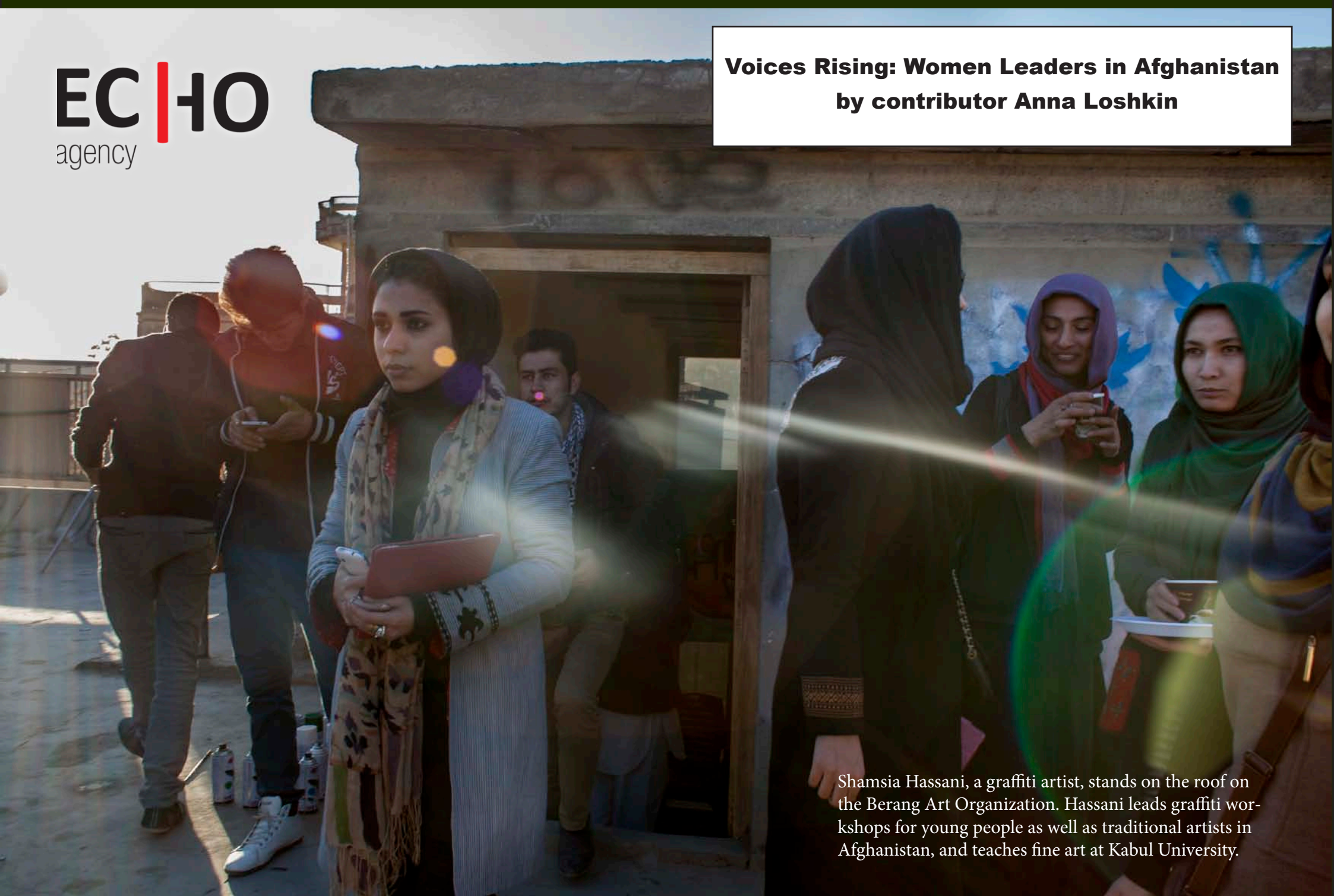


**Voices Rising: Women Leaders in Afghanistan**  
by contributor Anna Loshkin



Shamsia Hassani, a graffiti artist, stands on the roof on the Berang Art Organization. Hassani leads graffiti workshops for young people as well as traditional artists in Afghanistan, and teaches fine art at Kabul University.



Surrounded by her staff, Governor Habiba Sarabi takes in the view from the roof of the newly inaugurated Highland Hotel in Bamiyan. As the only female governor in Afghanistan, Sarabi worked on women's education, and on reviving tourism in Bamiyan province



# Voices Rising: Women Leaders in Afghanistan

**T**he situation for some women in Afghanistan is abysmal. However, in order to understand the future of this war-affected nation, Afghan women - overwhelmingly portrayed as veiled subjects controlled by their fathers and husbands - cannot all be viewed as powerless victims.

**W**omen are moving to the forefront, despite the country's male-dominated culture. They are parliamentarians, lawyers, athletes, businesswomen, musicians, and more than even before, they are role models for a younger generation of girls. Since the Taliban were thrown out of power almost 13 years ago, women have taken an active part in government and civil society, returning from years spent as refugees in Pakistan or Iran, or reemerging from the hidden life they were forced to lead in their own country.

**W**omen are attaining leadership and power positions despite being harassed and threatened for going against fixed gender roles in a traditional society. They are fighting to make their voice heard, both in their professional and personal lives.

**W**hile these women must deal with challenges, risks and targeted attacks, none of them is willing to give up what she has achieved.



Nilofar Bayot crosses the main street in her West Kabul neighborhood to catch a taxi to her university. Bayot sustained a spinal cord injury at the age of two. Despite her handicap and the perception that handicapped women should stay at home, she plays wheelchair basketball, is in her second year of university and works at the ICRC Orthopaedic Center, where she herself was treated as a child.







