

# UNSTOPPABLE WOMEN

THE AFGHAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT



# **‘Unstoppable Women’** **The Afghan** **Women’s Movement**



# **“The Taliban may not have changed, but Afghan women certainly have.”**

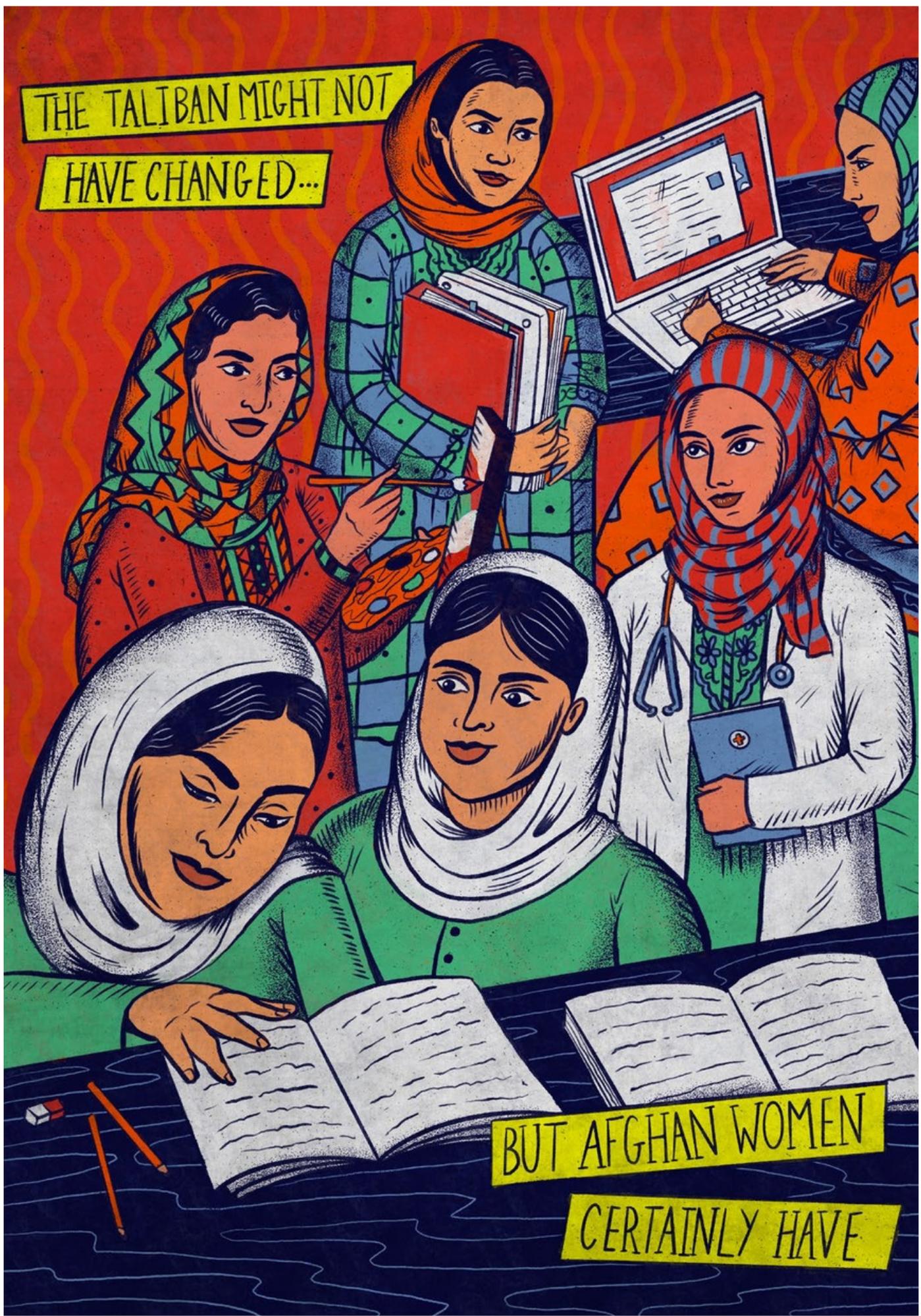
**Afghan women are not only defying the Taliban’s attempts to systematically erase them in the most dangerous reversal of women’s rights in the world, they are advocating for a future with rights for all.**

**Afghan journalist Fatima Faizi and artist Shehzil Malik’s co-produced illustrated reportage reveals that while the Taliban may not have changed, Afghan women certainly have. With interviews from four advocates across the movement speaking out on behalf of millions who cannot, women are calling for solidarity with their unstoppable resistance – and international action.**

None of us could have known that within months of Afghan women’s taboo-breaking campaign – which shattered the tradition of women’s names not being mentioned formally in public anywhere from our birth certificates to our gravestones – the Taliban would take over again. Afghanistan is now the most dangerous country in the world for women. Again. However, as campaign founder, Lalah Osmany, says, “The Taliban may not have changed, but Afghan women certainly have.”

