

➤ Free to Run

2019

# ANNUAL REPORT.





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# LETTER FROM PRESIDENT.

**S**ince 2014, Free to Run has been working tirelessly to support women and girls in conflict-affected regions through outdoor sports and leadership activities. We're so proud of how far we've come to help build this fearless community of runners across Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2019, despite the ongoing security issues in both countries, 875 female participants (15-25 years old) attended almost 1000 sports sessions and 650 educational sessions with Free to Run.

Free to Run has delivered a number of ground-breaking initiatives in the regions where we operate. In 2019, we brought a group of young women together, coming from multiple provinces, for an expedition to the remote Wakhan Corridor in north-eastern Afghanistan. We saw record levels of female participation in the 2019 Marathon of Afghanistan, and we organized a camping expedition to Bradost Mountain in Iraq. These were just a few of the achievements that helped us to get shortlisted for the prestigious Beyond Sport Gender Equality Award.

We also expanded our programs to southern Afghanistan and Mosul, Iraq - two areas that are well-known for their culture of conservatism around rights of women and girls. Running our programs in these areas has been challenging, but we've been very encouraged by the doors that are opening.

Above all, we're inspired by our participants who are using sports to safely and boldly engage in outdoor activities and explore new possibilities for their future. We firmly believe that outdoor adventure enables women and girls to reclaim public space and change views about the roles they can, and should, play in society. To the organizations and individuals who have enthusiastically supported us on this amazing journey, thank you from everyone at Free to Run.

**Stephanie Case**  
President + Founder



## DEVELOPING FEMALE LEADERS IN REGIONS OF CONFLICT.

**Conflicts can have a devastating impact on societies, causing suffering on a widespread scale. Women and girls are often disproportionately affected, and the particular ways in which their rights are restricted are often overlooked. Their invisibility from society is as much of a symptom of discrimination as it is a cause.**










We believe that there will never be a solution to the conflict without free, full, and equal participation of women as equals in society.

Free to Run's mission is to enable women and girls to safely and boldly engage in outdoor activity in conflict-affected regions.

Through a combination of sports programs, life skills development, and community outreach, we help females to reclaim public space and change views about the roles they can (and should) play in a society. Our programs are designed to develop community leaders who can bring people together across cultural, ethnic and religious lines. We work to provide our participants with the tools to succeed because they can and will be a force for positive change.



## IMPACT IN NUMBERS: 2019 AT A GLANCE.

-  875 participants
-  969 sports sessions
-  640 educational sessions
-  40 communities worked in
-  36 volunteer sessions
-  25 community outreach events
-  13 mixed-gender races held
-  6 leadership and sports weeks
-  2 conflict-affected countries



## WHAT WE DO.

**Free to Run programs include a combination of adventure sports, life skills development, and community service. All participants run and hike with their team 3-5 times per week, depending on the season. They also volunteer monthly in their community and actively contribute to local projects, which further strengthens community support.**

Central to the learning and leadership aspect of our program is the Life Skills through Sports (LSS) curriculum. Designed in collaboration with a UNICEF Education Specialist, the LSS curriculum helps participants to learn communication skills, conflict negotiation, leadership and service learning.

Three times per year we host week-long leadership events. We provide participants with an opportunity to get outside of their comfort zones and experience new adventures, like camping, kayaking, cycling, ice skating, and skiing. We bring together groups from different cultures, offering them the space, time and support to share their experiences, learn from each other, and re-examine their preconceptions.

Participants who successfully complete a year or more of Free to Run programs are encouraged to lead LSS and sports sessions in their local schools, creating a positive ripple effect in their own communities.

**We focus on developing skills and competencies, and shifting the attitudes of participants and their communities.**

We are not singularly focused on measuring the athletic performance of our participants. The success of our programs is linked to the skills and competencies that participants develop, as well as the shift in attitudes achieved within themselves and in the surrounding communities. Our goal is to increase the opportunities for women and girls to engage in public life, using sport as a tool of empowerment and education.



## WHERE WE WORK.

Free to Run operates in some of the most challenging regions in the world, where decades of conflict and instability have resulted in extreme social isolation for women and girls as well as harassment, constrained mobility, and unequal access to education. Since 2014, we have worked to create positive change in the lives of over 3000 women and girls living in regions of conflict.



