



Free to Run

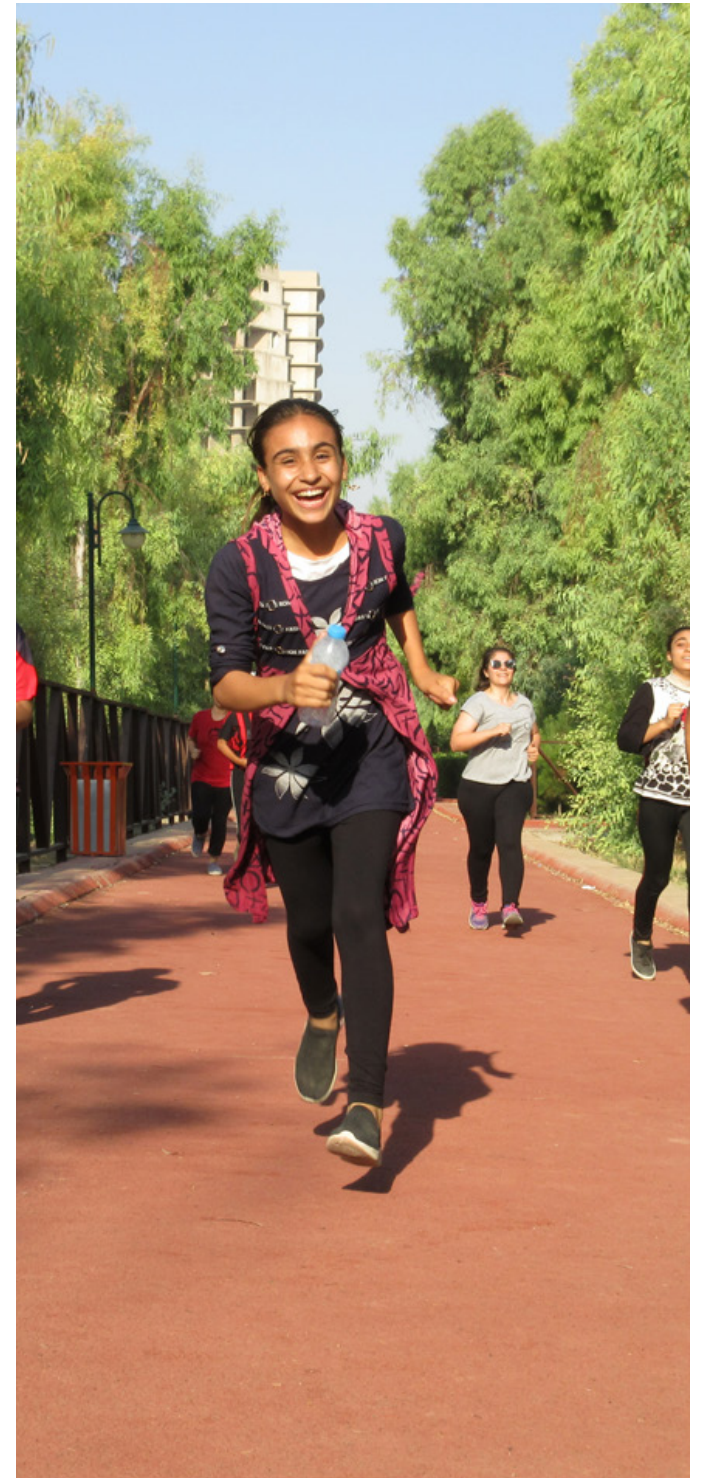
Free to Run

Annual Report 2020



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A Letter from our President

This year, the world faced an unprecedented crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic, exposing us to immeasurable challenges and forcing us to change the way we went about our daily lives. For the Free to Run teams in Afghanistan and Iraq, the pandemic exacerbated the difficulties and complexities that come with working in areas of conflict. Since 2014, Free to Run has worked tirelessly to support female leaders in such regions through outdoor sports and adventure. That has never felt more important than now, as women and girls in these regions face even further isolation and shoulder more responsibility in the wake of the health, social, and economic crisis. Free to Run adapted swiftly throughout the pandemic to respond to our participants' changing needs and ensure that we maintained a lifeline of support. We remained committed to supporting this fearless community of runners that we have helped to build across Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2020, despite the ongoing security and health crisis in both countries, 421 female participants (15–25 years old) attended almost 700 sports sessions and 500 education sessions.

