toward modernization and reform, while others,

particularly those aligned with leftist ideologies, became disillusioned with Daoud Khan's increasingly authoritarian rule (Kakar 1997). Many young people, particularly students in Kabul and other urban centers, were attracted to Daoud Khan's promises of reforms aimed at modernizing Afghanistan's economy, legal system, and infrastructure. Youth, especially those involved in the Afghan National Youth Organization (ANYO), which was formed during this time, supported the political changes Daoud Khan sought to implement (Kakar, 1997). They believed these reforms would modernize the country and provide better opportunities for education and employment.

The Afghan National Youth Organization (ANYO) was established during the early years of Daoud Khan's rule in the 1970s to promote his vision of modernization and national sovereignty. Its main objective was to build political support for Daoud Khan's newly formed Republic of Afghanistan while encouraging youth involvement in governance and national initiatives. His young supporters welcomed his initial Five-Year Economic Development Plan in 1957, which was partially financed by a $100 million Soviet loan (Kakar 2018). Dupree (1973, 560) contends that with such foreign support, Daoud Khan became complicit in advancing Soviet agendas, particularly concerning political freedoms and women's education and rights, however, this did not sit well with the conservative parts of Afghan society.

These reforms helped shape a generation of educated youth who became increasingly involved in public life and the country's political affairs. However, despite these reforms, some segments of the youth, particularly from conservative backgrounds, opposed Daoud Khan's push for secularism, viewing it as a challenge to traditional Islamic values (Barfield, 2010). Although many young men and women who later became prominent figures supported Daoud Khan's

vision, his increasing centralization of power and repression of political opposition led to widespread disillusionment. By the late 1970s, leftist intellectuals and students, inspired by Marxist and socialist ideas, began criticizing Daoud Khan's regime. At the same time, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which had a significant youth following, grew increasingly influential. While Daud Khan may have succeeded in utilizing young power to overthrow King Zahir, and attracting more young people through ANYO, there was the rise of two competing visions for Afghanistan, both emanating from Kabul University in the 1970s. The socialist model and the Islamic model.

Young women were increasingly active not only in public life but also in political discourse and engagement. In 1965, the Democratic Women's Organization of Afghanistan (DWOA) was founded under the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Among its few urban female members were Anahita Ratebzad, Soraya Parlika, Kobra Ali, Hamideh Sherzai, Momeneh Basir, and Jamileh Keshtmand. Anahita Ratebzad served as the organization's president from 1965 to 1986 (Khalil 2025 and Mazyar 2025). Among these women was Soraya Parlika (1944–2019) an ethnic Pashtun. Parlika started her political career during her Kabul University years and was a dedicated Afghan women's rights activist and political figure. She co-founded DWOA to advocate for women's political participation and education. Under her leadership, the DWOA fought for labor rights, maternity leave, and workplace childcare (Rutting 2020). She played a significant role in protests against a proposed law that sought to ban women from studying abroad without a male guardian, leading to the bill's withdrawal after a month-long demonstration (Ruttig 2020).

When the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power in 1978, the DWOA was legalized, and Parlika temporarily chaired the organization. However, during internal party conflicts, she was imprisoned in Pul-e Charkhi jail and tortured. When the Soviet intervened in 1979 they reinstated her faction (Parcham) on December 27, 1979. Under her leadership, the DWOA successfully advocated for extended maternity leave, retirement benefits for women at 55, and the establishment of workplace childcare facilities (Ruttig 2020).

Following the PDPA regime's collapse in 1992, Parlika remained in Afghanistan where she founded the All-Afghanistan Women's Union (AAWU), which operated clandestinely during the Taliban era, providing underground education and vocational training for women and girls. After the Taliban's fall in 2001, she emerged publicly, campaigning for women's rights to be enshrined in the new Afghan constitution. Her efforts earned her a place on the 21-member Preparatory Commission for the 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga (Ruttig 2020). Throughout her life, Parlika remained steadfast in her commitment to women's rights, even in the face of personal risk. With her focus on serving people, she also served as head of Afghanistan's Red Crescent Society from 1986–1992. She survived multiple assassination attempts and continued her advocacy undeterred until she died at the age of 75 in 2019 (Ruttig 2020).

Meena Keshwar Kamal, an ethnic Pashtun, founded the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) in 1977, determined to fight for women’s rights, democracy, and social justice in Afghanistan (RAWA 2025). While still a university student, at 20 years of age, she mobilized women against political oppression and sought to empower them through education, literacy programs, and political activism (Chavis 2003, 27). Meena played a critical role in establishing Watan Schools, which provided education and practical skills to

refugee women and children in Pakistan (RAWA 2025). Through RAWA, she also launched *Payam-e-Zan* (Women's Message) in 1981, a publication that openly condemned both the Soviet-backed regime and the rise of fundamentalist factions (Dupree 1980, 372).

Meena's activism was not limited to Afghanistan. She participated in international conferences where she fearlessly denounced Soviet atrocities and the growing influence of Islamist fundamentalism. At the 1981 French Socialist Party Congress, her speech condemning Soviet oppression led to the Soviet delegation walking out in protest (RAWA 2025). She also addressed the United Nations, warning that women's rights in Afghanistan were under dual threats, from both foreign occupiers and domestic fundamentalists (Chavis 2003, 45). Her growing influence made her a target, and in 1987, she was assassinated, allegedly by KHAD (Afghan secret police) and Hezb-e Islami operatives (RAWA 2025).

The Muslim Youth Organization of Afghanistan (MYO) was founded in the early 1970s as a political and social group aimed at promoting Islamic values and fostering unity among Afghan youth. It emerged during a period of political and ideological shifts within Afghanistan, driven by both internal changes and external influences such as the spread of communism and the rise of Islamist ideologies in the region. The MYO was heavily influenced by the broader Islamic revivalist movements of the time, particularly those from the Middle East. It sought to counter the secularizing policies of the Afghan government, especially the reforms introduced by King Zahir Shah's regime and later the socialist government of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). These political changes and the increasing influence of leftist ideologies led many Afghan youth to look for an alternative, which they found in the Islamic principles promoted by the MYO (Gossman, 2002).

The MYO attracted a diverse membership, primarily consisting of young Afghans who were influenced by Islamic revivalist ideologies in the 1970s and 1980s. The group's members came from a wide range of social, political, and economic backgrounds, but shared a common commitment to promoting Islamic values and opposing the secularizing and leftist political movements that were emerging in Afghanistan at the time. The MYO, although not a single faction, served as an umbrella organization that united individuals from different segments of Afghan society, including students, professionals, and religious clerics (Rashid, 2000; Zeynalov, 2010). Among its prominent members were figures who later became key players in Afghanistan's political and militant landscape, many of whom were involved in the resistance against the Soviet occupation.

One of the key figures linked to the MYO was Burhanuddin Rabbani**,** born in 1940 and ethnically Tajik; he started his career in the early 1960s and was a professor of Islamic studies at Kabul University in the early 1970s. Through his leadership in Jamiat-e-Islami, Rabbani led the fight against Soviet occupation while following the ideological path set by the MYO (Gossman, 2002). Rabbani later became the President of Afghanistan in 1992.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, born in 1949 and ethnically Pashtun, was a student of the engineering Faculty at Kabul University. He later founded *Hezb-e Islami*, an Islamic movement, and became a leading voice for Afghan insurgents during the Soviet-Afghan War after his prominent role with the mujahideen (Johnson 2018). Even though Hekmatyar did not formally join the MYO, he supported their Islamic State campaign (Rashid, 2000).

As leader of *Ittehad-e Islami*, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, another young mujahidin's leader, worked alongside other mujahideen members to oppose the Soviet occupation of

Afghanistan. Sayyaf was born in 1946, ethnically Pashtun, and studied Islamic law at Kabul University before pursuing higher Islamic studies at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. His education and exposure to Salafist teachings shaped his ideological stance, making him a significant Islamist figure in Afghanistan. During the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) his faction played a major role in the resistance against Soviet forces, and he maintained strong connections with foreign jihadists, including Arab fighters who later formed the foundation of global jihadist networks **(**Giustozzi 2012, 87**).**

Like Hekmatyar, Sayyaf joined the MYO because his beliefs aligned with the organization's views, and he lso worked with other Islamist groups (Zeynalov, 2010). The MYO's ideology was closely aligned with regional Islamist movements, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and *Jamaat-e-Islami* in Pakistan. The all-male members of these groups were called "Ikhwan" which refers to Afghan Islamist movements that drew inspiration from the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan al-Muslimin*), an organization founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna. These groups shared similar political and religious objectives, especially the establishment of an Islamic State and the rejection of Western imperialism and communism (Zeynalov, 2010). During the Soviet-Afghan War, the MYO contributed to organizing resistance efforts, and many of its members joined the ranks of the mujahideen fighters (Gossman, 2002). These ideological movements played a significant role in shaping the political discourse of the time and had a notable impact on the youth, who were actively involved in these debates and movements. While these Islamic groups were mainly populated by young men, at the same period women's education programs were expanded beyond the capital.

During Daoud Khan's rule (1973-1978), women's education in Afghanistan expanded, particularly in urban areas of Kabul, Herat, Helmand, and Kandahar. However, rural areas remained largely unaffected, with limited access to schools for girls (Kazem 2022, 210). Daoud Khan's government facilitated scholarships for Afghan students, including women, to study in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union provided financial aid, faculty, and scholarships, especially in technical and engineering fields through the Polytechnic Institute in Kabul (Kazem 2022, 215).

However, women's education and international scholarships faced conservative resistance. In 1968, religious leaders attempted to ban women from studying abroad, leading to a 24-day protest at Kabul University, the first major women's rights demonstration in Afghanistan. Women students and activists demanded their constitutional rights, resisting violent attacks from conservative groups (Kazem 2022, 222). Afghan women who received Soviet education became familiar with Marxist-Leninist principles, which prompted some to become active in leftist movements that championed gender equality. The period produced influential women leaders such as Anahita Ratebzad, and Soraya Parlika, who championed both women's education and political activism for women.

The author’s parents shared their stories of activism over their lifetime. My mother, born in 1958 in a Pashtun family in Grishk district, attended Loya Adey School until class 10. She moved to the boys only school at 15 years old to complete her high school. Since there were no girls' schools beyond that level in her district, she was one of the few girls who continued her education at a boys' school. At just 17 years old, she joined a political party and began advocating for women’s equal rights in Helmand. Girls from all districts were becoming

politically active. For example, Sima Samar, Fauzia Olimy, and Soraya Waziri all attended Lashkargah Girls' School, and each of them became politically engaged at a young age[6]. Among those young activists was Nazparwar, who later became a parliamentarian. Similarly, Dr. Sima Samar became one of the renowned Afghan women in politics (Sarwar 2024).

Meanwhile, young men would gather in *Samawats* (tea houses in Kandahar), often wasting time. The political parties of those times utilized these youth hubs, and educated youth sent to these *Samawats*, handing out newspapers, books, and journals. These casual gatherings became spaces for political awareness. This was how many young men were drawn into political activism, they realized they could contribute and be heard. My father was only 18 when he became involved in political activism through these *Samawats*. He started as a reader, but soon, he became an influencer, encouraging other young men from Kandahar to engage in politics (Khalil 2025).

One of the influential figures of this time was Nur Muhammad Taraki, ethnically Pashtun, who was also a prominent Afghan revolutionary and the first president of Afghanistan after the Saur Revolution in 1978. Before rising to power, he was a key member of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, and during Daoud Khan's era (1973–1978), he was imprisoned due to his political activities and his involvement in the party's Marxist ideologies. Despite his imprisonment, Taraki's influence grew, and his ideas, rooted in Marxist-Leninist principles, gained traction among Afghan youth. He authored several influential Pashto novels**,** including "De Bang Musāfirī" (*The Journey of Bang*), "Ṡaṛah" (*Criticism of Feudal Lords of*

[2] I didn’t look at any particular factor that might have contributed to their activism apart from that all of them went to school and were passionate about women rights at early age. All of them came from different socioeconomic backgrounds, but they did go to the same school.

Afghanistan), and "Be Tarbiyatah Zoy" (*An Uncivilized Boy*), which were aimed at exposing the socio-political realities of Afghanistan through a Marxist lens. These novels, particularly through their exploration of class struggle and feudalism, sought to inspire Afghan youth to embrace socialist ideologies and resist the traditional power structures (Kazemi, 1982; Rubin, 2002). Taraki's works aimed to engage the younger generation in revolutionary thought and pave the way for a radical transformation of Afghan society.

During this time, the world was experiencing the Cold War, and Afghanistan and its young people were not exempt from its effects. Leake's analysis underscores the complex interplay between internal political dynamics and external interventions, illustrating how Afghanistan's internal struggles were influenced by broader geopolitical factors during the Cold War. Her analysis is essential for understanding the motivations and actions of Afghan youth during this transformative period (Leake, 2018). Countries in the Middle East, Pakistan, the United States, and Iran were utilizing the young people within the MYO to fight the Soviet Union-backed socialist mentality. Similarly, the Soviet Union, China, and the communist fractions in Iran were supporting the leftist-involved youth of Afghanistan.

e. 1978-1992 Socialism-Communist Era - Taraki, Amin, Karmal, Najib

From 1978 to 1992, Afghanistan underwent multiple political transformations driven by both domestic and international factors, including Cold War tensions. At the start of 1978, the communist PDPA party seized control in the Saur (Red) Revolution, overthrew Daud Khan's Republic (Rubin, 2002), and announced the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). The DRA was not officially a communist state as the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) defined it as a "socialist-oriented democracy, " yet Soviet political

structures and organizational models strongly shaped its governance. One of the most notable developments of this era was the establishment of the Democratic Youth Organization of Afghanistan in 1975, modeled after the Soviet Komsomol[7]. The PDPA under Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin worked to establish socialist principles through land distribution and secular policies. The PDPA sought to politically and ideologically draw in young people, many of whom would later transition into the ranks of the PDPA. This was one of the first regimes in Afghanistan in which young men and women were actively pushing for political change.

Young Afghans were heavily involved in the PDPA's efforts to incite rebellion against Daud Khan government. Many of these young revolutionaries had been influenced by leftist ideologies, which gained traction in Afghanistan during the 1960s and 1970s. Universities and student movements became key sites for the dissemination of communist thought. The youth, inspired by Marxist and socialist ideals, formed revolutionary cells within these spaces, organizing protests and spreading anti-monarchy sentiment (Rubin, 2000). The Democratic Youth Organization of Afghanistan (DYOA)**,** a youth wing of the PDPA, became one of the most critical channels for recruiting young people to support the revolution. I interviewed multiple individuals involved in DYOA regarding their firsthand experiences on how these institutions played roles in young people's lives.

I spoke to Daoud Mazyar, who served as the Director of the Institute of Youth within DYOA. He became a member of DYOA at age 16 and served in different diplomatic positions during the 1980s. He told me, "The educational aspect of our [youth gathering in the DYOA]

3 Komsomol (short for All-Union Leninist Young Communist League) was the official youth organization of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Established in 1918, it served as a political training ground for young people between the ages of 14 and 28, preparing them for future membership in the Communist Party.

gatherings was significant, especially as part of structured ideological training. We learned the fundamentals of socialist thought and the historical development of society through five stages, primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and eventually socialism. Such teachings helped us contextualize our political beliefs. Another essential part of party meetings was book reading. Every member was assigned a book to read between meetings, and they were expected to present a summary. This ensured that everyone was engaged in intellectual discussions, preventing any false claims about the reading material. The books assigned varied, ranging from political to literary works."[8]

The DYOA was not just limited to academic and political discourse; it also played a role in organizing cultural and artistic events, including poetry readings, theatrical performances, and musical concerts that sought to inspire national pride and intellectual engagement among the youth (Khalil 2025, Mazyar 2025). The Democratic Youth Organization, initiated by the Parcham faction of the PDPA, rapidly expanded its reach, particularly in Kabul and other major cities. Under the leadership of Burhan Ghiyasi, a Soviet-educated professor, it recruited both male and female members through neighborhood networks and educational institutions. Initially limited to the relatives of party members, the organization later attracted students from high schools and universities. It provided structured political education, emphasizing socialism, nationalism, anti-imperialism, and intellectual engagement. Members participated in reading groups, discussions, and community activism, reinforcing ideological training. The organization

[4] Daud Mazyar, Director of the Institute of Youth and the second secretary of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in the Parcham faction, joined the party at 16 years old while still in middle school.

also had an official charter, outlining its commitment to national unity, education, student and worker rights, and Afghan-Soviet relations.

Afghan youth movements were deeply affected by foreign influences during the Cold War, as major global powers sought to shape Afghanistan's ideological landscape. The Soviet Union supported leftist movements through scholarships and training programs, while the United States promoted Western ideals through cultural and educational exchanges. China influenced Maoist factions, Iran spread socialist ideas through Tudeh Party publications, and Pakistan backed Islamist movements to counter communism (Mazyar 2025). This ideological struggle led to violent confrontations, as radical Islamist groups such as *Hezb-e-Islami* and *Jamiat-e-Islami* targeted leftist youth activists, leading to assassinations, exile, and underground resistance.

Young people continued to play an essential role in implementing the DRA's policies. These included land reforms, the establishment of collective farms, and efforts to modernize Afghan society through education and women's rights (Tudor, 2010). Women's rights included removing of bride dowry, the right to inheritance, giving women the right to marry, women choosing a husband were not imprisoned anymore, education for women became mandatory, and more. All these rights were legalized with the decree number 7 of DRA. Many of these policies were promoted and enforced by young cadres who had risen through the ranks of the DYOA**.** Young revolutionaries, both women and men, became part of the new government, occupying positions of power and executing radical social reforms.

However, these reforms, especially the women's freedoms and the secularism education system, were met with fierce resistance, particularly from conservative rural communities and religious groups (Gul, 2002). The government's inability to stabilize the country and growing

opposition triggered Soviet intervention in December 1979. The Soviet Union, under Leonid Brezhnev**,** deployed troops to support the communist regime, which resulted in the decade-long Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989) (Grozny, 2003). Despite the heavy presence of Soviet troops, the Afghan mujahideen fighters, backed by the United States, Pakistan, and other international actors, waged a protracted insurgency (Coll, 2004). As the DRA's policies began to face opposition, young revolutionaries found themselves at the center of the escalating conflict. Many initially believed in the ideals of the revolution. But with the rise of insurgency groups**,** especially the mujahideen, young people, the majority of who were men, began turning against the communist government and joining the resistance (Grozny, 2003).

Women played an active role in leftist youth movements, often through the Democratic Women's Organization of Afghanistan, founded in 1966. Women were involved in protests, literacy programs, and advocacy for women's rights such as education, the right to work, access to legal resources, and more economic independence and political participation within socialist ideology. However, their participation was limited by gender segregation and societal norms, with separate meetings and organizational structures (Mazyar 2025). Leftist women faced violent opposition from Islamist groups, particularly those influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, who resorted to acid attacks and intimidation tactics to push women out of activism and education. Many female and male school and university students were targeted and killed.

The Soviet Union ended its presence in Afghanistan in 1989 after taking significant casualties, spending enormous amounts of state funds, and facing the international opposition. Afghanistan fell into a violent internal conflict after Soviet troops left. The PDPA's rule ended in 1992 when Mohammad Najibullah's socialist regime failed to retain power (Khan,

2001). Several mujahideen leaders including Burhanuddin Rabbani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar fought to gain control of Kabul at this time. Rabbani took control of Kabul with *Jamiat-e-Islami* forces in 1992, but faced significant political unrest throughout his rule (Rubin 2000).

The lack of order paved the way for the Taliban's emergence. After emerging from southern Afghanistan, the Taliban began to enforce their version of Islamic law and their approach to restore order gained popularity (Tudor, 2010). The Taliban took Kabul in 1996 and created the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which imposed their strict version Islamic law and Pashtunwali through brutal enforcement methods (Khalid 2013).

Thus, the years between 1978 and 1995 were marked by a series of dramatic political shifts, from the rise of communism to Soviet intervention, followed by a chaotic civil war and, ultimately, the emergence of the Taliban. The consequences of these events had a profound and lasting impact on Afghanistan’s political and social fabric, setting the stage for further conflict in the years that followed.

f. 1992 to 2001 Civil War and Taliban First Era – Rabani and Mullah Omar

This era in Afghanistan was lived and endured by the generation of young Afghans in my study, including the author. We grew up under heavy bombardments; I remember spending days and nights huddled in the basement corners, hoping to escape the bullets and rockets. Most of the time we were not allowed to leave those basements during the day, only at night when the bombardment would easy down, people would come out. Schools were burned, and cities were reduced to rubble. I lost two friends to the rocket bombardment of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar when I

was just five and six years old. I watched on TV as bombs were disguised as toys, handed to children, only for them to vanish in an instant with a deafening blast.

I saw Mujahideen fighters storm into our neighbors' homes, looting everything in sight, and I heard the desperate cries of the women. At the age of five, a rocket's shrapnel tore into my leg, and it remains there to this day, a grim souvenir. The hospitals were so overwhelmed with the dead and wounded that they didn't have the time or resources to remove it.

I left Afghanistan with my family in the back of a truck, crammed in with cows and sheep, crossing the border into Pakistan. I saw on TV that President Dr. Najib along his brother was hanged in Kabul city, and I am sure many children and young Afghans witnessed it in person. I experienced girls being banned from school and much more. I lived through it all, just as every child and young Afghan of that time did. From 1989 to 1995, Afghanistan experienced deep political and military unrest after Soviet troops departed. The Mujahideen groups fell apart and started fighting each other in a destructive civil war. The civil war's main groups included Burhanuddin Rabbani's *Jamiat-e-Islami* faction, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's *Hezb-e-Islami* organization, and Ahmad Shah Massoud's *Shura-e-Nazar* faction (Rubin, 2002). Ahmad Shah Massoud (1953–2001) was a prominent Afghan military strategist and political leader who played a crucial role in resisting both the Soviet occupation (1979–1989) and the Taliban regime (1996–2001). In his early 20s, known as the "Lion of Panjshir, " he effectively led guerrilla warfare campaigns that prevented Soviet forces from securing the Panjshir Valley, a key stronghold of resistance (Rubin, 2002). Unlike many other Mujahideen leaders, Massoud advocated for a democratic and inclusive Afghanistan, emphasizing national unity and political pluralism (Giustozzi, 2008).

Hekmatyar's forces used artillery weapons to bombard Kabul, which caused significant damage across the city (Gerecht 2001). The people of Afghanistan suffered severe outcomes because rival political factions prevented Rabbani from establishing a reliable central government despite his becoming President. This was the time of mass displacement and immigration from Afghanistan, where many of the young Afghans of my generation experienced life in refugee camps and foreign lands living in harsh circumstances. In 1995, the Taliban established control over Afghanistan. After gaining support from madrasa-educated students, the Taliban seized control of Kandahar and expanded its influence throughout southern Afghanistan (Rashid 2000).

The Taliban is an Islamist militant group that emerged in the early 1990s amid Afghanistan's post-Soviet civil war. Comprised mainly of Pashtun religious students influenced by Deobandi Islam, the group sought to establish an Islamic state governed by their own strict interpretation of Sharia law (Rashid, 2000). They declared their intention to end Afghanistan's civil war and build an Islamic state according to their religious and ethnic understandings. Pakistan helped the Taliban rise quickly because the government saw them as a way to bring Afghanistan under Pakistan's influence and weaken their opponents (Coll, 2004).

The civil war raged until 1995, creating extreme suffering for Afghans who fled their homes in the millions, becoming refugees and internally displaced (Human Rights Watch, 1995). Different factions battled for Kabul resulting in high civilian death tolls (Gerecht, 2001). Fighting between parties caused great pain to Afghan citizens as they endured both war and starvation while lawlessness increased in society (Rubin, 2002). After years of fighting between

warlords the Taliban took control of Kabul and started a new dark chapter in Afghanistan's history (Rashid, 2000).

Role of Young Men and Women

During the years from 1992 through 1995, young people in Afghanistan actively participated in both the fighting and the political turmoil. Young men across Afghanistan joined different Mujahideen groups to fight for control after the government collapsed. Young men as young as 15 or 16 years old became combatants in these groups, participating in battles that caused widespread destruction, particularly in Kabul.

Many young Afghan men, especially from the Pashtun ethnic group, embraced the Taliban's religious teachings and their pledge to stop ethnic conflicts (Rashid, 2000). The group gained strength quickly through the enrollment of male students from Pakistan's madrasas who became young Taliban members (Rashid, 2000). These young male recruits joined the Taliban because they wanted to serve God and bring peace back to their war-torn country (Rashid, 2000). By 1995, the Taliban controlled major cities and prepared to seize Kabul making them Afghanistan's strongest military power (Khalilzad, 2001).

However, young people were also victims of the ongoing conflict. During the civil war many Afghan girls and boys had to abandon their homes because the conflict displaced millions of people. The conflict sent hundreds of thousands of people into refugee camps throughout Pakistan, Iran, and inside Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 1995). Afghan male and female youth in these camps experienced harsh survival challenges because they lacked basic services, school and medical services. The disruption of educational systems throughout the country

further limited opportunities for young people to pursue formal education, forcing many to join the war effort or take on work in dangerous conditions (Rubin, 2002).

By 1996, the Taliban seized Kabul, overthrowing the government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani and declaring the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan**.** Girls and young women, marginalized in the military, political, economic, social and culture spheres, endured the harshest consequences of the conflict. As the Taliban rose to power, they imposed harsh restrictions on girls' and women's rights, including denying them the right to education and work (Rashid, 2000). Despite these restrictions, some girls and young women resisted, with underground schools emerging in some areas to provide education in secret. Young women who fled the country became vocal advocates for refugees' rights, highlighting the resilience and activism of Afghan women despite their marginalization (Rashid, 2000).

In addition to these roles, young people also faced the cultural and social consequences of the ongoing war. The destruction of educational infrastructure and the lack of safety prevented many young Afghans from participating in normal social activities. Music, art, TV, and any form of entertainment were banned by the Taliban. The resulting generation was disconnected from the cohesive society that once existed in Afghanistan, with many becoming disillusioned by the endless violence and instability (Gerecht, 2001). Some young men turned to extremist ideologies, seeking a sense of identity and purpose in a society that had been torn apart by conflict (Khalilzad, 2001). The experiences of young people during this time shaped their lives and the future of Afghanistan, with many carrying the trauma of this tumultuous period for years to come.

Between 1995 and 2001, the Taliban ruled Afghanistan with their strict interpretation of Islamic law and oppressive policies, which brought widespread suffering to the Afghan people, with girls and women particularly affected. Their rule was characterized by harsh governance, including the imposition of severe restrictions on girls and women. Force marriages increased, and stoning, lashing, amputation and the public execution of girls and women was practiced. Girls and women were banned from education, employment, and public life, and the enforcement of the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia law led to public executions, beatings, and amputations of girls, boys, women, and men (Leake, 2017; Rashid, 2000).

The Taliban's disregard for human rights, their brutality, especially towards girls and women and minority ethnic groups, and their destruction of cultural heritage, such as the demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001, led to international condemnation (Rashid, 2000). Despite receiving support from Pakistan, the Taliban faced significant resistance inside Afghanistan, particularly from the Northern Alliance, which, led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, continued to fight the Taliban from the north (Leake, 2017). This resistance, along with growing international isolation, led to a massive humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, with millions displaced internally or as refugees.

Throughout this period, Afghanistan became increasingly dependent on international aid, though the Taliban's policies made it difficult for humanitarian organizations to operate effectively (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Additionally, the Taliban's alliance with Al-Qaeda drew Afghanistan into the global spotlight, especially after the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings by Al-Qaeda, which resulted in U.S. missile strikes (Rashid, 2000). Ultimately, the Taliban's refusal to hand over al-Qaeda's leader Osama bin Laden and their continued repression of Afghan

society played a pivotal role in the decision by the United States to intervene militarily after the September 11, 2001, attacks, leading to the collapse of the Taliban regime (Leake, 2017; Rashid, 2000).

Afghan youth played pivotal roles amid the intense conflict and repression under the Taliban regime. Many young men were drawn into the ongoing war, either as combatants in the various factions or as supporters of the Taliban's radical Islamic governance (Leake, 2017). The Taliban's strict interpretation of Sharia law led to severe restrictions on young people, particularly women. Girls were banned from attending school, and women were prohibited from working or leaving their homes without a male escort, which profoundly impacted educational and economic opportunities for young women (Rashid, 2000). However, despite these oppressive policies, youth continued to resist in various forms. Some young girls secretly attended underground schools, risking their safety to continue their education and defy Taliban control (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

Youth from rural and urban areas found themselves caught in a cycle of violence, as they either fought for the Northern Alliance or were conscripted by the Taliban (Rubin, 2002). The war left many young people displaced, both internally and as refugees, particularly in Pakistan, where they faced poverty and lack of opportunity (Gillespie, 2009). For young Afghans, particularly those from ethnic minorities such as the Hazara and Uzbek communities, the Taliban's rise to power represented an even more severe form of repression, as they were often brutality targeted by the regime's policies (Leake, 2017). Despite these challenges, Afghan youth, especially from minority ethnic backgrounds, continued to resist and support the Northern Alliance's efforts to combat the Taliban's rule, contributing to the military resistance and the

eventual downfall of the regime in 2001 (Rashid, 2000). This period is called the dark era of Afghanistan. But it also showcased the resilience of Afghan male and female youth, who struggled to maintain their rights, their education, and their identity amidst an environment of war and oppression.

Afghan male and female youth exiled to Pakistan and Iran played significant roles, particularly in education, political resistance, and supporting efforts against the Taliban regime. In Pakistan, where millions of Afghan refugees resided, male and female youth in cities like Peshawar and Quetta were actively involved in preserving Afghan culture and advocating for human rights. Many young people, especially in refugee camps, engaged in youth organizations and worked with Afghan NGOs to promote education and oppose the Taliban's oppressive policies (Rashid, 2000). These refugee youth often participated in protests and public demonstrations in Pakistan, calling for an end to Taliban rule and supporting the Northern Alliance.

In Iran, where up to 2 million Afghan refugees live, youth both male and female also face the challenges of displacement and limited educational opportunities. However, they became active in the political sphere, particularly in support of the Northern Alliance and resistance to the Taliban. Young people in Iranian cities like Mashhad and Tehran mobilized through protests and advocacy for the rights of Afghan refugees, calling for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Afghanistan (Gillespie, 2009). Many young Afghans both male and female in Iran, mainly from Hazara and Tajik backgrounds, played a role in providing logistical support for the Northern Alliance and voicing their opposition to the Taliban's repressive policies. In Pakistan and Iran, Afghan youth also worked tirelessly to continue their education. These young refugees became

symbols of resilience, playing crucial roles in preserving Afghanistan's intellectual and cultural heritage. Their activism, both in their host countries and within Afghanistan, helped lay the foundation for the future of Afghanistan, showing the world the strength and determination of Afghan youth in the face of war and oppression.

g. 2001 to 2021 The Afghan Republic

I remember watching the 9/11 attacks on the news while we were refugees in Pakistan. I knew it was a big deal, but I couldn't quite connect the dots to Afghanistan. A few months later, I saw my father sitting in the middle of the room, staring at the TV, something I had never seen him do before. Curious, I tried to see what was on the screen. It was a man giving a speech, later I would learn it was President George W. Bush (though at the time, I had no idea who he was). I asked my father what was going on. He looked at me and said, "We might be going home." Home? I wasn't sure what he meant. Then he explained, if the Taliban didn't hand over Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda, the Americans would invade Afghanistan. And if that happened, we would finally go back. I didn't think through the consequences, but one thing was clear, I wanted the Taliban gone. So, in that moment, I found myself hoping the Americans would come.

Afghanistan experienced profound changes between 2001 and 2021, shaped by an international, armed invasion led by the U.S., the overthrow of the Taliban regime, massive international intervention in every level of governance, internal armed conflict, and evolving socio-political dynamics. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the U.S. and its allies launched "Operation Enduring Freedom" to destroy Al-Qaeda and oust the Taliban regime, which had provided sanctuary to Osama bin Laden. By December 2001, the Taliban government

had fallen, and the Bonn Agreement established a framework for political transition, leading to the appointment of Hamid Karzai as interim leader (Barfield, 2012). This marked the beginning of Afghanistan's reconstruction, with international donors delivering substantial aid in all sectors. Yet governance remained fragile due to pervasive corruption and weak institutional capacity (Rubin, 2013).

Following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the country embarked on a multifaceted reconstruction process encompassing economic development, infrastructure enhancement, local governance reforms, and significant strides in social sectors such as girls' and women's rights, education, civil society, health, sports, culture, and youth political engagement.

Healthcare advancements were a cornerstone of Afghanistan's reconstruction. Between 2001 and 2021, life expectancy increased from 56 to 64 years, and the maternal mortality rate was halved. These improvements were attributed to the expansion of healthcare services, increased immunization campaigns, and better access to medical facilities, particularly in urban areas where 89% of residents gained access to clean water by 2021, a significant rise from 16% in 2001.

The cultural landscape of Afghanistan experienced a revival, with increased participation by boys and girls in sports, music, and other forms of artistic expression. Media organizations played a crucial role in training local men and women journalists and promoting independent media, thereby enriching the cultural discourse. For example, the Afghan Star music competition was a popular televised singing competition in Afghanistan, often likened to "American Idol." Launched in 2005 by TOLO TV, the show quickly gained a massive following, providing

a platform for aspiring men and women Afghan musicians to showcase their talents. The competition is open to participants from all backgrounds, promoting inclusivity across gender, ethnicity, and age. It was after more than a decade that Afghan young men and women were allowed to sing on stage through Afghan Star singing competitions that were broadcasted on TV channels. In the media sector, youth founded outlets such as *TOLO News*, transforming Afghanistan's media landscape into a vibrant platform for free expression and critical reporting (Sharan, 2014).

Women's political and civil society engagement peaked. Women were running businesses, working on grassroots issues with their nonprofit organizations, and participating in support, media, and running for public offices. Dr. Sima Samar, a Hazara medical doctor and human rights advocate, has been a prominent figure in Afghanistan's struggle for women's rights and social justice. In December 2001, she was appointed as the first Minister of Women's Affairs under the Afghan Interim Administration, playing a pivotal role in establishing the ministry dedicated to promoting women's rights and advancement. Although she did not run for the presidency, another trailblazing Afghan woman, Massouda Jalal, made history by becoming the first female candidate to run for president in Afghanistan's 2004 elections. Following Dr. Samar's tenure, the Ministry of Women's Affairs saw several female ministers, including Mahboba Hoqooqmal, Habiba Sarabi, Massouda Jalal, Husn Banu Ghazanfar, Delbar Nazari, and Hasina Safi, each contributing to the advancement of women's rights in the country.

Young activists were starting initiatives to express views and challenge the authorities, and some represented Afghanistan on the international stage. Roya Mahbooba, a tech entrepreneur in her early 30s empowered Afghan girls through digital literacy and technology

training via her *Digital Citizen Fund* (Akbarzadeh & Ibrahimi, 2020). She founded the Afghan Girls Robotics Team, known as the "Afghan Dreamers, " an all-female group from Herat, Afghanistan, in 2017. Comprising girls aged 12 to 18, the team has earned international recognition for their innovation in science and technology. In 2017, they participated in the FIRST Global Challenge in Washington, D.C., where they received a silver medal for "Courageous Achievement." Later that year, they also won the Entrepreneur Challenge at Estonia's Robotex festival with a solar-powered robot designed to assist farmers.

Omaid Sharifi, an artist and activist in his mid-20s, started to use art as a powerful tool to amplify the voices of Afghan youth in 2014, that gave young activists a nonconventional way to use art as protest tool. Rashid Khan, a 26-year-old cricketer who rose to international fame for his exceptional sportsmanship and skill, became a symbol of pride and inspiration for Afghanistan. Nadia Nadim, a footballer and refugee advocate, became an international icon, inspiring countless young Afghans. Adela Raz, in her early 30s, became the first woman to serve as Afghanistan's Ambassador to the United Nations, breaking new ground in representing her country on the global stage. Other notable figures among the youth of Afghanistan included Ahmad Massoud, in his mid 30s, the son of Ahmad Shah Massoud, who emerged as a political leader advocating for democratic reforms. Although young Afghan men and women faced persistent challenges, their resilience and innovation demonstrated their potential to lead Afghanistan out of violence, nepotism, and corruption and towards progress and peace.

Youth engagement in political processes also saw an uptick, with younger generations participating in civil society organizations and local governance, reflecting a shift towards a more inclusive and dynamic political environment. Afghanistan 1400, officially known as

Harakat-e-Afghanistan 1400, was a civic-political youth organization founded in December 2012 by a group of educated young Afghan professionals. The movement aimed to transcend traditional ethnic and sectarian divides, promoting democratic values and envisioning a prosperous and democratic Afghanistan by the year 1400 in the Afghan calendar (2021 in the Gregorian calendar) (Clark 2012).

Afghanistan 1400 members sought to establish a democratic and inclusive political platform. Key founding members included Shaharzad Akbar, the first chairperson and senior consultant at Qara Consulting; Waheed Omar, former presidential spokesperson; Abdul Ali Shamsi, a security adviser in Helmand province; Abdullah Ahmadzai, former chief electoral officer at the Independent Election Commission; Omar Sharifi, director of the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies; Haseeb Humayoon, director of Qara Consulting; Gran Hewad, researcher at Afghanistan Analysts Network; Farida Nekzad, director of Wakht news agency; Hashmatullah Radfar, journalist; Najlla Habibyar, chief executive officer of the Investment Promotion Agency of Afghanistan; Sediq Sediqi, spokesperson for the Ministry of Interior; Hekmatullah Foushanji, foreign affairs director at the Afghan National Security Council; Bari Salaam, civil society activist; Assad Zamir and Noorkhan Haidari, both government employees. All of these young Afghans were in their late 20s or early 30s when they started the 1400 movement, and later most of them became part of the government, such as Assad Zamir becoming the Minister of Agriculture and Shaharzad Akbar the chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. These individuals played crucial roles in advocating for democratic values and a progressive political vision for Afghanistan (Clark 2012, 45).

Between 2001 and 2021, Afghanistan's education system experienced notable progress. Student enrollment surged from approximately 900, 000 boys with virtually no girls in 2001 to over 9.5 million students by 2021, with females constituting about 39% of this number (World Bank, 2021). The number of schools expanded substantially, with over 16, 000 schools operating across the country by 2021. The teaching workforce also grew, employing around 220, 000 teachers, approximately 31% of whom were female (World Bank, 2021). The overall literacy rate rose to 43%, with male literacy at 55% and female literacy at 29% (UNESCO, 2020). Primary school enrollment was around 65% for boys and 55% for girls, while secondary school enrollment rates were significantly lower, especially for girls in rural areas. Gender disparities were pronounced in rural areas, with only 15% of girls attending secondary school. Higher education saw over 150, 000 students enrolled in public and private universities. (World Bank, 2021). Representing over 60% of the population, young Afghans were central to progress in education, with school enrollment rising dramatically, including among girls, following the fall of the Taliban regime (Barfield, 2012). Universities and private institutions expanded, creating a new generation committed to reform and knowledge-building (AREU, 2019).

Between 2001 and 2021, several youth organizations in Afghanistan played crucial roles in education, empowerment, and civic engagement. The Afghanistan Scout Association (ASA) was revived in 2003 to promote leadership and community service, reaching 34, 000 Scouts nationwide. Young Women for Change (YWC), founded in 2011, advocated for girls' and women's rights and organized Afghanistan's first anti-street harassment march. Skateistan, established in 2007, combined skateboarding with education, offering opportunities to underprivileged children, especially girls. Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM),

founded in 2010, preserved Afghan musical heritage while educating underprivileged youth, gaining international recognition.

LEARN Afghanistan, launched in 2018, focused on digital education for girls and children in remote areas, reaching over 10, 000 students. The National Youth Consensus for Peace (NYCP), created in 2020, amplified youth voices in the Afghan peace process and governance. HOPE Worldwide Afghanistan, operating since 2001, provided vocational training and health services to Afghan youth and women. These organizations played a vital role in shaping the resilience and activism of Afghan youth.

Entrepreneurial initiatives flourished, with programs like *Code to Inspire* empowering young women to enter the tech industry (Akbarzadeh & Ibrahimi, 2020). Many youths were also instrumental in peacebuilding efforts, with groups such as the *Afghan Youth Peace Council* actively advocating for inclusive dialogue and conflict resolution (Ahmad, 2021). Despite these achievements, Afghan youth faced significant obstacles, including widespread unemployment, insecurity, and sociopolitical exclusion, particularly in rural areas (SIGAR, 2021).

Furthermore, between 2001 and 2021, Afghanistan saw the rise of several youth organizations dedicated to social change, artistic expression, and peacebuilding. One such organization is the Sela Foundation, founded by Afghan young men and women from different professional backgrounds in Kabul. Since 2004, the Sela Foundation has focused on improving the lives of Afghanistan's most vulnerable populations by promoting volunteerism among youth (Asia Society, 2021).

In the arts, culture, and sports, young men and women revitalized and reimagined Afghan identity by promoting sports, traditional music, literature, and cinema while achieving international recognition, such as through the national cricket team's success (Semple, 2019). The use of art, particularly street art, brought significant social changes to Afghanistan, acting as a platform for expression, resistance, and dialogue in a society shaped by decades of conflict. Artists and art collectives, such as ArtLords, transformed public spaces with vibrant murals addressing themes like peace, human rights, and anti-corruption (ArtLords, 2023). ArtLords, established in 2014 in Kabul is a grassroots movement of "artivists" who transform the city's blast walls into vibrant murals that address pressing social issues. Their artwork fosters critical thinking, empathy, and dialogue, aiming to heal and inspire communities affected by decades of conflict.

Over the years, ArtLords has expanded its reach globally, using creative expression to advocate for artistic freedom and democracy (ArtLords.co, 2021; National Endowment for Democracy, 2020). Their notable "I See You" campaign, featuring murals with watchful eyes, symbolized the visibility of corruption and promoted government accountability (Artists at Risk Connection, 2021). By reclaiming public spaces, art fostered a sense of ownership and agency, inspiring resilience and hope amidst the hardships faced by Afghan communities (National Endowment for Democracy, 2023).

Some of ArtLords youth initiatives, such as the "Let's Talk Campaign, " which brought together young Afghan men and women from across the country in exchange programs and youth-led conferences to discuss their role in society. Similarly, conferences such as "Pieces of Peace" provided a platform for youth to engage in discussions about their involvement in

Afghanistan's peace process. The South Asia Youth Forum, led by Afghan youth alongside their South Asian peers, organized a series of conferences across the region to explore their role in regional politics, addressing issues like youth violence and war, gender discrimination, and diplomacy through art. Additionally, campaigns like *Dard-e-Dil* encouraged young people to write letters to the government, asking critical questions to hold leaders accountable. Hundreds of such initiatives were led by young Afghans, demonstrating their active participation in shaping the country's future.

The Afghan Youth Ambassadors for Peace Organization (AYAPO) is another prominent group working toward a peaceful and just Afghanistan. Led by Afghan youth from diverse backgrounds, AYAPO focuses on involving young leaders in peacebuilding efforts. It collaborates with local and national entities to localize the peace process and ensure sustainable peace in the country (Peacemakers Network, 2021; Rights Colab, 2020).

In the midst of this surge in democracy and youth engagement, by 2008, the Taliban had regrouped and took advantage of rural discontent to recapture significant areas in the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan (Giustozzi, 2008). By 2008, the Taliban had developed sophisticated recruitment strategies targeting Afghan youth, particularly through madrassas (religious schools), economically marginalized communities, refugee camps, and areas with minimal state presence or insecurity (Giustozzi 2008, 120–123). These efforts combined religious indoctrination, promises of martyrdom, and financial incentives, and were reinforced by anti-government propaganda spread through local clerics, peer networks, and media tools such as radio broadcasts and DVDs (International Crisis Group 2008, 8–10). The conflict escalated between 2006 and 2009 as Taliban insurgents launched more suicide bombings and IED attacks

against both Afghan and coalition military units. NATO strengthened its International Security Assistance Force operations while the United States raised its military presence under Obama's leadership, reaching 100, 000 troops in 2010 (Ruttig, 2010). The international community's attempts at counterinsurgency failed, and the Afghan government grew weaker and more despised for its corruption.

The 2014 presidential election brought out long-standing tensions between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah (the two presidential candidates), which led to a fragile power-sharing deal pushed by the United States that damaged Afghans' public confidence in their government's leadership abilities (Sharan, 2014). After NATO ended its combat mission in 2014, the Taliban expanded its control, while new threats such as Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) made Afghanistan's security situation worse (Semple, 2019). The United States and the Taliban reached their peace deal in 2020 through talks held in Doha to create conditions that allowed both the Taliban to take over the country and the U.S. to withdraw (Akbarzadeh & Ibrahimi, 2020).

In February 2020, the Trump administration signed the Doha Agreement with the Taliban**,** outlining the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan. Notably, the Afghan government was excluded from these negotiations, leading to concerns about the legitimacy and effectiveness of the resulting so-called peace process (Jadoon, Mines, and Sayed 2021, 5). The exclusion of the Afghan government from the Doha Agreement negotiations led to significant challenges in the peace process, as the Taliban refused to engage directly with Afghan officials, viewing them as illegitimate (Khalilzad 2021, 189). This exclusion also meant that the Afghan populace had no representation in decisions impacting their country's future,

undermining the agreement's legitimacy and effectiveness (Rashid 2022, 241). The lack of direct involvement of the Afghan government and its people in the negotiations contributed to the challenges in implementing a sustainable peace process in Afghanistan (Ahmad 2021, 97).

The Taliban took part in the peace negotiation with the US, but they did not stop targeting Afghans through their violent attacks. Afghan youth played pivotal roles in civil and democratic political movements, yet they were systematically targeted by the Taliban and other militant groups aiming to instill fear and suppress activism, governance, and media engagement. Among the several victims was Abdul Ali Shamsi, who served as the Deputy Governor of Kandahar Province and was a founding member of Afghanistan 1400, a movement established to bridge ethnic and sectarian divides by uniting influential young Afghans from diverse backgrounds. Shamsi was killed in a bomb attack on the governor's compound on January 10, 2017 (TOLOnews 2017). Women journalists and activists were particularly vulnerable and dozens were killed by the Taliban. Malalai Maiwand, a 30 year old journalist and women's rights advocate with Enikas Radio and TV, was fatally shot along with her driver in Jalalabad in 2020 (RFE/RL 2020).

Similarly, Fatima Khalil, a 24-year-old human rights activist working with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), was killed alongside her driver in a targeted bomb attack in Kabul on June 27, 2020 (UNAMA 2021). Her assassination was part of a broader wave of attacks on activists and civil society members, aiming to suppress voices advocating for progress and reform. Her death was widely mourned, as she symbolized a new generation of Afghan youth striving for change. This pattern of violence against young leaders, especially women in journalism and activism, reflects a broader strategy to silence dissent and

instill fear among Afghanistan's youth. Despite these threats, many continued to fight for human rights, democracy, and social justice, leaving a lasting impact on Afghan society.

Between 2001 and 2021, the Hazara community in Afghanistan faced repeated targeted attacks, particularly against students and educational institutions. One of the deadliest attacks occurred on July 23, 2016, when twin suicide bombers targeted a peaceful Hazara protest in Kabul, killing 160 people and injuring over 200, an attack later claimed by Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) (Rubin 2016). On August 15, 2018, a suicide bomber struck Mawoud Academy in Dasht-e-Barchi, a predominantly Hazara neighborhood in Kabul, killing 48 students and injuring 67 as they prepared for university entrance exams (Al Jazeera 2018). In another attack on October 25, 2020, IS-K militants detonated a bomb outside Kawsar-e-Danish Educational Center, also in Dasht-e-Barchi, killing 30 students and wounding at least 70 (Gibbons-Neff and Faizi 2020). The bloodiest attack on Hazara students came on May 8, 2021, when three explosions outside Sayed al-Shuhada Girls' School killed at least 90 people, most of them young girls aged 11 to 15, and injured over 240 (George and Faizi 2021). These attacks, particularly those on students and educational centers, were part of a broader campaign of sectarian violence aimed at Afghanistan's Hazara minority, leaving many in constant fear for their safety.

From 2001 to 2021, youth involvement in corruption in Afghanistan reflected the interplay of systemic socio-political challenges and the struggles of a rapidly transforming society. The significant influx of international aid and poorly regulated development projects created opportunities for corruption, with young people often caught between exploitation and necessity (Transparency International, 2017). Many youths, grappling with limited economic opportunities and pervasive unemployment, were drawn into corrupt practices, such as nepotism,

bribery, and participation in fraudulent schemes within government offices, education systems, and the private sector (World Bank, 2019).

In some cases, both male and female young people leveraged their roles in public administration or as intermediaries in aid distribution. In contrast, others succumbed to pressures from normalized societal corruption (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2018). Despite these challenges, a significant segment of young Afghan women and men emerged as reformers, advocating for anti-corruption measures, transparency, and accountability (Integrity Watch Afghanistan, 2020). This dual role, both as participants in and challengers of corruption, underscores the complexities of youth engagement in Afghanistan's governance landscape during this period.

In 2021, in line with the agreement signed by the Taliban and former President Trump, President Joseph Biden announced a full U.S. troop withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan, allowing the Taliban to seize control of the country at lightning speed. On August 15, 2021, Taliban forces seized Kabul and President Ghani fled the country (Mashal & Najafizada, 2021). After 20 years of international involvement, the United States completed its exit in a disorganized and highly criticized fashion. Many Afghans were injured and died during the evacuation in August 2021. Under Taliban rule in 2021, the people of Afghanistan, and in particular its women and girls, lost most all of the social progress and political and civil freedoms that had developed since 2001 (Ahmad, 2021).

h. Conclusion

Afghanistan's history is inseparable from the energy, ambitions, and sacrifices of its young men and women. Across different political eras, whether during monarchies, republics,

socialist regimes, civil wars, or foreign interventions, young Afghans have been both architects of change and instruments of power. They have fought for independence, advocated for modernization, engaged in political movements, resisted foreign occupations, and shaped the country's cultural and intellectual landscape. Their role has been both transformative and tragic, as they have also been manipulated, sidelined, and disproportionately affected by cycles of war and instability.

While young Afghans, both male and female, have been at the forefront of shaping Afghanistan's political and social transformations, young Afghan women have borne the greatest sacrifices. Throughout history, they have faced systemic exclusion from political power, education, and public life, only to be instrumentalized when convenient for state-building agendas. Their contributions, whether in reform movements, education, political activism, or the arts, have often been erased or diminished, and their bodies and freedoms have been the primary battlegrounds of ideological conflicts. Yet, despite these challenges, young Afghan women have consistently demonstrated agency, resistance, and resilience, reclaiming spaces for themselves in periods of reform and finding ways to survive and defy oppression in times of repression.

Afghan youth, both male and female, have not been passive subjects of history but active agents in both its construction and destruction. Whether through revolutionary movements, student organizations, artistic expressions, or underground activism, they have played a central role in challenging and reshaping Afghanistan's national identity. In times of war, they have been fighters and freedom-seekers; in times of peace, they have been innovators and reformers. Their struggles have defined Afghanistan's political shifts, and their identities have evolved in response to the ever-changing landscape of power, conflict, and ideology.

Despite persistent challenges, geopolitical interference, poverty, insecurity, and displacement, the resilience of Afghan youth remains one of the most defining features of the country's trajectory. They have consistently challenged imposed identities, rejected limiting narratives, and forged their own paths, whether through grassroots activism, cultural revival, or political engagement. Their participation in movements advocating for rights, democracy, and social justice demonstrates that Afghan youth are not just witnesses to history but its authors.

Moving forward, several critical questions remain: How can the lived experiences of Afghan youth deepen our understanding of their political agency, and of Afghanistan's history and its imagined futures? What lessons can be drawn from their historical struggles to inform pathways for social transformation? And to what extent can their engagement be mobilized for sustainable peace and progress?

This chapter lays the groundwork for future studies. Yet it is also important to acknowledge that the youth who participated in this study have been both directly and indirectly shaped by the political context outlined here. With this historical backdrop in mind, the following chapters of the dissertation turn to the core research questions: How do Afghan war-affected youth of all genders remain resilient? How do they nurture hope as they build their lives within the sociopolitical realities they navigate? And how does exposure to violence, displacement, and systemic marginalization shape their individual and collective identities?

Chapter 4: Sense of Self

Rooted and Displaced: Afghan Youth Navigating Identity and Belonging

1. Introduction

Identity in Afghanistan is both deeply personal and profoundly political, it is a story told through generations, shaped by histories of war, migration, loss, and bravery. For Afghan youth today, growing up in a country marked by decades of conflict, identity is not a singular, fixed reality but an evolving narrative that is constantly negotiated. It carries the weight of family histories, gender expectations, ethnic divisions, religious practices, and the trauma of war, displacement, and exile. Yet, despite these complex layers, young Afghans continue to seek meaning in who they are, who they are expected to be, and who they wish to become.

This chapter explores how young Afghan women and men, from different ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds, form their identities as they navigate a life shaped by violence, displacement, and social fragmentation. Drawing on life history interviews and focus group discussions with Afghan youth in Afghanistan and the diaspora, I trace how their individual and collective identities are shaped over time, from childhood and adolescence to adulthood. By centering the lived experiences of these youth, this chapter moves beyond dominant, often simplistic, narratives of identity in Afghanistan that tend to focus solely on ethnicity, gender, or national politics. Instead, I show how identity is an ongoing, dynamic process shaped by intersecting experiences of gender, age, ethnicity, family, history, education, war, religion, and mobility.

This chapter also addresses the gaps in identity-conflict literature that focus primarily on elite-driven politics and overlooks the everyday lives of ordinary people. While ethnic politics and identity manipulation by elites are central to Afghanistan's history, my focus here is on how diverse Afghan male and female youth, often marginalized and unheard, make sense of these inherited divisions in their own lives. How do Afghan male and female youth negotiate their personal and collective identities within a society where gender, ethnic, and religious divisions are deeply entrenched? What possibilities exist for re-imagining Afghan identity beyond inherited conflict lines? I argue that Afghan youth are not passive recipients of identity imposed upon them by history or society. Rather, they actively negotiate, contest, and reshape their identities as they make sense of a world marked by conflict. Their stories reveal that identity in Afghanistan, though shaped by deep historical divisions, remains a space of agency, struggle, and possibility.

Throughout this chapter and those that follow, three analytic threads, **memory**, **moral obligation**, and **imagination**, emerge as cross-cutting forces shaping Afghan youth's experiences of identity, hope, and resilience. These themes are not confined to any single life stage or conceptual frame; rather, they recur across participants' narratives as emotional, ethical, and imaginative scaffolding. These cross-cutting themes function as both survival strategies and tools for meaning-making in the midst of protracted conflict, displacement, and sociopolitical rupture.

These cross-cutting themes are deeply entangled with the central tension between **agency and determinacy**. *Memory* operates as both constraint and catalyst, it transmits trauma and inherited roles (determinacy), yet it also anchors youth in a lineage that offers meaning,

continuity, and resistance (agency). *Moral obligation* reflects internalized structures of duty; youth often feel compelled to fulfill familial expectations or honor ancestral sacrifice. Yet moral responsibility, in the context of this study, is not always liberatory, it is frequently constrained, relational, and ethically fraught.

Imagination, by contrast, emerges as the most generative expression of agency, particularly in contexts of overwhelming determinacy. In their childhood and adolescent years, participants imagined alternatives to inherited roles, dreaming of freedom, education, love, or radically different lives. Imagination became a survival tactic: a way to sustain hope by envisioning futures even when material conditions denied them. For many, it was also political, a means of resisting erasure, constructing hybrid identities, and imagining the rebuilding of Afghanistan itself.

These themes do not resolve the binary between agency and determinacy, they complicate it. The narratives in this study reveal how Afghan youth **carry agency within conditions of near-total constraint.** They do not act in a vacuum, but in relation to inherited memories, moral obligations, and imagined futures that both bind and empower them.

2. Identity Theory, Youth, and Conflict

Human experiences and interactions across time and space are influenced by the multifaceted construct of individual and collective identity. Identity at an individual level represents the unique attributes and experiences that set apart one person from another and

includes components like personal beliefs and self-perception (Erikson, 1968). A person's identity develops through the interaction of biological elements along with psychological and social factors, which affect their self-perception and independence as they grow (Oyserman et al., 2012). The formation of human identity unfolds throughout a person's life and involves an ongoing process that is shaped by cultural and social environments alongside personal decisions and life events. According to social identity theory, people develop their self-concept based on their group memberships, showing that individual identity emerges through societal interactions rather than in isolation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, the influence of society, such as family, peers, school, and ethnic and tribal affiliation, plays a crucial role in individual identity building.

The socio-ecological model provides a valuable framework for understanding identity as a dynamic and layered construct shaped by interactions across multiple levels of social influence. At the individual level, identity is formed through personal experiences, beliefs, and psychological development. The interpersonal level, including family, peers, and social networks, plays a critical role in reinforcing or challenging aspects of one’s identity through socialization, support, or discrimination. At the community and institutional levels, schools, religious institutions, and local cultures can offer norms, narratives, and structures that influence identity formation, belonging, and exclusion. Finally, the societal level, laws, policies, media, and dominant ideologies, shapes broader discourses of race, gender, class, and nationality, often imposing power-laden categories that individuals must navigate (Bronfenbrenner 1979; McLeroy et al. 1988). This framework is especially useful in identity research because it acknowledges that identity is not only personal but also deeply relational and structural. It allows scholars to trace how macro-level forces, like colonialism, patriarchy, or migration, interact with micro-level

processes in shaping how people see themselves and are seen by others (Stokols 1996). It also supports a more intersectional and context-sensitive analysis of identity development, especially in conflict or transitional societies.

Collective identity describes how groups share an identity through everyday experiences and cultural stories that connect individuals (Jenkins, 2008). It emerges from social and historical contexts and is crucial in shaping group cohesion, political activism, and cultural belonging (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Unlike individual identity, which emphasizes personal differentiation, collective identity fosters a sense of belonging and solidarity, influencing how individuals perceive themselves concerning a broader social structure (Castells, 1997). In conflict settings, collective identity can become particularly salient, reinforcing in-group loyalty while exacerbating intergroup tensions (Anderson, 2006). The interplay between individual and collective identity highlights how personal and social dimensions interact, shaping self-perception and social dynamics. This approach informs my study to pay attention to the individual understanding of identity in my study participants and their ethnic and tribal affiliations that may play a role in their identity formation and how they utilize or see this collective understanding of identity.

Understanding identity as a fundamental human need is essential in analyzing its role in conflict settings. Unlike material interests, identity is often non-negotiable because it is tied to personal and group recognition, security, and historical narratives (Azar, 1990). Threatening or denying identity can lead to deep-seated grievances and protracted struggles (Avruch, 1998; Burton, 1990). This dynamic is particularly evident when marginalized groups mobilize to reclaim their cultural, political, or social status, reinforcing collective identity through resistance

and solidarity (Ross, 2007). The inability to meet identity-related needs often fuels long-term tensions, making resolution efforts ineffective unless they address the underlying need for recognition and belonging (Avruch, 2012). Recognizing identity as a central element in conflict highlights its connection to psychological well-being and social stability, emphasizing the necessity of inclusive frameworks for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. My study, in consideration of the deep-rooted ethnic differences in Afghan society, recognizes identity as a basic need for my participants. That's why I am interested in understanding how these young Afghans nurture a collective Afghan identity despite belonging to different ethnic groups.

Identity in conflict zones is neither a fixed nor an inherent characteristic but a socially constructed and politically instrumentalized phenomenon that shapes group dynamics, power struggles, and violence. National identity is often a product of historical processes and industrialization, reinforced through state-building efforts that create rigid boundaries between groups, leading to political and ethnic rivalries (Gellner, 1983). Ethnic identity becomes particularly salient in conflict when political structures institutionalize divisions, solidify grievances, and create exclusionary systems that exacerbate violence (Horowitz, 1985). These conflicts are not simply byproducts of ethnic diversity but emerge when identity is tied to access to power, economic resources, and political legitimacy (Horowitz, 1985). My study looks at the historical context where ethnic marginalization happened through systematic structures, therefore, this approach informs my study to understand how these young Afghans identify those historically in placed ethnic divides.

Gender and patriarchy play crucial roles in how identities are constructed and experienced across social contexts. Patriarchy not only governs gender relations but also

intersects with nationalism, ethnicity, and class, reinforcing masculine norms into collective identities (Enloe 2000). For example, national identities often rely on idealized gender roles, casting men as protectors and women as bearers of cultural and biological continuity (Yuval-Davis 1997). Similarly, ethnic and class identities are gendered through differentiated expectations and symbolic roles assigned to men and women, reinforcing power hierarchies within and across communities (Anthias 2001). These dynamics reveal that identity is never neutral but always mediated through gendered systems of meaning and control.

The framing of identity as a singular and immutable reality deepens polarization, restricting individuals to predefined categories that fuel sectarianism and communal violence (Sen, 2006). Identity-based conflicts are further exacerbated when historical narratives shape national consciousness, reinforcing collective memories of past grievances and victimhood that sustain intergroup hostility (Lebow, 2008; Müller, 2002). This approach informs my study to look into how identity is formed when my young participants live in isolation from other ethnic groups.

The post-Cold War era has also seen conflicts increasingly framed through civilizational identity rather than ideological or geopolitical divides, with cultural and religious distinctions serving as new fault lines of global tensions (Huntington 1996). At its core, identity is a socially constructed reality, formed and maintained through discourse, institutions, and everyday social interactions, making it both a means of mobilization and a tool of exclusion (Berger & Luckmann 1966).

Understanding identity as fluid and contested rather than predetermined is essential in addressing its role in conflict, as identity-based violence thrives on rigid classifications,

constructed historical grievances, and exclusionary nationalism that deny the plurality of human affiliations. Recent academic literature continues to explore the intricate relationship between identity and conflict, emphasizing that identity is a dynamic and socially constructed phenomenon that significantly influences conflict dynamics. Studies have shown that cultural similarities and differences, particularly in religion, language, and ethnicity, can impact international dispute behavior, challenging conventional beliefs about identity and conflict (Rousseau & van der Veen, 2005). Theoretical frameworks suggest that identity conflicts often involve heightened anxiety and stress, as individuals navigate competing identity demands, leading to behavioral inhibition and increased tension (Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

The various marginalized populations in post-conflict environments, including LGBTQ+ individuals as well as refugees and women, face both scapegoating and silencing. At the same time, government-backed violence incitements make digital and physical security risks worse for these groups (McClearn et al.). 2023). Entrenched patriarchal and heteronormative structures commonly drive scapegoating tactics to regain control amidst societal instability (Cousens 2020). LGBTQ+ individuals face increased vulnerability to hate crimes and systemic discrimination because they are seen as threatening national cohesion and are targeted as embodiments of 'deviance' during and after conflicts (Human Rights Watch 2015). Women who fight for their rights encounter portrayals as subversive elements while facing intensified silencing through legal and extralegal mechanisms (Cousens 2020).

Although looking into the gender and sexual orientations of my young participants and how they influence their identities is not in the scope of this dissertation, it is important to mention that marginalized communities face increased online harassment and surveillance in

addition to doxxing within the digital space, which diminishes their safety and limits their freedom of expression (McClearn et al.). 2023). The complex challenges faced by individuals require an intersectional framework that recognizes how combined identities like gender, sexuality, and refugee status deepen oppression while also shaping routes to resilience and justice (Crenshaw 1991).

The intersection of identity and conflict is further complicated by economic factors, where identity-based divisions can be both a cause and a consequence of economic disparities, fueling cycles of violence and inequality (Esteban & Ray, 2008). Understanding the fluid and constructed nature of identity is crucial for developing effective conflict resolution strategies that address the underlying social, psychological, and economic dimensions of identity-based conflicts. In my study, I have looked into ethnic affiliation and how economic factors play a role in identity formation within groups.

a. Key Debates in Identity Theories

One of the early debates in identity theories is between primordialism and constructivism, which forms a foundational fault line in academic discussions of identity in conflict settings. Primordialists argue that identities such as ethnicity, religion, and nation are deeply rooted, ancient, and emotionally powerful, often leading to inevitable conflict when different groups interact (Geertz 1973). In contrast, constructivist scholars contend that identities are socially constructed, fluid, and shaped by historical and political processes, emphasizing the role of elites and institutions in creating and mobilizing group identities for strategic purposes (Anderson 1983; Brubaker 2004). While primordialism sees identity as a fixed essence, constructivism highlights how identity is contingent and performative, particularly in political crisis or violence.

This debate is crucial for understanding whether identity-based conflicts are rooted in age-old divisions or manipulated for political ends. This debate is crucial for my study to pay attention to the effects of ethnic politics on the lives of my study participants and see if their ethnic identities are shaped by the current needs of their ethnic leaders, their roots and communal experiences, or both.

Feminist scholars, particularly those working within postcolonial and intersectional traditions, critique both primordialism and constructivism for sidelining how gender, power, and colonial legacies shape identity formation. They argue that identity is not only a matter of ethnicity or nation but is also deeply gendered and embedded in everyday power relations. Postcolonial feminists emphasize that the identities of marginalized groups, especially women in the Global South, are often constructed through colonial narratives and global hierarchies, not merely through local or elite-driven processes (Mohanty 1988; Shepherd 2006). From this perspective, understanding identity in conflict zones requires attention to how intersecting forms of oppression, such as patriarchy, racism, and imperialism, shape both the lived experiences and political mobilizations of individuals (Tickner 1992; Sylvester 1994). This lens can expand my analysis by revealing how ethnic identity may be experienced and expressed differently by young women and men in my study, depending on their social positioning and access to power.