*It is an amazing feeling participating in a sporting event because everyone is really proud of you! Everybody was looking at us while we were running- I felt so powerful and visible! Sport is magic, it makes you feel you are still living in this world and not being neglected.*

**Heiveen**  
Erbil, Iraq

## AFGHANISTAN.

Afghanistan continues to rank amongst the lowest countries in the world in terms of educational opportunities, life expectancy, health, and access to justice. Despite significant advances that have been made since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan frequently ranks amongst the lowest in terms of educational opportunities, life expectancy, health, and access to justice for women and girls. Violence continues to take a heavy toll on the civilian population and in 2019, for the sixth consecutive year, the UN in Afghanistan recorded over 10,000 civilian casualties.

Afghan women and girls face inequitable access to formal education and they lack opportunities to develop the skills they need to lead productive and fulfilling lives. Free to Run has spent over five years building up increased support for Afghan women and girls in adventure sports. We began in 2014 with hiking activities for a small group of young women in the Central Highlands Region. Today, we

operate in five provinces and support over 770 ethnically diverse women and girls, ages 15-25, who commit to a comprehensive program of athletics, civic engagement, and leadership training.

Even with the insecurity in the region, Free to Run has experienced a number of ground-breaking achievements in Afghanistan. We supported the first woman to complete a marathon in the country, and the first female Afghan teams to compete in international ultramarathons, we are helping to significantly expand the number of female runners in the Marathon of Afghanistan, the only international marathon in the country. We also created the first ice skating program and the first kayaking training for females in the country. Of equal importance, we have transformed these sporting experiences into opportunities to participate in and lead local communities through our Life Skills through Sport (LSS) curriculum.

In 2019, we added a mental health framework and worked to create facilitated discussions on trauma-informed practice for our staff to use during training. This was developed in response to a rate of 80% of participants experiencing trauma in their lives.

External monitoring and evaluation indicates that participation in the program has demonstrably enhanced

women and girls' social well-being, stress-management, leadership skills, and experiences of equality. It has also broadened cultural competencies by facilitating collaborative activities, such as volunteer days and organized sports events, with boys and girls whenever possible.





# AFGHANISTAN. THE STATS.



## IRAQ.

In Iraq, following decades of armed conflict, nearly two million people remain internally displaced and 4.1 million are in need of humanitarian assistance. Since the end of the conflict in 2017, families returning to the country have struggled to reintegrate and prosper. Women and girls are especially disenfranchised and remain among the most vulnerable in society, suffering from domestic violence, gender based violence, and early child marriage.

Free to Run designed its program in Iraq based off of the model it created and honed in Afghanistan. the Iraq program is designed to provide sports and life skills training to women and girls, ages 15-25, who come from a wide variety of backgrounds. We started in 2018 with a

small pilot team of 18 participants who were living in Erbil, which is located in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Today, we operate in the Erbil and Mosul regions and support just over 100 ethnically diverse women and girls. We are very optimistic about the potential impact our programs could have in this region.



*I'm a girl living in an internally displaced persons camp, and it's difficult to do sports in our community. When I started running, I told myself it was impossible to run 12km. But I made it a goal and decided I should accomplish it. I have challenged my community and finished the 12km!*

Hala,  
Erbil, Iraq

# IRAQ. THE STATS.



INCREASE IN  
VOLUNTEERING



BETTER PHYSICAL  
CAPABILITIES



POSITIVE VIEW ON  
THE BENEFITS OF SPORTS



INCREASE IN  
ADVISING SOMEONE



INCREASE IN SETTING  
+ ACHIEVING GOALS



INCREASE IN  
PROJECT LEADING



INCREASED SOCIAL  
WELL-BEING



INCREASED EMOTIONAL  
WELL-BEING



INCREASED INTEREST IN  
OTHER CULTURES



DEVELOPED  
NEW SKILLSETS



BETTER AT CONFLICT  
RESOLUTION



DIFFERENT OUTLOOK  
ON THEIR FUTURE



INCREASED  
DECISION MAKING



SPEAK MORE OPENLY  
ABOUT ANXIETY



HAVE RECENTLY  
OVERCOME CHALLENGES

## MONITORING & EVALUATION.

At Free to Run, we are not singularly focused on measuring the athletic performance of our participants; rather, the success of our program depends on the skills and competencies that they develop, as well as the shift in attitudes achieved within themselves and in the surrounding communities. Our overall goal is to increase the opportunities for women and girls to engage in public life, using sports as a tool of empowerment and education.

