



GHEA21

THE FREEDOM TO LEARN:

Student Stories of Challenge, Aspiration, and Accomplishment

INTRODUCTION

Every year, students threatened or displaced by political repression, conflict, or crisis take more than 2,000 regular, credit-bearing courses offered by the Global Higher Education Alliance for the 21st Century (GHEA21). They include students at universities exiled from Afghanistan, Belarus, and Myanmar, students in Russia who value open inquiry and critical thinking, and students who live in refugee camps in Bangladesh and Kenya. Many have spoken eloquently in their GHEA21 courses about the challenges they face in accessing a liberal higher education and the hopes and promises it provides.

This collection of student work is a small selection of the perspectives on the freedom to learn that have emerged from GHEA21 courses. It presents a range of work—academic papers, articles written for public audiences, and creative writing—from several countries. GHEA21 compiled this collection as an initiative of its Collaborative for Threatened and Exiled Universities.

I invite you to hear these student voices, which are often missing from discussions of academic freedom, learn from the experiences and insights of threatened and exiled students, and consider how to expand opportunities for students who are determined, against enormous odds, to gain a liberal education. As this collection makes clear, a great many threatened and exiled students have substantial, often underappreciated potential to lead and advocate for their communities and thereby contribute to solutions to repression and forced displacement.

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Bard College on behalf of GHEA21

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DON'T PROVE OUR MOTHERS WRONG

by Marjan Noori

Marjan Noori is an Afghan first-year student in the Bard Global Degree Program with a deep passion for nonfiction writing and storytelling. She is interested in exploring people's lives and preserving their stories before they fade from memory. Her writing focuses on amplifying the voices of women whose experiences and rights are often overlooked because of gender discrimination.

Before the Taliban returned to power in 2021, teachers and families asked girls what they wanted to be when they grew up, and most answered "doctor". Now, no one asks this question or soothes the pain of girls who have no future. Their mothers suffered this pain before, when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s.

Today's young Afghan women are determined to get an education and want access to accredited online university degree programs and schools for Afghan women is far more effective than waiting to support them years later as illiterate adults.

My mother couldn't complete her school because of Taliban restrictions. Her mother, who was illiterate, told her a lot of long fairy tales, but she just remembers two of them. Because neither she nor my grandmother could write those stories down, we are losing our legacy. My mother told me that when I become educated, it means that my mother is educated, however after twenty years, when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan again, it was a harsh setback to repeat my mother and grandmother's destiny.

The first revelation of the Quran begins with the command "Read" (Surah Al-Alaq 96:1), emphasizing the importance of knowledge. This command applies to all humanity.

Khadija, the wife of the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who is universally recognized as the first person to accept Islam, was a successful businesswoman. She was highly educated for her time, particularly in areas of commerce, management, and literacy. While formal schooling was rare in the 7th-century, women who worked and earned money were accepted in early Islamic society.

The Taliban don't offer a purer interpretation of Islam, as they claim, but instead misunderstand the Quran. They are taking away our right of education, which is against Islam.

Today, Afghanistan stands out tragically as the only country in the world where secondary and higher education is strictly forbidden to girls and women. As a result, 2.2 million adolescent girls have been banned from attending secondary school, severely limiting their future opportunities and the country's development.

Technology has made it possible for the world to track the educational crisis facing Afghan girls in real time. The same technology should now be used to expand access to accredited education before another generation is lost.

Girls who are shut out of education now won't be able to go back because they will be overloaded with family responsibilities when they have grown into adults. We are tired of writing posts that beg the Taliban, "please open schools and universities for Afghan girls." We should look instead for alternative ways to get an education for Afghan girls.

In Afghanistan there are only a few online universities, such as the Afghanistan Open Online University, Women Online University, Roshan Afghanistan Online University, and their diplomas are not widely recognized by employers, as they lack full national or international accreditation.

Besides, there are just a few online schools like The School of Leadership Afghanistan whose students are Afghan girls. These schools receive thousands of applications for just a few

dozen spaces. Such opportunities are too limited.

The international community should invest in different opportunities that can be made available to Afghan young women: accredited online programs, community-based learning. Training for women to teach other girls can help build sustainable and recognized education systems.

Investment in girls' education in Afghanistan will reduce poverty,

improve women's mental and maternal health, and contribute to the country's economic development.

Give me your hand to make a chain. Together we can form a chain stronger than iron before an entire generation is lost. Afghan girls should be able to read the words written to preserve their legacy and prepare them for tomorrow.

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REFUGEE YOUTH REBUILD DIALOGUE THROUGH DIGITAL STORYTELLING

by Ata Ullah

Ata Ullah is a Rohingya youth advocate, community researcher, and founder of the NextGen Rohingya Network. He studies Political Science at Bard College through the GHEA21 network. His work focuses on youth empowerment, digital storytelling, and communication challenges in refugee contexts.

Can you imagine a home that feels like a jail? For more than a million Rohingya in the camps of Cox's Bazar, barbed wire isn't just a boundary; it's a barrier to the future. For children here, eight years have passed in Bangladesh without a stable, qualified school system, let alone journalism. And this follows decades of being excluded back in Myanmar, their homeland. The result isn't just lost lessons, but the slow extinction of hope.

We recently walked through these camps, sat on the floors of bamboo classrooms, and listened to students, activists, dreamed journalist, photographers, parents and teachers. Their message was unanimous and urgent: without education and journalistic work, a generation is being lost before our eyes.

In Cox's Bazar, the world's largest refugee camp, uncertainty breeds fear, not silence. Many Rohingya youth speak little Bangla, relying entirely on digital networks to connect to the outside world. Basic services like education, healthcare and electricity remain scarce. Smartphones have become lifelines used for online classes, English practice, global news and documenting reality: flooded homes, rebuilt bamboo bridges, night study by torchlight. These aren't toys; they're tools for survival, learning and expression. International reports cite shrinking civic spaces [UNHCR, 2025], but miss how youth shape dialogue daily. Through one voice note, one careful story at a time, they're rebuilding conversation amid crisis.

Phones as informal newsrooms

News reaches Rohingya camps first through WhatsApp groups, Facebook posts or late-night voice notes, not NGO reports. Police movements, food distribution

changes, fires or ration rumors all arrive as brief mobile messages.

“Rumors spread faster than truth,” Rohim Ullah said. Food shortage alerts trigger panic before verification. Humanitarian studies confirm this: without timely information, rumors fill the void [Internews, 2024].

Youth respond with newsroom instincts, cross-checking with community leaders, comparing messages across groups, waiting for NGO or mosque confirmation. “We pause before forwarding,” declared advocate Hafiz Ullah.

One incident showed their impact. When a WhatsApp rumor spread that food rations had been cut, “families panicked, children cried and elders feared losing fragile stability,” recalled storyteller Monjur Alom. NextGen Rohingya Network (NGRN) volunteers checked the claim with aid agencies and shared a clarification through 200-member WhatsApp youth groups. The panic eased within hours.

These storytelling “circles” begin simply: one youth posts poetry, friends join via private WhatsApp invites and groups grow to 100-300 members with trusted volunteer moderators removing inflammatory content daily. One page, started by three youths, now shares water point cooperation photos and learning successes with 250 members.

How these circles operate

One “circle keeper” (trusted volunteer) starts safe topics. Members join via local leaders or classmates. One circle grew from five friends sharing English tips to 70 members meeting twice daily. The daily rhythm follows set patterns — hygiene tips in the evening, education barriers later at night — governed by a founding rule: “No names, no blame, solutions only.” Moderators pin verified updates and delete rumors. Politics gets muted instantly.

These circles embody “journalism as dialogue space,” but are concrete, not theoretical. No physical squares exist. Bamboo walls separate neighbors, yet 70 phones create a public forum where young people are reshaping norms and creating spaces that feel “supportive yet cautious.” Education? Safe. Security conflicts? Off-limits. Still, real change emerges.

Through these circles, the youth are building their own verification systems. Moderation follows clear rules: no politics, no names, focus on solutions. What began as informal chats has become structured dialogue, proving Rohingya youth aren’t waiting for external saviors. One careful message at a time, they’re creating resilient information ecosystems where truth travels as fast as fear.

Storytelling between risk and responsibility

Young people in the camps are not merely passively consuming information; they are now also actively producing it. They record short videos or social media posts about water shortages, broken infrastructure and everyday resilience, filming themselves rebuilding a bamboo bridge after a rainstorm, documenting families queuing at water points, showing volunteers assisting elderly people during flooding. Others have posted about drainage issues that make children sick, or photographed people working together in distribution lines as evidence that dignity still exists amid hardship.

“I shared a video of how hard it was for us to collect water daily at the camp one time,” said Mohammed Hassan. “My goal was for people to feel our reality and understand what we deal with on a daily basis; not simply have a number.” For him and many others, the act of telling stories becomes an assertion that there are no statistics to define the lives of Rohingya people.

However, every story starts with a risk evaluation. Young storytellers have described to me an internal checklist they perform before sharing their stories: Will this put anyone in danger? Is there any identifying information about a sensitive location? Will this be read as a piece of political criticism or incitement? Will I be punished or have my actions closely monitored after sharing this? Most often, the young storytellers tell a story with images but without the mention of names of individuals. The use of anonymity doesn’t indicate apathy; it’s sometimes just an additional layer of protection.