The instrumentalist perspective on identity challenges essentialist notions by arguing that identity is not inherently deep or ancient but is often used as a strategic political tool by elites to mobilize support and pursue power. Instrumentalists emphasize that ethnic and identity-based conflicts are frequently the result of elite manipulation rather than longstanding divisions, as leaders exploit identity cleavages to advance political or economic interests (Brass 1991). Horowitz similarly argues that ethnic identity can be activated and politicized in multi-ethnic

societies, particularly where institutions and resource competition exacerbate divisions (Horowitz 1985). From this view, identities are context-dependent and flexible, shaped by changing political landscapes rather than immutable cultural or historical ties. Understanding identity in this way shifts the focus from viewing conflict as an inevitable result of profound differences to examining how political actors mobilize identities for specific ends. This academic debate is essential for my study to see how ethnic and national identities play roles in the lives of my participants and whether their ethnic notions are a political tool for the elites or a conscious phenomenon with several underlying factors.

Feminist scholars, particularly from postcolonial and intersectional perspectives, deepen the instrumentalist critique by highlighting how gender and power operate in the elite manipulation of identity. They argue that political mobilization is not gender-neutral, elites often deploy patriarchal narratives and gendered tropes to reinforce national or ethnic unity, portraying women either as symbols of cultural purity or as reproducers of the nation (Enloe 2000; Yuval-Davis 1997). Postcolonial feminists also draw attention to how colonial legacies continue to shape whose identities are politicized and how. They stress that identity mobilization by elites is often built on historically racialized and gendered hierarchies, which sustain exclusion and marginalization in postcolonial states (Shepherd 2006). By incorporating this lens, my analysis can explore how ethnic identity is not only a tool for political manipulation but is also constructed through intersecting systems of domination, especially for women and marginalized youth.

Another debate between understanding identity as a lived experience versus a political category highlights the tension between personal, everyday expressions of identity and identities

imposed through political, social, or institutional processes. Scholars focusing on lived experience emphasize that identities are embodied, intersectional, and shaped by daily interactions, arguing that conflict impacts how individuals navigate and perform their identities in complex ways (Crenshaw 1989; Mac Ginty 2021). In contrast, scholars like Mamdani argue that identities are often politically constructed and imposed by the state, mainly through colonial and postcolonial governance systems that rigidly categorize populations, thereby creating and reinforcing divisions (Mamdani 1996). This debate underscores the need to examine how people experience and negotiate their identities and how external forces shape and constrain identity formation in conflict settings. Feminist scholars deepen this analysis by highlighting how such categorizations are not only racialized and politicized but also profoundly gendered. Yuval-Davis argues that identity is not a singular or fixed attribute, but rather a dynamic set of social positionings shaped by intersecting axes of power, including gender, ethnicity, class, and nation (Yuval-Davis 2006). She warns against reducing complex experiences of oppression to additive categories and instead promotes an intersectional analysis that considers how structural divisions, lived subjectivities, and representational discourses co-constitute identity (Yuval-Davis 2006).

Further, Hudson et al. emphasize that the treatment and security of women is not peripheral but central to understanding how societal hierarchies, including ethnic and national ones, are constructed and sustained. They argue that patriarchal norms and gender-based violence often serve as templates for broader systems of control and conflict, suggesting that identity formation in postcolonial states cannot be detached from the ways gender norms shape both institutions and state behavior (Hudson et al. 2012). This feminist and gender-sensitive lens expands Mamdani's critique by illustrating that state-imposed identities are not merely ethnic or colonial in origin but also gendered in how they discipline, include, or exclude populations. This

debate is crucial for my study because I am looking at the lived experiences of my young participants, and this theoretical lens helped by paying attention to the role of structural division in Afghan society based on ethnicity and the impact of lived experiences that may or may not change the historical ethnic divisions. By incorporating a feminist perspective, I can also attend to how these divisions are experienced differently by young women and men, and how gendered expectations, roles, and exclusions may intensify or mitigate ethnic identity politics in everyday life.

The debate on state and citizenship centers on whether national identity is constructed as inclusive and civic or exclusionary and based on ethnic or sectarian lines. Scholars argue that state-building processes often define national identity in ways that include some groups while marginalizing others, shaping access to citizenship, rights, and belonging (Anderson 1983). Mamdani highlights how colonial and postcolonial states have historically used rigid identity categories to determine who is a legitimate citizen and who is excluded, often fueling identity-based conflicts (Mamdani 1996).

Postcolonial feminist scholars argue that these processes of state classification have also been deeply gendered. Women's identities were often invisible or instrumentalized within nationalist and colonial projects, where they were seen primarily as reproducers of the nation or as bearers of cultural purity rather than as political actors in their own right (Yuval-Davis 1997; Mohanty 1988). Such gendered constructions of belonging not only marginalized women from formal citizenship but also reinforced patriarchal hierarchies under the guise of cultural or ethnic authenticity. These exclusionary forms of national identity can lead to systemic discrimination and political violence, especially in divided societies. In contrast, inclusive models aim to create

a shared sense of belonging across diverse groups. This debate helps my study to focus on the notion of belonging to a unified identity by my participants under the same nation as Afghans have historically struggled with a unified national identity.

The debate on identity in peacebuilding revolves around whether sustainable peace requires recognizing and addressing identity-based grievances or avoiding identity politics to prevent further division. Some scholars argue that peace processes must acknowledge and incorporate the identities and experiences of marginalized groups to address the root causes of conflict and ensure lasting reconciliation (Richmond 2005). However, others caution that overemphasizing identity in peacebuilding efforts can entrench divisions and hinder social cohesion, advocating instead for approaches that focus on shared interests and depoliticized frameworks for peace (Mac Ginty 2021). This tension reflects broader questions about whether peace is best achieved through inclusive recognition or by minimizing identity-based claims in the post-conflict order. Both approaches have been part of Afghanistan's rebuilding efforts since 2001. However, neither is successful or wholly proven wrong. Therefore, my study is looking at the lived experiences of my participants to see if highlighting ethnic grievances or focusing on minimizing identity-based historical accounts helps my participants with their national identity formation.

The debate on colonial legacies in identity-based conflicts centers on whether enduring colonial impacts or modern political and social processes primarily shape contemporary identity divisions and violence. Scholars emphasizing colonial legacies argue that colonial powers institutionalized rigid gender, ethnic, racial, and religious categories through governance structures, censuses, and legal systems, which continue to shape postcolonial state formation and

identity politics (Mamdani 1996). Feminist scholars add that colonial governance not only categorized populations but also imposed patriarchal norms that redefined gender roles in ways that often displaced precolonial gender dynamics (Yuval-Davis 1997; Mohanty 1988). These gendered legacies continue to affect how citizenship, rights, and belonging are experienced differently by women and men in postcolonial contexts. These legacies often result in deeply entrenched hierarchies and exclusions that fuel ongoing conflicts.

In contrast, other scholars highlight the role of contemporary political dynamics, such as elite manipulation and state policies, in shaping current identity struggles, arguing that modern processes and actors also play a critical role (Chatterjee 1993). This debate highlights the need to examine historical continuities and present-day political strategies to understand identity shaped due to and during conflict. This approach influenced my study by focusing on the historical ethnic divisions established after the Second Anglo-Afghan War in the nineteenth century in Afghanistan. Abdur Rahman Khan (see chapter on history), backed by the British, hardened and institutionalized the already existing ethnic divisions in Afghanistan (1880–1901) through policies of forced migration, land redistribution, violent suppression of minorities (especially Hazaras), and the privileging of Pashtun identity in state-building. While ethnic diversity existed before, his rule marked the first systematic state effort to organize power along ethnic lines, with effects that have lasted to this day (Barfield, 2010, pp. 135–140). It is important for my study to understand if those divisions are maintained along the same grievances, manipulated by modern-day politics, or both.

The concept of intersectionality challenges approaches that treat identity as a single, unified category by emphasizing how multiple, overlapping identities, such as gender, race,

class, and ethnicity, shape experiences of violence, exclusion, and resilience in conflict settings. Intersectional scholars argue that focusing solely on one axis of identity, such as ethnicity, obscures the complex ways in which power and violence are distributed, particularly along gendered lines (Crenshaw 1989). Feminist scholars like Enloe highlight how women's experiences in conflict are shaped not only by their membership in an ethnic or national group but also by their gender, which exposes them to specific forms of violence and marginalization often overlooked in mainstream analyses (Enloe 1989). Intersectionality thus offers a more nuanced understanding of identity, urging scholars to consider how interlocking power structures affect individuals and groups differently within the same conflict. My study approach aligns with intersectional and feminist scholars because identity formation in conflict settings cannot be reduced to ethnic divisions alone. It is, in fact, coupled with how these divisions impact populations of all genders differently and how those impacts shape the formation of identities in the lives of my participants. As Yuval-Davis (2006) argues, identities are shaped through intersecting social divisions such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity and must be analyzed at multiple levels, including structural, intersubjective, and representational, rather than as isolated or additive categories.

b. Gaps in the Theory

A significant gap in identity-conflict literature is its predominant focus on macro-level political processes, such as state-building, elite manipulation, and institutional frameworks, while often neglecting the everyday, lived experiences of ordinary people navigating and embodying identity in daily life. This oversight limits our understanding of how individuals and communities perform, negotiate, contest, or resist imposed identities, especially in conflict and post-conflict settings where identity boundaries are frequently reshaped. Scholars like Roger

Mac Ginty argue for greater attention to the "everyday politics" of identity, emphasizing how people engage in practices of everyday peace to manage and mitigate identity-based tensions (Mac Ginty 2021). Similarly, James C. Scott's notion of "everyday resistance" highlights how marginalized groups subtly and at times overtly challenge dominant identity narratives and state categorizations through hidden and informal acts (Scott 1990). Addressing this gap is essential for capturing identity's dynamic and fluid nature as it is lived and experienced on the ground, beyond formal political arenas.

Another key gap in identity theories is the lack of attention to the emotional and subjective dimensions of identity, as much of the literature focuses on rational, political uses of identity while overlooking how identity is deeply tied to feelings of hope, fear, humiliation, dignity, and belonging. This neglect limits the understanding of how trauma, memory, and emotions shape identity-based mobilization and violence, particularly in societies emerging from conflict. Marc Howard Ross argues that cultural expressions and collective memories, often charged with emotional significance, are central to how identities are formed and contested in conflict settings (Ross 2007). Without integrating these emotional dimensions, identity theories risk offering reductive explanations of conflict that fail to capture the influential role of affect and memory in sustaining divisions and motivating action. Recognizing these emotional undercurrents is essential to understanding the persistence of identity-based grievances and the possibilities for reconciliation. My study seeks to amplify the emotional narratives of my participants, exploring how their ethnic and gender identities have shaped, whether by expanding or limiting, their life opportunities.

Another crucial gap in identity theories in conflict-affected societies is the tendency to treat identity as resolved or unproblematic once a peace agreement is signed, with limited attention to how identities continue evolving and contested or suppressed in post-conflict processes. This shallow treatment risks overestimating the success of peacebuilding and ignoring long-term identity grievances that can reignite violence. Scholars such as Oliver Richmond and Séverine Autesserre critique elite-driven peace processes for failing to address deep-seated identity issues at the grassroots level, emphasizing that sustainable peace requires engaging with the ways identity shapes local experiences of conflict and recovery (Richmond 2005; Autesserre 2014). Without this focus, peacebuilding efforts may overlook the ongoing struggles over belonging, recognition, and exclusion that persist beyond formal agreements.

A significant gap in identity theories is the limited attention to hybrid and transnational identities, as many frameworks assume identities are bounded within nation-states. This neglects how migration, exile, and diaspora politics shape identity formation and mobilization in conflict and peace processes. Ignoring transnational and diasporic identities limits the understanding of how cross-border connections influence political activism, memory, and belonging among displaced communities. Scholars like Peter Mandaville and Thomas Faist highlight the importance of transnational social spaces and hybrid identities, yet their insights remain underutilized in mainstream conflict and identity studies (Mandaville 2001; Faist 2000). Addressing this gap is essential to understanding how identity is negotiated across borders and how diasporas contribute to both sustaining and resolving conflict. My study explores the lived experiences of Afghan youth exiled by conflict and how life in diaspora shapes their individual and collective sense of Afghan identity.

c. My study

I started this study with a simple yet complex question: How do young Afghans view their individual and collective identity when they grow up experiencing different types of violence while still attempting to maintain hope and well-being? I had trouble understanding this question myself. I was born in Afghanistan, lived through the civil war, became a refugee in Pakistan, was part of the 20 years of rebuilding Afghanistan (2001 to 2021), and was exiled again in 2021 when the Taliban took the country by force. As a refugee child in Quetta, Pakistan, my parents made sure we never forgot that we were Afghans, that we should never try to belong in Pakistan. In the community we lived in, my mother was called *Kabuli*. Although she is not from Kabul, apparently anyone from Afghanistan was considered *Kabuli* by Pakistanis in Quetta. So, we were known as the children of the *Kabuli* woman. In every social sphere, we were outsiders.

When I returned as a teenager to Afghanistan after the fall of the first Taliban regime, to my surprise, I was still considered an outsider because my accent sounded like that of Pakistani people. I have seen and experienced a lot of discrimination when it comes to identity, as a woman, as a Pashtun woman among different Pashtun tribes, in society, and within my own family. But I have also experienced privilege due to my ethnicity, deep love, and acceptance for the same identity. I am married to a man from another ethnicity and have been welcomed and trusted by big circles of friends and community members from all ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Professionally, I have not been hated for being who I am, and I am fully loved and trusted by people from different ethnicities. Therefore, I became very interested in what role identity really plays in the lives of young Afghans and how this notion of individual and collective identity influences their life decisions.

My study focuses, in part, on understanding identity formation in conflict and post-conflict settings. Although national and state-level political identity formation is crucial, my study is interested in learning about identity formation in such a setting through the lived experiences of Afghan youth. I am particularly interested in individual agency over identity formation and what contributes to identities being shaped and how they change over time due to different circumstances. Therefore, my study offers a nuanced look at the lived experiences of 15 Afghan young women and men across three different stages of their lives. First is childhood. The second is during a transitional age that I call situational adulthood, because Afghans rarely experience a clear phase between childhood and adulthood as understood in Western societies. And finally, adulthood and their current lives. For Afghan young women and men, their life situations are often fragile, making these transitions even more complex. The goal of my study is to document and analyze the complex but still understandable processes of identity formation by individuals in conflict settings, where context and lived experiences often override fixed notions of identity formation.

d. Defining Identity by Afghan Youth

For the Afghan youth both male and female in my study, identity, specifically Afghan identity, evolves as a deeply personal sense of belonging shaped by history, struggle, resilience, and cultural pride, yet marked by internal conflict and uncertainty. Their identity as Afghans reflects a strong emotional tie to their homeland and ancestry, serving as a source of both pride and pain, forged through collective endurance but also fractured by internal divisions and contested meanings.

The participants in my focus group discussions in Northern Virginia and Toronto, Canada, along with my 15 life history participants, found it hard to differentiate between their personal and national identities. They believe they are products of collective identity formation, where nationality, war, poverty, gender, ethnicity, and refugee experiences all influence their individual identities. Many describe their Afghan identity as an unbreakable connection to their homeland. “Being Afghan means carrying memories of places like Kabul University, where I once dreamed of my future, ” shared a young male participant, emphasizing the emotional and nostalgic ties to Afghanistan. However, Afghan identity is not merely about birthplace; it is also about the weight of history, ancestry, struggle, and survival. “It’s not just about where we were born, it’s about the history we carry, the struggles we’ve lived, and the people who make us who we are, ” another male participant explained.

For my study participants, identity is characterized by resilience and endurance, as one female participant noted “We are brave, we work hard, we give, and even in the hardest times, we find ways to smile.” While there are markers of pride regarding their Afghan identities, they also grapple with the fractures within Afghan society, particularly concerning internal competition and divisions based on ethnicity and gender. “We don’t want others to be successful. If I’m not successful, I won’t allow the next person to be successful. It’s that kind of attitude I have seen in most Afghans, and I think it’s so unfortunate, ” one female youth observed, highlighting the internal barriers that hinder collective progress.

Some participants expressed confusion about what it truly means to be Afghan, as debates over national identity and ethnic belonging cultivate uncertainty. “If you had asked me this two years ago, I would have said Afghan means people of Afghanistan. But now I’m really

confused because so many discussions are happening, some say ‘Afghan’ is only for Pashtuns, while Tajiks want Afghanistan to be called Khorasan, and Hazaras want it to be called Hazarahistan” one female participant reflected. Despite these ongoing identity struggles, many still find meaning in their connection to Afghanistan. “Being from Afghanistan gives me the feeling that this is something of mine, it’s my roots, my land, and it gives me pride, ” another male participant expressed. The notion of belonging that comes with ownership land, the urge to protect their roots, and living on land they can call their own instills a sense of pride. Ultimately, being Afghan represents a paradoxical identity for my study participants, characterized by both deep cultural belonging and internal discord, resilience, fragmentation, survival, and uncertainty.

Afghan identity among my study participants emerges as a deeply layered and complex construct, shaped by both personal and collective experiences. It embodies notions of home, protection, belonging, and cultural richness, expressed through history, music, and love, while also carrying the weight of pain, war, and loss. This identity is neither fully embraced nor wholly rejected; rather, it is fraught with tensions and contradictions. Participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds harbored grievances against one another, each feeling victimized by historical injustices, demonstrating how ethnic divisions remain deeply ingrained in the national consciousness. Additionally, Afghan identity is not only shaped internally but also externally, as global perceptions frame Afghans through the lens of victimhood, terrorism, and perpetual conflict. Armed conflict plays a critical role in reinforcing this politicized identity, intertwining it with broader structures of power and exclusion. Furthermore, it is a gendered identity, as the lived experiences of war, displacement, and discrimination manifest differently based on gendered expectations and roles. This intricate web of belonging and alienation underscores the fragility and resilience embedded within Afghan identity.

e. Data Analysis

My study examines identity formation among male and female Afghan youth, tracing how their sense of identity evolves across different life stages. I have utilized the ecological system framework by Bronfenbrenner 1979 to study the identity formation of my participants through their lived experiences through the life history method employing the "Portal" approach (Tierney & Lanford 2019), which connects individual narratives to broader socio-historical contexts keeping into consideration that neither history determines or full explains identity in Afghan context. My interviews with the participants covered their experiences from early childhood memories to their current lives, delving into key aspects such as family dynamics, education (from primary school to university), social life, experiences of war, displacement, personal successes, and emotional well-being.

I begin my analysis of the micro-system, where young Afghan girls and boys absorb information and values and form their sense of self within their immediate surroundings, families, extended families, neighborhoods, mosques, and schools, while also being shaped by the early experiences of war and displacement. As they grew, I examined their identity formation in the mesosystem, which includes extended family networks, educational institutions, religious spaces such as mosques and madrasas, and peer groups, all of which play crucial roles in shaping their worldviews and sense of self and belonging. Finally, I looked at their lives at the macro-system level, where broader societal forces, including national politics, ethnic marginalization, and protracted armed conflict, contribute to displacement and exile, profoundly affecting their identities. Through this ecological system lens (Bronfenbrenner 1979), I explore how these layered influences interact, shaping the individual and collective identities of Afghan male and female youth.

3. Identity in Afghanistan

The complexity of identity for Afghans stems from historical events, ethnic and gender divisions, and religious and political forces, creating conflict and dividing society. Afghanistan's governance structures and power dynamics have been shaped by its multi-ethnic composition of Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and other communities, historically reinforcing exclusionary national narratives (Barfield, 2010). The British establishment of the Durand Line in 1893 disrupted ethnic identities by creating artificial divisions between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which split the Pashtun population across national borders (Rubin, 2002). The extended period of warfare, starting with the Soviet invasion in 1979 and continuing through Taliban governance and international military interventions in 2001, has intensified divisions among ethnic and religious groups since political factions have used these identities to struggle to gain control (Giustozzi, 2018).

Historically oppressed ethnic groups like the Hazaras have faced persistent discrimination throughout the history of Afghanistan, which has led to enduring societal grievances and insecurity for members of this group (Monsutti, 2005). Political discourse and conflict dynamics remain heavily influenced by competing visions of national identity that range from a Pashtun-dominated centralized state that began with the creation of Afghanistan in 1747 through 1973 to periodic decades of inclusive multi-ethnic governance models (Saikal, 2012). Under the Taliban regimes (1996-2001) and from 2021 to the present, Pashtuns again rule the state. Gender identity issues were acute during the Taliban's first rule and in its 2021 return to power, which included severe restrictions on all women's and girls' rights and public participation (Kakar, 2022). I have provided a brief political and social historical context in Chapter Four of this dissertation which

will give a brief understanding to my readers about what are the impacts of these historical accounts on the lives of my study participants, and why some of them still hold on to grievances that shape their individual and collective identities.

The current chapter presents the lived experiences of my study participants in three different stages: the first being early childhood, where my participants' identities are shaped by storytelling, faith, and traditional rituals, and the learning of gender roles and ethnicity, often not by choice. The second stage is the period between childhood and adulthood and here I look at identity formation through the influence of peers and friends, gender and ethnicity, and the role of education and economy in shaping identity. Finally, I look at the identity transformation my young participants have experienced in their adulthood and the current realities of life, focusing on the role of exposure to different ethnicities, the role of cross-cultural exchange programs, and what it means to some of them be an Afghan in exile. My goal is to investigate how identity is learned, understood, questioned, reshaped, and transformed through different experiences in life by my young participants across different stages of their lives.

4. Early Childhood in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, a child's sense of self begins to take shape long before they are fully aware of who they are, through the stories, beliefs, and social expectations that surround them. From an early age, Afghan children inherit narratives passed down by their parents and elders, stories of family history, survival, loss, and resilience, that root them in a shared past and define how they understand their place in the world. Alongside these stories, faith and traditional practices play a profound role in shaping identity, as children are immersed in religious rituals and cultural customs that dictate not only what it means to be a good, faithful person but also

what it means to belong within their family and community. From learning prayers and participating in religious ceremonies to being taught they need to adhere to gendered expectations, children absorb lessons about morality, honor, and duty through daily interactions and observations. Equally powerful are the lessons they receive about ethnicity, often shaped within homogenous environments where exposure to other groups is limited. In many cases, ethnic identities are inherited as unquestioned truths, absorbed from the biases and beliefs of adults, rather than formed through direct interaction or experience. These early lessons, whether about family history, gender roles and expectations, faith, or ethnic belonging, are passed down as facts rather than choices, leaving children with little agency to challenge or reshape them. Together, these layers of storytelling, religious life, and social division create a framework through which Afghan children come to understand who they are, long before they have the power to decide for themselves.

a. Inheriting Identity: Learning Who They Are Through Stories Across Generations

Early childhood memories of my research participants often began with recollections of the home they lived in, their siblings, and their parents. For my study participants, regardless of whether they grew up as refugees in another country or a province of Afghanistan, their earliest memories are deeply tied to their childhood's sensory and emotional landscapes. They recall the comforting aroma of freshly baked naan made by their mothers, the cherished yet contested toys over which they fought with their siblings, and the dimly lit rooms where entire families huddled together at night. Many remember the warmth of a *sandali*, a traditional Afghan heating system used during the winter that consists of a low table covered with a thick blanket under which a

charcoal or electric heater is placed. Family members sit around the table, tucking the blanket over their legs to keep warm. During these times around the *sandali*, parents, grandparents, and older siblings would tell stories. Memory of elders' in these settings operates as the primary medium of socialization, stories of war, sacrifice, faith, and challenges overcome taught children who they were and who they must become. They recalled the laughter and freedom of playing in their courtyard and the joy of running barefoot through the alleys with their siblings. Their first day of school is often etched in their minds, sometimes filled with excitement, sometimes with fear. Some recall the tensions at home, the echoes of their parents' arguments, or the sting of discipline from a family member. Others remember the relentless push from their parents to excel in specific skills, often seen as a pathway to a better future. These memories of family, love, hardship, and resilience form the foundation of their early years.

An important finding in my research is that the childhood memories of my study participants are not only shaped by their own experiences but are also deeply influenced by the stories passed down by their parents and elders. In Afghan culture, storytelling is a cherished tradition, particularly at night when families gather. Afghan parents often share stories with their children, not just folktales but personal narratives of their own lives, struggles, and the hardships they overcame. These stories serve to pass down family history, wisdom, and resilience. Every participant in this study carried memories of their own birth, as recounted by their parents, whether it was the challenges of bringing them into the world, the joy their arrival brought, or the difficult circumstances their family faced at the time. These narratives, woven into their childhood, are vital to their identity and connection to their family's past.

"I was born in Kabul, in the Afshar area, near Qabar Agha Balkhi. I am the first male child of my parents. I was one and a half years old when the civil war started. My father told me that when I was one and a half years old, I got burned by a kerosene lamp (*lampa*). A rocket landed nearby while I was sitting on my father's lap. In shock, he dropped me, and my chin fell on the burning lamp. I still have the scar from that incident." *(Male, 32 from Ghazni)*

"I was born in Mazar-e-Sharif. My mother tells me that the weather was extremely hot when I was born, but on the night of my birth, there was a heavy storm and flooding. Many small districts were submerged under water. My family says that I came into this world with the storm." *(Female, 27 from Mazar-e-Sharif)*

"I was born in July 2000. Of course, I don't remember anything from that time, but my elders told me that Afghanistan was in a terrible state when I was born. Just a year later, 9/11 happened. My parents told me that my birth and its aftermath were not peaceful times for the country." *(Male, 24 from Kandahar)*

"I was born in 1996, the same year Dr. Najibullah was killed. My father was working with one of the Mujahiddin's leaders, so he fled with him. My mother was left alone with two of us. She was very young, so she went to my grandfather's house. My mother told us that life at my grandfather's house was difficult. In Afghan culture, once a young woman is married, she is not given the same respect in her father's home. She was under a lot of pressure and was

> eventually forced to search for my father so we could live with him again." *(Female, 29 from Panjshir)*
>
> "My mom told me that I was born on Eid, and everyone suggested naming me Eidema. When we moved to Pakistan, my aunt told me that I was the same age as my cousin. That's when I realized I was a 1998 baby. I knew I was a few months younger than my cousin, so in 2017, I decided to make May my birthday month, because my cousin was born in March. (She laughs.) I chose my own birthday because I wanted to be celebrated." *(Female, 27 from Ghazni)*

These birth stories illustrate how identity is shaped not only by individual experiences but also by the narratives passed down by parents and elders, embedding personal histories within collective memory. Each participant's birth is framed within broader events, war, natural disasters, political turmoil, and displacement, demonstrating how identity is constructed through inherited memory and familial storytelling. The young man from Ghazni carries a physical scar from an early childhood injury, linking his identity to both war and survival, with his father's recollection reinforcing the trauma of those years. The young woman from Mazar-e-Sharif is linked to nature's unpredictability; her birth is framed as part of a storm that left its mark on the land and on how she believes she came into the world.

The young man from Kandahar's birth is tied to Afghanistan's instability, reinforcing a sense of belonging to a generation shaped by war and global conflict. The young woman from Panjshir inherits her mother's struggle, learning how gendered oppression and displacement defined her earliest years, making resilience a central part of her identity formation in childhood. Meanwhile, the young woman from Ghazni, despite the uncertainty of her birth year, reclaims

her own narrative, reflecting the ways in which younger generations navigate and redefine inherited histories. These stories highlight how identity is not only personal but also deeply interwoven with family memory, historical trauma, and cultural storytelling, shaping a collective sense of self across generations. These early narratives underscore how memory functions as a foundational structure in identity formation. Participants' identities are rooted not only in personal experience but in the remembered and often emotionally charged accounts passed down from parents and elders. Whether it was a scar from a war-time accident, a storm coinciding with their birth, or a story of loss and survival, these memories, shared, imposed, or even silenced, serve as intergenerational transmissions of identity. In this way, memory acts not merely as recollection but as a formative social and emotional inheritance.

Similarly, from birth, a child carries the weight of their parents' experiences through the stories passed down to them. Eventually, these young people see themselves through their parents' stories.

> "My mom tells us that my dad had never raised his voice at her, and they had never had a serious argument. But that day, my dad got angry at my mom and told her not to interfere in such matters. Then he simply told her, 'Make something for dinner.' I don't remember much beyond that, but that's how their last conversation ended. *(Bande Khuda raftanish raftan shud dga – God's man left and never returned.)* He never came back. The Taliban killed all the men who had gone to speak with them, including my father." *(Male, 28 from Bamyan)*
>
> "My father used to say that Karzai's father [Karzai was the first President of Afghanistan after the American invasion of Afghanistan] and many other leaders'

> fathers were once young men like him, but they progressed in life because they were educated while he and his family could not advance due to lack of education. He would always blame the lack of literacy for the widespread ignorance and domestic violence in our village. He believed that if people, especially women, were educated, things would change, and they would no longer be oppressed. He was quite hopeful about the new government after the fall of the Taliban." *(Male, 33 from Kandahar)*

> "My mom always tells me that I was the calmest among all my siblings. She used to say, 'You were so ugly and dark-skinned when you were born, and you were so fat that your hands had deep folds (*qatakaaa meshud sar destait*).' That should be cute! [She laughs.] But for some reason, my mom didn't like it." *(Female, 27 from Ghazni)*

These narratives reveal how the storytelling traditions of parents deeply embed their children within their own lived experiences, shaping the way these children see themselves, even when they did not directly witness or remember these events. Through storytelling, parents pass down not only personal memories but also emotions, perspectives, and unresolved struggles, making their children inheritors of both trauma and hope and who they identify with. The young man from Bamyan carries the weight of his father's last words, a moment he may not fully remember but one that defines his understanding of loss and injustice. The young man from Kandahar, through his father's reflections on education and oppression, inherits a worldview shaped by unfulfilled aspirations and systemic inequality, framing his own identity in relation to his father's hopes and disappointments. Meanwhile, the young woman from Ghazni internalizes

her mother's recollections of her infancy, where affection is laced with humor and critique, subtly shaping her self-image and sense of belonging. These stories illustrate how parental narratives do more than recount the past; they construct a child's understanding of their own identity, linking them to broader social, historical, and familial realities that continue to shape their self-perception and place in the world.

These firsthand accounts from my study participants illustrate how their sense of self is shaped by early childhood memories and how their family and immediate environment play crucial roles in shaping their identity within the broader dynamics of family formation. Their understanding of who they are is not only influenced by their own self-perception but also by how their family contributes to that perception. In Afghanistan, young people inherit their parents' life experiences as a legacy, often carrying forward incomplete narratives that they feel compelled to continue and complete. For example, if a father has been injured in war, he does not only recount that story throughout his life, but the responsibility of remembering and retelling it also falls on his children, especially his sons, who internalize and speak of the injury as if it were part of their own lived experience. In addition, identity formation in early childhood is shaped collectively as part of a shared upbringing. For the majority of my study participants, their extended family played an active role in shaping both their sense of self and how they perceived themselves.

> "I was born into a really big family, many of my uncles and aunts lived together with my grandparents. I am the second child; my older brother was born before me. In many parts of Afghanistan, especially in our region, families often prefer sons over daughters. My mother told me that when she was pregnant with me, my

grandmother was hoping and praying for another boy. She really wished that I would be born a boy. I remember this from my childhood, and I think it has had a lasting impact on me because I have never forgotten that I was not wished for." *(Female, 28, Laghman)*

"Most of my father's side of the family had passed away before we grew up. On my mother's side, I have one uncle and one aunt who are her full siblings, but she also has many half-siblings from her father's other wives. My childhood was spent with my cousins from my mother's side, and at times, we lived together in one household. My maternal grandmother was much more present in our lives than my paternal grandmother. She was the one who named me. When my parents chose the name Baran, she objected, she wanted me to be named Hosha instead." *(Female, 27, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

"Although my father's family belonged to the royal lineage, they carried a very traditional mindset, holding onto old customs and beliefs. My paternal grandmother, in particular, was an extremely doubtful person (*shakok*). She was suspicious of everyone and everything. To the extent that she wouldn't even allow a brother and sister to be alone in the same room. Yet, ironically, she was also a very modern young woman. Even up until her death, which was during Karzai's era, she continued wearing skirts and socks, even though by then, no one else did. I remember my brother and I used to sit together under the ***sandali*** in winter, playing games. But my grandmother would come and separate us. I don't think it's necessary to do that to children, especially siblings, it didn't make sense. She

> used to tell me, 'Whenever you two are sitting close together, Satan is present.' And I would think, 'Grandma, he's my brother!'" *(Female, 21, Kabul)*
>
> "My relatives sometimes tell me that when I returned from Malaysia, I didn't speak Farsi well. But I don't remember that myself, I thought I knew both Farsi and English. However, at that time, I felt like an outcast, like I didn't belong among the people around me. I felt this way because I could sense how everyone was looking at me differently, as if I was different just because I spoke English." *(Male, 25, Badakhshan)*
>
> "The small happiness I had came from my friends. I had a cousin who now lives in Switzerland, I loved him. I didn't like my other cousins because I was constantly compared to them and always seen as the one who was not good enough." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

These narratives highlight the crucial role of extended family in shaping the identities and experiences of children in Afghanistan. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins are not just peripheral figures; they actively participate in a child's upbringing, influencing their sense of self-worth, belonging, and even their names. In some cases, family members reinforce cultural norms and gendered expectations, as seen in the disappointment of a grandmother over the birth of a girl, leaving a lasting emotional imprint. In other cases, relatives provide primary caregiving and shape childhood memories, as with a grandmother who exerts influence over naming traditions. The stories also reveal how extended family can serve as both a source of comfort and restriction, offering love and shared experiences but also imposing rigid social expectations, as seen in the enforcement of conservative gender norms within the household. Additionally, these

accounts demonstrate how familial relationships are deeply intertwined with personal identity; being compared to cousins, feeling like an outsider due to language differences, or being molded by the values of older generations all contribute to how individuals perceive themselves. Ultimately, these stories reveal that extended family in Afghanistan is not just a support system but a powerful force in shaping children's self-perception, social standing, and emotional development.

> "Starting with my family, they constantly judged me, whether it was about how I dressed, my passion for music, or simply for being 'that bad girl.' I remember every family gathering; they made fun of me and my personality. My mother was deeply hurt by it. But the day I left for Bishkek, everything inside the family changed. I was no longer bombarded with hurtful comments."*(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

> "I remember when I was very young, my mother, especially, used to tell me, 'Don't laugh loudly.' I used to laugh really loud, and it would trigger people around me. I would laugh everywhere. Eventually, my mother started telling me to stop, and then my grandmother and other family members reinforced it. Now, I laugh completely differently. I laugh so quietly." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

These narratives illustrate how extended family and societal expectations in Afghanistan regulate self-expression, particularly for girls and women, reinforcing gendered norms that shape identity over time, starting from early childhood. The first account demonstrates how social control operates within the family, where nonconformity, whether through music, or personal style, is met with persistent criticism and ridicule. The second account highlights how even

laughter, a fundamental expression of joy, is subject to regulation under the influence of extended family. The gradual internalization of these restrictions leads to a permanent behavioral change, illustrating how deeply ingrained familial norms dictate acceptable forms of femininity. Together, these stories reveal how social expectations function as invisible constraints, shaping identity through both direct criticism and subtle conditioning. They also suggest that breaking free from these norms often requires distance, either physical or psychological, to reclaim authenticity and self-expression.

> “The names given to us were not only chosen by our parents but also by our aunts, uncles, and other relatives. That’s why everyone has two or three names. This is done to ensure no one feels left out; it is a form of collective happiness. No one should feel unhappy about the arrival of a new baby. All of us have names chosen by our parents and names given by our relatives.” *(Male, 32, Ghazni)*

> "There is a story behind my name. When the women in my family told me about it, they used to add extra details like spices to make it more interesting. My aunt told me that on the day I was born, my mother was resting, so my eldest aunt took me to get vaccinated. When she entered the vaccination room, the doctor asked for my name. Suddenly, a mysterious voice from behind her whispered a name. My aunt turned around, but no one was there. The doctor asked again, and my aunt, still startled, just repeated the name she had heard. Because the name came from an unknown voice, my family decided to keep it for me." *(Female, 21 from Kabul)*

> "We have a tradition in Ghazni called *Shaw Shene* [Night of Celebration] when a child is born. A few nights after childbirth, our uncles, aunts, and their families are invited for a fun night to celebrate the newborn with music, laughter, and sometimes a name-selection ritual. It symbolizes communal joy and the welcoming of the child into the family. We play a game where everyone chooses a name, writes it on a piece of paper, and places it in a bowl. Then, the mother of the child picks three names from the bowl and selects one of them as the child's name." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

These quotes from my study participants highlight how naming in Afghan culture is a deeply communal and symbolic act, carrying expectations that shape a child's identity and sense of responsibility. A name is not merely a label but a guiding force, often chosen collectively by parents, extended family, and even mysterious circumstances, as seen in the story of the name whispered by an unknown voice. The tradition of multiple names ensures inclusivity, reinforcing the idea that a child's birth is a shared familial event where no one should feel excluded.

The *Shaw Shene* in Hazara community, a celebration, further emphasizes this communal aspect, making the naming process a collective ritual that strengthens intergenerational family bonds. Beyond tradition, names carry meaning that influence how individuals perceive themselves. Naming a child plays a significant role in shaping their identity and the expectations placed upon them. A child's name is more than just a label; it carries meaning and responsibility. For example, a boy named Omaid (meaning *hope*) is expected to bring hope to his family as he grows up. Similarly, if a girl is named Wayarana (meaning *pride*), she internalizes the idea that she is the pride of her family and feels a deep connection to embodying that role. As children

grow, they internalize the weight of their names, often striving to embody the qualities they represent. This practice demonstrates how identity is not only shaped by personal experiences but also by the social and cultural expectations embedded in one's very name.

Who you are, whether a girl or a boy from a young age, is shaped by the influence of Afghan extended families, which play a significant role in defining both your identity and how you should carry yourself. Afghan society is deeply hierarchical, and a child's upbringing is embedded within a dense network of family and community relationships. For example, if you are fortunate enough to be the child of the eldest son or daughter in the family, you are likely to grow up under the direct authority of both sets of grandparents. Their decisions take precedence in your life due to the generational hierarchy that defines Afghan culture. Aunts, uncles, and older cousins play major roles in shaping not only your daily life but also your self-perception, reinforcing both spoken and unspoken expectations about how you should behave.

Most Afghans live in villages, tightly knit communities, or small towns where neighbors know one another intimately, and the younger generation is expected to treat elders in the community with the same respect as they do their own older family members. Similarly, the *mullah* of the neighborhood is a prominent figure whose influence extends beyond religious practice. Even in families that do not strictly adhere to religious teachings, there is often an unspoken expectation that young children will attend the local mosque to learn *Quranic* studies. This collective notion, while providing a protective shield of belonging, also makes it difficult to resist its influence. Many of my participants expressed dissatisfaction with the rigid roles and norms imposed within their households and extended families. Yet, having been raised within

these deeply ingrained structures, they found it difficult to imagine an alternative way of living in their childhoods.

b. Faith and Traditions in the Life of an Afghan Child

Afghanistan's religious identity evolved from ancient polytheistic and Buddhist roots to today's Islamic faith because of its historical position at the intersection of many civilizations. The Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE) saw widespread Zoroastrian practice until Alexander the Great brought Greek polytheism and Hellenistic influences during his conquests in the fourth century BCE (Holt, 1989). During the Kushan Empire (1st–4th century CE), Buddhism emerged as the predominant religion in Afghanistan, which became a key educational hub for Buddhism, as demonstrated by the monumental Buddhas of Bamiyan (Frye, 1996). The Ghaznavid Empire promoted Sunni Islam from the 10th to the 12th century while suppressing pre-Islamic traditions, which facilitated the gradual conversion of the region after Islam arrived through Arab conquests in the seventh century. Mahmud of Ghazni conducted military operations in the 11th century, which accelerated the decline of Buddhism and Hinduism (Duprees, 1980). The Naqshbandi and Chishti Sufi orders significantly influenced Afghan religious identity over time, while the Hazara people preserved their unique Shia Muslim identity (Canfield, 2002). British and Soviet interventions combined with the emergence of Wahhabi and Deobandi ideologies shaped modern Afghanistan and influenced groups like the Taliban (Edwards, 2002). The U.S. intervention in Afghanistan led to a temporary pluralistic religious environment in 2001, but the Taliban's resurgence in 2021 fostered extreme Sunni Islamic interpretations, which intensified sectarian discrimination and targeted Hazara, Hindu, and Sikh populations (Giustozzi, 2018). Today, Afghanistan stands as a majority Sunni Muslim country where religious minorities encounter growing limitations and violent persecution.

In every Afghan household today, traces of the country's rich religious history can still be found. Many traditions are practiced without a clear understanding of their origins, as they have been passed down through generations. The influence of past religions, whether they left by force or remained through gradual assimilation, continues to shape Afghan customs and ways of life. Even individuals who claim to have had a secular upbringing are still profoundly influenced by religious traditions, as many aspects of daily life that may not explicitly align with contemporary Islamic teachings stem from earlier faiths. Given Afghanistan's deeply religious and traditional nature, every child grows up immersed in faith and cultural customs within their micro, meso, and macro social environments. Afghan society operates within a communal framework where reverence for and vulnerability to a higher power are deeply ingrained. As a result, sending children to madrasas (Islamic religious schools), Mosques, or to an elder in the family to learn religious texts and teaching is often expected, reflecting the unspoken societal norms that shape religious education and upbringing and that early childhood identity formation is influence by religion, rituals, and traditional practices. Following are the testimonies of my study participants about those early childhood religious experiences.

> "All the children in our village were required to study the Quran. It wasn't a choice. Going to the Shia mosque was something every child was expected to do. It wasn't because my parents were particularly religious." *(Male 32, from Ghazni)*

> "I was bullied at madrasa for not being good enough. My cousin was better than me at reciting the Quran. At that time, I really wanted to become a *Hafiz* [a Muslim who knows the Quran by heart]." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

> "I went to the mosque every morning for Quranic studies, just like all the kids my age. Our *Qari* [Mullah] terrified me. He never beat me but watching him beat other kids was enough to make me dread going. His stick was enough of a warning." *(Female, 29, Nangarhar)*
>
> "I finished the entire Quran at a madrasa in Pakistan. It was a strict religious environment, very different from home." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*
>
> "I used to sing *Nawha* for the mourners who hit themselves during Muharram. I was the youngest in *Deydarat* [a town in Ghazni province] to do this. My father even bought me Iranian books of *Nawha*. One time, I missed the rhythm, and the lead mourner called for a different singer. But I loved my voice, so I practiced relentlessly and returned every night to sing. I didn't have the traditional *Nawha* clothes. My mother was very superstitious and wouldn't let us wear black. When I grew up, I made my own black clothes, and nothing happened." *(Male 32, from Ghazni)*

These stories show how Afghan children go through religious studies because it is expected by their family, neighbors, and the larger community. Going to madrasa or learning the Quran at the mosque or going to a religious neighbor's house to learn the Quran is not just a choice but something that everyone around them does, making it a part of daily life. Children feel pressure to do well, like the girl who was bullied for not being as good as her cousin at reciting the Quran. Teachers at these schools can be strict, and even if they don't hit the children, the fear of punishment is enough to make them nervous. In some cases, kids push themselves to

meet these expectations, like the boy who practiced singing Nawha every night after making a mistake in front of the mourners. Nawha is a form of Islamic elegy or lamentation recited during mourning ceremonies, especially in Shia Muslim communities**.** It is commonly performed during Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar, to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and his companions at the Battle of Karbala**.** These experiences show that religious education is not just about faith, it's also about fitting into the family, the streets, and the neighborhood, where being part of religious traditions is a way of belonging.

> "My father's side of the family isn't religious at all, not strictly religious, anyway. Of course, they are Muslim, but they are not rigid about it. My mother's side, however, is extremely religious… My mother's family never viewed us as good Muslims. Even today, they judge us, my brothers wearing pants and shirts, my father shaving his beard. They don't approve of any of it. They even say that going to school isn't *Shar'i* [Islamic] and that my mother should have sent us to a madrasa instead." *(Female, 28, Nangarhar)*

> "My mother used to bake twelve *fateer* [homemade sweetbread] in honor of the twelve Imams. She did this twice a month, and my sister and I would accompany her and our aunts to *Baghcha*, where women tied pieces of cloth [*Dosmal*] as offerings. People would bring *fateer* or potatoes as *Nazer* [a religious offering], and there was always food available because everyone shared… I didn't really believe in any of it. I went to the mosque for fun and for the free food. My father didn't believe either, but he never stopped my mother from practicing her faith.

The *fateer* she made could have fed us for three days, but she continued to make offerings." *(Male, 32, Ghazni)*

"My aunt and neighbor taught me how to pray and perform *wudu* [ablution] for the first time. I used to go to the mosque every Friday for *Jumu'ah* prayer. And I remember my one constant *dua* [prayer]: 'Please God, have my back, protect my *abro* [honor], and help me.' To this day, I don't know why I always repeated that same prayer for years." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

"My grandmother always told my mother that reading the Quran was mandatory, but everything else, education, schooling, was not Islamic." *(Female, 21, Kabul)*

"I have never been to a madrasa. I learned how to pray in school, and I picked up religious texts at home or from a family member who was more knowledgeable. But I have always considered myself a person of faith. Even when I was imprisoned [by the Taliban], I held onto my belief that God was there, and He would help me." *(Male, 32, Kandahar)*

"Until I was 12, I remember my mother praying and my father reading the Quran and teaching my brothers. They never forced us to pray, but my father always said, 'Namaz is the backbone [*Soton*] of religion. They were strict about us learning to pray and read the Quran, but they didn't focus much on what we wore. They just told us to dress in a way that would prevent harassment, but they didn't link it to religion. But when it came to praying, fasting, and reciting the Quran, they were firm. Before we left for school, we had to pray. Before we wove

carpets, we had to pray. When we returned home, they asked if we had read our prayers."*(Female, 29, Bamyan)*

These accounts reveal the deeply personal and often contrasting ways that religious beliefs and practices are shaped within Afghan families. Faith is not just an individual experience but is influenced by generational, regional, and gendered expectations that create tension between personal belief and communal judgment. The young woman from Nangarhar experiences a divide within her own family, where her mother's relatives impose strict religious standards that cast doubt on her family's faith, illustrating how religiosity is often measured not just by belief but by outward expressions, clothing, education, and daily practices. Similarly, the young man from Ghazni recalls religious rituals centered around food offerings and communal gatherings, not because of deep personal faith but as a family tradition intertwined with social interactions and shared meals. His father, despite his skepticism, allows his mother to continue her devotion, demonstrating how religious practices persist even within households where belief is questioned.

The young woman from Kabul and the young man from Kandahar, despite not receiving formal religious education in a madrasa, find faith through informal learning at home and in school, suggesting that belief is not always dictated by structured religious institutions but instead absorbed through personal encounters in children's environments. Meanwhile, the young woman from Bamyan illustrates a practical approach to religion in her family, where prayer and Quranic recitation were central obligations, while clothing and appearance were framed more as social protection than religious duty. Together, these narratives challenge the idea of a singular

Afghan religious experience, showing instead that faith is shaped through family dynamics, personal agency, and the expectations of the broader community. It doesn't matter if a child is born into a non-religious family; the larger community still expects them to participate in religious teachings from an early age.

> "My father, who was in the military, sometimes jokes about the Taliban era. Back then, he was forced to grow his beard long. Now, when he sees old photos, he laughs and says, 'I never wanted this beard, it was forced on me.' If you didn't grow a beard, you couldn't work anywhere; you'd be punished or even tortured." *(Female, 28, Nangarhar)*

> "Religious? No, not really. [She smiles.] It's bad to say, but during Ramadan, all the men in my family would eat. There was always lunch, dinner, and even breakfast for them. But the women, only the women, fasted. Even now, since 2018, that hasn't changed. Once, my uncle [*mama*] visited from Pakistan. To this day, he jokes about how much he loved Kabul, because everyone was eating! After that trip, he stopped fasting too." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

> "My mother is religious, but not overly so. I have prayed, fasted, and gone to mosques for prayers. One day, during a family conversation, my mother asked me, 'Why don't you pray?' I told her, '*Nana* [mother], right now, I am praying for you.'" *(Male, 28, Bamyan)*

> "In our family, no one is extremely religious. My father is not religious at all, and my mother is normal, she is a believer but not an extremist. My father was never

> religious and struggled to cope with the harsh realities of life. But during Muharram, he and I would go to *Takia* together. My mother, on the other hand, is a deeply godly young woman. She follows the teachings of Abulfazl Abbas, the brother of Imam Hussain. Even now, when faced with difficulties, she turns to religious rituals." *(Male 32, from Ghazni)*

These stories show how religion is practiced differently within families, shaped by personal beliefs, societal rules, and gender roles. The young woman from Nangarhar shares how her father, once in the military, was forced to grow a beard under Taliban rule, highlighting how religious expression was often not a choice but a requirement enforced through fear. The young woman from Ghazni points out the double standards in fasting, while women in her family observed Ramadan strictly, the men continued eating, revealing how religious expectations can be applied unequally based on gender. The young man from Bamyan expresses faith in a personal way, showing how prayer can take different forms, not always in the traditional sense but as an act of love and care. Meanwhile, the young man from Ghazni describes a family where religion is not extreme, yet both his parents approach it differently, his father struggling with faith, while his mother finds strength in religious rituals. These accounts highlight that in many Afghan families, religion is not rigid but varies across individuals, shaped by history, societal pressures, and personal experiences.

The majority of my study participants experienced religious practices within their homes. Some were sent to religious institutions, such as madrasas and mosques, to receive formal instruction in Islamic teachings, while others observed their families practicing in their daily lives. Many were also expected to actively participate in religious rituals and gatherings due to

societal and familial expectations, as Afghan communities place significant emphasis on collective religious observance. In Afghanistan, religion is deeply embedded in both the private and public spheres, influencing social interactions, moral values, and communal structures. As a result, the childhood of these Afghan participants was shaped by religious practices in various ways, contributing to the formation of their identities and sense of belonging within their families and communities relying on a supreme power.

c. Learning Us and Them: How Ethnic Divides Are Passed Down in Childhood

Before becoming a refugee in Pakistan, I went to kindergarten and first grade in Afghanistan, and of course, as a child, you learn much more in those spaces than just what your parents and family expose you to. It was there that I experienced my first dose of ethnic divide. At that time, of course, I didn't know what it was, but I learned that I had to use what I learned against the "other." I remember seeing two kids fighting, and one of them saying to the other in a poetic way: **"***Hazara dam dara, hagai wacho taira, pa Akhtar ba jango, sha mela ba pa kow***"** (Hazara has a tail and lays eggs, we should get those eggs for an egg fight during Eid festival). I saw the other kid, who was Hazara, become furious. But I had no idea what it meant, and I saw the Hazara kid end up hitting the kid who sang this song.

That day, when I told my mother about the incident, she laughed and said, *"Do they still remember these songs?"* She told me that when she was in school, this was the song they would sing to Hazara girls when they fought with them. She also said there was another song they would sing to Tajik girls: "*Farsi ban tar khra qurban, gooz ya wacha par bam, bam w naridi, gooz ya shak w dridi.*" (A Persian speaker, less than a donkey, they fart on the roof, when the roof falls, their fart stays strong.) And the Tajik girls would sing this in response: "*Pashtun da*

khara zangoon, par wachawa palana, par spor sa Farsi bana." (Pashtun is the donkey's knee, put a saddle on it, and ride it while speaking Persian). I remember this as a funny memory, my mother telling me these songs, but I don't remember her ever explaining what Hazara or Tajik meant.

Later, in first grade, I remember our class would start at 11:30 am, and all of us kids would bring lunch because we had a break at 1 pm. My mother would pack me a piece of bread that she baked in the tandoor, along with a water bottle filled with yogurt drink. I didn't like it, but that was my lunch every day. There was a Hazara girl who would sit beside me during lunchtime. Her lunchbox always smelled delicious, but she would stare at my bread and bottle, and I would always wish to eat what she had. One day, she gathered the courage and asked me if I wanted to exchange. I happily agreed. She had something like oats porridge, and the moment I took a spoonful, I don't think I had ever tasted anything so good. But then I remembered being told that Hazara people urinate on any food they serve to Pashtuns. So I didn't eat more. Until today, I always ask my Hazara friends if they know what that dish might have been, because I can't forget the taste. This context is important to share because the following section is about how ethnic learning, about "us" vs. "others", starts in childhood. Maybe not in systematic ways, but even when you don't question it, as a child you learn to despise, distrust, and even hate the "other".

The experiences of ethnicity in childhood among my participants varied significantly based on their upbringing and social environment. For some, ethnicity was not a prominent factor in their early lives, as they grew up in mixed communities where different ethnic groups coexisted peacefully. Growing up in villages where Pashtuns and Hazaras lived together, some

participants formed close relationships across ethnic lines, often sharing language, education, and daily life without recognizing ethnic divisions. In bilingual households, where parents spoke different languages, ethnic differences were not emphasized, and children were raised with a sense of unity rather than separation. However, for others, the strong awareness of ethnic identity and its implications developed over time.

Those who lived in Pashtun-majority areas became more aware of tribal affiliations and internal conflicts, observing the complexities of inter-tribal relationships. In more homogenous environments, where exposure to other ethnic groups was limited, ethnic identity was not as immediately visible but still shaped perceptions of the broader social landscape. As they grew older, some participants became more conscious of societal narratives surrounding ethnicity, particularly concerning political and historical events. This awareness often emerged when encountering discussions about the Taliban, as some recalled childhood questions about their identity being answered in ethnic terms. These reflections highlight how childhood environments shaped early understandings of ethnicity, sometimes fostering coexistence and other times planting the seeds of awareness about ethnic divisions.

As an Afghan researcher, I was not surprised to find that most participants had a deep understanding of their own ethnic identity, often viewing themselves as victims of wrongs by other ethnic groups while possessing limited or generalized knowledge about other ethnic groups. This pattern is rooted in Afghanistan’s historical and socio-political realities, where ethnic narratives are shaped by family and community story-telling, intergenerational biases, political structures, and, in some cases, personal experiences. Childhood perceptions of ethnicity were largely influenced by their elders' beliefs and their observations of their immediate

surroundings, in which their elders would act and react in certain ways towards the “other, ” reinforcing divisions rather than fostering cross-ethnic understanding. In many cases, children internalized a simplistic "us vs. them" mentality, where the "other" was often framed as a threat or antagonist.

Several factors contributed to this limited inter-ethnic awareness. Geographic isolation, exacerbated by decades of war and the destruction of roads and passes, and restricted mobility made it difficult for Afghans to travel between provinces, preventing exposure to diverse communities. Conflict not only reinforced territorial and ethnic boundaries but also deepened mistrust, as different ethnic groups often found themselves on opposing sides of political and military struggles. In rural areas, where media and education were historically limited and news was shaped by specific ethnic perspectives, the lack of direct interaction with other groups further entrenched stereotypes. Even in more urban and diverse settings, interactions between ethnicities were often shaped by deeply rooted historical tensions rather than opportunities for meaningful engagement. These realities highlight how Afghanistan’s complex ethnic landscape is not just a matter of identity but also historical, political, and social conditioning. While inter-ethnic harmony has existed in many Afghan communities, broader national narratives have often reinforced divisions rather than unity.

> "I have been raised in the arms of a Pashtun young woman [*da damani Pashtoon*]), a young woman from Wardak. She was our neighbor. In Khwaja Omari, where we lived, the neighboring village was called Bedmushk, and everyone there was Pashtun. Two of the boys from that place would come to study English, and my father would teach them. There were two other

neighboring boys, Nasimgul and Said Rahman, who are still my friends; they were in my school, and they were Pashtun. I think in my village, because Pashtuns and Hazaras were living together, we didn't have any issues like that." *(Male, 32, Ghazni)*

"We talk in Farsi with our father and in Pashto with our mother, all of us siblings are like that. My mom and dad speak Pashto together. It was always weird that despite these many differences, we were getting along. As I grew up, I realized and learned about racism and discrimination, but at that time, when I was a kid, I had never felt or understood or knew about discrimination or differences. My parents also never taught me that a certain group is better than another. My father used to say that these discriminations are learned from older generations and passed down to the younger generation." *(Female, 28, Nangarhar)*

"I lived majority of my life among Pashtun-populated places. I went to schools where most of the people were Pashtun. But within our own village, for example, there are different tribes of Pashtuns, and I was completely aware of tribal politics and tribal conflicts within Pashtun communities in the city." *(Male, 30, Kandahar)*

"My father is Tajik, and my mother is Pashtun. When people see me, they think I'm either Hazara or Uzbek, but I'm neither. When I was four or five years old, I knew I was Sunni. My mom is Pashtun, and, of course, she is super racist towards Hazaras. I'm sure she had an impact on us because she was our mother, and she would exhibit her hatred towards them on a daily basis. As a kid, I always felt that

> the Hazaras were not good people or that they were in conflict with Pashtuns. I knew these issues from that age. My mother is from Kandahar. I don't know if it's true, but she says my father's grandmother was Hazara. I don't know if it's true, but somehow, throughout our lives, I have noticed that she has so much prejudice against Hazaras. For example, my brother was once in a relationship with a Hazara girl, and my mom told him that if he ever married her, she would disown him. Whenever my parents fought, my mom would always tell my father that he has Hazara blood in him, and that's why they would never be on good terms. My mom was Pashtun, but she could not speak Pashtu. So she was Pashtun by ethnicity, but she didn't know the language." *(Female, 26, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

These accounts show how childhood exposure to different ethnicities can shape, challenge, or reinforce perceptions of identity and social divisions. For some, growing up in mixed communities fosters a sense of coexistence, as seen in the Hazara young man from Ghazni, who was raised alongside Pashtun neighbors and classmates without experiencing ethnic tension. Similarly, the woman from Nangarhar, raised in a bilingual household where her parents spoke both Pashto and Farsi, initially viewed diversity as natural and only later became aware of racism as a learned behavior passed down by older generations. However, exposure does not always lead to acceptance. The young woman from Mazar-e-Sharif recalls how her mother's deep-seated prejudice against Hazaras was a constant presence in her upbringing, shaping her early views of ethnic relations. Despite her mixed heritage, she internalized ethnic biases from a young age, showing how family influence can override personal exposure to diversity. The young man from Kandahar, though accustomed to living among different Pashtun tribes, was more attuned to tribal divisions rather than broader ethnic differences, demonstrating how

identity can be shaped by the specific social structures one grows up in. These stories highlight that while childhood experiences in diverse environments can promote understanding and integration, they can also reinforce inherited biases, depending on family influence, community dynamics, and personal interactions.

> "The area we live in, I didn't see other ethnicities a lot. The majority of the people who live here are Qezelbash people." *(Female, 22, Kabul)*

> *"[Hesitating and trying to find the right words]* I don't mean you [referring to me as the interviewer], but when I was growing up, I had a question, who are the Taliban? Who are they? And the answer was always: They are Pashtun. They are Pashtun." *(Male, 28, Bamyan)*

> "I remember when an attack used to happen, people would say that Pashtuns did this. They didn't mention the Taliban. So I used to hate Pashtuns so much because I had this monstrous image of them, killers. The younger me used to think of Pashtuns as really, really bad. Until I arrived in Kandahar, Spin Boldak border. If you remember, the border is very crowded and not nice. People are so *wahshatnak* [terrifying], but the freedom I felt there, I swear I had never felt the freedom before. And I think that was an opening for me to see Pashtuns in a different way, but still, I had my hate for them." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

> "Everyone was Hazara in the city, and everyone around us was making carpets. Everyone I knew was busy in this job. In the four years that I lived in Kabul after coming from Pakistan, I never saw *Shahr-e-Naw* or *Cinema Pamir*. My mother

(بنده خدا) used to go to *Cinema Pamir* for work, cleaning grapes and walnuts. My sister and I were making carpets. I never wished to visit *Shahr-e-Naw* or *Cinema Pamir* because no one really told me there were parks there, and in the parks, there were swings and playgrounds for children. No one told me about these things. I was just happy that on some Fridays, I had free time and could go outside to play marbles. That was my *delkhoshi* [happiness]." *(Male, 28, Bamyan)*

"My friends, cousins, and I were playing outside. So we used to play and see these *morchas* [ants]. The small ones we used to call '*Morcha Sayeed'* [Sayeeds are from the lineage of prophet Muhammad] and the bigger ones '*Morcha Awghoo*' [Hazara people call Pashtuns Awghoo]. And we used to kill the *Morcha Awghoo*. I don't remember exactly where this discussion took place, or who told us to do so, or how we came up with this idea. I really don't." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

"My school friend was Hazara. The moment I got to know that she was Hazara, I would look at her strangely. I don't know why, but I just felt like she was this other thing. [Laughs.] I would imagine how she prayed. I would always imagine them praying with open hands. I don't think I was aware or asking questions about it, but I remember that I would always back the Pashtun girl whenever there was a fight. I think this was the influence of my mom. First, because she was Pashtun, and second, because she really pumped a lot of hatred into us towards Hazara people." *(Female, 26, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

> "To be honest, before coming to Afghanistan, I hated other ethnicities because I was living in Borori, Hazara Town, and there were no Pashtun families. But I knew Pashtuns. I did not know that Tajiks or Uzbeks existed. But I knew who Pashtuns were. I don't know exactly how, I don't remember any specific discussion, but I knew they were bad people. I knew they had killed Hazaras. These discussions must have taken place around me." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

These stories reveal how isolation and lack of exposure to other ethnicities shape perceptions, reinforce biases, and create rigid understandings of identity. Growing up in ethnically homogenous communities means that many participants formed their earliest ideas about other groups based on hearsay, fear, and inherited narratives rather than personal interactions. The young woman from Ghazni recalls how, as a child, she instinctively associated Pashtuns with violence, shaped by the way attacks were discussed in her community. It was only after traveling to Kandahar that she began to see them differently, though her ingrained biases remained. Similarly, another young woman from Ghazni grew up in an area where she never encountered Tajiks or Uzbeks, but she still "knew" Pashtuns were bad, evidence that prejudices were absorbed from family discussions and community beliefs rather than direct experience.

The young man from Bamyan, surrounded only by fellow Hazaras, had such a limited understanding of the outside world that he never even knew parks existed in Kabul, highlighting how physical isolation also restricts social and cultural knowledge. The childhood game of killing "*Morcha Awghoo*" (Pashtun ants) is a striking example of how ethnic biases are embedded in daily life, even in innocent play, without children fully understanding where these ideas come from. The young woman from Mazar-e-Sharif describes her instinctive sense of

otherness when she first met a Hazara girl, showing how familial influences, such as a mother's prejudices, can shape how children categorize and judge others. These stories highlight that when communities remain isolated, identity is formed in opposition to an "other" that is often feared or demonized, making exposure to diversity a crucial factor in breaking cycles of inherited bias.

None of my participants mentioned questioning the ethnic divisions in their childhood, and this is not surprising. As children, individuals have little control over where they live or how their environments shape their understanding of society. More importantly, many of these young people grew up during times of war, post-war instability, or as refugees in neighboring countries, where survival and adaptation were far more pressing concerns than questioning ethnic divides. In such circumstances, children often absorb the narratives present in their surroundings without critically analyzing them.

Ethnic divisions in Afghanistan are not passive or incidental, they are actively reinforced by parents, relatives, local leaders, political actors, warlords, and conflict-driven narratives that have been passed down for generations. These divisions are deeply rooted in Afghanistan's political history (See chapter 4), where ethnic identity has often been weaponized to mobilize support, justify violence, and secure power and resources. From the monopolization of state resources by one group to the systematic marginalization of others, ethnic identity has played a defining role in shaping social and political structures. Additionally, geography has contributed to ethnic separation. Provinces like Bamiyan and Daikundi are predominantly Hazara, while provinces such as Kandahar and Paktia have strong Pashtun majorities, and Badakhshan remains

largely Tajik. This geographic division has historically limited interethnic interactions, reinforcing the "othering" of different groups.

Within families, elders often act as the primary transmitters of ethnic narratives. While some elders, particularly those with higher education and exposure to diverse communities, challenge divisive rhetoric, the overwhelming influence of inherited biases remains strong across all ethnic groups. Whether it is the portrayal of Pashtuns as aggressors, Hazaras as perpetual victims, or Tajiks as the elite class, these narratives shape how children view each other from a young age. These biases become even more ingrained in ethnically homogenous communities, where interactions with other groups are minimal or nonexistent.

The consequence of these divisions is a cycle of misunderstanding and mistrust that extends into adulthood. Many participants recalled growing up with strong negative perceptions of other ethnicities, often without ever interacting with them. These biases were only challenged later in life when direct interactions, such as traveling to new provinces or meeting individuals outside their community, forced them to reconsider what they had been taught. However, the forces driving ethnic divisions in Afghanistan remain strong, making it difficult for even those with broader exposure to fully escape the deep-seated narratives of ethnic rivalry.

