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UN Volunteer Asma Halimi is passionate about empowering women in Afghanistan through education.

Advocating for a change in Afghanistan through education

UN Volunteer Asma Halimi serves as a Communications Officer with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Afghanistan. On the occasion of International Women's Day 2020, she shares her journey and passion to empower women in her home country.

Having survived a long journey of struggles and hard work, UN Volunteer Asma Halimi is enthusiastic to be contributing to the development of Afghanistan. She is a passionate advocate for women in her community to obtain a proper education.

Asma was born to a conservative family in the Maidan Wardak Province. During the Taliban rule, her father had to move to Pakistan to save his life, leaving Asma's mother and her siblings behind. Days later, Asma's mother, along with then one-year-old Asma and her siblings, disguised for their safety, braved the mountains to cross the Pakistan border to be reunited with their father.
Life was full of challenges in Pakistan for Asma and her family. "As my mother recalls, we lived in a house with no door, but a curtain," she says. To support the family, her mother started teaching Islamic studies and home-schooled children in the neighbourhood. Her father engaged in daily-wage labour and began a small business.

After completing her high school education, Asma did not want to stop there. She always dreamt big. She wanted to pursue undergraduate studies in a private and credible university. However, she could not afford to support her education. Determined to follow her passion, motivated by her dream for a better education she began looking for a job that would allow her to pay for her education.

"I walked door-to-door for hours to share my CV, looking for employment opportunities", Asma shares.

Her perseverance and talent secured her employment as a teacher, although, at the time, she did not possess any higher education qualifications.

Education is the key to bring change to Afghanistan. --UN Volunteer Asma Halimi

She wanted to teach others from a young age and pursue her degree at the same time. However, there were still challenges.

Due to societal and cultural norms, her relatives found it unacceptable for a woman to pursue a university degree and be employed. Even though her father was supportive of her education, he wanted her to study at a university where female students are separate from male students. It took her a lot of effort to convince everyone, including her parents, to allow her to pursue higher studies.

During her studies, she volunteered as the youth representative of Afghan refugees at her university. She was the voice of young refugees to the Afghan consulate in Peshawar, Pakistan.

In 2016, Asma and her family returned to Afghanistan with a hope of helping fellow citizens. Within a month, she was able to secure a job at the Ministry of Finance.

Six months later tragedy struck, when she lost her newly-married sister in a bomb blast in Wazir Akbar Khan.

"This is the worst memory of my life. It affected my whole family’s love and their hope for our country," Asma reflects. "But I still insisted we stay. I was passionate about helping fellow Afghans and to be part of the change in Afghanistan."
In 2017, Asma left her job at the Finance Ministry to join UNDP as a UN Volunteer.

She currently plays a crucial role in the communications team. She has appeared in several Facebook live streams, creating awareness on community issues. While managing the communications and social media aspects of the team, she also helps communicate gender-sensitive issues through her field visits.

Despite tackling challenges in many different areas of life, as a refugee in Pakistan and in Afghanistan, young women like Asma are brave enough to fight the restrictions local communities impose on them.

"Both my father and my mother are very proud of me today," says Asma. "I make regular visits to my home village to help and inspire other girls and convince their parents to allow their daughters to work and obtain an education."

"I give examples of the need for doctors. In our society, people cannot bring their female family members to a male doctor when they are sick. That is why they need every single woman to study, to become doctors, and pursue other professions, which allows them to help other women."

Besides her professional life, she is a tennis player and encourages fellow female colleagues to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Recently, she won a medal during the biggest welfare event at the UN Compound in Kabul - the UN Day Run & Walk.
Asma participated in the 5-kilometer run to show how women can be as strong and resilient as men.

"I have proven not only to my relatives, but everyone around me," Asma explains, "That there are no barriers you cannot overcome to achieve success and realize your dreams."

Asma is proud to have been able to influence attitudes and behaviours towards women - starting with her own family. She has come a long way from a time the members in her family friends were forced to get married as teenagers, and women were not allowed to work. Her younger sister is currently in medical school, pursuing her dreams.

"One day, I wish to be the first female president of Afghanistan, because Afghan women need such a change. I have experienced it in my own family. My brother had no issues studying or working, but my sisters and I had to ensure a lot of hardships to get to achieve our dreams," says Asma.

Asma is passionate about continuing to be an advocate for change in Afghanistan, through volunteerism, promoting education, and empowering women, and contributing to the
country's sustainable development.

Asia and the Pacific

• International women’s day • IWD • gender empowerment

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 5: Gender equality, SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals