

# IMPACT

**2025  
Annual  
Update**



THE SPARK  
OF HOPE  
FOUNDATION

# Message from The Chair and CEO

**From the CEO:** As CEO, I have the privilege each year of getting to know many remarkable women through our rigorous selection process. I also have the joy of following their journeys through university—and often beyond—as they grow into confident leaders and begin making a meaningful difference in their communities.

Our scholars come from 35 countries and study in 27 countries, so I can rarely meet them in person. I was especially moved in July 2025, at the Global Encounters Festival in Dubai, to meet alumnae face to face (see page 12).

One alumna, Aqsa Kay, now lives in Dubai and has built a growing communications and marketing firm. She shared how The Spark of Hope Foundation (SoHF) changed the course of her life. She also encouraged us to tell our story more powerfully, reach a wider audience, and grow our donor community. Her work on our new branding, refreshed IMPACT, and remodeled website (in progress) are important first steps. We are especially proud of this full-circle moment.

**From the Chair and CEO:** In 2025, SoHF held awareness events in Toronto, Dallas, and Calgary, helping deepen support and connect with new friends of the Foundation. In 2026, we are planning a new series of events in an updated format to allow us to share our mission more widely without geographic limitations.

The Foundation has undertaken a strategic review to help shape its next chapter and identify the most effective path to sustainable, long-term funding, while working toward doubling annual support by our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2034.

We were honoured to receive our largest one-time gift to date from the Umedaly Family Education Foundation, along with their commitment to raise greater awareness of SoHF. We are deeply grateful for their unrestricted support and trust.

A warm welcome to our 24 new scholars, and congratulations to the 21 students who graduated in 2025, helping us maintain a 98% graduation rate since 2014.

To all our donors, partners, and friends: **thank you.** Your generosity makes this work possible and helps create pathways for women to lead.

## Cora Di Pietro

Chair, Board of Directors

## Narmin K. Ismail MBA, M.S.M.

Founder and CEO

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# Key Numbers

Total scholarships

(64 current students)

298

Master's-level  
scholarships

97

Students pursuing  
medical studies

54

Students in  
S.T.E.M. fields

(Science, Technology, Engineering and Math)

65

Institutions  
attended  
globally

80

Countries of origin

Afghanistan, Argentina, Benin, Brazil,  
Cameroon, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, India,  
Indonesia, Iran, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Kenya,  
Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Liberia,  
Madagascar, Mexico, Nepal, Nicaragua,  
Pakistan, Palestine, Peru, South Africa, Syria,  
Tajikistan, Tanzania, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine,  
United Arab Emirates, Venezuela, and Yemen

35

PhD students

International Public Law; International Monetary  
and Financial Law; Mobility and Transport;  
Forestry Sciences; Social Forestry;  
Wood Sciences; Educational Studies; Hepatology;  
General Management & International Business;  
and Electrical & Computer Engineering.

15

5x

Multiplier effect for  
every donor dollar  
contributed, thanks  
to the generosity of  
our partners

## Our Alumnae

# Where are they now?



The Spark of Hope Foundation first helped me continue my bachelor's studies when I was unable to cover the tuition. Later, SoHF supported my living costs, making it possible for me to begin my graduate studies in Europe. I am deeply grateful for this support, because it changed not only my educational journey, but also the direction of my life.

I completed my BA in Communication and Media at the University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan, and I am now finishing my MA in Russian, Eurasian and East European Studies at the University of Helsinki in Finland. I currently work as a Social and Digital Media Officer with the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), where I contribute to public communication through social media and digital content.

My graduate studies have deepened my understanding of Central Asia in its political, social, and historical context, and have helped me develop a more critical and nuanced perspective on regional developments. In my MA thesis, I examine how Kyrgyzstan's 2024 Foreign Representatives Law reflects the selective adaptation of Russia's foreign agent model and its implications for civil society.

After graduation, I hope to contribute through research, policy analysis, and public communication on Central Asia, helping make discussions about the region more accurate, better contextualized, and more grounded in the voices and realities of the region itself. The Spark of Hope Foundation's support has made this path possible, and I hope to carry that impact forward through my work.