The last 20 years inspired my generation to embrace education, democracy and civic activism. This forged a resistance movement that advocates I interviewed say is “unstoppable” while the de facto regime is unsustainable. They say it’s a matter of when, not if, change comes, but these are dark days when Afghan women hold a candle of hope and call for solidarity and international action.

THE TALIBAN MIGHT NOT  
HAVE CHANGED...



BUT AFGHAN WOMEN  
CERTAINLY HAVE

**“Women’s resistance in  
Afghanistan: the most  
dangerous country for  
women in the world.”**

We learned resistance from our mothers, and their grandmothers, some of whom won the right to vote in 1919, a year before women in the US. This resistance is in our history. As Dr Habiba Sarabi, the first Afghan woman to become governor of a province says:  
**“Afghan women have not simply reached this position today. No matter how much they fall to the ground, they learn how to get up. And standing up is a characteristic of Afghan women.”**



However, almost every month far-reaching new edicts attempt to erase women from all areas of society. In stark contrast to 2021, when over one in four parliamentarians were women, no women are part of the Taliban's current administration. Over 50 edicts already prohibit women from public spaces, decision-making, education and employment.

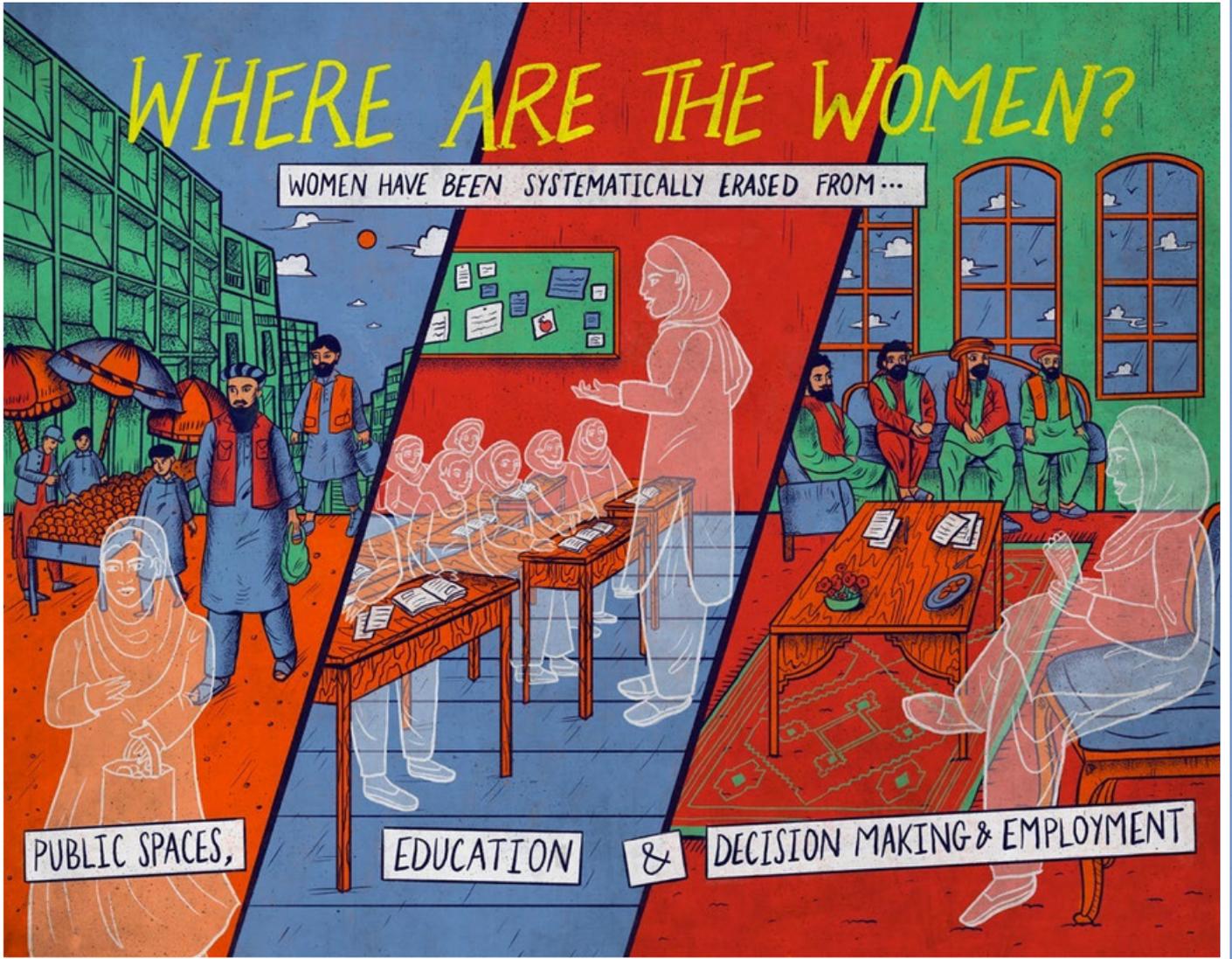
In December 2023, the Taliban extended these to prohibit women from teaching young boys, despite it leaving many students without qualified teachers. Earlier in the year, they mandated not just that all women should be replaced by men in leadership roles, but also that the word "women" should be replaced by "men" in public-facing documents and even beneficiary lists.