Prior to the pandemic, Free to Run hosted our 4th annual Winter Sports & Leadership Week, where 19 participants came together from five different provinces to ski and ice skate for the first time. Most exciting, this was the first major event that our newest and arguably most conservative region, Southern Afghanistan, was able to participate in! When COVID-19 lockdowns hit, Free to Run pivoted to provide a Lifeline Program,

In 2020, despite the ongoing security and health crisis in both countries, 421 female participants attended almost 700 sports sessions and 500 education sessions

addressing both the emotional and physical isolation our participants were experiencing. When it became safer to return to outdoor activities, we organized hybrid, small group activities for our teams to engage in sports in a socially distanced manner. We even organized our very first Virtual Races, partnering up our Afghan and Iraqi runners with runners from all over the world to run together!

Maintaining our programs in these times has certainly been challenging, but we've been very encouraged by the doors that are opening and the recognition we've received for our efforts. In 2020, Free to Run was recognized for its work in promoting peace and social justice across divides in Afghanistan and Iraq as a 2020 Beyond Sport Global Award winner, not only for the Peace & Social Justice award, but also the Courageous Use of Sport award given to our Iraq Coach, Shaimaa! Our Iraq program was also recognized as one the world's most disruptive girl-led organizations in the Middle East and North African region through a With and For Girls Award.

All of us have experienced restrictions on our movements and freedoms over this past year during the COVID-19 pandemic. For women and girls in areas of conflict, the restrictions have been particularly acute. Rather than deter us, the challenges that 2020 presented have only reinforced our commitment to provide safe access to the outdoors for women and girls in places where it is needed most. To the organizations and individuals who have enthusiastically supported us on this journey, thank you from everyone at Free to Run.



Stephanie Case

President and Founder
Free to Run

Mission: Future Female Leaders

Free to Run supports women and girls in areas of conflict through adventure sports to build their physical, emotional, and social well-being; developing them into community leaders so they can become changemakers across cultural, ethnic, and religious lines. Finding ways for women and girls to safely and boldly engage in outdoor activity allows them to reclaim public space and changes

views about the roles that women can, and *should*, play in society. By promoting women's and girls' access to sports, training alumni to lead life skills education amongst their peers, and securing safe spaces for outdoor activity, Free to Run supports females to transfer successes to their everyday lives so that they can and will be a positive force in building an enduring, equal, and just society.

Who are our female leaders?



Women and girls
(15–25 years old) in
areas of conflict



Internally displaced
persons (IDPs)



Refugees



Persons with
disabilities



Members of other
marginalized
communities

Financials



This year, the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on revenue for organizations across the world has been devastating. At Free to Run, we faced disruptions in the form of lost funds from race cancellations. Race-based fundraisers are an important source of funding for Free to Run programs and their loss in 2020 was a real concern. We responded by cutting costs while prioritizing the safety and well-being of our whole team, including salaries of our employees so that they could continue providing for their families.

We also came up with creative solutions to fundraise in other ways, such as our very first [Free to Run Virtual Races](#), which helped us to commit to our staff and participants that we would be able to stay and continue supporting them.

US (admin/fundraising):	US\$ 28,846
Afghanistan:	US\$ 239,400
Iraq:	US\$ 69,620
Total:	US\$ 337,866



Overall COVID Response

As March 2020 saw the official declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent changes across the world, Free to Run had to quickly adapt to the monumental challenges that faced our programs. With the nature of Free to Run's activities, creativity of staff, and perseverance of our participants, Free to Run was able to pivot programming and still meet the needs of women and girls in Afghanistan and Iraq during the pandemic. Free to Run implemented similar programs, dependent on specific country needs, and focused on the following activities.

Lifeline Programming: With indications that lockdowns across both Afghanistan and Iraq were not dissipating, we mobilized and created an immediate response program to address both the emotional and physical isolation our participants were experiencing. From May to August, our Program Officers and Coaches implemented a project we called "Lifeline Programming". We reached out to alumni and Free to Run participant networks 2-3x per week by phone to share at-home workouts for them and their families while staff continued to do mental health and family health check-ins to provide them with a critical lifeline.

Virtual Life Skills through Sports Programming: As lockdowns eased, we cautiously returned to small-group, hybrid programming. In Afghanistan, we used our network of local teachers, partner organizations, and government departments to recruit new teams for a hybrid delivery of our three month Life Skills through Sports

curriculum. In December, we celebrated their achievements in a COVID-safe way by hand-delivering certificates to each girl's house and phasing these small groups into Free to Run's hybrid "Core Team" training - beginning early 2021.

Socially Distanced Hikes & Running: After assessing country restrictions, infection rates, and safety measures, Free to Run began implementing socially distanced hikes and running sessions. Through these sessions, participants were able to be outdoors and get beyond many of the restrictions they had on movement throughout the pandemic. They were able to focus on their physical, mental, and emotional health at a time when much of the world was unable to access outdoors.

Activity Book: To combine Free to Run's standard 'Core Team Programming', a 9-month mixed program of marathon training, nutrition, and strength toolkit, we partnered with Laureus Sport to create an Activity Book that could be delivered in hybrid or virtual format. We facilitated contactless drop-offs for all of our participants and provided girls booklets containing leadership development exercises, family workout options, nutrition information, and access to Afghan and Iraqi female alumni stories to re-connect our participants with our mission. These Activity Books will continue to be distributed to teams that graduate from our program so they can continue to educate their families and communities on the skills they've learned.




Afghanistan



As the conflict in Afghanistan reached its twentieth year, civilian casualties, targeted attacks on prominent human rights defenders and journalists, lack of access to basic healthcare through the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and violence against women and girls continued to remain at the forefront of addressing peaceful prospects of a future Afghanistan. In 2020, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented 8,820 civilian casualties (3,035 killed and 5,785 injured). With peace talks leaving out any mention of women's rights and human rights, as well as a U.S. troop withdrawal and NATO allies slated to be complete by September 11, 2021, Afghanistan finds itself at a critical point in history. The pandemic has also placed additional strains on Afghan females' rights, with 97% of Afghan female respondents reporting that gender-based violence has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. School closures, the loss of protective spaces, and COVID-19 mitigation measures placed new stressors on parents and caregivers which contributed to an increase in the severity and frequency of domestic violence.

Free to Run has spent over six years building up increased support for Afghan women and girls using adventure sports. Our Life Skills through Sport curriculum, paired with intensive periods of physical and mental strength training, a dedicated effort to recruiting females into positions of leadership amongst their peers, and ensuring safe spaces for females to boldly challenge traditional norms all contribute to their push for gender equality. We began in 2014 in Afghanistan with hiking activities for a small group of young women in the Central Highlands Region. Today, we operate in five provinces across the country and have supported 1924 ethnically diverse women and girls ages 15-25 years old to date.



"I am happy that Free to Run is standing by us in these quarantine days. I couldn't put up with lockdown any longer if Free to Run didn't share these sports programs with us."

***Mahnaz,
Afghanistan
Participant***



633

sport sessions



479

education sessions



358

participants



5

provinces



57%

saw an improvement in **feeling capable of making their own decisions**



50%

saw improvement in **social well-being scores** across Afghanistan



50%

recorded improvement in **worrying less** about events in life



28%

reported **worrying less** for physical safety



25%

reported a **decline** in experiencing feelings of **sadness or disappointment**



23%

observed improvement in **emotional and physical well-being scores** across Afghanistan.

“For some time I thought I didn’t have a bright future because I got married. When I ran with my husband, it changed my whole mindset and my mood. Now, I feel so good and I can run. It is such a blessing for me”

Mariam, Afghanistan Participant



Even with the uncertainty that 2020 brought us, our Afghanistan team worked to meet the identified needs of our participants through a number of creative, groundbreaking ways:



Put into place a new emergency project called '**Lifeline Programming**', ensuring a proper line of contact and support delivered by our staff to 358 at-risk women and girls across Afghanistan.



Transitioned our three-month Life Skills through Sports curriculum to **virtual programming**, training five Program Officers/Coaches to deliver low bandwidth, virtual sessions in communication, conflict resolution, and leadership skills to participants.



