

Beyond Barriers: The Brave Pursuit of Education by Afghan Girls

RISE, EDUCATE, THRIVE: CHANGE MANIFESTO

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To commemorate Women's History Month, it is critical to spotlight the profound struggles and resilience of school-age girls in Afghanistan, whose educational journeys have been abruptly halted following the Taliban's ascension to power in 2021. For this manifesto, we have virtually interviewed eight young Afghan girls whose stories highlight the real and harrowing challenges they face daily in their quest for education. They once enjoyed their fundamental rights, including attending schools, engaging in activism, public speaking, sports, and arts, socializing with friends, accessing parks and gyms, traveling without a male escort, and walking freely without fear. These rights have been mercilessly stripped away by the Taliban through their restrictive policies and conservative outlook towards women's rights, rendering Afghanistan the only nation globally where girls are barred from attending school beyond grade six and cannot exercise their fundamental human rights.

Each story unfolds against the backdrop of an Afghanistan gripped by restrictive directives and societal norms that drastically limit women's roles and rights. They navigate through darkness, seeking the light of knowledge and the possibility of a better future. Despite facing significant risks, these young girls, with the support of underground networks, continue to learn in secret, embodying hope and resistance in the face of rollbacks.

Amid these stories of struggle and defiance, the pervasive reality of gender-apartheid casts a shadow over their lives and prospects; this systematic discrimination not only denies them education but also silences their voices and curtails their freedoms in the broader societal context.

In response to this crisis, it is imperative that the international community not only recognizes but also actively participates in creating pathways that circumvent these oppressive policies and dismantle barriers to gender equality. Innovative solutions such as global advocacy and policy pressure, expansion of scholarships, media campaigns, protection services, legal aid, investment in local and underground education, crisis-adapted education materials, virtual learning, and establishment of an oversight commission are vital. Furthermore, amplifying the voices of these girls and women on global platforms can pressure those in power to reconsider and revise their policies, ensuring education becomes accessible to all, regardless of gender.

The stories of Wazhma, Aisha, Muzdalifa, Zainab, Mahjuba, Zuhail, Shabnam, and Rana echo the pleas of hundreds of thousands of Afghan girls. It serves as a critical call to action for the global community to stand in solidarity with Afghan women and girls during these trying times. The fight for girls' education in Afghanistan is not just a local issue but a global crisis that demands immediate and concerted efforts from world leaders, governments, policymakers, multilateral and bilateral organizations, UN agencies, and individuals alike.

We dedicate this March 8 to all iron and courageous Afghan girls who have endured more than nine hundred days without school and formal education yet persist in their struggles and aspirations. Their resilience symbolizes hope and a stark reminder of the transformative power of education and the urgent need to support their fight for the right to learn, grow, thrive, and contribute to their society. These young girls' journey highlights the broader struggle for gender equality and human rights, underscoring the importance of global solidarity and action in championing the cause of education for all beyond barriers.

Wazhma: Whispering Wind of Resilience

Wazhma, a sixteen-year-old girl, finds herself at a crossroads of dreams and restrictions. Before the Taliban's education ban, Wazhma was a ninth-grade student with aspirations that reached far beyond the confines of her classroom. Wazhma envisaged becoming a politician to serve her country, influence policies, and boost positive societal change. However, the decree halting girls' education shadowed her future.

"At that time, when I first learned about the ban on girls going to school, I had a terrible feeling that I couldn't express. My throat was filled with hatred, and I was only thinking about my future."

Wazhma speaks with a heavy heart as she recalls her thwarted dreams. Despite the weight of the ban on her shoulders, Wazhma's daily life has drastically changed. Her days were once filled with the pursuit of academic excellence and were devoid of the structure and purpose education provided. Yet, in the face of such adversity, she refuses to surrender to despair.

"I had numerous aspirations; achieving my goals once seemed within reach, but the rise of the Taliban has turned everything upside down. Now, I drift through my days and am overwhelmed by a sea of unanswered questions."

Wazhma's journey to continue her education is fraught with obstacles. The societal belief that girls are destined only for housework and financial hardships has made learning treacherous. Wazhma explored online schools and other avenues, finding them inaccessible or inadequate for all girls. Wazhma's family has provided her with hope and support during tough times, motivating her to persevere in her studies. Her parents and cousins have been a constant source of encouragement and motivation. Emotionally, the ban has been a heavy burden, leaving Wazhma feeling like a "bird in a cage."