5. Situational Adulthood: Gendered Experiences

When I think of my adolescent years, to remember when I stopped feeling like I was a kid, I only remember the mocking of my maternal aunt and grandmother on different occasions where they would tell my mother “she is ready to be married.” Those instances were when my grandmother saw that the bread I cooked on the big round pan (women from Kandahar cook thin round bread like chapati but very big in size) was more round and equally thin compared to my

mother's, or when my mother told my aunt that I got my monthly menstruation when I was only 11 years of age. Everything around me changed by the behaviors of the adults in the family. Therefore, I didn't feel like a child and even felt older than my brother, who was three years older than me and was still playing in the streets. Suddenly, I became an adult. These experiences deeply shaped my sense of identity during adolescence. Identity formation, especially in adolescence, is not only about how young people see themselves but also how others see and treat them. In my case, the adult-like expectations placed on me, through gendered markers like cooking skills and menstruation, disrupted a gradual transition to adulthood and instead forced me to prematurely embody adult responsibilities and roles. My identity as a "girl" suddenly became entangled with ideas of marriage and womanhood, shaping how I saw myself and how others perceived me.

Adolescence, as a distinct phase of identity formation, is often shaped by socio-cultural and political contexts. In Afghanistan, the concept of age and the transition from childhood to adulthood are deeply influenced by gender, war, economic (in)stability, and family circumstances. Unlike in many Western contexts where adolescence is recognized as a formative period between childhood and adulthood, many Afghan youth experience a more abrupt transition, skipping what would be considered "adolescence" in other societies. For girls, this abrupt transition is even more gendered, as the onset of puberty is not just a biological marker but a social signal that shifts how the community treats them, shaping their emerging identity and often limiting their opportunities for self-exploration. In narratives of my study participants, the designation of childhood, *Jawan* (youth), and adulthood is conditional rather than strictly chronological. For girls, *Jawani* (the period of being youth) is often linked to access to education. Those who attend middle or high school may experience a phase of adolescence

where their identity formation is influenced by peers, teachers, and an expanded worldview. However, for many, this phase is skipped entirely, as marriage, often determined by familial and social expectations, marks their immediate transition to adulthood regardless of their actual age.

a. Coming of Age, Worlds Apart: Gendered Paths to Adulthood in Afghanistan

Gendered expectations shape the experiences of Afghan girls from an early age, restricting their mobility, education, and sense of self. The narratives shared by the young women in my study reveal the deep societal pressures that dictate their behavior, limit their aspirations, and reinforce rigid gender norms. From being forced to abandon education to care for siblings to being shamed for growing up too fast, these young women's stories highlight the ways in which gender roles are imposed and internalized. Yet, amidst these constraints, moments of resistance and confidence emerge, challenging traditional boundaries and reshaping their identities. This section explores how my participants as young girls navigated societal expectations, familial pressures, and their own evolving sense of self in the face of deeply entrenched gender norms.

> "Towards getting 12 or 13, my family really put pressure on me that I should be different, I should be like a girl, I should not play with boys, I should not run around in the streets like a boy, I should not be a tomboy." *(Female, 26, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

> "Once I reached the age of 16, I had to stop going to English classes because my mother was working, and I had to be home to take care of the home and my siblings." *(Female, 23, Kabul)*

> "My mom told me that I got my period early because I picked up heavy things, and that if anyone attacked me sexually, it would be my mistake because I grew up fast." *(Female, 26, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

> "My father and mother used to cut my hair very short, and my second home became the barber shop. I remember crying every time I went there because I wanted to dress like girl and was tired of acting as a boy" *(Female, 21, Kabul)*

> "I was the only girl among my father's male friends, and he would introduce me and talk about my education. That boosted my confidence and made me feel equal, but the moment I got my period, it changed. He would not take me with him" *(Female, 26, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

> "I was not allowed to go to Kankur preparation courses because my little siblings were going to school, and I had to be home to take care of them." *(Female, 23, Kabul)*

> "Before the Taliban [second regime], most young girls were going to school, and it became normal for girls to be educated. Unfortunately, the Taliban stopped that again." *(Male, 30, Kandahar)*

These stories highlight how gendered expectations shape the lives of girls and young women, influencing their behavior, opportunities, and self-perception from an early age. Girls face intense pressure to conform to societal norms, as seen in the experience of the young woman from Mazar-e-Sharif, who was discouraged from playing with boys and told to act "like a girl" as she reached puberty. Similarly, another young woman from Kabul was forced to leave

her English classes at 16 years of age to take on household and childcare responsibilities, showing how girls' education is often sacrificed for domestic duties. Gender expectations also extend to bodily experiences, with one girl being blamed for early puberty and told that any sexual violence would be her fault, reinforcing harmful narratives of shame and self-blame for females.

These gendered experiences deeply affect identity formation during adolescence, a critical period when young people are developing a sense of self, autonomy, and belonging. For girls and young women, internalizing expectations around behavior, appearance, and responsibilities limits their ability to explore different aspects of their identity freely. The pressure to "act like a girl" and avoid boys not only restricts their social interactions but also shapes their understanding of what is acceptable and possible for them as women. Being forced to abandon education for domestic work requires girls that their value lies in caregiving rather than personal growth or intellectual achievement, shaping identities rooted in service to others rather than self-realization. Furthermore, the internalization of shame and blame related to bodily changes and potential sexual violence imposes a negative self-image, where girls learn to see their own bodies as sources of danger and dishonor. Altogether, these pressures confine girls' identity formation to narrow, socially prescribed roles, limiting their opportunities to develop a confident, autonomous sense of self during their adolescent years.

In addition, gender roles can also be imposed in ways that deny personal identity, as seen in the young woman whose parents forced her to keep her hair short and present as a boy, making her feel trapped between expectations. For some, growing up around brothers or male figures shaped their habits and confidence, either reinforcing traditional masculinity or

challenging ideas of what girls could achieve, as seen in the young woman whose father proudly introduced her to his male peers as an equal and worthy of being educated. The young man from Kandahar reflects on the Taliban's restrictions on girls' education, showing how gender roles are also shaped by political forces, with progress in girls' and women's education being repeatedly undone. These experiences demonstrate how gendered expectations are deeply ingrained in Afghan society, shaping everything from personal identity to educational opportunities and social mobility.

> "I was 14 when people started asking when my father would give me away in marriage. If you're 15 or 16 and still not engaged, it's considered bad. My father would always say no, he would say she is studying." (Female, 21, Kabul)

> "I always had the support of my father and mother, they knew how much it was important for me to finish my studies until university level and beyond, therefore, they would often respond negatively to my mother side of the family when they preasured my family that why are they not marrying me and my sisters off." (Female, 27, Nangarhar)

> "As soon as a girl turned eight or nine years old, my grandmother wouldn't let her play in the streets. She even stopped us from going to English classes."(Female, 21, Kabul)

> "My sister was really young when my father died so my mother made sure she gets married, she got married at really young age. And I'm sure 100% she was made it because my father was not there anymore and my mom was scared to

> have a young daughter at home and not having a man my father is a protector there.” (Male, 24, Kandahar)
>
> "My older sister was like a mother, she cooked for us, washed our clothes, and took care of us while our parents worked. They put all these responsibilities on her, even though she was just 17, and she got married when she didn’t finish her school, although she wanted to go to university." (Female, 21, Kabul)

These narratives of young women reflect the deep entanglement of gendered expectations and family pressures in shaping identity formation within Afghan society. Young women, in particular, are confronted with early and persistent societal demands for marriage, which collide against their own aspirations for education and autonomy. The accounts from Kabul and Nangarhar highlight how parental support, especially from fathers, can serve as a crucial buffer against these pressures, allowing young women to envision alternative futures tied to education and self-development and in the long run help them understand who they are. Yet, the male voice from Kandahar reveals how, in the absence of a male "protector, " girls are quickly pushed into early marriage as a means of preserving family honor, showing how patriarchal norms define women’s identities through dependency and control. Furthermore, the account of a young woman whose sister bore adult responsibilities at 17 illustrates how gendered roles are imposed early, shaping girls' identities around caregiving and sacrifice, often at the expense of their own ambitions. This aligns closely with Eva Kittay’s (1999) analysis of “dependency work, ” where care is expected of some, particularly women, within unjust systems, often without recognition or reciprocity. The sister’s labor here illustrates how caregiving becomes not just a familial obligation but a stratified social expectation that defines identity itself. Carol Gilligan’s (1982)

ethics of care further illuminates how young women's identities are forged not through abstract moral codes but through relational responsibilities to parents and siblings. Collectively, these stories underscore how gender, family dynamics, and societal expectations converge to shape the pathways through which young women negotiate their identities.

The experiences of my male participants as boys growing up amid violence and loss reveal a distinct trajectory of responsibility, expectation, and resilience. Unlike women, who often navigate the aftermath of war through displacement, loss of educational opportunities, early marriage, or caregiving, men are frequently thrust into premature roles of leadership and burdened with societal and familial expectations. The loss of a father, a common tragedy in conflict zones, not only signifies personal grief but also marks a sudden transition into adulthood, one where survival is intertwined with duty for my young participants. These narratives illustrate how boys, shaped by the weight of loss and the aspirations of their fathers, struggled to navigate their own paths, often striving to balance personal grief with communal obligation. These experiences shape boys' identity formation during adolescence by anchoring their sense of self in responsibility, strength, and duty from an early age. For many young men, adolescence, a time typically associated with exploration and self-discovery, becomes instead a period marked by heavy expectations to "become the man of the house" following a father's death or absence.

This sudden shift forces boys to suppress vulnerability and internalize notions of masculinity tied to providing for and protecting their families, shaping an identity built on resilience but also emotional restraint. Additionally, growing up in a society where gender roles are strictly enforced, boys' identities are shaped in opposition to girls, expected to be strong, unemotional, and capable, while girls are associated with domesticity and caregiving. The

following quotes capture the ways in which men internalized responsibility, grappled with societal pressures, and found resilience in their lived experiences.

> "The last thing my father told me was, 'My son, now everything and all family is your *Amanat* [your responsibility]. Now you are the head of the family.' I was only 16 years old." *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

> "I knew many people in our community whose fathers never came back. I felt this is it. Now I am responsible for everyone in my family." *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

> "I think the Islamic education I got taught me that neither my father's killing was the end of life, nor was war the solution, but I had to get up and hold my family together." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

> "Everyone looked at me as if I was owing something to my father because all of them wanted me to be as smart and achieved like my father." *(Male, 24, Badakhshan)*

> "I wanted to fulfill my father's dream. He passed away before seeing children go to school in his village, so I promised myself that I would work to educate all of Afghanistan." *(Male, 32, Kandahar)*

These quotes give a glimpse of how boys' and young men's experiences in Afghan society are shaped by heavy expectations of responsibility, legacy, and resilience from an early age. Unlike girls and women, who often face restrictions based on gender roles, men are expected to step into positions of leadership and duty, especially in the absence of a father. The

male participants of my study find these leadership and responsibilities of legacy to be restrictive, although they may be positioning them in a higher place in the social hierarchy. The young man from Ghazni described how, at just 16 years of age, he was told he was now the head of his family, expected to provide and protect, regardless of his own immaturity or emotional readiness. This sense of duty is not just personal but communal, one young man from Badakhshan felt pressure to live up to his father's intellectual reputation, while another from Kandahar saw his father's unfulfilled dream of education as a responsibility he had to carry forward for an entire nation. These experiences highlight how Afghan boys and young men are socialized to take on the heavy burden of sacrifice and leadership at an early age, tying their self-worth to their ability to meet demanding familial and societal expectations, often without space to process their own struggles, insecurities or grief.

These experiences shape boys' identity formation by embedding in them a deep sense of obligation and self-worth tied to fulfilling roles of protector, provider, and bearer of family and societal legacy. During adolescence, a critical time for developing personal identity, boys are pushed to align their emerging sense of self with externally imposed expectations of masculinity, leadership, and resilience. Being told to "be the head of the family" at a young age forces boys to suppress vulnerability and prioritize responsibility over personal growth, shaping an identity rooted in duty rather than individual aspiration. The pressure to uphold a father's intellectual or educational legacy, as seen in the cases from Badakhshan and Kandahar, also instills in boys a sense that their worth is measured by their ability to succeed where others could not, turning their identity formation into a project of redemption and fulfillment of family dreams.

From an early age, many youth internalize the idea that their identity is not solely personal, but also collective and representational as a moral obligation. They are not just "themselves, " but also their family's hope, their father's legacy, or their community's exception. One young man said, "I always looked up to my brothers. I wanted to be like them." Another noted, "My father always said that the lack of education held us back… so I told myself I would build a school again one day." These statements reveal how youth absorb family struggles and aspirations into their sense of self. The pressure to fulfill someone else's dream becomes a core part of who they are, a form of moral inheritance that blurs the line between self and other.

This process often leaves little room for emotional exploration or acknowledgment of personal desires, as boys internalize the belief that to be a man means to carry the burdens of others. Thus, their adolescence is shaped not by freedom or self-discovery but by the need to meet high expectations, forming identities deeply marked by sacrifice, endurance, and unspoken struggles.

> "My father was also working but I don't remember what it was, I do remember we didn't work neither me or my sister until my father was alive." (Male, 24, Kandahar)

> "My adolescent years have passed while I was busy to build our own home. I was studying at school and also working. I would study at home and only go for exams to school, the rest of the time I would work. I was responsible for making a house for the family." (Male, 31, Ghazni)

> “My brother although he was so young, but he accepted his responsibility as a big brother as does in Afghanistan, and he never disappointed us.” (Female, 27, Nangarhar)

> “When my grandparents died, I was 16 years old, my dad sat me down and told me listen, son, now I'm also alone because my father died, and now you have to take more responsibility in the household with me.” (Male, 30, Herat)

These narratives reveal how gendered expectations around responsibility and family roles are central to the identity formation of young men and women in Afghanistan. For young men, especially, identity is shaped around the role of the provider and protector, often beginning in adolescence. The young man from Ghazni describes a life where work and education are intertwined, reflecting how his sense of self was formed around fulfilling familial duties. Similarly, the young man from Herat illustrates how the death of elders pushes boys prematurely into adult roles, as fathers consciously pass on responsibilities to their sons, shaping their identity as future heads of household. In contrast, the young man from Kandahar reflects on a time of protection and privilege while his father was alive, suggesting that male identity can also be tied to periods of dependence that abruptly end when the father is gone. For young women, like the woman from Nangarhar, male siblings' assumption of responsibility becomes a key part of their own sense of security, showing how young women’s identities are often intertwined with the actions and roles of their brothers. Collectively, these accounts show how Afghan youth’s identities are formed through navigating familial roles, responsibilities, and gendered expectations in a society shaped by both loss and duty and different gendered expectations.

b. Influence of Friends

When I'm asked about my first crush, I always talk about a Hazara boy named Hamayon from my kindergarten, who was later killed in a rocket blast. Friendships have always had a profound place in my life. At every stage, I had a friend who shaped how I saw the world. As a teenager, I had a Tajik girl friend from Herat and a Hazara boy from Ghazni. During my refugee years in Pakistan, I became friends with a Hindu boy named Vijay Kumar. I remember the first day I met him at our English language school. When he introduced himself, his name reminded me of Hindi movies (which all Afghans love). That day, as we stood in front of our educational center, drinking tea from a nearby stall, Vijay was among us. He was very social and happy. When he handed back his empty teacup to the young boy serving customers, he placed it in a big bowl filled with water, where all the dirty cups went. The stall owner shouted at the young server, saying he had made all the cups *makro* (dirty) because a Hindu had touched one. The owner ordered him to throw away all the cups in the bowl.

That experience made me question more than I ever had, especially about the assumptions I grew up with, like when people said Hazaras urinate in the food they serve to Pashtuns. I told this story at home, and my aunt asked me to have my Hindu classmate bring food from his house because some people in Afghanistan believe that if a child is late to speak, eating food from a Hindu household will help them talk. Vijay kindly brought tasty parathas. But when I saw my aunt reciting verses from the Quran and apologizing to God before giving the bread to her daughter, it shaped how I saw my world in those years. My cousin eventually spoke, I don't know if it was because of Vijay's parathas or if she would have spoken anyway, but Vijay helped me understand the foundations of how I saw myself, him, and the society around us. These friendships allowed me to see a world that wasn't visible inside my family. The

realities of other people's lives, even when “othering” was present in sarcastic ways, were broadened through my friends.

Friendships play a fundamental role in the social and emotional development of young people. Scholars in child development emphasize that peer relationships are crucial in shaping a young person’s sense of self, worldview, and emotional resilience (Brown & Larson, 2009; Hartup, 1996). Friendships serve as a space for social learning, offering opportunities to develop communication skills, emotional regulation, and a sense of belonging. Adolescents, in particular, rely on friendships to navigate complex social dynamics, experiment with identities, and develop a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996). In conflict-affected contexts such as Afghanistan, where familial and societal pressures can be overwhelming while growing up, friendships often provide an essential refuge, offering not just companionship but also exposure to new perspectives and alternative ways of thinking.

For my study participants, friendships are transformative in defining their identities, aspirations, and emotional experiences. Whether through admiration of peers, shared struggles, or moments of personal growth, friendships offer young Afghans the chance to reflect on who they are and who they want to become. The influence of friends extends beyond companionship; they introduce young people to new ideas, challenge societal norms, and provide crucial emotional support in times of uncertainty. For many, friendships help shape moral and ethical perspectives, develop critical thinking, and reinforce a sense of agency and identity. The following testimonies illustrate the profound impact of friendships on the lives of my young participants while they were growing up. They highlight how friendships can serve as a source of inspiration, transformation, and emotional connection. From intellectual admiration to the

influence of peer groups, from breaking societal barriers to experiencing moments of shared joy and support, these narratives capture the intricate ways friendships shape identity and personal growth.

> "I had a friend, his name was Basir, and he was such a smart kid. He used to read a lot of books and was the smartest student in school. He was so happy, and I thought to myself, what is different and why can I not be the same as him?" *(Male, 24, Badakhshan)*

> "In grade 9, I found friends, Dokhtar [daughter of] Bismillah Khan. These were the reputation-wala girls. We had a circle in school, always showing off who had more power. Our conversations were always about boys. She used to say that her cousin was in love with her, bringing her flowers and holding her hands. But after I met Fatima, everything changed. My vision of life changed. She told me to live a life outside my comfort zone... Before, I used to be very stupid and do stupid stuff, but she really shaped my vision of life." *(Female, 28, Punjshir)*

> "My friendship with my two friends in Quetta is a memory I want to hold onto until the end of my life. I really had the best time with them; we used to plan our futures as scientists and powerful women." *(Famle, 29, Bamyan)*

> "Our ethnic issues ended, and then religious questions started. Everyone used to pray with their hands closed, and Shiraz asked me why I didn't come to *Namaz Jamat*. I said, 'because you guys pray differently.' Then, Shiraz invited me to pray with them, and they prayed with their hands open, just like me that day only

for me. That was such an eye-opening moment for me. I realized, OMG, we are all the same. I was shocked and enlightened." *(Female, 28, Ghazni)*

"I think that at that time of my life, the things I remember most are my friends. If I think hard, I don't even remember how I was at home with my family, maybe because it wasn't so significant then. But I remember my best friends, the jokes we would make, and how we would laugh so much that we fell over. I still remember all the jokes [*maskharay*]. I remember all my teachers, we would always give them nicknames and laugh about it." *(Male, 30, Kandahar)*

"I think I got my period really early in life, and I didn't know anything about it. I was so clueless. It was really scary for me. One day, I woke up, and my entire underwear was full of blood. I didn't tell anyone, but I was scared. I went to school in that condition. After a while, I told one of my friends what was happening to me. She said, 'it's OK, you got your monthly. It happens to every young woman.' *(Female, 26, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

These stories show how friendships play a crucial role in shaping young adults' worldviews, and their sense of self often becomes a turning point where they begin to question their own identities and beliefs or those of their parents. Friends introduce new ways of thinking, challenge assumptions, and provide experiences beyond what family and community teach. The young man from Badakhshan reflects on his school friend Basir, whose intelligence and joy made him wonder what set them apart, sparking a moment of self-reflection. Similarly, the young woman from Panjshir recalls how meeting Fatima changed her perspective, pushing her to step outside her comfort zone and reconsider how she had been living.

Friendships also provide lasting emotional connections, as seen in the young woman from Bamyan, who treasures her time with her friends in Quetta more than anything else. Exposure to different religious practices also becomes a moment of realization, as the young woman from Ghazni initially saw prayer as a point of division but later discovered that people she once saw as different, but when she became friends with, prayed the same way that she did. For the young man from Kandahar, friendships were so significant that they overshadowed his memories of home, reinforcing how peer relationships shape identity during formative years. These experiences highlight how friendships serve as windows into different perspectives, becoming key moments when young people start questioning, reshaping, and expanding their sense of self. However, friendships and peer relationships can also entrench familiar ways of thinking and deepen ethnic divisions in several situations in the life experiences of my study participants. The testimonies that follow show how friends and peers sometimes reinforced existing belief systems and ethnic affiliations.

> "Until I went to university, I didn't think much about ethnicity. But when the famous fight between Hazara and Tajik students broke out at Kabul University, I realised which group I belonged to; at home, no one talked about these things. I thought I represented all students from Ghazni, but I discovered I was seen only as a Hazara representative, every *qawm*[ethnic group] had its own delegate. Sunni students could use the mosque for *Tarawih* [nightly Ramadan prayers], yet Shia students weren't allowed to hold *sina-zani* [chest-beating ritual] during Muharram. That was when I began spending time only with Hazara friends." *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

"I grew up in *Hazara Town* [Hazara-majority neighbourhood] in Pakistan, and when I came to Afghanistan, I lived in Bamyan, another Hazara province. My first exposure to non-Hazara peers came only after I moved to Kabul and worked in a ministry. I had a close Pashtun friend, but after one incident I couldn't stay friends with him. Since then, all my friends, even in Kabul, have been Hazara. We formed a deliberately exclusive group: we vetted everyone we added, and it was Hazara-only. We read books on Hazara and Afghan history and discussed how and why we are marginalised." *(Female, 29, Bamyan)*

"I had a tight circle of friends at school, rich girls, mostly Tajik or Uzbek. I never thought much about anyone else; we believed we were the smart, respectable ones. Their influence shaped my outlook: I didn't bother befriending Pashtun girls or anyone who wasn't as wealthy or politically privileged as we were." *(Female, 27, Panjshir)*

"When I went to Bishkek, senior Hazara students, who later became my friends, warned me, 'Don't get too close to the Pashtun or other non-Hazara Afghans; they'll never accept you. We have to stick together because no one else wants us.' For a long time, I believed them." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

"Even now, I can't fully trust them. I feel safer around Hazaras. It's not hate; it's just, after everything, I can't forget what happened to my father. Interacting with Pashtun youth let me see their side of reality, but that doesn't mean I could ever live comfortably in the same reality with them." *(Male, 28, Bamyan)*

> "One day at the university mosque, I saw a man praying with such devotion that I befriended him. I began attending his gatherings, only to discover later they were recruiting boys for *Lashkar-e Fatimiyun* [Iran-backed Shia militia]. His influence was so strong that I even made my family stop watching TV and insisted everyone pray." *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

Exposure to friendship in these testimonies often functions less as a bridge across difference than as a crucible that hardens inherited ethnic identities. For the young man from Ghazni, the violent Hazara–Tajik clash at Kabul University reveals an unexpected "ethnic sorting" logic, once he realizes that others see him solely as Hazara, his new Hazara-only circle confirms that identity and normalizes withdrawal from mixed-ethnic spaces. The young woman from Bamyan exhibits an even more deliberate pattern: after a rupture with a Pashtun colleague, she and her peers form a vetted, Hazara-exclusive reading group that centres shared grievances, turning friendship into an echo chamber of collective memory and marginalization. Among the young women from Panjshir and Ghazni, peer influence likewise reproduces boundaries, whether through the class-inflected superiority of Tajik/Uzbek "rich girls" or the protective warnings of senior Hazara students abroad that Pashtuns will "never accept you." Finally, the young men from Bamyan and Ghazni illustrate how ethnically homogeneous networks can sustain distrust long after initial trauma or even channel piety into sectarian militancy.

However, whether friendships challenged or reinforced existing identities, they nevertheless compelled these young Afghans to interrogate the labels handed down to them. Each participant recounts a moment of re-evaluation, a pause to ask *who am I, and why?*, before consciously embracing or rejecting the inherited script. In that sense, friendship acted not only as a "social

reheater" of ethnic boundaries but also as a catalyst for reflexive agency: whatever position the youths ultimately adopted, they claimed full ownership of it rather than experiencing identity as something passively imposed.

c. Crossing Lines: Education, Responsibility, and the Challenging Identity Through Exposure

I remember sharing many times that while I was growing up, I did not witness much ethnic tension around me. I only fully came to understand these issues when I returned to Afghanistan. But as I reflect on this now, I realize that my lack of awareness about ethnic issues among Afghans was largely shaped by the fact that I lived only among my extended family and, for many years, did not have the chance to attend school. My exposure to "others" was limited by the simple reality of not being able to engage with people beyond my family circle. Because of this limited exposure, I carried with me certain assumptions, one of them being about the Ismaili community in Afghanistan. As a teenager, I was told that Ismaili women had to sleep with the Imam (Aga Khan) on their wedding night before joining their husbands. Years later, I asked a colleague from the Ismaili community about this. She looked at me, laughed, and said, "We Ismailis are close to 20 million people worldwide, and in Afghanistan, our population is about three hundred thousand. Don't you think the poor Imam couldn't possibly do that, even if he wanted to?" I share this story to highlight the critical link between education and exposure, both of which profoundly shape our sense of self and how we understand others. Without access to broader experiences and learning, we risk holding on to harmful stereotypes and misconceptions.

Despite all the constraints, some of the participants in my study were able to experience an adolescent phase, allowing them to explore their identities outside of immediate family structures. For these individuals, schools, friendships, and exchange programs provided

alternative sources of identity formation beyond the traditional family unit. During this phase, exposure to new ideas, relationships, and institutions played a crucial role in shaping their self-perceptions and worldviews. Unlike those whose transitions to adulthood were abrupt and dictated by external circumstances, these young people had the opportunity to develop personal aspirations, challenge societal norms, and cultivate broader perspectives on their roles within Afghan society. The following quotes illustrate how the places of education facilitated such encounters that made them question and challenge their perceptions.

> "At school, the entire idea of Pashtun being a monster changed completely for me. In 2015 I started to think differently about ethnic issues and at school Shiraz helped me understand everything. My conversation with Shiraz and other boys were really honest. I used to ask him why Pashtuns killed Hazaras and why do you guys really hate Hazaras, and his answer was always so enlightening. He used to say that I would not exchange you for 100 Pashtuns, I will stand for you." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

> "I think India changed me for good. I saw how ethnic issues in India were dealt with, they would talk about it openly, and I wondered why we don't do that in Afghanistan."(*Male, 28, Helmand)*

> "After visiting Helmand, and socializing young people from Helmand, I understood why they are the way they are. I saw that since a young boy or girl is born, they have seen nothing but guns and violence; I understood that it is not their fault." *(Male, 28, Bamyan)*

These reflections by young men and women reveal how identity formation in Afghanistan is deeply shaped by ethnic relations and personal experiences and can be challenged crucially through exposure, education, and educational institutions. The young woman from Ghazni illustrates a profound transformation in her identity as she moves from seeing Pashtuns as "monsters" to building trust and solidarity through honest conversations with a Pashtun classmate, interactions made possible within her school's educational setting. This process reflects how identity is not static but is reshaped through dialogue and learning spaces that foster critical thinking and empathy. Similarly, the young man from Helmand describes how studying in India, an educational journey outside of Afghanistan, exposed him to open conversations about ethnicity, prompting him to reflect on the silences and taboos around ethnic divisions back home. For the young man from Bamyan, socializing with youth during a visit to Helmand, itself an informal yet educational experience, allowed him to develop a more compassionate understanding of others, recognizing how cycles of violence shape the identities of boys and girls from childhood. Across these narratives, formal and informal educational spaces emerge as pivotal arenas where young men and women challenge inherited biases, engage in critical reflection, and reshape their understanding of themselves and others, forming more inclusive and reflective identities in a context marked by ethnic tension and division.

The ability to experience adolescence allowed participants to integrate multiple influences into their sense of self. Rather than solely deriving identity from familial and tribal affiliations, they incorporated experiences from educational institutions, social circles, and even global influences through digital media and international interactions. This broadened perspective among some of my study participants led to a more nuanced understanding of personal agency, aspirations, and the socio-political realities shaping their country.

> "When I saw girls from Helmand and Kandahar province participating in Kabul youth conference, and on cultural night when they danced, I was shocked because I would have never imagined this before I met them from what I have heard about the people of these provinces and how they treat women." *(Male, 28 Bamyan)*

> "When I went to Kandahar, I saw that all young people, girls and boys, knew Dari and Pashtu, and many of them spoke English as well. And we from Mazar only knew the Dari language. They were very much social and fashionable people, and this is not what I had heard about them." *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

> "When I went to Pune University in India, I learned that the two thousand plus Afghan students were still divided into fractions of ethnic politics. I ensured I helped all new Afghan students regardless of their ethnicities because, looking at India, there are so many ethnicities, but they live in peace together, so why can't we do the same?" *(Male, 32, Kandahar)*

These narratives from young men and women highlight how identity formation is shaped through exposure to diverse peers and experiences that challenge existing stereotypes and ethnic boundaries. The young man from Bamyan describes how seeing girls from Helmand and Kandahar confidently dancing at a youth conference in Kabul shattered his preconceived notions about gender roles in those provinces, demonstrating how direct social interaction in mixed spaces can reshape gendered and ethnic perceptions. Similarly, the young woman from Mazar-e-Sharif reflects on her surprise at the multilingualism, sociability, and modernity of Kandahari youth, countering the narrow images she had previously held. These moments reveal how encountering diversity in educational and social settings enables young people to question and

reconstruct their identities beyond inherited prejudices. The young man from Kandahar, reflecting on his time at Pune University in India, points to the persistent divisions among Afghan students along ethnic lines, but also to his conscious choice to forge a more inclusive identity by supporting all Afghan peers. His exposure to India's multicultural society pushed him to envision a more united Afghan identity. Together, these stories show how educational and cultural exchanges are critical in fostering new ways of thinking, enabling both young men and women to develop identities that transcend ethnic and gender-based divisions.

Education and poverty are deeply intertwined, shaping the opportunities and struggles of individuals from a young age. For many, access to education is not just a matter of ambition but of financial survival, where schooling competes with the necessity of contributing to household income. The decision to attend school often hinges on economic constraints, forcing children into labor or making education a secondary priority. Even for those who manage to enroll, their motivations for attending are often shaped by immediate material benefits rather than long-term aspirations. The following quotes illustrate how economic hardship influences perspectives on education, turning it from a pathway to the future into a daily negotiation for survival.

> "After Grade 6, Sima Samar [the school's organizer] was not able to maintain the school, and we had to pay fees. My parents decided we had to save more to afford it, so we had to wake up early to work before school." *(Female, 29, Bamiyan)*

> "I was not going to school to study, but to have some break from carpet weaving." *(Male, 28, Bamiyan)*

> "In school, they used to distribute biscuits to students. I was really interested in going to school for that reason as well." *(Female, 28, Nangarhar)*

> "Everyone didn't care about education a lot. Maybe I felt so because my cousins were intelligent and I was not. But I was always appreciated for my cooking." *(Female, 28, Ghazni)*

These quotes reflect the complex realities of education in Afghanistan, where access to schooling is often shaped by economic hardship, labor responsibilities, and shifting social priorities. For many children, education is not just about learning, it is intertwined with survival and daily struggles. The young man and woman from Bamiyan recall how school was secondary to financial burdens; one had to work early mornings to afford fees, while another saw school as an escape from the exhausting demands of carpet weaving.

These experiences of education, or lack thereof, play a crucial role in shaping the identities of young Afghan girls and boys. Growing up in a context where education is not guaranteed, but instead weighed against economic survival and family needs, deeply influences how children come to understand themselves, their roles, and their futures. For girls, in particular, these stories highlight how education is often a space of both hope and constraint. The young woman from Bamiyan, who worked early mornings to afford school fees, reflects the double burden many girls carry, expected to contribute economically while also seeking education as a pathway to a different life. This struggle shapes an identity built around resilience and responsibility, but it also teaches girls that access to knowledge comes at a cost, and is not a given right. Similarly, the young woman from Nangarhar, drawn to school partly for the biscuits distributed to students, shows how poverty can reduce education to a basic survival strategy. Her

motivation reflects not only hunger but also the complex negotiations girls must make between fulfilling immediate needs and imagining a better future.

At the same time, traditional gender roles continue to frame what is expected from girls, shaping their sense of self. The young woman from Ghazni, whose cousins were praised for their intelligence while she was recognized for her cooking, reveals how girls are often valued more for their ability to perform domestic roles than for their intellectual achievements. These experiences show how girls' identities are shaped not only by their personal aspirations but also by family and societal expectations about womanhood, caregiving, and obedience.

Taken together, these stories show that education in Afghanistan is far more than just a place of learning, it is a key site of identity formation, where young people come to understand their worth, their roles, and their futures. The constant negotiation between education, work, and family expectations teaches children, especially girls, powerful lessons about who they are allowed to become. Education can offer a sense of possibility, but it is deeply entangled with economic realities and gendered expectations that shape and sometimes limit young people's visions for themselves.

The transition of Afghan youth into adulthood involves the interaction of social friendships along with gender roles combined with educational opportunities. Growing up exposes young people to diverse social environments outside of their families, which helps shape their self-perception and understanding of their role in society. Friendships are essential in molding young people's views by questioning established beliefs and encouraging novel thought processes. Gender norms heavily influence these formative years, where young women encounter limitations on their freedom to move and study. In contrast, young men face early

expectations to become leaders and financial providers. These young adults begin to critically analyze their life's structures through questioning and adaptation while negotiating their identities in Afghan society as they navigate various challenges.

The identity formation of Afghan youth during the transformative years from childhood to adulthood is shaped by a dynamic interplay between personal agency and structural constraints, influenced by their exposure to social realities beyond their immediate family environments. As they encountered ethnic divides, religious discrimination, and gender stereotypes, these young people began to question inherited narratives and critically engage with their surroundings. In these formative years, imagination became a method of testing possible selves, envisioning futures shaped by education, travel, love, or rebellion, often in stark contrast to the realities they inhabited. This period of self-discovery was not merely about internal reflection but also about negotiating the tension between traditional expectations and emerging personal and societal transformations. Their evolving identities were influenced by both the collective structures of Afghan society and their individual agency in navigating these influences. For some, adolescence was marked by an abrupt transition into adulthood due to familial and social pressures and obligations, while others had the opportunity to explore their identities more freely. The ability to engage with formal education, friendships, and broader societal changes allowed some young people to reshape their perspectives and assert a more independent sense of self. However, structural barriers such as economic hardship, political upheaval, gender norms, and ethnic exclusion continued to impose limitations, reinforcing the complexities of Afghan youth identity formation. Ultimately, resilience, opportunity, and systemic inequalities intersected to define their evolving sense of belonging within Afghan society.

6. Becoming: Adulthood and the Choice

In November 2013, the Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly) was held in Afghanistan to discuss the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the United States. The purpose of this Jirga, which brought together 2, 500 participants from across Afghanistan's provinces, was to deliberate and advise on whether Afghanistan should sign the BSA, an agreement that would define the legal framework for U.S. forces to remain in the country after 2014. At that time, I was 27 years old, and I had just graduated from college. I volunteered as one of the facilitators during the Jirga. On the first day, as participants were divided into different committees, I was assigned to Committee Number One. My role was to read aloud each Article of the Agreement and facilitate discussions among the participants.

When I entered the room where Committee One was meeting, I immediately noticed that I was the only woman among 50 men, men who had traveled from various provinces across Afghanistan. Among them were former Mujahideen commanders like Sayyaf, as well as political figures like Ashraf Ghani, who would later become the President of Afghanistan. I made my way to the front of the room and introduced myself in Dari as the committee facilitator. As soon as I finished, a man wearing a large black turban and a long beard stood up and announced, "Now the Americans will explain to us what is in this Agreement! Most of us can't read, how are we supposed to trust her?" His words, spoken in Pashto, filled the room.

I felt a wave of fear, 50 men staring at me in silence. But I gathered myself, remembering that I was dressed modestly as expected of Afghan women, wearing a *chadar* over my head. Since he had spoken in Pashto, I responded in Pashto: "I am Afghan." He quickly asked, "Where are you from in Afghanistan?" I tried to recall everything printed on my national ID card and

replied, "From Kandahar." "Where in Kandahar?" he pressed. "Daman district, " I answered. "And which village?" "Dand, " I replied. The man remained standing as if ready to challenge me further, but after hearing my answers, he slowly sat down and allowed me to proceed.

That day remains one of the most important days of my adult life because I saw firsthand the power of identity, especially what it means to be Pashtun in Afghanistan. I realized that my ethnic identity, even though I had only memorized it from my ID card, could define how I was perceived, regardless of who I believed I truly was. That experience gave me deep insight into the identity politics of my country and made me reflect on where I am situated within that landscape. While I like to believe that everything I have achieved is the result of my hard work and dedication, I also cannot ignore the fact that my ethnic identity shaped some of the opportunities available to me in Afghanistan. I share this story because this section of my research explores the adult lives of my study participants and how their identities transformed as they gained agency over their lives. I examine their experiences through three key themes: their understanding of self and others through exposure, what it means to be Afghan, and how exile has shaped their identity transformations.

a. Through the Eyes of Others: Exposure and the Making of Identity

Most participants in my study had the opportunity to pursue formal education, with some either completing or beginning their college studies in Afghanistan before August 2021. By 2021, approximately 9 to 10 million Afghan children and youth were enrolled in primary and secondary schools, with around 40% being girls. Roughly 174, 000 students attended universities, with women comprising between 21% and 33% of the total. Despite these gains, an estimated 3.7 million children remained out of school, the majority of them girls (UNESCO

2021; UNICEF 2021). Their exposure extended beyond the classroom, as they participated in youth conferences in Afghanistan, national exchange programs such as *Lets Talk Campaign* by ArtLords, and work-related visits to other provinces. These experiences broadened their perspectives, enabling them to critically examine, question, and reshape their identities, something that those without such opportunities may not have been able to do. At this stage, my study participants, both young Afghan men and women, gained more agency in decision-making, political involvement, and expressing their views. By this phase of their lives, many of my study participants had formed their perceptions of themselves and their place within the broader context of life in Afghanistan. Following are some of the testimonies that show where my study participants stand when it comes to their perception of the environments they are living in and their own roles within these situations.

> "This was the time I realized that I had an ethnicity that I had to protect. Even in our Tazkiras [national identity cards], we are listed as Pashtoon, but we are Shia from Kandahar. Our village was always debating whether we should change our identity on official documents. We looked like Hazaras, lived in a Hazara community, but our documents said Pashtoon. Some argued that being officially Hazara would bring benefits, while others believed it would only complicate things further. The people of four villages, named after the four sons of Khwaja Omari, gathered several times to discuss whether we should remain as we are or officially change our identity to Hazara. Some feared that if we changed, we would be forced to conform to the four sects of Hazara identity, while others believed it was necessary to gain access to resources and representation." *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

> "Whenever there were attacks on Hazaras, I used to call myself Hazara, and that feeling has never gone away. But over time, my perspective expanded beyond ethnic identity. I see things differently, I understand that not only Hazaras are suffering in Afghanistan, all ethnicities are due to different reasons" *(Female, 28, Ghazni)*

> "I wanted to take the Kankor exam and go to Kabul University, but the exam was only available in Dari. My entire education had been in Pashtu, and I knew I wouldn't be able to compete. It felt like an invisible wall was put in front of me, preventing me from accessing the same opportunities as others." *(Male, 32, Kandahar)*

> "It is one of those things that I have always wanted to say, but I don't remember if I ever said it even once. I never could forgive Pashtuns. From one side, I never had any contact with Pashtuns because I was in Bamiyan, and there were no Pashtuns. On the other hand, when I grew up, even before the Taliban takeover, whenever I went to Kabul, to a ministry, or anywhere, they made everything so hard because of my ethnicity, being Hazara. For one signature, they made the procedure unnecessarily difficult. This kind of behavior happened to me and to many of my Hazara fellows. I don't want to talk about it all." *(Male, 28, Bamiyan)*

These narratives reveal how gender, language, and ethnicity intersect to shape an individual's experiences of identity, belonging, and exclusion. The young man from Ghazni describes the uncertainty of his community's identity, where official documents label them as Pashtun, yet they live among Hazaras and practice Shia Islam. This struggle over identity is not

just personal but political, as recognition can bring either protection or further marginalization. Similarly, the woman from Ghazni recounts how her identification with the Hazara identity strengthened in moments of violence against her community, illustrating how external threats reinforce ethnic solidarity and disassociation with the “other”. Beyond ethnicity, personal grievances show how ethnic divide is reinforced by the structure in the institutions. The young man from Kandahar faced systemic barriers because his education was in the Pashto language, preventing him from competing in Kabul’s Dari-dominated university system, exposing how language divides opportunity.

One of the key findings in this research was how transformative it was for young Afghans to realize that they have been isolated from other ethnicities despite living in the same country. Most study participants shared that, in their early lives, they had little to no exposure to other ethnicities. When they did, they realized that their perceptions were largely shaped by what their elders told them. However, as they grew older and had opportunities to engage with people from different backgrounds, whether through conferences, exchange programs, or travel to other provinces, their perspectives shifted significantly. Many described these experiences as life-changing, allowing them to challenge inherited biases and develop a broader, more inclusive understanding of their country's diverse ethnic landscape.

> "Attending that youth conference completely changed my perspective. I met people from different backgrounds, and for the first time, I saw that we all carried similar struggles, no matter our ethnicity. It made me question many of the things I was taught growing up." *(Male, 29, Herat)*

> "Before going to that youth conference, I always thought of myself only as Hazara. But after hearing different voices and experiences, I realized we are more connected than divided. It was eye-opening." *(Female, 29, Bamiyan)*

> "That event [gathering of young Afghans of different ethnicities] was a turning point for me. I felt happy being there, surrounded by young people who, like me, wanted to change something in Afghanistan. For the first time, I felt a sense of unity and belonging beyond my ethnic identity." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

> "At the conference, I saw how others carried their pain and hopes for Afghanistan, and it gave me a different outlook. I realized we don't have to stay stuck in our past divisions, we can choose to build a new future together." *(Female, 21, Kabul)*

> "I remember sitting in that hall, listening to young Afghans talk about their dreams, and I thought, this is the Afghanistan I want to be part of. I felt genuinely happy, hopeful, and inspired." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

Exposure to youth conferences and gatherings deeply challenged my young participants' presumed notions of identity. Coming together with peers from diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds, many described these moments as transformative, shifting from narrow, ethnic-based identities to a broader sense of shared struggle and hope. As one participant reflected, meeting others who carried similar dreams and pain made him question what he had been taught about difference. Others described these spaces as "turning points" where, for the first time, they felt a sense of unity and belonging beyond ethnic lines, realizing that their identities could be shaped by collective aspirations for Afghanistan's future rather than past divisions. Conferences

and exchanges provided spaces where young Afghans could hear each other's struggles and dreams, often for the first time, breaking down divisions reinforced by history and conflict. The man from Herat describes how meeting people from different backgrounds helped him see that pain and hardship were not limited to one ethnic group, while the participant from Kabul realized that moving forward required choosing unity over inherited divisions.

> "Before visiting Bamiyan, I had certain stereotypes about the people there [primarily Hazaras]. But when I spent time among them, I saw a completely different reality. It made me realize how little we truly know about each other in Afghanistan." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

> "When I went to Herat [a largely Tajik city], I was shocked at how different it was from what I had been told. People were warm, open, and welcoming. It made me question the way we divide ourselves based on assumptions rather than experience." *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

> "Spending time in other provinces made me realize that we are more similar than we think. Each place has its unique culture, but at the core, we all share the same dreams, the same struggles, and the same hopes for a better Afghanistan." *(Female, 26, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

> "Going to Helmand [a largely Pashtun province] changed my mindset. I used to think it was a place of only war and violence, but I saw a different side of it, a side where people were trying to live normal lives, just like in my own city." *(Male, 28, Bamiyan)*

> "Traveling to different provinces opened my eyes. I used to think only my community had suffered, but when I visited other places, I saw that everyone carried pain, loss, and struggles. It changed my understanding of Afghanistan." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

These stories illustrate how small but meaningful experiences, such as attending a conference or traveling to another province, can significantly shift young people's perceptions of identity, belonging, and understanding of other groups. Many participants describe how, before these experiences, their understanding of Afghanistan and its people was shaped by inherited narratives, biases, and limited exposure. For example, the young woman from Bamiyan initially saw herself solely through the lens of her Hazara identity, but after engaging with diverse voices, she realized the deeper connections that exist beyond ethnic lines. Similarly, the man from Kandahar, who once held stereotypes about Bamiyan, discovered a new reality when he lived among its people, challenging his previous assumptions.

Travel to other parts of the country played a crucial role in reshaping perspectives, several participants described being surprised by the warmth and openness of communities they had previously misunderstood. For example, the young man from Ghazni was shocked at how different Herat was from what he had been told, prompting him to question how Afghans divide themselves based on assumptions rather than firsthand experience.

These reflections highlight how young people's identity is not fixed but open to transformation by exposure to new experiences and people. For many, these moments of connection served as turning points, challenging ingrained biases and fostering a sense of unity beyond ethnic or regional boundaries. The realization that all Afghans, regardless of background,

share common pains, struggles, and hope for a better future demonstrates the power of interaction among diverse Afghan youth in bridging divides and reshaping national identity.

b. What it Means to be Afghan

I don’t remember a time when introducing myself as an Afghan didn't come with a reaction, whether surprise, disbelief, curiosity, or judgment. Being Afghan has been a heavily politicized identity for generations, especially since Afghanistan has known little stability since the Cold War. The dominant narratives about Afghanistan often focus on war, destruction, oppression of women, terrorism, and underdevelopment. But for many young Afghans, including myself, these are not the only, or even the defining, aspects of who we are.

Growing up and now as an adult, I have constantly struggled to push back against these narrow stereotypes. Yes, there has been war, injustice, and suffering under different regimes, but there is so much more to being Afghan. I identify as Afghan because I come from a society that is deeply hospitable, rich in multicultural traditions, and full of life. We are people who love music, poetry, and storytelling. We are sharp, resourceful, and creative, even in the face of hardship.

As an adult, I have traveled across Afghanistan and met countless young women and men who are working tirelessly to build a better future for themselves and their communities. I have represented Afghanistan in youth conferences across the region and around the world. With every step, I carry my Afghan identity with pride. Yet, I also find myself constantly trying to show others that being Afghan is not only about struggle, it’s about joy and deep cultural pride. What I love most about being Afghan is our ability to find happiness even in the smallest moments. We never miss a chance to celebrate, to dance, to sing, and to share those celebrations

with everyone around us. Our colorful traditions are worn proudly, and wherever we go in the world, we bring with us a piece of home, a home that is more than just what the headlines say. For me, being Afghan is always more than what the world assumes. It's an identity rooted in love, life, and beauty.

For many of my study participants, being "Afghan" is not simply a matter of nationality, it is a deep, complex identity shaped by history, loss, pride, and belonging. Across different regions and experiences, my participants reflect on how their Afghan identity continues to define who they are, regardless of where they live. Whether shaped by the sacrifices of ancestors, the trauma of war and migration, or the enduring love for the land they come from, these youth speak of Afghanistan as something embedded in their souls. For some, it is a source of pride and honor that carries a rich history of resilience and solidarity, even amidst internal divisions. For others, it is a complicated identity, tied not only to culture and belonging but also to the painful associations of war, displacement, and stigma. Yet, across their narratives, a common thread emerges, a deep emotional connection to Afghanistan that continues to influence their sense of self, purpose, and community. Following are some of the testimonies of my participants about what being Afghan means to them.

> "Where you are born and raised gives you your identity, your emotions, and your sense of belonging. I could be physically in Canada and become successful here, but emotionally, I don't think I will ever belong. My artistic soul is still fed by the place I come from." *(Male, 31, Canada)*

> "My family has been politically and militarily involved [in Afghanistan] for generations. My grandfather fought with Ahmad Shah Baba, my father was a

commander during the Mujahideen era, and my ancestors contributed to shaping Afghanistan. I felt the need to contribute too, but through education and technology rather than war." *(Male, 31, Kandahar)*

I think being Afghan means pride, honor, and identity. It's another thing that what we have Afghans have done so much to destroy this identity. One thing I love about us is that if we fight with each other for example if there are two families that are really against each other and fight with each other but if at the time of difficulties one family is in trouble the 1st who would reach out to support them would be the family that is not in good terms with them. Afghans might have problems with each other, but when we are in trouble with the outside world or other people, we stand for each other. ” (*Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

"Afghanistan is like my soul. A piece of me. I have lived both the sadness and happiness of Bamiyan. Everything that has happened to me, from my father’s death to our migration, all started in Bamiyan. It made me who I am today." *(Male, 28, Bamiyan)*

“To me being Afghan means first, I identify with it people in the world recognize me because I'm Afghan and I'm proud of it I am associated with the country of Afghanistan, but at the same time the same identity is problematic. Because being Afghan also means the symbol of misfortune the refugee life uncertain life, corrupt people, what your people, criminals war conflict. All these comes within Afghan identity unfortunately.” *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

These reflections show that for young Afghans, identity is deeply tied to a sense of belonging, pride, and emotional connection to their homeland. For some, like the young man from Ghazni and the young man from Bamiyan, Afghanistan remains part of their soul, shaping who they are no matter where they live. Others, like the young man from Kandahar, see Afghan identity as an inherited responsibility to contribute to their country's future, moving beyond war toward education and technology. The young woman from Nangarhar emphasizes solidarity and resilience, highlighting how Afghans come together in times of hardship despite internal conflicts. Yet, as another young man from Kandahar points out, being Afghan also carries the burden of war, corruption, and displacement. Together, these voices reveal that Afghan identity is both a source of pride and pain, shaped by history, struggle, and a deep connection to the land and its people.

It is important to highlight that my participants are very aware of the difficult realities of their country, and their personal and emotional connection to the Afghan identity is not on the basis of inexperience with dark political realities that control their everyday lives. For many of my participants, identity in adulthood is influenced by the lasting impact of war, ethnic divisions, and political violence they grew up with, realities that continue to follow them into their professional and social lives. As these young adults navigate universities, workplaces, and public life, they are constantly reminded of the ethnic lines that divide Afghan society. Some reflect on how, despite wanting to move beyond the legacies of violence, they are still caught in cycles of blame and resentment over which leaders are held accountable, and which are not. Others describe how even simple acts, like representing students or wearing cultural clothing, become loaded with meaning, marking them as belonging to one group rather than to the nation as a

whole. Together, their stories highlight how identity in adult life is not just about personal choices but is shaped by broader social and political divisions that remain unresolved.

> "Pashtuns always acknowledge that Gulbuddin [9]was a killer, we don't deny it. But why don't young people from other ethnic groups hold their own warlord leaders accountable? They should also accept that their leaders were killers and the destroyers of Afghanistan. If we are to move forward as a country, we need to be honest about all of them, not just one group." *(Male, 31, Kandahar)*

> "When Mazari[10] died, people went and were doing Sina Zani we didn't. In my family, I have heard stories of Hekmatyar and Massoud[11]; all of these leaders are considered very bad people. One of the biggest fights of the Kabul University started when a Hazara boy from Jaghori played volleyball, and his ball landed close to a boy from Herat. And you remember the rest, how many students got injured? The leading cause was that students would meet all these leaders at their

---

[1] Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (1949 -) is the founder and leader of the Hezb-e Islami (Party of Islam), a major mujahideen faction during the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989). He is often referred to as the "Butcher of Kabul" because of his role in the brutal civil war and the indiscriminate rocket attacks and shelling of Kabul in the early 1990s, which killed thousands of civilians and devastated large parts of the city. His relentless bombardment of the capital, driven by rivalry with other mujahideen factions, left a lasting mark on Afghanistan's history and collective memory.

[2] Abdul Ali Mazari (1946–1995) was one of the most important and respected Hazara political leaders in Afghanistan's modern history. He was the founder and leader of Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami. o while Mazari himself spoke of justice, unity, and equality, and is venerated as a defender of Hazara rights, forces under his command were involved in the brutal urban warfare that inflicted suffering on civilians of various ethnic backgrounds, as were all major militias of the time during Kabul Civil War (1992–1996)

[3] Ahmad Shah Massoud (1953–2001) was one of Afghanistan's most famous and influential military and political leaders, widely known as the "Lion of Panjshir" for his fierce resistance against both the Soviet occupation in the 1980s and later the Taliban in the 1990s. He remains a national hero to many Afghans, particularly among Tajik communities, but like many figures in Afghanistan's turbulent history, his legacy is also contested by others due to his role in the civil war of (1992–1996).

homes, like Hekmatyar, Mohaqiq[12], Dostum[13], and then these leaders were causing fights in student dorms and the university." *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

"For me, language and geography define my identity. When someone says they are from Afghanistan, I feel we share a connection. But when I wear a Hazaragi dress, I don't feel like I represent all of Afghanistan, I represent Hazara people and culture." *(Female, 29, Bamyan)*

"When I was elected as the representative of students from Ghazni I thought I was representative of all students from Ghazni but then I realized that I was only representative of Hazara students, every ethnicity had their own representatives. In these meetings I learned that how much conflict was there. For example, suni students would use school masque for their tarawee in ramadan, but didn't allow Shia students to use it for *Cena Zani* (Chest beating) during mahram." *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

Together, these quotes highlight how identity for many of my participants is shaped by both inherited ethnic divisions and their own conscious choices in adulthood. The male participant from Kandahar reflects on how acknowledging the violent history of Gulbuddin

[4] Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq (1955 -) is a prominent Afghan politician, militia leader, and a key figure representing the Hazara ethnic community. Mohaqiq has been an influential player in Afghanistan's political landscape since the anti-Soviet resistance era. He was a senior commander in Hezb-e Wahdat during the civil war of (1992–1996).

[5]1 Abdul Rashid Dostum (1954 -) is a powerful and controversial Afghan military commander, politician, and former warlord, primarily known for his role as a leader of Uzbek militias in northern Afghanistan. Dostum has been both a kingmaker and a ruthless militia leader, and his name is associated with both political influence and serious human rights abuses. He fought for control of Kabul against and alongside other warlords, including Ahmad Shah Massoud, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Abdul Ali Mazari, depending on shifting alliances.

Hekmatyar becomes not only an ethnic burden but also a personal stance toward truth and accountability, while challenging others to do the same with their own leaders. His reflection reveals that for some, claiming an honest identity means going beyond ethnic loyalty. Similarly, the participant from Ghazni recalls how violence among students at Kabul University was fueled by ethnic allegiances to warlords like Massoud, Mohaqiq, and Dostum, suggesting that even as adults, many young people are pressured to align with leaders who perpetuate division. Yet, he distances himself and his family from these figures, showing how rejecting these legacies can be an intentional act of identity formation.

The female participant from Bamyan brings this negotiation into the cultural realm, expressing that while language and geography connect her to a broader Afghan identity, her Hazaragi dress situates her firmly within Hazara culture, revealing how identity can shift based on context. Finally, the Ghazni male participant's reflection on student representation underscores how even attempts at inclusion are fragmented along ethnic lines, as he realizes his position as a Hazara representative rather than a collective one. His reflection on sectarian exclusion during religious rituals further demonstrates how identity is experienced as both imposed by social divisions and consciously recognized. Across these accounts, identity emerges as a complex interplay between inherited histories of conflict and personal efforts to carve out a more truthful or inclusive sense of self within a divided society.

c. Being Afghan in Exile

The shaping and reshaping of identity among my study participants is deeply influenced by their personal experiences, societal structures, and, for many, the realities of displacement and exile. The majority of the participants in this study chose to flee Afghanistan following the

Taliban's takeover in August 2021, adding another layer of complexity to their sense of belonging. Living in exile forces them to negotiate between their Afghan identity and the evolving politics of diaspora communities, where new cultural influences, shifting national narratives, and external perceptions of Afghanistan challenge and shape their self-understanding. Despite their physical displacement, Afghanistan remains central to their identity, a place of both longing and unresolved pain, where memories, aspirations, and struggles continue to shape their perspectives. Whether shaped by systemic discrimination, gendered expectations, language barriers, or newfound exposure to different ethnic and political views, these young adults find themselves in a continuous process of identity negotiation, caught between their past, their present realities, and an uncertain future.

> "If you had asked me two years ago, I would have said Afghan identity simply means the people of Afghanistan. But now, with all the discussions, I am confused. Some believe 'Afghan' only belongs to Pashtuns, while others want the country renamed Khorasan or Hazarahistan. I still tell people I am Afghan, but I don't know if I truly believe it anymore." *(Female, 29, Bamyan)*

> "To be honest, I never felt comfortable identifying as Afghan. Even when Afghans in Paris were chanting 'Afghanistan Allahu Akbar' during a protest, I felt distant from it. I prefer to say I am Hazara rather than Afghan." *(Male, 28, Paris)*

> "I feel I have never felt peace anywhere else but Afghanistan. Even now, under the Taliban, when I want to feel at peace, I imagine myself there. But if I go back,

> I won't just sit and tolerate things anymore. I will speak up, no matter what." *(Male, 30, Kandahar)*
>
> "What made me happy when I was leaving was that they were boarding us on KamAir [an Afghan airline]. As I took the last steps onto the plane, I looked back at the mountains of Kabul and promised them, 'I will return someday, even stronger.'" *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

These narratives reveal the deep complexity of Afghan identity in exile, where displacement forces young Afghans to continuously renegotiate their sense of belonging. For some, Afghanistan remains an emotional and cultural anchor despite geographical distance. The young man living in exile in Canada feels that his artistic soul is still rooted in Afghanistan, illustrating how identity extends beyond physical presence, and stepping onto the evacuation plane, he promised to return stronger, showing how exile may not sever the emotional ties to home but rather intensify them.

For others, exile brings profound confusion about what it means to be Afghan. The young woman from Bamiyan once believed that Afghan identity encompassed all people from the country, but recent political discussions have unsettled that notion, making her question whether she truly identifies with being "Afghan". Her internal struggle is also echoed by the young Afghan man exiled in Paris, who rejects the label "Afghan" altogether, preferring to identify as Hazara, a choice shaped by a history of ethnic discrimination. These experiences highlight how national identity is not experienced uniformly. While some continue to embrace Afghanistan as their defining home, others see it as a fractured entity that fails to represent them fully.

> "The first few days and weeks when I arrived here, I was even missing the guys on the street who used to harass women. I was looking for that one Afghan person just to say a word in my own language. I thought to myself, if I find somebody from Afghanistan, even with bad character, I would go and hug them. I was really missing anyone from Afghanistan."*(Female, 21, Kabul)*

> "I want to go back. I have a lot to do there." (smiles and cries at the same time) "I'm doing great here now, and I'm happy, but deep down... " (stops) "the little Eidema has been through so much" (sighs) "and I don't want other little girls to go through what I went through. And I love my country. Even now, I'm not sure if I want to apply for asylum because I want to keep my passport." (laughing) *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

> "I feel like in Afghanistan I had feelings, but here, I don't. I don't know how to explain it. Although life in Afghanistan was tough, everyone's life is super tough there, we don't have resources or opportunities like we do here. But still, I think I was experiencing life fully there. I don't feel that fullness here; I feel empty. In Afghanistan, I wasn't even allowed to laugh out loud in the streets, but I was still happy there. Here, I'm allowed to do whatever I want, but I don't want to. I don't feel like laughing out loud here. I think that small circle of life, with family, cousins, siblings, that was my small heaven, full of problems and challenges, but it was my happy place." *(Female, 21, Kabul)*

These reflections reveal how exile has complicated my participants' sense of identity, as they struggle to hold onto connections to Afghanistan while navigating life in a new country.

Their words show that identity is not only tied to ethnicity or culture, but also to the everyday experiences and emotional landscapes of home, even when home was filled with hardship. For some, like the young woman from Kabul, identity is rooted in language and the longing for familiar human connection, to the point where even negative aspects of home become sources of nostalgia. Others, like the participant from Ghazni, show how national identity remains deeply personal and unresolved, as she holds onto her Afghan passport as a symbol of belonging despite safety and opportunity abroad. What emerges is a sense of identity shaped by exile, caught between holding onto a country they love and struggling with the emptiness and disconnection of being elsewhere.

Ultimately, these stories illustrate how exile does not erase identity but instead makes it more complex, forcing young Afghans to navigate between nostalgia, political realities, current positions and personal redefinitions of who they are. Whether through longing, rejection, or critical reflection, Afghan identity remains an evolving, deeply personal struggle for those who have been uprooted from their homeland.

Many young Afghans initially embrace the identities assigned to them through family, ethnic lineage, religious beliefs, and community expectations. These inherited identities provide a framework for understanding their place in their families and society. Yet as they transition into adulthood, their lived experiences introduce new layers of complexity and meaning. Encounters with systemic discrimination, linguistic barriers, and institutional exclusion force many to reassess and renegotiate aspects of their identity. Some find themselves questioning the ethnic and national identities they were raised with, especially when confronted with structural inequalities that limit their mobility, access to education, or economic opportunities. Others

actively reinforce their inherited identities, particularly when faced with threats to their cultural or religious belonging.

For those exiled and living as refugees, identity takes on an additional dimension of displacement and longing. While they are physically removed from Afghanistan, their emotional and cultural ties to their homeland remain strong, often intensified by the sense of not fully belonging in their host countries. Their understanding of identity is shaped by both nostalgia and the challenges of integrating into new societies, leading to a dual consciousness that oscillates between the past and present. Despite geographical separation, many refugees continue to see Afghanistan as their true home, even as they recognize that returning may not be feasible. This dynamic underscores the fluidity of identity, where young Afghans continuously navigate between inherited traditions, lived realities, and the demands of a rapidly changing world. Whether choosing to uphold the identity of their upbringing or redefining themselves through personal experiences, their journey reflects the broader struggle of identity formation in a country where belonging is deeply intertwined with historical grievances, political instability, gender and age hierarchies, and social divisions.

As these stories reveal, the process of identity formation, transformation, or reconfirmation is ongoing and deeply influenced by one's ability to engage with people, places, and ideas beyond their immediate social circles. Ultimately, these reflections show that exposure, whether through travel, education, or interactions with other gender, ethnic and social groups, plays a critical role in shaping young Afghans' personal and collective identity. While some of their experiences reinforce existing divisions, others offer moments of understanding, challenging ingrained biases and broadening perspectives.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how Afghan youth navigate the complex and shifting terrain of identity shaped by family, community, gender, ethnicity, religion, violence, displacement, and exile. From an early age, identity is formed through family stories, religious teachings, and inherited ethnic divisions, often absorbed without question. As they grow, young Afghans encounter gendered expectations that dictate their roles and limit their choices, with girls often pushed into caregiving and boys burdened with early responsibilities as future providers. Yet, friendships and educational opportunities offer crucial moments of exposure that allow some to challenge the biases and divisions learned in childhood.

Adolescence for these young Afghans, rather than being a period of self-exploration, is often shaped by abrupt transitions into adulthood driven by war, poverty, and family expectations. For many, this includes navigating the tension between their inherited identities and the desire to define themselves on their own terms. Encounters with peers from different ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds, whether through school, travel, or exchange programs, allow some youth to develop more inclusive understandings of Afghan identity, while for others, divisions remain reinforced through lived experiences of discrimination and exclusion.

In adulthood, these young Afghans continue to wrestle with questions of belonging, shaped by the country's ongoing political crises and, for many, the experience of exile. Being Afghan carries both pride and pain, rooted in resilience, shared struggle, and deep cultural ties, but also marked by enduring divisions and collective trauma. Even in exile, Afghanistan remains central to their sense of self, though often accompanied by confusion, grief, and an ongoing

search for meaning. Ultimately, this chapter shows that identity for Afghan youth is a dynamic and unfinished process, constantly negotiated in relation to family histories, social pressures, structural inequalities, and moments of possibility.

The findings show that youth identity in Afghanistan is both fluid and constrained, shaped by personal experiences but also heavily influenced by larger social, cultural, economic, and political realities. While many young people adopt inherited identities due to deep-rooted gender and generational hierarchies that discourage questioning authority, some manage to redefine their identities through exposure to different realities like travel, education, and interaction with diverse communities. Religious identity also plays a crucial role, and even those from non-religious families are inevitably shaped by religious practices embedded in everyday life.

Importantly, identity emerges not simply as a fixed label but as a lived and relational process, produced across Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems, where micro-level interactions with family intersect with macro-level forces such as state ideologies and displacement. Exposure to new people, places, and ideas functions as a critical lever of transformation, enabling young Afghans to challenge inherited narratives and imagine alternative ways of being. This process often involves a tension between moral obligations to family and nation, and personal aspirations shaped by imagination and longing.

However, the possibility for reshaping identity is at times limited by gender, ethnicity, security, economic, political, and cultural barriers that restrict movement. Many youth carry a heavy emotional burden of moral inheritance, feeling responsible for their families and communities, while also trying to build lives of their own. They are often caught between

resisting the constraints of inherited roles and remaining tethered to them through love, duty, and unresolved loss. This raises critical questions about what it means to belong to a nation that demands sacrifice without offering safety or fulfillment in return, and how national identity is shaped under such conditions.

