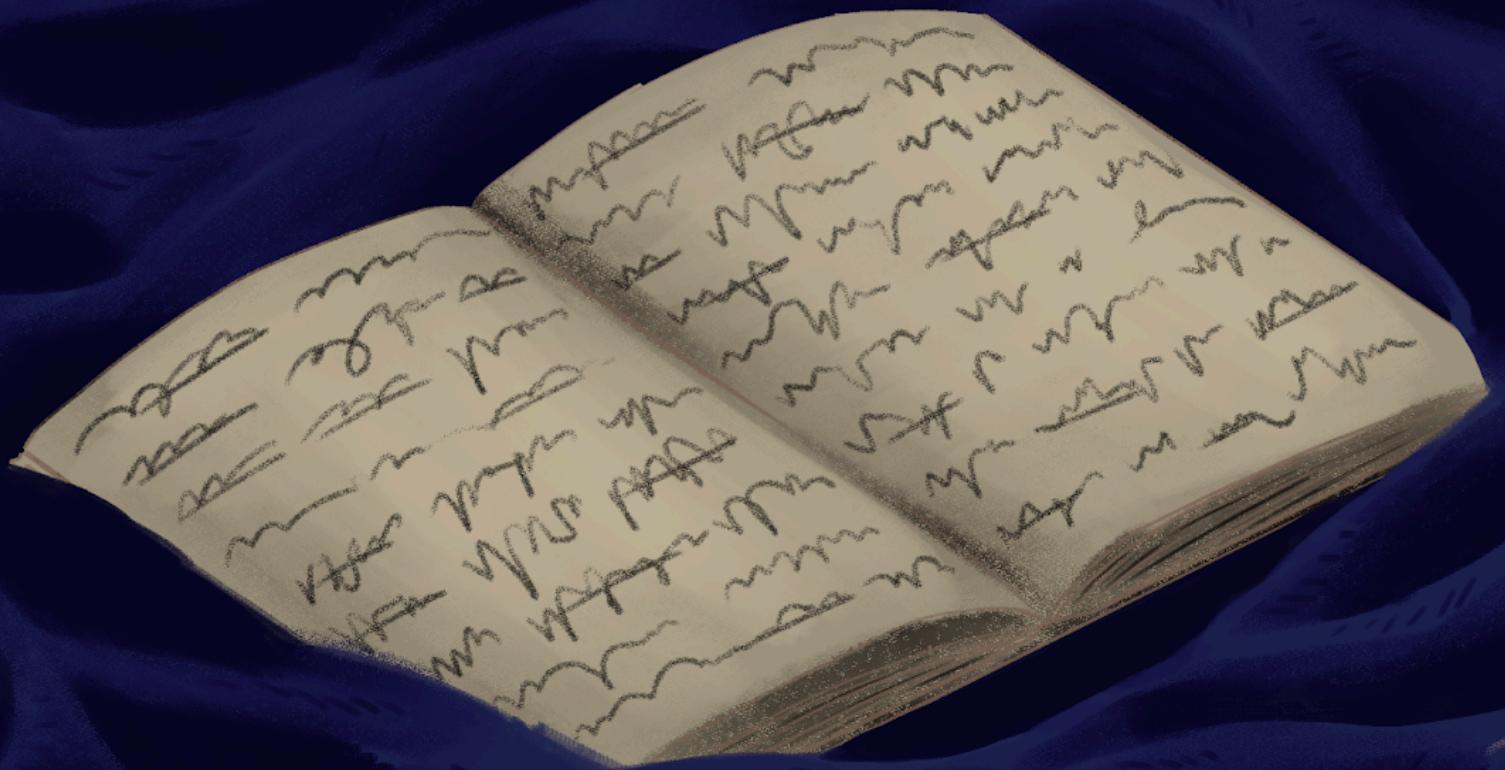


Knowledge Is Power:

Secret Schooling as Feminist Resistance in Afghanistan



Art by Tamora Longson

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER: SECRET SCHOOLING AS FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN AFGHANISTAN