For young people, these actions are thoughtful and courageous. Many have friends who have been given warnings or punishment for posting their views or reacting inappropriately on social media (tweets, video postings, etc.). As one respondent told me: “The camp I used to go to has given lots of people warnings for posting negative things about the camp.” Another mentioned how someone he knows was called into the office after posting a picture of a camp location. These types of warnings and stories also circulate among those who share through informal means and remind them to be careful.

Despite all of this, there are many youths generating digital stories. People create their own “youth pages” that showcase their own poetry and art in everyday life, revealing that there is more to being a Rohingya refugee than just suffering. According to Mohammed Junaid, “I love seeing a storytelling pages of Rohingya youth, as their focus on poetry, art and being resilient rather than just being refugees is inspiring.” Such stories also do not fall into the traditional “Rohingya refugee crisis” story. Instead, they represent Rohingya youth as creative thinkers, leaders and keepers of their community.

Rumors, fear and the hard work of trust

Rumors haunt Cox's Bazar camps daily. "Food rations end tomorrow." "Aid cuts begin tonight." "Relocation starts at dawn." These messages trigger immediate anxiety, spreading faster than corrections from community leaders or NGOs [Internews, 2024].

Trust becomes survival. Youth rely on community teachers, trained volunteers and verified NGO pages over anonymous forwards. "I check with teachers, leaders or multiple sources before sharing," said Monjur Alom. This isn't casual caution, it's community protection.

Youth voice circles also actively de-escalate conflict. In one case, Hamidur Rahman recalled, a post debunked rumors of a fire, preventing night-time panic in the camp.

These interventions work because trust networks are tight. A 70-member dialogue circle might spend 30 minutes verifying before posting. As one-page moderator told me: "We delete rumors instantly, but verified clarifications get pinned." What looks like simple messaging reveals sophisticated information stewardship.

In 2025 alone, youth circles calmed three major rumor waves: food cuts (verified false), police sweeps (routine patrol) and water shortages (due to a lack of sufficient water taps). Each time, panic subsided within hours, not days.

These small acts carry immense weight. In a camp of near-constant anxiety, one trusted voice can prevent escalation across thousands. Youth aren't just consuming information; they're curating it, filtering fear through community trust before it becomes collective trauma.

Reimagining journalism as participatory dialogue

The experiences of Rohingya youth living in Cox's Bazar demonstrate that journalism cannot be narrowly defined. Young people are creating a form of "dialogue journalism with little or no access to formal media training, stable connections or press freedom. They are documenting daily life, keeping communities informed without exposing individual identities, correcting misinformation, and creating space for marginalized voices — particularly girls. The tools used for broadcasting information are being transformed into tools for conversation.

Global journalism debates "innovative formats" and "audience participation." Rohingya youth live there.

Through the NextGen Rohingya Network (NGRN), informal dialogue circles and digital storytelling pages, grassroots media is taking shape within the camps. Community learning spaces operated by volunteers expand this ecosystem further by teaching peers to read, write, think critically and check facts. Such programs have been identified in the media development literature as critical to building "resilient information ecosystems", including communities with the capacity to verify information locally, discuss it and act.

Journalists from around the world have been writing about the Rohingya people and telling the same story of a group of young people (Rohingya) who have been characterized as vulnerable or voiceless. The reality is far more complex. Youth within the camps act as mediators, translators, facilitators and archivists for their community's experiences. They lack the tools and recognition to continue, but not the capacity.

As one young participant summarized: "We are not silent by choice. We are careful because the risks are real."

From "voiceless" to co-authors of dialogue

In an age of global polarization and distrust, it is tempting to see refugee camps only as places of silence and dependency. The reality in Cox's Bazar complicates that picture. Within high levels of restriction, surveillance and fear, Rohingya youth are already practicing forms of dialogue-based journalism. They use their phones like micro newsrooms and safe meeting spaces; they correct dangerous rumors and reduce panic through calm, verified messages; they use stories, poetry, photos and short videos to highlight dignity, not just suffering; and they hold spaces — online and offline — where difficult issues like girls' education and early marriage can be discussed honestly.

The media and development community must ask whether we will accept youth as co-authors of public discourse, rather than simply treating them as sources or beneficiaries. Supporting this work goes further than providing training workshops or equipment. It means advocating for safer digital spaces for youth and connecting them to future conversations about the future of journalism, via youth-led initiatives like NGRN, at a regional and global level.

Rohingya youth are not waiting. They are leading, mediating, verifying and storytelling through silence and risk. In places with very few decisions made for them, their thoughtful and responsible use of social media is redeveloping the once beautiful and precious asset of being able to communicate with each other.

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“TSAR’S PEOPLE”: TEACHERS’ ROLE IN THE RUSSIAN SCHOOL EDUCATION AFTER 2022

by Elizaveta Vergel

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Abstract

After the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian state greatly intensified control and patriotic education policies inside the schools. This article, based on interviews with Russian schoolteachers, examines the changes that occurred in the past 4 years and attempts to isolate continuities and discontinuities with pre-invasion policies.

Introduction

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian state introduced new policies for patriotic education, unified the history curriculum, and increased surveillance and repression inside the classroom. In the past years, these policies have been the center of attention of both academics and journalists, who have mostly focused on their formal attributes: presidential decrees, laws, methodological recommendations for new subjects, etc. This research paper draws on the experiences of schoolteachers, who are ultimately tasked with implementing all the changes. Educators occupy a dual position inside the school system, as they are both recipients and transmitters of propagandistic narratives, who, unlike many other state employees, enjoy high levels of trust of their communities (Forrat 2018, 419). The paper is based on 2 interviews that were conducted with public school humanities teachers from Moscow, who chose to remain anonymous for security reasons. In this essay, discourse analysis of the interviews is incorporated into a wider historical context of post-Soviet Russia, showing continuities and discontinuities in patriotic education before and after the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

Before the Invasion of Ukraine

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had tremendously low state and fiscal capacity. For a major part of the 1990s, schools and patriotic education in particular were not a priority of the government, eclipsed by economic crises, the First Chechen War, and political instability. This period is recalled as a “unique period for Russian pedagogy, when the state couldn’t bother with schools”; it was chaotic yet free (Interviewee 1: man, ~40 years old, interviewed in March 2026).

Putin’s ascent to power had significantly influenced the dynamics of patriotic education in Russia. Starting from 2001, the Russian government had been adopting 5-year Programs on Patriotic Education, all of which focused on military-patriotic education. (Kratochvíl and Shakhanova 2021, 445) However, the real impact of these policies on patriotic education is debatable. As shown by Sanina (2017), the patriotic education programs had limited impact on schools, because they did not have an efficient system of implementation or developed policy indicators (94). Instead, patriotic education was carried out by teacher-enthusiasts, who willingly reproduced their Soviet experiences (32). Patriotic clubs, created by these enthusiasts, often

employed patriotic narratives drastically different from the official narratives (Laruelle 2015, 9), and were seen by their members as independent from the state (24). Although there were several attempts of organizing pro-regime federal youth movements (*Idushchie Vmeste* (Walking Together), *Nashi* (Ours), Russian Movement of Schoolchildren, etc.), the population generally remained unresponsive to these innovations. (Lassila 2011, 260; Sanina 2017, 107)

Since 2001, the government has also experimented with standardized testing. One of the ideas behind implementation of the Unified State Exam (*EGE*) was addressing the educational inequality and widespread corruption in University admission tests (Eklof 2004, 12). After becoming the only allowed form of a University entrance exam in 2009, *EGE* has been used for signaling to teachers and pupils what constitutes the main focus of the school program (Feklyunina et al. 2025, 186). For example, 56.6% practice questions of the Unified State Exam in history contained military references, forming mnemonic habits that reinforce the idea of the importance of war for the country's international standing (188-90).

The control over Russian education and society in general was greatly increased after the Conservative Turn of 2012. As shown by Forrat (2018), Russian teachers were a factor of regime resilience in the 2012 Presidential Elections, forced to participate in election fraud and political campaigning under administrative pressure – the threats of unemployment or retraction of funding from the local and regional authorities (431).

Despite all these efforts, before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the regime's attempts in promoting patriotism were less than successful. The official patriotic narratives produced public displays of regime

loyalty rather than regime legitimacy (Goode 2016, 30), did not make Russians proud of their state or willing to defend it (Sanina 2017, 173-4), and failed to persuade young people to embrace militaristic and anti-Western ideas. (Bækken 2021, 269).

Putin's Russia after the Invasion of Ukraine

School Curriculum

In September 2022, a patriotic education subject called "Conversations about Important Things" was introduced to all Russian schools. It is conducted by homeroom teachers as the first lesson every week, simultaneously with raising of the Russian flag – another post-invasion novelty. Regional and federal educational authorities provide teachers with methodological recommendations (available online at разговорыоважном.рф) that include lesson plans, videos, interactive materials, and presentations. These materials are often jingoistic – for example, in high school, many lesson plans include fragments of the Nikita Mikhalkov's show *Besogon*. TV, infamous for its propagandistic narratives. Although it is hard to gauge how strictly teachers follow these recommendations, my interviewees were aware of their existence and claimed that they were largely useful. In the past, sociologists noted that Russian teachers tend to follow the government's "mandatory recommendations", seeing state authorities as pedagogical authorities (Sanina 2017, 122). My interviewees were critical of some topics covered during 'Conversations' (for example, 'Heroes of the Special Military Operation' or 'Police work'), but, unexpectedly, were supportive of the program in general:

I have to admit, there is a value vacuum in children, and, probably, there is nothing wrong with these ["Conversations"]. Probably, really, because we should talk, because family

loses this function... The generation of parents who bring their children [to school] is the generation of the Nineties. I was raised in the Nineties, but I am the last Soviet generation, which was brought up in a classical way – yes, my parents were engineers, and we more or less did everything. But those born in the Nineties are empty-headed. (Interviewee 1; emphasis added)

The idea of a moral decay of the Russian society after the collapse of the Soviet Union is actively used in propaganda to justify various top-down interventions, suggesting that even the teachers who do not support the regime may internalize the government's dispositions. However, the 'Conversations' were sometimes ridiculed for being too straightforward and 'clumsy'. (Interviewee 2: man, ~35 years old, interviewed in April 2026)

In 2023, the Russian state adopted a unified high school history textbooks, edited by a Presidential Aide Vladimir Medinsky, implementing Putin's plans dating back as far as 2001 (Merridale 2003, 23). The textbook was widely criticized in the media and academic community for its state-centeredness and history distortions (e.g., Konstantinova 2023). These features are evident to practitioners as well: "...If you take [the topic] 'Primitive People', every paragraph ends with 'And on the territory of the Russian Federation there also was a settlement!' ... And there is a link at every end of the textbook, that... Russia also was there!" (Interviewee 1) The militarization of history exams was also intensified – in 2022, a shocking 93% of the questions of the demo-version of *EGE* in history had military references (Feklyunina et al. 2025, 190).

Administrative Pressure, Repression, and Subjectivity

Ever since the full-scale invasion, teachers have been the regime's center of attention – for example, in Spring 2022, history and social science teachers from Moscow were

gathered for a briefing from Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative, Maria Zakharova, on correct interpretations of the 'military operation in Ukraine' (Interviewee 1). In similar spirit, in 2023, Putin agreed with a phrase attributed to Bismarck: "not commanders but schoolteachers and priests win wars." (Regnum 2023)

The level of reported administrative pressure and control varied greatly between the interviewees. Although it is impossible to determine the reason for this discrepancy based on my interviews, I would like to suggest two hypotheses for explaining this difference. First, homeroom teachers may experience higher levels of pressure and control. For example, let's consider the following excerpt:

... Those [homeroom teachers] start the lesson of "Conversations" in their classrooms, and [they] have to turn on the hymn... And the cameras are recording. So we had a meeting, and there: 'Why have you skipped the hymn?' And started calling out by name all homeroom teachers who did not play the hymn on Monday. 'Why haven't you talked about what's important?' So there is some control, that there is a camera and everything is visible, how the first lesson goes... So everything is tracked, controlled. (Interviewee 1)

In contrast, the second interviewee, who was not a homeroom teacher since early 2022, answered the question about administrative pressure differently: "There is, of course, a variety of controlling moments, for example, **the number of tables** that a teacher, especially a homeroom teacher, fills out during a day; it's catastrophic..." (Interviewee 2; emphasis added). It is remarkable that he understood administrative pressure as bureaucracy, not threats of unemployment or reduced funding, as it is normally understood in political science (Forrat 2018, 423). These threats, often connected with the favors (not) made for local authorities

by schools, are still present in the Russian educational system:

...And then, for example, came [school director], who said: 'Well, all of us are people of the state, we carry out our duties. All of us are tsar's people (lyudi gosudarevy), where can you go? You will do this because this is your direct functional responsibility.' To what extent was it possible to refuse after such an imposition? Well, no, either we say goodbye to you or you do as you're told. (Interviewee 1)

The second possible explanation is the influence of directors' personal qualities on school policies. As noted by Anna Sanina in her work, directors have a leading role in determining school policy, as they are the ones who negotiate with local authorities (2017, 86). This explanation raises questions about the subjectivity and motivations of teachers and school administrators:

*Even though the state would like to make school a unified system, it still is about people, first and foremost. ... And the difference was that, yeah, some [directors] had enough political will in everything, even at their own risk, yes, fear, meaning that they played along, they said: 'OK, we'll do it,' but how will we do it? So, the question was in the forms, as always... So, **this is a question about personality, yes, of the directors. Of all of us.** (Interviewee 1; emphasis added)*

In interviews, teachers stressed their role in the system, claiming that, ultimately, it was not programs and recommendations that mattered – it was the educators who carried them out. Interestingly enough, teachers who follow methodological recommendations verbatim were criticized, because their lessons were 'deadly dull' (Interviewee 1) and 'a student will get no [feelings] awakened to how fantastic and wonderful their Motherland is' (Interviewee 2). Russian teachers share the belief that awakening

patriotic ideals is important, and not putting effort into patriotic education is seen as slacking off.

Society puts additional pressure on anti-war teachers. When the war broke out, one of my interviewees made an anti-war post and quickly faced a backlash, with people asking him 'How can you even work in a school with a position like this?'; other teachers he knew were 'asked' to remove their anti-war posts by the school administration (Interviewee 1). However, there are limits to dissent; teachers do not see themselves as a potential opposition force: "Well, let's not kid ourselves, as long as we are in school, we are not 'against' [the authorities], we are all 'in support.' (my ne 'protiv', my vse 'za')" (Interviewee 1) Being 'too against' the authorities may create a cognitive dissonance and is thus avoided. Schools are 'closed worlds,' where all external events, including the Russo-Ukrainian war, 'drown in routine life' and are mostly seen as a background (Interviewee 2).

Military-patriotic Youth Organizations and Events

In 2022, a federal youth organization Movement of the First (Dvizheniye Pervykh) was personally initiated by Putin. The movement was supposed to connect extracurricular activities across all Russian schools, something the government did not force during previous attempts of establishing federal youth organizations (Sanina 2017, 106). Now, although branches of the Movement exist in a large majority of educational organizations, the level of their activity varies drastically between schools. The interviewees spelled out their distrust towards this initiative:

Yes, the Movement of the First, the Young Army are emerging... some organizations that are not quite close to me, because everything is very top-down, carried out as a governmental order. ... Today, we kinda raise some yes-man slaves (ispolnitel'niye raby), so that the Movement of the First comes: 'We have

this event.' Like it or not, but there is a governmental order, you must develop the budget for the event. (Interviewee 1)

However, distrust does not mean that they refuse to cooperate. Funded from the federal budget, the Movement of the First has immense resources for event organization and wide outreach to schools through its branches, giving teachers and enthusiasts strong incentives for collaboration. One of the interviewees shared that cooperating with the Movement for organizing an event allowed him to reach all the schools in an area of about 1.5 million inhabitants in a day – something completely unthinkable before (Interviewee 1).

Although the teachers I have interviewed claimed that the Movement largely is a peaceful organization, they voiced concerns about its future:

But, again, what attracts children? This pomposity. Sometimes children can't catch that. They get these perks... So that when children are brought somewhere, shown someone, for example [if you] take them

to [a famous Russian singer] Egor Kreed. They'll do anything for you. It's scary. And, so, the Movement of the First bribes [them] like that... And it can very easily change, from a civil [orientation]... and kids will be doing... [military stuff]. (Interviewee 1)

Another worrying development was the introduction of Zarnitsa 2.0, an official reboot of a popular Soviet military-patriotic game, in 2024. Unlike the Soviet game, the modern version includes a competition in simulated drone warfare and mandatory 'war reporting' – children posting photos from the events on social media. Today, the game is a prime example of militainment (Stahl 2009), as it intentionally blurs the line between war and play, offering 'clean' (in terms of absence of real violence and suffering) and techno-fetishistic war experience to schoolchildren. These experiences may make military service a lot more desirable and attract the tech-savvy recruits. (109) Oftentimes, participants are trained by Ukraine war veterans, who contribute to normalization of war experience by fostering personal connections with the kids (Edwards and Mathers 2025, 410).

Conclusion

The invasion of Ukraine greatly intensified pre-existing tendencies in the realm of patriotic education, since they became a lot more urgent in light of military recruitment goals and controlling the dissent. The outcomes of patriotic education will strongly influence the future of Russia – if the regime succeeds in imposing militaristic and jingoistic ideas on younger generations, future democratic reforms and demilitarization may be compromised. The factors that contributed to the limited success of patriotic education before 2022 (mainly, government inefficiency and lack of a well-pronounced ideology) are still present, but the emotional aspect of the presence of returning war veterans, commemoration of the dead soldiers, and overall increase of pressure and control in the society may render Russian patriotic education more mobilizing and efficient.

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I HAVE SEEN THIS BEFORE. NOT IN THE NEWS. IN A MANGA.