As the next chapters will show, this evolving sense of self is central to how Afghan youth imagine futures and cultivate both hope and resilience. Identity is not merely something they hold, it is something they continuously remake in relation to history, violence, and possibility.

8. Academic Contribution

My study, grounded in the life histories of Afghan young men and women across diverse gender, ethnic, and geographic divides, makes several critical contributions to the literature on identity in conflict and post-conflict settings. By focusing on the lived experiences of ordinary young people rather than elite narratives, this research addresses and fills one of the most significant gaps in existing identity-conflict theories, the neglect of everyday identity formation processes identified by Mac Ginty (2021) and Scott (1990). Moreover, my study adds a nuanced layer of analysis by tracing how identity evolves across different stages of life, from childhood and adolescence to adulthood, particularly in contexts shaped by conflict. In addition to this temporal dimension, my study offers an empirical contribution by bringing a feminist and intersectional perspective to everyday identity negotiations, demonstrating how gender, class/economic level, and ethnicity intersect to shape identity formation and resistance in conflict settings. My study demonstrates that identity among Afghan youth is forged at the intersection of personal struggle, family histories, religious and cultural practices, gender expectations, and moments of agency and resistance. It also shows that identity formation is embedded within

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems, shaped by family dynamics (micro), peer and school experiences (meso), and broader political ideologies and displacement (macro).

Second, my study contributes to the instrumentalist debate on the politicization of identity (Brass 1991; Horowitz 1985) by shifting the focus from elite manipulation to the agency of ordinary youth in contesting and reimagining identity. While instrumentalist scholars rightly emphasize how elites mobilize ethnic divisions for political purposes, they do not fully explore how everyday people, particularly young men and women, live with, negotiate, or challenge these divisions in their daily lives. My study fills this gap by showing how Afghan youth, through education, travel, and friendships, actively contest ethnic narratives imposed upon them. Moreover, building on Scott's (1990) notion of "everyday resistance, " I show that resistance among Afghan youth is not only about subtle defiance of imposed identities but also about reimagining new, inclusive forms of identity that transcend ethnic divisions. By centering youth experiences, and integrating gendered and transnational perspectives, my research expands the instrumentalist and everyday resistance frameworks to account for how young people in conflict settings negotiate identity beyond elite-driven categories. This contestation is not limited to political categories but is also deeply emotional and moral, as youth navigate inherited responsibilities to family, faith, and nation.

Third, my study pushes forward the debate on identity as lived experience versus imposed political category (Crenshaw 1989; Mamdani 1996) by offering a life-course, gendered, intersectional, and transnational perspective that is often missing from existing scholarship. While Mamdani (1996) highlights how states impose rigid ethnic and political identities, and Crenshaw (1989) emphasizes the intersection of multiple identity markers, my study shows how

Afghan youth actively negotiate, contest, and reimagine these imposed categories across different stages of life, from childhood to adulthood, and in contexts of displacement and exile. Through the life histories of Afghan youth, I demonstrate that identity is not only shaped by structural forces but also dynamically reworked through friendships, education, gendered experiences, experiences with people of different ethnicities and nationalities, and transnational encounters. This process is structured by, but also resists, the moral expectations youth inherit from family, community, and national narratives. These obligations often appear as ethically fraught responsibilities, rather than liberatory forces. In doing so, my study expands the debate beyond a static opposition between imposed and lived identity, offering a more fluid and evolving understanding of how individuals navigate overlapping ethnic, gender, and religious identities in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Fourth, by examining the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and class, my study extends intersectional approaches to identity in conflict settings beyond existing frameworks (Crenshaw 1989; Enloe 1989). While Crenshaw emphasizes structural intersectionality and Enloe explores gender in international relations, neither fully examines how gender, ethnicity, and class interact to shape everyday identity formation in protracted conflict contexts. My analysis shows how gender norms deeply influence Afghan youths' identity formation from childhood to adulthood, dictating access to education, freedom of movement, and family roles, but also how young men and women uniquely contest these expectations. By tracing these negotiations over time, my study reveals that ethnic and gendered identities are not fixed but co-constituted through everyday struggles and moments of resistance, offering a dynamic and life-course perspective on intersectionality in violent and patriarchal contexts. It also contributes to feminist scholarship by

identifying imagination as a site of agency that allows youth, especially girls, to articulate identities outside traditional gendered scripts.

Fifth, my study addresses the gap in the emotional and affective dimensions of identity formation in conflict (Ross 2007; Avruch 1998) by bringing in the lived, personal, and emotional experiences of Afghan youth. While existing literature acknowledges the role of collective memory and emotional needs in shaping group identities, it often overlooks how individuals experience and carry these emotions through their life trajectories. Through narratives of trauma, loss, pride, and longing, my study demonstrates that identity is not merely a political category but a deeply emotional experience, shaped as much by feelings of dignity, humiliation, and belonging as by material or political interests. By tracing how these emotional undercurrents influence identity from childhood to exile, my study offers a more humanized and dynamic understanding of identity formation in conflict and displacement, grounded in everyday life. In particular, memory, whether tied to family stories, war trauma, or communal naming traditions, functions both as a constraint and a form of continuity that anchors youth in a moral and historical lineage.

Finally, my study advances debates on post-conflict identity formation as a continuous and contested process (Richmond 2005; Autesserre 2014) by centering the lived experiences of Afghan youth beyond formal peace processes. While existing scholarship critiques elite-centered peacebuilding for ignoring identity grievances, my study shows how ethnic divisions, gender inequalities, and exclusionary national narratives persist long after the formal end of conflict, shaping young people's identities both inside Afghanistan and in exile. Rather than treating identity as a problem resolved through state-building or political settlements, my research

highlights how youth continue to negotiate and contest who they are in response to ongoing experiences of exclusion, loss, and resilience. By tracing these identity struggles across life stages and transnational spaces, my study challenges static notions of post-conflict identity and reveals it as a dynamic and unresolved process that shapes everyday life. By integrating the themes of memory, moral obligation, and imagination, my study not only maps how youth redefine identity but also theorizes these emotional and ethical dimensions as cross-cutting forces in identity formation under protracted crisis.

Chapter Five: Between Survival and Transformation: Hope as Refuge, Resistance, and Vision

It is more than just a belief, it is a collective practice, an unspoken agreement to endure, and a reminder that even in uncertainty, hope persists.

1. Introduction

I began thinking about my dissertation study with a simple yet profound question: *How are Afghans so hopeful?* As an Afghan woman in her 30s, throughout my lifetime I have known constant war and instability, as have all my agemates. Yet hope persists in the young Afghans I know. Twice now, I have been forced into exile, once in the 1990s and again after 2021. My study participants, aged 18 to 35, have also lived through four decades of armed conflict, ethnic tensions, economic uncertainty, forced displacement due to war and insecurity, and immeasurable loss. They have witnessed terrorism, foreign invasions, and the relentless churn of regional instability. It is rare to meet an Afghan who has not lost a loved one to war or violence or who has not endured personal suffering, whether through displacement, injury, or economic devastation. Yet despite this, Afghans continue to find joy and to laugh, build, dream, and achieve. As an Afghan, I have long grappled with this paradox that became a driving question in my dissertation: *How do we, despite everything, remain hopeful? How do we keep hope alive?*

Hope is central to the lived experiences of my study participants from Afghanistan, shaping how they navigate uncertainty, conflict, and displacement. This chapter explores how hope functions in their lives, not as an abstract ideal but as a lived experience deeply embedded in family, culture, faith, and collective struggle and their unfulfilled dreams. Through their narratives, my study reveals that hope is experienced and shaped by the individual and the

multifaceted contexts these young Afghans find themselves in. At the same time, their hope is intergenerational and communal, passed down through moral teachings, family resilience, and shared aspirations. My findings emphasize that hope includes not only individual cognitive and emotional processes. For the young Afghans I interviewed, hope is also a social and political force shaped by family, historical memory, cultural values, faith, and everyday survival strategies, and envisioned futures. Afghan youth actively negotiate between false hope (Snyder 2002; McGeer 2004; Lear 2006) and critical hope (Freire 1994; hooks 2003; Duncan-Andrade 2009), using imagination, education, and acts of resistance to create and maintain their hope for a better future.

This chapter makes an important contribution in research on hope by situating and analyzing hope in young people's lives over time within the broader context of war, forced migration, and exile. I examine how young Afghans, throughout their lives, use different strategies to maintain hope when faced with shattered dreams and uncertain futures. By analyzing their experiences through the lens of the social ecology theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) framework, I make contributions to the study of hope, demonstrating that in conflict-affected societies, hope is a deliberate, adaptive, evolving practice that young people use to endure extremely challenging situations and transform themselves and their surroundings.

a. Hope Theory, Youth, and Conflict

How do young people use hope to navigate in today's world, especially in situations of armed conflict and countries affected by disasters? The study of hope has gained considerable academic attention over the past two decades, particularly in psychology, social sciences, and

conflict studies. Scholars identify that hope is a psychological resource that enables individuals to set and pursue goals despite adversity (Snyder, 1994), making it particularly relevant in contexts of armed conflict and disaster-affected regions.

Rand and Cheavens define hope as the pathway to achieving desired goals (Cheavens 2012). Charles R. Snyder and his colleagues conceptualized hope as a cognitive-motivational construct comprising three primary components: goals, pathways, and agency (Snyder 1989, 1994; Snyder et al. 1991; Snyder, Hoza, et al. 1997). In this framework, goals represent the fundamental objectives that individuals strive toward; pathways refer to the perceived ability to generate routes and strategies to achieve those goals; and agency denotes the motivational energy required to pursue them. Agency thoughts often manifest in self-affirming statements such as "I can do this" (Snyder, Lapointe, Crowson, and Early 1998). Hope theory and research is instrumental in understanding hope as a cognitive and motivational process applicable to war-affected children and youth.

Since Snyder introduced his cognitive theory of hope over 30 years ago, various disciplines have built upon his foundational work. Clinical psychologists have examined hope's role in mental health and coping mechanisms, finding that higher levels of hope are associated with better psychological adjustment, lower levels of depression and anxiety, and more effective coping strategies in the face of stress and adversity (Chang 1998; Cheavens, Feldman, Gum, Michael, and Snyder 2006). Social psychologists have explored hope in the context of personality traits and social adaptation, finding that hope contributes to greater life satisfaction, positive affect, and adaptive functioning in interpersonal and social contexts (Bryant and Cvengros 2004; Carvajal, Clair, Nash, and Evans 1998). The application of hope theory has also

expanded into allied health professions, such as the positive use of hope in promoting rehabilitation and chronic illness management (Barnum, Snyder, Rapoff, Mani, and Thompson 1998).

To measure hope among children, Snyder and colleagues developed the Children's Hope Scale (CHS) (Snyder, Hoza, et al. 1997), which consists of two subscales: agency (willpower) and pathways (waypower). For older adolescents and adults, the Trait Hope Scale and State Hope Scale provide additional means of assessing hope, often including observer rating forms for a more comprehensive evaluation. Snyder and his colleagues' purpose was to develop standardized hope scales to assess individuals' perceived ability to set and achieve goals. However, critics argue that such measures are often Western-centric and fail to account for cultural variations in how hope is experienced (Larsen et al. 2014). This raises the question of whether hope can be universally quantified or whether it requires context-specific approaches. While I do not use standardized hope scales in this study, primarily because such scales tend to assess psychological states and physiological conditions, my focus is not on diagnosing or measuring psychological wellbeing. Instead, this study explores whether my participants demonstrate characteristics of high-hope individuals by examining how they articulate their goals and navigate pathways to achieve them through their lived experiences.

Importantly, Snyder and his colleagues also developed insight into what makes a "high-hope" person. They find that high-hope adults and children exhibit strong goal-directed thinking, can identify multiple pathways to achieve their objectives, and use their agency to reach their goals using alternative pathways, even in the face of significant obstacles. The concept of high

hope is rooted in Snyder's Hope Theory (1994), which defines hope as a cognitive-motivational system rather than just an emotional state.

While most of the research on hope has focused on individual psychological and cognitive-motivational mechanisms, scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of hope as a social construct. In conflict and post-conflict societies, scholars argue that hope extends beyond individual's actions to encompass collective aspirations, political agency, and social mobilization (Larsen et al. 2014; Webb 2013). For example, studies on Palestinian youth in protracted conflict settings highlight hope as a driving force for activism and social change despite significant, structural economic and political oppression (Habashi 2017). Similarly, Ungar (2008) explores how resilience, including hopeful thinking, is fostered through community resources and cultural practices in marginalized youth populations.

Recent academic studies in conflict resolution highlight how hope serves as a powerful agent of change in societies affected by conflict because it helps individuals and communities build resilience and social bonds that can lead to more sustainable peacebuilding. Scholars identify hope as a dual process that functions both psychologically, shaping individuals' capacity to envision alternatives, and structurally, through the social, political, and institutional conditions that enable or constrain the pursuit of peaceful futures beyond violence and insecurity (Lederach 2021; Bloomfield 2023). Hope also operates as a collective and socially embedded force, emerging through shared narratives, relationships, and interdependent struggles, which fosters common aspirations, mobilizes activism, and sustains long-term commitments to peacebuilding and transformative change in conflict-affected societies (Larsen et al. 2014; Webb 2013; Habashi 2017; Ungar 2008; Lederach 2021; Bloomfield 2023; Bar-Tal and Halperin 2022; Mani 2024;

Darweish and Rank 2023). Other scholars argue that hope is both a survival mechanism and a driver of transformation, shaped by personal determination, social structures, and cultural contexts (Ungar 2008; Darweish 2023).

These insights helped me frame how I approached the collective loss experienced by my study participants and their prioritizing taking responsibility to fix their country because they needed to believe they would be able to see a peaceful Afghanistan where they and the next generations of Afghans have better lives. Researchers also find that hope is an actionable process in extended conflicts because it drives people to communicate, overcome hopelessness, and work toward reconciliation under challenging systems (Bar-Tal and Halperin 2022). These findings helped me pay attention to whether my study participants may use hope as a process to motivate themselves to overcome setbacks and work towards a better future.

Key debates engage with critical concepts of hope. Darren Webb (2013) distinguishes between *passive hope*, which reflects wishful thinking, and *critical hope*, which actively engages with social change. However, some scholars warn of *passive hope*, mainly when political leaders manipulate aspirations for peace while failing to deliver concrete changes (Darweish and Rank 2023). Transitional justice studies show that hope is essential in forming post-conflict narratives because it empowers affected communities to develop important routes for restoring trust and rebuilding institutional structures (Mani 2024). Some scholars also caution that political manipulation and broken peace agreements that generate false hope can trigger new rounds of conflict and frustration (Darweish and Rank 2023). The insights from these scholars are essential to my understanding of the motivations of my study participants because they have experienced a continuous armed conflict, and their hopes have been shattered multiple times due to the

conditions caused by the conflict. Therefore, I paid attention to seeing how hope, either created by themselves or other factors, caused them to continue to hope or achieve their goals, or if passive hope plays only a negative role in retreating them into denial of their lived reality.

Scholars Paulo Freire (1994) and Jonathan Lear (2006) have examined the distinction between *realistic hope*, which inspires action, and *false hope*, which can pacify individuals and prevent necessary resistance. An ongoing challenge in hope theory is determining how people and communities sustain hope in oppressive conditions without it becoming an illusion that prolongs suffering. My study is influenced by this approach because I am interested in understanding how imaginations, dreams, and aspirations for a better future, which are far from the existing realities of my participants, keep them motivated and help them survive harsh situations.

Finally, hope has rarely been studied in Afghanistan. Importantly, a few researchers from the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, and sociology have examined the concept of hope in Afghanistan. These studies focused on understanding how hope is essential for resilience and coping strategies among Afghans who endure long-term conflict and hardship. In their study, Panter-Brick et al. (2011) examine how Afghan family dynamics are shaped by the interaction between their experiences of suffering and their maintenance of hope. They found that Afghans maintain their hope by following cultural norms of hard work, education, respect for elders, and moral behavior while living through continuous poverty and violence. Through these values, Afghans created a structure that helped them understand their life experiences while guiding them to imagine improved futures, which builds their resilience. Notably, the study also highlighted how cultural expectations transform into sources of entrapment when structural

inequalities block personal and collective aspirations, resulting in psychological distress. These findings alerted me that I needed to investigate my study participants' family and cultural dynamics by paying attention to the day-to-day lives of my participants and how hope is enabled or blocked through the family, communal practices, and cultural and religious beliefs.

Langer and his colleagues, in *Glimpses of Hope in the Shadow of War: The Afghan Youth Project* (Langer et al. 2019), examined Afghan youth's essential contributions to both peacebuilding and societal transformation. They observed that Afghan youth showed extraordinary hopefulness despite living through violence, political instability, poverty, and unemployment. I, therefore, pay close attention to understanding if and how Afghan youth exhibit extraordinary hopefulness despite living through adverse situations. In particular, I wanted to document and understand what factors help them be high-hope individuals.

b. Gaps in the Theory

There are several key gaps in field of hope studies that need further exploration in different contexts. First, most studies of hope are of individuals or communities in a limited time and context. There is a need to apply and explore hope theories and concepts to people across their lives and within a broader perspective, such as the socio-ecological perspective. Second, the long-term effects of hope remain underexplored, particularly how hope leads to positive outcomes or, in some cases, how *false hope* thwarts necessary action, resilience, resistance, and systemic change (Freire 1994; Lederach 2021). Addressing both these gaps requires a more interdisciplinary, context-specific, and culturally responsive approach to studying hope in diverse global settings.

Finally, limited research on hope exists in prolonged conflict and displacement settings**.** While hope is often studied in stable societies, less attention has been given to how it functions in protracted wars, refugee experiences, and post-conflict rebuilding efforts (Panter-Brick et al. 2011). To understand the role hope plays in their lives over time, my study will investigate hope through the lived experiences of young Afghan men and women who, over their lifetimes, have experienced prolonged armed conflict, post-conflict rebuilding efforts, refugee experiences, and internal and external displacements and gone through different types of violent situations. In my study, as I sought to understand my participants' lived experiences and how they cultivate hope, I structured my life history approach within the social ecological systems theory framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This framework allowed me to examine their lives across interconnected layers of influence. I investigated their direct surroundings at the micro-system level by examining family interactions and early life experiences that develop their sense of hope. Using the mesosystem as a framework for analysis, I examined how interactions between social spheres, including schools, peer groups, and community, helped maintain or disrupt their continued hope in everyday life. At the macrosystem level, I investigated participants' understanding of their place within the larger socio-political and economic landscape and how war, economic instability, and national crises impact their roles and resilience in this broader system. Throughout, I analyzed their layered experiences throughout their life histories to understand how Afghans experience and use hope while facing adversity.

c. Definition of Hope by Afghan Youth.

Hope is a complex and multifaceted concept that has been defined differently across cultures and academic disciplines. In Western psychology, hope is often seen as a future-oriented cognitive process that involves setting goals, identifying pathways to achieve them, and

sustaining motivation, as articulated in Snyder's Hope Theory (Snyder 2002). In Snyder's Hope Theory, "high-hope people" are those who exhibit a strong sense of hope, characterized by the ability to set goals, envision multiple pathways to achieve them, and persevere even when facing obstacles, leading to better outcomes in various aspects of life. From this perspective, hope is closely tied to individual agency and personal goal attainment.

However, other scholars emphasize the collective and relational aspects of hope, particularly in non-Western and Indigenous contexts. For instance, in many Indigenous cultures, hope is deeply embedded in communal relationships, ancestral knowledge, and spiritual beliefs, where it serves as a form of resilience in the face of historical and ongoing oppression (McGeer 2004; Battiste 2013).

Sociologist Ernst Bloch (1986) presents hope as a forward-looking, transformative force that drives individuals and societies to envision and strive for better futures, linking hope to social change and political struggle. Similarly, in contexts of conflict and displacement, hope is not merely an individual feeling but a collective practice of survival and resistance, shaped by cultural narratives, religious faith, and social solidarity (Delgado 2017). Thus, across cultures and disciplines, hope is both a personal and collective resource, deeply intertwined with cultural values, historical experiences, actions, and visions for the future.

Relational hope emerges and is sustained through meaningful connections with others, such as family, mentors, or communities, rather than existing solely as an individual trait. Scholars demonstrate that this type of hope exists within social and cultural environments where

mutual care and solidarity strengthen shared resilience to support personal belief in positive change. According to Shimshock and Le's (2022) model, trust, empathy, and mutual support play crucial roles in facilitating relational hope, which contributes to well-being. Similarly, Freire (1994) emphasizes that hope must be practiced collectively, especially in oppressive contexts where social transformation depends on dialogue and communal action. Relational hope is also present in trauma-informed and feminist literature, where it is recognized as vital to healing and resistance in the aftermath of violence (hooks 2003; Ungar 2008; Luttrell 2010). This approach challenges individualistic views of hope by asserting that it is co-created through reciprocal relationships and acts of care.

In my study, hope itself is experienced as a conscious belief in the possibility of change and a tool for survival and resistance, often acted upon, spoken, or insisted upon even in despair. Meanwhile, the building blocks of hope, like family bonds, cultural narratives, sensory historical narratives, memories, education, art, and small daily acts of care, create the emotional, social, and symbolic conditions in which hope can take root and endure. The definitions of hope, and the emotional, social, and symbolic elements that contribute to it, which I refer to as the building blocks of hope, used as an analytical lens in this study are drawn directly from the testimonies of Afghan young men and women in focus group discussions and life history interviews. These building blocks are the conditions that make hope possible, sustainable, and actionable in their lives. These definitions and building blocks emerged in response to questions such as: What is hope for you? What gives you hope? What keeps your hope alive? These questions were asked repeatedly across different stages of their lives, childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, to explore how hope evolves over time. At each stage, participants were asked: What made you hopeful at that age? What was giving you hope? What did you do to keep

hoping? It is crucial for this study to center the participants' own understandings of hope, so as not to impose external frameworks or interpretations that may not align with how Afghan youth themselves make meaning of their lives.

Hope for Afghan youth in this study emerges as a deeply personal and dynamic force, a psychological, social, and political mechanism that sustains them through immense hardship. It is not static or singular; rather, it evolves across life stages, contexts, and relationships. The participants' testimonies reveal both direct definitions of hope, what it means to them, and the emotional, cultural, and relational resources that serve as its building blocks, enabling hope to persist and take form even in the face of profound adversity.For many, hope is defined as the longing to return to a familiar and comforting way of life. One young man shared, "When I think of home, I think of the smell of naan [bread] from the Nanwayee [local bakery], " invoking not just nostalgia, but a vivid emotional image of security and belonging. This is not hope itself, but a building block of hope: a sensory memory that grounds their vision of what they wish to reclaim and rebuild.

Others define hope more explicitly as belief in change and the survival of possibility. "I believe each thing that has happened in my life, I believed it will happen. And now I believe that my life will change for the better, " one young woman said. Here, hope is expressed as an internal conviction in the future, operating as a survival mechanism. This belief, anchored in faith, agency, and continuity, is what transforms hope from a vague feeling into a functional emotional resource. Family, community, and love also surface not as abstract ideals but as critical building blocks of hope. "My family is my reason to keep going, " said a young woman. Another male participant added, "If I can protect them and see them happy, then I know I'm

doing something meaningful." These statements reflect how hope is often maintained through relational commitments, connections that provide youth with a purpose larger than the self. The desire to protect, uplift, or serve others is not only an outcome of hope but a condition that makes hope livable and actionable.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that hope is created, not inherited. One young man captured this bluntly: "Anyone who has been born in a country like Afghanistan, it is for all of us, there was no hope. We have to create hope to survive." This reflects a key definition of hope in the study: an active, self-forged tool for endurance. The act of buying lottery tickets, "one with my wife's name, one with my son's, one with mine, " as one participant described, may seem trivial, but serves as a symbolic building block of hope: a ritual that affirms belief in possibility, however remote, in a reality where few things feel within reach. Hope also functions as defiance and intellectual resistance. A young artist said, "I feel that someday I will win this war, not with guns but with my art… I will fight powerful men who have destroyed our country, and also Americans because they also played their role." In this case, hope is not only a survival strategy but a political statement, a refusal to be silenced. Similarly, another participant shared how education anchors their hope: "I don't go to any restaurants right now because I know if I work hard and get to my goals, I'm going to be able to go to a lot of restaurants. But now it is not a good time." These statements show that hope is sustained by acts of delayed gratification, intellectual commitment, and belief in eventual reward, each a building block that scaffolds long-term aspiration.

Another young woman described the ridicule she faced when pursuing her dream of studying political science: "One girl told me that it's not possible for women in Afghanistan…

but I told them that I'm going to fulfill this dream of mine." Her response reveals a form of hope that is both personal and political, a will to imagine a future beyond imposed limitations and to work toward that vision despite resistance. In this sense, hope is not merely an emotion; it is an intentional stance, an embodied act of resistance.For many participants, hope is carried across generations. "My father told us a lot of stories of war… even in times where he had lost all hope, he survived, " one young woman recalled. These narratives are not definitions of hope per se but cultural building blocks, oral histories that offer continuity, inspiration, and proof that endurance is possible. "Even now when everything is super dark during the Taliban time, I don't believe that my dreams are going to die, " another said, asserting an unwavering optimism drawn from historical and familial resilience.

Hope also draws strength from cultural proverbs and historical imagination. Referencing Sultan Mahmoud Ghaznawi's ring engraved with "this too shall pass, " one participant said, "I believe this so much with my core that time doesn't stay the same. It will change." Such expressions exemplify how cultural wisdom serves as a symbolic building block of hope, anchoring belief in the temporality of suffering and the inevitability of change. These narratives collectively show that hope is not an abstract or romantic ideal for Afghan youth, it is a strategy for survival, a foundation for rebuilding, and a force of resistance. "I see a future where I can achieve my dreams and give back to my community, " one participant concluded. This statement encapsulates the active nature of hope as defined in this study: a forward-facing vision rooted in purpose, agency, and relational responsibility.

Over the course of this study, it becomes clear that hope is both shaped by and shaping of Afghan youth's response to conflict, displacement, and political uncertainty. Their dreams often

clash with lived realities, but it is precisely this contrast that cultivates hope as a survival strategy. The building blocks of hope, family, memory, faith, creativity, cultural wisdom, and symbolic gestures, form the emotional and social scaffolding that enables youth to keep moving forward. In this context, hope emerges not as a passive feeling, but as a transformative force, constructed, sustained, and enacted in defiance of despair.

Differentiating Between Hope and Its Building Blocks

HOPE (Definition / Experience)	**BUILDING BLOCKS OF HOPE (Enablers / Sustaining Forces)**
Belief in the possibility of change even in the face of adversity.	Spiritual belief or cultural sayings (e.g., 'this too shall pass') that reinforce the idea that suffering is temporary.
Longing for a better future, such as returning home or rebuilding life.	Sensory memories like the smell of naan from the Nanwayee, which anchor emotional connection to home.
Refusal to give up on dreams, despite bleak realities.	Symbolic rituals (e.g., buying lottery tickets) that maintain belief in unpredictable but possible change.
Act of resistance and agency, especially through education or art.	Artistic and intellectual expression as a way to reclaim power ('not with guns but with my art…').
Determination to achieve long-term goals, even with delays.	Acts of delayed gratification and discipline ('I don't go to restaurants now because I'm investing in my education').
Vision of giving back to community and country.	Sense of moral obligation or social responsibility ('I want to give back to my school, my hometown…').
Persistence of dreams under oppression.	Intergenerational resilience passed down through family stories of survival in past wars.
Hope as a survival strategy actively created, not inherited.	Personal agency and mental discipline ('we have to create hope to survive').
Hope as a psychological refuge when everything seems impossible.	Emotional support from family ('My family is my reason to keep going'), care, and social connection.

Table 5.1 Definition of hope and building blocks of hope by Afghan youth

d. Data Analysis

To explore hope in my study participants, I structured my life history interviews around different stages of life. I asked similar questions at each stage, yet the responses naturally varied over time. For my analysis, I divided these life stages into three distinct periods. The first stage is childhood, where I found that the seeds of hope are cultivated. This section explores hope within family bonds, acts of kindness, the impact of education and self-empowerment, and moments of joy that nurture hope. The second stage captures the transition from childhood to adulthood. Here, I examine three themes: hope found in personal struggles and family responsibilities, the power of imagination, and the role of small achievements in fostering hope. Finally, I analyze adulthood and my participants' current lives, where hope has evolved through their experiences. This section covers three themes: hope in survival, hope cultivated through faith and cultural beliefs, and, lastly, how aspirations for Afghanistan continue to keep hope alive in their lives.

In studying my participants' life histories, I observed that the unfulfilled dreams of their elders, particularly their parents and especially their mothers, were often passed down to the next generation as hopes for their children's future. Therefore, before diving into the three stages of my participants lives, I start with a section where the hope of family members especially parents and caregivers, place their aspirations in their children in hope that their children will realize the dreams they could not.

2. Inherited Hope: How the Dreams, Survival, and Expectations of Others Shape Afghan Youth

Afghan society is deeply communal. We live, decide, and act in groups, and much of what shapes our lives is inherited from older generations. I found this to be true for the concept

of hope as well. Often, we don't realize we are living out the dreams of our parents and elders, driven by their hopes for us and a quiet desire not to let them down. This internalization of family dreams reflects a longing for a better future**,** which is a core definition of hope. Both of my parents graduated from high school and completed two years of teacher training college. I've heard them say they wanted to study more and had different ambitions in life, but family responsibilities and uncontrollable circumstances held them back. My mother once told us she had received a scholarship to study in the Soviet Union, but she couldn't go because she had to care for her mother and younger sisters.

I remember when I told my father in 2008 that I wanted to marry my now husband. My father didn't ask who the person was. Instead, he said, "You told me you wanted an education. How is that going to work?" I knew he always hoped his children would pursue academic careers, especially me, because he couldn't do that himself. So, I promised him that my marriage wouldn't interfere with my education. This negotiation between personal goals and familial expectations shows how *moral obligation***,** a building block of hope, operates to sustain commitment to long-term aspirations. While I didn't study solely to fulfill his hope, it was always in my mind not to let it die. This illustrates the persistence of dreams under oppression and delayed gratification, both building blocks of hope. In this way, the hopes of our family members often become the driving forces behind our goals. Many of my study participants shared similar experiences, where caretakers and relatives projected their hopes onto the next generation.

In many testimonies of my young participants, parents serve as mirrors of survival. When fathers or mothers tell stories of enduring war, deprivation, and loss, they pass on a form

of mirrored hope, the belief that "if they survived, so can I." This form of hope aligns with the definition of hope as the belief in the possibility of change even in the face of adversity**.** Their personal histories become living proof that resilience is possible, turning past suffering into future strength**.** At the same time, this is also a building block of hope through intergenerational resilience**,** where emotional survival is transmitted through narrative and modeling.

> "From the beginning, my father told us a lot of stories of war… even in times where he had lost all hope. His stories gave me confidence that whatever situation I am in, there is a chance I can come out of it." (Female, 27, Nangarhar)

> "I always believed I would see my father again. I think maybe my father gave me that energy that he would be okay, he never gave up on us all his life in all the difficulties. That's why I never gave up on trying to find him. Even now, that thing happens whenever I have an intuition about something. My heart usually gives me assurance of something good or bad that is going to happen, and at the end it is going to be okay, because I am going to make it okay." (Male, 31, Ghazni)

> "Three things kept me hopeful: my father's survival stories, my belief in the system and military men, and my own dreams and hopes for my future." (Female, 27, Nangarhar)

Each of these quotes illustrates how the participants internalized their parents' survival as a psychological and emotional anchor in their own lives. This is the essence of mirrored hope, a process by which the child sees a parent's endurance not just as history, but as evidence that

hardship can be survived**.** It combines both the definition of hope as belief in eventual change and the building block of intergenerational resilience. The concept of mirrored hope, where children internalize the hopefulness of their caregivers, finds support in several foundational theories of psychological development and resilience. Ann Masten (2001) describes that children often develop adaptive capacities by observing the consistent, hopeful behaviors of adults who care for them, especially under stress. In similar terms, Snyder (2002) notes that while hope is a cognitive process involving agency and pathways, it is significantly shaped by social models; children learn to sustain hope by witnessing others set goals and persevere through adversity. Erikson (1963) also grounds hope in early relationships, proposing that a child's capacity for hope is rooted in the experience of basic trust formed through responsive caregiving. Together, these theories show how hope is not only learned through direct experience but also mirrored by the emotional survival and moral orientation of trusted others, a core building block that sustains hope under pressure**.**

In many of these narratives, hope is not abstract, it is embedded in memory. The recollection of a parent's optimism, a mother's prayer, or a moment of joy during crisis becomes a wellspring for projected hope. These remembered experiences serve as moral inheritances that youth carry forward, even when the future remains uncertain. Through memory, youth root their hope not in fantasy but in past endurance.

Therefore, for the young woman from Nangarhar, her father's war stories, even when full of despair, end with survival turning fear into confidence that she would survive as well when her school was attacked by gunfire and bombs. Her father's presence and storytelling became a proof of possibility, helping her to believe in the potential for overcoming the crises she was

in. Such a moment exemplifies hope in its purest sense, a belief in the possibility of endurance and transformation despite the immediate threat, which aligns with definitions of hope as forward-looking persistence amid adversity. Similarly, the young man from Ghazni speaks of his intuitive belief that “things will be okay, ” rooted in a kind of emotional inheritance from his father. His father's survival instilled in him a deep, almost spiritual resilience, a coping mechanism that surfaces in the form of emotional clarity and intuition. What emerges here is hope functioning as a psychological refuge, an inner assurance cultivated through emotional memory and continuity of care, a key building block that stabilizes individuals in moments of chaos. This echoes the concept of internal refuge, where hope lives within, sustained by relational memory. The third quote from the young woman from Nangarhar further cements this pattern. Her hope does not stand alone; it is supported by a trifecta of sources, her father’s survival stories, her belief in institutional stability, and her own aspirations. Together, these elements represent distinct manifestations of hope: the institutional belief reflects agentic hope (Snyder 2002), while the family narrative and self-driven goals rely on building blocks such as intergenerational resilience and delayed gratification. The father’s endurance becomes a foundational layer that stabilizes and amplifies other forms of hope, such as belief in systems and personal goal-setting. Taken together, these stories reflect a profound intergenerational mechanism through which hope is passed down. The act of survival by the parent becomes the child’s roadmap, helping them to envision a future beyond crisis. Rather than isolated moments, these dynamics underscore how resilience narratives become scaffolding for youth to construct their own future-directed hopes. These narratives show how parents don’t just protect through material means, they protect by sharing their history of endurance, shaping how their children interpret and respond to adversity.

In the following narratives, hope is projected by parents onto their children. In these stories, children become carriers of their mothers' or fathers' unrealized hopes, especially around education. These participants do not just pursue education for themselves; they do so as acts of fulfillment, reparation, and loyalty. The kind of hope that takes shape here mirrors what Capps (1968) defines as projected hope, wherein the younger generation is entrusted with completing narratives interrupted by structural violence and deprivation. The kind of hope reflected here is critical and inspirational hope (Freire 1994; Webb 2013), born out of loss but directed toward transformation.

> "My mother was not allowed to go to school because her brother didn't allow her. But she always told me, 'I want you to study, I want you to go to school, because I couldn't. You have to study for me, for the dreams I couldn't fulfill.'" *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

> "My mother was never able to go to school. She always told me that if she had the chance, she would have studied and done something with her life. That's why, no matter what was happening around us, she made sure I went to school. Even when there was fighting, even when there was no proper school building, she would tell me, 'You have to study because education is the only thing that no one can take away from you.'" *(Female, 26, Kabul)*

> "My father wanted me to learn English, and he had made me a tiny schedule to teach me English. He always thought language was important. He wanted me to

> speak English with foreigners even if I was not from there." *(Male, 24, Badakhshan)*

> "When the government came to our village to build school, the land was contributed by my father, because he was never able to go to school, so he didn't want his children and the children of his village to not get education… I always wanted to do something innovative in the school as well because I was inspired by him, even in childhood." *(Male, 32, Kandahar)*

Across these testimonies, hope functions as a transferred mission, parents who were denied opportunity, particularly educational access, pass on their dreams with urgency and moral force. Their children don't simply pursue education for their own betterment; they do so with the awareness that they are also reclaiming what their parents were denied. In this context, projected hope operates alongside key building blocks like moral obligation and intergenerational emotional investment, which enable these aspirations to take root and endure. This is the essence of projected hope (Capps 1968), where the child becomes the vessel through which past injustices are righted and futures are rewritten. The concept of projected hope captures how parents and caregivers pass on their unfulfilled dreams and aspirations to their children, often as a way of sustaining meaning across generations. Paulo Freire (1994) refers to this as a form of critical hope, where oppressed or constrained individuals cultivate future-oriented visions through the next generation, trusting that transformation is still possible even if not personally realized. Similarly, D.W. Winnicott (1971) and Jessica Benjamin (1995) explore how emotional and psychic investments in children often carry the weight of parental loss, longing, or

unrealized ambition, which children internalize as a moral or familial duty. Arlie Hochschild (2003) extends this idea by showing how many mothers project their blocked opportunities, particularly for education and independence, onto their daughters, making their children's success both an extension and redemption of their own struggles. In this way, projected hope functions not only as motivation, but also as a complex intergenerational inheritance shaped by love, loss, and structural limitations.

The two quotes from the women in Nangarhar and Kabul demonstrate this most clearly. Their mothers, unable to attend school due to patriarchal barriers and conflict, infused their children with a determination that was both protective and aspirational. Such determination reflects a critical building block of hope: moral obligation that drives children to fulfill what their mothers could not. These women were not just students; they were carriers of unachieved hopes. Their mothers' words, "study for me" and “education is the only thing that no one can take away from you”, are deeply political and emotional. They reflect Freire’s notion of critical hope (1994), rooted in awareness of structural injustice and the determination to transform it through action. The quote from the young man in Badakhshan adds another layer. His father’s push toward English language learning was not only about education, but about mobility and access, expanding his son’s world beyond their immediate surroundings. What we see here is projected hope fused with strategic foresight, where the parent equips the child with tools for a future they themselves were denied. This shows how fathers also project hope not just as duty but as opportunity creation, linking education to facilitating a different future for their children that they themselves were not able to achieve. Lastly, the boy from Kandahar, whose father donated land for a school, reveals how the deprivation of a father fueled his actions to invest in material and symbolic investment in education that became a foundation for his son’s imaginative

engagement with learning. His son's desire to be innovative like his father within that same school space shows that the father's public contribution created space for the personal dreams of his son to flourish. In this instance, building blocks of hope such as symbolic action and modeling, actively give rise to new forms of imagination and agency in the child. Even in limited material conditions, his imagination and hope were nurtured by the fact that his father laid the groundwork for something bigger than himself. Together, these stories show how projected hope is deeply relational, ethical, and forward-looking. Parents' deprivation does not become an endpoint, it becomes a call to action, a reason for the child to strive. Hope here is intergenerational repair, enacted through education, discipline, and vision. It is a quiet resistance to erasure, fueled by the hope that children can fulfill the dreams history once denied.

The final set of narratives reveals relational hope born from responsibility. Hope in these narratives is rarely individualistic. It is deeply relational, often grounded in a moral commitment to uplift others or not let loved ones down. Participants described not just hoping for their own future but for a better life for siblings, parents, or their broader community. One participant said, "My mother sacrificed everything to send me to school." Another shared, "Even if times were tough, I could make it too… I had to make it for my family." These are not passive wishes they are ethically driven imperatives. Hope in this context is deeply relational and ethical, echoing Carol Gilligan's (1982) insight that moral development often emerges from an orientation toward care and responsibility rather than individual autonomy. Here, hope is not about personal aspiration alone, it is a duty to honor the sacrifices of others. Sara Ruddick's (1989) theory of maternal thinking is also instructive: while the participant is not a mother, their internalization of care, nurturance, and emotional regulation under pressure mirrors what Ruddick describes as the ethical labor of preserving life under precarity. Hope, here, is not just about belief in a better

future but a duty to bring it into being for others. In this form, hope functions through the building block of moral obligation, where ethical responsibility becomes the structural frame that upholds the hope itself. Moral obligation becomes the scaffolding that holds hope together, especially when circumstances are otherwise hopeless. In these stories, the participants became the object and carrier of their family's collective hope, especially in times of crisis. This kind of hope is deeply relational, duty-bound, and moral, reflecting the interconnected nature of survival and aspiration in Afghan families. The child is not just hope to have a better future for themselves, but becomes the medium through which others hope, survive, and seek transformation. This reflects relational hope theory (Shimshock & Le 2022).

> "I don't regret that I did not have a childhood… My mother sacrificed a lot, and I don't regret anything. I am very grateful to my mother because many children in my situation did not have the opportunity to go to school, but my mother did her best to send me to school." *(Male, 24, Kandaha*

> "During that time, there was so much pressure on me by my mom, aunts, and uncles (mama). Everyone was expecting me to take them out of Afghanistan, especially after coming back from Davos… But I was a middle school student myself, but I didn't want to lose their trust on me, and was doing everything I could to fulfill their dream, I know I might have committed mistakes to realize that hope of theirs." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

These reflections underscore a form of hope that is inseparable from social ties, a kind of hope carried for and with others, rather than solely for oneself. These narratives reflect a

powerful form of relational hope, where the participants become the bearers of not just their own futures, but of their families' survival strategies, longings, and unresolved struggles. This hope is duty-bound, emerging not from individual desire alone but from the expectations placed upon the youth by their families and communities. Rather than being projected in the sense of realizing someone else's personal dream, this hope is maintained through collective endurance, emotional labor, and the ethic of care, making it a relational building block that holds families together. Unlike projected hope, which often relates to realizing a parent's personal dream, relational hope is tied to collective endurance and reflects a social ethic of care and sacrifice.

In the first quote from the young man in Kandahar, we see how his gratitude toward his mother's sacrifices frames his own hardship, not as a loss but as meaningful responsibility. He does not lament a stolen childhood. Instead, he finds strength and purpose in having carried his mother's hope forward. His education is both an act of fulfillment and repayment, his success redeems her struggle. What this illustrates is that hope is activated through moral obligation and reciprocal care, a building block through which personal progress and familial healing co-exist. This embodies Ungar's (2011) framing of hope and resilience as emerging from social obligation, where personal development is interwoven with collective well-being.

Finally, a quote from the young woman in Ghazni reveals a more complex burden of hope. Her family placed enormous pressure on her, expecting her, still a child, to become the vehicle through which they might escape Afghanistan. This expectation stems from trust and belief in her potential, but it also illuminates the emotional toll of being cast as the family's only hope. Even though she knew she may not be able to meet their demands, she continued to internalize this responsibility, suggesting that hope, in such settings, is not always empowering

but deeply ambivalent, shaped by both love and overwhelming pressure. Here, we see how hope, though relational, is also emotionally taxing anchored not just in inspiration but in obligation and often negotiated under immense psychological weight. Together, these stories embody that hope is not always chosen, but often inherited and negotiated through duty. It is a shared emotional economy, where one person's endurance becomes the hope of many. Relational hope, in this form, is quiet, sacrificial, and deeply embedded in familial interdependence, where survival and transformation are communal endeavors.

3. Seeds of Hope: Nurturing Hope in Childhood

For most of my participants, childhood memories are inseparable from Afghanistan's broader political and security landscape at the time of their birth. Their earliest recollections often begin with a marker of national upheaval*: "I was born when the civil war was still raging, " "I was born when Dr. Najeeb, [the last communist president], was killed, " "I was born when American jets were flying overhead, signaling the fall of the Taliban, "* or *"I was born when the Karzai government was already in power."* Some remember the post-war economy through childhood experiences: *"The first thing I remember is children lining up at school for biscuits and oil, "* or, for those who returned from displacement, *"When I came to Afghanistan, I was told I didn't speak Dari well."*

From their earliest memories, these young people were introduced to crisis, conflict, and instability, whether through their own lived experiences or the stories passed down by their parents and elders. Regardless of whether their childhoods were joyful or marked by hardship, they all shared an awareness that life was not *`normal'*. Not because their parents didn't want stability for them, but because war and conflict shaped the very fabric of their young lives. Even

in childhood, they were conscious of how broader political and security dynamics shaped their and their families' lives. That's why, when we first spoke about what made them hopeful, they often didn't have a clear answer. However, as our conversations deepened, it was clear hope played a key role in their childhood as a protective mechanism during uncertain times, rooted in family bonds, the sense of security provided by their parents, and small moments of joy that brought motivation and happiness. These experiences gave my participants a sense of optimism and something to look forward to in their future.

a. Hope Through Small Moments of Joy

It is often assumed that children in conflict-ridden countries are solely victims of violence and instability. As a result, narratives of their lives tend to focus on suffering, overlooking the moments of joy they still experience. Yet, the absence of these stories does not mean such moments do not exist. My participants have experienced different types of adverse situations such as war, displacement, poverty, loss of family members, physical violence, and sexual exploitation in their childhoods. Yet, they shared childhood memories that, despite their challenging environments, carried an enduring sense of hope. This aligns with Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, which suggests that early experiences of trust, autonomy, and emotional connection in childhood are foundational to the development of hope, even in the face of adversity (Erikson 1963). These moments, though often simple, show how small acts of play, care, or joy can plant the earliest seeds of emotional safety and belief in one's capacity to act, a core building block of hope.

Hope often emerges in the smallest, most unexpected moments, fragments of joy that, though fleeting, leave a lasting imprint. In childhood, these moments become markers of hope,

shaping how individuals navigate adversity and find meaning in their everyday lives. These moments reflect what Paulo Freire describes as critical hope: a form of hope that acknowledges suffering yet insists on the possibility of transformation through awareness and action (Freire 1994). A sense of accomplishment, the warmth of belonging, or the simple delight of play can transform an ordinary experience into a source of strength in harsh times. Even under challenging circumstances, these glimpses of happiness offer reassurance that joy is possible, that life holds moments of beauty, and that success can be found in the most unexpected places. Here, what begins as momentary joy becomes, over time, a foundation for proactive hope, the internal motivation and perceived possibility that change is still within reach, no matter how far. This process reveals how proactive hope develops, as outlined in Snyder's hope theory, where agency (the will to act) and pathways (the perceived ability to find routes to one's goals) combine to motivate children to persist despite obstacles (Snyder 2002).

My study's young participants' stories also reflect relational hope, a form of hope nurtured through love, care, and connection with others. When hope is sustained by emotional bonds, acts of kindness, and shared joy, it is relational, rooted in the trust and support of the social world (Shimshock and Le 2022; Ungar 2008). This kind of hope is not necessarily about future achievement, but about feeling held by others, emotionally, spiritually, and physically, which becomes a steady anchor amid the chaos. It is through these memories that hope takes root, growing alongside the challenges and becoming a quiet but steady force that gives these young kids the belief that they can change their future.

> "I had a very difficult childhood, filled with violence by my family, especially my parents, but I have a few happy memories. My happy childhood memory was that

for the first time, I had made a kite… I worked really hard, using 20-25 plastics to make this small kite, and I went on the rooftop to fly it. It was flying so beautifully, and I started laughing that day… I was so happy that I had made this kite, and it flew so well." *(Female, 22, Laghman)*

"When our school was burned, I cried a lot. I felt I will also be not able to study as my father couldn't. We were forced to leave our village, and we came to Kandahar, where it didn't feel like home at all. I used to play with Mardiki (marbles) and Bijily (a game played with the ankle bones of sheep) a lot. I not only played but also rented my Bijily, I would give them to my cousins, and whenever they won, they had to give me a tax. There was a time when I had a lot of Mardiki and Bijily, at least if there was no school, I still was good at something, I was happy."*(Male, 32, Kandahar)*

"We didn't have new clothes for Eid, my mother would cut my father old clothes to make clothes for my brothers and me, so one winter, my father bought me a second-hand pink and purple coat from *Lilami* (a second-hand market). I really love purple! I used to wear that coat with my *Kalawsh* (local rubber shoes) and proudly go to the mosque. It felt like the fanciest thing ever."*(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

"My childhood memories are pretty much of fear, because I remember there was always bombing and gunfire. *One of my happy memories is that I would play outside with my friends* when there was a pause to the bomb blasts. *I would ask my mom to boil potatoes for me, and then I would take them outside and ask all*

my friends to eat with me in the street; it would make me very happy to be able to make friends*"(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

These childhood memories reveal an enduring sense of hope embedded in everyday experiences, where joy and creativity persist even in environments shaped by violence, deprivation, and war. The happy moments remembered, crafting a kite[14] from discarded materials, transforming a street game into a small-scale business, cherishing a second-hand coat on Eid, or sharing food with friends despite hunger, demonstrate what Paulo Freire (1994) calls critical hope: a form of hope that does not deny suffering, but recognizes it as the condition that makes transformative imagination and action both necessary and possible. Each example is more than a fleeting joy; it reflects how children in war zones develop building blocks like agency, creativity, and emotional resilience, which together sustain the broader feeling of hope.

These acts are not passive responses to trauma but instances of proactive hope, a form of hope that involves active engagement in changing one's situation, however constrained the circumstances (Curnow 2022; Webb 2013). For example, the ingenuity of turning a simple game of Bijily into an entrepreneurial pursuit reflects adaptability and a sense of agency in creating a possibility for a 10-year-old boy whose family was pushed out of their village and the school his father built burned by the Taliban. For this boy, hope was not merely a wish, it was an act of innovation and survival. This act illustrates the definition of proactive hope, where both agency

[1] The festival of kite running in Afghanistan, often held during the winter months or on special occasions like Nowruz (the Persian New Year), is a vibrant celebration of joy, competition, and tradition. Families gather on rooftops and hillsides, and the sky fills with colorful kites dancing on the wind. For children, it is one of the most exciting times of the year, a day when laughter echoes through neighborhoods and every successful kite cut feels like a personal victory. The festival is not just about play; it's about belonging, pride, and the passing down of cultural knowledge from elders to youth. In the eyes of a child, the festival becomes a rare space of freedom, where their imagination can take flight and their spirit can momentarily rise above the weight of everyday life.

and imagined pathways converge. The resourcefulness he exhibited is a building block; the belief that this resourcefulness could lead to recognition and meaning is what turned it into hope.

The pride in owning a second-hand coat, cherished not for its material worth but for the happiness it brought a 10-year-old boy who did not own new clothes on Eid day, highlights the ability to find joy in small possessions that gave him hope to sustain him through hard times of not owning many things**.** This joy is not only embedded hope, quiet and enduring, but is also supported by building blocks such as emotional affirmation, relational care from his parents, and symbolic meaning tied to identity and dignity. Similarly, for a young girl who was physically tortured by her mother and sexually abused by her father, the act of crafting a kite from discarded materials and watching it soar symbolizes the hope of possibility, creativity, and the joy of personal achievement. This is an example where building blocks, autonomy, imagination, and control over a creative act helped forge a deeply personal form of proactive hope.

Both examples reflect what feminist and decolonial scholars describe as everyday or embodied hope, hope that lives in material, sensory, and emotional practices that challenge erasure and reclaim dignity in small but powerful ways (hooks 2003; Lazar 2014; Shilliam 2021). What these scholars emphasize is that the repetition of small, sensory joys in constrained settings is not trivial, it is a vital structure through which hope is kept alive. These practices serve as both building blocks and partial manifestations of hope, depending on how the child interprets and acts on them.

Furthermore, these narratives are steeped in relational hope, where connection, solidarity, and communal care are central. The act of sharing food with friends underscores the hope that Afghans find in the deep value of and commitment to the community for a girl who hardly ate

once a day during her childhood, shaped by war. Her action reflects a clear building block, moral obligation and relational reciprocity that gives rise to hope by reinforcing a sense of belonging and worth. This act of generosity, despite hunger, exemplifies the collective ethic through which many Afghan children experience hope, not as an individual trait, but as something nurtured in relationships with others (Zembylas 2014; Westoby & Lyons 2017). Taken together, these expressions of hope are not naive or abstract. They are grounded, political, and resilient, refusing to surrender joy, imagination, and community to the logic of war and dispossession. In this way, relational and critical hope emerge not from abstract belief, but from concrete experiences of surviving and connecting despite the presence of structural violence.

> "One of my happy memories in childhood is that on Fridays, I would go to my uncle's and cousin's houses, but my family always insisted that I come back home on Saturday for school. Still, those visits felt like an adventure, and I would look forward to them." *(Male, 30, Herat)*

> "I remember my brother used to sell soap on the street, and whenever he was going out shopping with my mother, he would bring back ice cream. He made sure we all had ice cream. I still remember that taste." *(Female, 23, Bamyan)*

> "I just remembered a very sweet memory, the first day of school. The principal asked me if I knew my left hand and my right hand. My mom immediately answered for me! She was so fast that I didn't get the chance to respond. The principal laughed and said, 'He should come back when he knows his left from his right.' I protested, 'I DO know my left and right!' That memory still makes me smile." *(Male, 28, Bamyan)*

> "The happiest day of my life? When I got my first PlayStation! Laughing. My older brother liked movies, not video games, but my nephews had PlayStations and loved playing. I didn't have one. Then, out of nowhere, my brother got me one. I don't know why, but it was the best surprise ever!"*(Male, 30, Kandahar)*

These childhood recollections highlight how small moments of happiness foster a deep sense of hope, even in difficult circumstances; they make Afghan children look forward to the possibility of a better life and sustain them through hardship. For the boy from Herat, the excitement of visiting his uncle and cousins on Fridays felt like an adventure during the dark time of the Taliban, where he was not allowed to go outside. Sitting in the window hoping to see someone pass by, he found comfort in the routine visits, which grounded him in embedded hope, a quiet, enduring presence rooted in everyday rhythms and relationships (Bloch 1986). While these visits didn't guarantee change, they offered him emotional continuity, belonging, and joy, key building blocks that nurtured a deeper capacity for hope.

At the same time, the anticipation of these visits and the belief that change was possible reveal a form of proactive hope, one that looked toward the future with intention and desire for transformation (Snyder 2002). Similarly, the girl from Bamyan recalls how her brother, despite selling soap on the street, always brought home ice cream to share with the family. This small but consistent act of care created a lasting impression, reinforcing how relational hope, hope sustained by emotional bonds and acts of kindness, can flourish even in conditions of extreme scarcity (Walker 2006). His action served as a vital building block: consistent care in a setting of instability. The memory of that shared ice cream endures because it affirmed, again and again, that she mattered that someone would think of her and bring joy even when life was harsh.

For a girl whose parents could barely provide one meal a day, this moment nurtured the belief that life could not always remain so difficult. In this case, critical hope emerges as well, as her awareness of suffering is accompanied by a belief in the potential for something different and better, born not of illusion but of relational care (Freire 1994). Another memory, a boy's first day at school, where his mother's quick response overshadowed his own voice captures a humorous yet formative experience. This memory continues to bring a smile years later, showing how embedded hope can reside even in light-hearted or imperfect moments, reinforcing a child's sense of safety and continuity through subtle emotional layers (Bloch 1986). The memory itself may not be dramatic, but what it reinforces is a secure attachment, a building block that helps children believe they can participate in the world, even if their voice isn't always heard. That belief, in turn, underpins a quiet, sustained form of hope.

For the boy who remembers little from his early years except weaving carpets from dawn until nightfall, the dream of attending school offered proactive hope, a clear longing for a different kind of life shaped by education and change (Snyder 2002). In this case, the building block is his awareness of an alternative path education, and his desire to claim it, even when circumstances told him otherwise. The act of dreaming becomes a hopeful stance toward the future. In contrast, the joy of receiving a PlayStation as a surprise gift from an older brother, for a boy who was born after his father's death and felt like he "didn't matter, " represented a profound moment of relational and critical hope. The gift communicated recognition and love, offering a glimpse into the possibility that life could improve, and that he did indeed have value (Freire 1994; Walker 2006). The brother's gesture, unexpected and deeply personal, became a moment in which the boy experienced being seen, a building block of relational hope that affirmed his worth, reshaping how he saw himself in the world.

Across all these experiences, it becomes clear that hope is not always found in grand gestures, but in everyday acts of connection, generosity, and emotional resonance. These forms of hope, relational, embedded, proactive, and critical, are interwoven into the lives of Afghan youth, shaping their capacity to endure, imagine, and believe in the possibility of change. These stories reflect critical hope, a grounded, realistic form of hope that emerges not from denial or fantasy but from small, meaningful acts either by themselves or by witnessing someone in their surroundings that affirm life, connection, and the possibility of change even in bleak conditions. It's not passive or blind optimism; rather, it is built on lived experience, care, and imagination. The young people are not ignoring hardship, they are surviving through it, fueled by everyday sources of meaning and connection. These moments are not isolated flashes of joy. They give children a sense of capability, connection, worth, or future orientation. In each case, the feeling of happiness becomes more than emotion, it becomes a building block for how the child later understands what is possible, who they can rely on, or how they matter. In some narratives, this joy directly strengthens agency or imagination; in others, it reinforces belonging or emotional safety. These are not just memories, they are architectures of hope.

Framing these childhood experiences through the definitions of hope of my young participants, these small moments of happiness sustained them through immense hardships, motivating them to envision a possibility of change through these lived experiences.

b. Hope Through Family Bonds

The warmth and love in early childhood memories establish a foundational sense of belonging that builds a child’s ability to hope and overcome life's challenges. The family micro-ecosystem served as a crucial source of comfort and moral instruction for most of my

participants who faced forced displacement, relocation, and conflict. These intimate bonds reflect what scholars describe as relational hope, where hope is sustained and transmitted through close interpersonal relationships that provide emotional security and a sense of continuity amid instability (Walker 2006). Their stories demonstrate how strong family ties supported them, while parents and elders taught essential values of positive thinking and the belief that change is possible through action. Children were taught that good deeds will be answered with good outcomes and that if you act with good intentions and work hard, positive change is achievable, beliefs that echo the tenets of proactive hope, which emphasizes agency and goal-directed thinking in the face of adversity (Snyder 2002).

These early moral teachings and expressions of love shaped Afghan children's perspectives and helped them grow into hopeful people despite their difficult realities. One girl described how she believed the absence of something, like her father's embrace, did not mean it was impossible to experience it one day, as she longed for that connection throughout her childhood until it was finally fulfilled. This shows how embedded hope, a quiet, enduring belief rooted in the ordinary rhythms of life and the accumulation of small gestures, was cultivated in daily experiences (Bloch 1986). In harsh times, children longed for love and empathy, and love manifested in these personal spaces as shared laughter between family members and lessons in mutual respect. Small gestures, like presenting flowers to an elder sister, or valuing a stepfather's presence when the idea of fatherly love once seemed impossible, demonstrate how children developed a sense that their actions mattered and that emotional realities could shift for the better. These are powerful illustrations of how relational hope enabled children to see themselves as active participants in shaping meaningful change in their lives (Freire 1994).

Family bonds, in this sense, did more than offer comfort; they created the psychological and emotional architecture that helped my participants sustain hope during periods of intense uncertainty. These relationships gave their lives meaning and purpose, taught them that change was possible, and instilled the belief that hope was not a distant or abstract dream, but a lived and ongoing process in their immediate environments. As such, the hope that emerged in these narratives was multi-layered: relational in its roots, embedded in daily life, and proactive in its orientation toward change. Following are some of the testimonies of my participants that show how family bonds nurture hope.

> "I think I was a really happy kid because I was smiling and laughing all the time. When we came back to Afghanistan and we went to my grandparent's home, I was very alone and scared, but I think because everyone cared for me, especially my young cousin, it helped a lot, and I saw that everybody was my relative, and I felt it will be okay because everyone loved me. That's how I believe I survive when we first came back to Afghanistan" *(Female, 28, Punjshir)*

> "When we arrived at our village, the entire village community gathered in front of our home, they were all there to welcome my father, who was released from the Taliban. It was such a happy moment. When I entered our home and saw my father, he had a big beard. My brothers and I all ran to him and hugged him, and we cried. We were so happy. It was one of the happiest days of my life to see my father free and the care our whole village showed towards us. I knew we were not alone."*(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

> "After we came to Afghanistan, I was very alone at the beginning, I could not speak Faris very well, and I would feel sad, but whenever I was going to my Baba and Acha's (Grandparents) house, I used to have the most fun time. And my *Khalas* (aunts) were there too, and my cousins who are like my brothers, helped me adjust to my new home. I felt home whenever I was there, I did not want to go back to Malaysia" *(Male, 24, Badakhshan)*

The participants recall moments of joy, familial warmth, communal support, and a deep sense of belonging, experiences that anchor their hope for stability and continuity during times of rupture and separation. These memories do not just reflect happiness; they lay the emotional groundwork for hope by building trust, safety, and a belief that love and support are available even in unfamiliar or painful contexts.

The first quote illustrates how returning to a familiar and loving environment, surrounded by extended family, provided a young child with a sense of care and belonging. That feeling of being surrounded and protected, especially after fear and displacement, formed a key building block of relational hope. It reassured her that she could navigate difficult changes because she wasn't alone. This kind of relational hope, grounded in close emotional ties, aligns with feminist and resilience research that views care as central to psychological survival and meaning-making (Walker 2006; Ungar 2008).

The second quote captures the emotional intensity of reunion and the central role of the father figure after his release from Taliban captivity. The collective joy expressed by the entire village reflects a form of communal or collective hope, where community solidarity not only marks a turning point after trauma but becomes a vehicle for future-oriented belief in change in a

child's life (hooks 2003; Solnit 2009). This experience moves beyond an individual's feelings and shows how being part of a loving, affirming collective can generate radical hope, a shared sense that healing and restoration are possible even after collective trauma (Kwon 2013).

The third quote demonstrates how extended family networks, especially grandparents and aunts, serve as emotional anchors for displaced children, helping them retain joy and prevent alienation. This sense of belonging became a stabilizing force, a critical building block of embedded hope, which allowed the child to feel at home even in a new environment. The repeated joy of visiting family and the safety of familiar routines laid a quiet foundation for the belief that life could become good again. These experiences are illustrative of what Van der Kolk (2014) and Cunningham (2013) describe as memory-based hope, where childhood joy and emotional safety can act as psychological resources for resilience in later life. Altogether, these reflections affirm that strong familial bonds and community-rooted care foster hope and emotional stability, even in the face of uncertainty and displacement.

> "For the first time I loved everything about life. The very first time I started connecting with my stepdad, I have this photo, I am wearing a white gown and I am holding his hand, and it's beautiful. Even in the times when he slapped me, that photo reminded me of a beautiful feeling." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

> "My elder sister, I loved her so much. I would pluck flowers from outside and bring them for her, and tell her these flowers are only for her because I love her so much and then give her the flowers. And she would smile, and that would make me so happy." *(Female, 22, Laghman)*

These childhood memories reveal how love, connection, and familial bonds nurtured hope in the lives of these participants. The first quote captures a transformative moment of belonging, where a relationship with a stepfather became a source of newfound joy and security for a young girl who never met her biological father and thought every physical and emotional violence she was experiencing was because of the absence of her father. In this context, the photo becomes a symbolic touchstone of relational hope. Despite ongoing harm, it represents the possibility of something tender and affirming, a glimpse of what could be different. It also reflects the building block of memory, where one moment of emotional resonance becomes strong enough to carry through pain.

Similarly, the final memory illustrates how even small acts of love, offering flowers to a beloved sister, became meaningful expressions of connection and care and gave the little girl a sense of purpose. This is not merely a sweet moment; it's an instance of hope formed through relational action. Her desire to make her sister smile gave her a role, a reason, a place in the world, each of which is a key building block of hope. This little girl, who always felt unwanted by her parents, especially her mother, did not feel she meant anything in her family life. Most of my participants find hope in having a purpose in life to make their family happy and safe. When that purpose is returned with recognition or care, it becomes a source of emotional endurance. The child's hope emerges not as a vague optimism, but as a felt connection between effort, care, and meaning.

These stories demonstrate how childhood experiences, shaped by family relationships, provided a foundation for nurturing a hopeful outlook on life, even amidst broader uncertainties. They show how hope is not an abstract idea in childhood, it is something children

feel when they are seen, loved, and valued, and something they begin to imagine when those feelings are returned.

c. Hope Through Acts of Kindness & Giving Back

I remember as a child, whenever someone knocked on our door asking for food or clothes, my mother would never turn them away. She would ask me to bring a small bowl of flour and then look to see if she could find a piece of clothing, something of my father's, hers, or even ours, to give. As far back as I can remember, we were not well off. I always saw my parents struggle financially, but I never once saw my mother refuse someone in need. Whenever I handed over those small items of food or clothing, the person would respond with a prayer, "May God protect you, " or "May God give you more." Religious belief plays a strong role in shaping these kinds of behaviors for many Afghans. I remember my maternal grandmother telling us a story of the Prophet Muhammad, quoting him, that if a nonbeliever gives water to someone thirsty, that nonbeliever will go to heaven. This notion of karma of good deeds being rewarded is deeply woven into Afghan culture. It not only motivates acts of kindness but also offers a form of hope: the belief that something good will come in return. This type of belief, rooted in faith, ethics, and spiritual reciprocity, serves as a key building block of hope. It reinforces the idea that actions, no matter how small, are meaningful and can ripple outward to create future good.

