

## Bridging Understanding | Mina's story

In the *Bridging Understanding* series, McMaster students who have experienced global crisis, war or conflict share their experiences in their own words. For more on the series, please visit the [McMaster news website](#).

**Warning:** The topics covered by the interview subjects include grief, loss, trauma, sexual assault, aggression and sexual and gender-based violence. The content of the interviews may be triggering for some. All interview subjects reviewed and approved the material prior to publishing. Views expressed are strictly those of individual participants and are not endorsed by McMaster University. For support, please see the university's [resources page](#).

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### What is your connection to Afghanistan?

**Mina:** I was born and raised in Afghanistan.

### What led you to McMaster?

In August 2021, I was studying gender and social justice at Kabul University. The professor who was supposed to teach feminist theories could not come to Kabul because of COVID-19 and, also, the security concerns were growing worse day by day. She is a PhD student at McMaster, and she was in contact with her students in Kabul. After the government collapsed, she continued to reach us through a WhatsApp group. It was a tough situation for us; human rights and gender studies were against Taliban ideology.

I learned that McMaster was looking for a research coordinator and I started the application process. My professor, who is working on her PhD at McMaster, facilitated the process and fortunately my application was accepted. Between September 2021 until March 2022, McMaster was not connected with me directly because of the security situation. In March 2022, I received an email from McMaster with the possibility of going to McMaster from a second country because Canada did not have any diplomatic relations with the

Taliban. I had to leave Kabul, and I went to Pakistan with my husband, and we lived there for six months. We were two then, now we are three – we have a child!

When I arrived in Canada, I was thinking about continuing my Master's degree because when I was my home country, I was doing my Master's degree and I was at the last step of submitting my thesis. I decided to apply and fortunately, I was accepted.

**What do you wish your fellow students in Canada knew about your journey to McMaster / your story?**

That everything can be possible if you have enough self-esteem, confidence and hope to move forward. When I was in Afghanistan, I was hopeless. I didn't know how to deal with the situation because it was not just a situation for me, it was for more than 30 million people in Afghanistan.

So, I'm thinking that everyone who lives in a conflict zone lives in such a tough situation definitely should continue to create networking. Through networking, I'm here today. Self-esteem, confidence and hope. All those skills are absolutely necessary.

**Why is it so important for you to pursue a university degree?**

I was a student and at the same time that I was working as an assistant professor at Kabul University. When I got to Canada, the priority that I was looking for was the opportunity to complete my Master's degree. Getting a scholarship or being a student is so competitive, so all of this was the result of networking, the result of hard work.

**University is a major commitment. Why is it important for you to keep going with your studies; what motivates you?**

Well, because I have more than one decade of academic experience at Kabul University and I was also involved with many international organizations. So, my goal was to complete my PhD as a requirement to continue working with those organizations, but after I arrived in Canada, I thought that OK, I'm here

and I'm safe. But I still want to continue. I already had those dreams in my country.

I decided to first complete my Master's degree and then, if possible, my PhD because I want to do something for my country. I'm not here just to be here as an individual. To live, to have something for myself. I want to be involved with my own country. I'm still connecting with my students.

Some of my colleagues at Kabul University, they are in Afghanistan. I still am involved with this community. I know there is no hope (to go back to that community) because the Taliban is currently in power.

But I have thought that one day I will go there and I will do something for my country because if I'm an educated person, if I have a degree from one of the established Canadian institutions, like McMaster, that would be the best achievement in my life: To go there, to transfer my knowledge, to continue teaching and to connect these two countries.

After 2021, Afghanistan has lost thousands of scholars. They have all left the country, so there is a strong need for them to return, I would like to return. I hope to have my PhD and go there and continue working with them.

**Tell me about something that inspires you – as a student, or in some other aspect of your life.**

As I mentioned before, one of my colleagues and friend, she went through this process and came to Canada before me in 1991. She had been working with lots of organizations on refugees and immigration because she was an assistant professor at Kabul University on the Faculty of Law.

When she got there (Canada), she thought that "OK, I'm here. But I need to do something for my country." So, she started working with many organizations and after 15 years of working with them, she quit and returned to McMaster University. During her studies, she created a platform to connect Kabul University with McMaster University.

She has been involved with many, many organizations to advocate for women, Afghan women, Middle East women, any women from a conflict zone. She is inspiring, when I see her, she's the role model that I want to be like.

I want to be like her because she's amazing and she's a very hard-working person. She's very famous among the community.

**Is there something from your time at McMaster — or a moment or a place that helps you get through this difficult time and sustains you?**

Starting school as a newcomer in a Canadian institution like McMaster is tough.

It's challenging, during the initial weeks I was a little bit nervous. I was a little bit stressed because it was a new environment, but it was not my first time being in an academic institution in North America. I was in the U.S. in 2013 as a visiting scholar. I spent four months there and I was involved with many programs and organizations.