**I hope to contribute through research, policy analysis, and public communication on Central Asia, helping make discussions more accurate, better contextualized, and grounded in the region's own voices and realities.**

**Madina Shogunbekova, Tajikistan**

BA, Communication and Media  
University of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan

MA, Russian, Eurasian & Eastern European Studies  
University of Helsinki, Finland

Becoming a cardiologist was once just a dream. Today, thanks to the support provided by The Spark of Hope Foundation, I am well on my way: I am currently completing my residency in Internal Medicine in Montreal, with the goal of specializing in cardiology.

For me, medicine has never been only about clinical excellence. It is about human connection.

As I integrate into a new healthcare system, I've had to navigate long hospital days, 24-hour shifts, and the emotional intensity of patient care, all while building community, friendships, and professional relationships in a new city. One of my proudest accomplishments has been successfully settling into this demanding environment and finding my place within it.

My long-term vision extends beyond patient care. I hope to practice in an academic setting, where I can mentor and train medical students. Becoming an exceptional physician is not just about mastering textbooks, but about learning from mentors who model compassion, curiosity, and intellectual rigor in real-life practice.

At the same time, I am intentional about balance. In a profession known for burnout, I recognize that sustaining excellence requires caring for my own well-being. Balance is not indulgence, it is responsibility.

Looking ahead, I hope to volunteer in remote and underserved communities, particularly in areas with limited access to cardiac care. Women's heart health is an area of special importance for me. Too often, women's cardiac symptoms are overlooked or misunderstood. I hope to contribute to research, speak publicly, and advocate for better awareness and treatment in this critical field.

**I don't just want to treat heart disease.  
I want to change how we understand, teach,  
and deliver cardiac care, especially for  
women and underserved communities.**

**Shehzeen Lalani, Kenya**

**Doctor of Medicine  
Dalhousie University, Canada**





When conflict devastated Syria's infrastructure and production sectors, I saw more than destruction: I saw the urgent need for leadership equipped with both technical expertise and strategic management skills.

After completing my undergraduate degree in Textile Engineering at Al Baath University, I began my career in Syria's industrial sector, where I quickly assumed increasing technical and administrative responsibilities. Through my work, I realized that rebuilding production systems requires more than engineering knowledge. It demands strong business leadership in human resources, finance, marketing, and operational management.

In order to prepare myself for Syria's future reconstruction, I decided to pursue an MBA. I graduated with distinction and am now continuing my studies with a PhD in International Business & General Management so I can deepen my expertise to lead at an even higher level.

I have a deep commitment to service. Since 2015, I've volunteered with the Quality of Life Voluntary Team at the Ismaili National Council for Syria, where I led humanitarian assistance initiatives for internally displaced families. Through the Research Informed Pilot Intervention (RIPI) project, I worked to improve the quality of life of ultra-poor rural families, addressing education, health, housing, income generation, and social integration.

I have a clear vision: to return my knowledge and global experience to Syria and contribute meaningfully to national reconstruction. I hope to collaborate with international organizations involved in rebuilding efforts and to shape sustainable business systems that generate employment, stability, and long-term growth.

**Education is how we rebuild what war tried to destroy. I am preparing myself to help reconstruct not only infrastructure, but opportunity, dignity, and hope.**

**Lubna Saifo, Syria**

**MBA  
Alliance University, India**

**PhD, International Business & General Management  
Alliance University, India**

In early 2022, as war erupted in Ukraine, I fled my hometown near Kyiv with my two children and our dog, leaving behind a life interrupted by conflict. What followed was not retreat, it was reinvention.

Arriving in Switzerland, I had to rebuild from the ground up. I secured employment at PPG's EMEA headquarters in Rolle, initially as an executive assistant. With a lot of hard work and determination, I advanced to become EMEA Legal Operations Manager within the Legal and Compliance department of the global corporation.

Recognizing the need for deeper legal expertise to influence strategy at the highest levels, I pursued my LL.M. while working full-time and supporting my family. My thesis focused on Proactive Legal Risk Management, transforming legal teams from "firefighters" into strategic partners who identify and address risks before they escalate into disputes.

My long-term vision reaches beyond corporate success. I view my professional growth as preparation for rebuilding Ukraine's institutional strength after the war—contributing to resilient legal systems that support economic recovery and democratic stability.