By Babie

August 7, 2026

Babie is a Prospect Burma Online Scholar and Daughters Raising Orchid Scholar, studying Philosophy at Parami University. She is a disability rights advocate and project manager working with youth and individuals with learning disabilities. She has represented Myanmar at the 22nd UNCRPD Annual Conference in Geneva.

Since February 28, 2026, the United States and Iran have cycled through the same sequence more than six times: talks begin, a deadline is set, Trump threatens to obliterate Iranian infrastructure, a pause is announced, and the cycle resets. Today, Trump says the war will end “pretty soon” and a Hormuz deal is “on the verge of being finalised.” He is also warning that if Iran backs out, they will “get hit very hard.”

I have seen this before. Not in the news. In a manga.

One Piece: the world’s bestselling manga, with over 516 million copies in print and now a Netflix live-action series dominating charts in over 90 countries is not children’s entertainment. It tells the truth about how power works. And that truth has been on a loop since February.

The World Government

Eiichiro Oda, the creator of *One Piece*, began publishing the series in 1997. At the center of his fictional world is the **World Government**, a global federation controlled by the anonymous Five Elders, enforced by a military called the Marines. The World Government claims to exist for the safety and order of the world. In practice, it suppresses inconvenient history and eliminates anyone who threatens its authority. Its most extreme weapon is the **Buster Call: a military strike that erases a target completely: no survivors, no records, no memory**. The justification is always the same: *for the greater good*. (see Eiichiro Oda, “Chapter 420: Buster Call,” *One Piece Digital Colored Comics*, Vol. 44, Shueisha, 2006).

Ohara

In the Ohara arc, the World Government destroys an island of scholars. Their crime: studying the **Void Century**: a hundred years of history the World Government has erased from the world’s memory. The scholars were not soldiers. They were reading ancient stone tablets called Poneglyphs, which carry forbidden historical records. When a scholar named Professor Clover comes close to naming the kingdom the government spent centuries hiding, he is shot mid-sentence. After the island burns, the officials celebrate:

“It’s the perfect example to scare them all off!! Now no one will dare study the Void Century again!!” — *One Piece*, Chapter 398 (Ohara Arc)

The Buster Call was never about stopping a threat. It was terror as policy. When Vice Admiral Sakazuki orders the civilian evacuation ship destroyed in case a single scholar is hiding aboard, he calls it principle:

“If you’re gonna do it, finish the job!! If, by chance, even a single scholar is hiding out in that ship... You must destroy evil at its very roots!” — Sakazuki (later Fleet Admiral Akainu), Ch. 398

Before Operation Epic Fury launched on February 28, 2026, diplomats reported significant progress in negotiations. Iran was willing to make concessions. The strikes came anyway. Parliament buildings targeted. State broadcaster silenced. A desalination plant destroyed, cutting off clean water to civilians. The justification: Iran's nuclear programme was an "unacceptable threat to world stability." The Buster Call has a real name. We just do not call it that in the news.

Egghead

If Ohara shows what happens when you resist the World Government, the Egghead arc shows what happens when you serve it loyally, and then choose truth. Dr. Vegapunk was the World Government's greatest scientist. He built their weapons. He served their system for decades. Facing elimination, he broadcast a final message to the world:

"History, you see, tells a story... However, the World Government has made it a crime of the highest order... I broke this law. That was my second sin."

— Dr. Vegapunk, Ch. 1120 (Egghead Arc)

And knowing forces were already coming to silence him permanently:

"I regret none of this!!" — Dr. Vegapunk, Ch. 1120

Iran and Oman are close to finalising a Hormuz framework today. Treasury Secretary Bessent said a deal could come "today or tomorrow." But Trump has made clear: if the deal falls through, the strikes resume. Iran's willingness to negotiate in February did not protect it. Its six months of ceasefire compliance did not protect it. Vegapunk served the system faithfully for decades. It did not protect him either. When power decides your existence is inconvenient, cooperation is not a shield.

Oda did not predict this. He drew how power has always worked. Every island in *One Piece* follows the same pattern: a people, a dominant power demanding obedience, and someone who refuses. And then there is **Luffy, captain of the Straw Hat Pirates** who fights not for freedom but for liberation. The difference matters.

Freedom is something you keep for yourself. Liberation means you cannot rest until everyone around you has it too.

That is why the Straw Hat flag appears in protests across Asia. It is not merchandise. It is a POLITICS.

1984 taught us about surveillance states. *Things Fall Apart* taught us about colonialism. Those who dismiss manga as children's entertainment are not skeptical. They are not paying attention. I am from Yangon, Myanmar as I have lived under four governments and watched two democracies fall. The Buster Call is not a metaphor to me. It is a pattern I recognize. That recognition, felt first through story, is the beginning of political imagination.

The Meeting Is Always the Same

Today, August 7, 2026, diplomats are gathered and a deal appears close. Trump says the war can't "go much longer." The threat of new strikes remains on the table. The Five Elders are meeting. They have different names in the news. But as Oda wrote it:

"History is told by the winners... but the voices of the losers at the bottom of the sea are so very faint..." — One Piece, Chapter 398

Unless someone refuses to let them be.

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BEYOND THE WALLS

by Salma Rahman

Salma Rahman is an Afghan female student living in a country where women and girls continue to face severe restrictions on many of their basic human rights. She is passionate about education, freedom, and storytelling, and wants to explore the voices, dreams, and resilience of Afghan women through her writing.

Characters

- Laila** age 25 in Act I, 26 in Act II, and 38 in Act III. Gentle but strong. Omar's wife.
- Omar** age 30 in Act I, 31 in Act II, and 43s in Act III. Tired shopkeeper. Emotionally restrained. Laila's husband.
- Sofia** age 5 in Act I, 6 in Act II, 18 in Act III. Thoughtful, strong. Their older daughter.
- Liza** infant in Act I, age 1 in Act II, 13 in Act III. Observant. Their younger daughter.

Act I

(8:30 p.m. Early winter night in Kabul. A small, modest home. The living room and kitchen share the same space. A thin carpet covers most of the living room floor where the family usually sits and eats. There is no electricity. A single candle flickers on the floor beside the wall, casting long shadows across the room. Moonlight slips through a tiny window covered with thin plastic to keep out the wind.

In the corner is a very small open kitchen. A simple stove burns quietly. A pot of Qabuli rice simmers. The smell of carrots and raisins fills the room. Laila, wearing a simple red dress and headscarf, stands at the stove stirring the pot. The dress is a bit old but carefully kept. It was a gift from Omar during their first Valentine's Day, their first year of marriage. She hums a soft romantic Afghan folk song while cooking. Every few seconds she glances toward the door.)

(A knock.)

Laila (quickly wiping her hands on her apron, smiling): Hi, dear. You're home.

Omar (entering, brushing snow from his coat): Finally. It's freezing outside. (He removes his coat, rubs his hands together, exhales into them.) Bring me a glass of chai(tea).

Laila: Of course. Sit. (She pours tea carefully into a small glass cup and hands it to him with both hands.) How was your day?

Omar: Same as always. Shop. Work. What else is there?

Laila: Nothing... I was just asking. (A small pause. She forces a soft laugh.) I should check the food before it burns. I made your favorite. Guess.

Omar: Qabuli?

Laila: You got it right!

Omar: Good.

(Laila hesitates, watching him carefully.)

Laila (gently): Do you notice anything... different tonight?

Omar (confused): Different?

Laila (touching the sleeve of her dress): Nothing... I thought maybe you would remember.

Omar: Remember what?

(She quickly turns back to the stove.)

Laila: Nothing. Just the cold making me talk too much.

(Liza suddenly begins crying loudly.)

Omar (irritated): Laila! Liza is crying again! Where is Sofia?

Laila: Sofia is sleeping. I'm in the kitchen. My hands are full. Please see what Liza needs. I'm coming.

Omar: I'm exhausted. Can't you see? (Liza cries louder.) She is always crying. Ah... girls!

Laila (moving toward the room quickly): I'm coming. I'm coming. (She lifts Liza and rocks her gently. The crying slowly softens.) (softly to the baby) Shhh... my little star. It's time for your nap. (She kisses the baby's forehead and returns to the kitchen with Liza on her shoulder.) I've been up since morning. Cooking, cleaning, washing... (She sways gently while rocking the baby.) Liza didn't nap well today.

Omar: So?

Laila (quietly): So... I'm tired too.

Omar (short laugh): Tired from what? Maybe you are a little tired, but not as much as I am now. (He drinks his tea.) This is what wives do, Laila. What's new? All wives work at home and take care of their children.

(Laila freezes. The candle flickers. Her shadow trembles on the wall.)

Laila: I didn't sit all day...

Omar: But at least you stayed at home. You had a roof. Food. You should be grateful. (He gestures toward the house.) I'm the one who works all day in the cold shop to give you shelter, food, and a good life.

Laila: I understand how tired you are, but...

Omar: But what?

Laila: I also work hard during the day and...

Omar: Oh, come on. Don't start again. What kind of wife are you? Your husband comes home tired and instead of letting him rest, you complain. This is the only place I can feel relief, and you destroy it.

Laila: When did I complain? I just...