We use multiple methods to establish a baseline and monitor progress. The various, complementary methods used provide quantitative data on participation and qualitative data on perceived changes in behaviors and attitudes.

### Our methods include:

- Attendance
- Participant Journals
- Mini-Surveys
- Focus Group Discussions
- Final Interviews



Participant stories

## HASINA.

**My name is Hasina. I am 24 years old originally from Maidan Wardak province, which is controlled by the Taliban. Now I live in Kabul. In the summer of 2016, a friend told me about an organization that took girls hiking in the Central Highlands region of Afghanistan. She told me they were looking for girls who were interested in doing sport. At that time, I had just graduated from the Physical Education Institute.**

I reached out to them to join, and they said I was welcome if I could get permission from my parents. Even though I live in the capital and it's more open minded than most of the country, our family and our community are very traditional and to get permission for this on my own was a big deal.

When Free to Run asked me to attend a sports week in another province, I was worried and scared that my parents might not let me go. At first, they wouldn't let me go. I went to them again the next day

and talked and talked until they finally agreed. I was happy to get the permission because it was unthinkable at first, but sad because my father would not talk to me afterwards.

I traveled to another province without my family as a 20-year-old Afghan girl. It was my first time going hiking and seeing mountains so closely. My second trip was for the Marathon of Afghanistan in 2016 where I ran my first 10km race. From that trip on, I resolved to one day run a full marathon. In 2017, I trained hard and ran my first full marathon.

When I came home, I joined the Community Development Leadership Programme to work with high school girls because I understood what running could bring to their lives. Since I was such a dedicated participant and volunteer, I was then selected for the RacingThePlanet 250km ultra race in Mongolia in 2018. I was so happy to represent my country in an international race and prove that

Afghan women are strong. When we came back to Afghanistan, I remember feeling sad because I thought my journey with Free to Run was over, but I was wrong. A month after we came back, they told me about an open position as the Kabul Programme Officer. I interviewed and was selected! It has been a year and a half since I started work as a Programme Officer. I oversee the community development leaders who are leading our Life Skills through Sports and nutrition programs and managing the marathon training program. A few months ago, I was promoted to Country Program Manager to oversee all five provinces' program.

Free to Run has taught me so many things. They showed me the way. I faced lots of challenges and problems along the way in my pursuit of sports because

people here think women and girls are only for housework. But I am happy that I could change my family's mind, including my father's, to respect me and now I have no problems with doing sport or traveling alone to other provinces. I have turned my passion for sports and women's rights into a career. I am really happy that I work with girls and we teach them life skills through which they can find their way like me. Through them we change our community's minds about girls and their right to freedom.



Participant stories

## SEDIQA.

**My name is Sediqa. I was 17 when I joined Free to Run. Originally, my family is from the very conservative Uruzgan province in Afghanistan. Even though we moved to Western Afghanistan, we still followed that traditional way of life. My family raised me and my siblings in this way, with a lot of restrictions and few freedoms.**

