The Counterpart

Perspectives on the promise

For over 10 years, **No One Left Behind** has walked alongside Afghan and Iraqi wartime allies from the moment they leave danger through the years it takes to build a stable life in the United States. Resettlement does not end at the airport.

The women profiled here describe a reality our team encounters every week. Physical safety is not the same as wellness, and the absence of culturally competent care leaves a gap no paperwork can fill. What follows is a record of their voices, their silences, and their labor on behalf of other women.

We are grateful to **Mona Garimella and Zahra Rahimi, and the AidData research team at William & Mary** for documenting what too often stays unspoken, and to Yasamin Asetanekzai, Dan Altman, and Mursalina Amin for lending their voices to this record. Their work is part of a conversation we intend to keep having, with researchers, clinicians, sponsors, and allies themselves, about what it means to keep the promise long after the initial welcome is over.

This piece inaugurates **The Counterpart**, a new No One Left Behind series publishing voices from inside and alongside the ally community, including researchers, resettlement partners, veterans, supporters, and allies themselves.

We welcome members of the community to submit their stories, research, experiences, and perspectives to **The Counterpart** at nooneleft.org/counterpart.

— Matthew Marcellus, Director of Communications, No One Left Behind

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THE COUNTERPART - May 2026

Afghan Women Found Safety in America, But Not Solace

By Mona Garimella and Zahra Rahimi
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> ***"Afghan people are like onions. Every layer you peel, there's another story underneath."***
>
> ***— Yasamin Asetanekzai***



Illustrative. Subject not identified

In Northern Virginia, Yasamin Asetanekzai slips into a community center with a folder tucked under her arm and a list of families to check on. Around her, elementary and high school students crowd tables, sounding out the English alphabet as volunteer teachers guide them. The rhythmic call of "A, B, C..." blends with murmured Dari and Pashto translations from older Afghan youth helping the younger ones.

Through the noise, Asetanekzai moves with practiced calm. As a volunteer with NOVA RAFT, a nonprofit supporting Afghan families since 2021, she helps newly arrived women navigate food assistance, paperwork, English classes, and the shock of starting over. In crowded rooms thick with uncertainty and hope, she often becomes an anchor, especially for women struggling quietly beneath the surface.

For many Afghan women, safety in the United States has not brought peace of mind. Advocates and resettlement workers say this pattern of mental health struggles, as well as the silence surrounding them, is widespread among Afghan women adjusting to life in the United States.

"Every Afghan girl I've spoken to has mental health issues, but they can't speak about it," **Mursalina Amin** said, founder of Girls Towards Leadership. "Stigma makes this worse. They don't even have the language to describe what they're going through."

The struggles often began long before arrival. Decades of war, restrictive governance, and social exclusion left deep psychological **wounds**. Resettlement introduces new pressures: language barriers, financial strain, isolation from extended family, and the loss of familiar community structures. Migration may offer physical safety, but it also fractures identity.

"Afghan women, when they arrive in the United States, struggle to define themselves," Asetanekzai said. "They lose their way, their sense of action, their peace of mind because the women are all confused. I know some women who have a good education, but when they come to the United States, they face huge challenges with jobs and family life."

Many arrive to crowded apartments shared by multiple families, surviving on a single income while juggling childcare, work, and English classes. "Some of them live with ten or eleven people in one house," she said. "They pay for everything, food, bills, rent, with one person's job. Every day, I see constant crises that are uncontrollable."

Recent **federal policy shifts** freezing many asylum and visa processes have left thousands of Afghan families in immigration limbo, compounding fear for communities already rebuilding fragile lives.

But even without shifting policies, the mental health crisis is acute. A recent **UN Women report** found that 60 percent of Afghan women describe their mental health as "bad" or "very bad" since the Taliban's return to power.

Dan Altman, co-founder of NOVA RAFT, sees the consequences firsthand. "The single greatest barrier," he said, "is a lack of culturally appropriate, linguistically accessible resources."

Even in Northern Virginia — one of the most resource-rich regions in the country — culturally competent care is scarce. “We have… no female therapists who speak Pashto or who have cultural competency,” Altman said. “We can do trauma-informed stuff all day long, but… even in Northern Virginia, we don’t have a female Pashto-speaking clinician. So even if we did everything else perfectly, there’s nowhere for them to go.”

Language is only part of the challenge. In many Afghan families, emotional distress is not easily discussed outside the home. Cultural expectations tie family honor and social reputation closely to women’s behavior. While community can be a source of strength, it can also silence vulnerability.

“Going to therapy may not be the first thing that comes to their mind,” Altman explained. “The issues they would be talking about… are definitely not things that they should be talking to a stranger about.”

In tightly knit family networks, personal decisions can reverberate widely. Seeking divorce, for example, may fracture extended family relationships and create intergenerational conflict. The result is a powerful incentive to endure hardship privately rather than risk social rupture.

For women separated from relatives still in Afghanistan, the emotional strain is constant. Many rely on late-night phone calls and fragile internet connections to confirm loved ones are safe. When communication falters, anxiety surges. Safety in America does not erase the fear that lingers across oceans.

Asetanekzai understands this layered trauma intimately. She fled Afghanistan in 2021 and now spends her days helping others navigate the same terrain. “Afghan people are like onions,” she said. “Every layer you peel, there’s another story underneath. They are not empty. They are full of stress, of hard life, of continuous work, of everything bad they’ve carried from before.”

The work has taken a personal toll. “Two years ago, I began struggling with my own mental health when I saw those people, that situation,” she admitted. “My mom told me, ‘You can’t change the world, you can just help them.’”

Despite the challenges, Altman sees hope in the next generation — young Afghan women growing up in the United States, fluent in English and in the emotional language of their mothers' experiences. "Maybe the answer is one of you guys needs to be... social workers and counselors," he said. "The medium-term solution may be that some of them get trained to be social workers and counselors, and they can come back and help."

Healing cultural trauma requires more than emergency aid. It requires trust built over time, safe spaces for women to speak without fear, and investment in Afghan women not only as survivors but as future leaders and healers.

> ***"Afghan people are tough. Afghan women are tougher."***
> ***— Dan Altman, Co-Founder, NOVA RAFT***

"Afghan people are tough. Afghan women are tougher," Altman said.

But toughness should not be mistaken for wellness. Afghan women may have found safety in America. Solace, however, remains harder to secure.

Mona Garimella and Zahra Rahimi are researchers at AidData at William & Mary, where their work focuses on the resettlement and integration experiences of Afghan migrants in the United States across visa pathways. Learn more at aiddata.org.