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GREAT HEIGHTS

Having chosen the largest OBSTACLE in the land, this NOT-FOR-PROFIT is showing women in AFGHANISTAN they can scale much more than MOUNTAINS.

WORDS SERENA RENNER

It's 7am and a group of bleary-eyed young women have arrived at the Ascend office in Kabul, Afghanistan, for a hiking trip. In 10 minutes they transform themselves from elegant Afghan women in long dresses, silk headscarves and makeup to well-equipped athletes, ready for a day in the mountains.

On the bus ride out of town, the women, aged 16 to 22, grow increasingly animated and excited. They are free – and that sense of freedom only swells over the course of the hike, which is at times peaceful and at other times challenging and dramatic. When they reach the summit, one of the women transmits an Iranian song from her phone to a Bluetooth speaker and, at more than 4000 metres in the air, the group breaks out into a clapping, dancing celebration.

“When I’m climbing, and go to the top of the mountains, I always feel just great and free,” says Ascend team member Fouzia Effat in a fundraising video. “There is no one to tell me what I should do. Everything I do is my choice. I am me... it’s the most important thing [about climbing].”



In a nation where women were hardly permitted to leave the house until the Taliban was overthrown in most areas of the country in the early 2000s, Ascend’s mission is a bold one: to develop young women’s self-confidence, skills and leadership through the sport of mountain climbing and community service (each climber commits to a volunteer project, whether it be teaching, storytelling with street children, helping out at a shelter or even teaching illiterate fellow climbers to read).

“The reality for women is you never can advance women’s rights until women help each other and have something to unify them,” says Marina LeGree, the 38-year-old American founder of Ascend, who officially launched the non-profit in early 2015. “I wanted to find some way to bring young women together and create those bonds that can really last.”

Marina saw this need first-hand during almost five years of working in Afghanistan, first for the International Organisation for Migration and then the German government, focusing on infrastructure and water projects, as well



as vocational training for women. Despite being responsible recipients of aid, Marina noticed women were rarely talked to directly, offered opportunities or tapped for leadership roles. What’s more, says Marina, often their physical isolation in society makes it difficult for them to connect with, or really care about, one another. The prospects for women are so dismal in fact, that Afghanistan is the only country in the world where the suicide rate is higher among women than men.

For much of her time in Afghanistan, Marina, who was based in the Badakhshan province near Mount Nushaq – the tallest peak in Afghanistan at 7500 metres (24,580 feet) – thought it was a tragedy that Afghans didn’t experience the beautiful local mountains for fun. But the seeds for Ascend were really planted in 2009 when a Frenchman named Louis Meunier led four Afghan men to climb Mount Nushaq for the first time, two of them making it to the top.

“That told me [that Nushaq was] climbable and if men can do it with not that much training, surely if we find good guides and tough ladies, we can do it, too,” says Marina. “It is such a symbol for Afghan women to climb their own highest mountain. I thought that was just irresistible.”

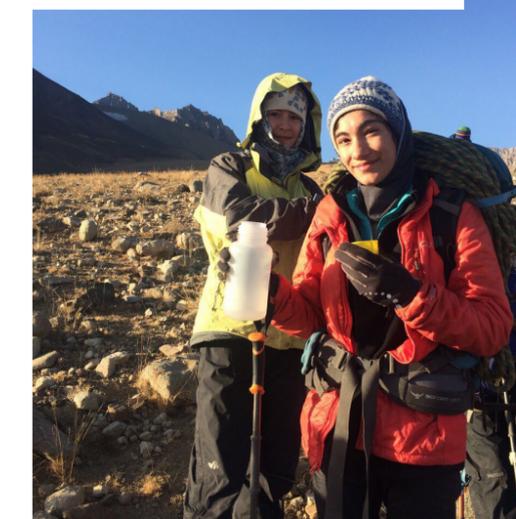
Today the Ascend team of 12 climbers, who work out for an

hour and a half at least three times a week, are training for just that, having already conquered a few nearby mountains, including Shah Fuladi peak – a 5075-metre (16,650 feet) mountain they almost conquered in October 2016 – as well as a similar-sized peak in the Panshir Valley, which they summited the year before and christened “The Lion

There is no one to tell me what I should do. Everything I do is MY CHOICE. I am me... it’s the most IMPORTANT thing about CLIMBING.

