

# The Young Women of Afghanistan

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## *Their fight for the right to education*

*An interview led by an all-girl student group in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of their Global Law degree in collaboration with Anna Santarelli, CISDA representative.*

*How would you feel if you were suddenly denied such a basic right as education?*

That's the question we asked ourselves as we worked on a project regarding Goal No. 4 of the Agenda 2030. Goal 4 aims at *ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all*. In our day-to-day life we might take it for granted, but in several areas of the world this right is denied. Given recent events in Afghanistan, and as young female students, we decided to focus our project on the reality that afflicts Afghan women, who, since the Taliban's seizure of power in 2021, have been denied access to higher degrees of education. Hence the idea of bringing a real testimony from those who have been able to

experience this sad reality up close, and who to this day continue to support the young women of the Afghan people. The following interview is in collaboration with Anna Santarelli, CISDA <sup>1</sup> activist, who kindly helped us understand the dynamics of the situation in Afghanistan. With Anna's help, we also tried to get in touch with young women living in Afghanistan who collaborate with CISDA to ask them a series of questions. Nonetheless, we are aware that getting answers will be complicated and either way, what we hope is that they are safe. It is to them that we dedicate our project, our voice and above all our support. So that they will not be forgotten and in the hope that the sun in Afghanistan may rise again.

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<sup>1</sup> Coordinamento Italiano Sostegno Donne Afghane

**G**ood morning, Anna, first of all thank you for having us and giving us the opportunity to interview you. The people reading might not know you and the incredible work of CISDA in supporting the Afghan cause and Afghan women. Could you walk us through what CISDA is?

Of course! CISDA is an association that has been active since 1999 and ever since has promoted solidarity projects for Afghan women. Everything started when the so called 'Donne in Nero', an association of Israeli and Palestinian women who manifested for the end of the war between Israel and Palestine, invited Afghan women from the RAWA and HAWCA associations to the *Assembly of the Peoples* held in Perugia (1999). From that moment on these associations kept an epistolary relationship and thanks to the efforts of Cristina Cattafesta, the founder of CISDA, the idea of supporting this cause developed. I got close to CISDA in the early 2000s when it was just at the beginning.

In 2004, after working as an unstructured free association, CISDA officially became an *onlus* association, which allowed to receive not only private contributions but also institutional funding.

**C.I.S.D.A**

***We were curious about the ways in which CISDA decided its projects – could you tell us more?***

A very interesting thing, I would say, is that we [the women of CISDA] always supported projects that some way or another were proposed by our friends in Afghanistan who could actually tell us their needs and what needed to be done. We believe this is a different approach than some bigger associations that develop projects which they export in Afghanistan, not that it is wrong, it is just a different approach. For example, the project 'Giallo Fiducia' aimed at providing workplace for Afghan women in fields where saffron was cultivated.



The idea was proposed by RAWA and funded by *Costa Family Foundation*, a family-led association from Trentino who owns several restaurants and hotels where such saffron is used. When possible, we promote this project in our stands by selling saffron.

Moreover, we organize missions in Afghanistan and Pakistan, that allow us to actually see the progress made and to support our friends there, of course when it is safe for us and safe for who

hosts us. I would like to point out that mission participants contribute themselves to the expenses of the trip and what goes with it; therefore, no association funds are used. The first mission was in Pakistan (2001) in the region of Peshawar where many Afghan refugees were. There RAWA built refugee camps, infrastructures, and schools. From that moment on, we tried to organize at least 1 mission a year and maintain our connections with RAWA.

Our work here in Italy focuses on promoting many projects like these, with particular focus towards the task of reminding people of the Afghan cause and the difficult situation Afghan women face every day. Then, of course, our main focus is *education*, because RAWA and we at CISDA believe that this right is what can make a difference. Surely, it won't be a revolution as we intend it here, but it will be a slow one.

**Do you have any means to be connected to your friends in Afghanistan?**

We try to hear as much as possible our friends and colleagues in Afghanistan via video chat, but as you can imagine this can be quite difficult because of low internet connection as well as safety reasons. These meetings take place once a month and this way we can be up to date with what happens over there and provide emotional support, reminding our friends that they are not alone.

***Are you currently working on any project in particular?***

Well, at the moment I am focusing on keeping up to date our *Osservatorio Afghanistan* website where I upload articles and documents I find interesting to describe the situation in Afghanistan. But I am not alone in this task, in fact we women of CISDA are not many, and live in different Italian cities, so we are organized in teams that work on different tasks.

***As an all-girls group, we feel very much for what the girls our age are facing right now in Afghanistan in terms to limitations of the Taliban to education. Could you tell us how CISDA is helping with that?***



*As I mentioned before, we [we women of CISDA] believe that education can really make a difference, so it is one of our main focus areas. We have supported and support many projects that aim at improving education in all its forms. For example, an engineer from Jalalabad, who worked with us and with RAWA, decided to build a safe village with the necessary infrastructure.*

For this project we raised enough funds to build a school and a clinic. Initially the school was a mixed school (both girls and boys went together), now because of new laws it's not possible anymore but at least girls up until 12 years old are able to attend.

Our efforts at CISDA for the right to education focus on raising funds to ensure the continuation of *underground schools*, which at the moment are the only way in which girls over the age of 12 can learn. The subjects taught in public schools are mostly linked to religion, so especially young girls are not taught subjects such as Math or English because they are considered to be too Western. The Taliban allows only to teach girls how to read, to write and to recite the prayers of the Quran because their view of women is limited to them becoming good wives and mothers. Sadly, these underground schools are getting smaller and smaller, mostly because of safety reasons. Before the Taliban takeover, when there was still the possibility to organize these schools out in the open, there was a teacher who went to a compound with the intention to teach and everyone was able to participate without major problems; now if one is not careful, this activity can attract the attention of the Taliban putting everyone in danger. That's why *the teacher*, in the guise of a relative, is hosted by activists or sympathizers

who spread the word to trusted families who let their daughters attend classes. In this way girls and young women can continue their studies and learn what they are not taught in school, from basic notions to classes where they are taught what their rights are, and subjects such as English. We tried to provide English remote classes, but we had to suspend them because of safety reasons.

