

# WE SEE







Photo by Rohina Yousufee  
femLENS workshops 2024, Afghanistan









**Photo by Malak Fouad Mostafa**  
femLENS workshops 2024, Nahr El Bared,  
Lebanon

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# BEFORE AND AFTER: PHOTOGRAPHY, RESISTANCE, AND THE STORIES OF AFGHAN AND PALESTINIAN WOMEN

by Maria Vesselko

In this issue of *We See* magazine, we present photographic stories of Afghan women living under Taliban rule and Palestinian women in refugee camps in Lebanon, capturing their lives in the summer of 2024 before the autumn war with Israel. For those observing from the outside, these stories may appear to be framed as ‘before’ and ‘after’—before the bombs fell, and after regime change. Yet for the women behind these images, this is not merely a reflection of past events but a lived reality—one of survival, resilience, and humanity that continues today.

At femLENS, we are dedicated to sharing the everyday lives that are often overshadowed by sensational headlines and major crises. While these images stem from conflict and displacement, they transcend the mere documentation of war and suffering. They convey the ongoing experiences of women whose voices are usually absent from mainstream media, which too often focuses only on the most dramatic expressions of suffering, ignoring the quieter yet deeply profound moments that shape life in such circumstances.

Photography, by its very nature, documents what Roland Barthes so famously described in his *Camera Lucida* as that which “was there”—the visual proof of existence, a frozen moment that can be revisited. “The invention of photography provided the gaze with an absolute plane of immobility, a space where movement is frozen, transformed into a still picture that can be observed without disturbance.” However, in a picture, what has been established—what has been fixed and stabilised—is at most a testimony to the moment of the photograph’s eventuation, in which photographer, photographed, and camera encountered one another.

While Barthes speaks to photography’s stillness, Ariella Azoulay, in her *The Civil Contract of Photography*, takes this further by exploring the photograph’s social and ethical implications. Azoulay argues that each photograph embodies a shared social contract between the photographer, the subject, and the viewer. The encounter between these three parties is central to her theory—suggesting that photographs are not just reflections of a moment but are part of a mutual responsibility, even after the shutter is closed. This concept is crucial to understanding the photographs featured in this issue of *We See* magazine, where the images do more than capture a moment; they invite us into a shared understanding of the women’s lives, their struggles, and their resilience.

But what does it mean to say that something “was there”? For Afghan and Palestinian women, whose stories we highlight in this issue, these images bear witness not only to their presence but to their ongoing engagement with the world. Their lives are not defined by a single photo but are part of a broader, active narrative of resistance, adaptation, and survival. Even under conditions of extreme distress—whether under the Taliban’s rule or in the midst of political



**Photo by Rohina Yousufee**  
femLENS workshops 2024, Afghanistan



**Photo by Falasteen Khalil**  
femLENS workshops 2024, Borj Al Barajneh,  
Lebanon

conflict and displacement—photography can restore something lost. As Azoulay writes, “Even when this encounter occurs under the difficult conditions of distress or disaster, when a threat looms over or has already caused harm to the political space, the act of photography and the photographs it produces might, at least potentially, restore it.” The photographer is not merely a passive observer; they are an active participant in the life and struggles of those they capture.

The role of the photographer in these contexts is complex. In this issue, the women whose lives are portrayed are not simply subjects of external photographers; they are the ones holding the camera. These women are participants in femLENS’s 2024 documentary photography workshops, which are part of our ongoing efforts to empower women through storytelling. The Afghan women took part in online workshops facilitated through an online school for Afghan girls and women, while the Palestinian women participated in workshops within their refugee camps in Lebanon, led by our facilitator, a Lebanese woman herself. In these workshops, the women learned not only the technical aspects of photography but also how to tell their own stories—on their own terms. This process of participation shifts the dynamics of traditional photojournalism. These women are not passive subjects but active creators of their own narratives. Their photographs, therefore, reflect a unique form of self-representation and agency in the face of displacement and violence.

