

Girls' Soccer in the Taliban's Wake



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Think about all of the rights that you have and take for granted every day. Think about your right to an education. Think about your right to speak your mind and express yourself. Think about your right to a life free of violence and humiliation. Now, take a second to picture yourself living in a place where these rights are no longer yours.

More importantly, most of the women in this place have no idea what it would be like to have those rights. 90 percent of the women there are facing violence and 75 percent are married by the age of 16.

Compare that to your life and the rights you have and you can see just how different this world is. You live in a world of knowledge and enlightenment while these people have been forced to live in a land of ignorance and darkness. Hope is an

element that few people have and even fewer know of. You can see the contrast that exists between the lives that you have lead and the lives that many lead today: the life I led up until my young adulthood.

I was born and raised in Afghanistan and lived with my parents, six sisters, and one brother until I was nineteen years old. We all lived in one big house as a family, and we were never separated from each other, no matter what was going on. I was only nine years old when the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 1996, changing my life and the lives of many others forever. I fell asleep every night listening to the sounds of rockets and gunfire. Although everyone suffered from the takeover, women and children were the greatest victims. Women's rights were not only terrible; they were non-existent.

School is something about which most children complain. In my case, it was what I wanted more than anything. I wanted to leave my house and go to school, but that was not possible. I remember as a young girl spending every day of my life inside the house for six years doing absolutely nothing. We had no television. The women and girls of my family were not able to go outside unless we were walking with our father or brother. Not only could I not go to school, I was not even able to read or study at home, by order of the Taliban. As if the ban on education were not demeaning enough, strict rules governed what girls and women wore. The length of our burkas had to be appropriate, covering our faces completely, and not an inch of our body was allowed to be exposed. Failure to comply resulted in physical punishment. I will never forget getting beat up on the street by the Taliban for not wearing my burka properly.

Though all of these external rules and rights violations hurt us all, it made my family come closer together. I was very lucky to have my three older sisters who would play with me and study with me inside our house. My family stayed together and slept in the same room because we were afraid of losing one another. The civil war created this deep fear in my heart,

the fear of losing a member of my family. Not only did I fear losing my father because I love him, but I knew that if he were to die, my family would not last without him. Women were not allowed to work, and without him, our family would have no income. We lived in fear. This is the story of my life and what I remember from my childhood. That, as terrible and all encompassing as it may seem, was only one experience of the war.

Let me tell you about the other experience of this war, the side that kept me alive—the clinging to hope. Hope for an education, hope for basic human rights, and hope for a better future. Hope is what helped me make it through all of those years of oppression.

When the regime fell, I had a chance to test out my new-found freedom, and with that, I fell in love with the game of football. This was a risky sport, a sport that empowered me. It made me feel like I was strong and equal, all of this occurring in a society that had known none of this for women for quite some time. I was humiliated over and over again and people tried to convince me to give up playing soccer, but I never did. I used their complaints and arguments as fuel for the passion I have for the sport. Their opposition made me stronger. My wonderful parents always supported my decisions, no matter what the situation was. They were always there for me, and for that I am eternally grateful.

My parents' undying support did not end with soccer. They supported my getting an education. I never knew how important education was to me until it was taken away. My parents always emphasized the importance of education and my mother told me that when we set our goals high and dream our dreams, the key to meeting the goals and making the dreams come true is education. It was the desire for education that drove me out of Afghanistan.

I have been very lucky, and I am so fortunate to live, now, in

America and have the opportunity to receive an education. If it weren't for soccer, I would not have made it to college. Through playing soccer and becoming a better player, I gained courage and power. It was this courage and power that allowed me to break free of the bonds of my gender role. I knew from the outset that being an Afghani girl playing soccer was not going to be an easy feat, but I followed through and pushed on because of my passion and love for the game. Through playing soccer, I gradually felt that I was actually a person who could make my own decisions, speak my own mind, and learn to be myself.

At the time when I started playing soccer, I was literally the only girl who wanted to play, and I had never played soccer on a team. However, through the Soccer Federation, one of the coaches started to recruit more girls from our high schools. By the end of 2006, we had 25 teams in Kabul and other cities and we also established the soccer teams for the first time in the history of Afghanistan. Eventually, I was named the captain of the first Afghanistan Women's National Soccer Team. I was honored and humbled at the thought of representing my conservative and oppressed country in such an empowering way—as a woman playing soccer. I wanted to show the world that these women were different from the women that they pictured when they thought of Afghanistan. We were not just playing soccer, we were making history.

We were harassed and threatened many times, but we refused to give up and quit. We accepted the challenges not just for ourselves, but for the other women that we represented and to whom we gave hope. Every time I stepped on the soccer field, I felt like there was nothing else existing around me. I felt happy and free like I had never felt before. The hardest moment for me in this journey was playing soccer at the stadium where women had been punished and executed for moral crimes and escaping from their abusive husbands. It was hard to block out the history that had occurred there. At the same

time, it was this terrible history that motivated me to fight for women's rights and be such a strong advocate for women everywhere.

Soccer was an outlet for my emotions: my anger and everything else that I had felt. But playing soccer on a team with girls from all over Afghanistan and various tribes also helped me to understand that there is value in every single person and that everyone deserves the best, regardless of their race, class, gender, or ethnicity. Playing soccer taught me to be a team player and competitor in a way that built confidence in me.

Soccer and education gave me the ability to look at the world from a completely different perspective, views I could have never imagined before. Most importantly, soccer gave me hope for living and hope for a brighter existence. After a while, it became a part of my life that I couldn't imagine living without. It changed my life and it shaped the person I am today. It also changed the lives of my teammates who are all studying abroad in various countries, pursuing higher education. My experience as a woman in sports has given me the determination and spirit that I have needed to call upon many times. I have learned that soccer builds confidence, and sports in general have the ability to empower women.

Join me in creating opportunities for women all over the world to become stronger and change their lives. Change is not easy, but great gains are preceded by great changes. Women are an essential ingredient in democracies and the peace that we hope for in this world. My hope is that I have inspired you to find a way to take action and do your part to help insure and promote the rights and opportunities of women all over the world.

I am one of many. Similarly, my story is one of many more just like it. Still, I hope that my story will be a source of hope for many young women who are dreaming of freedom and the freedom to be who they want to be. I pray that my story will

encourage women everywhere to follow their dreams, pursue their education, and do whatever else they need to do in order to break through the barriers that gender discrimination has made for them. Consider all of the freedoms you have in comparison to those of the women you have just heard about. Please take a moment to reflect on this. What can you do to help someone experience the freedom that you enjoy every day? I encourage you to go out and help those women, and in turn, help the world.

Learn more about Shamila's journey from her [TedxWomen](#) talk.