Welcome to Star Educational Society’s 4th annual Futsal Tournament. We are happy to be here today among the athletes and futsal fans. I am announcing on behalf of Star Educational Society, an institution that has always supported, is supporting and will support cultural, social and sports programs among youth. Star Educational Society is not only a language learning center, but also a canon of empowering youth with educational programs and a variety of extracurricular activities.

We are pleased to hold this tournament for the fourth year. We appreciate the participation of all the athletes and the support of our spectators. It is a priority for Star to provide opportunities, such as this tournament, for the young athletes and sports fans - especially the youth of western Kabul who have enjoyed many achievements in these past decades. In spite of many economic and social inequalities, security problems and limited opportunities, it is truly an honor for us and for Afghan society to have accomplished athletes like Rohullah Nikpai and Hamid Rahimi to look up to.

But unfortunately there is a huge culture of self-denying and inferiority complex in our country because of poor system of education where encouragement has no room. We have seen that many Afghans support the Spanish athletes and other international athletes more than our own athletes. Let’s develop pride in Afghan competitors and show our love and support to help make them famous. Join us to support Afghan athletes so that their popularity can extend beyond our borders and make them the Messis and Ronaldos of Afghanistan. With the ability and talents that our youth have, there are no doubts that they can achieve worldwide popularity and fame. But all of this cannot be accomplished without the support and encouragement of the people here today. Your encouragement for them can give them the motivation and energy to propel them to greater success.

Thanks warmly for your patience. Be successful. Whatever you do, whether it be sports, or studies, or anything you are doing, take yourselves and your efforts seriously. If you are someone who takes sports seriously, like Messi or Ronaldo, even if you live in the slums of Barchi (West of Kabul), people will seek you, find you and reward you. Work in silence and cherish your youth, be serious with your time and your skills and try for the best. Let the results be your voice and let the drums be struck when the real fruit of your labor is realized.

“When we love, we always strive to become better than we are. When we strive to become better than we are, everything around us becomes better too.”

– Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*
**Please Vote for Me**

A summary and reflection on the film

**Written by: Jumadul Babayab**

Star Educational Society was a screening partner for the 3rd Afghan-

i International Human Rights Film Festival. Among the many international

films in the festival, the first movie which was screened at Star was a documen-
tary from China, entitled *Please Vote for Me*. The audience members at Star were eager to watch *Please Vote for Me*. Hear-
ing the words “vote” and “democracy” in a documentary movie in China made us very curious. This film follows a first time
election to elect the class monitor in a 3rd grade class in Wuhan, China.

The movie started with the question “What is Democracy?” by a female teach-
er in a school in China. The students did not have any view or experience about
democracy. Then the teacher said, “Yes! It is a new phenomenon.” The subject of the movie, the classroom election, illustrated
the whole process of a campaign and was an excellent teaching method to answer the question “What is Democracy?” that was posed to the students.

The teacher of the class teaches about democracy and the voting process and in-
volves the students in a practical exercise to learn about democracy by conducting
a class election. The candidates, Luo Lei, Xu Xiaofei, and Cheng Cheng, compete against each other to be the class monitor. They have a few days to campaign, to demonstrate their abili-
ties and skills and to convince their classmates to vote for them. Each of the candidates have two deputies to help them in campaign affairs. The candidates’ parents do their best to support their child to be the winner. Kick-chi Cheng Cheng presented very well. He was a great lobbyist and was able to draw the attention of the students. Xu Xiaofei, the female candidate, didn’t have enough confi-
dence and mostly tried to campaign with the girls for their votes. Luo Lei, who won the election, did not seem very smart at the beginning, but his experience of be-
ing the monitor for the past two years and with the great support and help of his parents, he became the monitor. Luo Lei’s father provided a trip for the students and also a gift, shortly before the beginning of the voting.