As a student, it was a little bit challenging for me because I had to learn about the enrollment process and the technology used here. Now I'm settled and everything is going well.

McMaster has different supports, like counselling, for students who need them. There's an assistant administrator who was really helpful, I'm really thankful for the help I received.

**Is there something you wish your fellow students knew about you or your life?**

As I mentioned before I'm from a conflict zone. My country has been experiencing a long-term civil war, an armed conflict, for more than 40 years. It was very difficult time for me and my family because we didn't know how to deal with this situation.

When the Taliban came to power from 1994 to 2001, I was in Afghanistan. And I lived there as a girl. The Taliban deprived me of accessing education and work. I was a little kid. They hit me for not wearing a hijab. I was just seven or eight years old, a kid.

My family decided to start homeschooling because we were four females, I have three sisters and one brother. I received the quality of education that I was looking for due to the hard work that my parents did.

Today, I'm able to pursue my education, my dream. So once again I want to mention that if you are confident, if you are hardworking, if you, if you have self-esteem, you can make it as a human, as a woman.

We have to fight. We have to always look for any kind of hope to persuade us, to encourage us, to have any kind of passion to move forward. I have my family beside me, and I have my friends around, I have my spirituality to assist me through this tough process.

Fortunately, today, in my family, we are all educated.

One sister has a Master's degree in economy. The second, she is an engineer and in telecommunications. The third one is a student of commerce and at the same time, she just did her Master's degree in Japanese language literature.

One sister is in the U.S., the other is in Japan. My parents are in Afghanistan. And I'm in Canada. We're all pursuing education, pursuing our dreams and at the same time we are in connection with our family, with our friends, with our community in Afghanistan who needs us because currently more than 15 million Afghan women are deprived of education.

After the 6th grade, they are not allowed to go to school, and this is such a complicated and tragic situation.

My family went through that process, and we came out from that particular darkness with the support of others, and we had to have our plan. We have to have our dream. To fulfill that dream, we definitely need some skills.

### **Let's talk about support and community. Where do you look for support?**

Before I joined Master University as a student, I was a student at Mohawk College.

I was there to just refresh my English language speaking skills and at the same time I delivered my baby and he spent time in hospital. As a newcomer dealing with the situation was really tough and my baby is healthy today.

The services at Mohawk were outstanding. There was community, there was counselling. They had different people who assisted students, including helping find financial support.

I also had the Afghan community here in Canada, including women from the Gender Studies program at Kabul University. We have a community of those students here in Canada. They live in different parts of Canada, but we are in touch. We have a WhatsApp group. We are in connection with each other most of the time.

**Is there a person or a community here who means a lot to you?**

Yes, my supervisor and other professors and volunteers. I'm still connected with them.

**What would you like other students who find themselves in similar circumstances to know?**

As a person who comes from a country in conflict, the most important things that we should always remember is that we should follow our dreams and at the same time, we should continue to pursue education.

In any situation, they should continue to apply for any educational opportunities that come their way. An academic platform is the most powerful platform in the world.

If you want to be an expert, a professional, if you want to solve problems in your community, you need education. You need the skills you develop by earning your degree.

**Is there someone or something in your life that gives you hope for the future?**

Yeah, absolutely. My parents, in particularly my mother. She's a very spiritual woman. She's educated. And she is not only a mother for us, but also a best friend to us. She was always a role model for us, to go through difficulties, to find solutions, to make decisions. She always assisted us to be strong enough,

to take responsibilities for our actions and to be accountable. To be a person who stands alone on their own feet.

She's amazing still. She's in Afghanistan, whenever I face any difficulties, I call her. She is not my mother only, but she's also a great counsellor. Through any difficulties in terms of my personal life, in terms of my baby, dealing with the baby as a newcomer.

She has not met her grandson yet, because it's not possible because they are in a very tough situation. There is no diplomatic relations with Canada. There is no legitimate government in Afghanistan.

It's not possible for them, but I hope to see them soon. I saw my mom almost two years ago and we are trying to meet in a third country because we are not expecting political change in Afghanistan. But I hope there is.

### **What kind of supports do you find most helpful?**

Receiving the free bus pass. Yes, it was amazing. I didn't even know about that when I received mine. As I mentioned before, I had difficulties enrolling. I didn't have any access to the Student Centre, so it was difficult for me to manage learning everything I needed to learn, like Avenue to Learn, but I had help.

The bus assistance was really amazing for me because as a mother I actually do not have much time for walking.

And another thing that I would like to mention is that I received a scholarship from the School of Graduate Studies, which is a great for me.

It's an amazing opportunity for me and thank you so much, I appreciate what my family, community, McMaster and colleagues have done for me.