Partnered with Laureus Sport to create an Activity Book in Dari that could be delivered in hybrid or virtual format, encompassing **Free to Run's usual 'Core Team' Programming: marathon training, nutrition, and our strength toolkit**. Our drivers and Program Officers initiated over 110 contactless drop-offs, bringing Free to Run programs into the homes of our participants and their families.

External monitoring and evaluation indicates that participation in these COVID-response programs has demonstrably enhanced girls' social well-being, stress-management, leadership skills, and experiences of equality.



Iraq



“I have an idea about my future now, and not to give up in any case. I also know more about taking care of my health for the future.”

***Iman, Iraq
Participant***

Within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, there are still approximately 1.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) despite the 2017 defeat of ISIS in the country. For many, returning home poses many challenges due to ongoing security concerns, lack of housing and employment opportunities, and difficulties reintegrating with the community. The severity of humanitarian need significantly increased in Iraq in 2020, largely due to deepened socioeconomic vulnerabilities. At the same time, there is less humanitarian support for IDPs and refugees, and camps across the country have seen a decrease in funding and opportunities for residents. Women and girls remain the most vulnerable population and struggle with gender-based violence, lack of access to resources and early marriage, along with shouldering the burden of the majority of family responsibilities. Our participants, in particular, were faced with the challenges of lockdown in the camps as they were unable to leave. Furthermore, schools were closed and later only reopened to take place online on phones, which most of our participants lacked access to. Free to Run remained one of the few lifelines for women and girls throughout the pandemic.

Modeled after the Afghanistan program, but incorporating country-specific learnings, the Iraq program began in 2018 with a pilot team of 18 participants in Erbil camps. Free to Run has gone on to work with ethnically diverse refugee and IDP communities in Erbil and Mosul. In 2020, Free to Run supported 155 participants, ages 15-25 years old. Through our Life Skills through Sports curriculum, sports sessions, volunteering, and additional workshops, participants are able to develop their physical and emotional health, while forming strong bonds with their teammates and accomplishing more than they thought possible.



Though the pandemic has been hard on women and girls in Iraq, the Free to Run staff worked closely with participants and their families to ensure we could deliver strong and impactful programming:



Staff delivered 'Lifeline Programming' and reached out to alumni and current participants in Baharka and Harsham IDP camps to check in, offer support, and share exercises.



As with the Afghanistan program, partnered with Laureus Sport to create an Activity Book in Arabic that could be delivered in hybrid or virtual format, encompassing Free to Run's usual 'Core Team' Programming: marathon training, nutrition, and our strength toolkit.



Organized parent focus groups to discuss programming during COVID-19 and incorporate their feedback on how best to implement sessions and subsequently delivered running, hiking, and biking sessions while implementing COVID-19 safety measures for participants in Baharka and Harsham camps.



Due to a generous donation from the U.S. Consulate, Erbil, we received 13 bikes and taught participants from both camps how to ride them throughout the park.



63

participants



58

sports sessions



18

education sessions



96%

attendance rate



95%

say they have a different
outlook on their future



85%

say they have overcome
a challenge since joining
Free to Run



80%

increase in setting and
achieving a goal



60%

rise in feeling capable of
making decisions

"I feel that I can now endure running longer and better; and my legs are stronger from hiking."