The Spark of Hope Foundation scholarship enabled me to pursue advanced legal education at a pivotal moment in my life. Today, I stand not only as a graduate, but as a leader shaping how legal systems operate across borders and as a powerful example of resilience for my children, community and other women.

Through courage, discipline, vision, and support, I am turning disruption into impact.

**I believe legal work should prevent crises, not just respond to them. By strengthening institutions today, we build more resilient societies for tomorrow, including in my home country of Ukraine.**

**Nataliia Shkarban, Ukraine**

**LL.M., International Business Law  
University of Lausanne (UNIL), Switzerland**





# Current scholars with BIG ambitions

**“I arrived at university unsure of my voice. Today, I use it to lead, to advocate for girls and women, and to shape conversations on gender, justice, and youth leadership, locally and beyond. I am building the knowledge, networks, and courage to transform how power works so that girls from villages like mine can one day sit at decision-making tables around the world.”**

**Tolgonai Kalchoroeva, Kyrgyzstan**

BA, Communications and Media  
University of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan

“This scholarship has empowered me to pursue cancer research at the intersection of bioinformatics and biotechnology. With it, I’ve contributed to innovative projects and built skills that will support the development of personalized medicine. I am committed to advancing scientific discovery while mentoring students from underserved regions, especially in Syria.”

**Hala Alshaar, Syria**

MSc, Quantitative and Computational Biology  
University of Trento, Italy



“I want to become a surgeon who not only treats patients, but advances care through research that improves outcomes and expands access for my community.”

**Maliha Shah, Pakistan**

MBBS  
Aga Khan University, Pakistan



“I will use economics and entrepreneurship to transform opportunity in Tajikistan—turning ambition into institutions that create lasting prosperity.”

**Gulbegim Rahimjonova, Tajikistan**

BA, Global Economics  
University of Central Asia, Tajikistan



“I am pursuing medicine because I have seen what happens when women are not believed. I will become the doctor who listens, who advocates, who ensures that access to quality care is not a privilege, but a right.”

**Nagham Al Ajami, Palestine**

BSc, Biology (pre-med)  
American University of Beirut, Lebanon



## Letter from a scholar

# Changing the narrative around reproductive and women's health



Dear Spark of Hope Foundation,

I was just a young girl when I first saw the power of knowledge transform lives. Growing up in the Middle East, I witnessed how women's health was often shrouded in silence, how conversations about sexual and reproductive health were deemed taboo. Too many women suffered in quiet despair, uncertain about their own bodies, afraid to seek the care they needed. I knew then that I wanted to be a doctor—not just to heal, but to empower.

Thanks to SoHF, my dream became a reality. The scholarship allowed me to pursue my medical degree, and I graduated in 2022. Now, as a resident specializing in obstetrics and gynecology, I am dedicated to changing the narrative around women's health in my community.

One of the most rewarding parts of my journey has been working with the WISH project—Women Integrated Sexual Health—where I lead awareness campaigns in schools and with couples. In our culture, reproductive health is not just a personal matter; it's a family issue. When a woman struggles to conceive, it can lead to the breakdown of her marriage, even her sense of self-worth. Through education, I am helping women and their families understand that reproductive health is not a mystery or a burden—it is a right and should be addressed.

I also work with displaced women in free clinics, many of them pregnant, many of them traumatized by conflict. In those moments, my role extends beyond medicine—I am a listener, an advocate, a source of comfort. I see firsthand how resilience shapes motherhood, how hope persists even in the darkest times. This is why my research focuses on resilience during pregnancy and menopause. Words matter, and in Arabic, menopause translates to “Age of Despair.” I refuse to accept that definition. I want to change it to “Age of Hope.”

My journey is just beginning. I plan to specialize further in reproductive health, endocrinology, and infertility, ensuring that no woman is left without options. Thanks to The Spark of Hope Foundation, I have been given the chance to make a difference. Now, I am paying it forward: mentoring young medical students, advocating for policy changes, and standing with every woman who deserves to be heard.