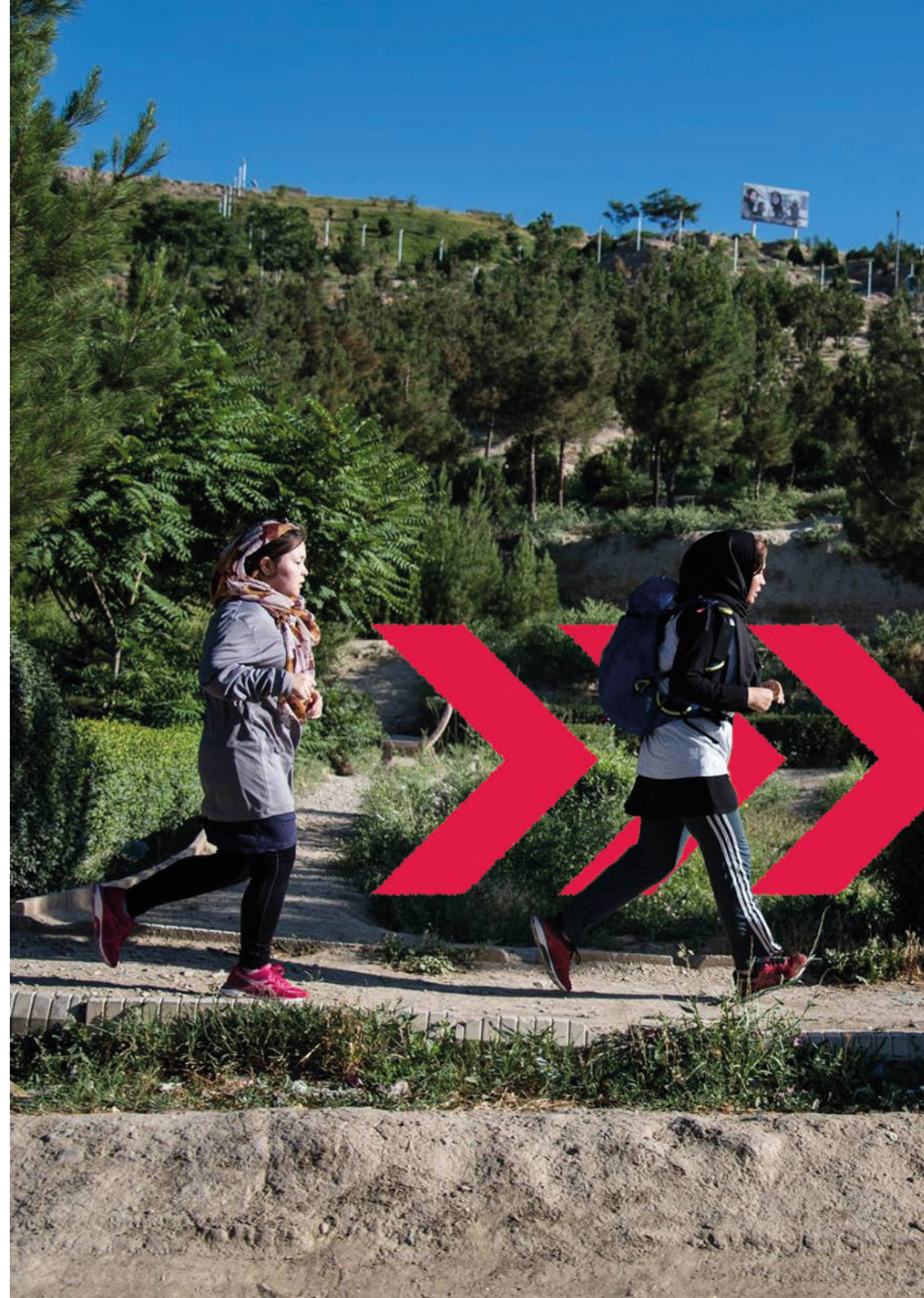
When a Free to Run Program Officer came to my high school to tell us about their programmes at our school, I immediately signed up. At first, I did not want to tell my family because they'd say no. As expected, they could not imagine me running around and did not give me permission. After many discussions, I convinced my mother to join one of the sessions. When she saw it was a female-only group and how excited the other girls were, she gave me permission to join.

But the biggest challenges was yet to come: the Winter Inter-Regional Sports & Leadership Week, where I was selected alongside 14 Free to Run athletes from

all provinces would travel to the Central Highlands for a one week training in winter sports and leadership skills. I had never travelled alone.

I had never even thought about it! But, joining the team in Western Afghanistan gave me the confidence to ask my parents. Against all doubts, prejudices, and fears, I eventually convinced them to let me go. I travelled to the Central Highlands and experienced one of the best weeks in my life.

This was over a year ago in 2019, but I still remember that powerful feeling of being able to do something that was once impossible for me. It serves as a source of positive energy whenever I face a difficult situations. Now, I'm preparing for university entrance exams. Every morning, I tell myself that I can do it. Just as I found a way to participate in Free to Run and travel on my own to a different province with them, I will pass my exams and any other challenge in my life.