Daughters of Mir Samir’. The holy grail, Mount Nushaq, isn’t just 2400 metres (8000 feet) more challenging, it also poses extreme transportation and security threats, as the peak is located in a notoriously

dangerous region of Afghanistan – the north-east corner of the country, along the Pakistan border. Ascend, which requires all participants’ families to support their involvement, prepared 13 women for summiting Mount Nushaq in August 2015 (though they tried to keep the date secret), but had to abort the plan due to safety concerns. >





“To get from Kabul to Nushaq, there’s really no safe way to go,” says Ascend outreach and development manager Kelly Schumacher Fuller. “Basically, we would have to fly from Kabul to Tajikistan and then come in [that way]. But even that is not safe. The Taliban is still present and so is the Islamic State. To travel with [a group of] young Afghan women possesses a [huge] security threat.”

Explosions are still occurring in some parts of Afghanistan, and even getting to weekly yoga classes, gym workouts and volunteer sessions can require the utmost caution. In August 2016, militants attacked the American University of Afghanistan, causing Ascend project coordinator Freshta Jafari to run for her life, and killing the cousin and several friends of operations manager Faisal Naziry.

The challenge of fundraising is similarly steep, says Marina, who has invested her life savings of more than US\$150,000 to get Ascend off the ground. Every month the project needs US\$4000 to US\$5000 to operate, not counting the cost of expeditions like Mount Nushaq, which requires around US\$35,000 to cover transportation,



equipment and qualified guides. In spite of all these obstacles, the young women of Ascend have managed to climb to greater heights than any other women in Afghanistan.

One team member’s experience exemplifies the transformational power of the not-for-profit. Married off at age 16, she moved to Pakistan where she endured years of abuse at the hands of her husband. She was finally rescued by her sister and, with her family’s support, she divorced her abuser, which carries a severe stigma in Afghanistan.

“Basically your life is over,” says Marina. “You can’t be remarried. And, of course, there was the shame of what happened to her. She was suicidal and she didn’t have anything to do. It’s not like you can go get a job or go to college or something. She literally lived in this room on the third floor with bare walls and no window. That’s where she stayed for almost two years.”

The woman’s distant cousin, who was on the Ascend team, brought her in to the office, and she has since become a climbing superstar that the not-for-profit will likely pick for the Nushaq journey – only the six strongest women will be chosen. Kelly says the story reminds her of the quote, “It’s not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves.” While the mental and societal barriers for women remain high in Afghanistan, the sense of achievement the Ascend climbers find on the peaks is helping them rise above.

“All of the damage or the happiness or whatever you’ve got inside of you, it comes out on the mountain,” says Kelly. “Once you conquer yourself enough and you decide you’re going to make it happen, and you get to the top, how does your family ever say you can’t do something? How [can] society say you’re not allowed to make that decision for yourself?”



CRACKING THE CODE

It’s not just the conquering of mountains that is empowering young women in Afghanistan. In a nation where 68 per cent of young females are illiterate, a small but lucky contingent are learning to code – thanks largely to Fereshteh Forough, who launched the country’s very first coding school for women in 2015. The 29-year-old Iranian-born Afghan refugee (who was the first person to bring bitcoin to Afghanistan) developed the Code to Inspire after-school program in order to arm women with the tools and know-how to work from home building websites and apps. Launched in Herat, there are now plans to expand into Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif, and the movement is catching on, with global not-for-profit The Womanity Foundation launching the Girls Can Code school program in Kabul last year.