Suha, Iraq Participant

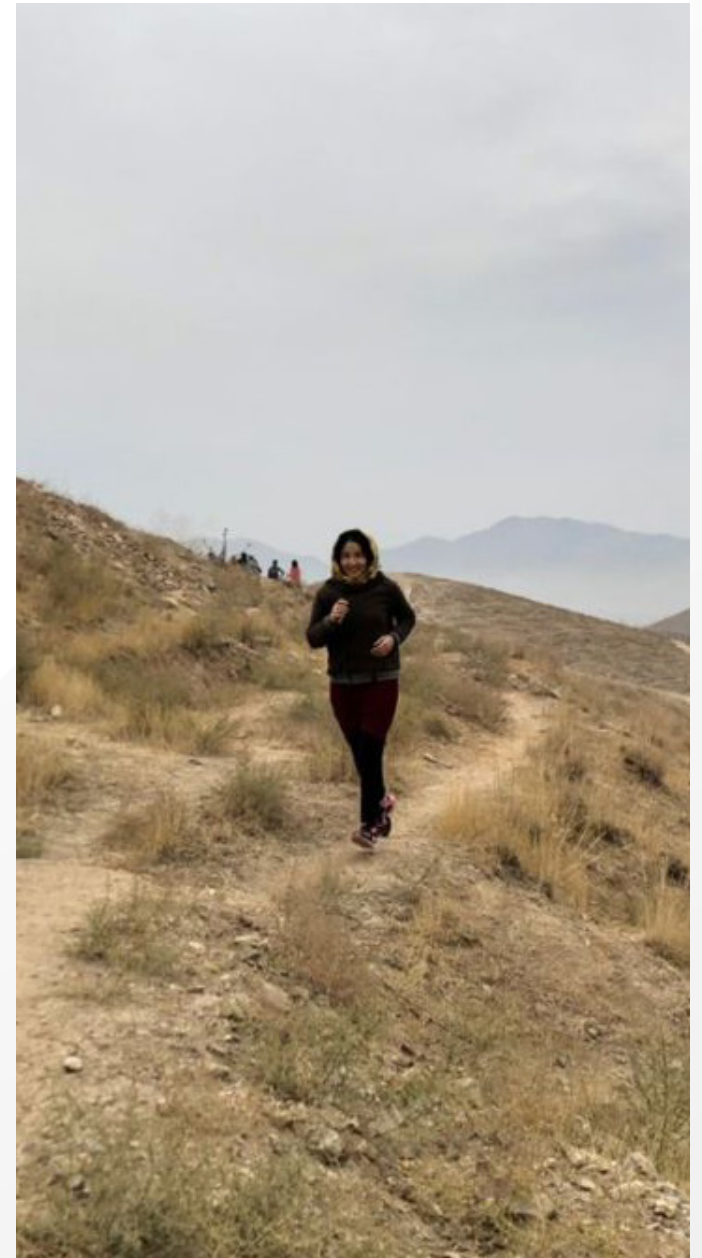
Alumni Focus

Afghanistan

My name is Zahra. I am 29 years old and originally from the rural Wardak province. When I was five, my family and I moved to Kabul and later to Pakistan to flee the Taliban. Nothing is more important to me than my family. While many people in Afghanistan struggle to have one family, I am lucky to have two families: my biological family and Free to Run.

My biological family consists of my mother, father, and two younger brothers. My mother is uneducated, and my father studied until the fourth grade. Growing up, I weaved carpets with my brothers while going to school full-time to help support my family. My brothers and I understood that with little resources at our disposal, we had to work hard to create opportunities for our family. I was highly internally motivated and studied hard so I would excel in my lessons. In 2009, I became the first female in my family to graduate from high school. Then, I continued my studies at Kabul University, graduating with a degree in Economics and Business Administration.

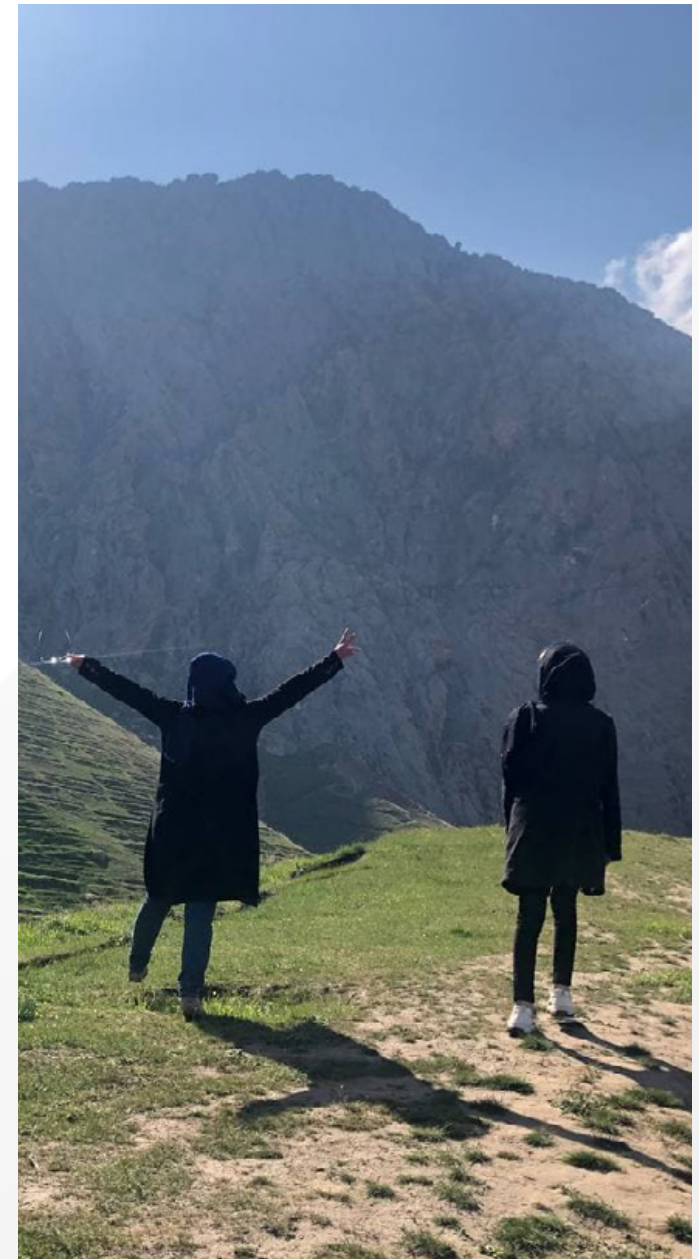
After I graduated I worked with different organizations, but during my work I started to feel sad. I wanted to add something new and healthy to my life. Then, my friend showed me photos on Instagram of girls doing outdoor activities with Free to Run. I had never heard of girls running in Afghanistan before! My friend sent me an application to join, and I was accepted into Free to Run's 2018 Core Team.



