

INTESOL Annual Conference Spotlight

This section will highlight one perspective from the annual INTESOL conference. This will generally be a contribution by the year's keynote speaker. This year, we feature the text of the keynote speech given by Nahid Sharifi. An advocate for women's rights in Afghanistan, Nahid Sharifi has taught university-level English since 2011. She has been a voice for breaking taboos about gender. She has been a role model for getting women more involved, supporting them to understand their important role in the future of Afghanistan. She left Afghanistan in 2021 when the Afghan government fell and US forces withdrew. Having grown up in a refugee family in Iran and experienced displacement to the United States, Nahid will share the power of her story and offer her reflections on teaching and learning through extraordinary change.

Nahid's story

In the name of Allah, the most merciful and the most beneficent.

Dear INTESOL board, educators, researchers, scholars, and dear ladies and gentlemen. Today is a great happiness to me that I have been invited to the INTESOL conference which gave me this opportunity to speak up about my story not because it is my story but because is the story of many Afghan women who are suffering a lot nowadays.

I thank every one of my IU professors who through their continued support, love, and words inspired me to follow my dreams. I thank every volunteer who helped Afghans to resettle in different States. We will never forget their kindness and support.

I am grateful for two men and one woman in my life. The first two men are my father and my husband who have encouraged and supported me and have never clipped my wings, but they let me fly and follow my dreams. I thank my mother who taught me to be patient, never give up, and fight for my dream.

About me and my Family

I was a lecturer at Kabul Teacher Training College in Afghanistan for 10 years and learned many things from students and tried to empower my students to learn and search for whatever they are interested to learn. For me, the obstacles didn't have any meaning because I learned this skill from my father. I was a teenager when for the first time Taliban invaded Afghanistan. They had turned the country to ruin. They were, as like today, against any progress and contribution of Afghanistan and people suffered a lot because of their extremist ideologies, like today. When they banned girls from schooling my father never let us be disappointed and we fled to the neighboring country Iran, when we graduated from Iran high school because we were refugees and couldn't pursue our education at a higher level in Iran again my father didn't give up and encourage us to pursue our education in Afghanistan. So, we returned to Afghanistan, and I could progress a lot and even could help other Afghan women to follow their dreams.

Why did you become a teacher?

Being a teacher was my and my father's wish because of the lack of female teachers in schools all Afghan children suffer a lot. Many female teachers were abducted, terrorized, and killed by insurgents over two decades. I became a teacher and encouraged my students to be a teacher because we have a lack of female teachers still in Afghanistan. My paradise has always been to

be a lifelong learner and learn new concepts and transfer whatever I learned to my students who were enthusiastic to learn.

What makes you so passionate?

I loved my job because I was strongly inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.'s quote: "Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You only need a heart full of grace".

I participated in some national and international programs to develop my capacities. I had a good feeling when I could do anything for my students and help them, especially those who had big dreams for their future. I really wanted to bring some positive changes into the lives of my students. I liked my students to know **why they are valued** in this world, **what matters to them** and **how they could make difference in the world** by contributing to the development of their country. I recall that the first time I held a leadership course voluntarily for my students, I started with five students without any female students because their perspective about leadership wasn't broad. But after a week the number of my participants changed from 5 to 30.

Have you had to make a decision in a few minutes that would have a huge impact on your future?

On August 19, 2021, overnight my beautiful dream turned into a nightmare. Education, and being educated became a crime for most people, especially women. I recall when I burned most of the documents and appreciation letters that I received through different programs.

When my world changed with this nightmare, my priority changed. I had two choices.

- **My first choice was to stay like many other educators who could never go back to their work and follow their dreams because since 2021 they were killed or arrested.**

- **My second choice was to leave the country, speak up and fight for the dreams of my people, even though I might be killed for speaking up.**

I chose the second one in a few minutes. I left Afghanistan last year. It was a tragedy for me but didn't mean a disaster, it means in a few minutes I had to make a decision for myself.