Omar: Don't start, please. Bring the food. I'm so hungry.

(She serves the Qabuli. Omar begins eating quickly. Laila watches him silently. Her hand slowly touches the sleeve of her red dress.)

Laila (softly): Do you remember when you gave me this dress?

Omar (still eating): What?

Laila: This dress. You bought it for me on our first Valentine's Day after we got married. (A small smile appears on her face.) You said red looked like spring.

(Omar shrugs, barely listening.)

Omar: Maybe.

(A long pause.)

Laila (softly): Today is six years.

Omar: Six years?

Laila: Our anniversary. (Silence.) But of course... you don't remember.

Omar: I work all day, Laila. I can't remember every little thing.

Laila: It's not a little thing. (She looks at him carefully.) You don't see me anymore. Only the mother of your daughters.

(A quiet silence fills the room. Omar avoids her eyes, but his jaw tightens – he heard her.)

Omar (quietly, avoiding her eyes): Come. Why don't you eat?

Laila: I'll eat after I put Liza to sleep.

Omar: But the food will get cold.

Laila (a faint smile): I'm used to it now.

(A few minutes later. Silence fills the small house. Omar finishes eating and goes to sleep. Laila returns slowly, places Liza down beside sleeping Sofia, and comes back to the kitchen. She sits alone. The candle trembles as the wind slips through the window. She finally begins to eat the cold Qabuli. She touches the red sleeve of her dress again.)

Laila (quietly to herself): Happy anniversary.

(The candle flickers. Lights fade.)

Act II

(7:30 a.m. One year later. A modest home. Morning light enters through thin curtains. A pair of small children's shoes rest near the door. A lunchbox sits on the table in the kitchen. Framed university appreciation certificates stand on top of a cupboard in the corridor, slightly covered with dust. Omar is kneeling near the door, tying his shoes. Laila is in the kitchen area, packing his lunch. Sofia (6) and Liza (1) are playing with a broken doll on the floor.)

(Phone beeps – a notification sound.)

(Laila freezes. She looks at her phone. Her hands tremble. She reads the message, covers her mouth, then gasps.)

Laila: Omar! Omar! (She runs toward him, still holding the lunchbox.)

Omar: What is happening, dear? Why are you shouting so early?

Laila (breathless, glowing): I got accepted... Omar... I got accepted! Tolo TV, as a journalist! And... they're giving me a scholarship to finish my last semester.

(Silence. The only sound is Sofia humming while playing with the doll.)

Omar (slowly straightening up): What did you say?

Laila: They accepted me. After all these years. I didn't even believe it. I thought my degree was too old... that no one would remember me.

Omar: When did you apply?

Laila (hesitates): Some months ago.

Omar: And I didn't know?

Laila: I wanted to tell you. Many times. But every night you came home tired. After dinner, you checked your accounts, called your parents... then you slept. I kept waiting for the right moment.

Omar: There is no right moment for secrets between husband and wife.

(Laila lowers her eyes.)

Laila: You are right. I am sorry, dear. But... aren't you happy? It was my dream. You remember? University... how hard I studied... I was first in my classes. (She looks toward the dusty certificate on the cupboard.)

Omar (coldly): Anyway, you cannot go.

(The air changes.)

Laila: What?

Omar: Media? Television? Do you want our relatives to laugh at us? Do you want them to say I cannot control my own house? Don't you know media is not a respectable place for women? It is disgraceful among our tribes.

Laila: Control?

Omar: It is shameful for a woman to appear on television. People will talk. Our tribes will talk. My uncles, my brothers, they will talk.

Laila: Before marriage, you told me I could finish my studies. You said, "Laila, I will always support your dreams."

Omar: That was different.

Laila: Different how?

Omar: Now you are a wife. A mother.

(Liza begins crying. Laila automatically lifts her and rocks her gently while speaking.)

Laila: So being a mother means I stop being myself?

Omar: Don't twist my words.

Laila: For five years I woke up before sunrise. I cooked. I cleaned. I took care of the girls. I stopped my last semester because Sofia was born. I told myself it was temporary. I told myself Omar will remember his promise. (She walks to the cupboard and gently touches her certificate, wiping dust from the frame.) Do you know what this is? This is the last proof that I was once Laila, not just "Sofia's mother." Not just "Omar's wife."

Omar: Enough drama. Please understand me, darling. I provide everything you need. Whatever you want. You don't need to work.

Laila (voice breaking): It is not about money. It is about hearing my own name again.

(Silence.)

Omar: You know we are from a tribe and a society where this would be disgraceful. Why can't you understand?

Laila: I understand. But I don't care about them. For how long will this go on? We can show them. We can help them accept that there is nothing wrong if a woman works in media.

Omar: You can't understand. People will mock me.

Laila: So you would rather bury me alive inside these walls?

Omar: Lower your voice.

Laila: You are afraid of their laughter. I am afraid of disappearing.

(A long pause. Omar turns away. His hand trembles slightly on the doorframe.)

Omar: I am going to be late. We will not discuss this again.

Laila: If I don't go... will you at least admit that you broke your promise?

(Omar avoids her eyes. He opens the door.)

Omar: Please forget this job.

(He exits. The door slams loudly.)

(Long silence. Laila stands still. The house suddenly feels smaller. She slowly opens her phone and reads the acceptance message again. Sofia walks toward her, holding the broken doll.)

Sofia: Mom, her arm fell off.

(Laila looks at the doll. One arm is detached. She tries to fix it, but it won't stay. She sits on the floor, holding both her phone and the broken doll.)

Laila (her throat tight, eyes filled with tears): It doesn't fit anymore, sweetie...

(She looks toward her dusty certificates. Morning light fades slightly as a cloud covers the sun.)

(Blackout.)

Act III

(Twelve years later. Late afternoon. The same modest home – but slightly improved. A dim electric bulb hangs from the ceiling, flickering occasionally. The corridor remains almost unchanged, as if time has paused here. The old wooden cupboard still stands. Laila's certificates are now clean but still slightly faded. A soft breeze moves the thin curtain near the window, letting in pale golden light mixed with dust particles floating in the air.

On the cupboard, next to the certificates, sits a repaired doll – one arm visibly mended with mismatched thread.

Sofia (18) sits on the floor in the corridor, her knees pulled close to her chest. In her hand is a folded letter – the edges slightly worn from being opened and closed too many times. She stares at it without unfolding it again. Her face carries both light and heaviness, hope and fear at once.

A long silence. The house feels still.

Liza (13) enters quietly, barefoot. She pauses, watching Sofia carefully, sensing something is wrong. She slowly walks closer and sits beside her, mirroring her position.)

Liza (softly, almost whispering): You've been sitting here for a long time.

(Sofia doesn't respond. Her eyes remain fixed on the letter.)

Liza (gently): Did something happen?

(Sofia forces a small smile, but it fades quickly.)

Sofia: Nothing.

Liza (with a small knowing smile): You always say "nothing" when it's something.

(A pause. Sofia exhales slowly, as if letting out something heavy.)

Sofia (quietly): I got accepted.

(Liza's eyes light up instantly. She turns fully toward her.)

Liza: Accepted? Where?

(Sofia finally looks at her. Pride flickers , but so does pain.)

Sofia: Stanford University. In the U.S. Full scholarship. Law.

(Liza gasps softly, grabbing Sofia's arm.)

Liza: Sofia... that's... that's amazing! You always dreamed of this!

(Sofia nods, but her smile disappears almost immediately. The letter trembles slightly in her hand.)

Liza (slower now, sensing something deeper): Then... why do you look like this?

(Silence. The curtain shifts with the breeze.)

Sofia (barely above a whisper): Because Father said no.

(The air changes. The excitement collapses.)

Liza (confused): No...?

Sofia: He says it's not appropriate. That people will talk. (quietly) That I'm too young... too alone... too far from home, and he wouldn't be able to protect me. (A pause. Sofia lets out a small, bitter breath.) And... he already chose someone.

Liza (frowning): What do you mean?

Sofia: His best friend's son.

(Liza freezes.)

Liza (whispering): Engagement...?

(Sofia nods slowly.)

(Silence fills the corridor. Even the breeze feels heavier.)

Liza: But... what about your dream?

(Sofia stares ahead, distant.)

Sofia: I don't know anymore...

(A long pause. Sofia's fingers tighten around the letter.)

Liza (after a moment, quietly): You always told me... we should never give up on what we want.

(Sofia lets out a soft, almost broken laugh.)

Sofia: Yeah...I still believe that. (She slowly looks around the corridor - the walls, the window, the cupboard, the familiar space.) Do you know... Mom used to sit here?

Liza: Here?

Sofia (nods, eyes distant): I remember... not clearly... but I remember she was broken. (quietly) I didn't understand back then... but later she told me. I was six... you were just a baby. (She gently touches the floor beneath her fingertips.) I think... this house remembers everything.

(Silence.)

Liza (firm, but emotional): Then don't become a memory too.

(Sofia looks at her – surprised by her strength.)

Liza (more intense now): Don't sit here one day... and tell your daughter the same story.

(A pause. Sofia's eyes fill slightly, but she holds herself together.)