They also closed loopholes to women's employment by requiring all employees to be on bankrolls. Organizations that fail to meet these edicts are unable to operate, causing the closure of over 60% of women-led organizations by 2023 alone.



# WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?

WOMEN HAVE BEEN SYSTEMATICALLY ERASED FROM...

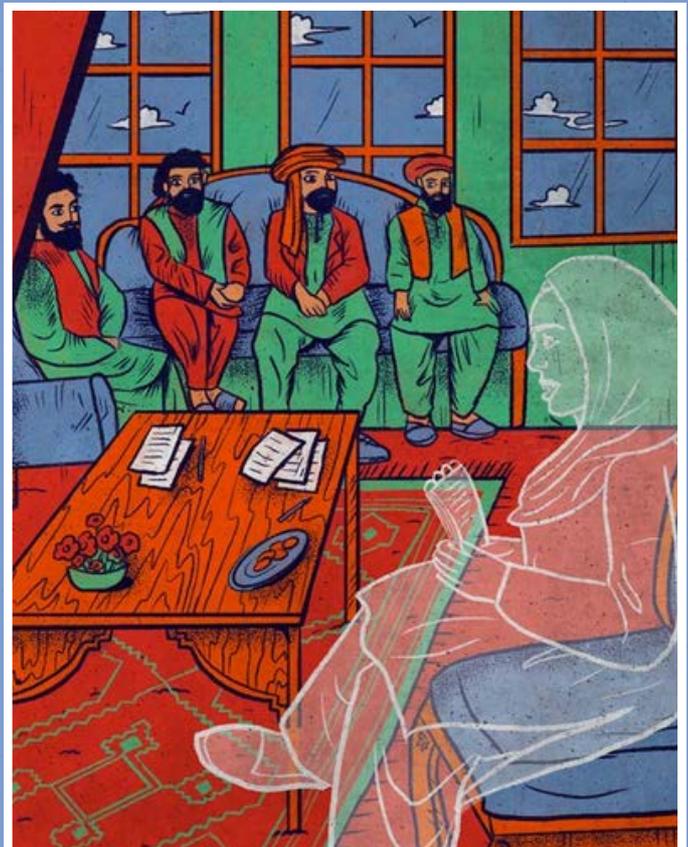


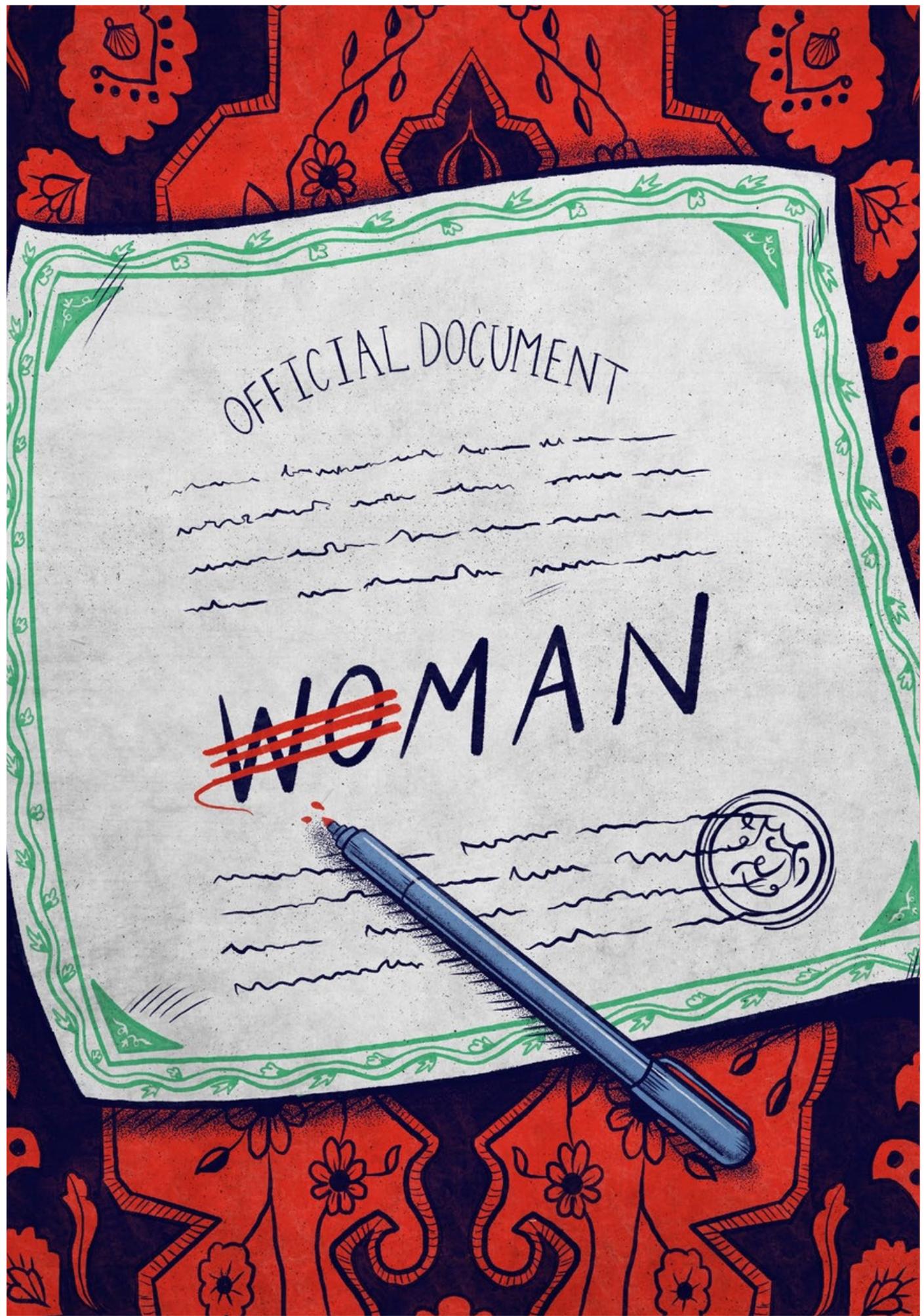
PUBLIC SPACES,

EDUCATION

&

DECISION MAKING & EMPLOYMENT





The Taliban, as de facto authorities (DFA), are using increasingly systematic tactics to enforce what is becoming known as gender apartheid. The violence, abuse and erasure from society that women face, day-in, day-out, is taking its toll and women are increasingly taking their own lives out of utter desperation.

However, Afghan women continue to defy the DFA in whatever way they can. They are confronting gun-carrying Taliban on the streets, forming networked movements across the country, advocating from seats at the Human Rights Council and UN Security Council, establishing alternative education organizations, launching new entrepreneurial businesses, sharing stories and art online and, wherever possible, carrying out direct negotiations with the DFA, despite its edicts prohibiting them from even moving without a male mahram.