And this is how children come to learn such values, by witnessing them in their closest environments. Therefore, the power of giving back through acts of kindness creates hope that starts during childhood because small, generous actions can establish lasting values and a sense of purpose. Many of my study participants developed hope in their childhoods by receiving support through acts of kindness and believing that if they were kind and gave back to those in

need, they would be rewarded for it. These values become more than behavior, they shape identity. Seeing themselves as contributors to others' well-being made children feel they had a place in their communities. Therefore, most of my participants actively participated in giving back as a way to create hope through both actions and pathways to achieve their goals. This mutuality, being helped and helping others, anchored hope not only in personal reward but in the shared belief that they were part of a meaningful social fabric. The experiences of my participants in their childhoods demonstrate that hope occurred when individuals acted with compassion and assumed responsibility for their community. As children living in resource-poor environments where they had little real power, they created methods to realize positive change, revealing that hope can be actively constructed through deliberate yet significant actions.

> ″Our school was under the tree, and that was the first school in our village. Our teacher did not have a chair, and I made a chair from clay and mud for the teacher. And I told my classmates that we don't have to wait for the government to bring chairs and furniture because we belong to a poor country, and our district is one of the farthest. So, we have to use our own resources to make our school better. And then I think the chair that I made for the teacher and then later on for other students as well was really picked up by the district education department and then they celebrated this innovative idea that a child, is using their own resources, which is mud and clay to create chairs for themselves because they want to get educated and they want to have a school that has all the resources but from their own resources." *(Male, 32, Kandahar)*

> "A beautiful memory I have from my childhood is once there was a dead bird on the road, and my cousins and I did a funeral for it. We really came in a circle and prayed for it. And now whenever I achieve something, I'm like, 'I had done that, and was kind to that bird, maybe that's why God is helping me in my journey' (laughs)." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

The childhood memories illustrate the ways in which hope took root through creative and generous actions and collective responsibility alongside inventive problem-solving. The initial quote shows how a child's creative ideas and active work to enhance their education by creating a chair for their teacher helped to better their school environment. This is a clear example of proactive hope, where the child not only imagines a solution but takes action toward it. The act itself draws on key building blocks, agency, initiative, and a sense of communal obligation. By receiving positive community and government acknowledgment, this reinforced the child's belief that through good deeds and action, positive outcomes result in ways they both hoped for and in ways they could not have imagined or intended. Equally important, this moment shaped how the child saw himself not just as someone who waits for change, but someone who makes it happen. This construction of self as an agent of change also speaks to identity formation through hope.

The second quote demonstrates the profound impact of a symbolic compassionate act, such as a child holding a funeral for a bird, which later influenced the participant's belief in divine support and the transformative power of benevolent actions to help her achieve her goals in the future. This belief that past kindness creates future blessings, is a fusion of spiritual and moral reasoning, deeply rooted in Afghan cultural narratives. While the act may seem small, it

provided a lasting emotional thread that connected her present actions to future hopes. The building blocks here include empathy, ritual, and moral imagination, all of which coalesce into a personal theology of hope.

These reflections demonstrate that small acts of kindness created hope: personal good deeds could generate positive outcomes for themselves, their peers, and their communities. More importantly, they helped children see themselves as capable of contributing to the moral life of their communities. As my advisor noted, these memories are not only about responsibility, they are about mutuality. The children were not just trying to be good; they were seeking to belong, to be recognized, and to matter. And through that recognition, their hope was not only sustained, it was made real.

d. Hope Through Education & Self-Improvement

As a refugee child in Pakistan from 1995 to 2001, educational opportunities were very limited for me. I still remember the day my father enrolled me, along with my brothers, in a language learning center. After spending years confined within the four walls of our home, this small step toward education felt like a huge breakthrough. I couldn't have been happier. It gave me hope that things could change, that I could transform my life. I attended the English language center for 10 months, and by the end of it, I was offered a job to teach there. When I received my first salary, a total of 850 rupees, which in the early 2000s was roughly equivalent to 14 U.S. dollars, I felt rich and empowered. I didn't go home directly that day. I went to the market and bought something for my mother and younger sibling with that money. I didn't feel the need to ask anyone for permission. The entire way home on the bus, I was already planning what I

wanted to study next. I imagined myself working in a prestigious educational institution, earning a monthly salary of 5, 000 rupees. At that moment, education became my pathway to freedom. It gave me agency and a glimpse of a future where my life was no longer confined to the walls of our home. This moment reflects proactive hope, a forward-looking orientation where agency and imagined outcomes converge. The building blocks here include restored autonomy, self-recognition, and the belief that learning could unlock new roles, identities, and futures.

My study participants experienced their educational opportunities shaped by war while growing up in Afghanistan during the late 1990s and early 2000s as well. The destruction of schools, along with the killing or displacement of teachers and the closing of educational institutions, meant that most of my participants, their siblings, and parents were robbed of learning opportunities. In these times, education became more than just learning; it represented an act of resistance and was fed by hope for improved futures. The limited access to schools increased the importance of education, while transforming learning into a rebellious act against those who wanted to eliminate educational opportunities. This framing shows how hope became deeply political and active, its building blocks were not only personal dreams but defiance, resilience, and moral purpose. My participants often recalled their first experiences of hope of changing their lives for the better as moments connected to academic institutions and the resolve to pursue their educational paths against challenging circumstances. The accounts that follow demonstrate how my young participants maintained their quest for learning and self-determination amid the very real challenges presented by wartime devastation and deprivation.

> "Until my generation in our village no one went to school. When school started in our village, under the tree, I was so happy I would go to that school, and not only

> me but all the kids in our village, girls and boys, would be educated. My father and uncles never went to school, nor our women. My father was a big supporter of education because he believed that our village was backward, since no one was educated. I think my father's encouragement and love for education encouraged me to love education and be creative and give back to our school by creating chairs from clay and mud first for our teacher and then for all the students." *(Male, 32, Kandahar)*

> "I was five when I started school. It was a crazy time! I was really good at school and always ranked first. Although my mother didn't study much, she was my biggest supporter. She always told me, 'You have to study; you have to achieve something bigger in life.' That made me feel special. When I was in grade two, I went to get my exam scorecard. It was winter, and I think I got second position in the class. I was really happy. I ran towards home to tell my father about the result I got, but when I arrived I noticed I had lost the score card on the way. My father has always been supportive of my education, and that's why I consider myself a successful woman in Afghanistan." *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

These childhood memories reveal how education served as a source of hope and transformation for Afghan youth despite structural barriers. The young woman from Mazar-e-Sharif found strength in her parents' encouragement, especially her mother's belief that she was destined "to achieve something bigger in life." Her academic achievements became a symbol of personal progress, dignity, and self-worth, expressions of aspirational hope, which imagines a future beyond inherited limitations and is often cultivated through relational ties and cultural

expectations (Shimshock and Le 2022). These emotional reinforcements, encouragement, pride, and recognition, served as critical building blocks that nurtured her sense of purpose and allowed hope to crystallize. At the same time, her determination to succeed, evident in moments like proudly running home with her exam result, demonstrates proactive hope, where the pursuit of education becomes an active response to adversity and a tool for transformation (Curnow 2022). This pursuit also reveals a growing sense of identity formed through hope: not only imagining a better life but seeing oneself as capable and deserving of it.

Similarly, the young man from Kandahar, inspired by his father's support, not only dreamed of a better future for himself and his village but also took initiative to build mud chairs for classmates when resources were lacking, an act rooted in agency, creativity, and a refusal to passively accept structural neglect. This act reflects not only proactive hope but also a collective ethic, here building a better school wasn't just about personal gain but mutual uplift. Hope in this case also builds identity through mutuality. His role in the community shifted: from child to contributor, from student to change-maker. These recollections show that the goal of receiving an education, despite political, social, and economic hardship, remained a force that shaped individual purpose and carried forward the unfulfilled dreams of past generations (Freire 1994; Snyder 2002).

> "The first time I got a certificate of completion from a six-month English language class… my teacher, who was teaching me at that time, is now a good friend of mine and reminded me of how I went through a lot of challenges to learn the English language and did not give up, and now I have made something out of myself." *(Male, 30, Herat)*

> “Yes, when I was only five years old, I started carpet weaving and my sister was seven years old. After a few years, when our financial situation improved with our work, my father decided to admit us to school. We started going to a school for refugees, and we didn't have to pay any fees. We were so happy that we were still able to work during the day and then study in the evening." *(Female, 29, Bamyan)*

> "Yes, I do have a memory, and I think it might be one of my happiest memories of life. When we returned to Afghanistan, the war ended, and some girls were already attending school. And I think Americans by that time were giving students who were going to school some biscuits and some cooking oil. And I really wanted to go to school for the purpose of getting biscuits and oil and not to get an education. But when I was admitted, and they gave me biscuits every few weeks, I was super happy. Every time I got oil and biscuits, I felt the feeling of achievement and the utmost happiness inside me. My mother told me later when you asked me to go to school for biscuits and oil; I just remembered my childhood and innocence when I wanted to go to school. She said at that moment, I was cooking on wood, and I stopped cooking, stopped everything, and prepared to take you to school. Because I didn’t want the same thing to happen to you. I didn’t want you to feel you could not get an education." (Female, 27, Nangarhar)

The testimonies of my participants illustrate both how hope for an education and the transformative power of education itself became sources of hope for a better future, motivating them to persevere amid adversity. The young man from Herat recounts his journey of struggle and triumph through language acquisition, a path that reflects proactive hope, the process of

setting goals, identifying strategies, and maintaining motivation in the face of challenges (Snyder 2002). Alongside this, the role of the teacher-turned-friend provided emotional recognition and validation, relational building blocks that reinforced the participant's sense of worth and progress.

Similarly, despite her early experience as a child laborer, the young woman from Bamyan embraced the opportunity to attend school with the hope that going to school would change her future. This narrative exemplifies goal-directed hope, where she was hopeful that education would change her life, even if she was within controlled and difficult circumstances (Webb 2013; Curnow 2022). Her hope was actively shaped by persistence and a supportive family decision, illustrating that opportunity itself can be a building block when it is paired with agency and long-term vision.

The story of the girl from Nangarhar, initially drawn to school by the promise of biscuits and oil, later evolves into a meaningful pursuit of education and self-worth. This transformation reflects critical hope, which recognizes structural injustice yet insists on the possibility of change through consciousness and action (Freire 1994). Her mother's swift decision to enroll her in school, rooted in her own unfulfilled educational dreams, demonstrates the intergenerational nature of relational hope, which is nurtured through acts of care, love, and memory (Shimshock and Le 2022). This is also where mutuality becomes central. The daughter's hope is not created in isolation, it emerges through her mother's sacrifice, through a shared effort to interrupt historical patterns of exclusion. This is a generative, identity-forming hope grounded in solidarity.

Together, these narratives show that education functions not merely as a means to academic achievement but as a vital mechanism for survival, dignity, and the reimagining of a future shaped by possibility. Education, in this context, was never just about schooling, it was how young people redefined themselves and their place in the world.

4. From Childhood to Adulthood: Challenges, Dreams, and Realities

When I arrived in the United States as a student many years ago, I was often asked about my teenage years. I always found this question difficult to answer, not because I had forgotten those years, but because I was never quite sure when or if I had been a teenager in the way the question implied. Like me, for many Afghan children growing up in the 1990s and early 2000s, adolescence was not a distinct phase of life marked by self-discovery, leisure, or personal growth. Instead, it was a time of shared responsibility, where children were integral to their family's income-generating efforts. I hesitate to label this as *child labor* because neither I nor my participants see it that way. It was not a case of exploitation but rather a collective struggle, one in which every family member, regardless of age, contributed to survival and stability.

In this context, most Afghan youth worked in some capacity while also attending school, if they could go to school. As a result, many of my participants struggled to pinpoint when they transitioned from childhood to adulthood. Their teenage years were not defined by the typical rites of passage but rather by a continuous negotiation of duty, education, and trying to envision a better future. While growing up, the mesosystem of these Afghan young people included their experiences at work and exposure to weightier responsibilities brought upon them by their situations. Understanding this context and background is crucial to making sense of their

narratives. The following sections explore the key factors that have shaped their experiences, factors that, despite hardship, have also cultivated hope that they could move beyond their immediate struggles.

a. Personal Struggles and Family Responsibilities as Motivation

The weight of responsibility for my study's participants serves as both a burden and an unexpected wellspring of hope. The experience of responsibility appears at various life stages with gender-specific expressions, but remains a common source of purpose for both young men and women. Their dedication to family was the most fundamental expression of their responsibility. This responsibility served as their life's anchor and driving force. The overwhelming burden of this responsibility gave individuals' purpose, which forced them to use hard work and hope to overcome difficult situations. It is here that the building blocks of hope, moral obligation, mutual care, and role assumption, emerge as psychological structures through which young people learn to endure. Their positive and hopeful action stemmed from a sense of duty, motivating them to continue moving toward their goals through difficult times. Knowing their actions and outcomes safeguarded the well-being of loved ones often meant they made personal sacrifices in their actions to reach their goals for their family members. Their responsibility to others often restricted their ability to pursue their personal goals, yet gave them a strong sense of purpose, which fortified their determination to keep pursuing goals to support their family. This dynamic of sacrificing self-interest for familial good also built identity through mutuality, a central aspect of how youth come to see themselves as valuable contributors within their relational worlds. They held onto the hope that they could make life better for their family in the present and future. Following are quotes from my young participants where I saw how responsibility was a driving force in their hopefulness.

"I only remember this. At that moment, I felt this is it. I knew what was next. I knew many people in our community whose fathers never came back. I felt this is it. Now, I am responsible for everyone in my family. I have to get up. I was only 16 years old by then. I started pleading with the Talib on the phone that whatever you want, we will give you; please don't hurt my father… *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

"From 2015 onwards, my father also retired, and the whole responsibility of the family remained on my shoulders, and I was grateful to work rather than only study and take care of my family" *(Male, 30, Herat)*

"When I was going with my father, as the oldest son, it felt like a responsibility… The last thing my father told me was, 'My son, now everything and all family is your *Amanat* (responsibility). Now, you are the leader of the family.' This sentence has made me who I am today: 'My son, now you are responsible for the entire family. It is your job from now on to take care of everyone.'" *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

"All I knew was carpet weaving… When I was 10 years old, my mother was going to work, and everyone was going to school or outside, and I had to be at home. I had to clean and take care of my sister." *(Female, 23, Bamyan)*

"My first challenge was financial. I would always wish to have more time to study, but I had to work… I knew once I was done with high school, I needed to look for a job, I didn't want my younger siblings to go through the same. I would tell my parents I will work as soon as I graduate." *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

From an early age, my study's participants were thrust into financial and familial responsibility roles, often in moments of crisis or necessity. Most of them had to work, sacrificing their educational and personal aspirations for family responsibilities. At just sixteen, the young man from Ghazni was forced to take on the role of provider. Although he knew the dark realities of what happened to the people captured by the Taliban, the moment he took responsibility, he didn't allow himself to be hopeless. He immediately took action. He pleaded for his father's life with the Taliban. He realized at that moment that he was now responsible for his entire family, and it became his goal to bring back his father somehow. This is not simply a story of obligation, it reveals how hope can materialize in the very act of stepping up, when forward-looking intention replaces fear with purpose. He had his personal goals of getting an education and earning money to make a home for his family, or getting a small pocket cassette player for himself, and he began devising different paths in extremely challenging circumstances to reach his objectives.

Similarly, the young man from Herat faced a sudden shift in responsibility when his father retired, leaving him as the sole financial support for his household. However, this responsibility and goal gave him a sense of purpose, rather than becoming hopeless for his future. For another young man from Ghazni, responsibility was not just imposed but explicitly passed down, as his father's final words declared him the family leader, shaping his identity and sense of duty. This form of hope can be described as moral and aspirational, hope that emerges from ethical duty, shaped by love, and directed toward the welfare of others. These stories show how relational bonds and ethical imperatives act as critical building blocks that anchor resilient, future-oriented behavior.

While these obligations restricted the freedoms of these young Afghans, limiting education or childhood experiences, they also became a source of hope, the hope that they will be able to support their families. The young woman from Bamyan, who had to stay home to care for her sister while others went to school, accepted her role as essential to her family's well-being. This sacrifice did not make her sad; instead, it gave her hope that with her contribution, her family was going to do well. This belief, that she mattered and her contribution had tangible meaning, reflects hope grounded in relational interdependence, where emotional worth is built through care. The young man from Ghazni, who wished for more time to study, remained committed to working, ensuring that his younger siblings would not have to endure the same struggles. The desire for a better future for his sibling was a source of hope for him. This, too, is a building block of hope, mutual responsibility, where the future is envisioned not as personal escape but collective elevation. These experiences highlight that while responsibility placed immense pressure on these young Afghans, it also instilled a deep sense of purpose, and that purpose sustained them through hard times. The belief that their sacrifices and actions could improve their families' futures became a source of hope and ultimately resilience, reinforcing their determination to push forward despite immense challenges.

> "My only dream and goal was to help my mom and dad so they wouldn't have to work anymore. My father is getting weaker every day, and the same with my mother. I just want them to rest for a bit of their life. I also wanted to become a psychologist because sometimes, when I look back in life, I want to change something, but I can't. To process those experiences, I want to be able to deal with them because it's really hard sometimes.*"(Female, 23, Bamyan)*

> "As you know, for high schoolers, there are not many job opportunities in Afghanistan, or maybe anywhere, but some private schools were giving teaching jobs. So, I started that job to earn some salary and take tuition classes for university exams while I was still in high school. Also, as the family's oldest daughter, I had many responsibilities. I helped my mother from a really young age with household chores… Luckily, my family understood that studying was important for me." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

> "Once upon a time, I really loved learning English. I joined an English center for a very short period, but that was it. I had to leave the English center because my mother was working, and I had to be home to take care of my siblings." *(Female, 23, Bamyan)*

These testimonies reveal personal sacrifices yet maintain a deep-seated sense of hopefulness within them because they set aside personal ambitions for family responsibilities and contributed to a bigger goal than just their personal dreams. In each case, the building blocks of hope, moral obligation, emotional maturity, and familial reciprocity, serve as the scaffolding for hope to emerge and endure. Responsibility drove the young woman from Bamyan to achieve her dream of providing her parents with rest after their years of struggle; instead of viewing it as a burden, she has hope that through her act of taking the load of family responsibility, she will be able to do that someday. She also wants to become a psychologist both as a personal ambition and a means to work through her past, all the while maintaining hope that she can heal and transform.

The young woman from Nangarhar maintains her hope in achieving her education through the dual challenges of work and family duties. The young woman from Bamyan maintains her passion for education even after stopping studying English to look after her siblings, realizing that her path to school is currently blocked but not giving up on her goal. These examples demonstrate how mutual responsibility can fuel hopeful futures, not through passive waiting, but through active caregiving, quiet endurance, and a commitment to collective well-being. These stories demonstrate that hope is a tangible force that is influenced both by young people's responsibilities and their own goals. It provides these young Afghans with purposeful determination and belief in their actions, leading to improved futures for themselves and their families.

b. The Power of Imagination: Hope Through Dreams and Aspirations

For as long as I can remember, I have always dreamed of something big at every stage of my life, even in childhood. As a refugee child in Pakistan, I vividly recall dreaming of myself graduating from school while collecting wood scraps from the streets, despite having no prospect of ever attending school. I would imagine luxurious furniture in our small, one-room rental house, where we barely had a worn-out plastic carpet to sit on. I envisioned myself teaching at a respected educational institution at a time when the idea of an Afghan student passing board exams to attend university or college was almost unimaginable. I share these examples to illustrate the scale of my dreams, even when the reality of my circumstances seemed worlds apart. Yet, those dreams never allowed me to become a hopeless child or experience a sad childhood.

During the focus group discussions for my study with Afghan youth in the U.S. and Toronto, I noticed a striking similarity, many of my participants dream big, often far beyond their current realities. These dreams did more than offer comfort. They sustained my participants through fear, displacement, and upheaval. Their imagined futures became tangible expressions of hope, not passive longing, but an active commitment to believing in the possibility of change. Hope, for them, is deeply intertwined with survival, resistance, and aspirations for the future. It is both a psychological refuge and an active force against despair.

Many participants describe hope not as something inherently present but as something they must build. One participant articulated this sentiment, saying, “Anyone who has been born in a country like Afghanistan, for all of us, there was no hope. We have to create hope to survive.” (Male, 30, Ghazni) This articulation reflects what I identify as constructed or proactive hope, a response to absence, a form of mental labor through which they invented possibilities for survival. In the absence of stability, hope becomes a means of endurance, forged through personal beliefs, aspirations, and resilience. Following are some of the stories of my participants they recalled from their years of growing up and how these dreams and imaginations kept them motivated and hopeful:

> "I think since I can remember, I have dreamed big. I always felt myself was somebody who was born to do big things. I want to talk about one of my happy memories of that time, which is also funny. So in our school there were extra computer and English classes taught after school hours. I would attend those classes and then attend religious study classes at the same school. One day in English class, the teacher asked what everyone wanted to be in the future, and my

> answer was that I wanted to be the best President of Afghanistan. My teacher laughed for a long time due to my answer, not only her, but my classmates as well. Although I laughed a lot with them, I was a little embarrassed as well because I was not sure if my answer was correct or if I was dreaming too big. But even now, I don't think my dreams look like super impossible dreams." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*
>
> "I think in childhood, as everybody tells you, I also wanted to be a doctor when I grew up. But at the same time, I didn't want to be only a doctor, I think I really wanted to be somebody with a status. Somebody who has authority in the family, somebody who has money and power where people could come and ask for help. I wanted to have big cars and businesses. I wanted to be a respected person." *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*
>
> "I told my classmates I wanted to study political science and be a political person. They laughed and told me it was not possible for women in Afghanistan. But I told them I will fulfill this dream of mine." *(Female, 22, Laghman)*
>
> "I didn't know what work I would be doing, but I would imagine myself like those women I saw in movies and dramas, wearing a beautiful bag, going to an office, and having a computer. That was my dream." *(Female, 29, Bamyan)*

These stories show that for my participants, imagination itself functioned as a building block of hope, what some scholars call an "internal refuge" (hooks 2003; Bloch 1986), a space where the impossible becomes imaginable, and the imaginable becomes a lifeline. For the young

woman from Nangarhar, envisioning herself as president, even while living under Taliban rule, was not a delusion but a form of political and emotional resistance, and a drive to not give up on studying as a sign of resistance. Her hope was aspirational, future-oriented, but deeply grounded in a sense of agency. The young woman from Laghman, laughed at for wanting to study political science, turned that ridicule into a defiant motivation to keep going. These expressions are not just hope, they are hope shaped by courage and imagination, nurtured through a refusal to let circumstance define self-worth.

For many of my participants, dreaming big, whether of power, wealth, leadership, or simply going to an office in a nice bag, served as tools of emotional survival. These dreams acted as both hope itself and the cognitive scaffolding that made hope sustainable. They were acts of imaginative defiance, of not giving in to what was, because they still believed in what could be.

> "I wanted to be a doctor since childhood, but when I got to my teenage years, something changed, I wanted to be a midwife. Maybe my mom used to say midwives have a big income. So maybe that encouraged me. Before I started my journalistic activities, I always saw myself as a parliamentarian and involved in politics. I really wanted to be a politician, an ambassador, a parliamentarian, or a minister. I wanted to have an association for women's rights." *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

> "I used to see videos of the U.S. and Harvard, and I liked them. But to say I planned it? I would be lying. The only thing I knew was that America existed and Harvard existed. And I guess my aunt had told me once about it. But the name

was hacked into my mind, and whenever I was alone in dark times, or getting beaten, I would imagine myself in Harvard, and the pain would go away." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

"I had this self-confidence, I don't know where it was coming from. I always believed that I was mentally strong compared to others, so I always believed that I would win in whatever I am doing. So when my husband was hitting me I knew I am not going to stay in that situation for long." *(Female, 27, Panjshir)*

"For instance, I am in the worst time of my life. I will start by imagining a scenario. I start creating an entire story in my mind, and I feel it. With all my soul and body, those imaginations take me out. For example, when I was at my brother's home in 2012, I was really lonely and feeling bad and hurting. I used to start imagining myself walking in the airport, wearing a beautiful dress, and walking around, and that could take me out instantly. Even now, I imagine falling in love, and a guy is coming, and his hand touches mine, and I feel these emotions while imagining. So, imagining these scenarios usually takes me from dark to light. It might be bad, but it has helped me." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

In these narratives, imagination becomes a critical emotional tool for survival. The hope my participants embody here is proactive, they don't just wish for something better, they actively construct it in their minds. The young woman from Ghazni who imagined Harvard during moments of physical abuse did not map out a detailed path to get there, but she envisioned it as an escape, a beacon. That mental image reduced her pain in the moment, illustrating that hope is not always rational or goal-directed in the traditional sense, but rather sensory, embodied, and

immediately sustaining. Similarly, the woman from Panjshir, beaten by her husband, held tightly to her inner belief that she would not remain in that situation. That certainty, drawn not from external guarantees but from within, became her grounding. Her hope lived in her sense of identity, as someone who would "win, " who would not stay silenced.

Scholars like Lear (2006) and Walker (2006) have distinguished between "false" hope, hope disconnected from reality, and more grounded or critical hope, which emerges from reflective awareness and lived experience. The stories my participants share complicate these distinctions. Their imagined futures may not always materialize, but that does not make their hopes any less real or important. For many, the act of imagining is what gets them through the day. It creates emotional stamina, a sense of self, and a refusal to accept imposed limitations. In that sense, imagining oneself walking through an airport in a beautiful dress or studying at Harvard is not false hope, even if the imagined outcome never comes true. These dreams act as psychological lifelines. They offer emotional regulation, a sense of worth, and the courage to continue. Sometimes, these imagined futures do pay off, participants move forward, study, build careers. But other times, the dreams remain just that. Still, their power lies not in their fulfillment, but in their function.

Imagination, in these cases, functions as both the definition and building block of hope**,** a generative act that allows participants to endure and assert their right to picture a future beyond what is given, even when every structural message tells them they cannot. These imaginative hopes may not always translate into linear progress or measurable outcomes, but they create emotional and cognitive space for survival, which is often the precondition for any form of future transformation.

These stories also reveal a gendered pattern: the women in my study consistently turned to imagination as a coping strategy and a source of inner agency. Their hopes were often larger than their immediate realities, not because they were detached from reality, but because in the face of extreme constraint, their refusal to surrender was its own act of grounded resistance. In contexts where control over one's life is systematically denied, imagination becomes resistance, and hope becomes survival.

5. Carrying Hope into Adulthood: The Evolving Landscape of Hope

While writing this chapter on hope, I keep receiving messages from colleagues and family members asking, *What's going to happen to us?* Some are in the U.S., waiting for their asylum cases to be processed. Others have been stuck in Pakistan for three years, hoping their refugee cases will finally move forward. And then there are those in Afghanistan, waiting on immigration cases, people who supported the U.S. mission and were promised they wouldn't be left behind, only to now face the risk of Taliban persecution.

My husband is a green card holder, and he's supposed to travel for work outside the U.S. But I told him he can't. The Trump administration has announced a ban on Afghan citizens entering the U.S. Fear and uncertainty are nothing new to me, or to anyone from Afghanistan. But today, it feels especially heavy. Will there ever be a day when we have true agency over our lives? When can we control our futures? I tried to remind myself of all the past losses and uncertainties I've survived, but nothing feels quite like this moment. Then, I remembered

something one of my participants once told me: *There was never hope, but we had no choice but to create it in order to survive.*

And so, today, I find myself once again in a position where I have to create hope, where I have to imagine a better outcome, a vision for a future that doesn't feel so out of reach, so I don't completely give in to the weight of uncertainty. Adulthood for many of my participants unfolds just as it does for people anywhere in the world. They finish school, find jobs, and search for life partners. Some experience heartbreak. Some give in to societal pressures. Some fail. Some succeed. They try to contribute to their families and communities. They navigate the ordinary struggles of life. But they also carry so much more.

They have lived through war, where instability is a constant. They have experienced terrorism, losing loved ones, and never knowing if leaving home in the morning means coming back at night. They have suffered the loss of agency, watching their country's fate decided by foreign powers that never considered their voices or needs. They witnessed the return of the Taliban, knowing the U.S. and the world had handed over a nation of 40 million to a terrorist group. They have lived in fear of being persecuted. They have endured the limbo of refugee camps, of waiting in airports with no clear future. Now, they are scattered across the world, some of them trying to build lives in exile, and some in Afghanistan living with uncertainty that never seems to end. I wanted to know how they keep hope alive in their adult lives.

I met most of my participants in Afghanistan before the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops and the Taliban takeover in August 2021. During my participant selection process, my goal was to include young people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and capture a broad range of experiences. I was successful in this, until August 15, 2021. While my participants'

individual experiences varied, one event bound us together: the fall of the country to the Taliban and the U.S. withdrawal. Fear, loss, and an uncertain future became universal emotions among Afghans.

This section begins with my participants' current realities, where they are now, how they navigate life after August 2021, and through what mechanisms they sustain hope. By the time I started my life history interviews, 12 of my 15 participants had already left Afghanistan and were now scattered across France, Germany, Turkey, Canada, and the U.S. Some are slowly adjusting to life in exile. In contrast, others remain caught in the limbo of uncertain futures. Those who stayed behind in Afghanistan live under the Taliban rule, a notorious group that has no respect for human life, no education for girls and women, and constant uncertainty, not knowing what tomorrow holds.

One of my participants, still in Afghanistan, was arrested by the Taliban, imprisoned, and brutally tortured for seven months. Even after his release, he remains under house arrest. Another, now outside Afghanistan, was also tortured before managing to flee, his crime: being a journalist. The majority of my participants, however, endured the chaos of the U.S. evacuation. They spent days and nights at Kabul airport, risking their lives to Taliban gunfire and suicide bombings that killed hundreds. They have since spent months, even years, in refugee camps around the world, taking dangerous routes in search of safety. Some are still waiting, unsure if they will reach a safe country or be forced back to Afghanistan. Providing this context is essential. It sets the stage for the following testimonies, accounts of how my participants' notions of hope have evolved in the face of displacement, violence, and an uncertain future in their adult lives.

a. We Feel Everything, Yet We Survive

I always say that I may never feel a loss as devastating as losing my sister Natasha, but on August 15, 2021, I felt something just as profound, perhaps even heavier. That fateful day remains a deep wound, not only in the memories of my participants but in the collective soul of Afghanistan. A shared grief, where an entire nation will mourn for generations to come. This chapter will be unsettling for readers, as I share the testimonies of my participants who lived through the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban. I don't know whether I or my participants shed more tears while telling these stories, but through these stories of loss, I try to show that my study participants lose hope, but when there is nothing left, they have to recreate hope somehow to survive. Following are some of the stories shared by my participants that relate to their current lives:

> "I had to leave like a thief in the middle of the night. I had to leave the country so I could get an education. The most horrible experience of my life was those days when I was traveling to Pakistan and especially the day that I was at the border. Most of the time, I joke about it, but it is there within me that I have experienced and has made me traumatized for the rest of my life. Those 25 hours from Torkham to Islamabad was basically a living hell and so uncertain. And the fact that there were just two guys and 16 girls, we were under so many questions and answers, and we were worried. During that journey, we negotiated so many times with so many people and so many guards." *(Male, 24, Badakhshan)*

> "I didn't know what to do, thinking what to believe. I asked, or maybe I ordered, 'He must be joking.' I received a text from my brother, and he had attached a

video clip, people were running, the Taliban holding guns on their shoulders. I went to my class and started writing words on the board, but I just started crying. I couldn't continue anymore. My students came to me, asking what happened. I told them, 'The Taliban are here. They took over my country.' Something inside me broke. I was not thinking about my parents, my siblings, I was only thinking, 'Oh my God, Eidema, you don't have a country anymore. Your country is gone.' Then my family started messaging me, my sister, my brothers, and that was the moment when I stopped thinking about Afghanistan and started thinking about them. I think until today, I have blocked that corner of my brain where I don't want to face the reality that I don't have a country anymore, that I cannot go back to Afghanistan anymore. I put all my energy into getting my family out. That was my only priority. I think I did well because I don't think I would have survived the reality that my country was gone." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

"When every province was falling, it felt like our dreams were falling one by one. Everything was becoming dark. During those days, one of my classmates messaged me, asking what was happening. That was the first time I had nothing to say, nothing positive to hold on to. I just replied, 'Everything is gone. Everything is destroyed. I don't think there is anything left to hope for.' That night, when they[The Taliban entered Jalalabad, I couldn't sleep at all. I just lay there, staring at the ceiling, feeling like I was disappearing with my country. The only thing I could feel was uncertainty, a darkness I couldn't escape from." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

> "My first feeling was not like 'Oh I am going abroad.' I was holding a lot of fear within me that the Taliban's first round in power is back. The war and the killing and the horrible situations. I was very conflicted (Do raha) because it was good that I got out of there, but in the meantime, I was worried that my family was still there. And what can you do for them then? Finally, I chose to arrive here. Well, it was hard, although I was not expecting that time that when I went to France, I might not return back. I really want to see my mother. For me to go to Iran is not difficult, but to bring my mother to Iran is hard. Aside that Taliban don't harass elderly people or elderly women if they have men (Mahram), and if I get a plane ticket for her, how could she get there with that age and find the airport gate by herself?" *(Male, 28, Bamyan)*

These testimonies paint a stark picture of hope collapsing under the weight of forced exile, fear, and the irreversible loss of home. The repeated themes of displacement, desperation, and uncertainty reveal how the fall of Afghanistan shattered not only physical security but also the psychological and emotional stability of its people. A young man from Badakhshan describes his departure as that of a "thief in the middle of the night, " highlighting the forced nature of his exit, not as a choice but as a last resort, driven by the need for education. He shares his harrowing journey through borders lined with fear and negotiations, underscoring the dehumanizing experience of seeking refuge. Even after reaching safety, he remains haunted by the trauma of that crossing. This narrative illustrates the collapse of hope**,** but the underlying motivation to pursue education, despite the risks, reflects a building block of hope**,** a belief that education can transform one's future, even amid chaos.

A young woman from Ghazni captures the paralysis of loss, the moment when a person watches their homeland fall in real time, unable to comprehend the gravity of what is happening. The words "something inside me broke" encapsulate a profound rupture of personal security and national identity. Her immediate reaction is despair, but her decision to focus on getting her family out, rather than being consumed by grief, represents a shift from hopelessness to agency, a survival-oriented building block of hope**,** where purpose (protecting family) becomes a stabilizing force. A young woman from Nangarhar describes the sense of vanishing alongside her country, saying, "when every province was falling, it felt like our dreams were falling one by one." The repeated emphasis on “darkness, ” “disappearing, ” and “uncertainty” illustrates how hope eroded as provinces fell, leaving nothing to cling to. Yet even in this moment, the articulation of dreams, though perceived as lost, points to their enduring presence, a residual form of hope**,** suspended but not erased.

Even for those who managed to escape, like a young man from Bamyan, survival is bittersweet, burdened by the agonizing separation from family and the impossible logistics of reunification. He describes his struggle of knowing he is safe while his mother remains behind, trapped by bureaucratic and political barriers. These voices do not merely recount a singular loss; they echo the collective mourning of an entire nation trapped between past devastation and an uncertain future. Hope, in these moments, was not just lost, it was forcibly stripped away. The emotional labor of imagining ways to reunite with his mother, despite recognizing the practical obstacles, is a building block of hope**.** It reflects the persistence of longing and relational love, which sustains the possibility of a future together.

"When I was leaving Afghanistan, I was sad. I was really sad, and I think I was crying. The feeling that I knew I was not going back was not a good feeling. I was sure I could never live among people who did not value women anymore. I knew I was not going back, but at the same time, I felt lost. I don't know why, but I was feeling really heavy inside. I was leaving everything behind, not just a country, but a part of myself." *(Female, 23, Laghman)*

"I never believed there would be a day I would leave behind my parents, the home I grew up in, my brother, and all my life there. My parents were crying; my wife was crying because our bedroom was our small universe. In Afghan families, we live extended family together, so the only private place for a newlywed couple is their bedroom where their own world is built. My wife was crying because we were leaving our small world behind that we had built with so much love and dreams. I couldn't even look at my books and my art works there; I just left. I didn't want to think a lot, I knew it would break me. I left all my books there." *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

"I was scared. I was really scared. I knew that my number was known by the Taliban, and I felt like they were watching me, waiting. I couldn't stay any longer. I got my visa after four attempts and had to find a way to leave. But the Taliban were not allowing single women to leave. I had no choice, I had to find someone to take me as his wife. That's how I got out. I wore the full Taliban hijab, I pretended, I lied, just to escape. And when I finally crossed the border into

> Pakistan, I took a breath of relief, but it wasn't freedom, just another step in a long, exhausting fight for survival." *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*
>
> "I saw the videos, the Taliban walking freely, the city falling without a fight. I was standing there, my hands shaking, my body frozen. I whispered to myself, 'Is this it? Is this how it ends?' It felt like everything was crumbling, not just my country but my entire existence. In that moment, I knew life as we knew it was over. I didn't leave; I escaped. I walked through the airport, knowing I might never see my home again. I left behind my books, clothes, and walls that held my childhood dreams. I looked back one last time and whispered a silent goodbye. But the truth is, Afghanistan had already left me long before I ever stepped onto that plane." *(Female, 29, Bamyan)*

Leaving Afghanistan was not just an act of physical departure for those who made it; it was the painful unraveling of lives, dreams, and identities. A young woman from Laghman who attempted for a year to leave and was caught several times by the Taliban in the airport, describes the weight of finally leaving, the realization that she could never return to a place where her existence was no longer valued. The grief was not just for the home she was leaving but for the part of herself she was forced to abandon. This testimony conveys the disintegration of hope, a recognition that the future she imagined in her homeland is no longer possible. A young man from Ghazni echoes this sentiment, recounting the pain of leaving behind his family, his books, and the small world he and his wife had built within the walls of their home. His silence, his refusal to look back, was not just an act of self-preservation but an acknowledgment that some losses are too great to confront in the moment. Still, the intimacy of memory, the books, the

room, the love, act as emotional anchors, building blocks of hope that preserve the meaning of what was, even in absence.

For a young woman from Mazar-e-Sharif, the act of leaving was not just emotional but a terrifying negotiation of survival. Her existence was reduced to a false identity, she had to pretend, to conceal, to become someone else just to escape. Even after crossing the border, relief was fleeting; freedom was still a distant reality. Her actions, taking risks, and strategizing for escape showcase hope as a tactical and active resistance. The willingness to act, despite fear, reveals a form of critical hope, created in motion. Another young woman from Bamyan recounts the helplessness of watching her country fall in real time, the numbness of knowing that everything familiar was vanishing before her eyes. Her departure was not one of choice but of necessity, a forced exile where the past was left behind in quiet resignation. These stories are not just about leaving Afghanistan; they are about the profound rupture between what was and what will never be again. Yet, the act of remembering, and the sadness embedded in that remembrance, implies an unwillingness to forget, a quiet form of hope held through memory.

> "We sold everything, and we went to Pakistan. In Pakistan, during my six months there, I couldn't afford breakfast for my family, so we were not eating any breakfast. I was barely able to provide food twice: dinner and lunch. I would encourage my family to sleep until late. It might sound like we were lazy people. We didn't have anything to do, but I think we were doing that because there was not enough food, so I wanted to spend more time sleeping rather than being awake and hungry. When anyone asks me why you are unhappy, I tell them that

my soul and my happiness, everything I have, was left in Kabul." *(Female, 21, Kabul)*

"For ten days after August 15, every morning I woke up crying, and every night I went to sleep crying. It felt like my world had collapsed, like everything I had built, everything I had dreamed of, had vanished overnight. I had finally created a life for myself, a home filled with things that were mine, a space where I could think, dream, and plan for the future. And then, in an instant, it was gone. I wasn't mourning just a country; I was mourning the version of myself that could only exist in that Afghanistan. After that, I became afraid of everything, of losing everything. Even now, I feel like I'm constantly waiting for something to collapse again." *(Male, 30, Kandahar)*

"The day the Taliban came, I couldn't believe anything I was hearing. When I woke up, everything seemed normal. Then my brother ran inside and said, 'Within an hour, the Taliban will enter Kabul.' I told him, 'That's a lie. People always make things up.' But then I turned on the TV, and it was all there, their fighters in the streets, their flags rising. My body went cold. I kept trying to convince myself it wasn't happening. I was scared for my mother and father; they had suffered under the Taliban before. My mother had always refused to even say their name, just hearing it would shake her. When she finally came home, she collapsed, crying, saying she couldn't stay, she had to leave. I had never seen my mother like that before. It was in that moment I knew, this wasn't just fear. This

was something deeper. This was a terror that had already lived inside her, and now it was back." *(Female, 21, Kabul)*

Loss of hope is not always immediate, it unravels slowly, in the quiet moments of hunger, displacement, and the realization that what was once home no longer exists. A young woman from Kabul speaks of selling everything to escape to Pakistan, only to find herself trapped in another form of suffering. The weight of survival is placed entirely on her shoulders. The simplest acts, eating and staying awake, become unbearable because there is nothing left to look forward to. She describes how sleep was not a refuge but a necessity to escape hunger. Her words, "Everything I have was left in Kabul, " reveal how exile is not just about physical loss but about the hollowing out of one's existence, a slow and painful detachment from everything that once brought meaning**.** This is a moment where hope is almost entirely absent*,* but her reflection still carries a sense of mourning, which signals emotional presence rather than numbness**,** a potential seed of future hope or a young man from Kandahar, the loss came as a sudden, irreversible break.

The world he had carefully built, his dreams, space, and sense of self, was wiped out overnight. "I wasn't mourning just a country; I was mourning the version of myself that could only exist in that Afghanistan." His grief is not just about the fall of Kabul but about the erasure of who he was allowed to be before August 15. What remains is a constant state of fear, a sense that nothing is secure, that the fragile illusion of stability will be shattered again at any moment. He is not living, he is waiting for another collapse. This is a state of suspended hope, where grief dominates, but identity is still present. The self that mourns suggests latent hope**,** a memory of meaning that could be reactivated.

A young woman from Kabul recalls the disbelief that gave way to terror. Her mind resisted reality even as the news played in front of her. But when she saw her mother break down, the same mother who had survived the Taliban's first rule, she understood that this fear was not new; it was returning. The Taliban were not just taking over a country; they were resurrecting buried traumas, reviving past horrors that had been endured but never forgotten. Her mother's collapse was not just grief, it was the certainty that history was repeating itself, that all the survival, all the struggle, had been for nothing. This intergenerational memory of terror could become paralyzing, yet it also offers a building block of hope when reframed: the fact that survival had happened once before implies it could happen again.

Each of these testimonies reveals how hope does not simply vanish, it is drained, piece by piece, until there is nothing left to hold on to. Whether through hunger, exile, or the destruction of a future, the fall of Afghanistan in 2021 did not just take the land, it took away the right to dream, to believe, and to exist without fear. But does that mean it is the end of hope for these individuals? Certainly not. In 2020 when my sister was killed by the Taliban, it was the darkest time of my life, but my father told me I should go back to the US and take my comprehensive exams for my PhD. I told him nothing really means anything anymore, it was dark like that but he told me, "if you drop off from your PhD, you are going to make Taliban win again. They killed my one daughter who was a human rights advocate and if you leave your PhD, you are going to make them successful because that's what they want for women to not get education". I came back to the US and within the four months of my sister passing, I passed my comprehensive exams. So what pushed me and what gave me hope during that time? I think for me hope worked as active force of resistance. I wanted to fight back, and win. This is an explicit declaration of hope as resistance**.** The refusal to give up education, spurred by moral duty and

feminist defiance, embodies hope as both a belief in the possibility of change and a conscious, disciplined act of agency**.**

So how do the participants of my study create hope after going through these harsh and certainly dark times? Below are some of the testimonies by the same participants, given on the same days when they shared with me the above stories of losses. In their current lives, hope comes from not letting go of the lives they want for themselves; from not accepting defeat; hope is found through faith or questioning their faith; hope is the answer to their good deeds, and finally hope is a collective practice and unspoken agreement to survive.

> “I live in New York, Queens. We have a two-room apartment, very small but very nice, and for the first time in my life, I feel like this is my house. Although I had an apartment in Bishkek, here it feels like it’s my house because my siblings are here, and I pay for everything. We have “meat”. We eat dinner together, and we sit and talk. I love it. Every day, I walk into the office, and I feel like Emily in Paris. I am Eidema in New York. Having my coffee in my hand and walking into the office, I feel so ba class. [laughs]. *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

> "Oh, yes, I'm still married to that guy by document, and I think I can only do it once our documentation process starts. So far, I am his wife. I did this because I thought he was a journalist, and I'm a journalist. This would make our cases stronger here, so that's why we applied together as a married couple, although we didn’t even know each other. When I arrived here, I talked to our case coordinator; I told her I wanted to get separated from my husband. I didn't love or

> like my husband. Laughing [There is this pain in her voice as she was repeating these words]" *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*
>
> "Surely, there must be a lot that has helped because I think a human would not be able to survive a situation like that. I felt that everything was gone; I had nothing to rely on. I think the biggest factor that helped me survive was my mother's presence. My mother stood by us and ensured we survived those days and that difficult time. She would always make sure to tell us that she's here with us, she's here for us, nothing's going to go wrong, she's not going to let anything happen to us." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

Even in exile, hope is found in the smallest moments, a meal shared, a familiar routine, the quiet certainty of survival. But survival alone does not always mean hope; people can endure without imagining a future, and sometimes what remains is bitterness or numbness. For my participants, what distinguishes these small acts from mere coping is how they are infused with intentionality, claimed spaces, chosen rituals, quiet joys that say: "I'm still here, and I'm building something." A young woman from Ghazni, now in New York, describes a two-room apartment not as a place of confinement but as something she has claimed as her own. Giving in to the tough circumstances of refugee life would mean giving up her agency, which she certainly is holding on to by calling this apartment her home. The presence of her siblings, the act of providing, and even the simple joy of having "meat" on the table represent not just stability but a sense of belonging she does not allow to be taken from her. These daily routines and emotional rituals are building blocks of hope, social connection, sensory comfort, and acts of provision that reinforce agency and dignity. Her joyful imagination of being "Eidema in New York" shows

how hope can re-emerge through symbolic re-identification and playfulness, marking an active form of hope as self-reclamation.

For another young woman from Mazar-e-Sharif, the hope of living a better and free life has come at the cost of difficult compromises. Marrying on paper to secure a future is a calculated decision and a painful reminder of what she had to sacrifice for safety. Her laughter, strained and tinged with sorrow, carries the weight of resignation and defiance, a quiet acknowledgment that she is still here, fighting for the life she deserves. This is hope forged through strategic adaptation. Her decision reflects hope as a survival strategy, and her ability to make difficult choices is a building block of hope, a form of agency born from necessity, even if it means temporarily sacrificing personal desires for future safety.

Meanwhile, a young man from Kandahar reflects on the one force that kept him from completely unraveling, his mother. Amidst the chaos, she became his anchor, offering a constant assurance that "nothing’s going to go wrong." His words, though shaped by past loss, reveal a truth that lingers, hope, no matter how fragile, is often carried by those who refuse to let go of us. His mother’s presence and encouragement is a core building block of hope: emotional support from family. Her calm and care provide a psychological refuge and stabilize his survival amid uncertainty. His ability to articulate this retrospectively shows that hope can also be carried by others, especially when one is unable to hold it alone.

> “Let's start by sacrificing for each other. Why not? In Albania, my wife Arzo, we both talked about our dreams and visions for our future and our careers. When we came here to Canada, we could not study both of us. But then I decided that I would work and let her study. Every night, when I come and see her reading her

> books and studying, it makes me so happy and so proud. I think it's the wisest decision I have made, and I'm really proud of it. I feel like she's going to fulfill her dreams. Although she's a mother, she has been busy with our son and is pregnant, but she is so dedicated to her studies. She takes care of herself, our house, and our children, but at the same time, she gives time to study and dedicates herself to changing her life." *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

> "When anyone asks me why I'm not happy here, I tell them that I've left my soul and happiness in Kabul [When she says this, she cries]. You won't believe the things I miss from home, from Kabul, things I never thought I would miss. It's the little things that I never realized would matter so much. I just feel like I wish I could return to Kabul again. Sometimes, when I'm sitting in class, I zone out and remember Kabul's different streets and shops; my mind travels there. Every day, when I want to leave my room, I hope I can open my door to the streets of Kabul and see all those places again. I feel like I've left my soul and my happiness there." *(Female, 21, Kabul)*

Hope in these stories stays hidden and gentle through daily decisions, quiet sacrifices, and a desire to return to past life experiences. Although he has to sacrifice his education to support her studies, the young man from Ghazni who lives in Canada finds happiness in enabling his wife to attend school. His pride and happiness when watching her chase her dreams demonstrate how love can serve as a powerful tool for hope. He does not see his sacrifice as a loss, but as an investment in a future, they are building together, a future where both share one person's success. This is a clear instance of hope expressed through relational investment, a

future-oriented dream being sustained through moral obligation, delayed gratification, and emotional support, all of which are building blocks of hope. The act of prioritizing his partner's education becomes a strategy to maintain shared aspiration, which in itself is an expression of hope.

For a young woman from Kabul, hope is what keeps her motivated that one day she will return home. She grieves for the streets, the shops, and the minor details of the home, things she never thought she would miss. Her narrative conveys a deep sense of attachment and intentional remembrance, reflecting a persistent emotional connection to her place of origin. Her hope is not in forgetting but in remembering, in keeping her city alive within her, no matter how far she is. This longing is hope as memory: a belief in the possibility of return that is sustained not by denial, but by deeply felt sensory and emotional recollections. Her hope is anchored in the building block of sensory memory, smells, streets, daily life, which bridge loss with the desire for continuity.

These participants express hope through everyday actions and relationships, suggesting that hope functions as a concrete and relational mechanism, rather than a distant ideal. In these moments, hope is not an abstract future, it is an active, relational, and embodied force. It is made visible through agency, reimagining, strategic compromise, care, and memory. In the absence of institutional support, participants re-establish hope through intentional practices that reframe daily life with meaning and agency. These expressions of hope are not naïve, they are often painful and contradictory, but they are resilient. This form of hope contrasts with memory-oriented expressions, which center on emotional continuity and identity preservation, rather than future-oriented action. Some forms of hope in exile are actionable, tied to rebuilding or

reinventing daily life, while others are quiet and retrospective, focused on holding on to a past self or world. Both are valid, but they operate differently in terms of temporal orientation and emotional labor. This complexity reveals that hope among displaced youth is not a singular force, it oscillates between resistance, memory, fantasy, and pragmatism, often within the same person.

b. Between Fate and Good Deeds

Hope is embedded in the fabric of everyday life in Afghanistan. Every Afghan alive today has likely never seen a time of true peace, where they did not have to actively search for hope to survive. As a result, regardless of religious beliefs, certain phrases have become part of the collective vocabulary of Afghans: *"Pana ba Khuda"* (seeking refuge in God), *"Khudai Mehraban dai"* (God is merciful), *"Mēsha"* (it will be okay), *"Tashwish nako"* (don't worry), *"Deer gham makhora"* (don't grieve too much), *"Gala Gap ast"* (it is nothing, I can overcome this). These words are not just expressions but a lifeline, reassurances that echo through daily conversations, offering comfort and bolstering resilience.

Though these sayings are deeply rooted in faith, even those who do not identify as religious use them. Hope in Afghan culture is more than just a belief, it is a collective practice, an unspoken agreement to endure, and a reminder that even in uncertainty, hope persists. But this form of hope is not only cultural or spiritual, it is deeply historical. For generations, Afghans have lived through waves of invasion, coups, foreign occupations, and internal power struggles. These experiences have forged a relationship to hope that is shaped not by control, but by the lack of it. Forces larger than themselves, empires, regimes, ideologies, have constantly reshaped

their lives, often without warning. In such conditions, hope serves both as an adaptive response to structural powerlessness and as a strategic orientation toward meaning-making under uncertainty. These commonly repeated phrases function as culturally embedded coping mechanisms, shaped by historical disruptions and collective survival strategies. The following testimonies from my participants reflect this deep connection between faith, good deeds (Good Karma), and an enduring hope that something greater will help guide them forward.

> "Since I remember all of my life until I was imprisoned recently and until even now, I always believe that God is there and I rely on God, and God's going to help me throughout my life." *(Male 32, Kandahar)*

> "I think what was helping me was my faith; I think I am really religious; I believe in God; I believe that if I prayed, something good would happen. So, spiritually, religion was helping me during the tough times. I would pray more often, and I would recite the Quran, which would give me some peace. And I would always pray that whatever has happened, it happened. Now let's hope for the next steps in my life and how I'm going to take those next steps. And I also believe prayers are super powerful. If you do good for people, people will pray for you, and those prayers will protect you." *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

> "When I was even in prison, and the most difficult time, I believed that there were so many orphans that had prayed for me. Nothing is going to happen to me. I have opened a lot of schools for young girls, secrete schools for girls, so all of their prayers would not go unheard. I knew that their support was behind me and nothing was going to happen to me. For example, I was in one village distributing

> books and stationery. Just when I left, the Taliban had arrived there and told people to report where I was. Every province that I was in, the moment I was leaving that province was captured by the Taliban and a lot of people were killed. But I would just leave a few moments or a few hours before that. And I always believed that it was because of the prayers of the people behind me." *(Male, 32, Kandahar)*

These testimonies show how faith operates not just as belief, but as a building block of hope, a sustaining force that offers psychological stability, moral clarity, and even a sense of protection amid extreme uncertainty. The man from Kandahar, imprisoned and under threat, describes his continuous reliance on God not as passive acceptance but as a source of inner endurance. His unbroken faith represents a form of hope that does not require proof, only conviction. For the woman from Mazar-e-Sharif, faith is deeply actionable: praying, reciting the Quran, and doing good deeds become spiritual practices that generate both peace and direction, hope as a moral and emotional compass**.** The second man from Kandahar invokes a layered form of hope, one rooted in social good, reciprocity, and collective spiritual protection**.** His belief that girls' prayers shielded him reveals how acts of service and communal connection are transformed into building blocks of hope**,** offering both meaning and a perceived safeguard. Across these narratives, hope is not only spiritual, it is relational, earned, and carried forward through faith, good deeds, and the remembered voices of others.

In Afghan society, faith, coupled with good deeds, serves both as a religious duty and a profound source of hope. Enduring hardship is not only seen as inevitable but often understood as spiritually meaningful. Culturally, many Afghans are taught that suffering builds character,

earns dignity, and sets one on a path to future success, whether in this life or the next. Religiously, this belief is deepened by the conviction that this world is a place of trial, while the next world is the true reward. As some participants described, *"the luxuries of this world are for the infidels, "* while believers are tested so they may be elevated in the hereafter. In this framework, faith is more than comfort, it becomes a moral and emotional infrastructure. It sustains people not only through personal struggle but also through a collective belief that their patience, kindness, and sacrifice are being recorded by a divine presence. Faith, then, is both an act of devotion and a vital strategy for enduring life's challenges with meaning and integrity.

To look at these examples from the definition of hope from the Afghan youth, faith plays the role of hope as internal refuge and act to sustains them through immense hardships**.** The young man from Kandahar maintains a strong belief in God and believes that divine assistance will lead him through any difficulties. This faith developed through his prolonged hardships is an active anchor that keeps him moving forward despite dark times. A young woman from Mazar-e-Sharif explains that faith functions as both a spiritual haven and an active guiding force for hope. Through prayer, she finds comfort while believing that good actions do not go unanswered. The phrase "if you do good for people, people will pray for you, and those prayers will protect you" demonstrates a cultural belief that the pathways and actions of hope involve actively doing good deeds that will eventually protect you.

Some people find protection from danger by combining their faith with good deeds. The Kandahari young man who endangered his life to educate girls against Taliban attacks credits his repeated escapes from death to the protective prayers of orphans and girl students. His belief that his survival is the result of miracles strengthens his trust in unseen forces keeping him

safe. Some Afghans maintain their hope that through faith and good deeds they will be able to survive the destructive forces of war and displacement. They believe that good deeds serve protection, strength, comfort, action, and healing. On the other hand, some of my participants were skeptical of such beliefs because they questioned why God was still so unkind to people and why they suffered instead of being protected.

> "Religion could be used as a motivator or as a tool to get radicalized or go after your revenge. But that's not my story. My story is that religion has helped me, and my mother has helped me." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

> “When I was young, I used to think about God a lot and I used to ask this question, where is God? I used to get different answers. Some would say that God is in your heart. Someone would say that it is closer than the vein on your neck, and someone would say that it’s in the skies. I had made God the whole sky. I used to have conversations looking up at the sky, thinking I was talking to God. And I used to beg, 'Please do something so this fight ends, please do something so my mom doesn’t cry anymore.' I used to talk to the sky all the time, I think I have spent half of my life talking to the sky." *(Female, 21, Kabul)*

> "One thing that always triggered me was that you see poor people who are so religious, people who don’t have anything, and they are in pain, why do they never get better? Why does God not see them?" *(Male, 28, Bamyan)*

> "I don’t think I made peace with God, so of course I was really mad and still mad at God. I don't know why, but I was waking up every day, I think just to cry.” *(Male, 30, Kandahar)*

> “I’m a believer, I believe in God, but I don’t believe what happened to her [she is refering to a friend who was killed by the Taliban] was something that God wanted for her. I don’t believe in God blindly as many Afghans do. I don’t believe in the concept that when something bad happens, we should just say, ‘God wanted this for you, so you have to accept it.’ The other day, somebody told me this, and I started fighting with her and told her to get out of my way. I told her, ‘Go throw yourself from the balcony, and when you have broken legs and arms, then say, Oh, God has brought this upon me.’" *(Female, 27, Panjshir)*

A young man from Kandahar acknowledges that religion has been used as a tool for radicalization and revenge. However, for him, it has been something different, a personal refuge shaped as much by his mother's guidance as by his beliefs. However, he understands that faith has the potential to be manipulated to cause harm. The young woman from Kabul recalls her childhood connection with God as a continuous exchange through intimate skyward dialogues where she pleaded for peace and relief for her mother's pain. Nevertheless, the silence she received in return lingers, her faith was not lost, but it was shaped by longing and a desperation that never found an answer. Did she give up? No, she is still negotiating and not letting go of hope that God might help her and her family.

For others, faith is not a comfort but a contradiction. A young man from Bamyan questions why those who are devout suffer. His doubt is not just intellectual, it is deeply

emotional, an inability to reconcile his belief in a just God with the suffering he sees around him. Knowing that God and faith is not going to help, he hopes that his own actions can help his family. A man from Kandahar echoes this frustration, still unable to make peace with God, waking up every day feeling only grief. Faith, for him, is not a source of hope but a wound that will not heal. Similarly, a young woman from Panjshir refuses to accept the idea that suffering is God's will. Her anger is raw, directed not just at those who tell her to accept fate but at the concept of blind faith. Her rejection of fatalism is an assertion of agency, she refuses to let belief justify injustice.

The testimonies show that faith is a deeply individual and evolving experience, shaped by personal histories of loss, displacement, and unanswered prayers. While religion is woven into the social and cultural fabric of Afghan life, its role in shaping hope is far from uniform. For some youth, religion offers a source of strength, endurance, and moral grounding, providing the language and rituals to sustain hope through uncertainty. For others, faith is fragmented, contested, or even abandoned, yet even in rejection, the struggle with belief reflects an ongoing effort to find meaning and stability. Across these variations, what emerges is not a singular religious hope, but a shared search for something larger than the self, whether spiritual, ethical, or existential, to hold onto in the face of suffering. Thus, religion plays a complex and dynamic role in hope: it can be a wellspring of resilience, a site of disillusionment, or a symbolic framework that participants wrestle with as they navigate a world that often denies them safety and control. This nuanced landscape of belief underscores how Afghan youth rework, reinterpret, or resist religious traditions in their pursuit of hope and survival.

c. Dreams for Afghanistan and Personal Aspirations

As I discussed in my chapter on identity, many young Afghans have an unspoken expectation: *We need to fix Afghanistan!* This sentiment remains deeply ingrained in most of my participants. While they develop personal goals for success and a better life, they still hold onto the belief that they must do something for Afghanistan, and the hope that their homeland can become a peaceful home for future generations. Their responsibility to be part of fixing Afghanistan is something that none of my participants wants to give up. The following testimonies reflect this strong belief that they must return, rebuild, and keep the hope of a better Afghanistan alive within themselves.

> "I hope I will end up somewhere in a Western country, but I think five to ten years is not enough time for me to dream the same way that I used to achieve those dreams. One of my dreams was to work in the United Nations. My dream was to work there on Afghanistan projects or Central Asian programs. But now I don't feel like I can achieve that dream in five years because my life is uncertain now. But I still dream for this; I believe I will get into the UN someday." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

> *"*My first dream is I want to have my own house, home, place, whatever you call it. I want to feel that I'm living in my own home and place. I want no one to tell me what I am supposed to do in that home or tell me to leave that house. I want to be close to my sisters, but I don't want to live in the same place as them. I really want my sisters in my life; I miss them. I want to get myself a car, a bicycle, anything that I wanted as a child, as a young person, that I couldn't have. I want to

> get everything for myself. I should have my own business; I don't know, a business of art, but I really want to have my own business. I think I'm really good at trade, so I will be doing something related to trade. I see myself as a really well-earning trader. I surely want to go back, but I don't want to go back when the Taliban is in power. I will go back and do some charity work, some organizations that I want to work with people, but I don't want to do it during the Taliban time. Now I want to have a free life; I don't want to be contained by anyone in my life. I really want to be free. And in Afghanistan right now, I am not free."*(Female, 23, Laghman)*
>
> "If the situation changes from the current situation, in the next five to ten years, I want to lead one of the major organizations working inside and outside of Afghanistan. I see myself becoming the President of Afghanistan in the next twenty years." *(Male, 29, Herat)*

Hope, for these individuals, is not just a distant wish, it is an act of defiance, a refusal to let circumstances dictate the limits of their dreams. For a young man from Kandahar, hope is tied to ambition, even when reality makes that ambition feel far away. The dream of working in the United Nations, shaping policies for Afghanistan and Central Asia, remains alive even as the pathway to it feels blocked and uncertain. He acknowledges that the next five years may not be enough to reach where he once envisioned himself, but he does not surrender the dream entirely, he still believes that one day, he will get there.

A young woman from Laghman dreams of something deeply personal, a home that is hers alone, a space where no one dictates her life. She envisions not just a house but complete

autonomy, financial independence, and a life where she owns every part of her journey. She dreams of trade, of business, of giving herself everything she was once denied. With her independent life, she envisions living, having a business and giving back to communities inside Afghanistan. And yet, despite her longing for Afghanistan, she refuses to return while the Taliban are in power. Her hope is conditional, it exists, but only in a future where she can be free, where she can give back to her country without sacrificing herself.

And then there is the young man from Herat, whose hope is vast, almost audacious. He does not dream of escape, he dreams of leading his country. If the situation changes, he sees himself running one of the most important organizations working for Afghanistan. And in 20 years, he sees himself as the President of Afghanistan. His hope is not just personal but collective, built on the belief that his country's fate is not sealed, that change is still possible.

These voices reflect different shades of goals, some tied to small rituals, some to personal independence, some to ambition beyond borders. What binds them together is the person's refusal to give up, the belief that something better is possible, even when the pathway is unclear. Whether through sheer optimism, patient ambition, or a determination to build a life on their own terms, each of them holds onto hope as a steady force driving them forward.

> "In the coming 10 years, I will be doing my PhD and at the same time, I will be someone politically involved in my country. I love my country. Yes, I would love to go outside to study, but I do not want to go live outside Afghanistan. I love to live independently and separately in Afghanistan; I would love to live in Kabul. I really want to live in Kabul in Macroryan and have my own apartment. I dream of

a life like that where I would work every day and go out and come back to my home."*(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

“I don't think about the years in the near future. I'm not in a hurry. Whenever that comes, let it come. I'm not in any rush. But in the coming ten years, I feel that I want to give back to my school and university in Kabul, to my hometown, to the place I was raised. I really want to go back and do something there because I think my home, my school, my country needs my contribution. I feel that someday I will win this war, not with guns but with my art. I will fight the powerful men who destroyed our country. I want the world to see what they have done to us, and I will do it through my art." *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

"I will become ba class [Classy](laughing). I think I will have two babies. I will have a very ba class house. I will have my talk show as the best talk show. I want to have my own foundation. I want to bring some Afghans to study abroad. And I want to have my own brand. I want to make Afghan culture like Tory Burch. I think in ten years I will be very rich (laughing). I want to go back to Afghanistan. I have a lot to do there. I believe with my heart that there are so many Zarifas right now, boys and girls in even worse situations than me, searching for someone to look up to. If I had not met the people who guided me, I wouldn’t be where I am today. Now I don’t want any child to cry alone by themselves. Their parents gave birth to them, but that’s it, I want to be there, just like others were there for me. And another reason I want to go back is that I love my country. Even until

> now, I'm not sure if I want to apply for asylum because I want to keep my passport."*(Female, 27, Ghazni)*
>
> "Well, I really love being a carpenter. I want to find some money and then give this dream a chance. I want to have a place where I can make things out of wood. I don't know how the journey from now until ten years will be, I just want to spend it and survive it. But at the end of that, I really want to achieve my dream of being a carpenter. And, yes, I wanna go. I have told myself that if I'm ever going back to Afghanistan, I'm going with political interest in mind. I'm not going there to work or earn money or make a life. I want to go back to say the things that nobody wants to talk about, the things that people are afraid to hear. I have to say them out loud and make people hear them." *(Male, 29, Kandahar)*

Hope takes many shapes, woven through the ambitions of those who refuse to let go of their dreams, no matter how uncertain the path to reach that future may seem. A young woman from Nangarhar imagines herself completing a PhD and engaging in politics, not from a distance, but from within Afghanistan. She dreams of a life in Kabul, not as an outsider, but as someone who belongs, someone who returns home every day to a place she has built for herself. This vision reflects proactive hope, where the individual not only imagines a better future but also devises pathways and sets personal goals to achieve it, even in constrained settings (Snyder 2002). Her hope is rooted in presence, in staying, in claiming space where she and so many others have been forced to leave, a deeply embodied and situated hope, grounded in identity and place (Curnow 2022). It also reflects her vision for a better future, aligning with the definitions of hope offered by my participants.