China has done its best to fight against liberalism and individualism and the government provides everything in collective manner, gradually it is be-
ing influenced by liberalism and citizens are fervently interested in a democratic culture. The film, we were able to wit-
tness how these concepts stand against each other. The practices of collectivism, communists, holding elections, and lib-
eralism are somehow paradoxical in this movie. “Think about it seriously, voting is a sacred matter,” the teacher always try to totalize the term and prac-
tice of democracy help to prepare the grounds for a democratic regime both in

theory and in practice, by holding elec-
tions in the schools. The parents of the candidates, some of whom were govern-
ment employees, have a great hope and dream of a democratic regime. The movie
was able to demonstrate the democratic process very well. The students exercised their right to either be elected or to elect a representative which is one of the human rights. The challenge for the producer to record and raise the voice of the people in a communist regime is formidable.

In addition to the message about de-
mocracy, the film depicts the issues fac-
ing women and girls in China. In China, people see women as the second sex and women are not treated as well as men. The message of the movie encourages girls and women not to act from a weak position in political processes and games. Xu Xiaofei did her best to lobby and at-
ttract the votes of the other girls in the class. Her campaign rested on the weak
premise that if Luo Lei was elected, he will shout at the girls and that is why she
urgently asked the candidates not to vote for her. She

didn’t exhibit her own leadership abili-
ties or provide classmates with a compel-
ing reason to elect her. If I were Xu Xiao-
fei, I would not only rely on the votes of the
girls in the class. In politics, ethics is not
the concern but the benefit is. So, if
you do not want to be kept within bound-
aries, walk beyond the cliques.

The movie was received warmly by the audience. At the end, participants discussed different aspects of the film and most of the participants contributed in a heated discussion. Soheila Noori, one of the participants, praised the movie and commented that the education system in China is incomparable with Afghanistan. She said: “The support of the family in making their children’s success plays the key role.” The participants spoke about the strategies, policies and the positive and negative points of the candidates and the election process as well. They found the movie fruitful and heartening and wished such programs continue in the future.

**Women’s rights – lessons from my mother**

About the author: Shoabi Mehryar is a former student of the Star Educational Society in Quetta, Pakistan. She studies economics at Bakhtar University in Kabul.

There are many misunderstandings about Islam and women’s rights. Young Afghans have struggled to eliminate the military from China, entitled *Please Vote for Me*. When I was a child, I was presented to the students.

At the beginning of the film, the teachers presented the words “vote” and “democracy” in a documentary movie to introduce the concept of democracy.

Despite feeling compelled to follow
traditional practices, the father couldn’t tolerate the grief of losing his wife. The father provided a trip for the students and also a gift, shortly before the beginning of the voting.

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premise that if Luo Lei was elected, he will shout at the girls and that is why she
urgently asked the candidates not to vote for her. She

chose to sell herself every night so that her
dughter wouldn’t experience what she
had experienced. She wanted her child to have a strong enough personality to stand up to this discrimination.

My mother told me this story so that I would have a different perspective of
democracy. Her words when I see how men still abuse women in society.

Though this abuse has decreased among people in Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan, the uneducated men in remote provinces, and even some in the city, still do not treat women as their equals. I stand with women who have felt this discrimination. I want men to step up
together to change this injustice and the unfair violations against women in our
country. The men of Afghanistan must own the crimes they have committed against women.

Mahatma Gandhi once said that we should be the change we wish to see in the
world. I plan to be that change. I hope that my wife will never feel any kind of discrimination and will have full freedom
of speech and action. We will work hand-in-hand to make every decision for our family. Moreover, I will respect the rights of each woman I meet. I won’t tolerate any kind of abuse or injustice towards women and I want all men to do the same. I will start making further changes by telling my future sons and daughters these stories and I will ask them to spread the word and teach their families. I will be the change to make the world a better place for women.
Confabulations of educated Afghan job seekers

As a child, I hated education. In Afghanistan, con-
nections are often all that matter. Quali-
fications are like a strange foreign word
negating any official employment-related
policy and putting qualified but uncon-
nected applicants in a defensive posi-
tion. Or to state the matter differently,
in Afghanistan applicants do not have to be
qualified for the respective vacancies
they seek to fill. If they are introduced by a
very high-ranking official, it is equivalent
to holding a PhD degree and possessing
more than the required work-related ex-
perience. That is the common process for
climbing the employment staircase for a
governmental position. If a job seeker has
a powerful connection, someone else’s
qualifications such as their educational
degree and how talented they are will not
matter. In other words, the famous saying
"You will be asked what your talent is, not
who your father is," is totally reversed in
Afghanistan.