Yet, photography’s truth is never whole. “Critical discussions seeking to challenge the truth of photography, or argue that ‘photography lies,’ remain anecdotal and marginal to the institutionalized practices of exhibiting and publishing photographs,” Azoulay notes. A photograph shares a moment of reality, but it is never the full reality. What “was there” is only a fragment of the situation, shaped by the relationships between photographer, photographed, and viewer. The stories in this issue reflect that truth—they are partial, yet powerful, and within them lies the broader context of social relations, power dynamics, and lived experiences that surround each click of the camera’s shutter.

The photographs in this issue provide a window into these women’s worlds, yet they also remind us that the moment documented is always part of something bigger—something unseen but felt. The photograph, as Barthes noted, is “literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here.” Photography connects us across time and space, creating a bond between the subject and the observer, between those who were there and those who witness through the lens.

These stories of Afghan and Palestinian women serve as visual testimonies not only of conflict but of an enduring presence in the world. In each image, we see not only what was there but the resilience, the strength, and the humanity that continues. This issue of *We See* magazine also challenges us to look beyond the stillness of the photograph and see the life that pulses within it—life that continues, despite the chaos and hardship that so often surrounds it.



# ON TWO WHEELS

by Laila Rezay

This story is about people riding bicycles. This type of transport is very old and people on bicycles can get around easily. Around the world, women and men can ride a bike, but in Afghanistan only men can ride bicycles.

When you go out and see cyclists, it will always be a man. They maybe be someone who is going to an education center to learn, and have a bag pack or several books and notebooks.

They wear warm coat, gloves and use an ascot in winter. Sometimes we can see two young boys on one bicycle. In the street we can see small boys riding bicycle or in the corner they stop bicycle and play with other boys.

Also we see men going to work early in the morning, or an old man with their weak legs who is able to ride a bicycle. In Afghanistan, when boys want to ride a bicycle, their family allows to them to do so, but when girls want to do the same, their family say: you are a girl, you can't ride a bicycle, it is bad for you, and what will people say about you riding a bicycle. Before the Taliban, some girls used to ride bicycles, and their families allowed them. Right now when a girl rides a bike in the street, people see her and the Taliban will imprison her for this. They believe through this girls do non-Islamic work, but I believe everyone can ride a bike, and it doesn't matter if it's a girl or a boy.

In Afghanistan usually poor people use bicycles. Rich people never use a bike, because they can afford a car.

























# CHILD LABOUR IN AFGHANISTAN

by Lina Kiani

The war is one of the main problems in Afghan society, which has plagued its people for many years. The war in Afghanistan has caused the Afghan people to endure difficult lives for many years, and the most damage of this war has been for the children of Afghanistan. One of the most serious harms of war is the spread of poverty and the decreased access to money and funds in the country, which has caused harm to children who are forced to work, and has prevented children from studying. This has caused and will continue to cause another type of social poverty for future generation - the absence of educated people who can develop their country.

When you walk in the streets of Afghanistan's cities, you see children working hard everywhere and at every step. They accept all kinds of hardships and pressures so that they can find a little money for their nightly bread.

In the most optimistic circumstances, children are engaged in heavy work in shops, hotels, restaurants, repair shops, construction works, etc. This can be considered as luck because the child has a certain place to work, an income, and their work is stable. Also, the possibility of mental abuse and harassment by people is less common.

But a large part of Afghan children are in the streets and are busy with work such as hand-selling, cleaning cars, begging, smoking pecan nuts, collecting occupations (such as picking rubbish), etc. which can be very harmful to children because these children have small bodies due to poverty and lack of food, and they may not be seen by drivers on the streets, causing

serious accidents. They are harassed by people, they experience injuries in the hot summer heat, and freeze in the extreme cold of winter. In the midst of work pollution might be another danger causing serious illnesses.

Unfortunately, due to the hardships and pressures on these children, the spirit of childhood is killed in them from early on in their lives, and things such as play and childhood are lost in them. They become parents for their siblings from early childhood and work hard for a piece of bread. You can see plenty of children who smile when you tell them you want to take a picture but their smiles show a bitter face, expressing many hardships in their early years of life.

When you walk around the streets of the city, you will see that young girls and boys are very busy with work. They hurry and don't want to waste time talking so that they can get back to their work to not lose any possibility of income.

