

# Commentary

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## Afghanistan's women need our support and ideas to improve the future

I remember my first trip from the United States to Afghanistan. Traveling from our beautiful mountains and flying over their extensive, majestic mountains, and I thought about how they looked so much like our Rockies. I could not wait to land and see more.

To be honest, I had some fear because this was the first year I could go into country. It was 2003. I developed and started my first program there in 2001 after the fall of the Taliban and the Soviet invasion. I had to wait two years until I was told it would be safer for me to visit.

I was hit with a dose of reality when we were flying over Kabul.

There were tanks on the ground. I felt as if there was a cloud over this land. I was told that it had not rained in seven years. And it was taking a long time to remove all the now unused tanks.

My days included interviewing female candidates for U.S. undergraduate degrees. They needed to speak and read enough to score 550 on their TOEFL exam. Otherwise, we would be setting them up possibly for a failed experience at college.

My background allowed me to evaluate their psychological resilience, since many were schooled living in refugee camps. Or in basements of apartments, secretly, in their country. Essentially, I knew the women all had some

degree of trauma. I wanted them to thrive in college in the U.S. The good news is all 70 students who were eventually enrolled in the U.S. colleges across the country graduated with high grades and many were tutors and leaders on their campuses.

This all happened over the 10 years I was director of the nonprofit Initiative to Educate Afghan Women.

The women grew wings in every way. As did I.

During the other parts of my nine visits to Afghanistan, I wanted to learn and experience Afghan culture, get to know the people, as well as the Islamic faith. I knew after Sept. 11 when I decided to educate the women of Afghanistan! I knew Osama bin Laden and his gang created misperceptions about the Afghan people and Islam.

I shared many meals on beautifully colored cotton spreads on the floor. I noticed that being together for dinner as a family happened every night for them. They ate together, laughed, talked about their day. And talked about life!

As a guest in their homes, I was offered the food they could not afford. That might have been a piece of chicken. Or something they only had on a holiday or at a wedding. I was the honored guest, always, at any table I sat at over my many warm and caring visits.

I returned to the United States hooked on the Afghan people, their traditions, their care. When I visited the students on our great campuses in the U.S., I went with the women for prayers at the mosques that were nearby, if there were any. I felt the up and down body movements in their prayers, supporting me.

Today, the current situation in Afghanistan is unfolding hour by hour. Day by day. With hope in mind, regardless of this tragedy, I am thinking of any and all, small or grand solutions. How can the world help Afghanistan now? I know these answers will come to us in time. Twenty years ago when I spoke to my first audience after launching the program, the name of the talk was, "Afghanistan: A Reason For Optimism." That was in 2002. People were a bit confused with my choice of words!

So then, what can the world do now? Is looking for and talking about who to blame helpful? How about putting our different sized heads together to talk, share ideas of how we can move forward to make a difference in life for Afghan people.

This is my creative thought. What might yours be?

I am thinking that we find investors to develop the adventure fitness tourism market in the lovely country of Afghanistan that so

many of us have or have not been able to visit.

The mountains, if some were developed for skiing, honestly watch out Aspen Skiing Co. They would give Aspen Snowmass mountains a run for the money! Same with hiking, biking and so much more. The Taliban might leave with bunches of money paid by these smart investors. We would then get our country back proceeding forward as they have been over the past 20 years.

One more possibility: Those in the space travel business might even invest in private plans to fly people directly to these resort areas. Just like the new flights to space. Only these would be much bigger planes. So the cost would be far less than the flights to outer space.

Please keep your thoughts, prayers, blessings or whatever you do, with the people of Afghanistan who are suffering. And let us please find ways to help. Even if we have to build an underground something.

*Paula Nirschel, who lives in Aspen, is the founder and past director of the Initiative to Educate Afghan Women (IEAW) and founder/director of Action for Afghan Women (AAFW). She the facilitator of "Socrates Cafe Forum on Afghanistan" on Aug. 28 at Here House in Aspen. She can be reached at Paula@afaw.org.*

**Paula Nirschel**  
Guest column