To further understand Afghan advocacy, I spoke with just four women from across the movement. Nazia is an attorney risking her life and freedom to speak from Kabul about the women’s advisory group, where she and other members from across 34 Afghan provinces continuously agree on country-wide priorities, brief the UN and other intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and advocate for women’s rights on the international stage. Nazia says she tries to **“be the voice of a million Afghan women who are not even able to take a breath with ease and have lost all that they have earned in the past 20 years.”**

The three other interviewees are women’s rights defenders forced to live in exile from Afghanistan, who use their relative safety to advocate for those priorities set by women in Afghanistan. Lalah Osmany is the founder of the taboo-breaking campaign that changed legislation just before the current Taliban takeover by asking #WhereIsMyName? Naheed Farid was the youngest female Afghan politician and one of the MPs who pushed through the legislation won by Lalah’s campaign; Negina Yari was forced to resign as director of a women-led non-governmental organization (NGO) of 120 people, reflecting the systematic erasure of women from all NGOs, and employment more broadly.

Each interviewee emphasizes their position as part of a wider network, in Naheed’s words: **“Afghan women have been deprived of their basic rights and that’s why they created an ecosystem among each other to help each other, to nourish the next generation, and not to give up.”**

Like all the women in the ecosystem, the interviewees speak of gaining their strength from these networks, from the women who came before them, and the shared successes of the movement.