They have a strange sense and understanding of what is happening to them and their childhood. When I asked Farid and Umair to take a picture of them, they hid their tools. When I asked them why are you hiding them, Umair said, I don't want to show them to people. They know that they have to work, but they also know that they are nothing more than children. It is true that they have to work hard like adults and are deprived of all the beauties of childhood, but this does not mean that all of them do not feel like children while their souls have grown up. Only their fate and the hard times have forced them to be big.















# SUCCESS AND DEFIANCE OF THE ODDS

by Basma Qassem

In light of the economic crisis in Lebanon that began at the end of 2019 and the rise in the price of the U.S. dollar, which affected the residents of Nahr Al-Bared camp and made a large part of them live below the poverty line, including Mrs. Sanaa Al-Karaki, who was forced to work to help her husband secure the obligations and expenses of the house.

Mrs. Sanaa Al-Karaki (38 years old) and her husband Mr. Ayman Al-Karaki (also 38 years old) have 7 children (3 girls and 4 boys) and live in the Sheikh Ali neighbourhood in Nahr al-Bared camp.

This family, like many families in the camp, suffers from financial hardship, which prompted Mrs. Sanaa to work to help her husband secure their family's expenses.

Sanaa chose the profession of making pastries to help her husband, as she had a hobby in this profession since she was young, so she rented a shop, bought an oven kit and started working.

I asked Sanaa about her work and her time in the shop: she wakes up at five o'clock in the morning, prays, then starts preparing mixtures for pastries such as za'atar, cheese, labneh, heat, and pizza until seven o'clock, then she goes to the shop and enters the kitchen (the place designated for kneading in the shop) and starts preparing and kneading the dough. Sanaa kneads the dough with a mixer, but many times she makes a great effort to mix by hand, due to regular electricity outages. After preparing the dough, Sanaa covers it for fermentation and leaves it for about two hours, during which time she returns home to clean and prepare breakfast for her children, and to feed the cat and birds. In the meantime her husband Ayman goes to the shop and cuts the dough, and Sanaa returns to the shop and helps her husband to roll the dough with the machine. By then, people from the neighbourhood start ordering their different pastries, each according to their taste and cravings.

When I visited her in the shop on a Tuesday in July 2024, one of the customers came and



ordered a large quantity of pastries with meat for a wedding. I asked her curiously: "how do you bear the pressure of work?", especially since her shop is small and the weather in the summer is very hot. She smiled and said that she is used to it and that she wears a light dress (prayer dress) to stay comfortable at work, and that her husband supports her and helps her





at work, and they exchange roles in preparing the filling of the manakeesh or baking it in the oven.

I was very pleased when I saw the people of the neighbourhood come to the bakery and buy manakeesh. The sign of satisfaction and pleasure was clear on the faces of Sanaa and her husband for this turnout.

Sanaa and Ayman stay in the bakery until all the dough is finished, until around four o'clock in the afternoon after which she returns home while Ayman stays in the shop to clean and organize it for the next day.

When Sanaa arrives home, she rests for a while and then starts preparing food. On one of my visits to her, I found her making date cookies,



she laughed and told me, "Don't be surprised, my children love to eat date cookies."

Her husband was sleeping, when he woke up he welcomed me with a smile. He is a cheerful person and loves people, and while we were sitting, her daughter came and brought her mother some medicines, so I asked her about these medicines and she said that they are painkillers because she suffers from discs and varicose veins in the legs, because she stands for long hours in the shop, and these medicines are only painkillers because the actual medicine is expensive needles that she cannot afford. I asked "Why don't you quit this work? It has caused you difficult diseases." She replied sadly, "I wish I could! With the start of the crisis, the high prices and my husband's lack of regular work, we had to think of a solution, and I chose this profession because it is my hobby. At first we couldn't afford to buy the tools, so I borrowed money from my brother, and the people of the neighbourhood helped us buy the mixer.