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This piece examines the role of secret schools in Afghanistan in feminist resistance against gender apartheid, concluding that their functions are not just educational, but political too. In it, I argue that their use in the first and second Taliban occupations has had three major impacts - establishing mutual aid and community, providing an alternative to masculinised conceptions of resistance, and challenging narratives that cast Muslim women as victims. First, I outline extreme legal and institutional efforts to repress Afghan women's voices, control their movements and remove their agency, culminating in a state of 'gender apartheid'. Next, I investigate the characteristics and core functions of secret schools, situating them as coalitions vital to both education and political mobilisation. Finally, I analyse secret schooling through three lenses. The first evaluates secret schools as sites of community and mutual aid, given they build networks, deliver education, and foster political action. The second positions secret schooling as a direct challenge to masculinised conceptions of resistance involving violence and militarisation, given its community and care-based nature. The third, and final, lens presents secret schooling as an antidote to the pervasive narrative that Muslim women are victims in need of saving, as they showcase the agency and activism of Afghan women. This piece concludes that secret schools play a vital role in counteracting the Taliban's gender apartheid by ensuring they are not silenced, and preventing the government from achieving full control over their lives. Their effects extend beyond Afghanistan's borders, though, in helping us to reimagine 'resistance' beyond violent, masculinised images, and reframing Muslim women as actors with agency and strength.

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Introduction

Upon regaining control of Afghanistan in 2021, the Taliban re-instated the extreme misogyny that characterised their previous rule, systematically removing the basic rights of women and girls and creating an apartheid society divided on gender lines. In this article, I will examine the experiences of girls and women in Afghanistan living under these oppressive conditions of 'gender apartheid' with particular focus on their lack of access to education. Next, I will explore the establishment of secret schools led by Afghan women as a form of feminist resistance to misogynistic Taliban policies. I will then contend that these coalitions of educators positively impact the livelihood of Afghan women through community building and mutual aid, providing an alternative to traditional masculinised conceptions of resistance, and effectively challenging the pervasive stereotype of Muslim women's victimhood. Finally, I will conclude that the coalition of secret educators led by Afghan women effectively interrupts the gendered oppression perpetrated by the Taliban regime, ensuring it does not achieve its goals of fully controlling women's lives and silencing them in public and private.

This paper does not suggest that Afghanistan is the only place where women's rights are significantly restricted, or the only regime practicing gendered oppression or even apartheid. Nor does it suggest Afghan women are the only oppressed women in the Middle East or elsewhere whose stories must be told and voices must be amplified. It certainly does not suggest they are uniquely deserving of this. Instead, this paper intends to focus on resistance, studying the coalition of female educators resisting this oppression, and what we can learn from their practice to apply to feminist struggles globally.

Methodology

The majority of information available about secret schools in Afghanistan, particularly during the current Taliban rule beginning in 2021, is in the form of covert reporting by broadcast and print journalists. While this does not provide qualitative data insights, it centres the lived experience of Afghan women via interviews. There is therefore little information about the scale of secret schooling, and given the secrecy involved, detailed facts about specific schools are difficult to come by. This

includes names of interviewees and locations of secret schools, due to the extreme risk to the safety and lives of the women involved if they are caught. As a result, the section of this paper concerning modern secret schools draws from testimonies of teachers and students in its analysis, rather than statistical evidence or academic literature (Graham-Harrison, 2022; Hadid and Qazizai, 2022; Kermani, 2022; Mahmood and Abdelaziz, 2023; Sadid, 2024).

Moreover, the information available about the regime at large is limited due to growing censorship in effect across Afghanistan. The Taliban closed twelve media outlets in 2024, including print, television and radio reporting, detaining several journalists in the process (RSF, 2024). Two provinces have instituted bans on capturing images of living beings, including any human (The Independent, 2024), impacting the availability of photographic evidence. As of 2025, all political and economic broadcasts are banned domestically (CPJ, 2025) making it more challenging to ascertain the overall status of the country or the messages the Taliban is promoting. However, international governmental organisations and aid providers such as the UN have diligently collected evidence, and academics inside Afghanistan have worked to document the situation on the ground.

