

# **Finally Meeting Aisha: The Culmination of a Year of Rescuing Afghan Women**

**By Phyllis Chesler**

**Is feminism about donning hijab as a statement against racism-  
-even as women in Iran and Afghanistan are being murdered for  
refusing to do so? Even as Iranian women, men, and children  
are being hanged, raped, shot down in a frenzy by mad mullahs?**



Here I am pictured in 1959

I really think not. Here's an example of what feminism is—and should be about.

On July 26th, 2021, my dear friend and colleague Mandy Sanghera, a London-based human rights activist and philanthropist, called and asked me if I wanted to help rescue women from Afghanistan.

“Are you kidding? I’ve been waiting for this opportunity all my life.”

“I thought you had some unfinished business there” she wisely said.

I was once held against my will in Kabul as a bride a very long time ago. I published a book about it titled [\*An American Bride in Kabul\*](#) and have since read many memoirs written by Muslim or ex-Muslim women, by Muslim reformers and dissidents, and by Westerners who have traveled to Afghanistan—and I have a very good idea of what being trapped there might be like for women, dissidents, infidels, and gays forced to live in an Islamist tenth century.

I immediately threw myself into this very feminist, very moral, and very Jewish work, full-time, 24/7, and with all my might.

Mandy introduced me to feminist Aisha (not her real name), who lived in Kabul. Beginning on July 26th, 2021, we began to exchange confidences via Signal, an encrypted app, via What’s App, via text, and eventually via email. I connected Aisha to our team which had, in a short period of time, rescued many hundreds of Afghan women and their families.

In August of that year, when President Biden pulled troops out of Afghanistan (in a mismanaged and terrible way), I did not know whether Aisha had actually made it to the airport under the hail of the Taliban’s whips, bullets, and death threats. I did not know whether she was alive or dead.

Talk about drama! My Aisha was on the last flight out on the very day (August 26th) that a suicide bomber blew up Kabul

Airport. She later told me:

“We saw it all from our plane, which had just taken off.”

Aisha clarified this for me yesterday, at the airport where she had landed, literally a year and a week since we had first met.

Aisha appeared in my early pieces up at *4W*—pieces that were absolutely invaluable in terms of both fundraising for her GoFundMe campaign and, as important, for attracting very valuable new members to the team.

Aisha also told me that she and her family were waiting outside the Kabul airport for two full days. Her family wanted to turn back but Aisha kept texting with the angel who had access to planes, who kept telling her not to give up, to keep waiting.

Aisha did just that over and against her family’s protests.

And so, Aisha finally landed in America. I met her plane together with my good friend Professor Lilia Melani, who has pledged to pay Meena’s rent for the first year. Aisha flew first class (!) due to the generosity and access to frequent flyer miles that one of *4W*’s staunchest readers, Linda (Penny) Wilson, had provided. (*4W* is the blessed feminist space where I first published articles on Aisha’s behalf to raise money for her and for all the other 398 Afghan women.)

Yes, she could easily be my Afghan granddaughter, and I now think of her this way.

د افغانستان شاهي دولت

ROYAUME  
D'AFGHANISTAN



اولد درجه پاسپورت

PASSEPORT  
DE  
PREMIERE CLASSE

Doing rescue work is hardly glamorous. It is tedious, exhausting, demanding, intense, round-the-clock work. It is unpaid. One ends up paying for what one needs. The cries for help, the description of conditions on the ground never stop coming. They are haunting requests. They are still coming my way. One needs a team to do this work. One cannot do it alone. One finds such people; one delegates the work.

The team I was privileged to join consisted of Mandy; two feminist anti-trafficking experts from Germany who got women out to Europe, but prefer not to be named; an American academic who had to drop out almost immediately due to illness—but before she did, connected us to her anti-trafficking network; an American lawyer; an American anti-trafficking expert who, through her connections, had access to seats on military planes; Russ Pritchard and Sarah Lange of Team Themis, both of whom, if funded, were prepared to organize food, medicine, and wood drops, as well as doctor and midwife visits in Afghanistan; two ultra-Orthodox rabbis, Zvi Boyarsky was one, as well as the amazing Lela Gilbert, who works with the Shai Fund, which is both based in America and in Israel. They all funded the escapes of Afghan Christians and one or two Afghan Jews. Tam Weissman, the best social-worker-therapist I know, consulted with Aisha online all year.

