

Afghan Women Activist Stories

Part I: Claiming the Narrative – Voices from Exile

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Susanne Schmeidl is a critical peace researcher and practitioner with over two decades of experience in research on forced displacement, conflict prevention and participatory peacebuilding. With a PhD in Sociology from Ohio State University she has worked at the intersection of academia, policy and practice, including with UNSW Sydney, the UN Refugee Agency, the Swiss Peace Foundation, Saferworld and as co-founder of two grass-roots organisation in Afghanistan: The Afghan Civil Society Forum and The Liaison Office. Her work has long centred on locally led responses to violence and the importance of citizen voices in peace processes. Through sustained engagement with Afghan civil society, she has sought to amplify voices often sidelined in both national and international arenas. Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Schmeidl has become increasingly concerned with the systematic silencing of Afghan women and the urgent need to preserve and elevate their perspectives. Motivated by this conviction, she encouraged the women featured in this Current Debates section to document and share their stories. This collection is both a response to erasure and a form of resistance – foregrounding the lived experiences, insights and agency of Afghan women in shaping the country's future.

Suraya Pakzad is the founder and director of the Voice of Women Organization (VWO), one of Afghanistan's prominent women-led NGOs. Renowned for her courageous leadership, she was awarded the U.S. State Department's International Women of Courage Award and Afghanistan's Presidential Malali Medal in 2008 and was named one of *Time Magazine's* 100 Most Influential People in the World in 2009. Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, she has lived in exile in Hamburg, where she continues her tireless advocacy for Afghan women's rights, education and protection.

Zainab Qadiri is an Afghan writer, playwright and theatre director from Herat, renowned for her pioneering work in women's theatre and literature. She studied literature at Herat University and became editor-in-chief of the literary and artistic magazine *Shirin*. Zainab was actively involved with the Simorgh Film Association of Culture and Art and the Yaran-e-Yar Cultural Association, directing plays that addressed gender issues and discrimination against Hazaras. Now based in Berlin, Zainab continues her activism as a fellow with the Academy in Exile and collaborates with the KULA Theatre Company. Her work focuses on documenting Hazara history and advocating for Afghan women's cultural and artistic expression.

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Afghan women have long resisted being silenced and erased. Despite the risk of breaking cultural norms, they have created and defended spaces in which to speak, teach and act, in places such as homes, schools, courtrooms and stages. In doing so, they have produced knowledge, not only through formal storytelling, but also through their lived experience.

This section is part of the editors' commitment to centring the voices of Afghan women across disciplines, locations and positionalities, and recognising diverse forms of knowledge – not only from academic scholarship, but also from activists whose work, though often undocumented, continues to shape feminist praxis and social resistance. The first part of this IQAS Special Issue presents two stories of Afghan women activists in exile. Each story is rooted in personal memory and political struggle, providing powerful examples of women producing knowledge. Although these two women coincidentally both originated from Herat in western Afghanistan, ended up working in the capital, Kabul, and later moved into exile, their lived experiences were quite different. In the second part of this Special Issue, we will feature additional voices of activists who remain in Afghanistan despite increasing restrictions and risks. Together, the contributions in both parts document diverse perspectives and experiences of Afghan women, highlighting forms of knowledge that might otherwise be overlooked or marginalised.

The first story in this section is written by Suraya Pakzad, the founder of the Voice of Women Organisation (VWO). Pakzad's activism began when she was a schoolgirl and witnessed the killing of her school principal. Beginning with coordinating clandestine home schooling for 300 girls in Taliban-controlled Kabul in the 1990s, she went on to found one of Afghanistan's largest women-led NGOs (VWO) in 1998 – until it was forcibly closed by the Taliban following their return to power in 2021. In the second story, Zaynab Qadiri, a writer and theatre practitioner who uses performance and literature to combat gender-based violence, provides an insight into her efforts to revive Hazara cultural memory and assert women's rights to be seen, heard and remembered.

Such autoethnographic narratives are not only records of resistance – they can also constitute acts of epistemic resistance (Beard 2009) and forms of writing “from below” that reclaim voice and visibility (Shome / Hegde 2002). By foregrounding embodied and situated knowledge, particularly that of postcolonial and marginalised subjects, autoethnography challenges dominant epistemologies and recentres the narrative authority of those historically silenced.¹

The stories selected here document the everyday labour of Afghan women to preserve culture, demand justice and envisage a future in which their knowledge is valued. By telling their stories – and, crucially, putting them in writing – we transition from oral history to herstory, acknowledging the knowledge pro-

1 See Chawla / Atay 2017, Pathak 2013, Holman Jones et al. 2013, Chawla / Rodriguez 2008.

duced by Afghan women. At a time when Afghan women are once again being pushed out of public life, publishing these accounts affirms their role as thinkers, creators and agents of change. The stories speak for themselves and are therefore presented without further editorial framing.