"I am like a bird in a cage; my soul and spirit languish. I am in a harrowing plight, yet I will not succumb to despair. I shall rise again like a phoenix."

The Taliban imposed various restrictions on freedom of movement and speech, cracking down on local media and increasing arbitrary detentions of journalists, human rights defenders, and civil society activists, including women protesters who have been targeted for opposing abuses. Unfortunately, for many girls like Wazhma, the dream of becoming a politician remains unattainable.ⁱ

As a young advocate for girls' education, Wazhma calls upon global leaders to advocate for reopening girls' schools or seek alternatives to ensure education is accessible to all Afghan girls nationwide. Wazhma emphasizes the critical role educated women play in the fabric of society, invoking the enduring wisdom of Plato to underscore her point:

"If a mother is literate and educated, it is evident that her children will also be educated and become invaluable, dedicated contributors to their society."

Wazhma's ambition for herself and her peers remains brightly lit. She dreams of a future where every Afghan girl can pursue their education. Through Wazhma, we hear the voice of a generation clamoring for transformation. In her vision, we see the wisdom and promise of a more fair and prosperous future.

Aisha: Alive with Hope

Seventeen-year-old Aisha was in the ninth grade when the Taliban seized the country in 2021. Residing in Takhar province, Aisha envisioned a future where her voice would echo through classrooms, nurturing minds and shaping the destiny of her nation, becoming a teacher to educate young girls and aspire to enter the business world and contribute to her country's economic revitalization. Yet, these dreams faced an abrupt halt when the Taliban barred girls from receiving secondary education. The ban not only stifled Aisha's ambitions but also embodied a broader crackdown on women's rights, placing Afghanistan at the center of the global discourse on gender equality and women's rights.

"When I learned about the ban on girls' education beyond grade six, I was shocked; I felt devastated and frustrated; my dreams and aspirations were unjustly being taken away."

The Taliban's restriction on girls' education contradicts Islamic principles. Islamic teachings, as seen in the Quran and Hadith, emphasize the importance of seeking knowledge for spiritual and intellectual growth. Verses like "Read, In the name of your Lord who created" (Quran 96:1) and sayings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) such as "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim" (Sunan Ibn Majah 224) underline education's value without gender bias.

"Islamic principles encourage seeking knowledge, underscoring that the exclusion of girls from education lacks support from the core tenets of Islam."

Mental health challenges and emotional trials overshadowed Aisha's journey. The heavy burden of feeling helpless and anxious nearly crushed her spirit, yet a relentless spark of hope and resilience continued to burn brightly within her. She found solace in the collective strength of girls like her, who, despite the odds, continued to struggle for their dreams. Amidst the silence, voices of support whispered words of encouragement, her family, teachers, friends, and international advocates for girls' education became her pillars of strength.

"Despite the restrictions, I have tried to keep learning by accessing resources online, attending underground educational programs, and connecting with like-minded individuals who share my desire to learn. The threats we face in seeking an education are daunting, but the real danger lies in silence; our desire to learn is a rebellion born of hope, not fear."

Aisha envisions a future where every Afghan girl can chase her dreams unimpeded by fear. She imagines an Afghanistan transformed by education, where doors of opportunity open for all, allowing girls and women to lead, inspire, and propel their communities toward more significant progress. Aisha calls on global actors to elevate girls' voices, champion their fundamental right to education, and provide opportunities for academic growth.

"To the world, I say: look beyond the headlines and see us, the girls of Afghanistan, as more than victims. We are warriors of knowledge, champions of our destiny."

Aisha's aspirations for herself and Afghan girls are a clear call to overcoming today's barriers, pursuing education with unwavering determination, and unlocking their fullest potential. She dreams of a nation guided by the wisdom of educated, empowered women, heralding a new dawn of hope, advancement, and prosperity for Afghanistan.

Muzdalifa: Nurturing Dreams in the Darkness of Bans

Seventeen-year-old Muzdalifa, a ninth-grade student before the Taliban's educational restrictions, shares her journey and aspirations amidst the backdrop of Afghanistan's complex socio-political landscape. With ambitions of becoming a successful business owner or a doctor, Muzdalifa's dreams represent the silenced hopes of many Afghan girls facing unprecedented educational barriers.