Young actors in costume practice their lines before going on stage to perform. The all-female cast puts on plays that encourage fair treatment of women in the community.





Nargis Azaryun, an activist and director of the non-governmental organization RED (Road to Equality and Development) drives in traffic in Kabul. Women drivers experience both favoritism and discrimination on the road. While they are often waved through checkpoints, male drivers may purposely try to hit their cars.





Members of Parliament listen to Shukria Barakzai, an outspoken member of Parliament and the only woman to serve on the Defense Committee. In July 2013, the percentage of seats reserved for women in Parliament was lowered from 25% to 20%. Barakzai has been threatened and targeted by extremists, along with other female Parliamentarians.



High school girls in Herat prepare to start their computer class after power has been restored. The Women's Annex, an organization that strives to increase computer literacy for girls, sponsors 10 such centers in high schools across Herat, all of them with internet access.





General Khatol Mohammadzai takes care of paperwork in her new office. She is the only woman to achieve the rank of general in the Afghan National Army, although she doesn't receive the same benefits as the men who share her position. Widowed when her son was only 40 days old, General Khatol has struggled in both in the army and in her personal life as a husbandless woman and single mother.





Nilofar Bayot and her teammates play wheel-chair basketball. Women's practice starts as early as 5 am, and sometimes the men's team joins them later on for a co-ed pickup game. Bayot sustained a spinal cord injury at the age of two. Despite her handicap, she is in her second year of university and works at the ICRC Orthopaedic Center, where she herself was treated as a child.







Laila Haidari talks with the men who live at her shelter for recovering heroin addicts. The 2012 Afghanistan National Urban Drug Use Survey estimates that nearly 11% of adult males use drugs nationwide.



Frozan Rasuli, one of the ten women on the Afghan Women's National Cycling Team, gets ready to pass a man riding on a city bicycle. The women train by riding on the well paved roads in Kabul and the suburbs. Passersby sometimes stop and stare as the team rides by. Bicycling is considered off-limits for women in Afghan society.





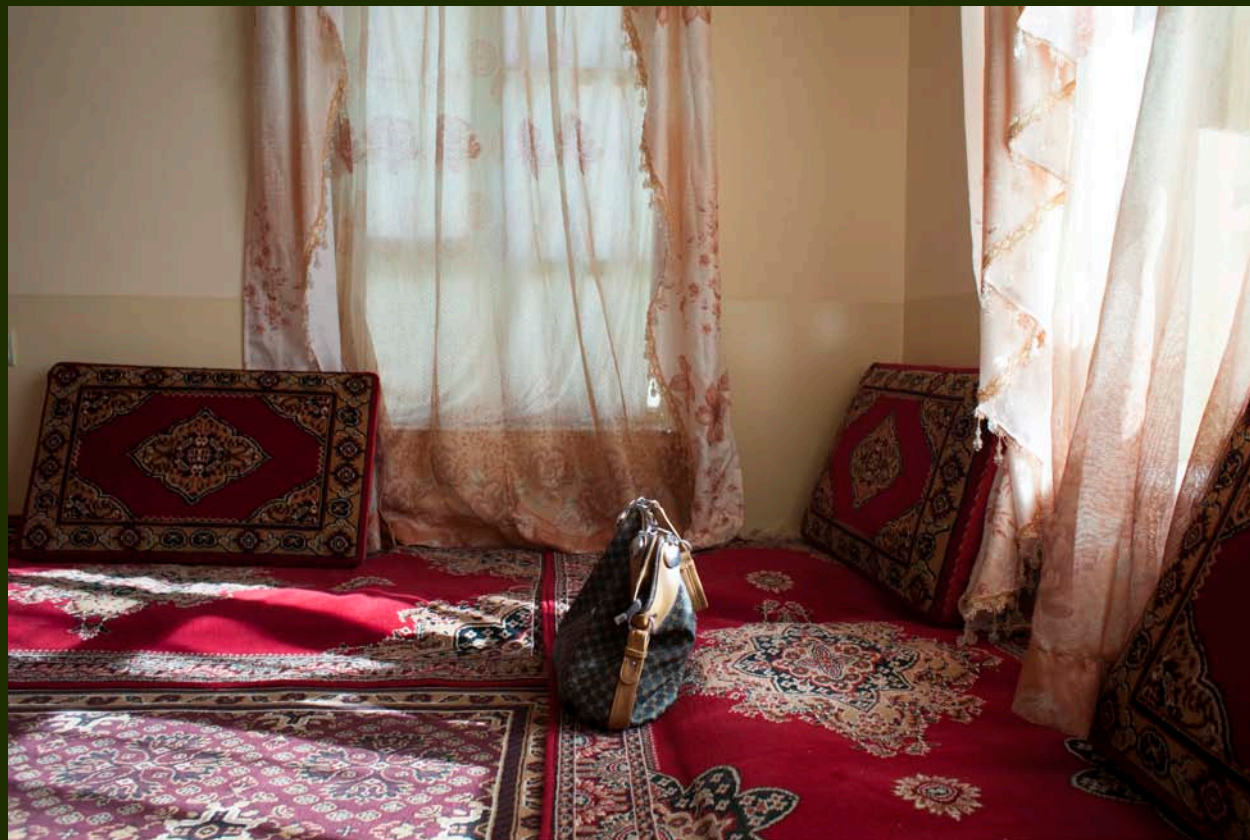


Niloofar, Frozan and Ramila work on their poems at the Herat Literary Association. During the weekly meetings, young men and women share and critique each other's writing. Niloofar has been coming to the Association for the past ten years. Several members have published books of poetry or prose.



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