A group known as the Rainbow Railroad, run by K, managed to get gay men and/or LGBTQ people out of Afghanistan and into some Western countries.

When Professor Sandi Cooper, a former colleague of both mine and Lilia's, recently heard about what we were doing, she wrote a very generous check for Aisha.

My own former paid executive assistant Emily Feldman was the one who created Excel spreadsheets and kept track of the voluminous correspondence between Afghan women and our team, which may easily now number thousands of pages. Mandy's volunteer assistant, Saba Ali, did likewise, as did someone

named Jonathan, whose wife had thirteen family members left behind in Afghanistan and who both wanted to help us and to get his relatives out.

We were in touch with women judges, lawyers, physicians, social workers, business women, journalists, artists, athletes, professors, mothers—all of whom feared for their very lives as well as their futures under the Taliban. They shared horror stories with us.

Here's one: A Taliban barbarian wanted to marry one young woman who refused his offer. He had her kidnapped, gang-raped, and had boiling water poured onto her genitalia. Members of this glorious team got her and her sister out to Pakistan within days.

Here's another: A prominent women's rights activist was in hiding; she knew the Taliban were hunting her. They kidnapped her—and returned her corpse later that night.

I made Aisha my special ward. Where could she turn for asylum? Aisha had worked with several foreign governments who were doing field work in Afghanistan. Norway was one. The United States was another. A European NGO was a third. I contacted every one of her Norwegian contacts on her behalf many times—but Norway did not want another Afghan. I had no luck with the European NGO. I then tried her French-American professor, Jean-Francois Trani, with whom she'd worked. I contacted him and his staff again and again and again—and he came through brilliantly.

Trani spoke so highly of Aisha's work that he was able to obtain a \$76,000 scholarship for her in social work at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, a university with which he is affiliated. Initially, he offered to have Aisha live with him and his wife, but along the way his plans changed as he will be living in another country. However, what he'd already done was more than sufficient unto the day. He

also met her plane when it landed in St. Louis, helped her open a bank account so she would have access to her GoFundMe money, and escorted her to the very charming suite of rooms at a B&B on or near campus, where she would be living. (By the way: Aisha graduated at the top of her class and obtained a Master's degree.) I am one proud American grandmother.

However, at that time, nothing was yet definite. I thought: What about India? It was close by and planes were still flying there. I have a very dear friend, the American feminist physician Dr. Michelle Harrison, who founded an orphanage for severely disabled girls in India. (I think of her as "Michelle the Saint.") She was absolutely willing to take Aisha in, allow her to rest and heal while she decided what her next steps would be. I had been in touch with a number of Indian Hindus with whom I had worked, and they all tried so hard to help make this happen. The Indian government did not want any more Muslims at this time, not even one very educated Afghan woman who, of course, would be coming with her parents and siblings. Would even one of them become radicalized? The government never said a word. But my contacts apologized and suggested that this might be the case. The crises and conflicts between Hindus and Muslims were already too incendiary, too tragic.

In addition, Aisha would not have left without her family and Saint Michelle may or may not have been able to shelter them all.

Dear friends Hannah Meyers, Nahma Sandrow, and William Meyers invited me to dinner in order that I meet Ruta Nimkar, an expert in human-trafficking routes. She easily identified two Afghan men who, for a price, would lead Afghans over the border into Pakistan. I shared this information with everyone immediately. Too many of the women had no money, but they also feared that worse might happen if they took this chance: they'd be robbed, raped, captured, and ultimately not allowed to stay in either Pakistan or Iran. Even if they could obtain

