



Opinion: Locked out of classrooms, Afghan girls are taking drastic measures

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Opinion by Wazhma Frogh

When Heela came out tops in her 9th grade school grades last year, the 14-year-old girl ran home full of excitement, bursting to tell her family the happy news.

This was in June of last year, shortly before the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Heela's mother, a former government service director (who doesn't want to be named for safety reasons), and her three other sisters in elementary school were all excited for her to go into grade 10. (Heela's father no longer lives with the family.)

They all went to a restaurant in Kabul's bustling Shah-e-Naw neighborhood and celebrated Heela's success with Kabab and Qabeli palaw, a traditional Afghan dish.

Now, almost eight months into the Taliban take-over, which dramatically changed education for girls, that day seems like a distant dream for Heela's family. Last week, the young girl attempted to end her life by taking over 20 sleeping pills. After finding her unconscious one morning, Heela's family rushed her to hospital where she was saved.

Heela's mother, who is hiding at home along with her four daughters, said to me: "Maybe ending our lives will be easier than continuing this life." Since the Taliban took control, scores of former government workers, security forces, female police officers, lawyers and judges have either been [killed or disappeared](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.npr.org/2022/01/31/1077003325/united-nations-afghanistan-taliban-takeover-extrajudicial-killings_!!AQDq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!yrMeoVHdz7dw38p114yAU35ibOcOGMh568H0Zvaivx8eg5bxQay8CHE5wkITYGVi7jT8Cd0$).

Sobbing, her mother told me: "I named her Heela -- hope. But today our lives are so dark that even her name can't give her any hope."

Under Taliban rules, girls above grade 6 are no longer [allowed to attend school](https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/23/asia/taliban-girls-school-delay-afghanistan-intl/index.html). But accessing education in Afghanistan is a risky business for anyone. While girls' schools have been [targeted](https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/09/asia/afghanistan-girls-school-attack-intl-hnk/index.html) by the [Taliban and other armed groups like ISKP](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/21/world/asia/taliban-girls-schools.html_!!AQDq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!yrMeoVHdz7dw38p114yAU35ibOcOGMh568H0Zvaivx8eg5bxQay8CHE5wkITYGVi_YGDUd8$) many times in different parts of the country over the years, education centers for ethnic and sectarian minorities like Shias and Hazaras have also come under attack.

On Tuesday, a boys' educational center and high school in an area of Kabul home to a large Shia and Hazara community [were bombed](https://edition.cnn.com/2022/04/19/asia/afghanistan-kabul-explosions-intl/index.html), with at least six people killed.

Just shy of eight months since the Taliban took over and almost all international organizations pulled out of the country, the picture for ordinary Afghans is bleak. But you don't really hear about our stories in the international media anymore, as the focus shifts to the war in Ukraine. Afghanistan stories are tied to US foreign policy priorities – and when the US abandoned Afghanistan, we disappeared from the news.

Today, Afghanistan is on the brink of civil war. Every day, scores of killings, abductions and targeted murders of former government members, Taliban opponents, activists and journalists are in the news, thanks to the last remnants of a free media.

Meanwhile, the women that I work with in different parts of Afghanistan share stories about pockets of armed resistance against the Taliban in some parts of the country. They say that incidents of Taliban internal fighting are on the rise.

When the Trump administration started direct negotiations with the Taliban in 2018, many of us in Afghanistan welcomed the effort. Indeed, we had already started the process long before the United States. I was part of Afghanistan's High Peace Council where we went to different provinces, spoke with armed insurgents, their mothers, community members and mobilized communities to influence local and national peace processes.

During these trips to different provinces, I met and spoke with many youths in the Taliban insurgency who had genuine grievances. They needed to be given a voice and platform to live their lives without fear. That's why I kept [advocating](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.cfr.org/blog/women-and-afghan-peace-process-conversation-wazhma-frogh_!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!yrMeoVHdz7dw38p1I4yAU35ibOcOGMh568H0Zvaivx8eg5bxQay8CHE5wkITYGVILCM3bFY$) ([https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.cfr.org/blog/women-and-afghan-peace-process-conversation-wazhma-frogh_!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!yrMeoVHdz7dw38p1I4yAU35ibOcOGMh568H0Zvaivx8eg5bxQay8CHE5wkITYGVILCM3bFY\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.cfr.org/blog/women-and-afghan-peace-process-conversation-wazhma-frogh_!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!yrMeoVHdz7dw38p1I4yAU35ibOcOGMh568H0Zvaivx8eg5bxQay8CHE5wkITYGVILCM3bFY$)) for an inclusive peace and political settlement between the Taliban and other members of Afghan society.

The Taliban are just one part of Afghanistan. There are many other groups – millions of young women and men who found peace in using their democratic rights over the past 20 years; women who found careers in politics, sport, media and businesses; and countless other social, religious and ethnic communities.