With Free to Run, I discovered a new purpose. I felt happy again, and was motivated both at work and at home. Sports helped me to understand how to focus and break up tasks so that I could accomplish even more than before. I also made friends from different provinces who taught me the value of teamwork. With my new friends and the support of Free to Run, I ran the Mazar Marathon (2017), Marathon of Afghanistan (2018, 2019), and also participated in a half iron-man in Dubai.

When I run, I can feel the wind and sun against my face, and I appreciate the beauty of the world in the moment. I feel strong and invincible. I am so grateful to Free to Run for opening these opportunities and becoming my second home. It's the work of small organizations like Free to Run that makes me feel hopeful about the future for women in Afghanistan.

Now, I am a Fulbright Scholar working on my Masters of Finance from Southern New Hampshire University. While in the States, I plan on competing in a half-Ironman with my fellow Fulbright Free to Run friends. When I finish my degree, I want to return to Afghanistan and start my own consultancy firm to help Afghan women open businesses. Through this, I hope to become an example to other Afghan females so they will be motivated to dream and create alternate futures for themselves, just as Free to Run and all my other opportunities did for me.



Iraq

My name is Sarah and I am 15 years old. I was born in Mosul and lived there until I was 10 when we fled because of the bombings that destroyed our neighborhood. I have four brothers and four sisters and we have lived in Camp Baharka [for Internally Displaced Persons] now for six years.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was really scared and mentally tired. I was silent and did not talk much, even with my family. My day consisted of household chores, sleeping, eating, and doing nothing special. When I heard about Free to Run I was afraid that I wouldn't have enough energy or the strength to do the running. My parents were open to me joining though, and encouraged me that I could do it. At first I was shy about getting to know the girls and thought it would be difficult to make friendships because no one would understand me. Then I got to know the team and we became friends. After joining Free to Run, there was something to look forward to every week - the running, biking, and hiking sessions. I started to not feel afraid anymore.

In the beginning the activities were challenging, especially the hiking, but I gradually got better. One of my favorite experiences was one day after hiking in Shaqlawa, we went to the bazaar and had a joyful time together. I have now learned to depend on myself and to be patient. I have also learned good tips about healthy food. Because of my participation in Free to Run I am more open to the world. I am more open to meeting and getting to know new girls and now I make friendships easily. I feel energetic and my body is in good condition. My life looks better.

In the future I will continue studying and hope to be a nurse or pharmacist. I want to help and support my parents all my life. And, of course, keep going with sports!



