

AFGHANISTAN WOMEN FLAG FOOTBALL

HOW IT ALL STARTED

By: Diane Beruldsen - President / Founder IWFFA



I traveled to India in 2018 to train a group of Afghan women - flag football. At that time U.S. troops occupied Afghanistan. The American government used sport programs to empower the Afghan women in order to counter: their culture, the submissiveness of females, dominance of men and the Taliban in their country. Many sports were offered and encouraged for the Afghan women to join.

The International Women Flag Football Association (IWFFA) was contacted in 2017 requesting the IWFFA teach the Afghan women flag football. This is what our organization does, the IWFFA will travel to countries where flag football does not exist, then train and teach the women to develop the sport in their country putting the women as the leaders because women should rule their own sport. However in this case being asked to teach the Afghan women flag football, was much more than introducing the sport to their country. This situation was the essence of our organization. The IWFFA is a woman's organization who uses flag football to develop leaders, to empower females and this opportunity was very important to us which we were careful to succeed. A lot of planning, money and hard work would go into this effort.

On June 15, 2018, I fly into New Delhi India (33 hour travel from Key West, Florida), and was met by India coach: Andray Benjamin. We then took a four hour bus ride to Jaipur. The Afghans have not arrived yet because they're waiting to get their visas. As soon as I arrive I am given a traditional Indian welcome, introduced to everyone and next day I start training 35 Indian women. The Indians have played 5 on 5, no contact flag football for the past two years. The president of their league: Mohit Singh Rajawat, thinks 5 on 5 is boring and he wants something more exciting for the women, so he wanted the IWFFA come to India to train the women 8 on 8. IWFFA flag football rules include many skills such as: blocking, kicking, punting, field goals, fake kicks, flag grab, rushing, etc. The game should be played with strategy and finesse vs. brute force and this style of flag football provides a position for every female body type so we can include all women & girls in the game and in our organization.





Elite Football League of India (EFLI), now known as Elite Sports of India (ESI) and Jaipur Poornima University who sponsored the trainings were very professional and organized. The Indian women were very disciplined, focused, strong athletes and a coach's dream to coach. They gave 100% in temperatures 110 degrees °F and twice a day for 2.5 hours each training. We continued in classroom during the day time in the middle of the day with no air conditioning to learn the rules and how to officiate. Trainings for the Indians were going extremely well, however there is delay for the Afghans arrival and at this time, we do not know if they will get their visas to make the trip to India.

Trainings for the Indians were extended, and we wait more days for the Afghans to arrive. This was the main purpose for the IWFFA, to train the Afghans, so they could bring the sport back to Afghanistan, and I'm feeling extremely stressed. Finally, after almost a week, we get word that the Afghans have received their visas, and will arrive on Saturday, June 23. However, there are more delays during their travel and it was not until next day, June 24 at 7:25 am when the Afghans arrived to Jaipur.



First time I saw the Afghan women was a profound moment and an image I will never forget. It was during morning practice with the Indian women, when all of a sudden everyone stopped. I turned my head to see what everyone was looking at, and at a distance were the Afghan women standing in a perfect row looking at us. They made it, and I felt like crying. The Afghans came to us and we all said hello, but we had to continue our training, and they had to sleep. They had been traveling all day and night and were extremely exhausted physically and mentally. We would begin our first training next day, and so today was my last day training the Indian women. EFLI male coaches would take over the Indian women's flag football teams and our goal at that moment was to get the two teams ready for the 1st international women's flag football match in India to be played on July 1, 2018.

I began the same training with the Afghans as I had with the Indians, however coaching the Afghans would be different. The Afghans were looking at a football for the first time. They never threw or caught this type of ball. They would have their first competition in a week and they had to learn as much about flag football so they could bring the sport to Afghanistan to coach and train other Afghan girls and women and to develop their flag football league. These women were made clear of their responsibilities, and there was a deeper desire to learn. The Indian women were more physical, and the Afghan women were more perceptual during their training.