"The moment I heard that I was not allowed to go to school, I felt a deep sense of inferiority and helplessness. The ban marked the beginning of a challenging journey, navigating a future where the prospects of education and independence seemed bleak."

The closure of schools and educational institutes has compounded the difficulties of continuing her education. Economic hardships have made access to even primary education a struggle, highlighting the broader plight of Afghan girls seeking to learn and grow amid ongoing restrictions.

"In pursuit of acquiring scientific skills, I dreamed of a future with a good job and a self-sufficient lifestyle. Yet, the closure of schools has posed huge challenges to achieving my goals."

Imagining a future where Afghan girls can freely pursue education, Muzdalifa envisions an Afghanistan where growth, progress, and development prevail across various fields. She ardently believes that free education is every woman and girl's inalienable right, a principle underpinning the foundation of a truly progressive society.

"It is never too late to acquire knowledge. Despite being knocked down many times, I will rise again stronger than before and fight for my freedoms and education."

This vision captures a world where women's empowerment through education leads to holistic societal growth. It underlines the critical role of accessible learning in shaping a future marked by equality and prosperity. Muzdalifa's message to the international community is a poignant plea for support and action.

"Education is not a privilege but our fundamental right that should be readily accessible to all Afghan girls everywhere."

"Despite our many appeals, the global community has yet to take meaningful action to help Afghan girls deprived of education. We are in darkness, yearning for knowledge and opportunities."

Women face significant security challenges, including increased gender-based violence and punitive actions for non-compliance with strict regulations. Constant surveillance and harassment contribute to a pervasive state of fear and insecurity. Women also risk arbitrary detention, significantly those vocal against the regime, and suffer from a lack of legal protection against abuse, assault, and other threats to their physical safety and well-being.ⁱⁱ

"Whenever I go out, I am constantly afraid of being detained and harmed by the Taliban."

Muzdalifa's story highlights the fear and security challenges against women and girls and their struggles in accessing education and their rights.

Zainab: A Petal in the Field of Learning

Zainab is a sixteen-year-old girl from Kunar province with ambitions more prominent than the mountains that encase her home. The Taliban's resurgence in August 2021 brought with it a wave of restrictions that have particularly throttled Zainab's aspirations and placed her future goals under a cloud of uncertainty. Distinguished by her intelligence and determination, Zainab aspires to become a dentist with a vision to offer vital services to the less privileged in her community. Despite the challenging circumstances, her unwavering spirit and commitment to her dreams inspire all who seek to overcome adversity.

"I aspired to be a dentist, committed to serving my community, especially the underprivileged. My goal is to ensure everyone, regardless of their economic status, has access to essential dental care, bringing health and confidence through my service."

Zainab shared, her eyes glinting with the reflection of a dream that seemed increasingly distant with each passing day. Becoming a dentist was not just a career path for Zainab but a mission to make a remarkable difference in the lives of those around her. The Taliban's ban on secondary education obstructed her path to achieving her dreams and signifies a broader crackdown on her rights and freedoms.

"When I heard the Taliban had closed the schools, my heart dropped, and I felt frozen in place, overwhelmed by a deep sense of loss and sadness."

Zainab recounted the weight of her words, bearing the heaviness of the reality she faced. She did not see her classmates and friends for quite a while. She occasionally communicates with them through WhatsApp and other social media avenues. In her view, the fortunate ones among her friends and classmates who have managed to leave the country. Her family, clinging to a thread of hope, reassured her that the schools might reopen after three months. Yet, as days turned into months and years, that hope dimmed into resignation.

"My family speculated that the schools might reopen after three months once the holidays concluded. In anticipation, I awaited daily for an announcement from the Taliban regarding the reopening of girls' schools. However, as time progresses, I increasingly accept that my dream may remain unfulfilled."

Zainab draws attention to the profound obstacles hindering girls' access to education and technology in her area; she underscores the widespread financial difficulties that prevent families from affording basic educational tools and internet access.

"Sadly, most girls in my area lack family support, internet access, books, and electronic devices due to economic constraints. More than 70% of families nearby struggle to cover the expenses of internet connectivity."