Sofia (whispers): What if I can't change anything?

Liza (soft, but certain): Maybe you can. (She nudges the letter in Sofia's hand.) Maybe this is your chance.

(Footsteps echo faintly from another room.)

Liza (quietly): Mom is coming.

(She squeezes Sofia's shoulder gently and exits.)

(Sofia slowly unfolds the letter. Her eyes scan it again, as if trying to believe it's real. The golden light shifts across her face. Laila enters quietly. She stops when she sees Sofia. She doesn't speak immediately – she understands.

A deep silence between them.)

Laila (softly): You got accepted.

(Sofia looks up, surprised.)

Sofia: How did you..

Laila (a faint, knowing smile): I know that face. (A pause. Laila's expression softens – but there is pain in it.) It's the same one I had... once.

(Sofia lowers her eyes.)

Sofia: He said no.

(Silence. Laila absorbs this – not surprised, just... familiar.)

Laila (quietly): I thought so. (She walks slowly and sits beside Sofia in the exact same spot – past and present overlapping.) What do you want?

Sofia (after a pause, clear): I want to go.

(A long silence. Laila looks ahead, then takes Sofia's hand – firmly.)

Laila (low, but strong): Then don't disappear. Not like I did.

(She glances toward the cupboard – at her certificates, and at the repaired doll with mismatched thread.

Then, without a word, Laila exits into another room. A moment later she returns, carrying a small, worn suitcase. She places it quietly near the living room door. She and Sofia exchange a look – no words needed. Laila nods once.

A sudden knock at the door breaks the moment. Liza runs to open it.)

Liza: Salam, Father!

Omar (entering): Wa alaikum salam.

(He steps in, brushing dust from his coat. His eyes move toward the corridor – he pauses, something familiar in the scene.)

Laila: Salam alaikum.

Sofia: Salam, Father.

Omar: Wa alaikum salam. Why do you both sit here? Anyway, Liza – bring me a glass of water.

(He moves to the living room, which is next to the corridor. Omar stands near the center of the room, removing his coat slowly. Laila and Sofia enter from the corridor. Liza lingers near the doorway, uncertain, watching everything.

Near the door, a small suitcase rests quietly.

Omar notices it. He stops.)

Omar: Whose is this?

(A brief silence.)

Laila (steady): I put it there.

(Omar turns, confused.)

Omar: For what?

(Laila steps forward. Sofia stands beside her – not behind.)

Laila (calm, but firm): For a beginning.

(A pause.)

Sofia (gently, but clear): I want to go.

(Omar's jaw tightens.)

Omar: This discussion is finished.

Laila (firm): No. It was never finished.

(Silence. The room feels smaller.)

Laila: Twelve years ago, I sat in that corridor – just like her. I had dreams too. (Omar looks away.) You told me to forget them. And I did. (her voice lowers – sharp) Not because of your reasons. Because of

this – (she gestures at the house, the cupboard, the walls) – this life that leaves no room for a woman to be anything but a mother. I stayed for my children. (stronger) But I will not watch you do the same to her. (She gestures to Sofia.) Let her go. Let her fail. Let her succeed. Do not bury her before she's lived. (quiet, firm) I was buried. (a breath) Let us be the ones who stop the burying.

Sofia (stepping forward): If I go... I won't just go for myself. I will study. I will speak. For girls who cannot leave... who cannot even dream anymore. (A pause.) If I stay... I become silence.

(Omar looks at her – really looks this time. Conflict shows, but he hardens again. He turns away – but his hand hovers near the edge of the table, fingers pressing down as if steadying himself. When he speaks, his voice is quieter – not softer, but wounded.)

Omar (strained): Do you know what they'll say about a girl alone in that country? What they'll do? Also I won't lose you to a place I cannot protect you.

Sofia: Then trust me. Trust what you raised.

(A long pause. Omar's face works through something he cannot name.)

Omar: If you choose to go, I won't have a daughter by your name anymore.

(Silence. Sofia's eyes fill, but she does not look away. She reaches for the suitcase. The light flickers once.)

Sofia: One day you will proud of me, father!

(She turns to her mother. Laila's eyes are filled with tears, but she doesn't want to show weakness. She embraces her.)

(Sofia walks to the door. She pauses. Looks back one last time.)

Sofia: I'll come back... as myself.

(She exits.)

(The door closes.)

Silence. Liza goes to her room.

Omar stands still, his back to the room, his hands clasped behind him. After a long moment, his shoulders drop – just slightly – as if something has been released against his will. He does not turn around. Laila does not sit. Instead, she walks to the corridor – the same spot where she once sat broken. She picks up the folded letter Sofia left behind (either accidentally or intentionally). She holds it, reads a few words, then places it carefully on the cupboard beside the repaired doll. She exits into another room. The stage is empty except for the flickering light, the letter, the doll, and the certificates. Omar remains frozen with his back to the room. The light fades slowly on the empty corridor.)

End of play

LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION AND CIVIC AGENCY UNDER AUTHORITARIAN RULE: EXPERIENCES OF PARAMI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN MYANMAR

by Myo Myint Maung Maung

Myo Myint Maung Maung is a senior student at Parami University, where he pursues a degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. His research explores how young people in authoritarian contexts build civic lives and how a liberal arts education can nurture the skills and commitments of democratic citizenship. Moving between theory and practice, he is involved in grassroots initiatives that lift indigenous knowledge, preserve oral histories, and foster cross-institutional collaboration among Myanmar youth.

Abstract

This study examines how Myanmar youth educated in liberal arts programs, particularly at Parami University, translate democratic and civic values into tangible social action while navigating authoritarian rule. Through oral history interviews with three students, the research reveals that liberal arts education fosters critical thinking and civic identity. Yet, students face profound tensions between academic ideals and the harsh realities of political repression, economic survival, and physical insecurity that define daily life in contemporary Myanmar.

Education in the Shadow of Crisis

What does it mean to study democratic values when democracy itself has been violently swept away? For thousands of young people in Myanmar, this is not a philosophical question but a daily reality. This essay explores how students educated in the liberal arts, particularly at Parami University, translate democratic and civic ideals into tangible action while living under military rule. Drawing on oral history interviews with three students, it uncovers a world where critical thinking becomes both a survival skill and a quiet form of resistance.

The liberal arts tradition, with its roots in ancient Greece and its modern revival in American higher education, promises something deceptively simple: an education that prepares people not just for careers but for citizenship (Nussbaum, 2010; Becker, 2014). It champions critical thinking, interdisciplinary breadth, and the capacity to engage with complexity, all qualities that scholars believe underpin healthy democracies (Cronon, 1998). Yet nearly all the research on liberal arts education has taken place in contexts where academic freedom is protected. What happens when such an education unfolds under authoritarian rule, where the very ideals it teaches are seen as threats?

Myanmar offers a stark case. After the military coup of February 2021, the country's fragile higher education system collapsed. Over 350,000 students walked out of traditional classrooms as part of the Civil Disobedience Movement (Nanthakorn et al., 2023). The coup not only shattered the socio-political landscape but also dismantled the education reform progress that had allowed institutions like Parami University, Myanmar's first private, not-for-profit liberal arts university, affiliated with Bard College, to emerge. Parami now operates as an "exile university," delivering courses online to students scattered across a war-torn country (Becker, 2022; Kyaw Moe Tun, 2021). The scale of the crisis is staggering: approximately three million young people, one in five, are out of employment, education, or training (UNDP, 2025).

This is a generation on hold, and their education may well determine whether Myanmar can ever rebuild. While liberal arts education is widely theorised to foster civic agency, there is surprisingly little empirical research on how students in authoritarian settings actually put these values into practice. This essay seeks to fill that gap. Through the personal stories of three Parami students, it examines the transformative power of critical thinking, the grinding tension between educational ideals and the demands of survival, and the small but significant community projects through which these young people exercise civic agency under the most constrained of circumstances.

Liberal Arts and Authoritarianism

The liberal arts have long been linked to democratic citizenship. Martha Nussbaum argues that such an education cultivates “cultivated humanity”, individuals capable of critical self-examination, empathetic understanding, and reasoned public deliberation (Nussbaum, 2003; 2010). William Cronon similarly describes liberal education as fundamentally about connection, shaping people who can grapple with complexity rather than retreat into simplistic certainties (Cronon, 1998). The American Association of Colleges and Universities defines it as “an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change” (AACU, 2018, as cited in Cheng, 2018). These capacities—critical thinking, communication, and ethical reasoning are not luxuries; they are, according to scholars, the essential equipment of an engaged citizen (Becker, 2014). In recent decades, liberal arts programmes have expanded beyond the West, with Asian institutions adapting the model to local cultural and political settings (Satchanawakul & Liangruenrom, 2025; Nishimura & Sasao, 2019).