We women were much more organized than other political and social groups. We came together, we talked to community members, formulated our concerns and continued [asking for inclusion in the negotiations](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/peacebuilder-resource-un-security-council-briefing-afghanistan-wazhma-frogh-december-2017/_!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!yrMeoVHdz7dw38p1I4yAU35ibOcOGMh568H0Zvaivx8eg5bxQay8CHE5wkITYGViu3FBGGY$) ([https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/peacebuilder-resource-un-security-council-briefing-afghanistan-wazhma-frogh-december-2017/_!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!yrMeoVHdz7dw38p1I4yAU35ibOcOGMh568H0Zvaivx8eg5bxQay8CHE5wkITYGViu3FBGGY\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/peacebuilder-resource-un-security-council-briefing-afghanistan-wazhma-frogh-december-2017/_!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!yrMeoVHdz7dw38p1I4yAU35ibOcOGMh568H0Zvaivx8eg5bxQay8CHE5wkITYGViu3FBGGY$)) that were happening in Doha.

But members of the US negotiation team and international community, including the European Union and other countries, sufficed with one or two meetings between themselves and some of the women leaders.

We asked them to help us meet with the Taliban leaders face-to-face so that we could share our side of the story. [We asked](https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/26/opinions/taliban-regain-power-i-lose-everything-frogh/index.html) (<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/26/opinions/taliban-regain-power-i-lose-everything-frogh/index.html>), the UN envoys, US ambassadors, US Special Envoy and European ambassadors. None of them took the risk of harming their negotiations with the Taliban leaders by bringing Afghan women leaders into the mainstream meetings. They kept us in the silos – with just zoom meetings here and there, [took pictures and tweeted](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://ariananews.af/khalilzad-meets-with-female-talks-team-members-for-their-feedback/_!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!yrMeoVHdz7dw38p1I4yAU35ibOcOGMh568H0Zvaivx8eg5bxQay8CHE5wkITYGVifhBbh4c$) ([https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://ariananews.af/khalilzad-meets-with-female-talks-team-members-for-their-feedback/_!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!yrMeoVHdz7dw38p1I4yAU35ibOcOGMh568H0Zvaivx8eg5bxQay8CHE5wkITYGVifhBbh4c\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://ariananews.af/khalilzad-meets-with-female-talks-team-members-for-their-feedback/_!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!yrMeoVHdz7dw38p1I4yAU35ibOcOGMh568H0Zvaivx8eg5bxQay8CHE5wkITYGVifhBbh4c$)) empty comments like, "Afghan women's voices should be heard in the peace process."

The US signed a peace deal with the Taliban alone – excluding women and the people of Afghanistan, diminishing the chances for a political settlement between the Taliban and Afghan people. The [US-Taliban deal](https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/29/politics/us-taliban-deal-signing/index.html) (<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/29/politics/us-taliban-deal-signing/index.html>) paved the way for the Taliban political take-over of Kabul. And with it, the removal of public spaces for millions of Afghan women and education opportunities for at least 5 million girls. This is not just a crisis of women's rights and freedom – the country, too, is falling apart.

I understand the Taliban are only one actor in the picture of Afghanistan today. And if the country descends further into chaos and internal unrest, if the armed resistance groups resort to terrorist organizations for ammunitions and support, if the Taliban infighting leads to emerging insurgencies, then it is the Taliban who are responsible for that. But also bearing some responsibility is the US, the EU and other stakeholders who signed a peace deal with the Taliban without an inclusive political settlement.

Over the past 20 years, when Afghan women and girls were [fighting for spaces](#) ([https://urldefense.com/v3/https://www.womeninourtown.com/when-women-push-for-peace-the-world-can-change/_:!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!rMeoVHdz7dw38p114yAU35ibOcOGMh568H0Zvaivx8eg5bxQay8CHE5wkITYGVilCVmhZY\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/https://www.womeninourtown.com/when-women-push-for-peace-the-world-can-change/_:!!AQdq3sQhfUj4q8uUguY!rMeoVHdz7dw38p114yAU35ibOcOGMh568H0Zvaivx8eg5bxQay8CHE5wkITYGVilCVmhZY$)) in politics and public, we were told by members of the UN agencies, international human rights organizations and women leaders that there is an international law that protects you, there are UN Conventions, there are UN Security Council resolutions. But today I cannot say any of this to Heela's mother, who doesn't sleep at night with the fear that Heela might try again to end her life.

To global women leaders, feminists' movements, women and human rights activists internationally, I ask: are the rights of Afghan women not relevant anymore? The US government has certainly turned a blind eye to them. And if the international rhetoric, laws and UN Resolutions do not protect the rights of Afghan women and girls, can women in other parts of the world really trust these systems?

Sometimes I ask myself whether I am not tired of repeating myself for 20 years, whether my voice has any meaning or importance. But the 200 women that I interact with daily, whose stories, pleas for help, thank-you messages and weeping voice notes crash my phone every morning push me to try another day.

These voices are the early warning signs of another crisis in the making, a civil war in Afghanistan that again will harbor and anchor terrorist groups like Al-Qaida and others in the region that can pose serious threats to global security. We must be heard.

How to get help: A worldwide directory of resources and international hotlines is also provided by the International Association for Suicide Prevention. You can also turn to Befrienders Worldwide.

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