Zainab's story, marked by determination amidst Afghanistan's educational challenges, underscores a broader issue: the fight for girls' education under a restrictive regime. Her ambition to become a dentist and serve her community persists despite the uncertain future of female education in her country. As a symbol of resilience, Zainab exemplifies the struggle and hope of many young women in similar situations, highlighting the critical need for global support and advocacy for their right to education and a better future.

Mahjuba: Hidden Strength in a Veild Future

Eighteen-year-old Mahjuba from Balkh province was navigating her 10th-grade education when the Taliban's resurgence in Kabul abruptly altered her path. Once brimming with aspirations of donning a white coat as a doctor or steering a successful business, Mahjuba now grapples with a future rendered uncertain by the Taliban's rigorous restrictions on girls' education. Reflecting on the moment the educational ban became a reality, Mahjuba added.

"My heart sank at the thought of all my dreams plunging into darkness. I found myself lost, unsure of what steps to take next. But thankfully, I was raised in a family that never allowed me to give up on my dreams and did not let the ban's mental toll on me."

The sense of despair, profoundly resonating with her, marked a significant turning point, reshaping her daily life and aspirations. The prohibition disrupted Mahjuba's academic pursuits and instilled a profound uncertainty regarding her future. Her resilience, mainly supported by her mother's unwavering motivation, has been pivotal in sustaining Mahjuba's quest for knowledge. Mahjuba has tirelessly sought alternative ways to continue her education but has encountered formidable obstacles.

"The greatest challenge was finding a place to study, a dilemma compounded by the absence of my school-graduation certificate, which is crucial for planning my future education."

Despite these barriers, Mahjuba has kept the flame of her educational ambitions alive through online learning platforms. Amidst the trials, Mahjuba's faith has been an unyielding source of strength and motivation in the face of daunting challenges. However, her reflection on the broader educational crisis in Afghanistan underscores a critical perspective. She believes the crux of the issue lies with the internal dynamics and powers within Afghanistan that hinder progress.

"The problem is with those who have been proxies of systems that do not wish for our country to advance."

Envisioning the future, Mahjuba dreams of an Afghanistan where girls can freely pursue education and contribute to a society rendered by peace, security, women's independence, and progress.

"I dream of a society where I can access education, progress, and growth. Together, we can raise a generation that contributes to the country's advancement rather than its regression."

The Taliban's restrictive policies severely impacted women's economic independence. Before their rule, Afghan women had achieved progress in all fields; however, the Taliban policies regressed these gains. The dismantling of women's supportive institutions like the Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Women's Affairs and restrictions on women's employment pose significant setbacks. Previously, women comprised 60% of civil servants and over half of university students, but now, they face extensive limitations. These measures not only infringe on women's rights but also have dire economic ramifications, with potential losses to the Afghan economy of up to \$1 billion or 5% of GDP, exacerbating the nation's crisisⁱⁱⁱ.

"I have embraced the digital world to keep my dreams alive. Working virtually on Shopify supports my financial needs and strengthens my resolve to pursue education against all odds. This journey reaffirms my belief: where there's a will, there's always a way forward."

Mahjuba's journey underscores the pivotal role of education in empowering women and propelling Afghanistan toward advancement. It urges the global community to stand in solidarity with them in their quest for advancement, progress, self-reliance, and economic independence.

Zuhal: Coping with Restrictions

Eighteen-year-old Zuhal from Helmand province dreams of transforming women's healthcare in her community by becoming a doctor. Despite facing the Taliban's severe restrictions on female education, her determination remains strong. Zuhal sees her future in medicine as a profession that ensures that women receive quality medical services and sufficient care and understands their distinctive needs. Her goal to become a healthcare provider reflects her deep desire to uplift and empower women in a setting where their access to healthcare is limited, embodying her hope to make a significant difference in their lives.

"Before the enforcement of the educational ban, I wanted to pursue a career in medicine to serve and uplift my community through healthcare. The moment I learned about the ban felt like watching doors to my future slamming shut, compressing the desolation that seized me."

Many Afghan girls were forced to abandon their aspirations by restrictive directives, facing a harsh reality. Despite grave risks and limited access to education, Zuhal's determination to keep learning remained unshaken. She explored every avenue, from underground schools to online resources, continuing her education clandestinely. The emotional toll of these restrictions cannot be overstated. Still, the collective resilience and support from the community within Afghanistan and globally fuels a hopeful persistence to overcome these barriers.