In other countries, people can make
connections through their education and
talent. In Afghanistan, people can
cannot even begin to climb the employment
staircase without connections. Young
people with a high spirit of service wish
to be assigned their rightful positions
in society. They do their utmost to get
educated, and work in harsh, hard-labor
jobs to earn money while seeking a well-
suited job. They experience tremendous
emotional pain when they cannot secure
a position that they are completely quali-
fied to fill. Young people are exhausted
at the end of everyday looking for a job.
They have invested much of their time
in study to find, in a field, to apply for the field-
related vacancies, to take employment-
related exams. However, when their con-
fidence rises and they feel optimistic that
they are the most-deserving candidate for
a position, they are rejected only because
they are not introduced or supported by
any officials.

Equal employment opportunity en-
tails unbiased management and judg-
ment in all aspects of employment. In
Afghanistan, this is rare. In the rare in-
stance when a young person without
connections is recruited, s/he will face
much discrimination on the grounds of
gender, nationality and ethnicity and will
feel forced to quit to escape from the ha-
rassment.

In Afghanistan’s bias-based gov-
ernment whose several promises went
unfulfilled, the educated youth without
connections cannot avail themselves of
favoritism-stricken job opportunities.
They cannot fight their way through the
discriminatory and obsolete office pro-
cedures to reach their goals and cannot
fairly compete for their positions.

These young people are dissuaded, depressed,
disappointed, and lost and they find
themselves subjected to a harsh, back-
breaking life.

Young job seekers find themselves
prisoners of discrimination and I fear
that this will open the floodgates of dis- 
ter for Afghanistan, contributing to more
brain drain and an irremovable stigma on
the face of Afghanistan. With this situa-
tion, Afghan assets will be forced to ven-
ture into angry waters and head abroad in
pursuit of a better life, to go to countries
where their intellects and talents will be
encouraged, not dissuaded, praised, not
disparaged and finally where their inge-
nuity will be nurtured, not tortured.

Sometimes...

Sometimes I don’t believe my life
It’s just a never-ending nightmare
Sadness after sadness with grief
I can’t breathe to find the happiness
Death surrounds me
Tears within my eyes like stones
Sometimes I can’t believe my life
I am going to be honest.
I am exhausted that our lives mean nothing
to the people running this country.
We all deserve so much better.
Our citizens deserve better.
The arguments change and swell in intensity, but the reality remains
the same.
As we argue, highly preventable deaths continue to happen.
Whatever your religious or personal stance, we should be united in
the knowledge that we are all people – that we all deserve a
chance to live our lives.
In neighborhoods, in every school, in every home, we should remind
ourselves that our lives mean something – that it should not be
so easy for someone to take them from us.
We should see ourselves in every senseless death that happens in this
country. When you are walking on a sidewalk, or sitting in a
classroom with your as yet unseen dreams still
free as buds from spring soil – remember, it could have been
you whose life was cut short.
It could have been your bed that will be empty tonight.
It could have been your mother crying and comforting your children
in your absence.
It could have been your absence filling the silent, still space where
feet no longer tread and hearts no longer beat.
The Launch of 'HeForShe' global campaign in Afghanistan

Reported by: Alisina Dosti

UN Women is a UN organization dedicated to work for gender equality and women’s empowerment. Very recently they launched a campaign called “HeForShe” to end violence against women and raise voices for gender equality.

This project is a solidarity movement for gender equality that engages men and boys as advocates and stakeholders, to break the silence, raise their voices and take action for the achievement of gender equality. Gender equality is not only a woman’s issue, it is a human rights issue that affects all women and girls, men and boys. Pakistan’s forecasts indicate that the whole humanity benefits. Gender equality liberates not only women but also men.