**Huriyah El Moussa, Palestine**

**Doctor of Medicine  
American University of Beirut, Lebanon**

# Fostering Stronger Teachers



## **How has this scholarship changed your journey?**

The scholarship was more than financial support. It was the bridge between aspiration and opportunity. At a time when my husband's income could only cover our basic needs and I was without work, pursuing a Master's degree felt impossible. But I strongly believed in the power of education—not just for myself, but for the women and children in my community. SoHF gave me the chance to grow professionally and step into leadership. It helped me move from being a classroom teacher to becoming someone who could influence entire schools.

## **What are you doing now?**

Today, I serve as the English Language Coordinator with the Aga Khan Education Services in Hunza, supporting over 300 teachers across 22 schools in some of the most remote areas of Northern Pakistan. My work focuses on strengthening teachers' English fluency and improving classroom practices at both primary and secondary levels. I provide mentoring, professional development workshops, and teaching resources that are practical and culturally relevant.

The region's remoteness presents real challenges: limited resources, isolated classrooms, and logistical barriers. But I have learned that when one teacher gains confidence, hundreds of students benefit.

## **How has your education shaped your leadership?**

During my Master's research, I explored how teaching strategies are shaped by context. That insight continues to guide my work today. Rather than imposing solutions, I meet teachers where they are, understanding their realities and building from their strengths. My goal has always been to be an agent of change in my society. Today, that change happens not only through direct teaching, but through empowering educators across the entire region.

## **What impact do you hope to make?**

If we want our children to dream bigger, we must first empower the teachers who guide them. My vision is long-term: to elevate teaching standards in remote mountain communities and ensure that geography does not limit opportunity.

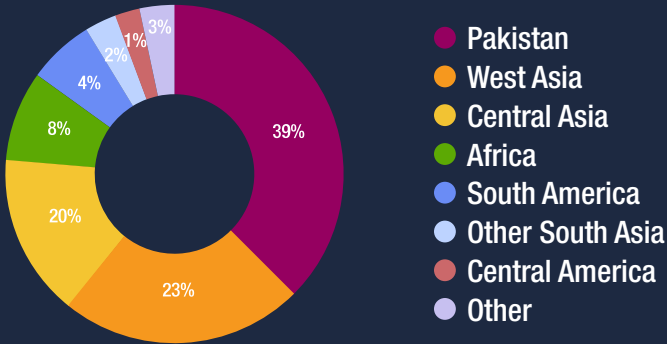
Education transformed my life. Now, I am committed to multiplying that transformation—one teacher, one classroom, one child at a time.

## **Fatima Sher Baz Khan, Pakistan**

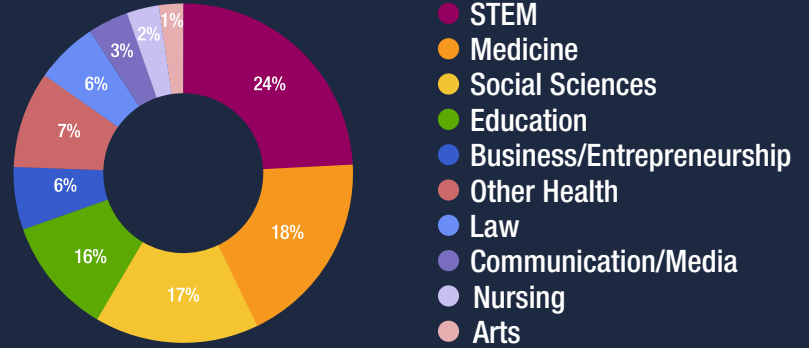
**Master of Education  
Institute for Educational Development,  
Aga Khan University, Pakistan**

# Scholar Profile

## Geographic Origin



## Field of Study



# Connection That Changes Outcomes

*Since October 2024, Tasneem Damji has served as the Foundation's Scholar Liaison Officer—a role created to strengthen connection, mentorship, and support across the Foundation's global scholar community. With lived experience in several scholar countries of origin or study, and more than a decade of coaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds, she understands the nuances, challenges, and strengths that shape each scholar's journey. Tasneem helps scholars build the clarity, resilience, and leadership that enables them to pay their learning forward in meaningful ways.*

## **What does your role involve?**

I serve as a bridge between the Foundation and our scholars, providing mentorship, guidance, and regular communication. Through one-on-one calls, a private LinkedIn group, and tailored resources, I help scholars navigate academic, personal, and professional transitions with confidence.