In addition to restrictions on journalism, academic sources detailing women's experiences of gender apartheid are few and sometimes difficult to locate. This gap in scholarship can be understood as a product of archival silences. Archival silence refers to the omission of particular events and perspectives from an archive, often concerning a particular group (Bruns, 2024, p. 11). In this case, the omission of women's experiences under the Taliban. Trouillot, a central theorist on the concept of archival silence, argues that silences often occur during fact creation i.e. the making of sources (Trouillot, 1995, p. 26) - in a society where women cannot speak outside their homes or obtain an education, it is increasingly difficult for women to record their experiences orally, in print, or digitally. This is a deliberate form of archival violence - under gender apartheid, women's perspectives and experiences are considered unimportant and irrelevant by the Taliban, and are actively suppressed. Moss and Thomas situate Trouillot's analysis in a

political context, arguing that whoever is in power can enforce silence, by deciding what or who is important enough to record. By controlling the archive, governments are able to decide who can exist (Moss and Thomas, 2021, p. 16) - those who are not recorded in the archive are removed from history. This is useful for understanding the Afghan context, because power relations between the Taliban and Afghan women are characterised by extreme control and restriction. By removing Afghan women's agency in every area of life, the Taliban continually minimises their existence, and archival silence is an effective way to do this. A final theoretical insight that can shed light on these archival silences is that of Taylor and Jordan-Baker, who argue marginalised people are most likely to suffer from archival silences. Archives for these groups are unlikely to be created in the first place, and formal institutional archives may be about these groups but not by them, focusing on statistics rather than lived experiences (Taylor and Jordan-Baker, 2019, p. 201). Because the voices of Afghan women are so heavily restricted, the majority of scholarship and archival material concerning their experiences under Taliban rule is generated by external academic institutions and international organisations. This risks not capturing their authentic experiences and contributing further to their erasure in future, because Afghan women themselves do not shape or own this narrative.

Archival silence has shaped the methodology of this article significantly - firstly, because it suggests archives are not neutral or always factually comprehensive, and secondly because it means relevant archival material is limited. However, this paper can be read as an intervention against and direct challenge to archival silences. It aims to centre stories of Afghan women's resistance, as well as detailing their experiences living under gender apartheid. It uses the interviews discussed above to centre Afghan voices as much as possible, and acknowledges the effects of Western-led scholarship in shaping previous narratives about muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 783), attempting to address this head-on. The research process included seeking out and compiling archival material detailing women's experiences under 'gender apartheid' and the paper itself could contribute to filling the archival gaps discussed above.

The Taliban Regime - Living Under Gender Apartheid

The Taliban first came to power in 1996, controlling most of Afghanistan until the 2001 US invasion as part of the "War on Terror" (US Department Of State Archives, 2001). The conflict between the Taliban and US-backed Afghan government continued for twenty years (Hollingsworth, 2021), until the Trump administration brokered a deal in 2020, which included a promise to withdraw US troops from the country, intended to be followed by peace talks (Graham-Harrison et al., 2020), which did not materialise. The Afghan army was heavily dependent on US support, and the country fell to the Taliban within weeks (Borger, 2022). After regaining power and territory, the Taliban established the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' by force in August 2021 (Akbari and True, 2022, p. 625) and progressively re-instituted an Islamic fundamentalist regime, despite refusal from the international community to recognise it as a state (rather than a terror group) and significant international sanctions.

Over the last four years, the Taliban has imposed its interpretation of Sharia law, entirely re-shaping the lives of Afghan people, especially women (Vivin and Prema, 2024, p. 120). Vivin and Prema argue that Islamist extremist groups favour puritanical interpretations of Sharia values, extending it beyond civil law into criminal law and encouraging punishments that reach far beyond what the code permits. These are often targeted at religious minorities, LGBTQ+ people, and women (Vivin and Prema, 2024, pp. 123–127). Many leaders of these groups are untrained in interpreting Sharia law, and use it to rebuke Western influence, implement anti-democratic systems and establish fundamentalist regimes (Vivin and Prema, 2024, p. 127). While Afghanistan does not have a clearly defined legal or judicial system, Taliban rule has been characterised by severe punishments, limits on the rights of minority groups, and a quest for control, aligning with a more fundamentalist interpretation of Sharia into Islamic law. This fundamentalist legal system is the tool through which the Taliban has orchestrated the restriction of women's rights, framing this as traditional and Islamic. This is despite the fact that the Qur'an as the central religious text of Islam holds women morally and spiritually equal to men (Vivin and Prema, 2024, p. 124), suggesting religion is actually a pretext for

implementing the extreme, misogynistic ideology of the group and creating a ‘gender apartheid.’