I was saddened and pained by their situation, but what relieved me was the state of satisfaction of this struggling and patient family. I noticed that what relieves Sanaa is her husband's appreciation for her and the work itself, he praises her and says: "Sanaa is the rose

of the house, and without her we would starve." Ayman then asked his wife's permission to bring them watermelon, so Sanaa brought the watermelon, cut it up and fed her husband and children. I was happy with this scene that shows the extent of love and warmth in this family despite the hardship they live in.

I asked the family for permission to leave and they insisted that I stay and repeat the visit.

Sanaa is an honourable example of a woman who defies the difficulties and hardships and stands by her husband and supports him to raise his children.

**I am Basma Qassem, a Palestinian from Nahr el-Bared camp. I love photography very much and I got interested in it because it documents the beautiful moments that we can freeze and make a permanent memory. Photography for me is like painting which communicates what is inside of me to the world, but it is also a way to discharge and communicate feelings. One picture can tell a complete story and communicate feelings through it to the world around me.**

**Nahr El Bared, Beirut, Lebanon.**

















# A DAY IN THE (ME AND YOU) FLOWER SHOP

by Mina Majidi

This photo essay takes you on a visual journey through a day in the life of Agha Sahib's shop, capturing the beauty, passion, and dedication that goes into creating and sharing the joy of flowers with the community. In the enchanting city of Herat, Afghanistan, there are a few small flower shops, but one stands out as a larger and more diverse option. Located in the heart of the city, it boasts a wide selection of flowers and plants and is surrounded by the Herat Province buildings, bustling restaurants, and a large sports stadium. The shop, owned by Agha Sahib, was originally rented from the extra space of a restaurant and has since become renowned for its exquisite flower arrangements.

Agha Sahib has a deep love for flowers and takes great pride in sourcing the freshest and most vibrant blooms from local growers in the surrounding countryside and Iran. The shop is a riot of colour and fragrance, with roses, tulips, and daisies adorning every corner.

The day begins with Agha Sahib carefully caring for his blossoming treasures. Soft morning light streams through the windows, Agha Sahib is hard at work right now, carefully checking the soil for fresh blooms and always using the best soil.

The open and beautiful space of this flower shop has become a gathering place where people come not only to buy flowers but also to seek

peace, celebrate love, and find beauty in the midst of life's challenges.

In his shop, beautiful decorative stones in different colours are always available, which can make the vases more luxurious.

Every customer who visits the shop is warmly welcomed and receives dedicated assistance in choosing the most beautiful flowers and plants for their special occasions or home decor. The staff at the shop also share stories about the symbolism and significance of each flower with their customers.

As the day unfolds, customers begin to trickle into the shop, drawn by the enchanting fragrance and kaleidoscope of colours. Agha Sahib greets each visitor with a warm smile, eager to share his passion for flowers and help them find the perfect arrangement for their special occasion.

Despite the political turmoil and uncertainty that often-plagued Herat, Agha Sahib's flower shop remained a beacon of hope and happiness in the community. His dedication to his craft and unwavering commitment to his customers made him a beloved figure in the city.

Today, shops like Agha Sahib's stand as symbols of resilience and beauty in Herat. Their colourful displays continue to brighten the lives of locals and visitors alike, reminding everyone that beauty and kindness can flourish even in the harshest of circumstances.













# IN SEARCH OF SHELTER

by Farida Azizi

My story is about street dogs and this is a very important issue in today's society of our country, Afghanistan. Through my photography, I want say to my people to treat animals, especially dogs, with kindness.

Due to a lack of healthy food and shelter, they suffer from various diseases and these diseases can be transmitted to humans as well, which is a big problem today. Dozens of people go to the hospital every day because of dog bites, all of them are bitten by street dogs.

They are born on the streets and grow up on the streets without any shelter. Dogs are very kind and loyal. If we treat them with kindness, they will return it.

Dogs are harassed daily in the streets by people because our people do not yet have much understanding of compassion and proper treatment of animals. We must learn that animals also have the right to live in this society unharmed.

They have the right to have a shelter, food and water. They are constantly looking for shelter in the streets. In the cold season, they suffer a lot because they have no shelter. They feed on garbage. Dogs are often beaten by children or injured by cars on the roads. In some cases, they are sexually assaulted by drug addicts.