National Staff Profiles

Rahmat

Finance & Operations Manager
Afghanistan

Tell us about yourself, your role, and how you became involved with Free to Run

My name is Rahmatullah, and I am the Finance and Operations Manager of Free to Run in Afghanistan. I hold a Masters in Business Administration with specialization in Public Administration and Public Policy and have also founded an Afghan NGO called Hope for Education and Leadership in Afghanistan (HELA). In 2014, I met Stephanie Case [President and Founder] in one of the UN compounds in Kabul explaining her concept of bringing positive changes to the lives of women in Afghanistan through adventure sports. In that meeting I was so impressed by the idea of women doing outdoor sports to develop their leadership skills, learn about health and nutrition, but more importantly, women being provided access to the same opportunities that men have.

Although some of my female friends in that network joined the organization as participants, I had always dreamed to work for this wonderful mission and be a part of this great initiative to implement positive change. In 2017, I met the Executive Director of Free to Run, Taylor Smith, and she brought me on board as Operations Manager. Since then we have all worked hard as a united team to deliver our services to differ-



ent corners of Afghanistan. My role as Operations and Finance Manager for Free to Run in Afghanistan is to expand the network of our government partners, manage the finances of the organization in Afghanistan and facilitate all of the operations and government processes of the program.

What's one thing you're passionate about outside of work?

I am always seeking to learn different skills and to transfer those skills to other Afghans. The philosophy of my life is to "Learn, work hard, serve the people and never give up."

What was the biggest challenge you faced in your role in 2020? How did you and the rest of the team overcome this challenge?

The biggest challenge that we at Free to Run and the whole world faced in 2020 was the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the risk of this pandemic, most of the organizations in Afghanistan stopped their programming and many Afghans became jobless. The first thing that we did as a team of Free to Run was to develop a strategy that would not stop us from delivering our services to the participants, ensure that employees would retain their jobs and, more importantly, make sure that everyone would be kept safe and healthy. We worked hard and finally were able to accomplish our mission through this strategy. In 2020, Free to Run was able to provide services remotely to our participants and also support them by giving them masks, hand sanitizer and other supplies to keep them safe from this pandemic.

What impact did you see Free to Run have on participants during the pandemic?

At Free to Run, besides other activities and curriculums, we also train participants in nutrition and hygiene. This curriculum well prepares our participants to avoid eating unhealthy food and to be careful about their and their families' health. Also, by supporting participants in hard times, they now feel more connected to the Free to Run family and the trust of families has been raised. Now the families of participants have more trust in Free to Run and its team and they feel that the curriculums that we teach are important for the daily lives of their children.

What brought you hope throughout the COVID-19 pandemic?

Teamwork of the Free to Run family for supporting Afghan women in hard times brought me hope during this pandemic. This should also be a lesson learned for future hard times. Free to Run continuing their programming during challenges in a unique and huge example of not giving up.

What excites you about working with Free to Run in 2021 and beyond?

It excites me more when I see Free to Run running even after the pandemic and to see women who are now able to do outdoor sports in the areas where it was never even possible or accepted.

Juan Program Officer Iraq

Tell us about yourself, your role, and how you became involved with Free to Run

My name is Juan and I am the Program Officer in Erbil with Free to Run Iraq. I am a mother of two beautiful children and lived in the Netherlands for 21 years.

In addition to my job with Free to Run, I am also working as a tour guide in my region, Kurdistan, North Iraq. I love to show tourists everything about my people, history, nature, and all the difficult times we have gotten through.

By coincidence on Facebook I saw something about Free to Run. I reached out and eventually started working as a volunteer because of two things: one, this was an opportunity to run and do sports, which is difficult in this community, and two, I was curious about the work Free to Run was doing in this context with the participants. I worked for 10 months as a volunteer and when the Program Officer position opened up, I got it!

What's one thing you're passionate about outside of work?

Outside of work I am passionate about health. I love walking long distances and hiking.



What was the biggest challenge you faced in your role in 2020? How did you and the rest of the team overcome this challenge?

Because of the lockdown in Iraq it was very difficult to move around and at the camps, it was also difficult to get permission to visit and make contact with the girls. The camp managers let me come after I shared with them about our health measures and all the precautions we were taking. It was tough to convince families because sport is sometimes considered to be a shameful thing for girls and "not necessary." It was also the last thing parents were thinking about during this time of the pandemic. I went back over and over again to gain trust and show them that we were taking COVID-19 and safety precautions seriously. I did not give up and I was very patient, sometimes even speaking with the same family three to four times. I was finally able to gather a group of girls who were so excited to do the program and commit to the activities.