***All of these projects show the exceptional help CISDA and RAWA provide, but nonetheless the motivation of the young women that keep on fighting for their right to education is fundamental. We were wondering, where does all this strength come from?***

To answer your question, I am going to tell you what Maryam Rawi, a RAWA representative, told us when she came to visit us in Italy. We asked her the same question you asked me, and she told us:

*'If we don't do anything and we don't continue fighting like we are doing right now, we are trapped. We are trapped in our own house - we are in a cage. Fighting gives us a small hope that the situation might change, despite how dangerous that might be.'*

Nonetheless, there are a lot of people that left the country, for safety reasons, like *Selei Gafar*, who spoke against the men of war on television. She was heavily insulted, and her life was in

danger after the Taliban takeover. On the other hand, some women want to stay because they think about what would happen to the poor and undefended population if everyone left.

***Given the strength of these women, do you believe that in the future the population, and especially women could establish a dialogue with the Taliban?***

Engaging in a dialogue with the Taliban would be difficult and it would endanger women more than ever. This is due to the fact that, even before the Taliban regime, the Afghan society was misogynistic. In this prospect, before a dialogue could be established, a series of changes in society would have to happen, including the eradication of cultural legacies and not just laws.

***Now that you have mentioned aspect of the Afghan society, why do you think that there is this adversity of the Taliban towards women?***

Well, to put things in perspective, keep in mind that the Taliban as a political organization was created in the 80s from a group of young men whose education was religion-centered from koranic schools. During the USSR occupation in Pakistan, they lived in male only koranic madrasas. This environment might have caused, what I believe is a sort of *fear of women*. Also, it is important to remember that they are originally Pashtun, one of the many ethnic groups of

Afghanistan, meaning they follow a traditionalist and integralist approach to Islam in which the honor of a man is measured by his capacity to protect the '*Zan, Zar, and Zamin*': women, gold and land'. However, the protection they refer to is *control*. What a woman can do is still strictly connected to this idea of the male honor: a woman must be devoted to the family, the house, and the husband because this is the only way for her to not create any scandal to her man. As 'scandal' they intend a woman showing her hair, her body, or simply leaving the house.

***Do you think Western countries are doing enough for the Afghan population and for the women there? What do you think is the most important thing Western countries should focus on to help?***

In some ways, the West has done too much, on the other hand it hasn't done that much. Let me explain better: the American occupation in the past 20 years was strictly military and extended only over Kabul and surrounding areas. This meant that rural areas remained under the control of the various lords of war. In this timeframe there wasn't a real commitment to improve the Afghan society, its wellbeing or its institutions, so much so that, today, the 87% of women in Afghanistan is still as illiterate as they were then.

RAWA believes that Western countries should not recognize the Taliban government or link themselves through agreements. Nonetheless,

there's the chance that eventually agreements between Western countries and the Taliban will happen, because of economic, political and geopolitical interests.

Afghanistan is facing an extremely difficult humanitarian situation, where the Western governments cannot act like they have done before by occupying the country.

At the moment, Afghanistan sadly represents a closed game for the Western Governments.

***Well, what about international organizations? Is their help useful from the point of view of changing the dynamics there?***

Surely the financial weekly aid sent by the United Nations Organization to Afghanistan would be useful if it did not go to the pockets of the Taliban government. Of this contribution, very little goes to the population and no real progress is ever made.

***Due to misinformation, such restrictions are often blamed on the Islamic religion, do you think there is a correlation? More importantly, how (and if) has women's relationship with this religion changed after the trauma they have experienced?***

I would like to preface this by saying that I am not an expert in theology and, therefore, cannot give a precise answer. However, I can say that in almost all religions, there are extremisms, which, in the case of Afghanistan, are represented by

the Taliban, characterized by a very rigid and fundamentalist view. Therefore, my guess would be that women who continue to be Muslim after such traumatic events, have had the realization that what they were experiencing was linked to an extremist interpretation of Islam. In some circumstances, faith is often seen as a way to connect with others, for example, some Afghan women who came to Italy to reunite with their family, stay with the Muslim community so they can communicate with people who have a similar history and interests to them.

***From your personal point of view, how do you see the future of Afghanistan or how would you like it to be?***

Our hope is that that in the future Afghanistan can develop under a less corrupt government and provide for its whole population rather than take from it. The truth is that we find ourselves in a misogynistic society that cannot be easily changed: it represents a very long and cultural issue, as it takes time to change, it doesn't happen in one day.

The fact is that one cannot think about changing a society that is fundamentally closed, now more than ever. It looks Afghanistan is going backwards rather than moving forward.

***Is there any way in which we can concretely support Afghan girls and women in their fight for education and rights?***

Of course, CISDA provides many ways in which one can donate towards any preferred cause. All instructions can be found on our website <https://www.cisda.it/>!

***Finally, is there any message you would like to share with us and with our readers?***

It goes without saying that I thank you for wanting to meet me and know more about CISDA and its projects. Thank you for wanting to share the word about Afghanistan so that this country that we care so much about won't be forgotten and so that the efforts of Afghan women and their strength won't be in vain.

***Thank you, Anna, both for your time and for the amazing work you and your colleagues do for our peers in Afghanistan!***

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