My Journey as a Women's Rights Activist in Afghanistan

Suraya Pakzad

I was born and raised in Herat, Afghanistan, where I witnessed the early signs of conflict and the tightening grip of oppression. One moment stands out vividly – a memory that changed the course of my life. It was 1979. I was a schoolgirl when our principal, a strong and educated woman, was shot before our eyes just as we were leaving the school grounds at the end of classes. That act of brutality seared itself into my memory. It left me with questions about justice, rights and the value of a woman's life – and it ignited something in me. From that moment, I knew I would dedicate myself to fighting for women's rights.

Despite the country's instability, I completed high school in Herat and moved to Kabul in 1992 to attend university, even as civil war engulfed the capital. Studying during that time required courage – bombs fell, militias fought and fear was constant – but I was determined. I graduated from Kabul University just before the Taliban took over in 1996. What followed was a devastating time: girls' schools were shut down, women were erased from public life, and public executions returned. As a university-educated woman, a mother and a citizen, I couldn't remain silent.

In 1998, while living in Kabul with my four children, I turned one room of our home into an underground school for girls. We started with 300 students. Teaching under Taliban rule was dangerous. If discovered, I risked arrest or worse. But we continued. Every lesson was an act of defiance. Every girl was a seed of hope. That school became a symbol – a small light in the darkness. But teaching alone wasn't enough. The mothers of my students came to me hungry, unemployed and desperate. They needed more than education; they needed economic support. I realised we had to do something broader – something that combined education, protection, empowerment and solidarity. That's how the idea for the Voice of Women Organization (VWO) was born.

Registering an NGO as a woman under Taliban rule was impossible, so I began exploring the option of registering VWO in Pakistan through the Afghan NGO Coordination Body, ACBAR. But fate intervened: the Taliban fell before I could complete the process. This unexpected shift allowed me to register VWO inside Afghanistan – making us one of the first women's organisations officially recognised under the new government. The Ministry of Economy

granted us temporary permission to operate while our registration was being finalised. And just like that, VWO was officially born.

VWO started with small projects – literacy classes, legal aid, basic health awareness – but it grew quickly. Over the next 20 years, we served over 626,000 people. We employed more than 5,800 staff, including 318 full-time workers by 2021. We provided legal and social protection to over 145,000 people, education and capacity-building to more than 110,000 and economic support to over 70,000 women and girls. More than 299,000 people benefited from our community awareness programmes. One of my proudest moments came when schools reopened after the Taliban’s first fall. I personally helped enrol 300 girls into seventh grade – girls who had studied in our underground school. That day felt like a quiet revolution.

But success was never easy. We operated under constant threats – from local commanders, political elites and eventually, once again, from the Taliban. Still, we adapted, protected our staff, built safe houses and pushed forward. We trained paralegals. We ran legal aid centres. We created income-generating programmes for women. We refused to stop.

In more than two decades of activism, I’ve seen extraordinary courage – from girls who walked miles to reach our underground school, to mothers who fought for their daughters’ futures. I’ve seen loss, fear and betrayal. But I’ve also seen power, dignity and resistance. People often ask me where I found the strength. The answer lies partly in my upbringing. I grew up in a family of 15 siblings, where my father treated all of us equally – sons and daughters alike. We all had the right to education and choice. That sense of fairness and dignity shaped my worldview. I knew early on that equality had to begin at home – and that no society could thrive while half its population was silenced.

But activism also taught me hard lessons. Over the years, I saw how fragmented we were as women’s rights defenders. We were strong individually – some of us in politics, others in civil society – but we failed to build a unified front. That was our greatest weakness. Even now, in exile and across the diaspora, we remain scattered. Our voices are divided. Our impact is less than it could be.

If I’ve learned anything, it’s this: unity is the foundation of real, lasting change. Women’s rights movements must be built on trust, collaboration and shared purpose. We need to listen to each other, support each other and elevate each other’s voices. No one organisation, no one activist can do it alone.

Looking ahead, despite the fact that my organisation is now officially banned by the Taliban, I remain hopeful. I dream of returning to Afghanistan one day to provide legal services to women and support community-based programming. I want to see a country where women live free from violence, where they access education, healthcare and opportunity as a right – not a privilege.

This is my story: a story of love, defiance and resilience. I've learned that impact isn't measured by numbers alone. It's in every life changed, every woman who finds her voice and every girl who dares to dream. I invite others to walk this path with me. The journey is long. The road is difficult. But together, we can build a more inclusive, more just world – for Afghan women, and for all of us.

Writing Our Freedom: Theatre, Memory and Afghan Women's Voices

Zainab Qadiri

Looking back at the history of theatre in Afghanistan, it is clear that women artists have always struggled. We fought battles on two fronts: against societal beliefs that questioned our presence on stage, and against state policies that sought to erase us entirely. In the early years (1940 to late 1950s), men wore women's clothes to play female roles. Slowly, we broke through – women joined radio dramas, cinema and the theatre (1960s to 1970s). But war and politics were always lurking. For women artists, job security was a fantasy.

I was fortunate to come of age during the democratic window. Even with all its flaws, it gave me a chance. I had loved reading since high school – novels, magazines, anything I could get my hands on. I dreamed of becoming a writer. Then, in 2010, before finishing high school, a friend introduced me to the Simorgh Film Association of Culture and Art in Herat. That's where I fell in love with theatre.