Millions of people stand with this global movement and believe equality for women is a human right not just women’s right. They commit to take action against gender discrimination and violence to make a world of equality.

For this reason, on Sunday December 6, the UN Women organization in co-operation with Khat Media Organization provided an opportunity to launch this campaign in Afghanistan with the slogan, “A brave man stands with women.” The program was held at the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University with the participation of students, women and youth activists.

The event started with the introduction of the HeForShe global campaign and the observation of gender equality in Afghanistan.

Najla Habibyar, former head of Export Promotion Agency of Afghanistan, talked about her own experience and gender inequality in Afghanistan. “I experienced ups and downs. My father was the only support for my education. With his encouragement, I pursued my studies in psychology at Kabul University. Later on I did my masters as well. As a woman, I was eager to do my studies in medicine but at the same time I couldn’t make it happen. When I started working at Export Promotion Agency of Afghanistan, I wished my father never had a daughter but a son so that I didn’t have to face the discriminatory comments. This was maybe the next reason I left everything behind and gave up. I was completely depressed and disappointed. But still my father gave me the hope to show up and serve society.”

Abdul Rauf Gowhar, the chancellor of Kabul university, talked about how people can start within their own families and communities to put an end to violence against women and gender inequality.

At the end of the program, the participants were asked to sign and commit to take action against gender inequality.
Zainab Hussaini, the first girl who completed a 42 km marathon in Bamyan

Translated by: Jumakhah Rahyab
Written by: Mahjoubi Nourezai
Source: BBC Persian

Sports have always been a problem and controversial issue for women in Afghani stan. However, in recent years, the presence of women in this area has been slowly but steadily growing.

Zainab Hussaini is a 25-year-old Afghani woman walking the long and difficult path fighting for gender equality through women’s involvement in sports. She is the first Afghan woman who completed Bamyan’s 42 km marathon and became the hero of the news.

“Thi...
My little tree

I remember being in the first grade of elementary school. We all wore the same uniforms, had the same height and same wishes. We liked eating ice cream and chocolate, looking at cartoon pictures and decorating our notebooks and backpacks to create a small, colorful world. Our fallen baby teeth made us different from others.

School was really enjoyable for me. It had a big yard and there was a nice garden with short and tall trees on one side. The garden made our school green and fresh. It was six months after the time that I understood how to hold a pencil in my little hand and had a heart full of excitement to write for the first time. It was the last month of winter and the weather was great. I went to school happily. I was in the class and waited for the school bell to ring for our 15-minute morning break. Everyone waited to go outside, they put their books and note books in their bags and took out their snacks. When the principal came to our class, we stood up to respect her and she kindly asked us to leave the class in a line and stand up by the garden. We all were shocked and surprised and started asking the same question, "Why by the garden?"

When we made a line near the garden our teacher gave us information about arboriculture week and also the advantages of planting trees and the importance of protecting trees. I love all plants and trees like the little seedling I planted and nurtured in first grade.

The difficult path to success

The old shoeshine man was outside the entrance of Star Educational Society just as he had been every other day I went for my classes. But this day was different. It was the day to celebrate the position held by the old man. The old man looked at me kindly and gave me the brush to clean my black sneakers. He asked me, "My daughter, when will you stop taking the break and look tired, and you are so happy." I began to brush the dirt off of my sneakers. My happy heart was bouncing. I put my hand on my heart, took a deep breath and began to tell him about all the difficult moments I had passed and the accomplishments I had achieved.

For many months, every morning I woke up early and said 'good-bye' to my father. Every evening I returned home and greeted my father with a 'hello'. I worked as a teacher at a primary school from morning until 2:00. After my last class, I took my black leather bag and started the one-hour walk to Star. I was alone and tired on my long walk to Star. However, accompanied by my dreams, my goals, and my wishes I never felt alone or tired. When I entered Star, I joined the class with much enthusiasm and interest because I was sure that English would open up new doors of opportunity to me and would bring huge positive changes in my life.