Gender apartheid refers specifically to conditions under which women and girls are denied fundamental rights through institutional frameworks, and occurs when oppressive cultural and religious norms are codified in government laws (Safaeimojarad, 2024, p. 2). The term ‘apartheid’ refers to a separation in political, economic and social terms, in which one group is isolated in order to be systematically targeted and oppressed (Safaeimojarad, 2024, p. 25), reflecting the splitting of Afghan men and women into separate classes of citizens with differing rights, freedoms and status. It is firmly applicable to both iterations of the Taliban government, given many of the oppressive policies currently in force are modelled after those of the 1990s. This apartheid has been reintroduced in everyday life and institutions, and consequently the relative power given to men over women, combined with the misogynistic attitude of the state, has ‘emboldened’ men to subjugate women and girls, often via extreme violence. In these conditions, women and girls are not just disempowered and disenfranchised by the state, but in their own communities - this regression of rights is coordinated, and continually enforced by men as fathers, brothers, and husbands (Akbari and and True, 2022, p. 625).

Freedom of movement is largely restricted and women cannot be employed in the public or private sectors, use many public spaces including parks, or see male doctors, stripping away their right to healthcare given they cannot work as doctors either, to provide healthcare to one-another (Bennet, 2024, pp. 5–7). One ‘vice and virtue’ law introduced in 2024 demonstrates the extremity of these regulations, stating: “Whenever an adult woman leaves her home out of necessity, she is obliged to conceal her voice, face, and body.” (Kelly and Joya, 2024) What is and is not a necessity is decided at the discretion of Taliban leaders, creating significant potential for exploitation of this policy to harm women via punishment, especially given the severe penalties extreme groups such as the Taliban favour. The severity of this gender apartheid is reflected in a 2024 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, stating the Taliban’s system of oppressive laws “is motivated by and results in a

profound rejection of the full humanity of women and girls” (Bennet, 2024, p. 3).

Thus, there is clear evidence that Afghan women are living under extremely restrictive conditions and being treated as second class citizens, with this gender apartheid extended to every area of their lives. This demonstrates the Afghan context is particularly severe in its legal and institutional efforts to oppress women, extending beyond misogynistic attitudes or rhetoric.

Secret Schooling

A significant element of gender apartheid that has prompted feminist resistance is the legal ban on girls and women receiving secondary (Akbari and and True, 2022, p. 626) or tertiary (Amiri, 2023; Amiri and Ahmadi, 2023; Toran, 2024) education, as well as a ban on seeking private education or leaving the country to pursue tertiary education elsewhere (Bennet, 2024, p. 5).

This resistance comes in the form of secret schools, which are a familiar method of resistance for Afghan women, having been used to counteract the previous Taliban restrictions on girls’ education during their rule from 1996-2001. A key organisation resisting Taliban policies was the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), which used education to deliver empowerment through literacy and political consciousness. In addition to classes, RAWA improved access to information by publishing and distributing a quarterly political magazine (Farhoumand-Sims, 2005, pp. 118–119), blending their humanitarian aid with consciousness raising efforts and more political acts. RAWA exemplifies the role of education and information sharing in resisting oppressive regimes, as well as resistance that is by nature community-based. Such organisations provide a valuable insight into the continuous work needed to protect and advance women’s education under the Taliban. This practice has been revived across the country in the last four years, with several key impacts.

The main function of secret schools is to ensure girls do not fall behind. A wide variety of subjects including biology, chemistry, physics and maths are taught, often for just an hour a day to avoid detection, but are still instrumental in ensuring education is available at all.

Private schools continue to operate as they did before while evading government attention, whereas informal community-led secret schools are a lower quality option available to those who cannot pay, continuing often with the aim of providing morale and community for young women (Graham-Harrison, 2022; Kermani, 2022). Non Government Organisations (NGOs) championing girls' education such as Shahmama provide practical support - textbooks, stationary, and sometimes teacher wages (Graham-Harrison, 2022) - to keep the schools running, which are especially essential for those that are improvised in homes or mosques (Kermani, 2022). The ability to hold online classes has allowed an expansion of secret schooling and helped it to reach the minority of Afghans who can access the internet (Graham-Harrison, 2022), with online connections playing a key role in increasing access to information, a key element of education as resistance.