But this global spread has run headlong into a central tension: authoritarian governments frequently regard liberal arts education as a direct challenge to their control. Becker (2022) documents how such programmes face political scrutiny, media attacks, and outright closure in repressive environments. Sanger and Yew (2021) note that in less liberal contexts, liberal arts principles may be perceived as “foreign” or even illegal, subjecting institutions and students to intense political surveillance. In Myanmar, the 2021 coup represented a brutal assault on emerging educational freedoms. Kyaw Moe Tun (2021), president of Parami University, captured the despair of that moment: “Burmese faculty and students are rapidly losing hope. At best, they anticipate stagnation; at worst, they fear total annihilation of a budding modern higher education system.” The reforms that had permitted new models of teaching and learning became casualties of political violence, and the educational landscape found itself trapped between COVID-19, conflict, and military repression (Htut et al., 2022).

In the vacuum created by the collapse of traditional institutions, non-governmental actors have scrambled to offer educational alternatives (Lin, 2023). But while scholars have charted the broader crisis and documented institutional survival, we know far less about what happens inside students themselves. How do they internalise democratic and civic values when speaking them aloud could be dangerous? Cheng (2019) examined liberal arts-educated citizens in Asian contexts, yet the specific intersection of authoritarian governance and student agency remains largely uncharted. This essay turns directly to the students’ own words to illuminate that hidden ground.

Capturing Voices through Oral History

This study employs a qualitative methodology centred on oral history and narrative inquiry. This approach prioritises lived experiences and personal meanings students attach to their education, revealing the “how” and “why”, specifically, how students internalise the role of “social agent” to navigate authoritarian rule. By capturing individual narratives, this methodology allows exploration of internal psychological and ethical shifts when academic theory meets high-risk reality. The research draws on semi-structured interviews with three Parami University students, selected to represent diverse experiences. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, narrators A, B, and C, to protect their identities. All interviews were conducted through secure communication platforms, with participants informed of their rights.

The three narrators brought distinct perspectives. Narrator A had studied liberal arts previously at Mandalay University before a four-to-five-year gap; she later joined Parami while working as a human resources associate and now leads a project supporting Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. Narrator B came to Parami to study politics and international relations, with aspirations of becoming a diplomat; he is involved in a youth empowerment initiative targeting students from conflict-affected areas. Narrator C started a community project creating philosophy dialogue circles for young people in Taunggyi, carving out spaces where displaced students can think critically about their circumstances. Together, their stories offer a rich, multifaceted view of liberal arts education in a time of crisis.

The primary opportunity of oral history is its ability to reveal “hidden” histories excluded from official narratives. However, limitations include memory bias and constraints imposed by the

authoritarian environment, which may limit disclosure. To mitigate these limitations, the study uses pseudonyms, focuses on education and civic action rather than sensitive political affiliations, and ensures participants have the right to skip questions.

Stories of Resilience and Agency

The oral history interviews reveal three interconnected themes: (1) the transformative value of critical thinking and liberal arts pedagogy, (2) the tension between educational ideals and survival constraints, and (3) the development of civic agency through community-engaged projects.

All three narrators described the liberal arts classroom as fundamentally different from traditional Myanmar education, where memorisation dominated. Narrator B explained that conventional classrooms involved *“the teacher explaining the literature, followed by memorisation of those readings,”* whereas Parami required active engagement. Narrator A, who had previously studied at Mandalay University’s Centre for Excellence, found Parami *“closely aligned with the academic traditions found in the United States.”* The impact of critical thinking extended beyond academics. Narrator B described distinguishing between real and AI-generated content and analysing news for hidden agendas. Narrator A noted her education transformed perception: *“I look at situations, news, or human behaviours and try to understand them deeply through theoretical frameworks.”* Narrator C reflected: *“My training taught me to notice my first emotional reaction like anger or sadness and then step back to ask structural questions.”*

Participants demonstrated remarkable resilience. Narrator A identified *“future nation-building”* as her primary motivation. Narrator B’s motivation centred on education as investment in collective future. Narrator C

emphasised intellectual community: *“Being part of an intellectual community with classmates helps me cope with uncertainty.”* All acknowledged severe external pressures. Narrator B noted that discussing sensitive issues outside intellectual community spaces *“could be dangerous.”* Narrator C described protecting her mental space through daily boundaries.

Each narrator engaged in tangible community projects. Narrator A supported Burmese migrant workers in Thailand, developing accessible educational videos tailored to workers’ schedules. Narrator B participated in a youth empowerment initiative for conflict-affected youth. Narrator C created philosophy dialogue circles for displaced students. These projects reveal how liberal arts education translates into practical civic action through creative adaptation.

Challenges included the division between academic spaces and target communities, financial management difficulties, and paramount security concerns. Narrator B explained: *“We do not disclose our specific locations or physical settings... Trust is built because we share the same safety concerns.”* Narrators described significant transformations in civic identity. Narrator B, who initially lacked confidence, realised: *“We do not have to wait for large institutions; there are many meaningful actions we can implement ourselves right now as social agents.”* Narrator C moved from seeing herself *“mainly as a student”* to a *“contributor who can connect knowledge to community needs.”*

The findings illuminate the complex interplay between liberal arts education and civic agency under authoritarian conditions. The experiences of narrators reveal profound tension between democratic ideals and authoritarian reality. As Becker (2022) notes, liberal arts institutions in less liberal environments are perceived as

threats. Yet all narrators maintained commitment to liberal arts values, suggesting authoritarian environments do not extinguish democratic aspirations but transform how they are enacted. This challenges assumptions that liberal arts education is viable only in democratic societies.

Despite constraints, narrators translated liberal arts principles into community action, extending Sanger and Yew’s (2021) framework by demonstrating that students develop *“civic agency”* even when formal civic spaces are closed. Narrator C’s reflection that civic agency means *“turning ideas into real action that benefits others”* exemplifies how abstract concepts adapt to community needs, aligning with Nussbaum’s (2010) argument that liberal arts cultivate *“cultivated humanity.”*

The findings have significant implications. Narrator B powerfully articulated: *“The international community shouldn’t assume that simply granting a full financial scholarship solves the issue. Financial aid is only one piece; economic survival factors and severe political security threats must be factored into the analysis.”* This challenges approaches treating education and humanitarian assistance as separate domains. Projects demonstrate the value of flexible, community-engaged education in crisis contexts. Intellectual community emerges as crucial for sustaining resilience, suggesting support requires investment in community-building structures enabling safe intellectual exchange.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The small sample size limits generalizability. Reliance on self-reported data may involve memory bias or self-censorship given the sensitive political context. The authoritarian environment inevitably constrains disclosure. Focusing exclusively on Parami University means findings may not apply to other

institutions. The cross-sectional nature captures experiences at a single point, limiting understanding of longitudinal development.

Longitudinal studies tracking liberal arts students over time would illuminate how civic identity evolves. Comparative research across different institutions and authoritarian contexts would reveal broader patterns. Quantitative studies with larger samples could measure civic engagement prevalence. Research examining community perspectives would provide external validation. Studies exploring education's influence on political participation would deepen understanding. Comparative research in other authoritarian settings, such as Vietnam or Belarus, would contextualise the Myanmar case.

This study has examined how Myanmar youth educated in liberal arts programs apply democratic and civic values while navigating

authoritarian rule. Through oral history interviews with three Parami University students, the research reveals that liberal arts education provides transformative intellectual tools, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and structural analysis that students apply to everyday life and community projects.

Despite severe constraints including political repression, economic precarity, conscription threats, and physical insecurity, these students demonstrate remarkable resilience and commitment to civic agency. They have developed community projects supporting migrant workers, providing education to conflict-affected youth, and creating spaces for philosophical dialogue. These initiatives reflect the practical translation of liberal arts principles into tangible social action.

However, significant tensions remain. Liberal arts ideals of democratic

citizenship clash with authoritarian reality, compelling students to navigate trade-offs between academic engagement and physical safety. Their resilience is concrete, shaped by financial insecurity, security threats, and the necessity of balancing education with survival.

The findings challenge assumptions that liberal arts education is viable only in democratic societies and demonstrate its potential value where democratic spaces are under threat. They highlight the need for holistic support addressing educational access and broader economic and security challenges. Myanmar faces profound challenges in rebuilding its educational system; these students offer caution and hope.

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BEYOND THE CLASSROOM WALLS: AFGHAN GIRLS' EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE EDUCATION UNDER SOCIAL RESTRICTION

by Silsila Zafari

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Abstract

This article explores how Afghan girls continue their education through online learning despite ongoing social restrictions. Drawing on oral history interviews, it examines the challenges they face, including limited access to technology, family responsibilities, and uncertainty about the future, while highlighting their resilience and determination to continue learning.

Introduction:

For many students around the world, education is a normal part of daily life. Going to school, attending classes, and planning for the future are often taken for granted. For many Afghan girls, however, continuing an education has become a daily challenge. As access to formal education has become increasingly restricted, many have turned to online learning as one of the few remaining ways to continue their studies.

According to the Afghanistan Education Situation Report 2025, Afghanistan's education system is facing one of its most serious crises in recent history. The report estimates that 2.2 million girls are currently excluded from education, while learning opportunities continue to decline because of restrictive policies, limited resources, and ongoing humanitarian challenges (UNICEF, 2025). Although online education has created new opportunities for some girls, access remains unequal due to technological barriers, financial constraints, and the conditions in which many students are expected to study.