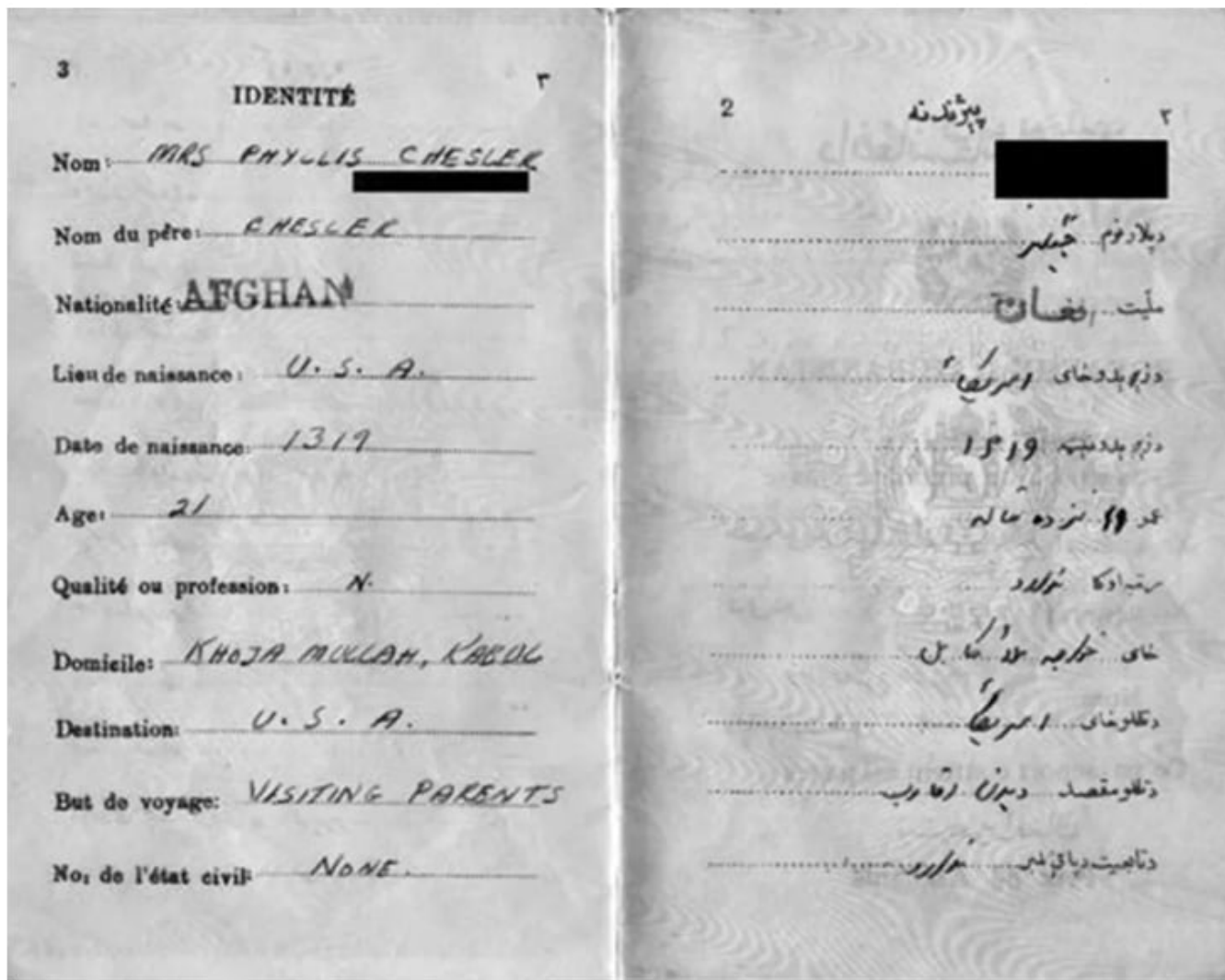
visas and could stay—they could not get jobs. How could they feed their children?

A great feminist, who shall remain unnamed, introduced me to her friend in Turkey who runs a shelter for immigrant women. However, the longest anyone can stay there is only a few weeks—and they would need a visa to Turkey. And she had no room at the time.

I spoke to American army veterans, hedge-fund mavens, and with imposters and opportunists of all kinds. My team was mainly volunteers except for my assistant at the time, Emily Feldman.