I had done this before and trained women in countries who never saw a football. In 1997 I traveled to Denmark and remember how amazed the Danish women were to see it's shape, and when they picked up the ball to hold and touch, they did this slowly and were laughing. I showed the Scandinavian women how to throw and catch and they taught me another way to kick the ball for field goals and long kicks. The women from Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Iceland had a different style, which I was concerned with at first because I grew up in United States and was influenced by men's tackle football. These women looked awkward, like beginners playing flag football, but when the Scandinavians played their flag football games they were successful. They just looked different catching, throwing and running with the ball. The Scandinavians learned the game by reading the rules and to this day, on our IWFFA rules committee sits a Swedish woman who knows the rules better than myself. The Scandinavians taught also, that women's flag football should have it's own style and tackle football should not be our role model. Women need to develop our own style and strategy. And when it came to the country Afghanistan, there would be no man or boy who would play flag football, it would be only the women and girls playing flag football. So at this moment in India, for me a woman to train the Afghan women, then the Afghan women train other females who never have been influenced by a man's style, was indeed a great opportunity. I could not wait for the first generation of Afghan female flag football players to develop. This was a dream for the IWFFA to come true.



“At the same time the Afghans were learning how to throw, catch and kick a football, they were learning the rules, how to call penalties and the philosophy of the IWFFA which was: more important than winning, is understanding one’s position so that during the game you can make the best decisions. When you play your best, and your team plays their best, that’s when the magic happens and that’s when you win, no matter what the numbers are on the score board.”

The trainings seemed slow for when I spoke, my English had to be translated into the Persian language (same for the Indians when we entered the classroom. We needed a translator to translate to the Hindi language). But the Afghans were a smaller group, only 8 vs. the 35 Indians, and so these Afghan trainings were much more manageable. We did progress quickly. At the same time the Afghans were learning how to throw, catch and kick a football, they were learning the rules, how to call penalties and the philosophy of the IWFFA which was: more important than winning, is understanding one's position so that during the game you can make the best decisions. When you play your best, and your team plays their best, that's when the magic happens and that's when you win, no matter what the numbers are on the score board. The Indian female athletes did not take in this philosophy. I shared it with them, but they wanted to win and would play hard to win in the Friendship Game.

The Afghan team worked very hard and we needed a break. I suggested we take a camel ride, just as we did with the Indian women. One day we went into town to ride the camels, walk around and see the sights. It was GREAT. There were cows roaming the streets, and goats crossing the roads. A young boy came up to our group to share his talent as a magician, and everyone came to me to tell me to hold on to my wallet. It was a great day.

I shared my room with Sabria Mahboobi, who would become the IWFFA Ambassador for Afghanistan. We talked late many nights and I listened to her stories of what it was like to be a woman in Afghanistan. It's really hard to understand why the men would suppress and prohibit women from living their lives to such extremes. Women were not allowed to watch T.V., nor use the internet, could not go to school, could not play sports and could not leave the house if the man refused the woman to go outside. Not just husbands, but brothers and other male relatives had the right to control the women. There are also child marriages that takes place. This is the life for women outside Kabul. These Afghan women who came to India, were lucky to be living in Kabul, occupied by U.S. troops. The rest of Afghanistan was still run by other militias and the Taliban. I thought as I listened to these stories (and more personal ones), how important flag football is for these Afghan women here in India. To exercise their bodies, build their muscles, strengthen their lungs, play together as a team of women, socialize, have a goal on the field and working together, and unity of women. Whether they win or loose, this experience to play against the Indians in their Friendship Game, would serve as a huge benefit and a greater purpose.



At the end of the Afghan training, on July 1, 2018, the Afghan women would have their first ever flag football competition with the Indians, in a competition that was broadcast and highlighted as India women's first international flag football competition. There was TV and radio media, a crowd of over 300 standing on the side lines to watch the game. Afghanistan scored first in the game, but India would come back with four touch downs to win 24 - 6. Awards were given out, speeches were made, that night after the awards the Afghans would leave India and go back home to Afghanistan.