A second function is restoring hope to girls who feel their future is constrained and there is little point in resisting. One school teacher told the Guardian "I do this as a volunteer, to support the girls and create hope in their future, and the girls also give me hope" and "[I] try to motivate them, with messages like 'no knowledge is wasted'. I tell them I am here to teach and support you, you have to stay hopeful, take your opportunities" (Graham-Harrison, 2022). An education is a key tool of hope in the Afghan political climate - further Taliban legislation that bans women from speaking outside of their homes has been implemented (Kelly and Joya, 2024), adding to the growing effort from their government to silence them. It is important that teachers impress upon young women that their contributions are valuable and encourage them to plan for the future, to counteract government messaging.

A third function is political mobilisation. The political role played by organisations such as RAWA has been replicated in educational resistance throughout the second Taliban government, and students are keenly aware of its transformative social effect. One seventh-grade student reflected to the Guardian: "I have my argument ready if a Taliban stops me. I will say 'you didn't study so you are like this, I have to study so I won't be the same'" (Graham-Harrison, 2022). A fifteen-year-old student also attending an underground school told

the BBC: "Be brave, if you are brave no-one can stop you." (Kermani, 2022) Because women are both prevented from holding political office and ostracised from political spaces and discussions, this is a fundamentally important practice for an anti-Taliban coalition. Including girls in those political discussions and communicating political ideas to them further strengthens activist coalitions and builds feminist organisations that can continue to resist. Currently, no woman in Afghanistan holds a political leadership post at the provincial or national level, and women rarely have any input into decisions made in their communities (Penn, 2024). Active and intentional political mobilisation of Afghan girls counters the message that politics is not for them, and the Taliban decree that they should not participate. As Alison Davidian, the US Women Country Representative in Afghanistan, argues "Nothing undermines the Taliban's vision for society more than empowering the very part of the population that it seeks to oppress." (Penn, 2024) These acts of political mobilisation reflect the part Afghan women play in long-term, covert acts of resistance in the spaces between large-scale revolutions. Sharing feminist ideas and delivering empowerment to the next generation is one example of this.

The Impacts of Secret Schooling Community Building and Mutual Aid

The functions of secret schooling in Afghanistan demonstrated above are demonstrative of a wider scope than just academics, and combined they exemplify community building. Social connections between women and girls are in themselves a form of resistance, allowing ideas to be shared and strength to be gained in numbers, particularly in a system designed to isolate and silence women. Given the implementation of laws prohibiting women from showing their faces outside their homes in 2024 (Kelly and Joya, 2024) effectively preventing them from seeing or speaking to each other, covert community building between women is becoming even more important in resisting the Taliban regime. Strong community builds solidarity and faith in 'people power' which fights demobilisation brought on by isolation and "hopelessness-induced apathy" (Spade, 2020, p. 137).

These actions can also be interpreted as a prime example of mutual aid. Mutual aid refers to a form of political participation where community members work together to meet each other's needs and in doing so build political movements, to make change on social issues that concern them (Spade, 2020, pp. 136–137). By providing education, which Afghan girls cannot access from the state, Afghan women support their wellbeing and survival. If this is occurring on as large a scale as news organisations report, Afghan women have begun to create their own underground system for delivering education, albeit disjointed and greatly reduced from the previous public system, but nevertheless tackling the social problem of gender discrimination collectively. This is valuable because it provides tangible, daily impact rather than leaving Afghan girls in limbo. This is an important alternative to waiting for substantive policy overhaul or regime change which is not guaranteed, and necessitate a lengthy process if it were to occur. Afghan women are doing what is necessary to fill the gap of entirely dismantled educational infrastructure, aligning with the mutual aid theory suggesting the most impactful political acts are not necessarily the largest in scope, most publicised or most radical.