If one harasses a human being or someone is hungry or thirsty, they can express it and can

say "I am hungry, I am in pain, I want water", but animals cannot speak and they cannot say for themselves what they need. We must understand and protect them, as well as treat them with kindness so they can live a peaceful life.

The municipality does not even collect the numbers of how many dogs were culled in the last several years, and there are thousands of dogs on the streets.

Over the last few years, it has been said that about 4000 dogs are culled every year because they carry various diseases and these diseases may be transmitted to humans, that's why the municipality has decided to take action but culling all of the dogs, especially the ones that have diseases.

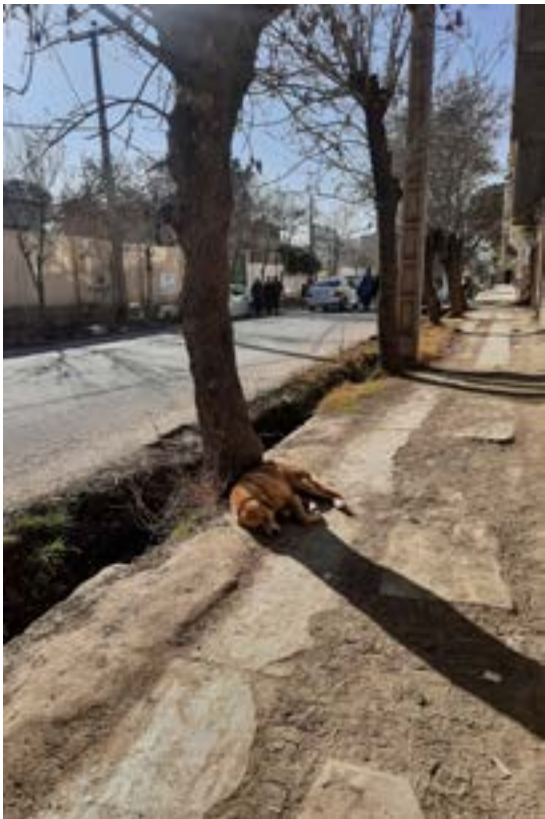
These statistics refer to just one city and Afghanistan has 34 cities.

I couldn't find the exact statistics of street dogs but every street I go I see dozens of dogs without any shelter in this cold weather. There are individuals in our society who show some kindness to the street dogs, feeding them and giving them water. Maybe if these kind people organised a shelter for the animals, our streets would be safer, and the dogs would be able to enjoy a better life while not being a problem for our society. Volunteers could bring food, and take turns looking after the animals. There are many such examples around the world.

















# HEALING HANDS: SAHAR'S JOURNEY FROM DREAM TO DOCTOR IN A REFUGEE CAMP

by Fatima Snounou

My older sister Sahar Snounou, 32 years old, had the dream to become a doctor and treat people. She received a full scholarship at the University for six years and now she works as a doctor of Physical Therapy in a social support society (The Prophysio clinic). She's been in this profession now for seven years in Borj Al Barajneh Camp, Beirut.

She loves her job greatly and she is committed to reach the goals of her patients so they can get better, to reduce their pain and be able to return to their normal life. She works 7 hours 6 days a week at the clinic, and after her shift she goes to visit patients at their homes to treat them when they are unable to go to the clinic. These patients are often bedridden.

Sahar works with all nationalities (Palestinian,

Syrian, Lebanese, and others) and with all ages (paediatrics, adults, elderly). My sister can treat any case for example sports injuries, post surgeries, stroke, neck and back pain, cerebral palsy.

I am proud of my older sister.

I always say that just as there are good clinics and associations that provide good treatment outside of the camp, there are also good clinics and associations inside the camp that provide good treatment as well.