We afforded the equipment given- the Afghans, to develop the sport in Afghanistan, by fundraising "Ice Bucket" contests. I got a few Afghan women and an Indian woman to participate (see below links to these You Tube videos). As soon as the Afghan women got back home, they coached the women and girls and started the: Afghanistan Women Flag Football Federation. The women coached, officiated and played flag football until end of August 2021 when the U.S. took their troops out of Afghanistan and the Taliban took control of the country. That was when I got a text message: "Madame can you help us".



put harsh and brutal restrictions on women and now that they have complete control in Afghanistan, they began looking and searching for women who participated in sports because they broke Taliban law and must be punished. Mahjabin Hakimi, a player on the Kabul Municipality Volleyball Club, was beheaded in the capital city of Kabul by Taliban troops. All our flag football players had to go into hiding because if they were found, they too could be killed. And it's not just the women in danger, but their families who allowed our flag footballers to play.



As soon as I read this text message, I thought of all the women who traveled to India. I knew these women personally. Then I thought of all the women and girls who joined the flag football sport in Afghanistan: "If the IWFFA did not go to India, would these Afghan flag footballers have been involved in another sport?, did we put their lives in danger, and what the hell did we do?"

The responsibility was mounting terribly and the guilt over bearing. Normally the IWFFA would travel to a country to help develop the sport, not get the women killed. And of course, I rationalized all this, that it's not our fault to bring flag football to Afghanistan, but I did feel some responsibility and I had to do all that I could to get our flag footballers out of Afghanistan.

We were text messaging frequently after that message and the Afghans asked me to write a letter to the U.S. State Department which I did. Then I was asked to write to a certain congressman which I did. "Please madam, write to this Senator"... I then did. Whatever they asked me to do, I did. But nothing was happening with these letters and I was trying to find other ways I could help.

It was then when I got this text message: "Madam can you get us a lawyer" when I became distraught. Anyone living in the U.S., knows how expensive lawyers are, and at that moment I really didn't think we could help our Afghans if we had to go in this direction. I phoned several lawyers, and the cheapest one would do the work to get our Afghans out of Afghanistan for \$1,500 per person. Humm..... but that was not a guarantee and at some point I knew this lawyer would come back and say it will cost more because it's taking more time.

In the early days, soon after the Taliban took over Afghanistan, groups from other countries were evacuating Afghans through the Kabul airport. The Australia Women's Soccer and FIFA were successful to get many of the female Afghan soccer players out. This gave us hope. And at that time, scenes at the airport were shown on mass media, and you could see the hysteria and chaos as people were desperately trying to get into the airport and on a plane to anywhere.

U.S. troops were still stationed at the airport, and I was asked if I knew any soldiers stationed there because I live in a military town. I called up all my friends and parents of children in the military asking if their son or daughter was stationed inside Kabul airport. We wanted to find someone inside the airport to open a locked gate to let our flag football players in. The soldiers had cell phones, and a simple phone call might just work. But I didn't find a soldier inside the airport, and our Afghan flag football ballers would go on their own. And then that day, on August 26, a bomb went off killing 60 Afghans and 12 U.S. soldiers, and I didn't know if our flag football players were injured or even alive. I waited for hours until we were contacted by our Afghan leader who told me that all the women were fine. They had a meeting that night to discuss if they would make another attempt the next day to get into the airport, very concerned for what a huge risk this would be. At the end of their meeting, they decided they would try again. But next day when they went to the airport, it was hopeless and soon in the coming days, there were no more U.S. troops left in Afghanistan, and there was no chance to fly out this way. Everyone had to go into hiding. Now I'm really scared.



The IWFFA was started in 1997 and with over ten thousand flag football women, I thought maybe we could get help from our flag football players. On September 23, 2021, I put out an email to all IWFFA flag football players asking if anyone knew of a lawyer who would work pro bono to help us.



IWFFA
International Women's
Flag Football Association

**Help Get Our Afghanistan Women's
Flag Football Association Members
Out of Afghanistan!!!!!!**

We need your help!

It's simple
Do you know a lawyer
who would be willing to help us get the
Afghanistan Women's Flag Football
Association Members - Out of Afghanistan?



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ANY AMOUNT OF
MONEY
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FUND**

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Within hours, I received an email from Bridget Cambridge:

On Sep 23, 2021, at 2:17 PM, Bridget Cambria
<bridget.cambria@cambriaklinelaw.com> wrote:

Hey! I am a former women's football player and IWFFA player. My name is Bridget Cambria. I am also an immigration lawyer and have a nonprofit working on some of these cases. My organization is called Aldea (aldeapjc.org).