## **What early successes have you seen?**

Scholars have shared that they feel more connected, not only to the Foundation but also to the support they need day-to-day. I've been able to walk alongside scholars as they face real university challenges, including mental health, time management, and uncertainty about life after graduation.

A meaningful outcome has been helping scholars connect with other scholars locally. I've also supported many scholars in preparing for interviews, reviewing graduate-level application essays, facilitating important educational and career decisions, and accessing key resources. Scholars are opening up more, asking for help sooner, and trusting that someone is in their corner.

With regular contact, I'm able to listen deeply to scholars' experiences and ensure they feel heard and supported. My lived experience and background help me understand their journeys in a very real way. That shared cultural awareness builds trust, making SoHF's support feel personal and meaningful.

## **Can you share a situation that stands out?**

I was working with a scholar preparing for a highly competitive exchange program interview. She felt overwhelmed and unsure how to present her experiences confidently. We practiced her responses, refined her storytelling, and talked through the interview environment. The preparation helped her walk in feeling grounded and capable—and she was selected for the program.

**Tasneem Damji**  
Scholar Liaison Officer

## **In what ways has your role helped SoHF better understand and respond to scholars' evolving needs?**

Regular conversations with scholars allow me to identify key themes. We've learned that scholars benefit from mentorship as they approach graduation, and that mental well-being and peer connection are essential to their success. These insights help the Foundation respond to both academic and human needs.

## **What excites you most about the future of the SoHF community and the scholars you support?**

What excites me most is seeing our scholars step into leadership—mentoring younger scholars, launching initiatives, and contributing to their communities in ways that reflect the Foundation's mission. Many have shared that they want to pay it forward and support SoHF in the future.

The ripple effect is powerful: one scholar's courage or success often inspires another to dream bigger. We're building a community grounded in hope, possibility, and shared purpose—and I can see that impact expanding far beyond any one scholar's journey.



# Funding Snapshot

Our annual revenues, raised through donor contributions and grants, are allocated primarily to scholarships to help support our students. This generous donor support helps secure five-fold funding from university and partner collaborations.

Our program management, scholar support, evaluation, marketing, and reporting costs amounted to only 10% of total funding in 2025. The Foundation's Board of Directors, partnerships and volunteers help us maintain this efficiency.



# Your contribution will help women from remote areas and conflict zones to become tomorrow's leaders

Take advantage of convenient, affordable, and tax-smart ways to make a strategic donation, including gifts of stocks and securities, annuities, and bequests.

Donations are multiplied 5x by participating universities and other partners.

All donations are tax deductible.

Visit our website  
[www.thesparkofhope.org](http://www.thesparkofhope.org)

## From our Donors

We were impressed and inspired by your organization and the meaningful education support for talented women, who will make important contributions to their communities. We very much like the integrity, ethic and culture of your organization. We are also impressed with your partnership development and the ongoing development and vision of your organization.

We believe that The Spark of Hope Foundation is absolutely aligned with Mossadiq Umedaly's principles and vision to educate future leaders so they can in turn improve their communities. Education and giving forward were in his DNA, as well as the importance of women's education in improving families and communities. Nothing would make us happier than to see his contribution come to meaningful and sustainable fruition.

Hamed Umedaly, on behalf of

**The Umedaly Family Education Foundation**  
Vancouver, BC

What inspired us about Spark of Hope is its belief in potential. The Foundation identifies remarkable women who already have the drive, intelligence, and determination to change their lives and their communities, but who simply need someone to open a door.

By supporting their education and connecting them with strong institutions, Spark of Hope is creating leaders whose impact will be felt for generations. We are honoured to support work that invests so directly in people and possibility.

**Alim and Fatima Somani**  
Toronto, ON

**Become a Benefactor**

# Empower the Next Generation of Women Leaders



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or \$1,200/year**

For four years provides a  
partial scholarship

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For four years provides a  
half scholarship


## Gold Benefactor

**\$500/month  
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For four years provides a  
full scholarship

### The Spark of Hope Foundation

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