

Finally Meeting Meena: The Culmination of A Year of Rescuing Afghan Women

The process of getting Meena and other women out of Afghanistan was difficult and dramatic, yet ultimately worth it.



by Phyllis Chesler

Last year, 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 probably 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 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 had a very good idea of what being trapped there might be like for women, dissidents, infidels, and gays forced to live in an Islamist 10th century.

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

Mandy introduced me to feminist Meena Safi 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 Meena to our team which had, in a short period of time, rescued many hundreds of Afghan women and their families.

Last August, I did not know whether Meena 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! Meena was on the last flight out on the very day (August 26th), that a suicide bomber blew up Kabul Airport.

"We saw it all from our plane which had just taken off."

Meena clarified this for me yesterday, at Newark Airport, where she had just landed, literally a year and a week since we first met.

Meena (whom I named "Aisha") in my [early pieces](#) up at 4W—pieces which were absolutely invaluable in terms of both fundraising for her GoFundMe campaign and as important, for attracting very valuable new members to the team.

Meena 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 Meena kept texting with Tatiana (whom you'll soon meet), who kept telling her not to give up, to keep waiting.

Meena did just that over and against her family's protests.

And now, Meena has 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. Meena is flying first class (!) due to the generosity and access to frequent flyer miles that one of 4W's staunchest readers, Linda (Penny) Wilson, has provided.

As I write this, she is on her way to my home for an early, surprise Afghan dinner. She is the sweetest, kindest, most sensitive, and worthiest young woman whom I've ever met. Yes, she could easily be my Afghan granddaughter and I now think of her this way.

Doing rescue work is hardly glamorous. It is tedious, exhausting, demanding, 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 people.

The team I was privileged to join consisted of Mandy; two feminist anti-trafficking experts from Germany, who got women out to Europe, but who 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; a Ukrainian anti-trafficking expert, Tatiana Kotlyarenko, 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, 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 of one or two Afghan Jews.

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 Meena.

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, that 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 for her. They kidnapped her—and returned her corpse later that night.

I made Meena my special ward. Where could she turn for asylum? Meena 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 Meena'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 Meena live with him and his wife, but along the way his plans changed as he will be living in another country. However, what he's already done is more than sufficient unto the day. He, too, will be meeting her plane when it lands in St. Louis, helping her open a bank account so she will have access to her GoFundMe money, and escorting her to the very charming suite of rooms at a B&B on or near campus where she will be living.

As 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 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 Meena 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 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 was already too incendiary, tragic.

In addition, Meena 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 an expert (I will call her R.N.) in human trafficking routes. She easily identified two Afghan men who, for a price, would lead Afghans over the border to 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 two women—my assistant and another one of us.

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 either become a Hollywood actress or so that a filmmaker could make a film about her life. Mandy was helping the British government

resettle 40,000 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.

“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.”

What does doing such work cost?

I 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 Meena 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 which almost completely failed.

When we realized that the \$50-60K that I had mainly raised had been used in this way, 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.

My treasured colleague did not bother checking with either Mandy or myself and the story got spun in such a way that three rather vicious emails landed in my Inbox all at once accusing me of ruining a good woman's life. My special colleague suggested that I read a book—what was the title she asked? Oh yes, [Woman's Inhumanity to Woman](#).

The demands of this work did not allow me to fall apart or to 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 which he then photoshopped of himself, one which made him 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 (which she kept losing), but which 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.”

Before Meena left this evening, she 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. Meena 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, quite clearly, destined to become: A Leader of Women.

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