Please give me your contact information and we will call and help you all with requests to parole these players. I am putting Sahar on this email, she is a lawyer working on our Afghan cases who can help communications and works with us and Adriana who facilitates our pro bono program.

And NOW the ball is ROLLING!



- Bridget is co-founder of: ALDEA - The People's Justice Center, and they would fight for our flag football women, pro bono. We zoomed every Friday afternoon (few exceptions) and lawyer Sahar Jalili would interpret the language with our Afghan leaders who would represent the families.
- Our plan was to get asylum for all our Afghans in the United States. My job was to find jobs and a place to live for everyone. We didn't want our Afghans getting asylum and then getting stuck at a military base for months. We wanted to find them jobs and housing, making it easier for them to start their new lives. Key West, is also a tourist town and I found two hotels who would meet with me. After sharing our story, Casa Marina and Ocean Key Resort hotels were happy to hire the majority of our Afghans and provide housing. Other businesses and individuals in Key West and also Provincetown, MA would hire other women or take them into their homes. We had them all covered. In all, we were fighting for 70 Afghan flag football players and their families. Now, we had to figure out how to physically bring them over to the United States.
- To purchase airline tickets would be expensive, maybe we could hire a plane and pilot to bring them over. We contacted a local pilot who flies cargo all over the world. He is willing to fly the plane, but we have to find out if he can get a passenger plane because you can't fly passengers in a cargo plane. It was a week later, we found out this would not be possible and so we ditch this idea.



As we waited for the paperwork to be accepted and approved for the asylum case in the United States, the IWFFA had it's Mexican Women's Flag Football Tournament coming up at the end of May 2022. We invited our Afghan flag footballers to the competition. In that way, at least, they would be out of Afghanistan. To do this, they needed tourist visas to enter Mexico. But those papers would not come on time and it was taking too long. Our Friday meetings were not so happy as there was no news or updates. The only good thing that was going our way was that our case before the U.S. Government was not thrown out yet which gave us a bit of hope. At this point ALDEA contacted with the Mexico City Office of Greenberg Traurig and, boy, are we lucky! They came up with an idea for our Afghans to seek asylum in Mexico! For weeks the Mexican Greenberg Traurig lawyers worked hard. Elba Gutiérrez was the leader together with Daniela Reyes and Karla Copka, they coordinated the work with many other attorneys at their firm. They thought there was a good chance they could succeed and now it was up to our Afghans to decide if they would like to change course and start their new lives in Mexico.



I thought this was a no brainer: get out of Afghanistan in any way you can. But these Afghans had heard stories about Mexico being a dangerous place. I explained to them I grew up in New York and at one time New York City had a terrible reputation for crime which was just an exaggeration. I shared that I traveled to Mexico four times, that my opinion was Mexico was a beautiful country and Mexicans are sweet people. I liked their culture very much and felt safe every time I visited. One family decided not to go. .

These lawyers negotiated with the Mexican Government for the team to be granted political asylum. And then, the day came: we announced at our Friday zoom meeting that the Mexican Government had agreed to welcome our Afghans and grant them asylum! Elba, the attorney, explained to the Afghans that Greenberg, their firm, had partnered with Programa Casa a Refugiados, one of the most important non profits in Mexico working with refugees. Programa Casa Refugiados would provide housing, and assist with some food, help them to enroll into the educational system, help them to look for jobs and a flag football field.... A Flag Football Field! I was crying. Many thanks to Jose Luis and the Catholic Church for helping to arrange the field.

Mexico agreed take in our Afghan women and their families. I told you Mexico was a beautiful country. By this time, some families were living in Afghanistan, some others made it out to Iran and some more made it out to Pakistan. Now, we had to coordinate their travel and buy their airline tickets. We decided to split our Afghans into two groups: those with passports and those without

It was those with passports that made it into the first group who would arrive to Mexico first. The second group would work on getting their passports. The day came, when we started to purchase airline tickets. Some families could afford their own tickets, some tickets were purchased by the IWFFA and some tickets were purchased through our fundraisers which raised \$13,000. We are currently working on getting money to buy the second group's airline tickets. Tickets cost between \$1,200 - \$1,650 U.S. dollars and you can donate any amount of money here as the fundraiser is still going on <https://gofund.me/607f586d>