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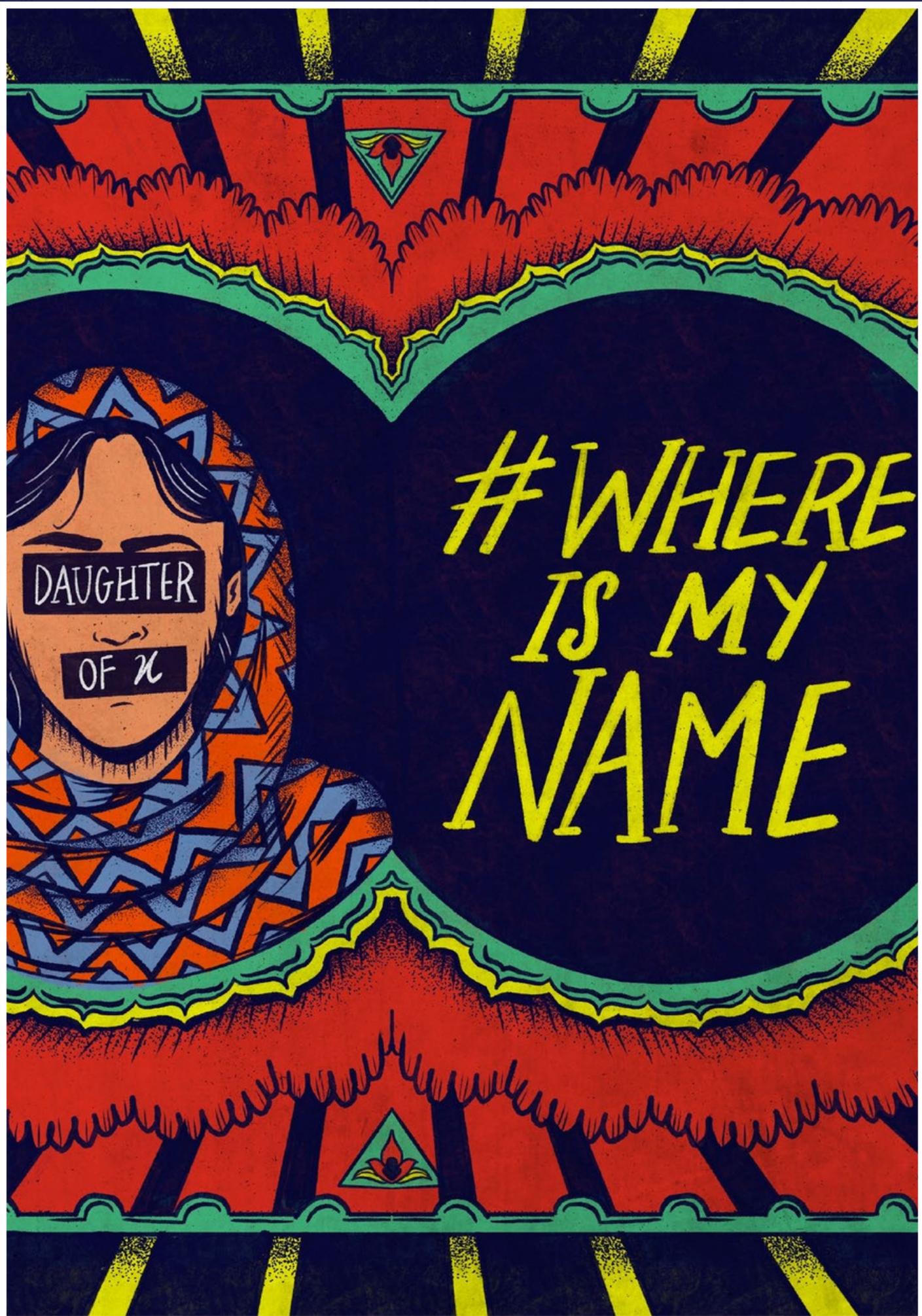


Perhaps the most high-profile success by Afghan women advocates is the #WhereIsMyName campaign. It highlighted the absence of women being named publicly, sought to emphasize the importance of recognizing women's identities in society and pushed for broader gender equality. The founder of the campaign, Lalah Osmany, describes how **“Ordinary women from ordinary families went to war with conditions that were not ordinary. Our demand was that the mother’s name be included in the Tazkira [identity card] of her child’s nationality and in this way the authority should be given to mothers.”**

Lalah goes on: **“It became a movement on social media. So many men, including [the Governor of Herat in Afghanistan], started to put their mother’s picture on their social media account, saying ‘This is my mom. I’m so proud of her. It’s her name, I want to acknowledge that she has an identity that I’m so proud of.’ I saw so many messages from men of Afghanistan, saying that this is the smell of development. This is the first step towards a bright future.”**

After three years of relentless advocacy, during which the campaigners were threatened on and offline, in 2020 the then-president signed a decree allowing women’s names to be included on their children’s IDs – a historic first for Afghanistan.





**“A woman’s identity  
should not be defined  
by their male relatives.  
Identity is the primary  
right of all human beings.”**

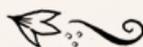
**Prior to all else, we must  
affirm women’s existence,  
as this acknowledgment  
forms the bedrock for  
all subsequent rights  
of women.”**



Naheed Farid, the youngest Member of Parliament (MP) at the time, was one of the MPs who helped pass the legislation. **“In just one week, this campaign successfully made headlines in national and international media. Afghan women began to earn their first right: their identity. We demonstrated that we exist and breathe,”** she said. **“We challenged and changed a collective taboo, a culture that kept women from being recognized for generations.”**

However, this achievement was short-lived. Within months, the Taliban took over, and despite their assurances during the Doha peace talks, they began rolling back the progress achieved in the last 20 years.

Since the Taliban’s takeover, rates of forced and early marriage have escalated, along with the sale of body parts and even children to avoid whole families starving. Afghanistan is now one of the few countries in the world where the female suicide rate is higher than the rate for males.

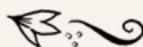




However, across the movement women are clear about the transformation that education, training and employment have led to since the last Taliban rule. #WhereIsMyName? is just one example of how powerful Afghan women's advocacy is now. In grass-roots protests led by women, "Bread, work, freedom" became one of the most popular slogans. Women were defending what they knew the Taliban would attack: their independence, their employment and their agency.