A young man from Ghazni does not rush toward the future, but he knows where he wants to stand in 10 years. His battle will be undertaken not with weapons, but with art, his way of fighting back against those who have destroyed his homeland. He wants to return, not just to give back to his school and his hometown, but to hold a mirror to the world, to make them see what has been done to his people. This is the essence of critical hope, a form of hope that does not deny suffering but confronts it, using truth-telling and creativity as tools for justice (Freire 1994). His hope lies in resistance, in creation, and in exposing painful truths so they are no longer ignored. This reflects my participants' understanding of hope as an active force of resistance, a political and moral responsibility to act even when conditions seem immovable.

For another young woman from Ghazni, success is not just personal, it is something she wants to share. She imagines a life of wealth, influence, and giving back. She wants to build a foundation, create a brand that represents Afghan culture, and offer opportunities to young Afghans who, like her, once needed someone to guide them. She laughs as she envisions herself living a *ba class* [classy] life, but her dreams are serious, she refuses to let children grow up feeling alone, abandoned by the world. Her account illustrates relational hope, where one's dreams are sustained by the support of others and, in turn, seek to lift others up (Shimshock and Le 2022). Her story echoes the mirrored and projected hopes of those who mentored her, hopes that now live on in her own aspirations to be a guide for others (Erikson 1963; Masten 2001; Snyder 2002). Even now, she hesitates to apply for asylum because part of her is still holding onto Afghanistan, still committed to the community and country that shaped her. This hope is deeply relational, generational, and communal.

A young man from Kandahar dreams of something simpler but no less profound. He wants to be a carpenter, to create with his own hands, to literally carve a future for himself. But returning to Afghanistan, for him, is not about work or stability, it is about challenging the silence. He wants to go back and speak the words that others are afraid to say, to bring into the open what has long been buried. His return is not just about reclaiming a place but about confronting the truths that others choose to ignore. His hope is anchored in resistant and ethical hope, a hope driven by the moral imperative to speak out, even when it carries personal risk (Lear 2006; McGeer 2004). He survives the present, but envisions the future as a space for speaking truth, fulfilling what my participants describe as hope as resistance and commitment to social transformation.

These dreams are shaped by different visions of hope, but they are all tied to something greater than the individual. Whether through knowledge, art, generosity, or defiance, each of them holds onto the hope that their return, their presence, will mean something, that their future is not just about survival but about making a mark, about changing what can still be changed. Each of these testimonies echoes the definitions of hope shared by my participants: a commitment to family and community, a vision for a better future, and hope as an active force of resistance.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I traced how Afghan youth cultivate and carry hope across the shifting stages of their lives, through childhood, their transformative adolescent years, and into the complexities of adulthood. In childhood, hope often emerged in simple, everyday joys: a shared game, a gifted coat, and the smell of naan from a local bakery. These moments, though small,

planted the first seeds of the belief that life could be good, even amid conflict and displacement. Family bonds and acts of kindness created a sense of safety and meaning, offering young children an emotional grounding in an unstable world. These early expressions of hope align with how participants defined hope as the possibility of return, as sensory memory, or as emotional rootedness. Such definitions were not abstract but grounded in lived experience and shaped by key building blocks of hope, especially familial affection, imagination, and place-based memory.

As they entered adolescence, these youth were thrust into roles of responsibility far earlier than many of their global peers. Their hope took on new weight, driven by family obligations, educational goals, and the quiet but powerful act of imagining something better. This stage was marked by sacrifice and transformation, where dreams became fuel and purpose was found in action. Here, hope was often defined as struggle, as the willingness to endure and the refusal to surrender to despair. Its building blocks included moral obligation, religious faith, and the courage to envision an alternative life. For many, hope became entangled with duty, where fulfilling a parent's dream or protecting younger siblings was not only a responsibility but a core part of their self-worth. These stories reveal what Carol Gilligan (1982) describes as an ethics of care, where moral reasoning emerges from relationships rather than abstract principles.

In adulthood, that hope has been tested and reshaped by exile, loss, and political betrayal. And yet, it persists. Whether through creative resistance, caregiving, or daily acts of persistence, Afghan youth sustain hope not as an optional sentiment, but as a strategic and necessary response to protracted instability. These narratives highlight definitions of hope that shift from longing for return to building meaning in exile. They show that hope can be a form of action, relational

loyalty, and defiant joy. What sustains it are the building blocks: religious conviction, collective memory, imagination, and ethical responsibility to others. These acts, ranging from advocating for others in exile to emotionally supporting parents during uncertainty, embody what Joan Tronto (1993) calls the political labor of care: maintaining and repairing life under conditions of structural abandonment. Their narratives illustrate that hope is not an innate disposition but a practiced and evolving process, emerging in early life, adapting through adversity, and sustained through intentional forms of resilience. As such, hope in this context is not solely forward-looking; it is also a relational and affective practice rooted in caregiving, sacrifice, memory, and imagination. It is carried not in isolation, but in relation to others, through what Sara Ruddick (1989) might call maternal thinking, protective and life-sustaining acts even by those who are not mothers themselves.

Throughout this chapter, the cross-cutting themes of memory, moral obligation, and imagination recur as structuring forces that shape how Afghan youth define, carry, and adapt hope. Memory anchors their emotional attachments to home and past selves; moral obligation drives much of their future orientation, especially toward family and community; and imagination offers a horizon of possibility when the present becomes unbearable. These themes do not stand apart from identity or resilience but are deeply interwoven with them, hope becomes the connective tissue linking past wounds to future dreams, mediated through ethical and affective relationships.

As the next chapter will show, the capacity to sustain hope, especially under conditions of uncertainty, precarity, and exile, is not only a personal achievement but a social and political practice. Resilience, as I will argue, builds upon many of the same building blocks explored here:

relational care, spiritual and cultural meaning, and the imagination of alternative futures. However, while hope speaks to the emotional and ethical energy that propels youth forward, resilience concerns the structures, strategies, and daily practices that make that forward motion possible. Together, they form a framework of survival that is both deeply personal and profoundly political.

7. Academic Contributions

My research expands the study of hope beyond Western perspectives by incorporating non-Western, conflict-affected, and diasporic experiences. Existing theories have predominantly focused on stable contexts. While some studies, such as those by Leshem and Bar-Tal et al. that examine the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, very few have provided an in-depth analysis of the lived experiences through life histories in conflict settings, as I have done in my dissertation. In particular, my study examines how hope evolves under conditions of repeated betrayal and abandonment, not only by domestic regimes but also by international actors. For many participants, hope becomes a moral refusal to be erased, a way to remain tethered to a sense of personal and national agency in the wake of political collapse. By drawing on participants' own definitions of hope, as return, struggle, or relational duty, and situating these within their broader life course, this chapter contributes a grounded, non-linear theory of hope as both a survival mechanism and an evolving ethic.

Furthermore, my study introduced a multi-layered conceptualization and study of hope through adapting and applying Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework, demonstrating how hope operates at the micro, meso, and macro levels. By applying Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems

theory (1979), I looked into the lived experiences of youth in conflict settings to show that hope functions at multiple levels: it is nurtured at the micro-level within family and personal relationships, cultivated at the meso-level through education and social networks, and the concept of responsibility, and shaped at the macro-level by political instability, historical memory, and forced displacement. This multi-layered understanding provides a more comprehensive framework for analyzing hope in conflict settings. My findings also show that hope is not only structured through these layered systems, but sustained by specific building blocks, such as imagination, moral obligation, memory, and faith, which serve as cognitive and emotional anchors across systems. These building blocks are relational in nature and not individual traits, helping bridge the psychological and socio-political dimensions of hope.

A key contribution of my study is bridging the gap between false hope and critical hope (Freire 1994; Bar-Tal and Halperin 2022). False hope refers to the belief that positive change is possible without confronting the actual barriers to transformation. In conflict settings, it can foster passivity or denial, preventing meaningful action. Critical hope, in contrast, combines a clear understanding of reality with a commitment to change, what Freire calls “hope with praxis, ” and what Bar-Tal and Halperin describe as a realistic optimism grounded in truth and action. My study contributes to this theoretical conversation by showing how Afghan youth constantly move between these forms. My study participants use hope to drive resistance, through education, activism, and care work, demonstrating critical hope in action. In other times they rely on dreams that feel out of reach, using imagination as a temporary survival strategy. In these moments, imagination functions both as a building block of hope and as a coping mechanism that keeps despair at bay. This aligns with feminist and narrative theorists who see imagination as a refusal of fatalism, a space where political and emotional resistance are cultivated. In these

cases, what may appear as false hope is often a necessary refuge, a way to remain emotionally and spiritually intact when the world collapses. Rather than labeling hope as either true or false, my research shows that hope is fluid, an ongoing negotiation between despair and determination, between the reality of loss and the longing for something better. I introduce the idea that even false hope can be functional, a form of resistance when all else fails, and a way to keep moving forward when reality offers no guarantee of change. At the same time, my study illustrates how critical hope is lived not only in political resistance, but in the small, everyday decisions of Afghan youth who continue to show up for their families, communities, and dreams, despite repeated betrayals. This reframing challenges binary approaches and calls for a more nuanced understanding of how hope is practiced in protracted crisis.

The fluidity of hope, its ability to be shattered yet reconstructed, challenges linear understandings of hope as either false or critical. Instead, my findings emphasize hope as an ongoing negotiation, shaped by realities, backed by action and belief in a better future outcome that helps individuals endure dark times. My findings illustrate that hope is both an act of endurance and a means of transformation. It is sustained through dreams of a better future, not just for the self, but for Afghanistan as a whole. Even in exile, Afghan youth hold onto the vision of returning home, of rebuilding their country, and of ensuring that the sacrifices of their past are not in vain. This tension, between inherited duty and individual aspiration, adds a new layer to how we understand youth agency in conflict settings. Hope here is not merely abstract or symbolic; it is embodied in caregiving, moral choices, and daily persistence. Drawing on feminist care theorists such as Carol Gilligan (1982), Joan Tronto (1993), and Sara Ruddick (1989), I show that hope is frequently carried through relational ethics: caring for parents, raising

siblings, or sustaining community ties. These acts of emotional and domestic labor are deeply political and constitute a form of resistant hope.

In addition, my study reframes hope as a socio-political force, highlighting its role in resistance, activism, and shaping future aspirations. By moving beyond Western psychological models, this research provides a more complex, context-sensitive framework that reflects the lived experiences of Afghan youth navigating war, displacement, and systemic oppression. The cross-cutting themes of memory, moral obligation, and imagination offer a unifying structure across youth narratives, each shaping how hope is felt, sustained, and acted upon. Memory provides emotional continuity across disrupted timelines; moral obligation binds the self to community and kin; imagination becomes the bridge between despair and vision. Ultimately, this chapter underscores that hope is a deliberate, evolving practice that is cultivated and nurtured throughout young people's lifetimes. Afghan youth cultivate hope through practices of relational care, strategic resilience, and value-based persistence, transforming uncertainty into a context for socially situated meaning-making. Hope emerges as both a survival mechanism and a socio-political strategy through which Afghan youth conceptualize alternative futures and reassert agency.

Chapter Six: Against All Odds: Afghan Youth and the Labor of Resilience

1. Introduction

This chapter explores how Afghan youth, both women and men, develop and sustain resilience amid layered and ongoing adversities, ranging from war, displacement, and systemic violence to intimate experiences of loss, betrayal, and constrained opportunities. While "resilience" is often casually attributed to the Afghan people in media and policy discourse, it is rarely unpacked with the nuance and complexity it deserves. Here, I resist simplistic portrayals of Afghan youth as "naturally" resilient. Instead, I trace how young Afghan's resilience is learned, performed, and struggled for, often with little choice, within families, communities, and broader systems that are in crisis.

Drawing on 15 life histories and two focus groups with Afghan youth aged 18 to 35, this chapter critically examines what resilience means to them, how they define and experience it, and what enables their survival and resistance. Their stories, spanning childhood to adulthood, within Afghanistan and in exile, challenge and broaden dominant models of resilience that focus on psychological recovery or individual traits. Instead, their reflections highlight resilience as a dynamic, context-dependent process shaped by political violence, gender norms, social expectations, and acts of imagination, defiance, and care.

Theoretically grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model and informed by feminist and emic approaches to resilience, I examine how intersecting layers of family, peer networks, institutions, and structural inequalities shape the possibilities for young Afghans'

resilience. My participants show that resilience is often less about "bouncing back" and more about navigating uncertainty, negotiating survival, and creating meaning in the face of loss. Their testimonies offer insight into the daily strategies, quiet rebellions, and deep emotional labor that resilience demands, particularly from youth who are already marginalized by class, gender, and ethnicity.

This chapter contributes to the broader dissertation by offering a critical, grounded, and intimate view of how resilience is learned and practiced, not as an abstract theory but as a lived reality. In doing so, it resists trauma-centric narratives that reduce Afghan youth to passive victims, instead foregrounding their agency, aspirations, and refusal to give up. Their stories also reveal the emotional and ethical weight of carrying unfulfilled dreams, both their own and those of loved ones lost to violence. Through their voices, this chapter argues that resilience is not only a quality to be celebrated, but a way of making a life in a world that has given them few other options.

a. Resilience

Resilience is a multidimensional concept that has been widely studied across various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, human security, and conflict studies. The scholarly study of resilience emerged in the fields of ecology and psychology in the 1960s and 1970s (Cicchetti 2010; Masten 2014; Rutter 1987). Early investigators such as Norman Garmezy, Lois Murphy, Michael Rutter, and Emmy Werner sought to understand the correlation between resilience and competence. Their research was influenced by developmental theory and decades of clinical studies on mental illness and adaptive functioning (Garmezy 1991; Rutter 1999; Masten 2014).

These early resilience studies conceptualized resilience as an inferential concept of positive adaptation in the context of risk or adversity (Masten et al. 2009; Rutter 2012). Scholars identified protective and promotive factors that play a crucial role in resilience across diverse situations (Werner and Smith 1992; Ungar 2011; Luthar 2006). These factors, such as self-regulation skills, good parenting, community resources, and effective schools, suggest that resilience arises from ordinary processes that safeguard human development and promote support systems under adverse environments.

Over time, resilience research expanded beyond psychology to include social and ecological perspectives. Researchers argued that resilience is not only an individual trait but a dynamic and context-dependent process influenced by social, cultural, political, and environmental factors (Ungar 2011; Bonanno 2004). The socio-ecological model of resilience emphasizes the role of protective systems, including family, peer networks, community resources, and policies that shape individual and collective resilience (Folke 2006; Masten 2019; Panter-Brick and Eggerman 2012). This scholarly shift in focus led to a broader understanding of resilience as an adaptive process rather than a fixed characteristic, with significant implications for youth development and conflict settings.

b. Resilience in Youth Studies

In studying resilience in youth, researchers sought to understand how youth overcome adverse experiences and succeed despite challenges, what contributes to their success, and how resilience can be fostered in children and youth. Early resilience studies with children and youth focused on strategies such as reducing risk, building strengths and assets, and mobilizing

adaptive systems that protect and restore positive development (Werner 1995; Luthar et al. 2000; Masten et al. 2009).

Resilience in youth is complex and shaped by multiple interacting factors, including individual characteristics, familial support, peer relationships, and societal structures (Luthar 2006; Ungar 2012). Positive adaptation has traditionally been assessed in youth resilience studies using indicators such as social and academic achievements, happiness or life satisfaction, and the absence of mental illness, emotional distress, criminal behavior, or risk-taking behaviors (Cicchetti and Blender 2006; Luthar 2003; Masten et al. 2009). A major shift in youth resilience research occurred with the acknowledgment that resilience must be studied in context. Traditional studies focused on Western-centric models of resilience, often failing to consider cultural and social variations (Masten 2012; Ungar 2013; Panter-Brick 2014). Recent approaches emphasize an "emic" perspective, incorporating culturally relevant criteria and localized understandings of competence and adaptation (Durbrow et al. 2001; Theron et al. 2013). These studies highlight the importance of sociocultural and political factors in shaping youth resilience, particularly in diverse global contexts (Ungar 2008; Panter-Brick 2014; Theron 2015; Betancourt and Khan 2008).

c. Resilience in Conflict Settings

Resilience in conflict settings has been an area of growing interest, particularly in understanding how children and youth navigate adversity in war-affected regions. Traditionally, resilience in children exposed to armed conflict was viewed as an innate trait that made certain children invulnerable to adversity (Khan and Betancourt 2008; Luthar and Cicchetti 2000). However, contemporary research argues against this notion and instead focuses on resilience as

an interactive process influenced by protective factors and social-ecological dynamics (Betancourt and Khan 2008; Tol et al. 2013). My study aligns with the notion of focusing on resilience mechanisms found in the environments of youth that support resilience among youth in different stages of their lives, such as family, cultural beliefs, and community.

An important factor studied in resilience in conflict settings is the role of meaning-making in political violence. Barber (2009) found that Palestinian youth involved in the first Intifada (1987–1993) exhibited resilience in large part because they understood and internalized the historic and political goals behind their participation (and their family's participation) in resistance efforts. These findings suggest that a sense of purpose and collective identity can play a significant role in youth resilience during violent conflicts. This lens is important for my study because I am interested in understanding how my young participants from Afghanistan make meaning of their identify, history, sense of belonging and, for those now in exile, their desire to return to Afghanistan even though they have never seen a peaceful Afghanistan in their lives.

Dyan Mazurana emphasizes that resilience in war-affected youth should not only be studied from a deficit-based perspective. She critiques research that focuses primarily on trauma and suffering, arguing that such approaches overlook the capacities, hope, and optimism that many war-affected children exhibit (Mazurana n.d.). She states, "You run to the house on fire to assist the people there, racing past the other houses not on fire, paying them little to no attention, not pausing to ask why they too are not on fire" (Mazurana n.d.). Her argument underscores the importance of studying both challenges and strengths in youth resilience research. My study aligns with her argument of moving beyond a narrow focus on trauma and suffering. Instead of treating my participants as passive victims of poverty, constant violence, and religious

radicalization, circumstances often assumed to set children up for failure, I focus on understanding why and how they did not give in to hopelessness. My research asks what enables young people to resist these forces and carve out alternative futures despite the odds.

Betancourt and Khan (2008) advocate for a social-ecological approach to resilience in conflict settings. They emphasize that protective factors, such as strong family relationships, community networks, and access to education, contribute to positive mental health and developmental outcomes in war-affected youth (Betancourt et al. 2011). They argue that resilience must be understood as a dynamic process rather than a static trait, requiring researchers to examine how resilience shifts over time and across different contexts (Betancourt and Khan 2008). I have adopted this approach in my study to understand the dynamic processes that shape my young participants' lives, how their resilience shifts over their lifetimes and what supportive mechanisms enable them to navigate challenges.

d. Key Debates

Resilience as a Trait vs. Process vs. Outcome: One of the earliest debates in resilience theories concerns whether resilience is a trait, a process, or an outcome. Early research viewed resilience as a stable, innate characteristic that specific individuals possess, making them naturally resistant to adversity (Garmezy 1991; Rutter 1987). This perspective led to the idea of "invulnerable" or "super-resilient" individuals. However, contemporary scholars argue that resilience is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process that unfolds over time, influenced by social, environmental, and cultural factors (Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker 2000; Masten 2014). Some researchers define resilience as a measurable outcome where an individual or group successfully

adapts despite adversity (Werner and Smith 1992; Bonanno 2004). The debate continues as scholars question whether resilience is best understood as a characteristic, a process, or a result of overcoming hardship. Thes debates influenced my study approach causing me to pay attention to both the individuals and different processes in their lived experiences to locate how resilience developed throughout their lives.

Universal vs. Context-Specific Resilience: Another major debate is whether resilience is a universal phenomenon or context-dependent. Some researchers argue that resilience arises from common, fundamental human processes such as strong caregiving relationships, effective schools, and stable communities (Masten 2001). According to this view, the mechanisms of resilience are similar across different societies. Others challenge the universalist perspective, emphasizing that resilience is deeply embedded in cultural, social, and political contexts (Ungar 2008, 2011). These scholars advocate for an "emic" approach, which recognizes culturally specific definitions of competence and adaptation (Theron et al. 2013; Panter-Brick and Eggerman 2012). The debate raises questions about whether resilience models developed in Western societies can be applied globally, particularly in non-Western, conflict-affected, or resource-scarce settings. My research builds on the understanding that resilience is shaped by cultural, social, and political contexts and evolves over time. By taking an emic approach, I explore how these processes unfold through different stages of life for Afghan youth in a conflict setting.

Individual vs. Collective Resilience: Resilience is often studied at the individual level, but scholars debate whether resilience should also be analyzed as a collective phenomenon. Psychological studies tend to focus on personal attributes such as self-efficacy, emotional

regulation, and cognitive flexibility (Luthar 2006). Sociologists and political scientists emphasize community resilience, arguing that social networks, cultural practices, and institutions play a crucial role in resilience (Putnam 2000; Kaniasty and Norris 1995). The individual vs. collective debate is particularly relevant in conflict-affected areas, where resilience is often expressed through social solidarity, cultural identity, and political resistance (Barber 2009; Betancourt and Khan 2008). This latter approach informs my study because I want to understand how family and community shape my participants' resilience over time. That's why I focus on exploring family dynamics, friendships and peer relationships, and the social networks that play a role in their lives.

Measurement and Operationalization of Resilience: The concept of political resilience has also emerged in the scholarly debates, examining how communities survive state violence, displacement, and systemic oppression (Joseph 2018). The challenge of defining and measuring resilience has led to extensive debate. Some scholars argue that positive psychological well-being is sufficient to define resilience, while others contend that external adaptation (e.g., social and academic success) must also be considered (Masten et al. 2009; Luthar 2003). Some scholars measure resilience as immediate recovery from trauma, while others examine long-term adaptation over decades (Bonanno 2004; Panter-Brick 2015). While many scholars rely on standardized psychological assessments, others argue for qualitative and ethnographic methods that capture nuanced experiences of resilience in diverse cultural contexts (Ungar 2013; Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010). These debates highlight the importance of where and how resilience is studied and applied in fields such as mental health, humanitarian aid, and social policy. In my research, I decided against using any standardized psychological assessments for resilience. Instead, I’m interested in understanding what supports my participants’ well-being in

the face of adversity, and what kinds of habits, actions, strategies, and supports they have used to get through hard times.

Resilience and Structural Inequalities: A growing debate among scholars questions whether resilience research ignores structural inequalities and places too much responsibility on individuals to adapt to adversity. Some scholars argue that resilience has been co-opted into neoliberal policies that shift responsibility from institutions to individuals (Evans and Reid 2014; Joseph 2018). This perspective critiques resilience discourse for reinforcing inequality by expecting marginalized communities to "bounce back" without addressing systemic injustices. Researchers in this vein emphasize the need to examine how poverty, systemic discrimination, and political violence shape resilience (Betancourt et al. 2011; Panter-Brick and Eggerman 2012). These researchers argue that resilience must be studied in relation to power structures, governance, and access to resources, rather than as an individual or psychological trait. These debates have significant implications for applying resilience in public policy, social work, and international development. These debates are important in shaping my approach to my research subjects, and make me pay close attention to their gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic backgrounds, and the social, economic, cultural and political systems shaping their lives. I'm also focusing on what kinds of resources have played a role in their lives and that may have supported or undermined their resilience.

Resilience in Conflict Settings: Resistance vs. Adaptation: In studies of war-affected populations, a key debate is whether resilience is best understood as an adaptation to adversity or active resistance. Some scholars view resilience as adapting, recovering, and maintaining

psychological well-being despite experiencing violence (Tol et al. 2013; Betancourt and Khan 2008). Others argue that resilience in conflict settings often involves political resistance, collective action, and defiance (Barber 2009; Chaudhry 2017). This view suggests resilience is not only about surviving violence but actively challenging oppressive structures. This debate is crucial for shaping humanitarian responses and post-conflict recovery programs, as it challenges traditional psychological models of trauma recovery. This debate is crucial for my study because it shapes my approach to tracing the life histories of my participants. I'm exploring whether they have internalized violent experiences and simply adapted to their current lives or if they have found ways to resist and change their circumstances.

e. Gaps in the Resilience Theories

Lack of Consensus on Definition and Scope: Resilience scholars disagree on whether resilience should be understood as a trait, process, or outcome, leading to inconsistencies in research methodologies and interpretations (Luthar, Cicchetti,
and Becker 2000; Masten 2014). The broad application of resilience across multiple disciplines has resulted in conceptual ambiguity, making it difficult to develop standardized frameworks for studying and applying resilience theory (Ungar 2011).

Overemphasis on Individual Resilience: A significant portion of resilience research focuses on individual-level factors such as personality traits, coping mechanisms, and psychological well-being (Bonanno 2004; Werner and Smith 1992). However, this overlooks the broader social, economic, and political determinants of resilience (Betancourt and Khan 2008). While some studies have begun to explore community and structural resilience (Putnam 2000;

Kaniasty and Norris 1995), the emphasis on individual adaptation often ignores systemic inequalities and the role of institutions in shaping resilience outcomes (Joseph 2018).

Limited Attention to Cultural and Contextual Variations: Many resilience studies are based on Western-centric models that may not be applicable across diverse cultural and geopolitical settings (Ungar 2008, 2011). The assumption that resilience operates universally disregards the influence of cultural values, social norms, and historical contexts in shaping resilience (Panter-Brick and Eggerman 2012). More research is needed on culturally embedded definitions of resilience, particularly in non-Western and indigenous communities, to avoid imposing externally derived frameworks on different societies (Theron et al. 2013).

Challenges in Measuring Resilience: Resilience is often measured using quantitative indicators such as mental health outcomes, academic achievements, or economic recovery (Masten et al. 2009). However, these measures fail to capture resilience's complex, dynamic, and multidimensional nature (Luthar 2003). There is no agreement on whether resilience should be measured as a short-term recovery or long-term adaptation (Bonanno 2004; Panter-Brick 2015). Additionally, qualitative and participatory approaches that consider lived experiences and local understandings of resilience are still underutilized (Ungar 2013; Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010).

Insufficient Research on Structural and Policy-Level Resilience: Most resilience research focuses on individuals and communities, but there is limited exploration of resilience at the institutional and policy levels (Evans and Reid 2014). Governments, organizations, and global

institutions play a crucial role in fostering resilience through policies, resource allocation, and governance structures (Betancourt et al. 2011). The lack of research on how political systems, social policies, and economic frameworks influence resilience limits the effectiveness of resilience-based interventions in public policy and international development (Joseph 2018).

Neglect of Power, Inequality, and Social Justice: Many resilience theories assume that individuals and communities can "bounce back" without adequately addressing structural barriers such as poverty, discrimination, and conflict (Panter-Brick and Eggerman 2012). This has led to critiques that resilience discourse sometimes reinforces neoliberal ideologies that place responsibility on individuals rather than addressing systemic oppression (Evans and Reid 2014; Joseph 2018). More research is needed on how power dynamics and social inequalities affect resilience and on strategies for promoting resilience through equity and justice-oriented approaches (Betancourt et al. 2011).

Resilience in Protracted Crises and Armed Conflicts: While resilience has been extensively studied in the context of acute disasters and short-term adversities (Masten 2014), there is limited understanding of how resilience functions in prolonged crises, such as ongoing armed conflicts, displacement, and chronic poverty (Tol et al. 2013). Existing resilience models often assume that individuals and communities recover after adversity, but in many conflict-affected regions, adversity is continuous, requiring a different conceptualization of resilience beyond short-term recovery (Betancourt and Khan 2008).

The Role of Political Resistance in Resilience: Traditional resilience models focus on adaptation and recovery, but in conflict settings, resilience is often expressed through political resistance and collective action (Barber 2009; Chaudhry 2017). Studies on war-affected populations, refugees, and oppressed communities highlight how resilience can manifest as defiance, activism, and efforts to challenge injustice (Panter-Brick 2015). However, mainstream resilience research has not fully integrated these perspectives, limiting its applicability in understanding resilience in politically volatile environments (Joseph 2018).

Resilience Across the Life Course: Most resilience studies focus on children, youth, or disaster-affected populations, but there is limited research on how resilience evolves across different stages of life (Werner 1995). More longitudinal studies are needed to examine how resilience develops and changes over time, particularly in aging populations, marginalized groups, and people experiencing multiple intersecting adversities (Masten 2014; Panter-Brick and Eggerman 2012).

Ethical Concerns in Resilience Research: Research on resilience often involves vulnerable populations, including trauma survivors, refugees, and conflict-affected individuals (Betancourt and Khan 2008). However, resilience studies sometimes romanticize suffering by portraying individuals as “strong” without fully acknowledging the long-term psychological and social costs of adversity (Mazurana n.d.).It is essential to give precedence to ethical considerations to guarantee that resilience research does not inadvertently normalize or justify exposure to harm (Ungar 2013).

f. My Study

The term "resilience" has repeatedly been associated with Afghans. I remember reading news articles and academic accounts where there was always some reference to Afghans as a *"resilient people."* But to be honest, there were many times when I wasn't even sure what this word truly meant, and even now, I'm not sure I fully understand it. I was born during the Cold War, lived through the civil war in Afghanistan, grew up as a refugee child in Pakistan facing harsh realities, was part of Afghanistan's rebuilding process after 2001, and survived the years of terrorist attacks. I have lost friends and family members to suicide bombings. Yet, I never saw myself or the people around me give up on life.

I am not trying to glorify what I have experienced or what so many of my countrymates have gone through as some kind of success story. The toll of these experiences is evident in my everyday life. The never-ending sense of loss and homelessness feels unbearable at times. The struggle with belonging and the question of where our next home should be is nothing to brag about. And yet, I think it's important to say that I, and most Afghans I know, often find ways to be excited about life, laugh, and keep trying our best to work toward a better future. I have never fully understood how Afghans, after every catastrophic event, somehow get up, carry on, and continue striving forward.

This question has stayed with me for years, and it is what led me to undertake this research. I wanted to understand what resilience means in our context and why Afghans are often described as resilient. I began this study with the question: How do Afghan war-affected youth of all genders remain resilient physically, emotionally, spiritually, and psychosocially in the face of decades of armed political and criminal violence? I wanted to explore this question by looking

closely at the lived experiences of young Afghan women and men from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds to understand what allows them to endure and even thrive despite everything they have been through.

g. My Theoretical Framework

For this study, I employed Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as the primary theoretical lens to analyze resilience among 15 young Afghans women and men aged 18 to 35 from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. This framework allowed me to examine how resilience is shaped by interactions across the micro (family, peers), meso (community, schools), and macro (sociopolitical structures, cultural norms) systems over different life stages (Bronfenbrenner 1979). By using the Portal approach to Life History, I recorded detailed narratives to understand how these ecological layers influenced the participants' resilience across time. I incorporated methodologies grounded in other resilience frameworks to complement the ecological systems theory. I used Masten's positive development resilience theory to structure my open-ended interview questions, focusing on how different aspects of life contribute to resilience through the interaction of protective and risk factors (Masten 2014). This approach helped me define the role of adaptive systems in positive developmental outcomes despite adversity.

Additionally, I employed Kathleen Kostelny's body mapping technique, a method rooted in participatory and visual research, to facilitate focus group discussions with Afghan youth resettled in the United States and Canada (Kostelny 2017). I modified this method by integrating artistic activities, allowing participants to express their conceptualizations of resilience beyond verbal narratives. This aligns with the idea that visual methodologies can offer deeper insight

into individual and collective resilience processes (Panter-Brick and Eggerman 2012). I adopted the above theoretical lens and research methods because Afghan youths' lived experiences have not been adequately studied to understand their resilience or lack thereof through looking at their lived experiences since their childhood to their current lives. By integrating these approaches within an ecological systems framework, I aimed to explore resilience not as a static trait but as a dynamic process shaped by multi-level environmental influences.

h. Definition

Before starting the analysis of the data I collected through the life history method with my 15 young participants, it was important for me to understand and analyze their life experiences using frameworks and definitions that resonated with them. To ensure that I grounded my analysis in the language and meanings that reflect their realities, I conducted two focus group discussions with a total of 30 Afghan young women and men ages 18 to 35, living in Toronto, Canada, and the Northern Virginia, U.S.A, all of whom were evacuated after the Taliban took control of the country on August 15, 2021. These discussions aimed to explore how they define and understand the concept of resilience. The insights they shared shaped how I approached and analyzed the narratives of my participants. I also asked the same questions that I posed to my focus group participants to my 15 life history participants. Below, I present the definitions of resilience that emerged from these focus groups and the responses of my life history participants. Throughout this chapter, I analyze the life histories of my participants using these definitions as guiding concepts.

Across these perspectives, resilience emerges as a dynamic and evolving process, not a fixed trait. It is shaped by personal experiences, creative strategies, social and family expectations, and resistance to structural inequalities. It is both survival and defiance, both

coping and striving**,** marked by the ability to transform adversity into action toward a meaningful life.

Resilience, as described by my participants, is understood first and foremost as an inner force and active response, an internal strength that propels individuals forward in the face of overwhelming challenges. It is not passive endurance but an active, often embodied way of coping with hardship, expressed through movement, creativity, and action. As one participant put it, *"If I sit quiet, I feel bad and bad thoughts come, so I have to move."* This act of movement becomes a way to resist being overwhelmed by negative thoughts and emotions. For others, resilience is a form of creative and emotional survival expressed through artistic outlets such as dance and art. One participant shared, *"Whenever I dance, my parents know I am not doing well (Dewana shoda), "* illustrating how creative expression serves as a vital strategy for coping with distress.

Beyond immediate coping, resilience is deeply tied to purpose, dreams, and long-term commitments, reflecting a determination to pursue aspirations despite ongoing adversity. As one participant explained, *"I promised my family that whatever you expect from me as an engineer, I will achieve all those dreams of yours as an artist."* Here, resilience is a bridge between idealistic dreams and real-world achievements, fueled by a strong sense of purpose. For others, resilience takes the form of defiance and claiming agency, particularly in response to societal and systemic barriers. This is especially true for young women who resist gendered expectations. One female participant noted, *"When I said I want to study political science, many of my classmates laughed... but I told them I'm going to fulfill this dream of mine."* Resilience, in this sense, is about asserting one's right to dream and pursue goals, despite social opposition.

Participants also describe resilience as a form of learned endurance, a necessity shaped by life's relentless hardships. As one participant shared, *"You learn to be strong when life keeps testing you, when you have no choice but to carry the weight."* This points to resilience as a form of strength acquired through repeated struggle, not something innate. At the same time, resilience functions as both protective armor and a persistent climb**,** serving as a defense mechanism*, "our protective gear to endure hardship",* and as a determination to keep moving forward, *"climbing even though the mountain keeps getting steeper."* Resilience is thus both a shield and a source of action that enables individuals to persist through adversity. Finally, participants described resilience as navigating uncertainty with hope and determination**,** refusing to give up on their dreams despite unstable circumstances. As one participant powerfully described, *"Resilience is like walking a tightrope, you see your dreams on the other side, and no matter how shaky it gets, you keep moving forward."* Altogether, these reflections show that resilience is not a static quality but a dynamic, evolving process, one that involves struggle, creativity, purpose, defiance, and hope.

2. Afghan Youth and the Power of Resilience

The lived experiences of my study participants in this chapter are organized into three distinct life stages. The first stage focuses on childhood, exploring their early experiences of resilience amidst the impacts of war, the influence of family (both in terms of support and struggle), experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation, and the cultural norms that glorify hardship and emphasize gratitude. The second stage examines the formative years, with particular attention to the role of responsibility in resilience-building and the influence of

negative motivation as a cultural force. The final stage, adulthood, delves into themes of finding meaning through work and resistance, experiences of collective loss, navigating life between home and exile, and confronting unfulfilled dreams.

3. When You Don't Know Why or How: The Quiet Strength of Childhood Resilience

I was born in Helmand, Afghanistan, in my maternal grandmother's home. My mother tells me she does not remember much of my childhood because too much life happened to her. But I do remember my early childhood in Kabul, going to kindergarten, waiting for my mother to pick me up in the late afternoon, and even attending first grade for a few days in Helmand province during the civil war.

One memory of that time stayed with me, one that hurts me even into my adult life. I must have been five or six years old. I was coming home from school, our little kid's shift to come home was at noon for some reason. As I walked home, I passed by a man sitting on the side of the street, fixing his bicycle. He looked up at me and asked, ***"Ay Injalee, kos na rakaway?"***[Hey girl, will you give me your p***y?] I started running. I didn't understand why I was so scared. How does a child that young recognize vulgarity? How does she know the weight of those words? But I sometimes convince myself that maybe I knew because these things were happening. Maybe we children were more aware than we like to believe, more aware than we now assume children to be.

After that day, I never took that route home again. That route, which was only fifteen minutes, became forbidden to me, not because anyone told me not to take it, but because I understood that something in it was dangerous. Instead, I took a different route, one that took me

forty-five minutes. One day, when I arrived home late, my father was angry. He told my mother, **"She can't go to school anymore."** He thought I was playing somewhere after school. That was the end of school for me, at least in those early years. No one asked why I was coming home late. And I didn't tell anyone. But I carried anger toward my father for pulling me out of school when I was trying to protect myself well into adulthood. I never told him of what happened or my deep anger about his response. I also never stopped studying, and once back in school, I kept going, all the way through to my doctoral degree. Maybe I am trying to resist what was taken from me as a child.

Laying down this context matters because so many of my young participants have experienced adversity in their childhood; some recognize it, and some don't. But two things are strikingly common, maybe even in myself: first, we find justifications for why our parents or our circumstances were difficult. We rarely blame our parents. Instead, we blame the situations that made them act the way they did. These common factors tell me that young Afghans want to believe they were loved and cared for, but that the situations were difficult, and it was these difficulties that produced the harmful results. Second, when asked to recall the most important parts of their lives, none of my participants spoke of happy or funny memories. Not on their own. I had to ask them specifically, **"Tell me about a funny story from that time, "** or, **"Tell me about a happy memory."** What I found is that these young people don't see life in its ordinary, day-to-day flow. As I now know, most of them are happy people, and some even funny people, but when they recounted their lives to me, they saw life only in hardship, in the moments that tested them. The following are the testimonies of my participants when I asked them to tell me about their lives, starting from the earliest childhood memories they could recall. I didn't ask

them specifically about hardship or sad moments. But these are the first things they chose to tell me about themselves.

> "I didn't have a big brother; I always wished I had one. I was really harassed in Ghazni. Because we were not from the area and went from Kabul there, we were really bothered. I always wished I had a big brother who could protect me. I had two cousins who were my friends. I remember I used to get beaten by other boys who would gang up on me. But I had a small car that my father got me when he was in Hungary. That car gave me some social position among other children because they wanted to play with it. Before the birth of my youngest brother, we had very hard living conditions. We lost everything due to the civil war. My brother Arash was born, and the civil war started, so we used to joke that he brought bad luck with him, and in contrast, the youngest brother brought luck with him. After his birth, our situation started to improve." *(Male, 31, Ghazni)*

> "I have this memory of my mother when she got married. I didn't know if it was true or not, but I remember standing outside. All the women were wearing these things, and my mom was sitting on pillows and wearing a big green shawl. I know I didn't like it. I ran to my biological grandfather's house and hid behind the curtain for a long time. Also, I have this memory of when I was sleeping with my mother when she was with my stepfather, and I have no idea why I was there or why I have this memory. But I remember I was crying, and I was being a really bad kid."*(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

"I always thought my mom was the biggest enemy in my life. Wherever she went, she would take my big sister with her and talk about how good a daughter she was. She would never talk about me, like I didn't exist. My sister was always their favorite; she was always obeying them, but I was someone who would protest. My mom always scared me that if I did something wrong, my father would punish me. Anything she bought, she would give it to my sister first. I think, as a child, I was always invisible."*(Female, 27, Panjshir)*

"My childhood, I think I remember things from when I was four or five years old. I was really naughty, playing and running around all the time. And that was among boys; I had brothers and cousins, all of them boys, so I would play any games they played. My mom tells me that when I was born, it was really hot weather, but the night I was born, there was a flood, so much rain, and even a storm. Many small districts were underwater. That's why they named me Baron, it means rain. When I was born, the midwife thought I was dead. But my aunt didn't accept it, and she gave me CPR. After that, I started breathing. I'm the fourth among the siblings. I had a brother who was my best friend, but he passed away recently." *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

"One thing was so general about our family: none of us were allowed to go outside, neither girls nor boys. We were always locked at home. We didn't have permission to go to a shop, just in our own street. Because our family was a

political family, my brothers were all involved in political parties, so they were scared for their families. My whole life was inside a house. Until I went to India for college, I didn't have any friends outside my home. However, our family was so big that I never realized during my childhood that I was alone because I had so many friends within the family. There were so many other children. Two of my older brothers are doctors, and they have such good characters. I always looked up to them. I wanted to be like them. I think looking up to them gave me hope that even if times were tough, I could make it too." *(Male, 29, Kandahar)*

"From the time that I remember, the things that seemed so hard now seem so small. On very small matters, I used to get hurt; I was crying. From my young age, I remember that I was very much with myself, I didn't hurt anyone, I didn't involve myself in others' business, I just cared about my life and myself. Even when kids were fighting with each other, I didn't take sides. The only thing I have hated since I was a child, and until today, is fighting, whether verbally or physically. I have never fought. To avoid fighting with my brother, I would talk to my dolls or, if my dolls were taken, I would start talking to the walls." *(Female, 21, Kabul)*

"When we came back from Pakistan, we couldn't afford any place in a good area of Kandahar, so we were in a really underdeveloped part of the city. It was an area where you would not see women outside their houses. There was not much respect among the people. I think I was bullied. I remember because I had fair

skin, and in the area we lived, people worked outside in the sun, so I stood out. For some time, I was lonely. But when I started school, I found friends. I was really fond of kite flying, and I made friends more quickly than my sister. I remember I would go to school half a day and then go with my mom, who was a teacher. In school, they would give biscuits to children, and I loved those biscuits. That's why I was really interested in going to school." *(Male, 24 Kandahar)*

"I was born in Herat, and after a year, the Taliban took control. The first memories of my life are of living under the Taliban regime. The first time I went to school was in 2002 after NATO and American forces came. I remember my father saying that if the school curriculum remained as it was under the Taliban, he would not let me go. But when the Taliban escaped, I joined school, and my dad was happy." *(Male, 30, Herat)*

My childhood was difficult. Since I remember, there were fights in my family. My parents would fight over everything. I was just a kid, eight or nine years old, and it was hard. I remember once I dropped a dish, and my mother beat me so badly with a brick. I was sick for days after that. It felt like I was born into hell. I kept asking myself, 'Am I really their child?' Because it didn't feel like it. But I kept pushing myself to survive. I would escape home to be with neighbors or play outside. That was my only escape." *(Female, 23, Laghman)*

"I was born during the civil war of the 1990s. My grandmother prayed I would be a boy. I remember feeling unwanted when I heard that. When we were refugees in Pakistan, my father sold bananas on a cart. I would go with him to the fruit

market. I knew we were poor. When we returned to Afghanistan, I was so happy when my mom enrolled me in school. I wanted to go for the biscuits they gave students. That was my biggest happiness." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

"I was born in Maroof district of Kandahar in Mirokhail village. My grandfather was a landlord, and before I was born, no one in our entire family had gone to school. My father was the only one who had attended a few classes, and he always said that the lack of education held us back from progressing. When Karzai's government started, my father was excited about education. He started a school under a tree in our village. He went door to door, convincing families to send their children, including girls. More than 600 children attended, and I was among them. But then the Taliban came. They burned our school to the ground, destroyed our books, and made it clear that education, especially for girls, would not be allowed. My father was threatened and forced to leave our village. We moved to Kandahar, and life changed completely. We lived in other people's houses, and it never felt like home. People looked at us like we were outsiders because we were pushed away from our home for believing in education. It was difficult, but I held on to my dream. I told myself I would build a school again one day." *(Male, 32, Kandahar)*

"My father was killed during the first Taliban rule, and my mother searched for his body for years. We never found a grave. After that, we fled to Pakistan, where we lived in a crowded apartment with more than 20 people. I was too young to understand much, but I started working in carpet weaving. That's all I knew, work

and more work. I don’t regret not having a childhood. I never had a toy, never played like other kids. The only thing I remember from my childhood is carpet, carpet, carpet. But I don’t regret it because my mother sacrificed everything to send me to school. Many kids in my situation never got that chance, but I did. That’s why I don’t regret my tough childhood." *(Male, 28, Bamyan)*

"I was born in Iran but moved to Kabul when I was very young. My family was poor. My father sold goods on a cart in the streets, and my mother sewed clothes to support us. As a child, I didn’t think much about our hardships, I just lived. But I remember when my younger brother was born, everything became harder. At five years old, I started weaving carpets with my brother. I didn’t know any other life. By six, I was fetching water from the end of our street. I remember my school, just a small house with two or three shops around it. It didn’t look like a school, but I went there to get out of the house. I didn’t understand the value of education; I just wanted an escape. The hardest memory I have is of my father getting injured while working. He came home in pain every night but still had to work the next morning. There was no choice. Even though life was hard, I had dreams. I wanted to be a teacher. When I saw my teachers standing in front of the class, writing on the board, I wanted to be like them. But as I grew up, my dreams grew with me." *(Female, 23, Bamyan)*

"I was raised in Quetta, Pakistan. I started carpet weaving at five years old, and my sister at seven. That was our life. We couldn’t afford school at first, but later, when our financial situation improved a little, my father sent us to a school for

refugees run by Sima Samar. It was free, so we could study in the evenings after carpet weaving all day. From dawn until 3:30 PM, we worked. From 4 PM to 7 PM, we went to school. But I am grateful that my parents supported our education. After grade six, we had to start paying for school, so we saved more and worked harder. I woke up in the dark every morning to weave carpets for extra hours. Even though it was exhausting, I felt lucky that I was still able to learn." *(Female, 29, Bamyan)*

"One of my earliest memories, from when I was maybe three years old, is my father making me a tiny schedule to learn English. Even though I didn't understand where I was from, born in Malaysia to Afghan parents who had left their country because of war, my father believed language would open doors for me. He wanted me to be able to speak to foreigners, to belong in a world that wasn't ours. Education was everything to my family, not just my parents, but my uncles and aunts too. They all believed learning was the way forward. So even when I didn't know what Afghanistan was, or why we had to leave Malaysia when I was five or six, one thing was always clear: I had to study, to be the best version of myself." *(Male, 24, Badakhshan)*

These quotes offer a window into how my participants remember their childhoods, not as complete narratives but as fragments and glimpses shaped by moments of joy, fear, loss, and resilience. Through these memories, we see how violence, displacement, poverty, and family dynamics shaped their early lives. Some remember moments of love or hope, like a father buying a toy car or a mother insisting on education, while others recall experiences of neglect, bullying,

or war. Many participants carry memories of early emotional pain, bullying, sibling loss, family violence, or neglect, which shaped their emotional landscapes in adulthood. These memories serve as emotional anchors, quietly shaping how they relate to others and to themselves. One participant recalled, *"I think, as a child, I was always invisible"* while another described, *"My mother beat me so badly with a brick… it felt like I was born into hell."* These are not just recollections; they are the groundwork of emotional self-reliance. Resilience, in these cases, begins as an inner posture of endurance in the face of being unseen, unsafe, or unloved.

Memory as a moral compass that showed Resilience was frequently grounded in memories of parental sacrifice and hardship. Participants remembered "my mother sacrificed everything to send me to school" and "my father came home in pain every night but still had to work." These memories became moral compasses, shaping a sense of duty to make those sacrifices meaningful. The sense of "not regretting a tough childhood" was common, not because it was easy, but because those remembered struggles instilled a fierce commitment to persevere. Resilience here is fueled by memory-driven gratitude and responsibility.

For many youth, early memories of war, displacement, and structural violence shaped political clarity. One participant remembered, "My father was killed during the first Taliban rule, and my mother searched for his body for years. "Another recalled, "The Taliban burned our school to the ground." These memories are not merely personal, they are political. They forge an early understanding of injustice and often become the reason why participants pursue education, activism, or community service. Resilience here takes the form of historical consciousness, rooted in a refusal to forget.

Several youth recounted fragmented, transnational, or disjointed childhoods. Memory served as a way to rebuild identity across displacement. One young man shared, *"Even when I didn't know what Afghanistan was… one thing was clear: I had to study."* Another said, *"I was born in Iran but moved to Kabul when I was very young… I didn't think much about our hardships, I just lived."* These memories became identity touchstones, connecting them to values like education or perseverance, even when place and belonging were uncertain.

Some memories reflect the creative, adaptive strategies youth developed in difficult environments. One participant said, "I had a small car that my father got me… it gave me social position, " while another shared, "To avoid fighting with my brother, I would talk to my dolls… or to the walls." These are not trivial details, they show how memory holds the traces of how children managed risk, loneliness, and fear through small but strategic actions. These early coping strategies often evolve into the practical backbone of resilience in adulthood.
I share these quotes to give readers a sense of the textured, complicated nature of growing up in Afghanistan over the past four decades, a way to hear their voices as they reflect on their childhood memories.

a. The Lasting Scars of War and Violence in Childhood

I am not an athletic person, not at all. I've never understood why I don't like running. I admire people who make running a daily habit, but something deep inside me knows I could never force myself into that routine. One reason is that every time I try to run, my left foot gets tired and sore, and I have to stop. It's because I carry a piece of shrapnel, a fragment from a

rocket fired by Gulbuddin[15]'s faction of the Mujahideen at our house. As a child, during the civil war, there were no proper medical facilities. The hospitals couldn't remove the shrapnel, so it stayed in my body. Over time, I may have learned to forget the pain, but did I forget everything else? No.

I remember my two hens being killed in those rocket attacks. I remember walking home from school with my brother and a friend when a blast shook the ground. I remember the dust and smoke rising around us, and when I could finally see, I saw my brother, but I couldn't find our friend. All I saw was blood pooling on the side of the road. I remember grabbing my brother's hand and running. I remember coming home from visiting my grandmother in Helmand and looking for my friend Haroon, only to be told that he had been killed by a rocket. I remember all the craters, the massive holes the rockets left in the ground around our house. I remember all of it. Even now, when a balloon pops, it feels like a rocket has landed nearby. My heart races, and I am the first to run. I call all these memories scars of war, and whatever you do, they do not disappear and will show in different phases of your life.

The majority of my study participants carry their own share of scars, wounds that are either directly or indirectly tied to the wars and violence that have shaped their lives. During the interviews, as they recounted these painful memories, I was especially interested in understanding what factors may have helped them endure those early, difficult years. As I asked

---

[1]1 Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is the founder of Hezb-e Islami (Party of Islam), a fundamentalist Islamist political and militant group established in the 1970s. His faction became one of the major mujahideen groups during the Soviet-Afghan war (1979–1989) widely known by the grim nickname "the Butcher of Kabul" for his role in the Afghan civil war of the early 1990s, when his forces were responsible for indiscriminate shelling and mass civilian casualties in the capital.

them these questions, I often found myself traveling back to my own childhood, reflecting on what had helped me survive those times. What I can remember is that I was fully aware of what was happening around me. My parents would openly talk about the war and violence; sometimes, they would speak directly to us about what was going on. There was no culture of hiding information from children, at least not in my home. I knew that we were not alone in what we were experiencing. I knew that if we stayed in hiding, in makeshift basements that my father would dig under our house and reinforce with wood, we might survive. I remember how my brother and I would help my father cut wood to make those shelters. It seemed like every house we lived in had to have such a space to stay alive. I also knew, even as a child, that I hated the Mujahideen. I was aware they had guns, that they were killing people, and I understood what that meant.

I remember hearing a lot of fights between my parents inside those basements. But what also stays with me are the moments when my brother would play pretend, making up stories with his fingers, and I would watch him. It felt like I was watching a movie, and for a while, it helped me escape. Those basements were always dark. I don't even remember if it was night or day. But I do remember that playing**,** even for a little while, helped. I would also make up stories in my own mind, imagining going to visit my grandmother or an aunt, as if I could free myself from the dark, confined space we were in. Looking back, I realize that these moments of imagination and play were what helped me cope, what gave me a sense of normalcy amid chaos. The following are accounts by my young participants who shared their early memories of wartime.

> "I was born in 2000 in Kandahar. When I was about a year old, 9/11 happened, and the country was in chaos. We fled to Pakistan when I was a baby because of

the war between the Taliban and Americans. When we came back to Afghanistan in 2005, we had nothing, no carpets, nothing to sit on. My father worked for the government and was killed in 2012, I was 12 years old." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

“The day I was born a lot of rockets were fired, and there was a lot of fighting going on. At that time, there was a big fight between Mujahideen and the democratic government. There were so many rockets that even on that day, rocket shrapnel fell into our house. I think my family remembers that rocket and shrapnel because of my birthday. But I do remember the 2001 fight of the Taliban. I think there was a war, that’s why my parents left for Pakistan. There was a lot of bombardment, it was the time when Americans attacked Afghanistan. I do remember it was really dark during the night when we left, and we walked on the road for a while and we were scared. I remember my father would hold me in his arms and cover my head so that I wouldn’t see anything or hear anything. I do remember those things." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

"When my father died, we never found his body. The only thing I remember of him is his yellow jacket. I remember my mother tied me on her back while she was running down the mountain. Because we had to run, even now when I close my eyes and try to remember how my father looked like, I only remember being tied to my mother’s back and running down the hill." *(Male, 28, Bamyan)*

"When I was taken to the hospital, I was not admitted because the hospitals were not allowing people to stay since rockets were landing there, so they would send

people back to their homes. The hospital was close to Pamir Cinema, and my father tells me that bullets were coming from all sides, and there was no vehicle available to take us home. There was a minibus coming but it didn't seem to stop for us, so my father had to stand in front of it holding me, so it would stop and take us. There was a possibility that the minibus could have hit us and left." *(Male, 30, Ghazni)*

"In 2007, I was at home with my sister when a bomb exploded 50 meters away. I couldn't understand what it was; I thought something blew up in the kitchen. It was my first realization that our life was not safe. I remember my parents being scared after the explosion, and since then, I carried the fear that one day I might be among those who die." *(Male, 24, Badakhshan)*

"The entire killing/dying knowledge as a kid started from Quetta, Pakistan. I learned what a bomb blast does to human beings. The first one was a neighbor in Quetta who died in a bomb blast. And when I came back to Afghanistan, I used to hear of someone dying every day, on the road by the Taliban or by bomb or by ISIS. I have seen blood and have heard bombs. I am aware of the pain of the bomb." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

These powerful narratives of childhood and early life under war, bombardment, and personal loss collectively point to the environments in which these young individuals begin their lives. Each story reflects a life marked by violence before life itself could fully begin, being born

under rocket fire, growing up surrounded by bomb blasts, and losing a father to war. From a young boy being tied to his mother's back while fleeing down a mountain in Bamyan to a baby girl being shielded by her father during a nighttime escape under bombardment in Nangarhar, these are not just memories but foundational moments that shape a lifelong experience of insecurity and trauma. What emerges across these accounts is a persistent sense of loss, of family, of safety, of home, and an environment where survival requires ongoing adaptation and inner strength. The image of a young man standing in front of a moving bus while holding his burned child to get help in Kabul symbolizes a desperate act of love and protection in a world where even hospitals could not offer refuge.

Yet, despite these experiences, the fact that these individuals have grown to recount their stories is itself a testament to profound resilience. Their memories are marked not only by pain but also by the endurance of familial bonds and personal will to survive. At the same time, these narratives highlight how the need for resilience is not just an individual responsibility but a societal failure to protect its most vulnerable, children. The pervasive exposure to violence from birth demonstrates the need for systemic forms of resilience, including safe spaces, healing, and acknowledgment of collective trauma. These stories call attention to the invisible strength it takes to survive daily life in such contexts, and the pressing need for social, psychological, and political interventions to foster resilience in war-affected populations.

b. War-Touched Lives: How Conflict Shapes the Role of Family

In war zones, as macrosystems, such as governance, security, and economic protection, collapse or become fragile, children grow up primarily within their microsystems, relying on family and immediate surroundings to shape their understanding of life. However, families themselves are not immune to the disruptions of war and conflict. Many parents and caregivers have been denied education due to prolonged instability, meaning that a significant number of my study participants were raised by family members who never attended school. In some cases, marriages are arranged not for love or companionship but to resolve disputes between families or villages, creating unions that often lack emotional stability and respect. Such dynamics frequently contribute to dysfunctional family environments, where children are exposed to various forms of violence. Several participants, for example, grew up in polygamous households, where their mothers were third or fourth wives, placing them at the lowest tier in the family hierarchy. However, despite these circumstances, some families, despite the absence of agency in their formation, still managed to foster protective and loving environments for their children.

When state-level institutions collapse or are riddled with corruption, alternative structures such as mosques and madrasas, which could otherwise serve as sources of moral and educational guidance, often fail to provide the necessary protection. In such contexts, families become the primary protective mechanism. Yet, for some of my participants, even these close environments failed to shield them from harm. As a result, these children were forced to adapt, navigate uncertainty, endure harsh realities, and develop creative survival strategies. In some instances, they actively resisted and fought back, reclaiming their agency in childhood despite overwhelming systemic and familial adversity. This interplay between macro and micro systems highlights how structural failures at the state level trickle down into the most intimate aspects of childhood, shaping how children experience safety, resilience, and agency. Without functioning

macrosystems, the burden of protection shifts entirely to the microsystem, yet when families themselves are fragmented, children must rely on their own resourcefulness to survive.

> "Since my childhood, there have been fights in our family. My parents would fight with each other over everything. I did not know why, but it made me feel like our home was a battlefield. My mother and father had married as enemies. Their marriage was done to resolve a family dispute, and from the very beginning, they resented each other. My mother was very violent towards her daughters. I don't know why. I remember breaking a dish when I was only 9 or 10 years old, and my mother hit me badly. She took a brick and hit me on my back for breaking it. My father was also violent; he would slap me in front of everyone. Being slapped in front of others was more painful than the slap itself. My mother never treated me like a daughter. She would call my brothers 'my son' but never used any affectionate words for me or my sisters. My father gave my brothers 100 rupees for pocket money, but only gave us girls 20. At first, I thought it was normal, but later, I realized the deep discrimination. But my older sister was always there for me. I would do anything to protect her from my parents"
> *(Female, 23, Laghman)*

> "My father is an orphan, he didn't have anyone, but he was a well-educated man and he was always my hero. When I was very small, I would go with him to get bushes from the hilltops; although it was a very laborious chore, I loved it because I felt I was helping my father and, at the same time, felt equal to him, which gave me the feeling of empowerment. I have not seen my parents in big fights, except

> one time. The time, when we moved to my grandparents' home. We would watch movies in the basement with my extended family on my uncle's TV. Once, I was insisting that we should get TV, and I did not understand their situation. My father beat me, and my mother fought with him, and then they would not sleep together for a long time. I have not seen myself and none of my siblings being beaten or any other kind of physical violence." *(Male, 30, Ghazni)*
>
> "My father always supported me as a child, and that's why I consider myself a successful woman in Afghanistan. I remember running home to tell my father I got the second position in my class, but then I saw that I had lost the score card on the way because my hands were very cold, and he held my hands between his own hands to warm them. That's a good memory. When my father lost his business, he lost his status in the family. The same people who once came to him for help now ignored us. I remember my parents fighting, my father hitting my mother, and me standing behind the door, crying. I have witnessed many times my father hitting my mom, and I think my mom stayed with him because of us." *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

The narratives shared by these young individuals highlight different forms of resilience in response to familial violence, gender discrimination, and shifting social dynamics. The first account, from a young woman in Laghman, exemplifies resilience as defiance and claiming agency. Despite enduring physical abuse and discrimination from both parents, she recognizes the injustice of her treatment, particularly the gender disparity in how she and her brothers were valued. Her protective instinct toward her older sister suggests an active assertion of agency, she

refuses to be solely a victim and instead seeks to shield another from harm. This defiance, even in the face of systemic and familial oppression, showcases how resilience can emerge through a commitment to protecting others.

The second story, from a young man in Ghazni, reflects resilience as learned endurance and protective armor. His admiration for his father, despite experiencing a singular instance of physical punishment, suggests that his resilience is shaped by an emotional connection rather than overt resistance. The moment when he labors alongside his father and finds empowerment in that equality hints at an internalized endurance, learning to take pride in difficult circumstances rather than resisting them. While he does not frame his experiences as traumatic, his resilience emerges from adapting to challenges and finding strength in familial bonds.

The third narrative, from a young woman in Mazar-e-Sharif, demonstrates resilience as a form of creative and emotional survival. Her relationship with her father is complex, filled with warmth and support in childhood but tainted by domestic violence as she grows older. Despite witnessing her father's fall from social grace and the deterioration of her parents' marriage, she holds onto memories of love and care, using them as a source of self-worth and motivation. Her success in Afghanistan, despite the instability at home, suggests an ability to emotionally navigate uncertainty and extract strength from positive moments amidst adversity. Each of these narratives illustrates how resilience is not a singular concept but a multifaceted response to hardship. Whether through defiance, endurance, or emotional survival, these individuals find ways to assert themselves and persist despite the challenges they face.

> "There was a period of life when they were really friends, and they loved each other. My mom tells us stories about how my father brought her jeans from

abroad and even taught her how to use sanitary pads when she didn't know. But as he rose in his career, they couldn't connect anymore. My mom always complained and fought with him, and he became more distant. I remember once they fought badly, and he threw my mom out of the house. We ran after her, but he shut the door and told us if we left, he would kill us. After years of being together, my parents' relationship became a power struggle. My mom resented my father's growing success, and my father resented her expectations. I think he felt she was trying to control him while she felt he was abandoning her. My mother lived in constant fear that my father would marry another woman. It consumed her to the point that she forgot about us, her children. Even though she has called me Faisha (Whore), I have been beaten by her and insulted by her, but I have just kept doing what I wanted to do. My father was always diplomatic with me, even his beating was diplomatic. He would massage my cheek as if to prepare it, then slap me hard on the same cheek. I always felt like I didn't exist for my parents. My sister was always their favorite while I was invisible. I think my childhood is really surrounding my cousin. I think he was the best part of my life. He really helped me adjust to a new life in Kabul. Also, I remember I would eat a lot, and laugh a lot and not care much."*(Female, 27, Panjshir)*

"My parents never fought, though they sometimes argued about finances. My father was sensitive about budgeting, especially when relatives borrowed money and didn't return it. My mother, a psychologist, played a key role in maintaining peace and ensuring their arguments never escalated. She always made sure her

children were mentally well, creating a supportive and stable environment at home." *(Male, 24, Badakhshan)*

"My father is very friendly with his family, especially my mother. Though she was not educated, they lived as friends, shoulder to shoulder. He never let external problems affect their relationship. Unlike others in my extended family, where I witnessed violence, my parents never had physical or verbal abuse. My father was patient and led the family with high moral standards. I witnessed conflicts between my mother and my grandmother. My grandmother was not open-minded and tried to control her daughters-in-laws. Our financial situation was difficult. From first to seventh grade, I had only one uniform. When I outgrew it, my father bought second-hand clothes, and my mother tailored them to fit me. I wore that uniform until I graduated high school. None of the financial issues made me feel my parents were not happy with each other or with us." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

"My parents had a respectful relationship in front of us. They never fought in front of their children. If they had disagreements, they resolved them privately. When we were kids, I don't remember if I had witnessed them fighting. We believe that all couples are like this. We had a very friendly environment at home. They created this image at home that a couple should always respect each other. My father would always tell us that we have to respect our mother. She has given us birth and has put so much effort into bringing us to this stage of life." *(Female, 29, Bamyan)*

The narratives in these accounts reveal the diverse ways individuals develop resilience in response to their family dynamics and personal hardships. Families play the role of nurturing collective resilience but, at the same time, in some situations, cause them to not count on families and instead groom their own skills at surviving in situations when families become sources of pain and hardship. The young woman from Panjshir demonstrates resilience as creative and emotional survival; despite experiencing neglect, favoritism, and even verbal and physical abuse by her own parents, she finds ways to maintain her sense of self. She clings to positive memories with her cousin, indulges in laughter and carefree eating, and ultimately persists in doing what she wants, showing an ability to adapt emotionally rather than succumb to her family's dysfunction. In contrast, the young man from Badakhshan embodies resilience as protective armor, his mother’s psychological expertise and his family’s peaceful environment provided him with a shield against emotional distress, ensuring that he developed a stable and secure mindset despite financial concerns.