I knew that starting this journey will be with many challenges and difficulties, but I accepted all these challenges. I left my hometown (Herat) one day after it was surrounded by the Taliban. I couldn't take a flight ticket because all flights were stopped, and I have to go to Kabul by bus. Moving to Kabul wasn't easy and it was another challenge for me because I was a government employee and some of our official documents were with me.

Kabul still was under the control of the previous government. For me still, there was a hope that government will take over the Herat from the Taliban and I will see my city again, but I have never thought Kabul would be taken over by the Taliban just in 3 days. I was a teacher for 10 years and I loved my students, but I left behind all these memories. I left behind my family, my students, my profession, my background, my love, and my passion. I need time to bring back all these gifts. It is not easy starting from scratch, but I have to be stronger and more purposeful than before because of my students, because of those who are banned from schooling and going to work, and because of all Afghan women, today all their **rights** are eradicated by the Taliban.

What did we have before?

Before we had teachers, educators, pilots, athletes, women's activities, ministers, lawyers, journalists, robotic teams, female musicians, and some female entrepreneurs but now some of them had left the country, and some others are still in Afghanistan and are living secretly because they contributed to the development of Afghanistan. Before people were happy and enjoyed their

life and they hung out with their families on weekends and could go to picnics, restaurants, and parks with their families. But now they can't hang out with their families outdoors.

What do we have today?

Afghanistan is the only Islamic country where girls can't go to secondary school or even follow their dreams. Since the Taliban have taken over, the rate of early and forced marriage of girls before the age of 18 again has increased. All Afghans who are living in Afghanistan feel powerless because of the tough and suffocating conditions that the Taliban has created for people. My mom's house was searched for the third time, and I am wondering how many times it is going to happen again.

I am wondering what teachers have that scares the Taliban. Teachers just have pens and words, and these are their weapons. The Taliban don't like conscious and awake people but they like the walking dead.

In Afghanistan 3.7 million children are out of school and 60 percent of those are females.

Taliban claimed they will bring peace to Afghanistan but today after passing more than a year in power they couldn't make an inclusive government or even bring some positive changes in Afghanistan. Women are banned from going to public places, they have to cover their faces and be accompanied by one of the men of the family.

No one has a peaceful life in Afghanistan not in their home and not in the outdoors. Last month more than 23 girl students were killed by a suicide bomber while they were in their classroom.

Now women protesters are the heroes of this story, although they are beaten with batons, they don't give up they gather in offices and homes to produce photos and videos. They

demand justice by sharing their voices through Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp.

Because they are women who don't have a place in the Taliban halls of power.

Taliban want recognition but at first, they have to safeguard human rights. They have to give back women's rights to them. Women tackled a lot for their rights for 2 decades with all insecurities and obstacles. They almost succeeded but unfortunately, Afghanistan fell. Still, Afghan women defy the Taliban and their rules because they fought for their dreams for many years, and it is not easy for them to go back home.

Afghan women and people now need the support of the international community because of the humanitarian disaster going on in Afghanistan. Half of Afghanistan's population is experiencing food insecurity.

In the chapter of the history of Afghanistan, this is the darkest moment for Afghan women, but this chapter won't be the final chapter. I believe that Afghan women one day like the phoenix would obtain new life by arising from the ashes of their predecessors and fighting for their future dreams. I hope I can continue the path of Afghan women and be the voice of those who are confined now in their homes in Afghanistan.

I believe that Afghan women will prove to these misogynists the real notion of peace is "Women, Life, Freedom".

I would like to conclude my speech with a famous poem by Saadi (Persian poet) that explain the relation of people to each other resembling the human body. Social harmony, compassion, and respect for others enable us to thrive.

" Human beings are members of a whole, in the creation of one essence and soul,

If one member is afflicted with pain, other members uneasy will remain.

If you have no sympathy for human pain, The name of human you can't retain".