



# WAR AGAINST GIRLS' EDUCATION

Two sisters raise their voices following the rise of the Taliban

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Senior Shakiba Omarkhail was 9 years old when she and her older sister, Shafiqah Omarkhail, found out they would no longer attend school in Kabul, Afghanistan. It was a horrific day when the Taliban poisoned the water system and diffused toxic gas in their local school in April 2012, hospitalizing more than a hundred girls and teachers.

"I will never forget that day," Shafiqah said. "That was the day that all our hopes and dreams were dead. It was terrifying knowing that [school] was the key for our bright future, but now somebody had taken it away from us."

Luckily, no students died in the incident, but the Taliban made their motivations clear: to restrict girls from education and confine them in their homes.

"[My classmates] all had big dreams," Shafiqah said. "They wanted to be doctors or engineers. They worked very hard to get to the level they wanted. On that day, it was not only me but thousands of other girls who had their dreams buried because of the Taliban. Even now, when I remember it, it breaks me into a million pieces."

But Shakiba and her sister did not want

to surrender to the Taliban's war against education in a society where the female literacy rate was already very low.

"My dad went against the norms when he put me and my sister in school," Shakiba said. "He didn't care about what other people were saying. [But] because of the [poisoning] incident, my dad knew [Kabul] wasn't safe anymore."

The Omarkhail family moved to the U.S. in 2014, not only to seek better opportunities for higher education without any restrictions but also to escape the ongoing war.

While Shakiba is now fully settled in Fairfax County, she is worried about her fellow Afghan girls because of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. The Taliban banned girls from secondary school after assuming power in mid-August, ordering that girls will only be allowed education under strict restrictions and gender-based segregated classes.

"I was worried," Shakiba said. "The first thing I thought of was girls—they wouldn't be able to go to school anymore."

With the Taliban's rise to power, many Afghans have been trying to flee the country just like the Omarkhail family did seven years ago.

"Every girl deserves the right to an education," Shakiba said. "They've been treated so horribly since the beginning of time. It's so sad to see how society has advanced so much, yet women in those countries have to worry about not being able to go to school, or if their daughters go outside, [families are unsure] if they're going to come back alive."

The rise of the Taliban has sparked protests in Shakiba's city, with many women condemning the new restrictions and fighting for their due rights.

"When the Taliban took over, a lot of Afghan women were protesting," Shakiba said. "It was such a big thing. It really made me proud as an Afghan woman to see them standing up for themselves, for their education and their rights. I hope that they don't lose hope."

Despite the dark cloud looming over female education in Afghanistan, Shakiba is optimistic, although she says it is going to be a long struggle.

"As I watch the news, I see how the Afghan [women] still manage to keep a smile on their faces and have been so brave through everything," Shakiba said. "Watching their resilience is what keeps me moving forward."