Chaos in Afghanistan @ airport



There was a 17 year old girl who was being forced to marry a much older man

There was a 17 year old girl who was being forced to marry a much older man. IWFFA Ambassador to Afghanistan asked if the IWFFA could buy a ticket for her, and yes we did. FIFA was fantastic in that they would purchase 12 tickets for one of the families. There was such excitement that day, because we felt we were really doing this and it was really happening. When each person received their airplane ticket, it made it real. Unfortunately for one family who was to be in the first group, our flag football player was pregnant and the baby was to be born before the day set for everyone's departure. The baby would need a passport and there was not enough time to get a passport. This made me cry. This family would have to wait for our second group to leave. Everyone would leave either on November 14 or 15 and everyone would arrive in Mexico City on November 16, first connecting through Istanbul, Turkey then Mexico City. It was a very specific flight pattern which we had to use. There were special documents everyone had to carry with them. This seemed to take forever, and the families were getting nervous. The time to travel was approaching and these papers were CRUCIAL. We just had to wait and be patient.

It was a huge effort to coordinate everything. Our legal team, Elba, Daniela, Karla, Bridget and Sahar, were awake for more than two days straight beginning when the first family started their journey. Each family had to take two planes and a lot could go wrong along the way. Our lawyers would give each family last minute instructions the day before they traveled. Turkey had been notified by the Mexican government that these Afghans would be traveling to Mexico. Each of them had their own documents on their person: their own passport, legal documents prepared by the Mexican attorneys in case they were detained, contact e-mails for the Mexican lawyers, instructions in written. Phone numbers and special contacts were shared. "Be patient, don't get upset, we will help you. There might be moments where some authority gives you a hard time - you might be detained - keep cool - be prepared for these things to happen", the lawyers said.





It was in Pakistan, where one of our families was held back. They were at the gate, and an immigration officer did not allow them to go through. We started to get lots of text messages in our coordination WhatsApp group. Lawyers were communicating with each other: "Did they pay all their fines?" - YES, "They don't need those papers", "The Ministry was notified", "How much time is left before they need to board?" - 1 hour. "This dude probably wants a bribe", "They asked for bribe and then put stamp on their papers", "We've got 20 minutes", "Tell them to get ahead on line", "They should be boarding now... tell them to run, run", "Did they make it?", "We don't know". Then, silence. Text messages from this family stopped and we all assumed they made it on to the plane, otherwise we would have heard from them. But that moment was intense. Reading their messages was like a scary movie, and then not knowing what had happened left a very strange feeling which I can't describe. But this is real life, with people's lives, it's not a movie, it's real life.

Then in Iran, we had more trouble. The airline was skeptical about the letter our Afghans were carrying with them. More back and forth. "Madam, they are holding us and will not let us go on the plane" The lawyers contacted the Ministry and asked them to send the papers immediately to immigration at airport, but the office is not open and we have to wait till they are open. Two Afghan families are waiting "We are all here waiting for permission". Finally, the airline accepted the papers. Yes!. And for two nights and days, all the lawyers were monitoring the phones for all the families travel. This was the most harrowing experience. As all our Afghans were flying the last plane from Istanbul, Turkey to Mexico City, our lawyers got a chance to get some sleep. I myself flew to Mexico City, leaving on the 15th and arriving on the 16th at 12:15 AM. I slept on the airport floor until they arrived.



November 16, 2022 at 8.30AM, the plane landed in Mexico City airport which brought 37 Afghans. This would be the largest group of refugees Mexico received through the work of Greenberg Traurig office in Mexico.

Mexican lawyers Elba, Daniela and Karla were at the gate and organized media coverage so there were a TV camera and reporters. These lawyers had all legal papers on them prepared in case there was trouble with immigration or any other crises that could arise, so their job was not over. The IWFFA Mexico Women's Flag Football League had representatives: Itzel and Rodrigo to greet everyone. Another group from Mexico at the airport, who would further support our Afghans were: Cristina, Jose, and Carlos from Programa Casa Refugiados. Greenberg had hired a bus to take the team from the airport to their new temporary home in a beautiful part of Mexico City.