Providing an Alternative to Masculinised Conceptions of Resistance

The imagery and events associated with resistance, especially to oppressive regimes, tends to be focused around violent revolt and conflict as a means of 'overthrowing' a government and forcing regime change. This concept of resistance has been explicitly masculinised because the participants in these events have been primarily male, as have the scholars documenting and analysing them. It has also been implicitly masculinised, due to associations often held between masculinity, militarism and the use of force. This masculinised resistance explicitly - due to primarily male participants and scholarly perspectives - as well as implicitly, due to associations between masculinity, militarism and the use of force. However, what is often not accounted for is community-based resistance, focused around mutual aid and mitigating harms. These more social and care-based behaviours are associated with femininity, and often considered less legitimate or sub-par forms of resistance, despite the positive impacts they have, especially in the long term. They may not even

be considered acts of resistance due to the narrow parameters outlined above.

Secret schooling in Afghanistan effectively challenges those assumptions about revolution and its historical masculinisation, proving effective resistance may not fit into this model. Afghan women teachers are providing tangible intellectual and emotional benefit to their communities, with remarkable consistency and at a remarkable scale given the restrictions imposed on their speech and movement. In this case, secret schools as a community-led act of resistance, directly defy the Taliban regime and effectively interrupt the goal it is trying to achieve by banning women from education - control. Underground educators during both the first and second Taliban regimes have also been considered a launchpad for political activities, whether this is by distributing political information (like RAWA) or communicating to young women that learning is a political act of defiance (reflected in the student perspectives represented in print and broadcast journalism). Thus, it can also represent a precursor to more 'active' or typical forms of resistance.

In the Afghan context, it can be argued that community- and care-based resistance is not only necessary but an ideal way to combat gender apartheid. Because gender apartheid is enforced by male relatives and community members in every area of daily life, and in economic and cultural spheres as well as political, it follows logically that resistance should uplift and centre women in the community. When human rights and dignity are denied, care becomes all the more vital. Gender apartheid is also associated, as outlined above, with isolation and a loss of hope for many young women, but education can provide social connection with other women and mobilise them toward organising for change. Secret schooling could also be considered a more sustainable mode of resistance over time, given the secrecy it operates under and the financial backing it garners from NGOs.

Challenging Narratives of Muslim Women as Victims

The phenomenon of secret education, led by Afghan women for Afghan girls challenges the narrative - driven primarily by Western governments and media as a pretext for the 'War on Terror' - that Muslim women are helpless victims; that Western intervention is required to

improve their status and fix ‘backward’ Muslim societies Abu-Lughod argues that Muslim women are continually presented as “neat cultural icons” reified over time by media and public discourse. This has resulted in the West, and in particular Western feminists, developing an “obsession” with the plight of Muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 783). She makes particular reference to the stereotype that Muslim women “shuffle around silently in burqas” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784) reducing them to one-dimensional characters without agency. This fails to reflect the power of Muslim women’s actions, as well as their ability and potential to lead resistance as opposed to being ‘rescued’ or ‘liberated.’

Challenging the Taliban’s oppressive laws and prioritising the human rights of women - even with the threat of extreme and violent retribution - displays incredible strength, and is a bold exercise of agency. In extremely challenging circumstances where they are actively resisting the Taliban regime on a daily basis, anecdotal and journalistic evidence shows Afghan women using the few resources available to make as large a positive impact as possible, and using the medium of schooling to achieve social and political collective benefits. This is antithetical to weakness or perpetual victimhood, indicating a positive impact of these underground schools beyond Afghanistan’s borders - this movement provides a counter-narrative to what has dominated Western scholarship and media in the past.

Conclusion

The coalition of Afghan women currently operating secret schools to counteract Taliban restrictions on girls’ education play an important role in interrupting the Taliban’s ‘gender apartheid’ by defying the government’s attempts to fully control women’s lives and ensuring their voices are not entirely silenced. In addition to carrying out the essential role of academic education, to ensure girls are informed and do not fall behind in their courses of study, secret schools provide three other major benefits to Afghan women as a collective. They build community and establish mutual aid, provide an effective alternative to traditional masculinised conceptions of resistance, and challenge the stereotype of Muslim women as victims that is so pervasive across the Western world. Thus, the impact of secret schools

extends beyond just increased knowledge, with substantive social and political impacts to communities where they are present that become more and more essential as gender-based discrimination worsens over time under Taliban rule. As a feminist coalition, they are instrumental in Afghan girls’ lives and futures.

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