"I call upon the global community to address Afghan women's educational crisis. Envisioning a future where educational freedom for Afghan girls is a reality, I see endless potential for us to make meaningful contributions to our localities and communities."

The rise in child, early, and forced marriages in Afghanistan since the Taliban's return to power is driven by economic woes, educational restrictions for women and girls, and fears of Taliban-enforced marriages. Families grappling with poverty and a lack of prospects for their daughters see early marriage as financial relief and protection. However, such decisions often exacerbate family distress and perpetuate cycles of violence.^{iv}

"Many of my classmates got married. When I asked them why they married so young, they told me it was because the Taliban had taken away all their rights and freedoms, and they had no opportunity to continue their education. They got married last year, and now they have kids."

The journey toward education under such oppressive conditions is more than a personal battle; it symbolizes a collective struggle for fundamental human rights. As Zuhal stands determined to fight for her right to learn and grow, her story becomes a rallying cry for action, reminding us of the power of hope and the urgent need for change.

"The world must not overlook the challenges faced by girls in Afghanistan. Their right to education, hopeful future, and progress depends on the world's response and commitment to collective advocacy, support, and change of their foreign policies towards women's rights."

Zuhal's story is a powerful testimony to resilience and ambition; she represents a generation of young people who refuse to be silenced by societal challenges. Despite facing obstacles, Zuhal is determined to pursue her passion for medicine and empower Afghan women. Her journey reminds us that fighting for education and equality demands global attention and action. Zuhal's story challenges us to imagine a future where every girl can achieve her dreams unbounded.

Shabana: Herald of Freedom and Courage

Seventeen-year-old Shabana from Bamyán province stands as a herald of freedom and courage. Shabana's aspirations of passing the university entrance exam to pursue a career in law were abruptly derailed by the Taliban's sweeping ban on female education and outdoor activities.

"Before the collapse of Afghanistan, I dreamed of passing the university entrance exam and becoming a lawyer to advocate for Afghan women and girls."

Shabana, with a voice tinged with both resolve and sorrow, reflects on how the announcement of the ban deeply saddened her, not just for the derailment of her dreams but also for what it meant for the future of women in her nation.

"It is like you work so hard for your dreams, and suddenly you see that all doors are closed, and there is no way to achieve what you have been working on and dreaming about."

Shabana transitioned to online and virtual classes from the confines of her home, a pivot that, while challenging, allowed her to cling to her aspirations amidst the chaos. The shift to digital learning underscores the ingenuity and resilience of Shabana, who faced unprecedented barriers to her learning journey and personal development.

"I acknowledge the privilege of accessing online resources and virtual classes, an opportunity not available to all my peers and in all geographical locations."

The consequences of the restrictive policies extend beyond individual aspirations, threatening to usher in a new era of isolation. The Taliban's ban on gyms, parks such as Band-e-Amir, and other recreational places for women and girls in Afghanistan has led to many negative effects. The ban has affected mental and physical health, increased social isolation, and hindered economic independence and progress towards gender equality. These restrictions limited women's movement right to freedom and expression, with long-term implications for their social and economic empowerment.^v

"Unfortunately, girls in my country currently are not in a good situation; the Taliban made all rules to take girls out of social life and confiscated their liberties."

Shabana paints a grim picture of the current state of women's rights in Afghanistan. Yet, amidst these challenges, Shabana envisions a future of empowerment and change. She dreams of a time when Afghan women are educated, assertive, and free to make their own decisions without the oppressive dictates of government.

"The current situation surely cannot stop Afghan girls from chasing their dreams; if I see my future in Afghanistan in a better situation, I will see myself as an educated woman who has all her rights and can speak for herself."

Shabana's moving story is a hope to the enduring spirit of Afghan girls and women who, despite facing overwhelming odds, continue to strive for education, empowerment, and a voice in their society. It is a call to the world to recognize and support the struggle for human rights and girls' education in Afghanistan, ensuring that the dreams of young women like Shabana are not lost to the shadows of repression.

Rana: Nurturing Seeds of Aspiration

Born in Paktia province, seventeen-year-old Rana's childhood was imbued with a love for learning and an inherent curiosity about the world. From an early age, she dreamt of becoming a journalist, inspired by the power of storytelling to unearth truth, foster empathy, and drive societal change.

