

Oliver W. Koonz Human Rights Prize Submission
“Flowers for the Future” — Education as the Sun and the Watering
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The situation for girls and women in Afghanistan is dire. If it is not stagnant, it is actively worsening. Under the Taliban, education for all girls above the sixth grade has been restricted for over three years now. Universities, too, are out of legal bounds. Without any discernible likelihood of change, hope has become scant. Dreams are being shut down. In 2024, the Taliban’s imposition of new “vice and virtue” laws has only left girls and women further condemned—to complete silence and immobility (without a *mahram*, male chaperone)—in the public sphere. Outside of private spaces, they are unable to speak, pray, or sing.

As a student leader at Flowers for the Future, I have committed myself to working alongside an international team of students to address this inhumane, gender-based divide. Our mission, as an organization, is to employ 21st-century technology to bridge gender-based gaps that exist in education. To this end, we use Zoom video-conferencing to teach over 500 Afghan girls at a clandestine education center in the Dasht-e-Barchi district of Kabul, Afghanistan. In this way, they are able to continue receiving a classroom education in spite of the ban.

Working together toward our mission, we design interactive lessons in STEM, English, the social sciences, and the humanities that are delivered, live through Zoom, twice every week. We also share art and creative writing, and hold discussions relating to culture, literature, and advancements in science and technology. In this way, we place an organization-wide emphasis on international mindedness, creative expression, and scientific literacy.

As of April 2025, we have eight currently-operating chapters around the globe, in Durham (NC), Hong Kong SAR, San Diego (CA), Boston (MA), Bowling Green (KY), Milan (Italy), Tbilisi (Georgia), and Meppel (The Netherlands). Before arriving at Duke in August 2024, I led the chapter of Flowers for the Future in Hong Kong, the city I call home, for three years. Additionally, over the past two semesters, I am fortunate to have garnered the support necessary — and more — to establish a new, fully-operating chapter of Flowers for the Future on Duke’s campus. Since the beginning of February, we have organized and delivered over 1,000 minutes, or 17 hours, of lesson-time.

Our chapter at Duke meets with a cohort of girls from the learning center every Tuesday and Thursday, in the mornings before we have class. They are some of the strongest people we have ever met. Just as our team teaches them lessons in an academic light, they teach us what it looks like to truly have to fight, tooth and nail, for their basic, human rights. These rights are not only limited to education, either. They concern the right to speak and sing in the public sector, to work, to move freely without a *mahram*, and to live without the prospect of early marriage. Still, these girls have harnessed clandestine routes toward education as a means of subversion, fulfilment, and internal liberation.

Ultimately, they show us what opportunism looks like when opportunities are scant, and importantly, that action is always worth more than privilege-nursed pity. In our exchanges, we are all, always learning. Every one of us is both student and teacher — and that is the most beautiful thing.