The young woman from Nangarhar exemplifies resilience as learned endurance; growing up in financial hardship although experiencing respectful relationships between her parents, still she had to navigate the tensions between her mother and grandmother, she did not resist or rebel but instead adapted to her circumstances, finding strength in her parents' ability to maintain their relationship despite adversity. Similarly, the young woman from Bamyan represents resilience as an inner force and active response; raised in a home where respect and emotional stability were core values, she internalized this as a guiding principle, shaping how she views relationships and personal struggles to not give up on goodness even in harsh times. These narratives collectively illustrate that resilience can be cultivated, acquired, and internalized in childhood at different

circumstances and rather a spectrum of responses shaped by the environment, personal agency, and coping mechanisms developed in response to life's uncertainties.

> "I remember a couple of times when my brother-in-law and his brothers would beat my mother and my sister; they hurt them physically. Many times, my brother-in-law had told us to leave the house. I remember once, around midnight, my mother and I had to leave. We took refuge in a relative's house; I couldn't help my mother; I was a little boy. I don't regret that I did not have a childhood, the age that I had to play, I didn't play. The situation was like that. My dad was not there, and my mom was responsible for everything. My mother sacrificed a lot. So, thinking back, I don't regret anything, to be honest. I am very grateful to my mother because most of the children in my situation then did not have the opportunity to go to school. But my mother did her best to send me to school. Although I was working, I also went to school." *(Male, 28, Bamyan)*

> "There were always fights at home in my childhood. My grandmother didn't let her sons live separately. She forced all the daughters-in-law into one house, even as they grew older with their own children. I have seen my mother being beaten a lot. One time, my uncle beat my mother so much that her eyes turned black. She tried to run, but they dragged her into a room and beat her together. My mother would tell my father but he couldn't do much about it. My brother and I would talk after the fights in our family. He always tried to make me feel better." *(Female, 21, Kabul)*

"I have three mothers. My own mom is the youngest of the three wives my father had. Until I was 15 years old, we were living together in the same household. There was always an issue about land distribution and property. The oldest siblings from the other mothers saw us as a threat to claiming part of the property, so we became a problem for them. My father was actually a millionaire. I am supposed to be a millionaire, but only on paper. *(Laughing) I remember when I was 8 or 9 years old* my mother was sick one day, and I went to one of my older stepbrothers to ask for money to buy her milk. He told me, 'Come back tomorrow.' That was the situation, being a millionaire on paper but not having pennies to buy milk for our sick mother. One time, one of my brothers beat me so badly that I fell unconscious. I was taken to the hospital. I don't think I have ever seen or experienced something like that. He really hit me so hard and so many times." *(Male, 29, Kandahar)*

"I didn't feel like my mom cared about me when I was kid. My mother compared me to my cousin all the time. My cousin was thin, quiet, and intelligent, a full package of everything I desired to be. Meanwhile, I was black, fat, and loud. I played with boys, I laughed too loud, things my mom didn't like. She used to say, 'You were so ugly and black at first, and you were so fat your hands had folds.' She laughed, but I don't know why my mom didn't like it. Before going to Pakistan, I have this memory of my mom dragging me and pulling me on the floor, beating me, shouting, 'It's all because of you! Get out of my house!' I was crying, and she kept pulling me. That memory hurts me more than any other memory. It still makes me so angry. My mom was pregnant and was beaten up by

> her in-laws all the time; I remember when she was in the hospital for two days giving birth to my sister, no one took food for her, and I was home looking after my brother. I guess my mother felt frustrated and she found me as her punching bag."*(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

These narratives illustrate how resilience takes different forms depending on the hardships faced, the support systems available, and the ways individuals learn to navigate their realities as children. The first account, from a young man in Bamyan, reflects resilience as learned endurance. Growing up in a household where his mother faced domestic violence and displacement, he was forced to mature quickly, sacrificing his childhood to work and support his family. However, rather than resenting these hardships, he embraces gratitude for his mother's sacrifices and the education she ensured for him. His hope is rooted in accepting his circumstances without regret, adapting to them, and finding strength in the opportunities he did receive. The second story, from a young woman in Kabul, embodies resilience as protective armor. Witnessing repeated violence against her mother in an environment where her father could not intervene, she relied on emotional support from her brother. The act of discussing their experiences together became a way to cope, creating a protective emotional layer against the hostility in their household. While she could not stop the violence, her resilience lies in finding solace through communication, using her bond with her brother as a means to endure.

The third narrative, from a young man in Kandahar, highlights resilience as navigating uncertainty. Growing up in a wealthy yet divided family, he was caught in a web of power struggles over inheritance, facing both neglect and physical violence from his older stepbrothers. His ability to laugh at the irony of being a "millionaire on paper" while struggling for basic needs

shows a psychological adaptation to uncertainty. He learned to navigate the contradictions of his life, surviving the hostility within his own home while maintaining a perspective that allowed him to process his experiences with a level of detachment. The final account, from a young woman in Ghazni, exemplifies resilience as defiance and claiming agency. She was rejected and physically abused by her mother, who projected her own frustrations onto her. Yet, rather than internalizing her mother's rejection, she holds onto her anger and sense of injustice, recognizing the emotional wounds inflicted on her. Her ability to articulate her pain and express frustration rather than suppress it suggests an assertion of agency, she refuses to be erased by the abuse she endured. By acknowledging the impact of these experiences, she actively resists being defined by them. Together, these stories reveal how resilience is shaped by lived realities, whether through endurance, protective emotional strategies, navigating instability, or outright defiance. Each individual finds a way to persist despite the profound challenges they have faced, showing that resilience is not passive survival but an active, evolving response to adversity, and it changes from individual to collective on the availability of resources to these children. It is also learned from looking at how communality their families survive and adopt in the absence of such a collective mechanism.

c. Childhood Betrayed: The Scars of Sexual Exploitation

In 2023 alone, over 300 million children worldwide experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse (UNSW 2024). Approximately one in eight girls and women, more than 370 million individuals, have faced sexual violence before the age of 18 (UNICEF 2024). When non-contact sexual violence is included, this rate increases to one in five (The Guardian 2024).

We often read these statistics and try to imagine the circumstances in which such abuse occurs, but we rarely acknowledge that it could be happening within our own homes. We just need to look around. When I reflect on my own experiences, I believe these numbers barely scratch the surface of reality. Both of my parents worked full-time, so my older brother and I were sent to first grade before I was old enough for school simply because there was no one else to watch me. After school, we looked after each other, and sometimes our neighbors were asked to check on us. One of these neighbors had children our age, and I was always excited when they came over to play.

I remember one day, their father took turns throwing his children in the air, making them laugh as he caught them. When he asked if I wanted to be thrown up as well, I eagerly agreed. I don't remember the thrill of being lifted, but I do remember the discomfort, the way his hands gripped me, the pain, and the moment his touch shifted to something that felt wrong. I tried to tell him to put me down. I didn't understand what had happened. After that day, I dreaded being left in their care. I cried whenever my mother asked them to watch us, yet I couldn't explain why. At four years old, I lacked the words to articulate what had happened, but that didn't make the experience any less real. These moments don't simply fade. They linger, shaping us in ways we don't fully grasp until much later. This section shares the stories of my study participants, memories from their childhoods that still cast shadows over their present lives.

> "I was going to bring water, and some guys came. One of them put their hand inside my pants, and I shouted and started crying. I tried to secure my pants with my hands, and they started touching my back. I kept crying and begging to stop but they didn't." *(Female, 23, Laghman)*

"In the mosque, I remember that Mullah (the cleric) used to hold my knees and push me towards him. Now that I see it and think about it, all the time when sexual harassment happens, that is in the mosque. That's why going to the mosque is really a bad memory of my childhood. He would always touch my shoulders and squeeze them, and I hated that. It was not only me, a lot of other boys have been the victims." *(Male, 30, Ghazni)*

"In the street, from my cousins, from neighbor boys, like all of them, either verbal abuse or sometimes touching my body in an abusive way, all of them really are some of the bad memories of my childhood. One of my cousins, my aunt's son, used to sexually harass me so much. And we used to go to their home a lot, and I didn't know how to protest, either going there or telling people what was happening. I remember once my mom was supposed to go somewhere, and he was at our place. My mom told me to stay until she came back. I remember I insisted and cried a lot that I wanted to go with my mom, I couldn't tell her why I wanted to go with her, but I really didn't want to be in a place where he was there." *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

"A Taliban would come to our place and teach all the children Quranic studies. We were kids, we didn't know, but he would touch us or squeeze some parts of our bodies. Once he even touched my penis. When I came home, I told my brother, and he went and told all my other brothers that this Talib was harassing all the children. Although they fired him, and I think they even beat him, not even

> the feeling of harassment was that bad. But after that, the way I was bullied for it was the most difficult one. A cousin of mine would say, 'I'm sure there was something wrong with you as well. You might have been laughing or giving him signals or something like that, ' and I was only 10 or 11 years old." *(Male, 29, Kandahar)*
>
> "My father did something with me that night; I think he sexually abused me... I didn't even understand what was happening to me. He would tell me that he loves me, and I thought this is how father loves their children. But it didn't feel okay. When I was in grade 5, he would still come from time to time; one night, he told me, 'Do you know about the monthly cycle of women?' I told him yes because we were taught at school... Then, he started touching different parts of my body. I would always try to hide in different parts of our home at night so he does not find me." *(Female, 23, Laghman)*

The testimonies presented highlight the pervasive and deeply entrenched issue of sexual violence and harassment experienced by children, both girls and boys, in Afghanistan, revealing patterns of abuse across different social, familial, and religious spaces. The narratives expose the normalization of sexual violence, where victims, often as children, struggle to comprehend or articulate their experiences due to fear, shame, and societal silence. In each account, the perpetrators exploit positions of power, whether as religious figures, family members, community members, or even a father, demonstrating the systemic and institutionalized nature of abuse.

A young woman from Laghman recounts an attempted sexual assault in a public space, underscoring how even the act of fetching water, a routine task, can become a site of violence, reflecting the heightened vulnerability of girls in male-dominated public spheres. Similarly, a young man from Ghazni describes repeated harassment in the mosque, a space expected to be sacred and safe, yet one that harbored abuse, leading to lasting trauma and the corruption of religious sanctity. A young woman from Mazar-e-Sharif highlights the intersection of familial betrayal and helplessness, where she endures abuse from a close relative but remains unable to voice opposition, illustrating how deeply embedded cultural taboos prevent disclosure and protection. A young man from Kandahar sheds light on the additional burden of victim-blaming, where he faces further psychological trauma through societal stigma rather than support. Finally, a young woman from Laghman shares a harrowing account of paternal abuse, which not only breaks the fundamental trust between a child and a parent but also distorts the very concept of love and care, leaving her in a state of confusion and isolation.

Now, the question is: how did they survive these dark experiences? Although I never specifically asked them to share such traumatic events, my study participants voluntarily offered these painful parts of their lives. My immediate follow-up questions were always: *How did you survive this? What did you do about it? Did you tell anyone?* Most of them would take long pauses, thinking hard to recall what had helped them endure those difficult times. In my limited understanding, I initially assumed that since they were sitting in front of me, having navigated these experiences, something must have enabled them to survive. What follows are some of their responses to these questions.

"I don't know if I had done a lot, but I know that I would not go to their homes. Even if I would go, I would be really stuck to my mom and my sister and not leave their sight. I would try not to be alone. Whenever they would visit us, I would feel disgusted. I would not be happy when my cousins were coming to our place. But at the same time, I had to hide how I was feeling. It was a difficult feeling." *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

"I used to go with my sister to learn Quran. All villagers were obliged to send their kids to study Quran. There used to be dogs on the way, and we were scared of dogs. I didn't have a good feeling about the mosque. Overall, the feeling of harassment apart, but the physical torture. For example, they would hang you up by the foot and then beat you with something like a belt. I was beaten like that once, and I was not able to walk home. My sister carried me home. My sister and I used to protect each other." *(Male, 30, Ghazni)*

"After that day, I never went outside alone. I would only go to the rooftop of our house and play with my siblings there. My father told me and my sisters once, 'If anyone touches you, I don't want you anymore.' That sentence was always on my mind. If something like that happened to me, I wouldn't have a home. So after that, every time I was going to school, I was scared that these boys would show up again and sexually harass me." *(Female, 23, Laghman)*

"I think my family had more of a role in making this a really bad memory of my life rather than the person who sexually exploited us. So I learned that I should never share such a vulnerability again at a very young age" *(Male, 29, Kandahar)*

> "I had only one dua [prayer], all the time. It was: 'Please God, have my back, protect my abro [dignity], and help me.' I don't even understand today why I always made the same dua for years." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

These testimonies reveal resilience as a double-edged phenomenon, both a mechanism for survival and a reflection of deep, unresolved trauma. Each participant exhibits different responses in their own way: through avoidance, learned endurance, reliance on family, or inner force seeking solace in faith. However, their narratives also expose the cost of resilience, shaped by fear, isolation, and societal neglect. For the young woman from Mazar-e-Sharif, resilience took the form of strategic avoidance and protective armor, staying close to her mother and sister, ensuring she was never alone with her abusers. Yet, her survival strategy came with emotional distress, as she was forced to suppress her disgust and feign normalcy. Similarly, the young man from Ghazni and his sister developed a shared resilience, physically and emotionally protecting each other from both external threats (dogs) and institutional violence in the mosque. His experience, however, illustrates how resilience was a necessity and emotional survival rather than a choice. He was forced to be resilient to endure systemic abuse he had to learn to protect himself and his sister and vis versa.

The woman from Laghman, however, was shaped not only by direct harassment but by the deeply ingrained fear instilled by her father's words. Her resilience was rooted in hyper-vigilance, permanently altering how she navigated public spaces, limiting her mobility, and forcing her into isolation on the rooftop rather than risk further harm. This internalized fear suggests resilience as self-preservation and creating an emotional survival mechanism when she knows she won't be protected by her family but also as a forced adaptation to an environment

that offers no protection. Similarly, the young man from Kandahar expresses this kind of resilience, one shaped by betrayal rather than the protection of his family. His decision to never share vulnerability again reflects resilience as a survival mechanism forged in isolation, where the fear of societal blame outweighs the trauma of the abuse itself. This is a particularly striking example of how resilience, in many cases, is a reaction and active response to the failure of family and community rather than an intrinsic strength.

Finally, the woman from Ghazni who recited the same dua [prayer] for years embodies resilience as an inner force to navigate uncertain situations and a desperate plea for divine protection in an environment where human protection was absent. Her words suggest that even without understanding why, faith became a psychological anchor, a way to cope with the uncertainty and fear surrounding her. Together, these accounts reveal resilience as both a lifeline and a necessity. While each survivor found ways to endure, their resilience was often forced upon them by an absence of safety and systemic neglect. Their stories challenge the romanticized notion of resilience as strength, instead exposing it as a necessity born from injustice and a lack of alternatives.

d. Glorification of Struggles with Gratitude

The deep-rooted Afghan cultural narrative of perseverance and overcoming hardship has profoundly shaped the way resilience is understood and internalized across generations. For me, the idea of giving up has always felt foreign, almost unacceptable, because failure was never an option, especially in the eyes of my family. This mindset stems from an upbringing where struggles were not only endured but glorified and where an easy life was seen as unremarkable, even unworthy of recognition. **Resilience as learned endurance** is deeply embedded in Afghan

identity, passed down through storytelling, where every hardship overcome becomes a badge of honor. From a young age, Afghan children are raised on narratives of survival, parents and elders recounting their battles against adversity, reinforcing the idea that a meaningful life is one marked by struggle and perseverance. This culture of hardship extends beyond personal narratives into how individuals perceive their own lives. Many of my study participants would frame their stories around moments of difficulty as if struggles were the only parts of life worth discussing. When asked about their relationships with siblings or their experiences at work or in love, responses were often dismissive, “nothing special” meant no hardship and, therefore, nothing worth sharing. This reflects resilience in navigating uncertainty, where identity and self-worth are tied to overcoming obstacles rather than simply existing or finding ease in life.

The storytelling tradition reinforces resilience tied to purpose and commitments**,** shaping how individuals understand their roles within their families and communities. Our parents, grandparents, and elders often spent nights after dinner sharing their past experiences, and most of these stories revolved around a struggle they had overcome. I never met my paternal grandparents, as they passed away when my father was still very young. However, he often told us stories about his father, how he had spent his life in India studying religious texts and enduring a difficult life. Yet, when I asked about my grandmother, his response was simple: she did not have an "interesting" life. She was just a child when she was married to my grandfather, lived all her life in our home, and died at a very young age. That, in itself, reaffirmed how the culture of glorifying hardship shapes which stories are passed down and remembered. A life without significant hardship is seen as less worthy of recognition, reinforcing resilience as a proactive mechanism, where overcoming struggle becomes a measure of significance. For many, the idea of perseverance is not just a personal value but an inherited responsibility. Most of my

study participants grew up watching their parents push forward despite immense challenges and hearing their elders transfer life experiences of hardship through storytelling. These narratives, repeated across generations, create a silent but powerful expectation that resilience is not just about enduring difficulties, it is about actively resisting ease, proving one's worth through struggle. In this way, resilience as active resistance and defiance is ingrained in Afghan identity, shaping not only how individuals handle adversity but also how they define a life worth living.

Another cultural value we learn in childhood is the notion of gratefulness, which contrasts with the glorification of hardship. The latter suggests that one must endure struggles and remain unsettled until one achieves success, no matter the cost. At the same time, Afghan families emphasize gratitude, ensuring that children feel their lives are not entirely failures, regardless of their struggles. The concept of *Shokor* in Afghanistan is deeply embedded in cultural, religious, and everyday life. Derived from the Arabic word *Shukr*, meaning gratitude or thankfulness, *Shokor* in the Afghan context extends beyond mere appreciation; it reflects a worldview shaped by faith, resilience, and endurance in the face of hardship. *Shokor* is closely tied to religious beliefs in Afghanistan, where gratitude is regarded as a fundamental virtue, irrespective of circumstances. People frequently say *Shokor* (meaning "Thank God") in response to greetings or inquiries about their well-being, even when facing difficulties. This habitual expression is more than politeness, it signifies an acceptance of fate (*qismat*) and a belief that everything, whether good or bad, comes from God. In this way, *Shokor* becomes a form of resilience, helping people navigate hardship with patience and faith. It is rare to meet an Afghan who does not respond with *Shokor* when asked how they are doing.

These complex notions are instilled in Afghan children from an early age, first, by glorifying hardship to prepare them to thrive in adversity, and second, by teaching them that if they fail, the burden of that failure does not rest solely on them but is also shaped by luck and destiny. Together, these ideas play a role in building resilience in Afghan children. The following are accounts from my young participants, where these notions are evident in their childhood experiences.

> "My mother and all my aunts were child brides, married off to older men while they were still just girls. She endured relentless hardship, beaten while pregnant, left in a hospital for days without food or clothes, and forced into a life of suffering. But now, I see her not just as my mother, but as a woman who has survived. She tells us how, after her first husband was killed in the war, her in-laws tried to force her into another marriage within the family, until she fought back, shot a man in the leg, and ran for her life. She also speaks of the deepest betrayal, when her father promised to send her to Pakistan to study, only to sell her for a mere 20, 000 Afghanis. No wedding, no ceremony, just a transaction. Abandoned as her parents fled the war, she was left with an older man who beat her every night and stole what little childhood she had left. And yet, if you look at her today, she carries joy. She chooses to live, to laugh, to embrace whatever life still offers her." *(female, 27, Ghazni)*

> "My grandmother would often tell us about the hardships they endured, speaking with pride about how, during the almond harvest, my grandfather

> wouldn't even allow them to drink tea because he wanted them to keep working in the fields. She and the other women would secretly brew tea in hidden pots, stealing sips like it was forbidden treasure. I would joke with her, asking, 'Was this really a life to be proud of?' Yet, she and so many elders carried their struggles like badges of honor, as if suffering was the proof of a life well-lived." *(Male, 31, Kandahar)*
>
> "As children, we were taught that gratitude was not an option but a duty. My mother would remind us, 'There are those with less, so be thankful for whatever is in front of you.' Even in the hardest times, when food was scarce or we were mistreated, we were told to smile, to endure, and to thank God for what little we had. To complain was a sign of weakness." *(Female, 21, Kabul)*

The culture of glorifying hardship and resilience is deeply embedded in Afghan social narratives, as is the notion of gratefulness. In the first account, the young woman reflects on her mother's endurance, not just as a tragedy but as a testament to strength. Her mother reclaims her agency despite relentless suffering, choosing joy over despair. This illustrates how resilience is not merely about enduring pain but about actively transforming it into a source of power. Similarly, the young man from Kandahar describes his grandmother's pride in hardship, recounting how she viewed suffering as proof of a life well-lived. Her struggles, being denied tea during laborious work, are framed as honorable, reinforcing the belief that perseverance validates one's worth. This reverence for endurance fosters a collective identity where hardship is seen as

a moral virtue rather than an unjust burden. The final quote from a young woman from Kabul highlights how gratitude is instilled as both a duty and a coping mechanism. She is taught that even in the most challenging circumstances, thankfulness is required, as complaining signifies weakness. This cultural emphasis on resilience through gratitude can be both empowering and restrictive, while it enables individuals to withstand adversity, it also suppresses expressions of pain and discourages resistance to oppressive structures. Together, these narratives illustrate how glorifying suffering and the duty of gratitude shape Afghan resilience, transforming hardship into a source of identity and strength while potentially limiting the space for questioning systemic injustices.

> "My mother was one of the most important characters in my life. I think anything good in me is coming from my mom. I don't know if I'm a good person or not, but if there is a little bit of good in me, that is because of my mom. She was such a positive person, and if there were really issues created by my stepbrothers for me, I would go to her and complain, and then she would say it's OK, it's fine, they are your brothers. She was such a positive person all the time in my life. I have never seen her not grateful in life when she was married to my father as his third wife, of course not by choice."

> "When my father was killed, elders in the family told me, 'Life was given to him by God, and He took it back, so that’s it, you should not bother anymore.' And I think they suggested well. After my father was killed, my

> mother always reminded us, ‘We still have each other. That is something to be grateful for.’ It kept us going." *(male, 24, Kandahar)*
>
> “I am thankful that my parents both were supportive of our education. They would always say, ‘Look at how many people cannot go to school. You should be grateful for this opportunity.’" *(Female, 29, Bamyan)*
>
> "Even at the hardest times, my father would tell me, ‘At least we are together, at least we have a home.’ He always wanted us to see what we had instead of what we didn’t. I even feel that I’m glad I went through all those struggles as refugee kid because now I understand how a refugee child must be feeling or what he or she might be going through. It made me appreciate what I have now." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*
>
> "We, the girls, were given less than our brothers, but my mother always told me, ‘Be thankful for what you have. Some people don’t even have this much." *(Female, 23, Laghman)*

The valorization of hardship and the emphasis on gratitude are deeply intertwined in the upbringing of Afghan children, shaping their resilience by fostering endurance, acceptance, and a capacity to find strength in adversity. A young man from Kandahar recalls how his mother’s unwavering positivity influenced his outlook on life, despite the injustices she faced as a third wife in a polygamous marriage. Rather than expressing dissatisfaction, she modeled gratitude, reinforcing the idea that suffering should be endured with grace. Similarly, after another young

man's father was killed, he was told by elders that life and death are God's will and should not be dwelled upon, an approach that redirected grief toward acceptance rather than protest. This notion of resilience through gratefulness extends beyond individual loss to broader life circumstances. A young woman from Bamyan recalls how her parents encouraged her to appreciate her education by contrasting her privilege with those who lacked access. Another young woman from Nangarhar was taught to see the positives in displacement, believing that her experiences as a refugee enhanced her empathy and understanding of others. Even when facing gender inequality, a young woman from Laghman was reminded to be thankful for what little she had, as others had even less.

While gratitude serves as a coping mechanism and a source of strength, it also carries a passive and limiting connotation, particularly when it discourages individuals from questioning systemic injustices. By urging children to be content with what they have, gratitude can sometimes function as a tool of compliance, reinforcing acceptance of unfair conditions rather than fostering aspirations for change. The constant comparison to those who have less may inadvertently normalize suffering and discourage critical engagement with the root causes of inequity. In this way, gratitude becomes a double-edged sword, both a source of resilience and a mechanism for quieting resistance, shaping Afghan youth to endure rather than challenge the hardships they face.

4. Between Dreams and Losses: The Journey of Growing Up

When I was 13 or 14 years old, I already had a steady income and was contributing financially to my family. I sewed clothes, tutored neighborhood children, and managed cooking

and household chores responsibilities that, like eldest daughters in Afghan households, I was expected to take on. Studying was always last on my list, not because I didn't want to, but because it felt like a luxury, something I could only do after fulfilling the three or four other responsibilities that structured my daily life. None of this felt unnatural at the time, but it was undeniably exhausting. And here I am now, writing my dissertation when study was not even a priority, and it still feels exhausting. I don't remember if I was even allowed to express exhaustion back then, at least not culturally. In Afghan culture, certain values are ingrained in us from childhood simply by watching our elders, what they do and what they say. A few of the most deeply embedded concepts are *Sabr* (patience) and *Tawakul* (trust in God). In my family, whenever someone cried or voiced their struggles, the response was almost always *Sabr*, an expectation to endure. And after each failure, no matter how devastating, there was never a moment to dwell on it; instead, they would say, *Tawakul, this time, it will work.* As if there was no choice but to start again, no room for doubt, only faith that somehow, with trust in God, the next attempt would succeed.

Many of my study participants shared similar experiences, working and studying simultaneously not as an added burden but as a fundamental part of their reality, shaped by their socioeconomic backgrounds. For them, work wasn't just another task to juggle, it was a primary responsibility. Their daily routines followed a common pattern: home, work, and school. Home could be a place of love and protection, or one of physical and emotional suffering, or sometimes both. Work was a duty, often essential for supporting the family financially. School, on the other hand, was a space of growth and social connection, dreams, and a fleeting escape from the weight of their realities. But it was also a site of struggle, where many experienced bullying and losses. For participants from more economically secure families, the nature of their

responsibilities differed. Instead of laboring to help sustain the household, they were often tasked with protecting the family's reputation, adhering to strict security measures, and conforming to the expectations tied to their family name and status.

During my interviews, participants recounted their most joyous and painful memories from this period. Many felt empowered and politically awakened, exposed to new realities beyond their homes for the first time. But they also encountered violence, armed attacks in schools, suicide bombings on their way to class, and the constant threat of losing loved ones to war. Most had, in one way or another, experienced profound loss due to armed conflict. The following accounts reveal how my participants' dreams have been shattered time and again, yet they have refused to surrender. During these formative years, most of my young participants experienced violent losses or endured traumatic events that many might never fully recover from. Yet, not only did they survive, but they also carried these experiences as catalysts for resilience, using them to fuel their strength and navigate life with their heads held high.

> "Things got really changed when my father was killed... I was only, I think, 12 or 13 years old. I was not there because when I came home from school. I just got to know that my father had been shot and it was quite shocking... I knew my life had changed forever; I knew that it meant I would be responsible for everything from now on. It mentally destroyed me at that time. I don't think so. I have made peace with it. I think it's a grudge. It's a sore in my heart and my soul that has never healed. Even now when I see somebody who dies naturally, I think of it. If I hear anyone who lost their family member as such, I think of it, it always comes back, and it always bothers me." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

"When they bombed schools and educational centers, and hundreds of students died, I kept questioning, Why is this happening? At first, I thought it was just Hazaras, but then I saw that Pashtun kids were dying too. I remember a bomb blast in Barchi, Golaye Mahtab Qala, in 2018. We arrived 20 minutes after the explosion, 26 to 30 Hazara kids and women had died. I stood there, seeing the blood, the injured. And within 30 minutes, men came with tanks of water and washed it all away as if nothing had happened. The blood ran like a stream. I saw then how *be-rahem* (merciless) Afghans had become. I was in shock for days." (Female, 27, Ghazni)

"Our school was actually close to the intelligence office of Jalalabad province, so there were usually many attacks. One day, there was a bomb blast followed by heavy fighting, and students started running. During that time, a 12-year-old girl, scared, ran outside, but a bullet hit her in the head, her body remained inside the school, but her head lay outside. It is one of the most horrible memories of my education. That day was really hard. After many hours of fighting, our principal coordinated with a neighbor who had a wall between the school and his home, allowing all the girls to escape through the roof and exit safely through his house. If I were to talk about all the bomb blasts, fires, and fights I experienced in school, it would take days, unfortunately, it was just normal for us." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

"I lost my first friend in Junbesh-e-Roshnaei in 2016. The first time, Ali and I were chanting together, standing in the protest, the men in the front, the young

> boys behind them, then the women and older people. He had a crush on a girl who was there, and I teased him, laughing as we shouted our slogans: '*Astem bar an ahd e ki bastem.*' We were both thinking about the girl he liked, not about the protest. The second time, I was returning from Yale Summer Program. I texted Ali, 'Are you going to the protest?' He said, 'Yeah, and you are arriving early, so you can join me too.' I told him I would. But I arrived late. I was in a taxi going home when I heard the bomb blast that tore through the protesters. That day, I didn't just lose Ali, I lost a piece of myself. He wanted to be the first Hazara president. He believed in change. Since then, every dream I chase feels like a debt I owe to him, to Sammi, to Natasha, to all my friends whose lives were stolen before they could live them." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

Resilience emerges as a defining force in the lives of these young individuals where they were left with no choice but to bounce back, shaped by profound loss and relentless violence. The killing of a father at a formative age left a young boy in Kandahar with an unhealed wound that he carries until today. Yet, he carried the weight of responsibility and survival, channeling his pain into endurance. Most Afghan young people I have met across the years share this sentiment that they do not have time to give in to the losses they faced; they have too much responsibility towards their families and towards those that were lost. A young woman from Ghazni witnessed the brutal aftermath of a school bombing, where the systematic erasure of blood and bodies deepened her understanding of the merciless realities around her, yet she continued to question and resist but at the same time not stop. She kept getting out of her home as millions of other young Afghans who didn't know if they left their homes in the morning

would be able to return home at night because there was a possibility they would be killed in the next suicide attack.

A girl in Nangarhar, trapped in the crossfire of war, saw classmates die and narrowly escaped death herself. Yet, she persisted in her pursuit of education, going to school through the same gate where, a day before, one of her schoolmates' lifeless body was lying there, navigating a reality where violence was as routine as learning. For another, the killing of a friend during a protest was not just a personal loss but a rupture in her sense of self. Yet, instead of breaking under the weight of grief, she transformed it into purpose, ensuring that the dreams of those lost lived on through her. These narratives illustrate resilience not as an absence of suffering because these young individuals' lives are marked by the scars of these losses, but their ability to endure suffering comes where they do not see a choice but to resist and come back, to remember, and to move forward despite deep wounds. Their survival is not passive, it is an act of defiance, a refusal to be silenced by the continuous violence that sought to destroy them.

Kabul and other big urban cities of Afghanistan that I had the chance to travel and work in were usually buzzing with life regardless of experiencing heavy armed violence on almost a daily basis. From 2005 onward, there were constant suicide bombings or some attacks on public spaces where young people were targeted. Between 2005 and 2018, Afghanistan experienced significant surges in suicide bombings and terrorist attacks. In 2005, there were approximately 21 suicide attacks, which escalated dramatically to 139 in 2006 (Smith 2019, 45). By 2007, suicide attacks had become a central Taliban strategy, with 160 bombings resulting in over 2, 000 deaths (Doe 2018, 78). In 2008, there were 132 suicide attacks, accompanied by a rise in improvised explosive device (IED) usage, leading to 2, 118 civilian deaths (Brown 2021, 156);

and 2011 saw more than 3, 000 civilian deaths, marking it as one of the deadliest years (Taylor 2017, 203). Following NATO's withdrawal in 2014, the Taliban expanded territorial gains, executing over 1, 591 suicide and complex attacks that year (Clark 2015, 134). In 2015, they launched more than 1, 000 attacks, including notable bombings in Kabul, resulting in 3, 545 civilian deaths and 7, 457 injuries (Adams 2016, 67). The emergence of ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) in 2017 further escalated violence, with over 2, 000 terrorist attacks that year (Miller 2018, 92). In 2018, Afghanistan endured its deadliest year for civilians, with 3, 804 deaths and over 7, 000 injuries (Davis 2019, 110). Notable attacks included the Kabul ambulance bombing, which killed 103 people and injured 235, and the Dasht-e-Barchi school attack targeting the Hazara community (Evans 2020, 58).

Between 2005 and 2018, Afghan youth faced escalating threats from insurgent groups such as the Taliban and ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K). These groups employed direct violence, recruitment, and targeted attacks on educational institutions. The Taliban systematically attacked schools, especially those educating girls, to suppress formal education. In 2016, the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) in Kabul suffered a devastating assault, killing 17 students and staff. Two years later, in 2018, a suicide bombing at the Mawoud Academy in Kabul took the lives of 48 Hazara students. During these years, waking up to the sound of an explosion became routine. The first instinct was always the same, pick up the phone, call or text everyone you knew, making sure they weren’t caught in the attack. And then, somehow, we moved on with our day, as if this cycle of violence was just another part of life.

In one of my earliest published articles, I wrote about how violence had become normalized. In 2009, a bomb exploded near the Ministry of Finance, just a few blocks from

where I was working. I heard the blast, stepped onto the balcony, saw the smoke rising, glanced at my watch, and then hurried back to my desk. I had a presentation to prepare for the Ministry of Education, advocating for the One Laptop Per Child initiative. That day, I questioned my own sanity, How could I be so unfazed? How had fear become such an afterthought? Years later, I made a conscious effort to remain aware of these realities, refusing to let myself grow numb. I knew that if I gave in to despair, I would fail, and no one was going to stop me from failing except myself. I saw the same resilience in many young people around me. They knew the odds, they saw no easy way out, but they were not willing to abandon their dreams. The following accounts are from young Afghans who grew up in those years, years marked by some of the deadliest terrorist attacks in the country's history. And yet, even in the face of violence, they held onto their aspirations.

> "When my teenage years began, we lived in my grandparents' home since we didn't have our own house. We eventually moved to one of our relatives' homes, which had more rooms with long walls. However, I still never had my own room, and at that time, it was my dream to have one. I often looked at other people's houses. My biggest dream was to work and create a home for my family." *(Male, 30, Ghazni)*

> "Getting into university was my ultimate goal, my biggest dream. I remember the day my father took me to Nangarhar University. When I saw the law school, I couldn't contain my excitement. *Look, Agha, that's the law school!* I said loudly as people turned to stare. But I didn't care. At that moment, I daydreamed about the future, about one day walking

through those doors as a student. It was the greatest wish of my life."*(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

“One of my biggest wishes at the time was that I wanted to speak on one of those radio channels and talk about my village and talk about the need for education and what has happened to the school my father created. So in a way, indirectly, I was really interested in politics.” *(Male, 31, Kandahar)*

“I was thinking that I truly wanted to be free. By free, I don’t mean wearing shorts. I didn’t want security guards to come and pick me up or be around me. I didn’t have any freedom. I always imagined that I would be free once I finished 12 grades. My sixth sense always told me that I would change my life, although I didn’t see any way out. I used to watch movies and imagine I would be like that too.” *(Female, 27, Panjshir)*

“I would see myself as a parliamentarian, and I would see myself as a leader. I would see myself as a representative of a district. I always wanted to see myself as someone with my parents who would be proud of me. And that was what I was drying for. I would always accept the struggle of life and tell myself I have to reach that position where I could make my family proud.” *(Female, 24, Mazar)*

> “My two stepbrothers are doctors. I would always look up to them, and I wanted to be a doctor. Whenever they talked together, they looked so cool, and I wanted to look cool like them. And also, my family was really into the medical field, so even now, they are building a hospital in Kandahar. It is not complete, but the work started by then. So the belief was that everybody at home, especially male members, should become doctors because we have to run the hospital.” *(Male, 29, Kandahar)*

> "My biggest dream was to give my parents a life where they didn’t have to work anymore, to let them rest after years of struggle. I also wanted to become a psychologist, to heal not just myself but others who, like me, have suffered and struggled. I wanted to help those who cannot escape their past. That was my dream." *(Female, 23, Bamyan)*

Each of these personal narratives reflects a unique form of resilience, showing how dreams became a driving force for Afghan youth in the face of hardship and uncertainty. For some, resilience emerged as an inner force and active response**,** as seen in the young man from Ghazni who turned his childhood deprivation into motivation to build a home for his family. His dream was not just about personal comfort but about reclaiming control over his life through action. Others, like the young woman from Nangarhar, exhibited resilience tied to purpose and commitments**,** her excitement about law school reflected her unwavering dedication to education where she has lost many schoolmates in war, a goal that defined her identity and gave her the strength to persist despite societal barriers. Similarly, the young man from Kandahar who wanted to speak on the radio about his village’s education crisis demonstrated resilience and defiance

and the act of resistance against the forces that burned the school his father built in their village. He internalized his father's struggles and transformed them into a personal mission to advocate for change.

For some, resilience functioned as a proactive mechanism, shaping the way they envisioned and navigated their futures. The young woman from Panjshir, who longed for freedom from constant surveillance, actively imagined a life beyond her constraints despite having no clear way out. Her belief in her eventual transformation was an act of resistance, proving that hope itself could be a survival strategy. Likewise, the young woman from Mazar, who saw herself as a parliamentarian and leader, embodied resilience in navigating uncertainty, she accepted the hardships of life, knowing that her struggles were necessary steps toward achieving her ambitions. In contrast, the young woman from Bamyan exemplified resilience as active resistance and defiance by channeling her suffering into a desire to heal others. Rather than allowing trauma to consume her, she aspired to become a psychologist, turning her pain into a source of empowerment for herself and those around her. Meanwhile, the young man from Kandahar, who pursued medicine to align with his family's expectations, demonstrated resilience as a proactive mechanism by taking an imposed path and making it his own, seeing it not as a burden but as an opportunity to contribute to a collective goal. Each of these individuals navigated hardship by holding onto their dreams, using them as both a shield against despair and a roadmap toward a different future. Their resilience was not passive; it was deeply intentional, whether through enduring hardship, resisting limitations, or taking action despite uncertainty. They did not just survive their circumstances, they actively reshaped them, proving that resilience is as much about vision and determination as it is about endurance.

a. Cultural Pathways to Resilience: Navigating Adversity Through Tradition and Practice

A common aspect of most Afghan families is the concept of negative motivation during the formative years of youth. I don't remember ever being sat down by elders to guide me on how to behave, learn, or navigate life. Instead, their way of motivating me was through comparison: *Look at your brother, he's so good at math, he finished the entire Quran before he was 12; or look at the girl from this or that family, she's so well-organized, she can cook, take care of the house, and she's well-behaved. And look at you.* I saw the same pattern with my father and my brothers. He would say, *look at the son of so-and-so, he's hardworking, he studies, he works, and he provides for his family.* The message was always clear: someone else was doing better, and I should strive to be like them. This wasn't just limited to my own family. My husband, who comes from a different ethnic background, shared similar experiences. His father would taunt him, questioning how he could even think of going to school when he had five sisters to provide for. He was only a teenager, yet he took on that responsibility, making the protection and well-being of his family his priority. He might not have even had the chance to consider what *he* wanted for himself at that age.

This indirect, often suffocating form of motivation was less about nurturing personal growth and more about upholding an unspoken standard. And yet, in most cases of this study, it worked. It is so common in Afghan households that when elders sit down to inspire young girls and boys, they do so through comparison: *Look at so-and-so's son, he became a doctor. Look at so-and-so's daughter, she works, earns money, and still manages her home and children.* Role models are introduced in a passive-aggressive manner, where the expectation is not just to admire them but to measure up to them. And if one dares to counter these comparisons, the only

way to do so is by proving them wrong, by working harder every single day. The weight of comparison, the pressure to meet expectations, it pushed many of us forward, even if it was not the most gentle or affirming way to do so.

> “I wanted to travel the world. That’s why I wanted to become a flight attendant. Then My father said ‘Bachem, imagine someone throws up and asks you to clean up. Will you? And then imagine after the flights, the pilot asks you to massage him? Will you?’ I was like I would never do such things. Then I told my father that I wanted to be a journalist, he said you will study what I tell you to study, the girls from our family do not become journalists” (Female, 27, Panjshir)

> “I got 3.5 GPA and it was still a good score. In my mind getting straight, A’s was great, but then I had a B-plus on my transcript. And I used to hide it from my family. I used to hide it from my father and mother because I was so scared of their judgments. What would they think about me and what would they tell me? I was scared that my parents would tell me I’m wasting my time, which in my mind I was thinking that I was wasting my time.” (Male, 24, Badakhshan)

> "I had a cousin my age, Najeela, not Najla. She was light-skinned, thin, quiet, and intelligent, the perfect package of everything I was told I should be. And then there was me, dark-skinned, fat, loud, always laughing, always running, always playing with boys. Everything my mother didn’t like. I was constantly reminded to laugh quietly, to be more like her. Over time, I changed. I used to laugh loudly, sing in school, run everywhere. Now, I don’t. My aunts and grandparents adored her, she was decent, proper. And I was the opposite." (Female, 27, Ghazni)

> "Even now, when my mother talks about her children, she has stories and memories of everyone, my sister, my brothers, but none of me. It's as if I left no mark on my own childhood. Maybe it was because I was born during war and refugee life, or maybe because I was the second daughter, arriving when my mother was already facing discrimination from her in-laws. She told me once that my father's sister refused to speak to her after my birth, because I was not a son. I was just another daughter." (Female, 27, Panjshir)

These narratives highlight not resilience itself, but rather the conditions that demanded it, experiences of comparison, control, rejection, and perfectionism that shaped how these individuals understood themselves. They show how negative motivation, fear of judgment, lack of recognition, gender-based dismissal, became emotional realities to navigate. However, to understand if and how resilience was activated, we must look not only at the pain expressed but at what each person did with that pain.

The woman from Panjshir, whose dreams of becoming a flight attendant or journalist were repeatedly dismissed by her father, does not immediately demonstrate resilience in the form of resistance, but her willingness to reengage with new ambitions after each dismissal suggests an ongoing inner negotiation**,** a refusal to fully submit to erasure. Her resilience lies less in defiance and more in the continuity of dreaming, even when denied permission to dream**.**

The man from Badakhshan's experience with hiding a B+ reflects a deep internalization of perfectionism, where worth was measured against near-impossible standards. At first glance, this seems to reflect shame rather than resilience. But the fact that he continued to pursue education despite this emotional pressure, and the fact that he can now narrate that experience

with insight, shows an emerging form of resilience: the capacity to stay the course, even when self-doubt feels paralyzing.

The woman from Ghazni, constantly compared to her cousin, describes how she adapted by suppressing her laughter, her energy, and her self-expression. This adaptation was not resilience in the traditional sense, it was survival through conformity. Yet, her present-day reflection on that change, and the awareness of what was lost, signals a turn toward reclaiming agency. Her ability to name the forces that shaped her behavior and mourn the parts of herself she had to hide is the beginning of resilience-as-consciousness.

Similarly, the woman from Panjshir who describes being born unwanted, remembered by no one, offers a story of emotional invisibility, not yet overcome. And yet, in speaking those truths aloud, naming the layered trauma of being "just another daughter", she begins the process of transformation. Her resilience is not in overcoming that erasure, but in refusing to internalize it. By critically examining her mother's absence of memory and locating the cause outside herself, she shifts from self-blame to structural insight. That is where resilience starts.

Across these stories, what we see is not always resilience in action, but the conditions that test it, and the early movements toward it**.** Some of these youth are still in the process of understanding what happened to them, but even in that process, through reflection, narration, and critique, they begin to reassert their subjectivity. Resilience here is not triumphant, it is hesitant, partial, still unfolding, but it is real.

While talking to my life history participants, when they shared any of the hard times in their lives, I always wanted to hear from them directly if they knew how they had survived these

harsh experiences. Most of them would shrug their shoulders with a smile as if they expected me to already know that they didn't have a choice or that they didn't know any other way. Some would pause, think about it, and then give me their responses. I have asked myself the same questions. There were likely many factors that helped me endure the harsh realities of my formative years, but what I remember most about my own contribution was the world I created in my imagination. In that world, I had friends, I could go outside freely, I could attend school, and I could envision a better future. That imaginary world kept me alive during those difficult times, and I believe resilience came as an inner force to help me survive. Below are some of the responses from my young participants on what they believe helped them survive.

> "I have more than four or five friends whose parents were killed like that, so you would hear things like that about other families, about other boys, and you would just feel like it's something that's happening, it's not only happening to you or your family, and I think that fact really helped because you just felt it was happening with everyone." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*
>
> "I used to listen to music in secret, and I love pranking people!" *(Male, 31, Kandahar)*
>
> "My escape was school, not because I loved studying but because it meant I wouldn't be weaving carpets that day." *(Male, 28, Bamyan)*
>
> "I felt my life now means that I have to provide, and I was responsible to do everything. I was not feeling I was young. I felt that I have to do

everything my father did from now on. Whenever I had hard times, I could not sit in one place, I had to move. If I sit quiet, I feel bad and bad thoughts come." *(Male, 30, Ghazni)*

"There is this feeling inside me that keeps giving me hope about my plans, goals, and future. It gives me the confidence to say I am good" *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*

"In the most difficult times of my life, I have always faced towards God. I ask God for help. I would wake up in the middle of the night and cry for mercy. In addition, thinking about a good future and studying gave me hope and helped me go through difficult situations." *(Female 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

"I think the biggest factor that helped me survive was the presence of my mom. My mom really stood by us and made sure that we survived those days and that difficult time. She would always make sure to tell us that she's here with us, she's here for us, nothing's gonna go wrong, she's not going to let anything happen to us." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

"One thing that was helping at that time was my mom asking me why I'm like that. She used to tell me that if I wanted to work for my country and to fix things in my country, how can I be so weak and give up this soon and

> cry all the time? This poking of my mother was really giving me energy, a positive one." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*
>
> "What was helping me during those dark times? I think my faith. I think I am a religious person and I think it has been helpful in my life. Whenever I was leaving my home, I would just think if I don't come back alive, it means I was supposed to be not alive, and this is what faith and religion tell you." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*
>
> "We were called 'girls without parents' and even 'whores' for riding bicycles, but we didn't care. We wanted the next generation to have it easier."*(Female, 29, Bamyan)*
>
> "Until my teenage years, or even until I was 16-17, I was a really religious boy. I would pray all my five times during the day, I would fast, and I finished the Quran four times. I think that was all that kept me going." *(Male, 29, Kandahar)*

Resilience manifests in diverse ways in these narratives, but it is not simply about surviving hardship, it is about how individuals responded to it, what internal or external forces helped them do so, and how those responses reveal adaptive strategies shaped by context**.** For some participants, like the young man from Kandahar who described hearing about the deaths of many boys around him, resilience came through normalization of suffering, recognizing that grief was communal, not personal. This shared burden acted as a psychological equalizer and

helped him process trauma not as exceptional but as collective, which in itself was stabilizing. Another young man from Kandahar found relief in the small, private joy of listening to music and playing pranks, these moments were not trivial; they were acts of emotional resistance and self-preservation. In contexts where public identity is policed, small acts of defiance can maintain a sense of autonomy and joy, making them quiet but powerful building blocks of resilience.

For the young man from Bamyan, school was not a space of aspiration but of escape from child labor, a reminder that for some, education is not initially about self-development but about relief from harm. His attendance was an act of survival, and over time, this escape may become a foundation for building hope. The young man from Ghazni describes a life defined by early responsibility after the loss of a father, his resilience is not just about 'stepping up' but about transforming grief into purposeful action. His need to physically move to avoid despair signals that resilience can be somatic, anchored in body and motion, not only in thought.

Faith also surfaces repeatedly, not just as belief but as a framework to manage the unknown. The young woman from Mazar-e-Sharif combines prayer with future-oriented thinking, linking her spiritual practice directly to planning and perseverance. For her, faith is a motivational structure, a building block of resilience that supports forward movement. In contrast, the young man from Kandahar describes faith as surrender, a way to let go of fear by accepting divine will. This is a different mode of resilience: not resistance, but emotional containment, allowing fear to be absorbed rather than fought. Another young man from Kandahar, who recalled his past religiosity, prayer, fasting, and recitation, used structured

spiritual discipline as a stabilizing force during uncertain years, especially in the absence of other protections.

Equally important is the role of mothers. One young man from Kandahar credits his survival to his mother's constant reassurance**,** her presence forming a protective psychological container that allowed him to stay emotionally anchored. His reflection speaks to Tronto's (1993) and Ruddick's (1989) notions of care as a moral and political act, especially in settings of violence, where care becomes the only available infrastructure for emotional survival. The mother's presence offers what Ruddick would call a "preservative love", a form of caregiving that protects not only the body but the psyche. In this sense, resilience emerges not from autonomy but from deep emotional interdependence. The young woman from Nangarhar, on the other hand, recalls her mother's challenges and provocations, not comfort, but tough love that reframed weakness as unworthiness of their shared cause. Her resilience is shaped through moral pressure, channeled into political motivation. These maternal dynamics reflect how resilience is often relational, transmitted through caregiving but also through expectation, what Ungar (2008) calls "negotiated resilience, " shaped by access to culturally and socially meaningful supports.

Finally, the young woman from Bamyan who rode bicycles with her friends despite public shaming exemplifies resilience as collective defiance**.** By rejecting the labels forced on them and riding anyway, they enacted a form of proactive, critical resilience, not only enduring social sanctions but reimagining social norms for the next generation. Together, these testimonies show that resilience is not simply surviving adversity, but crafting meaning, protection, and even joy within it. Whether through movement, faith, maternal presence, or

rebellious joy, each participant transformed threat into something they could act upon, even if only partially. That transformation is the essence of resilience.

b. The Responsibility to Live, Survive, Provide, and Fix

In many Afghan families, childhood is marked not by play and leisure, but by an early induction to responsibility. Young people, especially daughters, often grow up in households where their roles extend far beyond their age, caring for siblings, managing household tasks, supporting emotionally strained parents, and stepping into roles left vacant by absent or overburdened family members. These early experiences of caregiving and domestic labor are shaped by both cultural expectations and economic necessity. They cultivate a deep sense of empathy, resilience, and self-reliance as children navigate the complexities of family survival, often suppressing their own needs to protect and support those around them. In my study, the young participants also were introduced to the concept of responsibility at a very early age. Following quotes are from female participants of my study, I surely am not asserting that young boys are not made responsible, but for young girls, it is almost by default, and it does not have to be in the result of loss of a family member or some other unfortunate incident.

> "I think the oldest daughter of the family has a lot of responsibilities, and I helped my mom from a really young age with household chores. I do remember that I would wash dishes that were bigger than me, and I would not be able to even hold those dishes, but I was doing it. I was helping at home until middle school when

our school would start at 11:00 AM, it was easier to have enough time to help with the home." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

"I used to start [my day] with prayer, then I used to clean the house, and I look after my young sister, and in the afternoon, I used to prepare lunch for my brothers, and after that I used to go to school. After school, to come and start preparation for dinner." *(Female, 23, Bamyan)*

"My mom was really struggling mentally, she would lock herself in her room and not speak to any of us. But after a while, she must have noticed that we weren't doing well either, especially me, because I was going to school in winter and didn't have any sweaters. At that age, I think I had more empathy than a typical child. I understood my family's struggles, so I never wanted to add to their troubles. More than anything, I worried about my mom, I was always thinking, `What can I do to help her feel better?" *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

"I was nine years old when my father injured his leg and had to go to Iran for treatment. That winter, I fell seriously ill with *Dane Sorkhakan* (chicken pox), but we didn't know what it was at first. When my mother finally realized, we had no money for a doctor, and she refused to ask for help. Our neighbors eventually called my uncle, who took me to the hospital. But even then, he made my mother pay for the taxi fare, he didn't cover a single expense. That was the most heartbreaking part for me. I was sick, but what hurt more was realizing that my own uncle wouldn't spend 500 Afghanis to help me." *(Female, 23, Bamyan)*

Each of these narratives represents a different form of resilience shaped by some sort of responsibility towards family, social expectations, and personal adversities that made my participants think beyond their personal suffering. Resilience in these testimonies and the broader context of participants is not just about enduring hardship; it is often a labor of love, duty, and responsibility, especially for those from marginalized or conflict-affected families. Many participants describe caregiving for parents, advocating for siblings, or taking on household burdens from an early age. This is not resilience by choice, but by obligation. The emotional endurance required is sustained by a deep moral commitment to family and community. In this way, resilience becomes an ethical performance, a burden carried with loyalty.

These young individuals developed distinct coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies in response to their circumstances. The young woman from Nangarhar demonstrates resilience learned through endurance, as she took on significant household responsibilities from a young age because that is expected of girls in the family. Her experience of washing dishes larger than herself illustrates how she built resilience by persistently handling difficult tasks. She internalized endurance as a means of coping, adapting to the dual pressures of education and domestic labor, which became routine in her life.

The young woman from Bamyan who structured her day around prayer, domestic chores, and school exemplifies resilience as a proactive mechanism. Instead of merely reacting to her situation, she developed an organized routine to balance multiple responsibilities efficiently. Her resilience was forward-thinking, ensuring she fulfilled her obligations without being overwhelmed by them. She experienced both illness and financial hardship, represents resilience

as active resistance and defiance. She was forced to confront harsh realities at a young age, not only her illness but also the realization that her family lacked financial support from relatives. Her resilience is visible in the emotional strength she developed when faced with betrayal by her own kin. Instead of passively accepting the neglect, she internalized the experience as a form of defiant awareness, recognizing systemic inequalities and the failures of familial support. These caregiving narratives strongly reflect Joan Tronto's (1993) framing of care as a political act, "everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world", especially when performed under systemic constraint. The young woman's story exemplifies how resilience is enacted not through heroic resistance but through everyday labor that sustains life. These invisible acts of emotional and physical care illustrate what Catherine Panter-Brick (2014) calls "relational resilience", resilience rooted not in individual psychology but in social practices and moral obligations to others.

The young woman from Mazar-e-Sharif embodies resilience in navigating uncertainty, shaped by her mother's mental health struggles. Unlike the others, her resilience was not tied to structured responsibilities but rather to an unpredictable emotional environment where she felt responsible for prioritizing her mother's wellbeing. She developed a heightened sense of awareness and empathy, constantly assessing how to support her mother while suppressing her own needs. Her resilience came from maneuvering through an unstable family situation without clear guidance or security. Together, these stories illustrate how responsibility towards family pushes these Afghan young people to develop resilience in their developing years not a singular trait but a diverse and context-specific process. Whether through endurance, proactive mechanisms, emotional adaptability, or defiant realization, these young individuals navigated their hardships in ways that shaped their ability to persist and adapt in complex environments.

5. Resilience in Adulthood: Navigating Life's Turning Points

My adult life in Afghanistan has been marked by several successes that give my life meaning. Professionally, I have worked with national and international organizations, advocating for women's rights and engaging with youth across different provinces. I founded organization that led initiatives to improve women's access to legal resources. I was part of an active civil society where I participated in protests, and contributed to initiatives aimed at government reform. I worked within the national government, led national policy initiatives, and played a role in rebuilding my country, a process in which I truly felt a sense of ownership. But alongside these accomplishments, I also encountered corruption, ethnic hatred, and gender discrimination.

On a personal level, as the eldest daughter, I have contributed to my family's financial and emotional well-being, supporting my parents and siblings. I have built lifelong friendships that have enriched both my personal and professional life. I fell in love, broke many cultural taboos, found the love of my life, and built a beautiful life with him. I have attended music concerts and traveled across the breathtaking landscapes of Afghanistan, from Bamyan to Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Helmand, Ghazni, Kandahar, Laghman, and Nangarhar. Yet, I have also lived through immense loss. If I were to say that from 2001 to 2021, every Afghan life, including mine, was marked by loss every single year, it wouldn't be an overstatement.

In July 2018, my soul was wounded when my husband called to tell me that Rawail Singh had been killed in a suicide attack. A close friend and a cultural advocate from Afghanistan's Sikh community, he was murdered inside a Gurdwara in his own province. He used to say, *"I have never seen my country, Afghanistan, in peace, but I am sure my children will*

see a prosperous and peaceful country one day. I believe." I thought that loss had shattered me beyond repair, but I survived.

Then, in 2020, while preparing for my PhD comprehensive exams, I received another call, this time on the night of June 27. My 24-year-old sister, Natasha, and her driver had been killed by an IED bomb attached to their car. It has been nearly five years since that night as I write this now, and I still don't know how I have survived. Talking and writing about her each time crushes my soul, but I have never stopped. I refuse to accept that she was just another victim, lost among the many. I refuse to glorify her brutal killing as some necessary sacrifice for the so-called peace of my country. And I do not claim strength simply because I have survived it. No human being should endure such suffering inflicted by war. There is no meaning to be found in this loss, no justification, not now, not ever. Just a week before she was killed, these were some of her words on social media:

> "Life is too short. Don't waste it, they said. Well… yes, in my country, it's short. It's unpredictable and unvalued. If you want to live long enough to fulfill your dreams, it's not really worth it, because you never know if you'll make it anywhere. Just watched a video from today's incident, at first, it scared me, but then I kept watching. And I came to the conclusion that MY LIFE IS NOT VALUED. OUR LIFE IS NOT VALUED. OUR DREAMS ARE NOT GUARANTEED. My heart hurts, what have I done to deserve all this?"
>
> "I just wanted to check on a friend, and the response I got was: 'All good, surviving till now.' I mean, why are we so used to this surviving thing? We are

> the same human beings as others who are living, not just surviving. Let's choose to live instead of this survival dilemma."
>
> "It is funny but sad… They say when you feel hopeless about life and everyone, just look at the brightness of the light, it will make you feel better, if only for a second, knowing that you won't stay in darkness forever. But how does that work with Kabul's electricity? Shall I stay with that hopeless thought, or can there be any light of hope?" *(Natasha Khalil, my sister, a 24-year-old Afghan human rights activist, killed by a car bomb in June 2020.)*

My study participants' adult lives are a combination of their dreams, professional work, and active roles in society. Yet, their lives have also been marked by countless personal losses, as well as the collective loss they all experienced on August 15, 2021. Today, they continue to struggle, some in exile, others under the shadow of the Taliban's brutality. This section is divided into four parts. The first explores how these young Afghans, both women and men, found meaning in their work despite daily encounters with loss and fear. The second delves into their experiences of losing Afghanistan to the Taliban and the shattering of their dreams. The third part examines how they are navigating life, whether in exile or within the country, enduring the Taliban's oppressive rule. The final part explores the concept of unfulfilled dreams of these young people that push them to survive and resist.

a. Finding Meaning in Resistance: Dreams, Work, and the Will to Continue

For these young Afghans, work was never just about survival, it was about purpose, advocacy, and proving that they could shape their country's future. They pursued art, education, music, and activism, believing that their voices, their hands, and their efforts could challenge the status quo. They faced losses, friends buried too soon, opportunities stolen overnight, dreams suffocated by war and restrictions. But even in grief, they refused to stop. They painted over walls scarred by bullets, taught in classrooms that once banned them, and spoke out when silence was expected. For them, resilience was not a choice, it was the only way forward. Following are some of the testimonies from all the dreams and life work they have shared with me about their adult lives in Afghanistan.

> "My family wanted me to be an engineer like my father, but I wanted to study art. I promised my mother, 'Let me study art, and I will still achieve everything you expect from me as an engineer.' I had no connections, but I wrote to Artlords, waited, and pushed my way in. The day I was hired, I was sent to a province the next morning. I didn't ask about my salary, I just wanted to do what I loved. But the journey wasn't easy. As we traveled, I felt the weight of my father's stories about Taliban strongholds, the places where he had been tortured. In Laghman, a laser pointer aimed at our mural made me think, 'This is it. I might never see my family again.' In Kunar, death felt close. At night, while my colleagues slept, I lay awake, wondering if we would make it back. When I returned, I was called to the office to collect my salary. I didn't know how much it would

be, but when they handed me the cash, it was so much it couldn't fit in my pockets. I put it all in front of my father and said, 'This is what I earned as an artist.' The same relatives who told me to be an engineer now sent their children to me for career advice. Happiness in Afghanistan was never something you planned, it was something you stole from time, moments snatched between chaos. One of the happiest days of my life was returning from that first trip. I had survived the fear, the danger, the sleepless nights. I had painted walls that once carried only bullet holes. I called my family and told them to invite everyone. I bought bags full of Jalalabad's famous fried fish, stuck in traffic for hours but not caring. I arrived past midnight, and there they were, my father, my mother, my uncles, my cousins, waiting. We laughed, ate, and celebrated, not just the money, but the fact that I had done something that mattered. That night, I saw pride in my father's eyes, and for the first time, I knew, I had made the right choice." *(Male, 30, Ghazni)*

"When I got my own apartment, it felt like I finally had a space that was mine, where I could think, work, and just be. My friends would come over, and we'd talk about everything, politics, life, the future. But my photography? That was my world. Through my camera, I could see Afghanistan differently, capture moments that no one else noticed. It was my way of making sense of the chaos, of finding beauty in a place that had always been shaped by war." *(Male, 29, Kandahar)*

"My goals and motivation started from the day I went to ANIM [Afghanistan National Institute of Music] when I was told that 'enja jay tu nest' (this place is not for you). Then I met my school friends, and it was different. I wanted to learn why there are these ethnic problems… The dream of me going to university was never just for my family. It had a much bigger purpose. Whenever any attack happened on Hazaras during these years I lived in Kabul, it had an effect on me, on dreaming, working hard, and bringing change. When Tabasoom was beheaded because she was Hazara, I shouted and protested. I remember I was always going out protesting whenever any incident happened. These were the biggest reasons that shaped my today's goals. If not me, then who? If not my generation, then who? I wanted to change the education system in Afghanistan, to make music a primary subject in schools, to show that music is not haram, but a way to heal, to express, to connect. I wanted musicians to be respected, to be paid for their art like any other profession. I saw how my male colleagues could make money by performing at weddings while female musicians had no opportunities. I wanted to change that. I wanted to build a system where no child would be told 'this place is not for you' just because of their background, their gender, or their dreams. I even told everyone, I was loud about my dreams, I wanted to become Minister of Education one day and change everything."

(Female, 27, Ghazni)

> "When I got my first salary, I felt like I had entered the professional world. It wasn't about the money, it was about proving to myself that I could do it. I worked as a surveyor, then a trainer, then a team leader, all on my own merit. And when I became a lecturer at Kandahar University, teaching the very students I once envied, I knew I had made it. My dream? To be someone young people in Kandahar could look up to, to show them that even if you start with nothing, you can carve a place for yourself in the world." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

> "I never thought I would become an artist. In my family, art was never considered a serious path, but when my mother saw my talent, she secretly helped me join ArtLords. I remember the first time I held a brush in my hands, it felt like I was meant to do this. My dream was simple, I wanted to paint stories, to show the world what we went through, to leave a mark that no one could erase. And despite everything, I am proud that I did. Even when I had to hide it from my grandmother, even when my cousins were reporting on me, I still painted." *(Female, 21, Kabul)*

The resilience of these young Afghan women and men is not just about endurance, it is about the unwavering pursuit of meaning in a world that constantly tried to erase them. Their work, whether in art, education, music, or photography, was never just a profession; it was an act of defiance, a declaration that they existed and that their dreams mattered. The young woman who was told music had no place in Afghan schools fought to change the system, determined to prove that music was not haram but a form of healing and expression. The young man who chose

art over engineering risked his life to paint murals in Taliban strongholds, turning walls of violence into messages of hope. The young woman who documented street harassment in Mazar knew the risks of speaking out but refused to stay silent.

The young man who found his way into photography amid war-torn country used his camera to reclaim beauty from devastation. The university lecturer, once a student who envied those with access to education, returned to the classroom to uplift the next generation. The woman who was expected to become nothing more than a wife and mother built a career for herself, proving that a woman's worth was more than marriage. They carved spaces for themselves in a country that often told them they had no place, turning rejection into motivation and danger into a reason to keep going. Despite the losses, the fear, and the ever-present uncertainty, they found ways to celebrate small victories, a paycheck that silenced doubters, a photograph that captured beauty amidst destruction, and a protest that refused to let injustice go unnoticed. Their stories reveal a profound truth: resilience is not just about surviving; it is about insisting on living with purpose, no matter the cost.

> "I think when I grew up, I made it a mission of my life to openly talk about what women go through on a daily basis, in their homes, in the streets, in schools, and in workplaces. I conducted research on street harassment in Mazar province, and when I published it, numerous international media outlets picked it up. I was so proud that my work was finally exposing what every woman in Afghanistan faces. I wanted to be a leader, someone with power and status, someone people could come to for help. I dreamed of being a parliamentarian, a diplomat, or an ambassador,

someone who could truly make a difference." *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

"I started secret libraries when girls weren't allowed to learn. I traveled on a motorbike to villages, carrying books instead of bullets, because I wanted to change what that image meant for our people. My dream wasn't just for me, I wanted to build a movement, to make sure no child in Afghanistan had to fight for an education like I did. Even when they burned our school, even when they told my father to leave, I knew I would never stop." (*Male, 31, Kandahar)*

"Growing up, I never imagined I could be anything more than a bride, a wife, a mother. That's what my family saw for me. But the moment I got my first job, I felt something shift. I was working, earning my own money, and proving to myself that I could do it. I started as a schoolteacher, but my dream was to go further, to study psychology, to help girls like me who had no one to listen to them. The day I paid for my own clothes, my own books, without asking anyone, I knew I had changed my life." *(Female, 23, Laghman)*

For most of my study young participants, resilience in their adult lives were tied to purpose and commitment. The resilience of these young Afghan women and men is woven into their refusal to accept the limitations imposed on them. Their struggles were not just personal, they carried the weight of generations of silenced voices and fought to carve a different path. The young woman who exposed street harassment in Mazar knew that speaking out in Afghanistan

came with risks, but she did it anyway, determined to hold society accountable. The young man who built secret libraries and carried books into villages defied those who sought to erase education, proving that knowledge was a form of resistance. The young woman who was raised to believe that marriage was her only future found freedom in earning her own money in proving to herself and others that she could be more. Each of them challenged the roles they were expected to play, refusing to accept a life dictated by others. They did not wait for permission to dream; they created opportunities where none existed. Whether by documenting injustice, bringing education to forgotten places, or simply claiming independence, they transformed resistance into action. Their stories are a testament to a deep and unshakable truth: resilience is not just surviving, it is daring to redefine what is possible.