Women like Nazia joined those protests and continue advocating at all levels, organizing nationally, internationally and continuing today to confront the Taliban directly, despite these images fading from headlines: **"When you go on the streets, and you ask for your rights, it's like going to the front line in a battlefield," says Nazia. "We are confronting the soldiers of the de facto authority with a gun, again. They are really dangerous, but we keep going to meet with them because we are asking for rights for all women."**

**"In a country like Afghanistan, advocacy by women for women looks like playing with fire. One day, we will be killed or detained by them but still we are trying. Our request is that the international community stand with Afghan women."**



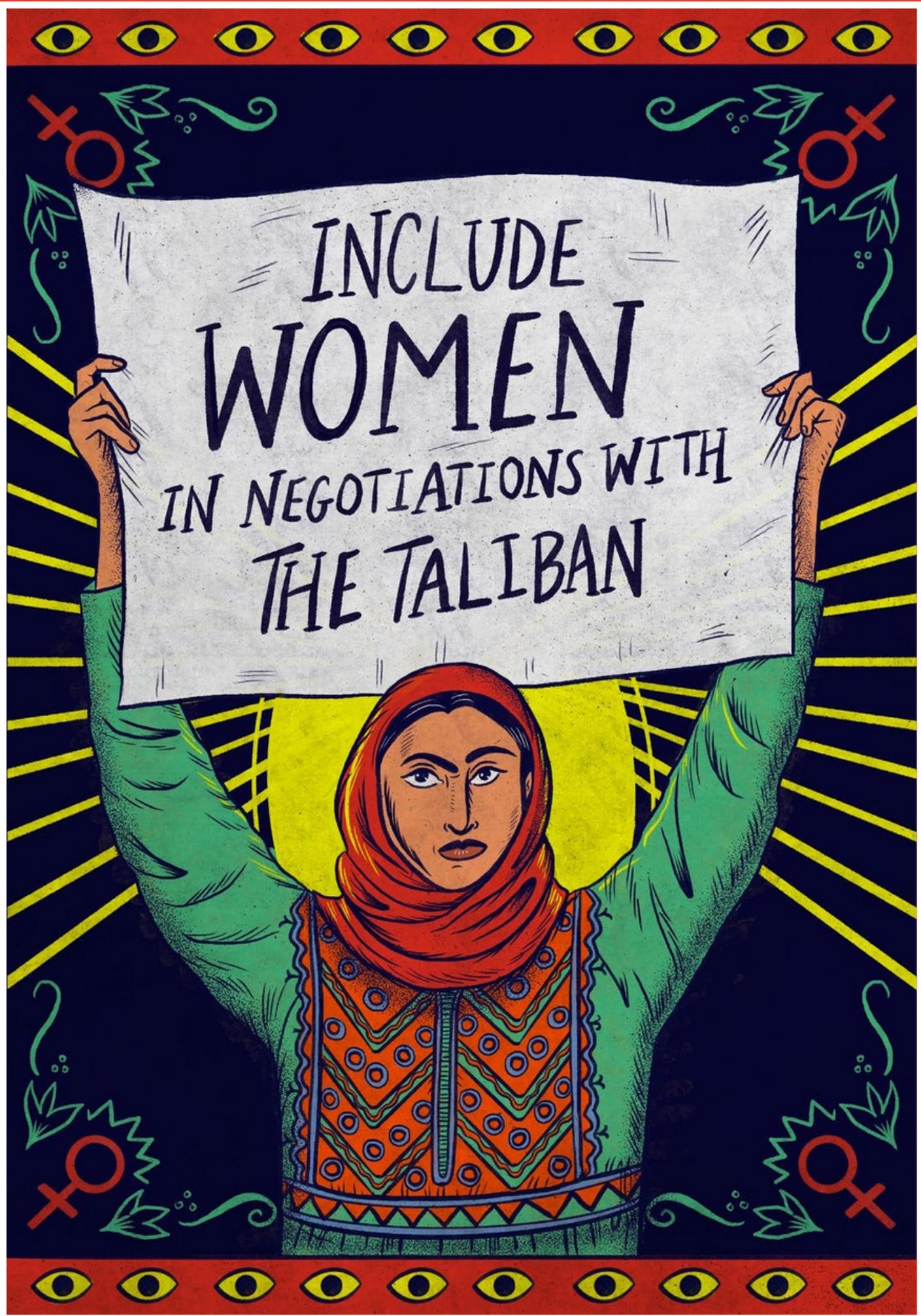


The call for direct advocacy with the DFA “by Afghan women, for Afghan women” is central to this richly diverse and varied movement.

While the DFA broadly refuse any interaction with female Afghan advocates, women create opportunities to directly negotiate with them. After the devastating earthquakes in Herat, one advocate demanded that the DFA allow women to tend to the sick, including pregnant women at risk of death. After being repeatedly refused, she returned with a delegation of women advocates, who stood through the heat all day negotiating. The DFA eventually relented, allowing the women in to save lives.

Afghan women have consistently called for the international community’s support by prioritizing women’s participation in negotiations with the DFA, not excluding them. This was overwhelmingly clear last year, when UN Women spoke to 592 Afghan women across 22 of the 34 provinces in the country. In their report, women stated that they must be included in negotiations with the DFA.

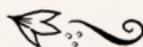




All too often, the international community has failed to include women in negotiations with the DFA, even those about women's issues. Sometimes international actors say this is due to security risks, but as many of these women are risking their lives to confront the Taliban directly, they question whose priorities the actors are pursuing.

This is the opposite of other international actors' claims that Afghanistan is now peaceful, and that women can work. These false claims, about a regime that sends women at risk of gender-based violence to prison, happen when international actors fail to listen to Afghan women.