I was studying Level 4 and Level 5 simultaneously. I worked full time during the day and had to study my lessons and do my homework at night. I practiced speaking English by talking to myself on my long walks from work to Star. The only nights I could sleep early were Wednesdays.
My Grandmother Told Me

My sister is a far cry from the tall and empowering figure she used to be. She is older than me, and I have always looked up to her. It is difficult to see her in that plump shape, laying in bed, counting down her days.

She had a stroke. She has been hemiplegic for four years. She can barely move. She needs assistance to perform her basic bodily functions. She needs to constantly rolled over to one side and the other, otherwise her flesh will rot. Her daughters-in-law are having to look after her, and they have a hard time doing it.

Those becharas are not to blame. It is difficult to look after someone for so much and for so long. Four months is a long time. Four years is too long.

I saw her last year. We talked all the time. As usual, I went and sat next to her one day. She looked at me and was startled. She wept.

Are you my aaghaaye? Where have you been? When did you come? Who are all these other people with you?

I had to sit there and explain things to her like I explain them to my baby grandson. Old age is a cruel time of life.

I pray that if something like that ever happens to me, I should die quickly. I don’t want to end up like that. Else, I will suffer and so will everyone else.

So, we, their hearts, seldom say much about those treasures, because people no longer want to indulge in the “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll” culture.

*bechara = hapless
*aghaye = sister

An excerpt from The Alchemist

Below is a great excerpt from Paulo Coelho’s The Alchemist - a conversation between the Alchemist and Santiago, an Andalusian shepherd boy. Santiago travels from Andalusia in southern Spain to the Egyptian pyramids in search of hidden treasure, learning life lessons along the way.

"Why do we have to listen to our hearts?" the boy asked, when they had made camp that day.

"Because, wherever your heart is, that is where you’ll find your treasure."

"But my heart is agitated," the boy said. "It has its dreams, it gets emotional, and it’s become passionate over a woman of the desert. It asks things of me, and it keeps me from sleeping many nights, when I’m thinking about her."

"Well, that’s good. Your heart is alive. Keep listening to what it has to say."

"My heart is a traitor," the boy said to the alchemist, when they had paused to rest the horses. "It doesn’t want me to go on."

"That makes sense. Naturally it’s afraid that, in pursuing your dream, you might lose everything you’ve won."

"Well, then, why should I listen to my heart?"

"Because you will never again be able to keep it quiet. Even if you pretend not to have heard what it tells you, it will always be there inside you, repeating to you what you’re thinking about life and about the world."

"You mean I should listen, even if it’s treasonous?"

"Treason is a blow that comes unexpectedly. If you know your heart well, it will never be able to do that to you. Because you'll know its dreams and wishes, and will know how to deal with them."

"My heart is afraid that it will have to suffer," the boy told the alchemist one night as they looked up at the moonless sky.

"Tell your heart that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself. And that no heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams, because every second of the search is a second’s encounter with God and with eternity."

"Every second of the search is an encounter with God," the boy told his heart.

"Everyone on earth has a treasure that awaits him," his heart said. "We, people’s hearts, seldom say much about those treasures, because people no longer want to go in search of them. We speak of them only to children. Later, we simply let life proceed, in its own direction, toward its own fate. But, unfortunately, very few follow the path laid out for them—the path to their destinies, and to happiness. Most people see the world as a threatening place, and, because they do, the world turns out indeed, to be a threatening place."

"So we, their hearts, speak more and more softly. We never stop speaking out, but we begin to hope that our words won’t be heard: we don’t want people to suffer because they don’t follow their hearts."

About Paulo Coelho

Paulo Coelho wrote the best-selling novel, The Alchemist, which sold 35 million copies and is the most translated book in the world by a living author.

Paulo Coelho was born on August 24, 1947, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He wanted to be a writer from a young age but was discouraged by his parents, who saw no future in that profession in Brazil. Coelho’s rebellious adolescence spurred his parents to commit him to a mental asylum three times, starting when he was 17.

Coelho eventually got out of institutional care and enrolled in law school, but dropped out to indulge in the “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll” of hippie life in the 1970s. He wrote song lyrics for Brazilian musicians protesting the country’s military rule. He was jailed three times for his political activism and subjected to torture in prison.

