

Behind the Screen, Afghan Women Tell Stories Through Video

By Antonia Morzenti

Since the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, more than 100 decrees have stripped women and girls of their rights. They can no longer receive a formal education past the sixth grade and are largely excluded from public life. Much of the learning that continues now happens on a phone or a computer screen, at a kitchen table or in the corner of a room, in whatever hours a week a student can spare.

A Class Built From What Came Before

The Hila Initiative, a women-led nonprofit based in Paris, works inside that narrow space. Its students take English classes twice a week and meet weekly with a conversation partner. Those who want to go further choose from a set of electives called Path Forward. One of the newest teaches them to make short films, using the phones they already carry.

The videography class grew naturally from Hila's photography elective, launched in July 2025 and guided by a dedicated and talented teacher who has helped students develop both their technical skills and creative confidence. Building on that foundation, videography offered a logical next step—one that allows students to apply their visual storytelling skills in a format that is increasingly marketable and closely connected to paid work. "This was a natural extension of the photography class," said Evelyn Isaia, Hila's development lead. "It builds on the strong foundation our photography teacher continues to provide while opening another practical pathway to income."

Teaching Filmmaking Without a Room

Hila's partner on the course, ReFOCUS Media Labs, has spent eight years working on a related problem. Founded in Greece in 2017, it teaches refugees filmmaking, editing, and sound — skills that make people competitive for work even without a university degree. Its labs, in Lesbos, Athens, Kraków, and Berlin, are physical rooms, with equipment students can hold. Teaching the same skills to women confined to their homes, working over unstable internet connections, on cameras they sometimes had to keep off, was new.

Instructor Sude Fazlollah led the pilot course, which ran from November 2025 to January 2026. It showed her that a class built for a room doesn't transfer directly to a phone. She couldn't always see what was happening on the other side of the screen, and students were sometimes unable to attend class due to family constraints or connectivity issues. Fazlollah started to record the material for students to access after the class. To keep students engaged, she also changed her approach, starting with seeing and finding meaning before bringing in technique. "Instead of only teaching composition as a rule," she said, "I ask what the way we frame something can communicate about how we feel or what we want to say."

A Language Shift That Changed the Room

Early in the pilot, the class switched from English to Farsi, Fazlollah's first language, and close enough to Dari that she could make the change herself. The interactions among the students, and with their teachers, changed completely.

On a Wednesday afternoon in August, the class opens in English before settling into Farsi. At one point, Fazlollah is teaching framing. Rather than describe it, she stands and moves through her own camera frame, toward the lens and away, showing what happens to a shot when the subject moves. The students try it themselves, filming

something where they are and posting it to the class group while the session is still running. The instructor responds in real time, and so do the students.

Learning to See, Not Just to Shoot

What's changing for her students, Fazlollah said, is not chiefly technical. One photographed a reflection in water, using the movement of the surface to build a feeling rather than a record. Another photographed a small green plant pushing up through dry, cracked ground, not because it was dramatic, but because she found meaning in the contrast between the lifeless ground and the living plant. "They are not only asking, is this a beautiful photograph," Fazlollah said. "They are beginning to ask, what am I trying to say with this image?"

A student who goes by Mira* described a similar shift. "I learned that photography is not only about taking a beautiful picture," she said. "It is also about having a different way of seeing the world and telling a story."

What the Class Has Given

Mira said the course has helped her put feelings into words she couldn't find before. "Before, I sometimes had feelings and ideas that I could not explain with words," she said. "Now I can express some of them through photography and video. A picture can show an emotion, a story, or a feeling without saying a single word."

Showing her work to the class is its own experience. She said she feels proud when she finishes something, and nervous about how it will land. "When the instructors give me feedback and encouragement, I feel more confident," she said. "It motivates me to keep learning and try new things."

She plans to keep making photographs and videos after the course ends, and hopes what she has learned will help her build something of her own. "I also hope these skills can help me build opportunities for my future and become more independent," she said.

"This class is more than just learning how to take photos or make videos," she said. "It has given me a space to learn, create, share my ideas, and believe in my abilities."

**Student's name has been changed for security reasons.*