If international actors do not listen to Afghan women, they are unable to hear half the population, leading them to inaccurately claim that Afghanistan is now more peaceful and that women can work. As Fawzia Koofi, former Afghan MP, says: **“Women's rights must not be the sacrifice by which peace is achieved.”**



Negina Yari breaks down the misunderstanding: “If they call it peace, so peace looks like ignoring half of the population. There is no bombing. There are no suicide attacks, but the women are killing themselves because they don’t have any other alternative options.”

This echoes the voices of so many of the women that UN Women has spoken with, including Munizha, a teacher in Afghanistan, who says: **“I ask the international community to listen to Afghan women; we need to be heard.”**

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# LISTEN TO AFGHAN WOMEN AND ACT

IS PEACE IGNORING HALF  
THE POPULATION?



Negina goes on to explain the origins of these international actors' false narratives that women can work a year after the DFA ban on women even working for local NGOs: **“Yes, some NGOs are using temporary workarounds to pay women despite the ban, and yes, some women successfully pushed for a women-only market to be reopened. But these are a few tiny pockets of hope taken out of context of the rest of Afghanistan. Women are working without any registration, now outside of the official and legal system, often at home. For how long might donors be able to pay these local NGOs' female staff salaries?”** In addition, she explains that international actors' false narratives inadvertently normalize the dangerous systematic erasure of women from employment.

Negina knows first-hand how dangerous women's employment is in Afghanistan. Like so many other women in Afghanistan, she found herself compelled to step down from prominent roles in Afghan NGOs when the DFA mandated that women holding decision-making positions must relinquish their responsibilities to men and made women's signatures illegal in the organizations' accounts system.

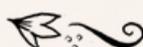
Negina faced countless threats, and like all the women I interviewed, she talks poignantly of the structural and mental health impacts of prohibiting women from employment and leading organizations: **“I imagine that two options were offered to us: you should leave the country or you should die inside the country. You get this message that you're nothing. That with one announcement I can remove you from everything, and you are the second class of the country.”**