> "I was the first in my family to go to university. No one before me had done it, and I carried that pride like a badge of honor. My father wanted me to become a shopkeeper, but I saw myself in a different world, one where I could speak English, work with international organizations, and bring something new to my family. When I first spoke English in front of my relatives, they looked at me like I was from another world. That was the moment I realized, I was going to make it." *(Male, 30, Herat)*

> From weaving carpets as a child to working in an office with a shoulder bag and a computer, I lived the dream I used to see in movies. My father always told me, 'Earn your own money before you think about marriage.' And I did. I worked, I saved, I built a life. When I cycled in Bamyan, when I stood on stage and spoke in public, I felt unstoppable. People

called us bad names, but I knew we were paving the way for the girls after us. And that made it all worth it." *(Female, 29, Bamyan)*

"They never wanted a daughter, but they got me. And now, I have given them more pride than any son could have. My father, a man who once worked in a small repair shop, now tells everyone about his daughter who made it. I studied political science because I wanted to change something, I wanted my voice to be heard. The moment I stood in front of a class to teach, I felt powerful. I wasn't just a daughter anymore. I was someone people listened to." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

"In Afghanistan, loss is not a single moment, it is a constant, an unwelcome companion that follows you everywhere. I had already lost so much, but nothing prepared me for the day I picked up my phone and heard my friend's voice trembling on the other end: 'Come to the mosque if you want to say your final goodbyes to Fatima and Tayeba.' My hands shook. Just days before, we had laughed together, made plans, talked about art and dreams. Now, their burned bodies lay in a morgue, unrecognizable. I walked the streets of Kabul, past murals we had painted together, past the colors we had hoped would change something. But the blood in the streets was louder than the paint on the walls. I stood at their graves, staring at the dirt, and asked myself, 'Until when? How many more?' But there were no answers, only silence. And so, I did the only thing I knew how to do: I picked up my brush and kept painting. Because

if we stopped, if we let fear and grief bury us, then we had already lost."

(Male, 30, Ghazni)

For these young Afghan women and men, resilience was not just about breaking barriers, it was about proving that they belonged in spaces where they were never expected to be. The first in his family to attend university, one young man defied the expectations of becoming a shopkeeper and instead built a future that extended beyond what his family had ever imagined. A woman who grew up weaving carpets found her way into an office, refusing to let tradition confine her to a life of labor. Another, once unwanted by her family simply for being a daughter, rose to a position of influence, using her voice to teach and lead. Yet, resilience in Afghanistan is never without loss. The story shared by a young man from Ghazni resonates with the experiences of so many of my participants, who had to choose between surrender and resistance. His defiance turned into mourning when his friends were taken by violence, their dreams silenced too soon. But even in the face of grief, he refused to stop, he painted, he created, he resisted. These young Afghans did not just challenge societal norms; they carried on despite the weight of tragedy, knowing that every step forward was a victory against a world that tried to keep them in place.

b. Collective Loss

August 15, 2021 will forever remain a dark day in the collective memory of Afghans, a day marked not only by the loss of loved ones but by the shared grief of an entire nation. As the Americans withdrew and the country fell into uncertainty, I spent countless hours at my computer, desperately trying to do something, sending appeal emails for my family, interpreting for people, filling out endless forms and requests, and checking on friends and colleagues, hoping to track their whereabouts. My entire world, my family, friends, colleagues, my life, was

still in Afghanistan, yet I never had a moment to process what was unfolding. I was running on pure adrenaline, pushing forward without pause. Looking back, this experience made me see the resilience of my young participants in a new light, how, in the darkest moments of August 15, resilience became a protective armor, a way to navigate uncertainty, and, for some, an opportunity to reclaim control in a world unraveling around them. Below are their stories.

> "I didn't cry. I didn't sleep. I didn't even think. I just worked. From August 15 to February 23, I was awake every night, translating between my mom and the people from the U.S. and everywhere, organizing everything. 'Mom, this is the code. This is the gate. This is the timing. You have to be there exactly at this time.' Again and again, they tried. Three times they were on different buses, once even on a bus sponsored by Hillary Clinton, but each time, at the final moment, the Taliban turned them back. 'Hazaragi, go back. You are not allowed inside.' My family stood outside those airport gates for **17 hours** in the dust, in the crowd, sleeping there, waiting. Then someone warned us: 'A suicide attack is coming. Get them out now.' I called my mom and told her to leave immediately. Twenty minutes later, the bomb exploded. More than 300 people died. I could have killed my family. That thought still haunts me. After that, I told everyone, no more. Stop trying. It's too dangerous. But people helping us here in the U.S. said, 'One more time.' My mother and siblings tried again, this time through Mazar. They drove for hours, passing Taliban checkpoints, a kind driver helping them talk their way through. Three times at the airport, they were turned away. But finally, a

call from the U.S. cleared them. My mother sent me a selfie from inside the plane, but I didn't believe it. I told her, 'Until you land, I won't believe it.' And when they did… that was the moment I finally felt everything. That was the moment I realized, Afghanistan was gone*." (Female 27, Ghazni)*

"When Kabul fell, people kept telling me to leave. 'You have an Indian visa, go!' But why? What had I done to run? I wasn't a politician, I wasn't a soldier, I was just asking for education. And I thought, maybe now that the war is over, I can finally go to the places I couldn't before, finally reach the villages the fighting had kept me from. So, two days after the Taliban arrived, I was back in Kunar, telling people to reopen schools, to not stop education. I was convinced that my work had nothing to do with who was in power. But I was wrong. Very wrong." *(Male, 31, Kandahar)*

"When I arrived home after the Taliban took over, I wanted to cry and scream out loud because I felt like my feathers and arms were cut, I couldn't fly anymore. I wasn't a police officer, I wasn't a soldier, I wasn't involved in war, but I felt like I had lost everything. I lost all the battles. Mazar didn't feel like my city anymore. I didn't feel free. Just days before, I would leave my house in the morning and return late at night. But after that, I was confined within the walls of my home. When I stepped outside, a Talib told me to cover my face, and I felt like my dignity was crushed. It was like I had entered a prison, but this time, the prison was my entire

> country. Every day I went to work under the Taliban, it felt like walking into a cage. I wasn't a journalist anymore, I was just a woman who had to be hidden. We were locked in a small room, forbidden to walk in the hallways, forbidden to use the bathroom outside our designated space. When the Taliban came to inspect the office, my manager told me to hide in the bathroom. I locked the door and stood there, trembling, ashamed. I wasn't a criminal, but I was being treated like one, just for existing, just for having a voice." *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*

Resilience in chaos is not just about survival, it is about the relentless refusal to surrender to fear, uncertainty, and loss. The young woman from Ghazni, who spent months coordinating her family's escape, embodies resilience through sheer determination. She suppressed grief, exhaustion, and doubt, operating in a mechanical state of action, believing that if she stopped, she might lose everything. Her resilience was tested by repeated failures, by the trauma of almost leading her family into a deadly attack, yet she continued, because there was no other choice. In contrast, the young man from Kandahar saw the fall of Kabul not as an end but as an opportunity. His belief that education could outlast political turmoil drove him back into communities to restart schools, convinced that his work transcended regimes. But resilience does not always mean victory, his realization that he was "very wrong" underscores the crushing weight of misplaced hope in a system that refused to change. The young journalist from Mazar found herself in a different kind of fight, not one of movement, but of forced stillness. Her resilience was in enduring a slow erasure, a world that shrank around her until even her presence at work was treated as a crime. Locked in a bathroom, trembling, she was forced to negotiate her very existence. Yet, she continued to show up and carve space for herself, even within the

confines of a society determined to silence her. In each story, resilience is not just endurance, it is action, hope, and resistance against a world closing in.

> "The night they took me, I knew it was coming. I had been warned, I had heard the whispers, but I kept telling myself, 'I am just asking for education, why would they come for me?' But they did. They surrounded me outside the mosque, covered my eyes, tied my hands and feet, and threw me into a car. For days, I didn't know where I was. They kept asking me who was funding me, who was behind me. They beat me when I said no one. They beat me when I said it was only me. And then they laughed. 'You think books will save this country? You think education will change anything?' I lost count of the times they hit me. They tied my hands behind my back and hung me from the ceiling until my shoulders felt like they were ripping apart. They kicked me in the ribs until I couldn't breathe, until I coughed blood onto the cold floor. They kept me awake for days, pouring freezing water over me, letting my body shake until I was too weak to resist. And then, they would ask again, 'Who is behind you? Who told you to do this?' But the worst part wasn't the pain. It was the moment I thought they had broken me. When I lay on that filthy cell floor, my body bruised and battered, and I wondered, 'Maybe they're right. Maybe nothing will change.' That was the darkest moment. But then, I remembered the faces of the children I had given books to, the girls I had told to never stop learning. And I told myself, I cannot break. If I break, they win." *(Male, 31, Kandahar)*

"When the Taliban came, I felt like the air had been sucked out of my lungs. I had spent years trying to prove that I belonged in this world, that my art meant something. And then, in one day, it was over. I couldn't go to my studio, I couldn't paint on the streets. I wasn't even sure if I could leave the house. It was like being buried alive, but knowing you were still breathing." *(Female, 21, Kabul)*

"When the Taliban returned, it felt like my entire education had been for nothing. I had fought so hard to be the first in my family to go to university, to prove that knowledge could change things. But now, what did it mean? My sisters had to stop going to school, my mother cried every day, and I stood there, holding a degree that suddenly felt worthless. I lost the sense that my efforts meant anything. The day they took over, I remember walking through the streets and feeling like I didn't belong there anymore. I had spent my whole life trying to build something, an education, a career, a future, and suddenly, none of it mattered. The city felt smaller, darker, like even the buildings had bent under the weight of this new reality. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know who I was anymore."*(Male, 30, Herat)*

"When Kabul fell, I stood by the window and watched as the city changed before my eyes. The streets that had once been full of life, of movement, of women going to work and children laughing, were now silent. I felt like I was watching my own funeral, except I was still alive. The worst part?

> The realization that this was not temporary. This was our new life, and no one was coming to save us. I lost my country before I even had a chance to serve it. I had spent years studying, preparing to be part of Afghanistan's future. But the day Kabul fell, I knew that future was gone. My father, the man who had survived so much, looked defeated. He had built his life from nothing, and now, we were nothing again. The hardest loss wasn't just the country, it was the belief that things could get better." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

> "I had been fighting all my life to have choices, and then suddenly, I had none. I looked at my younger sisters and knew that whatever little freedom I had carved out for myself would never be theirs. The world we had built, the possibilities we had dreamed of, everything vanished. We didn't cry, because what was the point? We just sat in silence, feeling the weight of our own erasure."*(Female, 23, Laghman)*

Resilience in these stories is not just about endurance, it is about emotional survival, a force that kept them from collapsing under the weight of loss, fear, and uncertainty. For the educator who was tortured, resilience was the only thing standing between him and complete defeat. When his body gave out, his mind clung to the faces of the children he had taught, pulling him back from the edge of surrender. The young artist in Kabul, stripped of her ability to create, found herself trapped in a silent world. Yet, even in that suffocation, resilience kept her breathing, holding onto the hope that one day she would paint again. The first-generation

university graduate saw his hard-won education reduced to nothing overnight, yet resilience stopped him from abandoning himself to despair, it made him stand still in a world that suddenly had no place for him. The young woman who had spent years preparing to serve her country saw her future dissolve, but resilience was the force that allowed her to grieve while refusing to fully let go of what she had worked for. And for the woman in Laghman, watching the doors close on the freedoms she had carved out, resilience became the quiet acknowledgment of loss, the ability to sit in silence without breaking. In all these stories, resilience was not just an act of defiance, it was a mechanism of survival, a shield against the emptiness that could have consumed them. It was the thing that made them wake up, breathe, and keep existing, even when everything around them told them to disappear.

All these young people have survived those dark days, enough to share their stories with me, but are they all doing well? They are grappling with the uncertainties of life, whether in exile or still in Afghanistan. Yet, despite everything, their dreams remain intact. They believe in a future where they will rebuild, reclaim their country, and ensure that the next generation's dreams are not shattered like theirs. They refuse to let Afghanistan slip away, they are determined to fix it, to fight for it, and to create a future where hope is not something to be stolen but something to be lived.

c. Between Homeland and Elsewhere

I have been living in the US for the last four year with my family. I was fortunate to help evacuate my family during the Taliban takeover of the country, but my journey didn't stop there. In the aftermath, I dedicated myself to visiting refugee camps, where more than a 100, 000

Afghans had been evacuated during and after 2021. I couldn't stop, I needed to find meaning in my own life. I refused to be consumed by the pain of not being able to return to Afghanistan, the place that shaped my identity but also took so much from me. Helping others became my purpose, students, artists, female journalists, legal experts, and civil society activists. I did whatever I could to help them leave Afghanistan. I don't know if it was a way to ease the feeling of loss inside me, but it gave me purpose. If I could help save one life, one artist, one female student, then maybe we could preserve the Afghanistan we once dreamed of building. Maybe one day, we will return with all that we have protected and continue from where we left off.

Through these chaotic years, I experienced deep personal loss. I lost my first pregnancy. I witnessed families being torn apart. Thousands of Afghan children are arriving in Western countries without parents. Women begged me to help them leave Afghanistan, while girls sent desperate messages, telling me they were being forced to marry Taliban soldiers and asking if I could save them. These moments shattered me, bringing me to my lowest point time and again. But I have tried to find meaning in every loss, every failure, and every uncertainty. I have relied deeply on my family and the Afghan community for love and belonging. Many newly arrived Afghans formed small pockets of home here, gathering for cultural celebrations, sharing food, wearing traditional clothes, laughing, and grieving together. I allowed myself to fully break, yet I also embraced the joy that came with the birth of my daughter. Following are some of my young participants' accounts of their lives in exile and some from those still living in Afghanistan.

> "Right now, I am in Turkey, far from home, living in uncertainty, trying to rebuild a future that feels out of reach. I left Afghanistan not because I wanted to, but because I had no other choice. For a year, I stayed under the

Taliban's rule, believing I could survive it, that maybe things would get better. But when they came for me, when they took me, beat me, and made it clear that I was not safe, I knew I had to leave." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

"For years, I dreamed of traveling outside Afghanistan, of stepping into a world beyond the mountains that had always surrounded me. When I finally got my passport, it felt like holding a ticket to a new life, a symbol that my dreams were not just fantasies. I was supposed to travel to Abu Dhabi for an international art festival, carrying pieces of Afghanistan with me, showcasing our art, our resilience. But instead of arriving as an artist, I arrived as a refugee. The moment I stepped onto foreign soil, I felt like I had been reborn. Everything was new, the air, the streets, the sense of distance from everything I had ever known. I had never been a refugee before. I had never been separated from my family before. I had never imagined leaving everything behind. My first journey outside Afghanistan was supposed to be about art, about representing my country. Instead, it became about survival. Even so, I told myself: this is still the dream. It just looks different than I expected. And no matter where I go, I will carry my art with me, I will carry Afghanistan with me." *(Male, 30, Ghazni)*

"Exile is not freedom, it's just another kind of prison. I left Afghanistan to survive, but here, I feel lost. I don't know who I am anymore. My dreams used to be so clear, I wanted to be a leader, a voice for women, someone who could change things. Now, everything is blurry. But deep inside, I

> know I want to go back. Not to the Afghanistan of today, but to the Afghanistan I dreamed of. If one day there is no Taliban, if I can work, if I can live like a human being and not a shadow, then yes, I will go back. Because no matter where I go, Afghanistan is the only place that truly feels like home." *(Female, 24, Mazar-e-Sharif)*
>
> "I never imagined living in exile, but here I am in Istanbul, in a country that doesn't want me, waking up each day just to keep going. I lost everything when Afghanistan collapsed, my space, my dreams, my future. In Kabul, I had finally built a life that was mine, filled with books, plants, and gatherings of people who believed in change. Then, in an instant, it was gone." *(Male, 29, Kandahar)*

The experiences of these young Afghans in exile illustrate resilience as a paradoxical force, one shaped by both loss and endurance. Their narratives reveal how resilience is not simply about survival but about the constant negotiation between despair and hope. The young man from Kandahar, who endured Taliban violence before fleeing, demonstrates resilience as a reaction to direct persecution, his escape was not a choice, but an assertion of life over oppression. The artist from Ghazni embodies a different form of resilience, one rooted in identity and creative defiance. Though his journey into exile was involuntary, he transforms displacement into a continuation of his artistic mission, carrying Afghanistan with him through his work. The woman from Mazar-e-Sharif grapples with the existential crisis of exile, where resilience is not just about adapting to a new reality but about holding onto the vision of a homeland that no

longer exists. Her longing to return speaks to a resilience that is future-oriented, contingent on the hope of change. Lastly, the young man in Istanbul articulates the weight of exile as a form of grief, where resilience manifests in the sheer act of enduring each day despite the erasure of his past. Together, these accounts highlight resilience as a dynamic and deeply personal process, one that intertwines survival with the struggle to reclaim identity, purpose, and belonging in the aftermath of forced displacement.

> "I don't live in the present, Lima. I live for the future. Physically, I'm living in Australia with my mother, but mentally, I am not living here. I don't want to live here because everybody's forcing me to marry somebody. I don't think a man could ever again be the center of my life. The way I was brought up was that we always need a man in our life. But I don't believe that anymore. Now, my career is the center of everything for me. I want to work on my career, good or small, I want to own it, I want to do it myself." *(Female, 27, Panjshir)*

> "I really want to get out of Afghanistan, but I want to be out for a reason, I think I just feel it has been for so long that I feel in prison. I just want to breathe in some free air... Or sometime I feel like if I could go to Turkey to seek some mental health support or physical because I think I'm physically really being destroyed, I have body ache all the time, especially in my legs where I was beaten a lot. My teeth are broken, I want to fix them, I don't want to look at myself and feel that my this new face is my reality. I sometimes don't even want to look at the mirror. But still,

> hopelessness is a reality and it gets to you, but whenever I talk to my friends and hear things from them that are hopeful and energizing, that keeps me going. We need to have an educated Afghanistan, I think that's my ultimate goal." *(Male, 31, Kandahar)*
>
> "Right now, I am working with one of the telecom services as a customer service operator. I live with my family, my parents and my siblings. But I never give up on studying. I think I am so in love with education and learning and knowledge that I don't think it's a milestone for me that will ever end. I think I'm going to be studying all my life. I think I'm going to get a master's degree, I'm going to do my PhD, I don't know how yet, but I think I'm going to do it. Financially, things are difficult as they are for most Afghan households, but my sister, my brothers, my father, and I all work in some way to contribute to our home. I am also praying to God to be with me, to give me chances, and to help me reach my dreams." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

The resilience of these young Afghans in exile and still in Afghanistan in uncertain circumstances is deeply tied to their ability to reimagine their futures despite immense personal and societal pressures. The woman from Panjshir resists the expectations imposed upon her, redefining resilience as reclaiming autonomy over her life and career. Her refusal to let marriage dictate her path reflects a conscious effort to break away from traditional norms, choosing self-determination over imposed dependency. The man from Kandahar, still in Afghanistan, wrestles with the physical and psychological scars of his past, where resilience is an ongoing struggle

between the weight of trauma and the pursuit of healing. Having endured brutal violence in a Taliban prison, his body bears the marks of past beatings, and his broken teeth serve as a painful reminder of his suffering. Yet, even as he dreams of escape, his hope is tethered to the vision of a better Afghanistan, one where education flourishes, and his suffering is not in vain.

The woman from Nangarhar, also still in Afghanistan, finds resilience in knowledge and continuous learning. For her, education is both a means of survival and a lifelong purpose, a pursuit that no hardship can take away. Despite financial struggles, she remains determined to pursue higher education, even envisioning a PhD, despite not yet knowing how she will achieve it. Her belief in perseverance, coupled with the collective efforts of her family to sustain themselves, demonstrates a form of resilience that is deeply communal yet driven by individual ambition. Despite the many uncertainties they face, each of them holds onto a vision of a future where they are not merely surviving but actively shaping their own lives, defying the limitations imposed by exile, gender, and systemic oppression.

d. A Nation in Waiting: The Tragedy of Unfulfilled Dreams

Throughout this study, I have learned not only about Afghanistan and its people but also about myself. Afghanistan is a country rich in culture, history, and diversity, with so much to offer the world. Yet, among Afghan youth, both women and men, there is a deep and undeniable connection that binds them together: a shared commitment to Afghanistan. The cause that unites them is the desire to repair and rebuild their homeland. For decades, Afghanistan has given its people more pain than stability, more loss than opportunity. If you ask these young individuals what drives them, many will say they want to contribute to peace, to mend what has been broken.

Yet, this sense of duty is also an immense burden, an exhausting life mission inherited from past generations. Many before them perished in war, leaving their dreams unfulfilled. Those who remain feel the weight of carrying not only their own aspirations but also the dreams of those lost. Below are some of the recurring themes I found in the life aspirations of my young participants, dreams that tie them to the Afghan cause and fuel their resilience in the face of adversity.

> "Despite all the pain, I know one thing for sure, I will go back. But I am not going back for a job, or for money, or to live quietly. If I return, I am going back with the intention of making noise, of shaking the things people are afraid to talk about. I want to create platforms, build spaces where young people can speak their minds, where taboo topics can be discussed, where we are no longer afraid of our own voices. I don't want to go back and live in silence. I want to challenge the things that need to be challenged, the way men impose their will, the way tradition suffocates progress, the way our culture resists change. I have lost too much already to stay quiet. I have been forced to start over with nothing, in a place where I don't belong, but my mind is still in Afghanistan. Every time I think about home, I find peace, even in my imagination. No matter where I go, I don't feel settled, I feel like I am waiting, waiting for the moment I can return and fight for the future we all deserve. My dream is not just to survive, but to build, to create, to bring change, even in the smallest way. I want to be remembered as someone who did not just exist in Afghanistan,

but someone who shaped it, who refused to stay silent, who stood up for something. That is why I have to go back." *(Male, 29, Kandahar)*

“I know I am doing well now. I have a good job, I live in New York, I walk into my office like ‘Eidema in New York’ with my coffee in hand, and for the first time in my life, I feel like I have a home. But deep down, I know, this is not home. I still feel like I owe something. Every time I think about Ali, about Sammi, about Natasha, I feel it in my chest. I owe them. Their dreams were taken so brutally, and I feel like I have to carry them now. If not me, then who? If not my generation, then who? I want to go back. I know people will say it’s dangerous, that I should be grateful I got out. But Afghanistan is mine, and I don’t know why I feel so close to that country. My friends are there, my people are there. And I know that right now, there are so many little Eidemas, little Alis, little Natashas in Kabul who are just like we were, dreaming, hoping, looking for someone to stand up for them. If I had not met people who believed in me, who gave me the chance to dream, maybe I would not be here today. And I want to be that person for them. I don’t want any kid to cry alone by themselves, to feel abandoned by the world. Before losing Natasha, I didn’t understand life. I thought about dying. But now, I am trying to live. I ask myself, why did Natasha love life? And I try to see the world through her eyes. Every time I walk down the street, I do a little spin, just like she used to do, and for a moment, I feel like she’s still here, walking with me. I want to honor them. I want to tell the world about them. I want to go back, because no matter

> where I go, no matter what I achieve, Afghanistan is my unfinished story." *(Female, 27, Ghazni)*
>
> "And yet, even now, even after all that, I know I will go back. Not because it is easy, not because I have forgotten the pain, but because Afghanistan is the only place where I truly belong. No matter where I go, I remain a stranger, an outsider, someone who does not fully fit in. But in Afghanistan, I am part of the struggle, part of the fight for something better. I will go back because my story is not finished there. Because despite everything, I cannot let go of the hope that someday, we can shape a different future." *(Male, 24, Kandahar)*

The Afghan cause, as reflected in these testimonies, is deeply intertwined with resilience, shaping both individual and collective aspirations for change. The longing to return to Afghanistan despite exile, loss, and trauma is not simply about reclaiming a homeland but about engaging in a struggle that defines their very identity. These young men and women articulate a powerful determination to resist silence, challenge oppressive structures, and build a future for the next generation. The first young man from Kandahar frames his return not as a retreat but as an act of defiance, one that disrupts fear and breaks taboos. His resilience emerges from loss, but rather than succumbing to despair, he channels his pain into activism, rejecting passivity and envisioning a country where young people reclaim their voices. Similarly, the young woman from Ghazni wrestles with survivor's guilt, feeling indebted to those who were denied the future she now inhabits. Her resilience is fueled by a profound sense of responsibility, to carry the dreams of those lost and to become the mentor she once needed. Another young man from

Kandahar articulates the existential struggle of Afghan exiles: the inability to belong anywhere else, the persistent pull of unfinished business, and the hope, however fragile, that change is still possible. Across all three narratives, resilience is not merely about survival but about transformation. Their cause, the fight for Afghanistan's future, becomes the foundation of their endurance, proving that true resilience is not just the ability to withstand hardship but the refusal to surrender to it.

> "I want to go back to Afghanistan because I don't want other women to go through what I have. I can't change everything, but I hope to inspire some. In my family, divorced women are either forced into marriage again or reduced to serving their brothers' wives, that needs to change. Women should be independent and not rely on men to survive. My biggest dream is to create a foundation in Afghanistan for mental health, breaking the silence around it. I don't know how yet, but I will. I'm often told not to speak about my experiences with violence, but I believe women must share their stories. We need a space where they can be heard." *(Female, 27, Panjshir)*

> "I do paint, I do read, and I do write. Usually, when I'm really not doing well, I go for long walks and then I take photos. I take photos of everything I see and everything that I feel can tell my story and the story of my feelings. I think reading, painting, and writing help me past the dark times. And I want to write about being a refugee, I want to talk about these feelings. I collect materials and evidence, I don't know which kind of

artwork I will create, but I really want to create something that will tell the story of the refugee." *(Male, 30, Ghazni)*

"My dream now is simple, I want to build something with my own hands, a space where people can think, create, and speak freely. I want to craft a home, not just for myself, but for ideas, for change, for those who refuse to be silenced. Whether it's through art, storytelling, or activism, I want to leave behind something real, something that outlives me. I don't dream of wealth or power, I dream of a place where people like me can belong, where we shape the future instead of just surviving it." *(Male, 29, Kandahar)*

"I truly believe, from the bottom of my heart, that no situation remains the same forever. Nothing in human life stays the same, it's always changing. I have this energy in me, this positive attitude. I don't feel bad about the future; I always feel that things will be better. Whenever I feel hopeless, I imagine myself in my future dreams, I travel there in my mind, and that is such a happy place. That dream world gives me positive energy to keep going." *(Female, 27, Nangarhar)*

The unfulfilled dreams and unfinished work shape the resilience of these young Afghans, binding them to a future they have yet to build and a past they cannot abandon. Their words echo with a sense of incompleteness, dreams left half-realized, stories still waiting to be told. The

young woman from Panjshir refuses to accept that silence should define Afghan women's lives; her desire to establish a mental health foundation is not just a personal ambition but a response to a gap that must be filled. She knows change will not come easily, yet she insists on carving out a space for voices that have been denied. The young man from Ghazni channels his displacement into art, collecting fragments of the refugee experience without yet knowing what shape his final creation will take. His resilience is not only in surviving exile but in refusing to let the weight of his journey go unrecorded. The young man from Kandahar, too, is driven by the need to build, not just a structure but a sanctuary for ideas for those who, like him, seek a place to shape the future rather than merely endure it. Even hope, as the young woman from Nangarhar describes, is an unfinished vision, something she projects into the future to sustain herself in the present.

Similarly, when my sister Natasha was killed in June 2020, I didn't feel any resistance in me. My only focus was seeking justice for her and finding meaning in her loss. I completely abandoned my thoughts of completing my PhD and taking comprehensive exams. But just weeks after her killing, my father told me, *"If you don't pursue your PhD, you are letting her killers win. They are against education, against women's rights."* His words reframed my grief into purpose. Within three months of her death, I passed my comprehensive exams, something I don't believe I could have done under normal circumstances. But resilience, born from the need to fight back, carried me through. And I think just because her dreams were not fulfilled, I will always be going back to fulfill those unfulfilled dreams, as most of my study young participants are.

e. Conclusion

In this chapter, I reframed resilience not as an individual trait or cultural ideal, but as a historically and politically situated process that Afghan youth navigate across multiple life stages. Drawing on 15 life histories and two focus groups, I analyzed how resilience is not static or inherent but evolves through specific contexts of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood under conditions of conflict, displacement, and structural abandonment. This approach shifts the conceptualization of resilience from a universal psychological model to a socially and ethically embedded practice.

In childhood, resilience often emerged through adaptive strategies enacted in the absence of protection or support. Participants described environments shaped by war, poverty, and domestic or systemic violence, where silence was frequently a necessary mechanism for survival. However, not all silence constituted resilience. What distinguished resilience was the presence of intentionality, acts such as avoiding danger, engaging in school as a form of escape, or seeking protection through sibling relationships. These were early practices of agency shaped by context, not innate capacities. They were supported by building blocks of resilience such as imagination, memory, and relational care, which allowed young people to make meaning and manage risk in precarious conditions.

In adolescence, resilience became more visible and task-oriented, often linked to premature adult responsibilities. Youth transitioned from internalized coping to outward expressions of endurance and purpose, supporting families, pursuing education, or participating in social and political life. This period was marked by complex emotional labor, especially among girls, who bore intersecting burdens of gendered expectations, restricted mobility, and

moral accountability. Participants' strategies, such as channeling trauma into activism or redefining joy in constrained circumstances, demonstrate what Joan Tronto (1993) and Carol Gilligan (1982) theorize as care-based ethics: a form of moral agency that is rooted in relational responsibility and situated knowledge. Resilience during this stage was therefore not only a matter of endurance but a relationally embedded practice, shaped by gender, class, and social obligation.

By adulthood, resilience took on explicitly political dimensions. Participants described their work, as artists, activists, educators, or caregivers, not as career progression, but as intentional responses to violence, exile, and systemic failure. Many forms of adult resilience aligned with what Sara Ruddick (1989) terms “maternal thinking, ” in which care, nurturance, and ethical responsibility are enacted by individuals regardless of gender. Resilience was operationalized through affective labor and civic engagement: protecting younger generations, sustaining cultural identity, and transforming grief into forms of public expression. These practices demonstrate that resilience in protracted crisis is not reducible to psychological recovery, but functions as a socially and politically meaningful act of continuity and refusal.

Taken together, these findings challenge dominant paradigms that either romanticize resilience or collapse it into survival. Instead, this chapter advances a definition of resilience as a multi-dimensional and ethically charged process. It is enacted through affective and relational labor, structured by historical trauma, and sustained by deeply contextual resources such as faith, familial obligation, and memory. The cross-cutting themes of memory, moral obligation, and imagination**,** first introduced in the previous chapters, are essential to understanding this form of resilience. Memory situates young people within intergenerational narratives of loss and

persistence; moral obligation informs their enduring commitment to others; and imagination enables the envisioning of alternative futures, even when such futures appear foreclosed.

This analysis also extends the arguments developed in the chapters on identity and hope. In Chapter 4, identity was shown to emerge through negotiation across structural hierarchies and relational contexts; in Chapter 5, hope was revealed to be sustained through acts of relational care and imaginative resistance. Resilience synthesizes these threads by demonstrating how Afghan youth convert moral and affective commitments into practice. It is not simply the refusal to collapse, but the capacity to act meaningfully within conditions of constraint. Resilience, in this framework, is a dynamic and evolving process through which Afghan youth engage with structural violence, reinterpret their experiences, and assert their agency. It reflects not only their ability to survive, but their capacity to generate meaning and sustain ethical responsibility across time and context.

6. Theoretical Contribution

My study makes several key theoretical contributions to resilience literature by both building upon and challenging dominant paradigms across existing debates. First, in response to the ongoing conceptual ambiguity about what resilience is, trait, process, or outcome (Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker 2000; Masten 2014), my study resists this false binary altogether. Rather than trying to resolve the definition, I treat the ambiguity itself as analytically productive. I show how Afghan youth experience resilience as both being and doing, both feeling and acting, across time. This plural, lived conceptualization expands the field's understanding of resilience not as a neat theoretical category, but as an everyday, shifting practice that is often hard even for participants themselves to define, yet deeply real in how it structures their lives. By tracing

resilience across life stages, from silent endurance in childhood to relational care in adolescence and political resistance in adulthood, I show that resilience must be understood as a dynamic and temporally situated phenomenon.

Second, my study directly intervenes in the critique that resilience has been over-individualized (Bonanno 2004; Werner and Smith 1992). Building on the ecological systems framework and the social-ecological model advocated by Betancourt and Khan (2008), I move beyond merely describing multi-level influences to showing how the absence of macrosystem support, broken institutions, systemic violence, structural exclusion, creates the need for resilience in the first place. I expand this body of work by theorizing resilience not just as a process supported by systems, but as a response to their collapse, especially in conflict-affected societies. This shifts the conversation toward what I call the "relational vacuum", the space where both state and communal structures fail, and young people must scaffold survival with whatever fragmented resources they can gather. My findings also highlight how relational care, especially emotional and domestic labor performed by youth, particularly girls, emerges as a compensatory system of resilience in the absence of formal protections.

Third, my study offers an emic, culturally grounded, and feminist approach that goes beyond the culturally sensitive calls made by Ungar (2008, 2011) and Panter-Brick and Eggerman (2012). I don't just document context; I center Afghan epistemologies, like shokor (gratitude), sabr (patience), and the glorification of endurance, as theoretical building blocks. I argue that resilience in this setting cannot be fully understood without engaging with local moral worlds, spiritual vocabularies, and intergenerational narratives of sacrifice. In doing so, my study not only contributes to emic resilience research but proposes a cultural-political theory of

resilience: one that is shaped by and reinforces social hierarchies, gender roles, and norms of silence. This deepens and problematizes what "cultural resilience" means in conflict settings. I also draw on feminist care theory (Tronto 1993; Gilligan 1982; Ruddick 1989) to frame resilience as a moral and relational act, particularly among youth who protect, nurture, and emotionally sustain others within fragile family and community networks.

Fourth, my study addresses ongoing debates about how resilience is measured or even recognized. Rather than using psychological indicators, I develop and apply a methodological framework rooted in life histories and body mapping to access the emotional, narrative, and embodied forms of resilience. This contributes to the underutilized area of participatory and visual methods in resilience research (Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010; Ungar 2013), and it advances a new way of "measuring" resilience, not through metrics, but through meaning-making across time, memory, and affect. My approach offers a model for how researchers can capture what cannot be measured, what it feels like to survive amid systemic collapse. This emphasis on memory, moral obligation, and imagination as narrative resources further illustrates how Afghan youth articulate resilience through ethical commitments and future-oriented thinking, even in the absence of structural guarantees.

Fifth, I expand the limited body of work on structural and policy-level resilience (Evans and Reid 2014; Joseph 2018). While existing critiques rightly point to how resilience has been instrumentalized in neoliberal governance, my study goes further: it theorizes how the failure of political and institutional systems gets internalized by youth as personal responsibility. I show how resilience becomes a learned burden, a moral obligation shaped by gender, class, and war. This moves the conversation from describing structural factors to understanding how they are

metabolized emotionally and behaviorally over time. In this way, I help advance a theory of resilience as a structure-induced ethical performance, particularly in war-affected states where institutions are both dangerous and absent. The burden of resilience, as my findings show, is distributed unevenly, structured by power hierarchies and relational roles, and expressed through different affective and moral registers, from protective silence to political defiance.

My study also responds to calls for integrating power, inequality, and justice into resilience theory (Panter-Brick and Eggerman 2012; Betancourt et al. 2011). I show that resilience is not equally available, it is shaped by class, gender, ethnicity, and geography. Girls carry the emotional labor of families; Hazara youth grieve differently under targeted violence; poor youth endure labor exploitation while being shamed for not "achieving." Rather than treating these as background variables, I make them central to theorizing resilience as stratified, gendered, and racialized. This not only aligns with social justice critiques of resilience discourse, it extends them by centering survivor accounts as the basis for new conceptual frameworks. By treating these intersecting identities not only as conditions of vulnerability but also as sources of moral authority and knowledge, I expand resilience theory to include relational ethics and everyday resistance in the face of structural violence.

In conflict studies, resilience is often still treated as either adaptation or resistance (Tol et al. 2013; Barber 2009). My study bridges this divide by demonstrating how Afghan youth move fluidly between endurance and defiance, often within the same moment. Resilience can be a quiet decision to go to school the day after a bombing, or a loud refusal to let grief turn into despair. I argue that this simultaneity is what defines resilience in protracted crises. Thus, I propose a theory of layered resilience, where resistance and adaptation co-exist, not as opposites,

but as interwoven strategies of surviving the unspeakable. This layered model also accounts for emotional and ethical labor, often overlooked in macro-political models, which is central to how youth generate meaning and sustain relational worlds under duress.

While longitudinal studies of resilience are still scarce (Masten 2014; Werner 1995), my study makes a rare contribution by tracing resilience across three life stages. I map how coping in childhood becomes responsibility in adolescence, and how both transform into political resistance in adulthood. This life-course analysis allows me to theorize how resilience is relationally transmitted, emotionally reconfigured, and ethically reframed across time. My work thus contributes a temporally dynamic theory of resilience, one that connects childhood trauma to adult activism and links personal grief to collective struggle. It also links to earlier chapters on identity and hope by showing how resilience is the process through which these orientations are enacted. Identity gives youth a sense of moral position; hope gives them a sense of purpose; resilience converts both into practice.

Finally, I contribute to the ethical critique of resilience research (Mazurana n.d.; Ungar 2013) by refusing to celebrate resilience. I argue that while resilience is often required, it is also costly, isolating, and, at times, violently imposed. I name this the “cruel optimism” of resilience: the hope that surviving will lead to meaning, even when it often does not. My study, therefore, calls for an ethical reorientation in resilience research, one that centers not just on what people do to survive but what it costs them to keep going. I show that resilience, in many cases, is not empowerment, it is what you do when no one comes to save you and you must save yourself. This requires a shift from valorizing endurance to interrogating the conditions that demand it, and to recognizing resilience not as triumph, but as ethically fraught survival.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

1. Introduction

This dissertation has sought to center Afghan youth not as peripheral subjects of global war narratives or development agendas, but as historical actors whose lived experiences, identities, hopes, and resilience offer profound insights into the human consequences of protracted conflict. Chapter three demonstrated how youth have played critical roles across Afghanistan's political history, whether through rebellion, reform, education, or resistance, highlighting their agency in shaping sociopolitical change. Identity, too, is revealed as a dynamic, relational, and contested process, shaped through inheritance, renegotiated through disruption, and reclaimed through acts of agency and creativity across different life stages. Similarly, hope emerges not as passive optimism but as an active force that challenges despair, sustains futures, and resists erasure. Their narratives illuminate how resilience is cultivated not in isolation but through intergenerational memory, social responsibilities, and acts of resistance. Drawing on life history interviews, focus groups, and participatory art-based methods, this research has traced the journey of fifteen young Afghan men and women across childhood, adolescence/formative years, and adulthood. In this final chapter, I return to the core questions that guided this study:

- How do Afghan war-affected youth of all genders remain resilient, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and psychosocially, in the face of years of armed political and criminal violence?
- How do they nurture hope in conditions marked by displacement, systemic marginalization, and political repression?

- How does exposure to violence, exile, and intergenerational trauma shape their individual and collective identities?

The findings presented across the dissertation suggest that Afghan youth cultivate resilience through a dynamic interplay of reimagined identity, relational hope, and moral practice, each informed by and responsive to the shifting conditions of violence, exile, and political uncertainty. This interplay is not static but evolves across the life course, shaped by developmental transitions and social environments. The study reveals that identity becomes a site of both inherited duty and negotiated meaning, hope serves as a relational and future-oriented force grounded in memory and imagination, and resilience emerges as both daily labor and political practice. These three concepts are mutually constitutive and operate within broader structural constraints, mediated by cross-cutting forces such as moral obligation, memory, and imagination. The dissertation constructs a recursive and developmental narrative arc: identity informs the nature and possibility of hope; hope sustains the affective and moral energy required for resilience; and resilience, in turn, reshapes identity through the integration of struggle, care, and resistance.

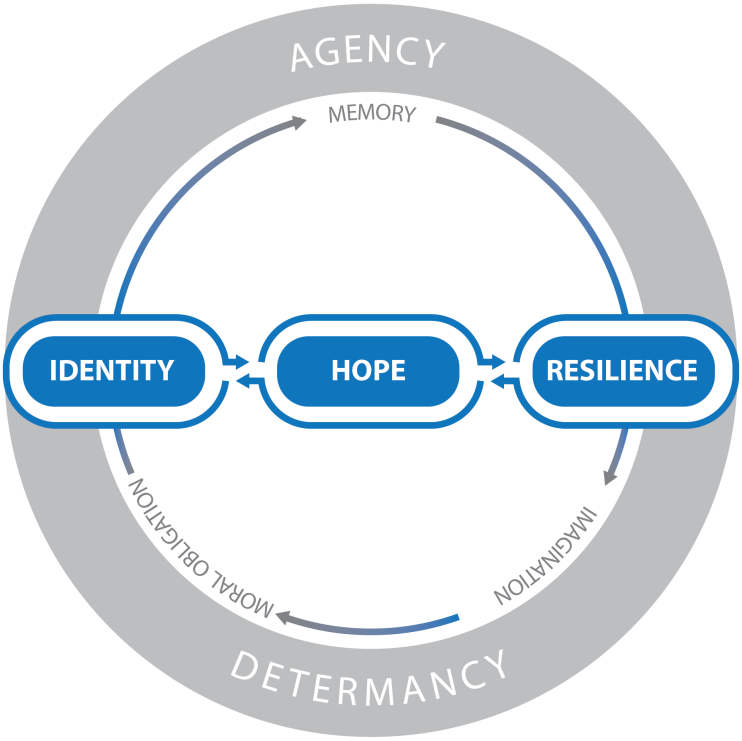

Figure 7.1: Core and Recursive Flow Between Identity, Hope, and Resilience

Core and Recursive Flow Between Identity, Hope, and Resilience

Bold Central Loop:

- **Identity → Hope → Resilience → Identity**

  This is the primary recursive cycle in which identity shapes what kind of hope youth can access, hope enables acts of resilience, and experiences of resilience then reshape and deepen one's identity.

Cross-Recursive and Feedback Arrows:

- **Resilience → Hope**

  Resilience sustains the capacity to imagine alternative futures. It allows youth to maintain agency and continue designing their future, even after deep loss or adversity.

- **Hope → Identity**

  Hope doesn't just look forward, it also reshapes how young people understand themselves. As they imagine different futures, they reimagine who they are and who they can become.

- **Resilience → Identity**

  Acts of resilience, enduring, resisting, and surviving fundamentally recreate or re-inform identity, especially when youth survive against systemic forces like displacement, war, and gendered violence.

- **Identity → Resilience**

  A youth's sense of self, rooted in family, history, gender, ethnicity, or values, can also fortify their capacity for resilience. Identity gives meaning to what they are enduring for.

The Outer Ring: Navigating Between Agency and Determinacy

Encircling the recursive relationship between identity, hope, and resilience is the dialectical tension between **agency** and **determinacy**. These macro-level forces frame the conditions under which youth navigate their lived experiences.

- **Agency** in this study refers to the capacity for intentional action, ethical judgment, and the projection of alternative futures. It is expressed through decision-making, relational care, creative engagement, and political or personal acts of resistance, even within contexts of constraint.
- **Determinacy** in this study denotes the structural, material, and sociopolitical conditions that delimit the scope of available choices to my participants. These include, but are not limited to, war, displacement, patriarchy, intergenerational expectations, economic hardship, and systemic marginalization.

Rather than occupying static positions within this binary, youth in my study engage in constant negotiation between these poles. Identity is shaped by both inherited structures and self-authored meanings; hope emerges at the intersection of desire and limitation; and resilience is exercised through both constrained obligation and cultivated intention.

The recursive flows are further mediated by three cross-cutting conceptual mechanisms:

- **Memory** facilitates the continuity between identity and hope by anchoring future aspirations in collective and personal histories.
- **Moral obligation** connects identity and resilience, as endurance is often driven by responsibility toward family, community, or a broader ethical commitment.
- **Imagination** links hope and resilience, enabling youth to generate meaning, project possibility, and sustain momentum in the face of adversity.

Thus, the outer ring in the diagram does not signify a fixed boundary but rather a dynamic field of interaction, within which Afghan youth in my study enact, resist, and reshape their

trajectories. The relationship among identity, hope, and resilience is not merely descriptive but constitutive of how young people locate themselves within, and act upon, the conditions of their lives.

a. Childhood: Learning Identity, Inheriting Hope, Cultivating Early Resilience

In the earliest life stage, participants' sense of self was shaped by storytelling, rituals, and collective memory. Afghan children come to understand who they are through oral traditions, family struggles, faith, and gendered expectations. These early lessons are often not chosen, but inherited. Identity in this stage is learned as a form of duty, to family, to ethnic history, to community legacy. Identity at this stage was not just inherited, but carried as a moral obligation to honor the past and fulfill the dreams of parents and elders. Children learned to embody names imbued with meaning, to navigate silence around war trauma, and to internalize expectations shaped by loss and survival.

Hope in childhood was relational and largely mediated through others, parents, elders, and community members, who transmitted visions of endurance and possibility. This hope was not abstract, but embedded in stories, religious faith, and everyday gestures of care. It functioned as a quiet resistance to despair and enabled children to imagine life beyond war and displacement. Resilience during childhood emerged in subtle but foundational ways: adapting to scarcity, managing fear, and sustaining emotional connection in fractured environments. It was often invisible yet deeply embodied in acts of coping, helping, and learning.

These three processes, identity, hope, and resilience, were deeply intertwined. Identity was shaped by and contributed to the transmission of hope. Hope, in turn, provided emotional

scaffolding for resilience. Cross-cutting forces such as memory and moral obligation functioned as the threads connecting these dimensions: memory provided continuity and orientation; moral obligation taught children to endure not only for themselves but for family and community. Imagination served as an early form of emotional resistance, a way to dream beyond limitation.

b. Adolescence: Disruption, Negotiation, and Emergent Interdependence

The transitional period between childhood and adulthood, what I termed "situational adulthood", was marked by intense shifts. Many participants experienced this stage not as a gradual progression but as an abrupt disruption due to war, forced migration, or the death of a parent. In this stage, peer networks, school environments, and gendered surveillance played defining roles. Adolescence was the period when participants began to question, resist, or reshape the identities inherited in childhood. Identity became increasingly agentic as youth negotiated their place within and against the expectations placed upon them.

Hope in adolescence became more conscious and agentive. It was expressed through dreams of education, acts of defiance, or commitments to care. Relational hope was particularly salient: encouragement from teachers, solidarity among peers, or admiration for siblings provided vital sources of motivation. Hope also became tied to imagined futures, as youth envisioned alternatives to their current constraints. Resilience in this stage evolved into a more active and visible set of practices. It included navigating danger, asserting autonomy, and sustaining moral commitments despite structural repression. Youth exhibited resilience by pursuing education under threat, supporting families, and resisting imposed gender roles.

Identity, hope, and resilience during adolescence were marked by increasing interdependence. The reworking of identity opened space for new hopes; these hopes, in turn, mobilized acts of resilience. Cross-cutting forces were acutely present here: moral obligation intensified as youth tried to live up to familial sacrifices; memory became more reflective, connecting past suffering to current choices; and imagination became a necessary tool to craft alternative narratives of self and society. These interdependencies demonstrate how adolescence is not just a developmental phase but a crucible of ethical and political formation.

c. Adulthood: Reclaiming Identity, Sustaining Hope, Enacting Political Resilience

In adulthood, the complexities of Afghan identity unfolded most starkly. Living in exile or under Taliban rule, participants grappled with layered contradictions: being Afghan and yet disconnected from their homeland, holding onto inherited trauma while building new dreams, and navigating hope amid disillusionment. Identity in adulthood was no longer passively inherited but actively reclaimed, redefined, or resisted. Many participants constructed hybrid identities that held space for grief, resistance, and transnational belonging.

Hope in adulthood was future-oriented but also deeply ethical. It was expressed through long-term commitments to justice, caregiving, and political resistance. Unlike earlier stages, hope here required conscious maintenance and strategic thinking, it was not merely about coping, but about creating new conditions of possibility. Resilience in adulthood manifested as political and creative labor. It included advocacy, mentorship, and community-building, as well as the emotional labor of sustaining belief amid loss. This stage reveals how resilience is not only about individual endurance but collective survival and transformation.

In this life stage, identity, hope, and resilience operate in a cyclical and reflexive manner. Resilience reinforces a renewed sense of identity; hope is continually re-articulated through action; identity expands to include transnational, hybrid, and ethically grounded forms. The cross-cutting forces evolve in meaning: memory becomes political testimony; moral obligation transforms into ethical responsibility; and imagination becomes a praxis of future-making. Together, these dimensions form an ecosystem of survival and resistance.

d. Conceptual Integration Across Identity, Hope, and Resilience

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 build a conceptual arc that maps the relational and developmental pathways through which Afghan youth navigate identity, hope, and resilience in contexts shaped by violence, displacement, and systemic marginalization. Chapter 4 (Identity) establishes the foundational terrain, illustrating how youth internalize inherited identities shaped by family, ethnicity, religion, and sociopolitical narratives. These inherited frameworks are not passively accepted; rather, participants begin to negotiate and reconstruct their identities, particularly during adolescence, often in tension with imposed social scripts.

This identity work becomes the basis for Chapter 5 (Hope), where redefined self-concepts inform what kinds of futures youth can imagine. Hope, as this chapter shows, is not abstract or individualistic. It emerges relationally through memory, familial belief systems, mentorship, and small acts of imaginative resistance. Hope functions as a bridge between identity and action, offering a forward-looking orientation that sustains youth amid conditions of uncertainty and dispossession.

This imagined future, in turn, enables the practices examined in Chapter 6 (Resilience), where hope becomes embodied in everyday acts of survival, care, and moral responsibility.

Resilience is not simply a psychological trait but a socially and ethically embedded response to adversity, expressed through caregiving, advocacy, and emotional labor. Critically, the experience of resilience feeds back into identity formation, particularly in adulthood, as youth integrate their struggles and capacities into revised understandings of self.

The conceptual flow, Identity → Hope → Resilience → Identity (re-informed), is not linear but recursive and dynamic. A proposed table or visual model (see Appendix X) could illustrate this arc with overlapping circles or a spiral model, marked by life stages and cross-cutting themes: memory, moral obligation, imagination.

An outer ring of the model will display cross-cutting forces (Memory, Moral Obligation, Imagination), while the inner loop of identity-hope-resilience-identity illustrates the dialectic movement. A horizontal axis within the model can show the tension between determinacy and agency, framing the narratives not only as reactions to structural violence but also as ethical and imaginative acts of becoming.

e. Theoretical and Conceptual Contributions

This research contributes to feminist, emic, and developmental theories of identity, hope, and resilience by offering a multi-layered analysis grounded in lived experiences of Afghan youth under conditions of chronic violence and political uncertainty. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and integrating feminist theories of care, this dissertation offers three major sets of contributions:

First, to identity theory, Chapter 4 challenges static and essentialized notions of identity by documenting how youth actively reconstruct their identities across different life stages and

sociopolitical conditions. Rather than viewing identity as merely inherited or externally imposed, this study shows identity as dynamic, negotiated, and deeply relational. It underscores the role of moral obligation and collective memory in shaping identity development, especially within contexts of displacement and intergenerational trauma. The findings emphasize how identity formation is marked by both determinacy and agency, an ongoing dialectic that transforms over time.

Second, to hope theory, Chapter 5 builds on and extends critiques of individualistic models of hope, such as Snyder's cognitive-based theory, by showing how hope functions relationally, ethically, and politically. Drawing from Freire (1994) and Webb (2013), the study demonstrates that hope among Afghan youth is not just a belief in a better future but an embodied and contextually grounded stance that enables survival, imagination, and moral orientation. Hope emerges through social bonds, memory work, mentorship, and small acts of imaginative resistance, thus anchoring it in collective practice rather than individual disposition. This reconceptualization positions hope as a critical affective force that mediates between identity and action.

Third, to resilience studies, Chapter 6 makes several key contributions by resisting dominant framings of resilience as a personality trait or psychological outcome. Instead, resilience is presented as a gendered, relational, and moral practice embedded in everyday life. This study responds to calls from scholars like Betancourt and Khan (2008) and Ungar (2011) to move beyond over-individualized models and attend to structural, familial, and political dimensions. Resilience is shown here as both visible and invisible labor, expressed through caregiving, advocacy, emotional adaptation, and intergenerational continuity. The study also

challenges binary definitions of resilience as "coping" versus "thriving, " instead offering a layered understanding of resilience as ethical endurance, creative resistance, and political care.

Together, these chapters offer a conceptual and methodological framework for analyzing youth subjectivity that centers temporality, life stage, and sociopolitical location. This work contributes to a longitudinal understanding of human security and post-conflict recovery by showing how identity, hope, and resilience are not discrete concepts, but interdependent and recursively reinforcing over time. Furthermore, this dissertation pushes theoretical boundaries by integrating feminist ethics of care with ecological and developmental systems theory, showing that psychological well-being and political resistance are not separate spheres but interconnected domains of youth experience. The attention to cross-cutting forces, memory, moral obligation, and imagination, further anchors the study in an emic framework, highlighting culturally embedded processes of meaning-making. In sum, this research offers an interdisciplinary and deeply situated contribution to theorizations of identity, hope, and resilience in contexts of conflict and displacement, with implications for future work in human security, youth studies, feminist psychology, and conflict transformation.

2. Final Reflections

This dissertation emerges not only as an academic endeavor but also as a political and ethical intervention into the silencing of Afghan youth experiences. By foregrounding their voices through life history interviews and participatory methods, this study resists dominant narratives that depict youth solely as victims or passive recipients of humanitarian aid. Instead, it

positions them as reflective agents navigating the dialectic between structural constraint and ethical imagination.

The narratives shared by participants speak to the transformative potential of storytelling in contexts of displacement and trauma. Several participants expressed that reading their own life stories provided a new lens through which to understand their experiences, not as fragmented accounts of suffering, but as coherent journeys marked by resilience, care, and meaning. These responses underscore the healing potential of research when it is participatory, emic, and grounded in recognition.

Furthermore, participants' desire to connect with each other, to meet, to embrace, to listen, demonstrates that this research facilitated not only individual reflection but also a sense of collective identity. Their feedback affirms that qualitative research, when done ethically and relationally, can contribute to the building of solidarities and the affirmation of shared humanity.

In centering Afghan youth as knowledge producers, this study calls upon scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to move beyond frameworks that instrumentalize youth. The findings challenge us to understand youth not as abstract categories but as complex individuals whose identities, hopes, and resilience are deeply embedded in moral, political, and cultural contexts.

Ultimately, this work underscores the importance of documenting lived experiences in times of crisis, not simply as historical record, but as a means of ethical witnessing. Afghan youth continue to navigate layers of displacement, repression, and uncertainty. Yet, as this dissertation illustrates, they do so with extraordinary creativity, ethical clarity, and collective

care. It is imperative that global conversations on human security, post-conflict recovery, and social transformation center these lived realities and the epistemologies they produce.

3. Bibliography

Ahmad, A. 2021. *Afghanistan's Peace Process: A Disrupted Negotiation*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.

Ahmadi, Belquis. 2015. *Afghan Youth: In Search of a Future*. United States Institute of Peace Special Report.

Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Anthias, Floya. 2001. "The Material and the Symbolic in Theorizing Social Stratification." *British Journal of Sociology*52 (3): 367–390.

Artists at Risk Connection. 2021. "ArtLords: Painting Afghanistan's Hopes and Fears." https://artistsatriskconnection.org.

Asia Society. 2021. "Sela Foundation - Afghanistan." *Asia Society*, accessed 2021.

Attayee, Mohammad Ibrahim. 1973. *Afghanistan in the Twentieth Century*. Kabul: Maiwand Publishing.

Avruch, Kevin. 1998. *Culture and Conflict Resolution*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.

Avruch, Kevin. 2012. *Context and Pretext in Conflict Resolution: Culture, Identity, Power, and Practice*. New York: Paradigm.

Barfield, Thomas. 2010. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bayraktar, Saban. 2018. "Modernization and Tradition: Atatürk's Reforms and Amanullah Khan's Modernization Efforts in Afghanistan." *Afghanistan Journal* 5 (2): 45–65.

Bezhan, Faridullah. 2013. "Afghanistan: Political Parties and Youth Movements." *Asian Survey* 53 (6): 931–956.

Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

Boyden, Jo. 2003. "Children Under Fire: Challenging Assumptions about Children's Resilience." *Children, Youth and Environments* 13 (1).

Brass, Paul R. 1991. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*. New Delhi: Sage.

Bronfenbrenner, Urie. 1979. *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brubaker, Rogers. 2004. *Ethnicity Without Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Burton, John. 1990. *Conflict: Resolution and Provention*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Castells, Manuel. 1997. *The Power of Identity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Charmaz, Kathy. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage.

Chatterjee, Partha. 1993. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Christiansen, Catrine, Mats Utas, and Henrik E. Vigh. 2006. *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood: Social Becoming in an African Context*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

CIA Factbook. 2022. "Afghanistan Demographics." *Central Intelligence Agency*.

Clark, Kate. 2012. "Afghanistan 1400: A Movement for Young Leaders." *Afghanistan Analysts Network*.

Coll, Steve. 2004. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden*. New York: Penguin.

Cousens, Elizabeth M. 2020. "Women and Peacebuilding: Mapping the Gender Dimension of Conflict and Peace Processes." *United Nations Reports*.

Crews, Robert D. 2015. *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*.

Darden, Jessica. 2019. *Tackling Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth*. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Dalrymple, William. 2013. *Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan*. New York: Knopf.

Dupree, Louis. 1973. *Afghanistan*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Durham, Deborah. 2000. "Youth and the Social Imagination in Africa: Introduction to Parts 1 and 2." *Anthropological Quarterly* 73 (3): 113–120.

Elphinstone, Mountstuart. 1815. *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*. London: Longman.

Enloe, Cynthia. 1989. *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Enloe, Cynthia. 2000. *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Esteban, Joan, and Debraj Ray. 2008. "On the Salience of Ethnic Conflict." *American Economic Review* 98 (5): 2185–2202.

Ewans, Martin. 2002. *Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics*. New York: Harper.

Faist, Thomas. 2000. *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Freire, Paulo. 1994. *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Gellner, Ernest. 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

George, Susannah, and Fatima Faizi. 2021. "Explosion Outside Kabul School Kills 90, Mostly Girls." *The Washington Post*.

Ghobar, Mir Ghulam Muhammad. 1967. *Afghanistan Dar Masir-e-Tarikh*. Kabul.

Giustozzi, Antonio. 2008. *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Giustozzi, Antonio. 2012. *The Army of Afghanistan: A Political History of a Fragile Institution*. London: Hurst.

Gossman, Patricia. 2002. *Afghanistan: Human Rights After the Taliban*. Human Rights Watch.

Gregorian, Vartan. 1969. *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880–1946*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Grover, Sonja. 2011. *Child Soldier Victims of Genocidal Forcible Transfer: Exonerating Child Soldiers Charged with Grave Conflict-related International Crimes*. New York: Springer.

Hazara, Faiz Mohammad. 1982. *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study*. M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin.

Honwana, Alcinda. 2012. *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa*. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press.

Horowitz, Donald L. 1985. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Human Rights Watch. 1995. *Afghanistan: The Forgotten War*.

Human Rights Watch. 2001. *Crisis of Impunity: The Role of Pakistan, Russia, and Iran in Fueling the Civil War in Afghanistan*.

Huntington, Samuel P. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Integrity Watch Afghanistan. 2020. *Corruption in Afghanistan: Recent Patterns and Trends*.

Jadoon, Amira, Andrew Mines, and Mahmut Cengiz Sayed. 2021. *The Islamic State Threat in Afghanistan: Spillover from Syria and Iraq*. West Point: Combating Terrorism Center.

Jalali, Ali Ahmad. 2017. *A Military History of Afghanistan: From the Great Game to the Global War on Terror*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Jeffrey, Craig. 2010. *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Jenkins, Richard. 2008. *Social Identity*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.

Johnson, Thomas H. 2018. *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict*. London: Hurst.

Kakar, Hassan. 1979. *Government and Society in Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Kakar, Hassan. 1995. *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979–1982*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kakar, Hassan. 2006. *A Political and Diplomatic History of Afghanistan, 1863–1901*. Leiden: Brill.

Kazem-Stojanovic, Halima. 2022. *Resisting Erasure: A Feminist History of Politics, Gender, and Empire in Afghanistan*. PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz.

Khalid, Adeela. 2013. *Women, the Koran and International Human Rights Law: The Experience of Pakistan*. Brill.

Leake, Elisabeth. 2017. *The Defiant Border: The Afghan-Pakistan Frontier in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lear, Jonathan. 2006. *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lee, Jonathan L. 2018. *Afghanistan: A History from 1260 to the Present*. London: Reaktion Books.

Mac Ginty, Roger. 2021. *Everyday Peace: How So-called Ordinary People Can Disrupt Violent Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mandaville, Peter. 2001. *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma*. London: Routledge.

Mamdani, Mahmood. 1996. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Masten, Ann S. 2014. *Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development*. New York: Guilford Press.

Mazurana, Dyan. 2019. "Children, Families, and Armed Conflict." In *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Conflict*, edited by Fionnuala Ní Aoláin et al., 165–181. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mazurana, Dyan, Karen Akesson, and Myriam Denov. 2022. *Gender, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*. Cambridge: Polity.

McGeer, Victoria. 2004. "The Art of Good Hope." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 592: 100–127.

McLeroy, Kenneth R., Daniel Bibeau, Allan Steckler, and Karen Glanz. 1988. "An Ecological Perspective on Health Promotion Programs." *Health Education Quarterly* 15 (4): 351–377.

Mousavi, Sayd Askar. 1997. *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Müller, Jan-Werner. 2002. *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oyserman, Daphna, Kristen Elmore, and George Smith. 2012. "Self, Self-Concept, and Identity." In *Handbook of Self and Identity*, edited by Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney, 69–104. New York: Guilford Press.

PopulationPyramid.net. 2022. "Afghanistan Population Pyramid." https://www.populationpyramid.net.

RAWA. 2025. "History of RAWA: Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan." https://www.rawa.org.

Rashid, Ahmed. 2000. *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Rashid, Ahmed. 2022. *The Return of the Taliban*. New York: Viking.

Richmond, Oliver P. 2005. *The Transformation of Peace*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ross, Marc Howard. 2007. *The Culture of Conflict: Interpretations and Interests in Comparative Perspective*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Rubin, Barnett R. 2000. *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*. 2nd ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Rubin, Barnett R. 2013. *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ruttig, Thomas. 2010. "The Battle for Afghanistan: Militancy and Conflict in Kandahar." *New America Foundation*.

Ruttig, Thomas. 2020. "Soraya Parlika: A Quiet Revolutionary." *Afghanistan Analysts Network*.

Scott, James C. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Seljooqi, Mohammad. 2015. *History of the Afghan Scouts (Sarandoi)*. Kabul: Government Publications.

Semple, Michael. 2019. *Negotiating with the Taliban: Issues and Prospects*. Chatham House.

Sen, Amartya. 2006. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Shepherd, Laura J. 2006. *Gender, Violence and Security: Discourse as Practice*. London: Zed Books.

Sharan, Timor. 2014. "The Dynamics of Elite Networks and Patron-Client Relationships in Afghanistan." *Europe-Asia Studies* 66 (7): 1001–1022.

Snyder, Charles R. 2002. "Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind." *Psychological Inquiry* 13 (4): 249–275.

Stokols, Daniel. 1996. "Translating Social Ecological Theory into Guidelines for Community Health Promotion." *American Journal of Health Promotion* 10 (4): 282–298.

Taylor, Verta, and Nancy Whittier. 1992. "Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities." In *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, edited by Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller, 104–129. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Tierney, William G., and Michael Lanford. 2019. *The Life Course Perspective and the Portal Approach to Research*. New York: Routledge.

Tudor, Maya. 2010. *The Promise of Power: The Origins of Democracy in India and Autocracy in Pakistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

United Nations. 1981. *Report of the Secretary-General on Youth*. New York: United Nations.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). 2018. *Corruption in Afghanistan: Recent Patterns and Trends*.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1997. *Gender and Nation*. London: Sage.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2006. "Intersectionality and Feminist Politics." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13 (3): 193–209.