Some of the women were terrified, traumatized, the Taliban was hunting for them as women's rights activists, going house to house, shooting guns off; others were, very understandably, deeply depressed and self-deprecating. Some were very demanding, hysterical, and had delusions of grandeur. One woman wanted a theatrical agent so that she could become a Hollywood actress or so that a filmmaker could make a film about her life. Mandy was helping the British government resettle 4,000 Afghan men and their families, men who had worked for the British military as drivers, translators, and "fixers," and she was inundated with bitter complaints. Mandy is no novice. She's been at this for a long time. Afghans were not an easy group to resettle. She said:

"If I got them into a hotel, they wanted a larger suite of rooms. If I got them that, they wanted a cottage, a nice house, a nicer house, one in a good neighborhood with a garden. The demands never stopped coming. And no one ever said thank you."



An inside view of my Afghan passport, 1961

What does doing such work cost?

I almost lost a very good friend doing this work—a feminist who called me and, unasked but in a very loud and angry voice, insisted: “President Biden did everything right in how he pulled out of Afghanistan.” I doubt she even remembers saying this, but at the time it may have been the cruelest thing anyone could have said to me. It was at a moment when I did not know whether Aisha and others were alive or dead. I hung up on her.

I had been without sleep; all Hell had broken loose; women with whom I was in touch were hiding, starving, running to the airport—and this was her way of what? Diminishing the importance of this work? Supporting Biden for the sake of the

Democratic Party's position on abortion rights and refusing to be clear about the harm he may have caused in another area?

I lost one of my major funders, a philanthropist who said, quite frankly, "I don't want any more of them here, and I'm not funding you to do this work." Her check was not in the mail.

I lost a treasured colleague with whom I'd worked on projects that mattered ever so much to me. It's a story for another day, but suffice to say, she chose to believe a false narrative, told by the only one among us who did not volunteer her services but who quietly paid herself for the work she was doing—work that almost completely failed.

When we realized that the \$50–60K that I had mainly raised had been used by our lawyer to pay herself, we called for a Zoom meeting, which Mandy chaired in a very balanced and diplomatic way. We managed to claw back \$12K with a promise of \$8K more for food and medicine drops and for doctor and midwife visits in Afghanistan.

The demands of this work did not allow me to fall apart or try and "process" such breathtakingly cruel behavior. The work demanded my entire attention, all my time. I had to keep thinking creatively. I had to keep after people to do what they promised to do. I had to help them cross all the "t's."

I guess that war zones and global crises attract both do-gooders as well as profiteers, egomaniacs, and scoundrels. I did not expect even a shadow of such bad behavior to rear its head among us—but one lives and learns.

There was one guy who said he was both a Muslim and a Jew, knew the Afghan territories, had money, and wanted to help. All he really wanted was to meet me and take a photo of us together—a photo that he then photoshopped to make himself look younger and thinner. I know because he proudly sent me a copy.

A major lawyer approached me wanting to do a fundraiser for the women who, on my say so, were and still are trapped in Meshed, Teheran, Rawalpindi, and Islamabad. She had me prepare extensive, back-breaking dossiers for her (that she kept losing), but that I gladly did. I never heard from her again. Russ did receive a small sum of money from one of the women who heard her pitch.

As Mandy says: "In doing this work, one meets the best of people, those who really step up and want to do good in the world, but one also meets gaslighters, phonies, egomaniacs, mad people, and lost souls."

I invited Aisha to visit in order to meet the team who participated in her rescue. Before she left, Aisha insisted on giving me the heavy gold medal she received in Spain on International Women's Day, March 2022, from "leading women" for her courage and bravery as a woman in escaping from Afghanistan. "It was the first such award I ever received in my life."

Moved beyond words, I finally said that I would keep it safe for her. Aisha then insisted that had I not written to her and had I not kept writing to her—she would not have become who she is now and who she was quite clearly destined to become: A Leader of Women.

This piece was first published in 2022 at *4W*. It was reposted in *Tablet* and elsewhere.

*First published in [Phyllis' Newsletter](#)*