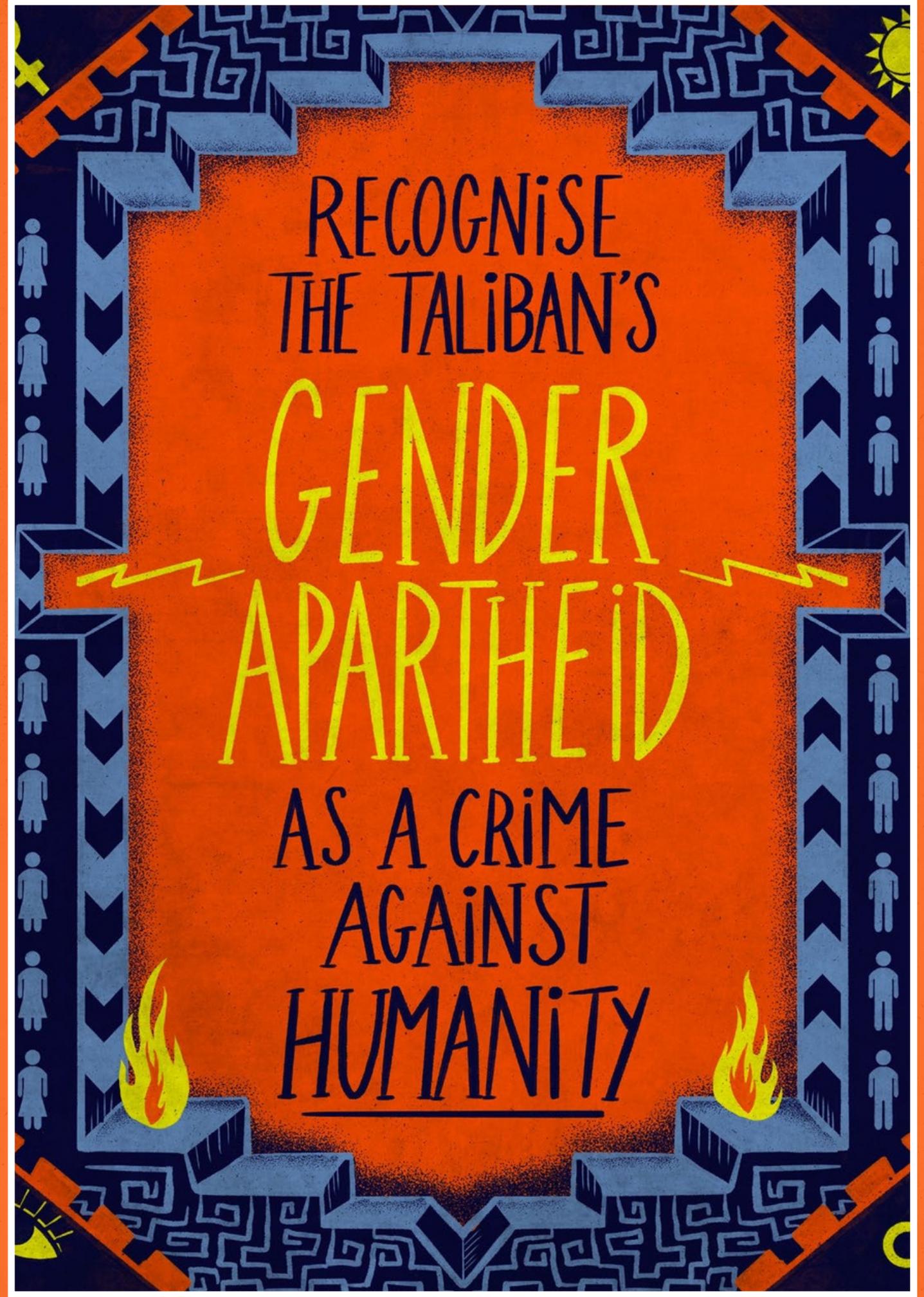


Despite being forced to live in exile, Negina says that, like countless other women living outside Afghanistan, she continues to advocate for women’s priorities in Afghanistan, working closely with a diverse network of women, including activists, human rights defenders, journalists, students, doctors, lawyers and more. Forced out of their country and employment, they all participate voluntarily. Freed from the influence that much-needed donor funding brings, and brought together by the urgency of shared suffering, Negina is for once almost lost for words to explain the absolute trust and support that women offer one another. She also emphasizes the political neutrality that this situation has created, and its impacts.

Negina says that over the past two years, the youth voice – free from previous influences – is increasingly finding unity in advocacy efforts. She emphasizes that **“The international community must hear the voices of the new generation of Afghan women.”** Not only does this give them a clear picture of young women and girls’ situation under the DFA’s gender apartheid in Afghanistan, it also recognizes women’s autonomy, and the importance of their first-hand perspectives in shaping the discourse and policies that affect their lives and their country.

**“The international community must hear the voices of the new generation of Afghan women”**





RECOGNISE  
THE TALIBAN'S  
**GENDER  
APARTHEID**  
AS A CRIME  
AGAINST  
HUMANITY

The failure of international communities to act means that a regime that many people argue amounts to gender apartheid, has been normalized. This perspective views the Taliban's policies and practices as a deliberate and organized effort to segregate, oppress and discriminate against women based on their gender.

Under such conditions, women are not only deprived of their fundamental rights, but are also treated as inferior to men in every aspect of life.

Naheed Farid joined a campaign last September urging United Nations Member States to codify the crime of gender apartheid in the Draft Crimes against Humanity Convention, the first major global treaty on core international crimes since the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. She hopes that if a court one day rules that the Taliban's gender apartheid is a crime against humanity, it will become much harder for them to be defended or legitimized.



**“The women of Afghanistan are leaders. They should not be ignored, nor should the extent of their resistance be underestimated. If international mechanisms and treaties can’t safeguard Afghan women now, they are just pieces of paper. It’s time to take action. Recognize the Taliban’s gender apartheid as a crime against humanity at an international level.”**

The failure of the international community to listen to Afghan women and act on their demands to participate in advocacy has left many Afghan women feeling like their rights are a football, kicked around in a game between international communities and the DFA. Naheed emphasizes that the result of excluding women from direct advocacy has far-reaching implications:

**“The women of Afghanistan don’t just fight for women’s rights. They are coming to this street to fight for human rights, for freedom of speech, for freedom of media, for a broad range of rights in society,”** she says. Their struggle is deeply rooted in a desire to shape a better future for their daughters and all who are oppressed in Afghanistan. **“Women of Afghanistan are resisting economically, publicly and domestically. They are the leaders. We must recognize their strength and give them the credit and credibility they rightfully deserve.”**

**“We women of Afghanistan, we are unstoppable women,”** says Negina, reiterating that the de facto regime is inherently “unsustainable” as it is systematically erasing and oppressing half the population. Meanwhile, the international community not only normalizes this situation by failing to listen to women or to act, but also adds to the false narratives.





Afghan women's request is crystal clear, in Nazia's words:

**“I earnestly and cordially request  
the international audience to  
stand with Afghan women in such  
critical moments. We don't want  
a castle to be built in the sky...  
we want our basic rights.”**



Co-created with Afghan female advocates Nazia,  
Naheed Farid, Lalah Osmany and Negina Yari

Written by Fatima Faizi with  
Emily Oliver (BeyondText) and Anna Ridout  
Illustrated by Shehzil Malik  
Directed and Produced by Emily Oliver, BeyondText  
Design by A Studio Called Jane

Commissioned by UN Women

## **Stories of loss reverberate throughout Afghanistan.**

But there is also hope even in the face of such loss. Afghan women don't accept the restrictions imposed on their right to learn, work and have a voice.

## **Afghan women will not give up. They are unstoppable.**

UN Women commissioned this piece, co-produced by Afghan women, to bring to life Afghan women's powerful advocacy and incredible resilience in the most oppressive circumstances. UN Women is supporting Afghan women in every way, elevating their voices, priorities and recommendations, funding the services they so desperately need, supporting their businesses and organizations.

#UnstoppableWomen  
#IWD2024