I thought it was important for me to be there when the Afghans arrived. For them to see a friendly face, and I wanted to be there to see our Afghan flag football players and their families, after 15 months of hard work. I just had to see for myself this first group to make it. This moment and this experience I should cherish for the rest of my life. And when the families started coming out of the gate, I felt very happy for them, very proud and thought how lucky we were to have all the players on our team, for without anyone of them, who knows if we would have been successful.

In our first group of 37 Afghans, twenty-two were women, eighteen were flag football players and all of the Afghans, women, girls, men and boys, were members of the IWFFA. In our second group we have 33 Afghans, who we work to raise money for their airline tickets.

If you would like to be a hero - please make a donation to the fundraiser:
<https://gofund.me/607f586d>



Casa Refugiados

MANY THANKS TO THESE PEOPLE AND GROUPS BELOW WHO MADE IT POSSIBLE

Greenberg Traurig - <https://www.gtlaw.com/en/> Leader Elba Gutierrez, Daniela Reyes, Karla Copka, Jose Raz Guzman, Caroline J. Heller, Luis Cortes, Victor Felipe Callarisa Rivera and Diana Cortes. The Mexican law firm branch for Greenberg Traurig, who did the legal work in Mexico to gain asylum and who continues to work with PCR to support the Afghans.

Casa Refugiados is a non-profit, non-partisan and secular civil association that collaborates with different allies from the public, social and private sectors, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and with other institutions, with the aim of providing humanitarian assistance and access to basic services and the exercise of the rights of displaced persons, access to employment, health and housing. Casa Refugiados promotes rights of the people on the move (POM), refugees, asylum seekers, displaced persons, and migrants, with emphasis on their local integration through the creation of spaces of solidarity and respect, and activities for a culture of peace.

The Misioneros del Espíritu Santo de la Provincia de México México (Missionaries of the Holy Spirit of the Province of Mexico) seek to promote processes for integral human development and in a defined commitment to solidarity with others, especially with people in vulnerable situations, they begin a collaborative relationship with Programa Casa Refugiados with the opening of the CEAHPAZ space. A joint effort that responds to the objective of generating relationships of inclusion and equity in the service of others.

CEAHPAZ Casa de Encuentro para el Acompañamiento Humanitario y Construcción de Paz (Meeting House for Humanitarian Accompaniment and Peacebuilding) Operate as a physical and virtual space to strengthen, scale and replicate collaborative efforts around humanitarian accompaniment from a peacebuilding approach, within the framework of the "Red Abriendo Puertas" and in the face of the challenge of responding to the growing impact of violence.

Aldea – The People’s Justice Center - <https://aldeapjc.org>

Leader Bridget Cambria, Sahar Jalili, Jackie Kline and other legal supporters worked on the USA side. Did extraordinary work, contacted all our flag footballers and families.

International Women Flag Football Association (IWFFA) - <https://iwffa.com/> President Founder Diane Beruldsen - trained the Afghans in India 2018 and was contacted by the Afghans in 2021 to get them out of Afghanistan who then contacted Bridget Cambria.

EFLI / Elite Sports of India - <http://www.efli.com>

President Mohit Singh Rajawat, coach: Andray Benjamin. Their organization made it possible for the Afghans to travel to India for flag football training in India in 2018

Poornima University - <https://www.poornima.edu.in>

Rahul Singhi - Director of Poornima University in 2018 who sponsored the trainings for the Afghans and Indians

You Tube videos for the 2018 IWFFA Promotional Tour in India

- <https://youtu.be/NFEAC0DRmb8>
- <https://youtu.be/7YRPvpSRjw8>
- <https://youtu.be/4VaYHjfd-vI>
- <https://youtu.be/9lvvCBGXt2I>
- <https://youtu.be/fgBhMkqHhXk>

Donate Now to the Afghanistan Fundraiser
We have 33 more Afghans to bring to Mexico

<https://gofund.me/607f586d>

Help resettle Afghan women's flag football team!



Julie Schwiert Collazo is organizing this fundraiser on behalf of Diane Beruldsen.

In 2018, US-based leagues began to teach American football to women in Afghanistan. When the Taliban took control in 2021, the Afghan women's flag football team -- and their families who supported them -- came under attack. The Taliban considered women playing football not [Read more](#)

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