What impact did you see Free to Run have on participants during the pandemic?

It was very hard on the participants because they were not traveling anywhere. Everything was closed and there was no school. Free to Run was a good opportunity for them and a sort of relief from the camps and the pressures they have. You could see in their eyes they were excited and waiting to get out for our activities. In the beginning, many had not even been in a car in six months. Most had never been to Shaqlawa [hiking area] before, even though it's close. They usually do not get outside Erbil or the camps.

During the trips, they were always singing and laughing on the bus. They would take videos and photos of so many things. The mountains were a big surprise for them and they had never imagined they would someday hike on a mountain. They would return home, tell their families, and show pictures. Families would say "Is this Iraq, Kurdistan? Is this real?" They couldn't imagine and thought that these types of places were only in beautiful, foreign countries.

Some of the participants didn't think they would make it to the top of the mountain and would be in disbelief that they did it. After doing it more and more they knew they could do it. And they felt the power that girls and women could do it alone. It was just us girls and women, without any men. I didn't do this when I was younger in Iraq. Now, we are doing this alone without men and just depending on ourselves. It gives us so much strength.

What brought you hope during COVID-19?

Delivering this service to the girls and not leaving them alone brought me hope. Seeing them so happy after every running and

hiking session. And seeing the progress in their mental and physical health; they were stronger and stronger every time. Even when they were tired, they were also happy. The way back from sessions there was always more dancing and laughing and music than the way there. They were tired, but that didn't stop them from expressing happiness. That gave me hope every time. I had no regrets in doing this work and going through the challenges during that difficult time. It was a relief for the participants.

What excites you about working with Free to Run in 2021 and beyond?

I never had this kind of job before, working with vulnerable women in these circumstances. I had dreamed about working in my own country with displaced people when I was in the Netherlands. During the last four or five years I was there, I saw ISIS and what happened to our country. I would constantly tell my husband that I just wanted to be there, doing anything I could to help.

This connection to this world and to these girls and women is very important to me. Sport and hiking is my passion and I love working with these women and girls. My friends and family say that they can see the light shining in my eyes whenever I talk about Free to Run. This job is just a dream come true, even with these challenges in this community. It makes me excited to challenge this and to change the mentality regarding sport for girls. I'm excited to teach people to follow a healthy lifestyle. I see this through sport and through this program. I love it. It is a very good combination between sport, health, and being with people.

Media

Media & Mentions



With and For Girls

We are honored to have received an annual award from With and For Girls. We were acknowledged as a grass-roots organization tackling gender discrimination and inequality. Awards and support such as this ensure that we can continue our efforts to support women and girls through sport and adventure programs.



Beyond Sports Global Award

We are proud to share that Free to Run won the Beyond Sport 2020 Sport For Peace & Social Justice Award! We were recognized for our work in promoting peace and social justice across divides in Afghanistan and Iraq through sport, and for developing female leaders as a force for change to bring people together across cultural, ethnic, and religious lines.

Thank you to...

Partners

Afghanistan Ministry of Education
Afghanistan Ministry of Economy
Bamyan Ski Club
PARSA

Public and private schools in Afghanistan

We organize regular sports activities and our Life Skills through Sports curriculum for students attending public and private schools in Afghanistan. For safety reasons, we don't publish the names or locations of these schools.

Emma Organization for Human Development
Al-Mesalla Organization for Human Resource Development
Kurdistan NGO Directorate
Public Aid Organization (PAO)

Awards

Beyond Sport-
Peace & Social Justice

Beyond Sport-
Courageous Use of Sport

With & for Girls
MENA Region

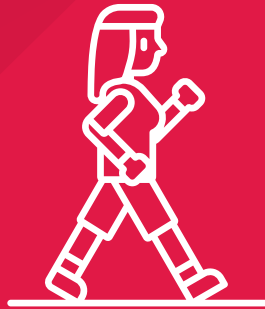
Volunteers

Rebecca Abel

Ericka Kriedel

Kim Madill

Call to Donate



Individual financial support helps us continue our mission of providing sport and personal development opportunities to the women and girls affected by conflict.



Donate [here](#) or help us raise awareness by sharing this report with your community!



Free to Run