Participant stories

## FATIMA.

**I am Fatima. I am 21 years old and originally from West Mosul. I grew up there with five sisters and six brothers, until we had to flee our home because of an ISIS attack. My father was taken in the attack, and is still missing. I've lived in Baharka Camp, a place for internally displaced Iraqis, for seven years now. I was mentally very tired and didn't want to see or speak with anyone when I first heard about Free to Run. Inside, I was searching for an outlet like Free to Run because I didn't have any friends. My parents were reluctant to let me join because of our culture, but I convinced them I would go back to school and be a good student if they gave me permission to join Free to Run.**

The first practices were so tough as my body was not used to running or hiking. But it was not long before I looked forward to practice because

I got to spend time with other girls and the Programme Officer encouraged us so much. The days we went hiking in the mountains were my favorite because there was so much laughter amongst my teammates. We grew strong together, and I gained so much self-confidence.

I even started to enjoy being back at school, and encouraged other girls to return too. My success at school made my parents encourage me to continue with Free to Run. My goals have entirely changed. Now, I want to study for as long as possible and continue participating in sports. I'd love to lead a group of girls in sports by myself one day. I wish more girls in the world could participate in marathons so they can achieve it for the ones who still cannot participate.



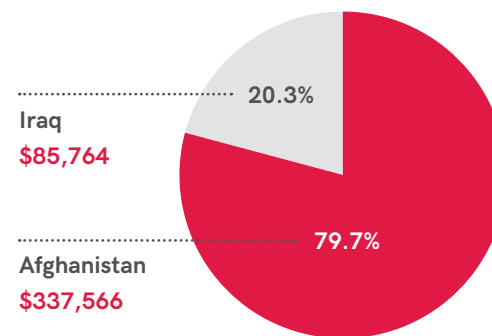


*The feeling you get when you cross the finish line is hard to describe. There are goosebumps and tears, but the most satisfying element is learning about yourself and what you're made of.*

**Maryam**

Northern Afghanistan

## FINANCIALS.



### Province breakdowns





## OUR PARTNERS.

### Public and private schools in Afghanistan

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

### Government Ministries / Departments

- Kabul Municipality
- Kurdistan Region of Iraq NGO Directorate
- Afghan Ministry of Education
- Afghan Ministry of Economy NGO Directorate

### Local and International NGOs

- Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Support for Afghanistan (PARSA)
- International Psychosocial Organization (IPSO)
- Women Empowerment Organization (WEO)

- Kurdistan NGO Directorate
- Public Aid Organization (PAO)
- IKNN

### Private Companies

- RacingThePlanet
- Untamed Borders
- Edgework Consulting

### Races

- The Marathon of Afghanistan
- Erbil Marathon
- The United Airlines NYC Half
- The TCS New York City Marathon
- Tor des Géants
- Bamyan Ski Club





## LOOKING AHEAD.

**Free to Run's ambition is that everyone, regardless of gender, age, religion, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background, should be free to safely and boldly engage in outdoor activity. We focus our efforts on women and girls living in regions of conflict because they are the most vulnerable population in our global community, and we believe they can be a force for positive change.**

When we started, most considered outdoor sports for females in Afghanistan to be an impossible dream. We started small, opened a dialogue with a handful of communities, created a culturally respectful approach, and got a team of female athletes safely outside. By 2015, Free to Run helped the first female athlete to run a marathon in Afghanistan.

Today, hundreds follow in her footsteps across five different regions of Afghanistan and now Iraq. As we create safe spaces, teach life skills, and promote concrete measures for women and girls to engage in outdoor sports, we're also working to achieve one of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) on gender equality. "Gender equality is not only

a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world."

Looking forward, we hope to deepen our leadership development of participants and alumni by teaching them project development and community mobilization skills. We also aim to expand our reach by incorporating more participants from other provinces into the Free to Run family.

Clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic has put the world on pause. We are using that time to strengthen our connection with the women and girls in our programs. Free to Run is often one of the only connections in their lives, outside of family. We are also using the time to develop a brand new development and community mobilization programme for Afghanistan and Iraq.

We remain steadfast in our commitment to continue programming in both regions. As always, our goal is to further the development of female leaders, on the trails and in their communities.

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