After drifting among several professions, Coelho changed his life’s course while on a visit to Spain in 1986 at the age of 36. Coelho walked more than 500 miles along the Road to Santiago de Compostela, a site of Catholic pilgrimage. The walk and the spiritual awakening he experienced en route inspired him to write The Pilgrimage, an autobiographical account of the trek. He quit his other jobs and devoted himself full-time to the craft of writing. It was his second book, The Alchemist, which made him famous. He has sold 35 million copies and now writes about one book every two years.
Jeffrey E. Stern is the author of The Last Thousand, forthcoming from St. Martin’s Press on January 26, 2016. The book takes place during America’s final year of military occupation in Afghanistan. The stakes of war are explored through the intertwining lives of five members of the Marefat School, an institution in the Western slums of Kabul built by one of the country’s most vulnerable minority groups, as the school community prepares for the departure of foreign troops.

At the age of twenty-three, Jeffrey Stern went to Afghanistan as a freelance writer. While reporting on the conflict in the region for several national publications, he worked with the American University of Afghanistan as it launched its Professional Development program, which has provided training to 300 women initiative. The Afghanistan Women’s Business Program that launched its Professional Development Program at the American University of Afghanistan as it worked with the Afghanistan American University of Afghanistan as it worked with the Afghanistan American students together to produce an interactive museum exhibition, opening simultaneously in Kabul and Philadelphia. Originally from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, he received his Bachelor’s in Public Policy Studies and a certificate in media and democracy from Duke University, and a Masters in Interdisciplinary Policy Studies from Stanford University, where he was named a Graduate Fellow at the Stanford Center for International Conflict and Negotiation.

Jeff, your book, The Last Thousand, is amazing. I could not help thinking while reading it that you barely speak Dari or Farsi and yet, you were able to capture not only the words but the emotions of the Afghans whom you interviewed. How were you able to do that using interpreters? I want to give credit to many who helped with translations, but I especially want to say that Saeed Madadi and Bismillah Alizadeh, who co-authored the book with me. They spent hours with me before the interviews understanding not just the words of the questions but the Why of the question. Many times they gave me background, history if you will, of why a person used a certain phrase or what the person was referring to. They also helped me to elicit the feelings of the interviewees, what the person was wearing, what a situation smelled like…we spent a lot of time talking but also listening.

As an American, the account early on in The Last Thousand of General Allen’s resigned acceptance of the reduction in American Forces and Teacher Aziz’s appraisal of the unpreparedness and the unwillingness of Afghan Security Forces to protect ALL citizens regardless of ethnicity lingered in my mind throughout the book. Any thoughts on the subject? I hesitate to answer. No. I do not feel the current number of forces will bring peace or the war to an end. I like to say I wrote the book to ask the question, not to answer it…the question that drove me is, when we launch our foreign wars do we inevitably raise in people the desire for things they cannot have forever….it is not a rhetorical question for me, I don’t have an answer, I am interested in reader feedback.

So the question, is war necessary to have peace? Is not a question you have an answer for? Exactly, I am conflicted, I am torn about it. And it brings up a similar question for me, whether women’s rights and minority rights are universal. If you answer yes, can you be a pacifist? Are those two things incompatible? Can’t you be a fighter for rights and a pacifist at the same time.

When you were travelling, researching and interviewing to write this book was there anything that surprised you…something you had not expected? For me it was the women we interviewed. I guess as many Westerners I had a pre-conceived vision of females in Afghan- stan being walled off, private about themselves, their needs, their feelings. I never expected to get to know Afghan women so deeply. In our interviews I was often amazed at their wit, their openness to express their feelings. As soon as they learned what the book was about they were so cooperative and they demanded to have their real names used, even though I still feel the risk is too great. I worry about the potential danger.

Any plans for another book? At the moment I am working on several long lingering projects and I am involved in co-authoring another book. I have a proposal into my publisher for a book that asks an even bigger question than The Last Thousand did.

Jeff, thank you very much for your time and I look forward to reading more by you.