**My name is Fatima Snounou, I am 15 years old.**

**I enrolled in this workshop because as I grow up I want to become a photographer.**

**Borj Al Barajneh Camp, Beirut, Lebanon.**













# THREAD AND BEADS

by Fatima Abdul Rahim

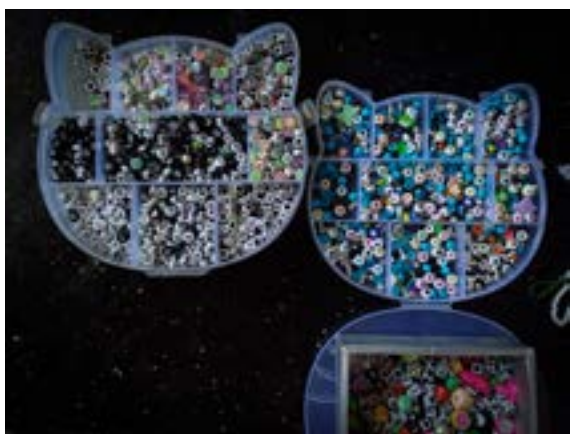
Handicrafts are among the industries in which the artisan puts a significant part of their emotions into their work. My sister, Leen Abdul Rahim, is a fourteen-year-old girl who makes accessories by hand using simple tools such as thread and beads. She started making these accessories about two years ago when she was in the sixth grade, during the development of the COVID-19 crisis, specifically when we were in home quarantine. She began to explore this hobby and make various accessories, from rings to bracelets and different flags. She also started gifting them to her friends at school and on their birthdays.

Then, her talent developed, and she began selling them to different people who admired her beautiful work.

Leen told me "I love making something special to me, something that represents and distinguishes me among my friends. I also saw a beautiful idea in beads, full of life and beauty that I love to spread."

**I love photography and I see myself in it (professionally). It is also a hobby that takes up all my time to the point that I photograph everything I see around me and keep it as a memory in my phone.**

**Borj Al Barajneh Camp, Beirut, Lebanon.**



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# COOING PIGEONS

by Hiba Hasan Hasan

Khaled Ali Al Sayed is 30 years old, he works at the Vocational Rehabilitation Institute where I'm studying.

Khaled comes to the center from 9am and stays until sunset. In the morning, he prepares food and water for the pigeons and opens the door for them to come out, eat and drink water. He takes care of them all day, and if he's not around his friends who work with him take care of them instead.

"The pigeons aren't mine, they belong to a colleague but since he is often busy, my friends and I take care of them. Caring for the pigeons is fun and amusing. It's nice and calming to watch them especially in a quiet place and a nice atmosphere, and more so when we're gathered with friends around a hookah and with coffee while listening to the cooing of the pigeons," Khaled says.

I am Hiba Hassan Hassan, 25 years old, and I enrolled into the photography workshop in order to gain experience and to learn.

Nahr El Bared, Beirut, Lebanon.







# SEA, WAVES, JUICE

by Aya Usama Kanaan

Yusra Khalil Dawood, 54 years old, has a shop “Fresco” which sells fresh juices and all kinds of natural beverages. Yusra used to own many shops, including selling accessories, but because of the living conditions, she decided to close them and open this fresh juices shop instead in order to sustain herself and her children.

She says “My son had a blacksmith shop, but due to the economic situation, he had to close it. I open “Fresco” from 10 am to 11 pm, sell and clean the equipment, and thank God we live comfortably.”

**I chose photography because it is a passion since childhood.  
Nahr El Bared, Beirut, Lebanon.**



















# ECHOES OF EDUCATION: CAPTURING THE EMPTY HALLS OF A GIRLS' SCHOOL

by Nabila Noori

The subject of school is a painful subject in Afghanistan right now. I live in Kabul, and wanted to photograph a girls school that has not seen female students for more than two years. At first, the guard didn't want me to let me in. Finally, I was allowed me to go into the school with great difficulty.

I encountered a painful subject in the school grounds, I felt that the gate, the desks and the walls of the school had something to say, and I remembered the scene from the past, when everything was fresh and new. Today everything is tired, every photo I took showed the pain of the scenes in the school.

How many girls in Kabul have not been able to go to school?

How many schools stand empty?

What are the girls doing instead?



















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WE SEE

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Photo by Fatima Abed Al Rahim  
femLENS workshops 2024, Borj Al Barajneh,  
Lebanon



**Photo by Aya Usama Kanaan**  
femLENS workshops 2024, Nahr El Bared,  
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