I still remember the first time I stepped into the Simorgh Film Association of Culture and Art (کانون فرهنگي و هنري سيمرغ فلم) in Herat. I was a high school student then, full of questions, books and dreams. Until that moment, I had spent most of my time reading novels and magazines, imagining myself as a writer. But that space – filled with students, instructors, lights, cameras and shelves of books – opened a new world to me. I discovered theatre. And with it, I found my voice.

Simorgh was more than a learning space. It was a community. We even had a small library. With guidance from both Afghan and foreign mentors, we learned everything: acting, scriptwriting, editing, filming. We rehearsed, we wrote, we performed. More than anything, we resisted. Because in a society like ours, being a woman in theatre meant being accused, harassed, shamed – even threatened. And yet, I loved it. I found confidence, purpose and power. Theatre taught me that I didn't have to remain silent – I could shape the narrative.

At Simorgh, we weren't just artists. We were activists. Our performances – some supported by UNICEF – tackled child marriage, the right to education

and health awareness. I'll never forget one performance at the Teenagers' Rehabilitation Centre. A teenage girl in the audience broke down in tears and fainted. She had been forced into marriage, brutalised by her family, denied education. After the play, she told us she wished her own father could feel the remorse portrayed in our script. She wished she, too, could be free. Thus, I realised, our stories were her story. And that made the risk worth it.

Soon, I began writing plays and short stories, often exploring themes of gender injustice. I eventually chose writing over acting because it allowed me to shape stories that pushed back against silence. My first short story, "The Vest" (واسکت) was about a girl like me – facing discrimination at home and dreaming of freedom. More followed, such as *Mukhabra* (مخابره), about a child in Mazar-e-Sharif during the Mujahideen-Taliban war, oblivious to the violence but caught in its shadow. Through these stories, I processed what it meant to grow up being female in Afghanistan, often ignored or forgotten.

When Simorgh closed, I launched *Shirin* (شیرین), a women-led literary magazine, with a few close friends. We managed three issues before financial and political pressure forced us to stop. Still, we kept going in other ways. I taught theatre privately to girls. I wrote and directed new plays – comedies and dramas, some based on Hazara folklore, others tackling girls' education and cultural identity.

One play, *The Magic Notebook* (دفترچه جادویی), performed on Teacher's Day, highlighted education's role in shaping a just society. Another, *One Heavy Meal, a Hundred Times the Pain* (یک من خور، صد من رش), revived ancient Hazara beliefs and customs. In 2016, I joined the student-run Yaran Yar Cultural Association (مجموعه یاران یار). There, I wrote and directed a major play, *From Shirin to Deh-mazang* (از شیرین تا دهمزنگ), that chronicled the systematic massacres of Hazaras – from the Abdul Rahman era to the 1993 Afshar massacre, the Ghor-Kabul bus killings and the Enlightenment Movement attack in Kabul. Each scene, grounded in testimony and history, challenged the erasure of our pain.

Meanwhile, I contributed satirical stories to the local weekly called KOMA (کانون مدنی اصلاح طلبان, Reformist Civil Society Organisation) and co-led weekly literary critique sessions with writers like Abdul Wahid Rafeay. After marrying a journalist and activist, we moved to Kabul, hoping for more freedom. There, I taught theatre and literature in private schools, staging student plays about forced marriage, cultural memory and the value of art. One comedy, *Khalay Kangoogzak* (خاله قنگوزک), based on Hazara oral storytelling, was performed at a graduation ceremony at Rahnoward-e-Noor High School in Kabul. Another honoured Hazara wedding customs, and yet another celebrated World Art Day. Every performance – whether watched by 30 or 300 – felt like an act of resistance.

But nothing prepared us for August 2021. When the Taliban returned, our world collapsed. My artistic life, like that of so many Afghan women, was brought to a standstill. I stayed home with my children, fearful and grieving,

struggling to imagine a future. At times, I hoped it was all just a nightmare. The creative world I had helped build collapsed. But I wasn't ready to let go.

Yet even in despair, I found courage. With former Simorgh friends – some now in Europe – and the support of the KULA Theatre Company in Germany, we began secretly producing a documentary on the lives of Afghan women artists under Taliban rule. Despite the risk, we completed it. That was my final act in Afghanistan. Soon after, like a migrating bird, I left my homeland behind – all its joy and pain – and sought refuge. Now, in Berlin, I work with the Academy in Exile, researching the Hazara genocide. I also collaborate with the KULA Theatre Company on Afghan productions. After 13 years of theatre and storytelling, my hope remains: that Afghan girls will once again be free to learn, to act, to create.

Theatre and literature have always been my tools – to defend human dignity, to promote girls' education, to spark moral reflection and to speak truth in a society that too often silenced us. I stood my ground when critics mocked or threatened us. I never gave up.

But now, after the fall of Kabul, with so many artists forced into exile and expression stifled at home, we in the diaspora carry a responsibility. We must use every platform to raise the voices of the girls left behind. We cannot let those who fear freedom erase what generations of women have built. Let us be the echo of their struggle – until they can speak for themselves again.

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