"The day I heard about the ban, something within me shattered, but it also lit a fire in me: a determination to resist and reclaim our stolen rights."

This moment marked a pivotal turn in her journey, catalyzing her transition from a student to an educator. The Taliban's imposition of the education ban struck a devastating blow to Rana. It was a regression into darkness, a denial of her rights, and an attempt to erase her future.

The path Rana has chosen is troubled with danger and difficulty. Running an underground school requires stealth, ingenuity, and immense courage. The need for more resources is a constant hurdle, compounded by the sporadic electricity and internet access vital for digital education. Yet, through a network of supportive locals and the ingenuity of her makeshift curriculum, Rana has managed to keep the lantern of learning alight for her students.

"Every day is full of fear, uncertainty, and challenge, but seeing the spark of knowledge in my students' eyes makes it all worthwhile."

The psychological toll of living under such oppressive conditions while shouldering the responsibility of educating others is immense. Rana confesses to moments of despair and isolation. However, the solidarity among her students, the support of her family, and the sense of purpose she derives from her work lend her the strength to persevere.

"In teaching them, I find hope for our future; it is a reminder that tyranny cannot extinguish the human spirit."

Rana teaches English and computer skills to her students, and she receives support from her father, who believes intensely in the power of education. His efforts to secure books, resources, and even undercover internet access have been instrumental in Rana's underground school.

"My father taught me that knowledge is freedom; his support is my stronghold against despair."

Rana's message to the world is clear; she asks for support that educates girls who do not have the opportunity to learn. She emphasizes creating space for women and girls to amplify their voices and support their fight for fundamental rights and inclusion.

"The future of an entire generation of Afghan girls is at stake; we already lost two precious academic years, not a single girl graduated from school, and it will continue; we want to study like all the girls around the world; we need concrete action, not just words."

Rana envisions a future where education is accessible to all, regardless of gender. She dreams of a world where she can openly pursue journalism, reporting on the ground realities of her country and advocating for change. More than anything, she hopes to see a day when Afghan girls can walk into their classroom without fear, empowered by knowledge, and unbound by oppression.

Pathways Forward and Recommendations

- ◆ **Global Advocacy and Policy Pressure:** We urge the UN, UNESCO, World Bank, and regional bodies to lead global advocacy for policy changes supporting girls' education in Afghanistan by collaborating with moderate Islamic scholars to influence local perceptions and foster regional cooperation for educational stability and development.
- ◆ **Scholarship Programs and Professional Development:** We call on international universities and educational institutions to expand scholarships for Afghan girls by partnering with the private sector to create funds and mentorship programs that enable access to higher education and professional development opportunities.
- ◆ **Strategic Media Campaigns and Community Support:** We recommend that social media platforms, influencers, and NGOs utilize strategic media campaigns to highlight the importance of girls' education, leveraging their reach to spread awareness and build community support within Afghanistan.
- ◆ **Global Forums for Innovative Education Solutions:** We encourage international NGOs, governments, the Afghan diaspora, and policymakers to initiate global forums that brainstorm scalable and practical solutions for education continuity in Afghanistan, focusing on virtual schooling and support for underground education initiatives.
- ◆ **Protection Services and Legal Aid:** We propose that human rights and legal aid organizations collaborate to provide protection and legal services to educators and families supporting girls' education by establishing networks for advice and protection and monitoring violations against educators or students.
- ◆ **Investment in Local and Underground Education Initiatives:** We appeal to donors, philanthropic organizations, and local community groups to support Afghan-led education initiatives and ensure they receive financial aid, educational resources, and security measures to safeguard educators and students.
- ◆ **Crisis-Adapted Education Materials and Virtual Learning:** We call on education and technology experts and content developers to create and distribute crisis-adapted project-based learning materials suitable for virtual and underground schools, focusing on real-life problem-solving and skill development.
- ◆ **Establishment of an Oversight Commission:** We suggest forming an effective oversight commission with education experts, technologists, local stakeholders, NGOs, and Women Diaspora to develop a robust monitoring and evaluation framework for virtual and underground schooling initiatives. This would ensure responsive and effective education delivery based on measurable outcomes.

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