While international reports have documented the growing education crisis in Afghanistan, they often focus on statistics, policies, and legal restrictions. These reports are essential for understanding the scale of the problem, but they do not always capture what it feels like to be a young woman trying to learn from home, facing unreliable internet, limited resources, family responsibilities, and uncertainty about the future. Behind every statistic is a personal story of determination, hope, and resilience.

This article explores the lived experiences of Afghan girls who continue their education through online learning under social restrictions. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Afghan students, it examines the challenges they encounter, the strategies they use to keep learning, and the hopes that motivate them to continue. By focusing on individual voices, this research seeks to contribute a more personal understanding of the realities of online education in Afghanistan and to highlight the resilience of girls who refuse to give up on learning despite significant obstacles.

Research Context

Education has long been recognized as a fundamental human right and an important foundation for personal, social, and economic development. For many young women, access to education creates opportunities to build careers, participate in society, and make informed decisions about their futures. In Afghanistan, however, access to education for girls has become increasingly limited in recent years. Since 2021, many secondary schools and universities have been closed to girls, leaving thousands of students unable to continue their formal education. According to Human Rights Watch (2024), girls have been excluded from secondary education beyond Grade 6 for more than three years, depriving at least 1.4 million girls of their right to education. The organization argues that these restrictions have far-reaching educational, social, economic, and psychological consequences that will affect both individuals and the country's future. As a result, online learning has become one of the few available alternatives for those who wish to continue studying.

Although online education has created new learning opportunities, it has also introduced new challenges. Many Afghan girls study from home using mobile phones or shared devices while dealing with unstable internet connections, electricity shortages, limited privacy, and financial constraints. Human Rights Watch (2024) further notes that prolonged exclusion from education has had a serious psychological and emotional impact on Afghan girls, affecting their hopes, confidence, and future aspirations. In addition, family responsibilities and social expectations can make it difficult to attend classes regularly or dedicate time to studying. These challenges affect not only students' academic progress but also their confidence, motivation, and emotional well-being.

Reports published by UNICEF (2025) and Human Rights Watch (2024) provide valuable evidence on education policies, institutional barriers, and the long-term effects of educational exclusion. However, much of the existing literature focuses on policies, statistics, and institutional barriers. Less attention has been given to the everyday experiences of girls who continue learning through online education. By focusing on their personal stories, this research aims to better understand how Afghan girls navigate these challenges, adapt to changing circumstances, and continue pursuing education despite significant obstacles.

Research Methodology

This research adopts an oral history approach to explore the lived experiences of Afghan girls who continue their education through online learning under social restrictions. Oral history focuses on documenting and understanding personal experiences through interviews, making it particularly suitable for this study. Since the central research question seeks to understand how Afghan girls experience online education, this method allows participants to describe their challenges, feelings, and everyday realities in their own words.

Through semi-structured interviews, participants were invited to reflect on their educational journeys, the challenges they encounter while studying from home, and the ways in which social restrictions influence their learning experiences. Unlike official reports or statistical data, oral history provides space for individual voices and personal narratives that are often overlooked. While many existing studies examine education policies and the broader situation of girls' education in Afghanistan, fewer focus on the everyday experiences of students themselves. By collecting these personal accounts,

this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how online education functions in practice for Afghan girls.

Like any qualitative method, oral history has certain limitations. The number of participants is relatively small, meaning the findings cannot represent the experiences of all Afghan girls. In addition, participants may feel uncomfortable discussing sensitive issues because of family or social pressures. Personal memories are also subjective, and different individuals may interpret similar experiences in different ways. Nevertheless, these individual perspectives are valuable because they reveal the diversity and complexity of lived experiences.

To complement the interview data, this research also draws on secondary sources, including academic articles, reports, and publications on girls' education in Afghanistan. Reports published by organizations such as UNICEF, and Human Rights Watch provide important background information on education policies, barriers to learning, and the broader impact of restrictions on girls' education. These sources help place the interview findings within a wider social and political context. While they offer reliable information and expert analysis, they cannot fully capture the personal experiences and emotions of individual students.

The participants for this study were selected from the researcher's personal network and include Afghan girls currently engaged in online learning. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face, by phone, or through online platforms, depending on what was safest and most convenient for each participant. Throughout the research process, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their participation remained voluntary, and their privacy was protected.

By combining oral history interviews with secondary literature, this study brings together personal narratives and broader contextual evidence. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how Afghan girls experience online education under social restrictions, highlighting not only the challenges they face but also their resilience, determination, and commitment to continuing their education.

Findings

The interviews revealed four main themes that shaped the experiences of Afghan girls studying through online education: limited access to learning resources, social and family challenges, emotional resilience, and hope for the future. Although each participant had a unique experience, many of their stories shared similar patterns.

1. Limited Access to Learning Resources:

One of the most common challenges discussed by the participants was limited access to technology and a stable internet connection. Both interviewees explained that online education provided an opportunity to continue learning, but technical barriers often made studying difficult. Maryam explained that she mainly attended classes using her mobile phone because she did not have a personal laptop. She shared, “I mostly use my phone. I don’t have a personal laptop, so writing assignments is difficult.” This illustrates how access to education is influenced not only by social restrictions but also by the availability of digital resources.

2. Social and Family Challenges:

The interviews also highlighted the influence of family responsibilities and social expectations. Studying from home often meant balancing household duties with online classes, while finding a quiet place to learn was not always possible. Both participants

described situations where family members did not fully understand the value of online education or viewed it differently from formal schooling. These experiences demonstrate that, beyond technological barriers, girls also face social challenges that shape their educational journeys.

3. Emotional Resilience and Motivation:

Despite these difficulties, both participants expressed remarkable resilience. Rather than giving up, they continued searching for opportunities to learn and improve themselves. They viewed education as an investment in their future and a source of hope during uncertain times. One participant explained that she remained motivated by reminding herself that education would help her build a better future. Their stories show that determination and personal motivation play an important role in helping Afghan girls continue their education despite challenging circumstances.

4. Hope for the Future:

Finally, the interviews revealed that online education represents more than simply completing courses. For both participants, learning was closely connected to their future aspirations. They hoped to continue their education, attend university one day, and build meaningful careers. Although they recognized that online education cannot fully replace traditional classroom learning, they believed it allowed them to continue growing academically and personally. Their experiences demonstrate that, even under significant social restrictions, education remains a powerful source of hope and possibility.

Discussion

The findings of this study support existing research showing that Afghan girls continue to face significant barriers to education under

current social restrictions. Reports published by UNICEF, and Human Rights Watch describe the decline in educational opportunities and the broader consequences for girls’ futures. Amnesty International (2025) similarly notes that “women and girls were deprived of almost all their fundamental rights,” including access to education beyond the age of 12. The interviews conducted for this research confirm these challenges while adding a more personal perspective. Instead of focusing only on policies and statistics, they reveal how these restrictions shape girls’ everyday lives and learning experiences.

A key finding of this research is that online education has become an important alternative for girls who wish to continue learning. However, access to online education alone is not enough. Similarly, Haqbeen et al. (2023) argue that “online education is perceived to be one of the potential alternatives that can securely facilitate the female education process.” Limited internet access, the lack of personal devices, family responsibilities, and social expectations continue to affect students’ ability to learn effectively. These challenges show that educational access depends not only on the availability of online courses but also on the resources and support available to students.

At the same time, the interviews demonstrate the resilience of Afghan girls. Despite the difficulties they face, both participants remained committed to their education and continued studying because they believe learning is essential for their future. Their stories highlight determination, hope, and a strong desire for personal growth. These personal experiences remind us that behind every report and statistic are individuals with dreams, ambitions, and the determination to keep learning. Although this study is based on a small number of participants and cannot represent the experiences of

all Afghan girls, it provides valuable insight into how online education is experienced at an individual level. Future research could include a larger and more diverse group of participants from different regions of Afghanistan to further explore these experiences and identify additional challenges and opportunities.

Conclusion

This study explored how Afghan girls experience online education under social restrictions through their own personal stories and perspectives. The findings show that although participants face challenges such as limited access to technology, unstable internet connections, family responsibilities, and social pressures, they continue to value education and remain committed to learning. Their

experiences demonstrate that online education has become an important opportunity to continue studying, even though it cannot fully replace traditional classroom learning. By focusing on the voices of Afghan girls, this research contributes a more personal understanding of the realities behind the education crisis in Afghanistan. While international reports provide important information about policies and statistics, individual experiences reveal how these challenges affect students' daily lives, aspirations, and emotional well-being. Listening to these voices helps us better understand not only the barriers they face but also the resilience and determination that enable them to keep learning.

Although this study is limited by the small number of participants, it highlights the importance of qualitative research in capturing experiences that are often overlooked. Future research could include more participants from different regions of Afghanistan to provide a broader understanding of girls' experiences with online education. Ultimately, this study shows that education remains a powerful source of hope, resilience, and opportunity for Afghan girls, even in the face of significant social restrictions.

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The **Collaborative for Threatened and Exiled Universities**, led by the Global Higher Education Alliance for the 21st Century, is a group of academic institutions and learning communities that have been forced to operate in exile due to political threats and military crises. It creates a unique academic space in which threatened scholars and students study, learn, and act together.

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