

Creating Space for Healing, Expression, and Connection in Afghanistan

By Antonia Morzenti

Every session of Hila's Expressive Arts for Empowerment class begins the same way: each student names how she's feeling, whatever that is, before anything else happens. It's a small ritual, but a deliberate one. For many of the women in the class, it's one of the few spaces in their week built specifically around mental health and well-being, in a country where women's movement and access to community outside the home has been tightly restricted over the past five years.

The toll is well documented. A 2026 [UN Women report](#) found that seven in ten Afghan women describe their mental health as “bad” or “very bad,” and that restricted movement, combined with a shortage of women health workers, makes care hard to access. Hila's Well-Being pillar responds to that gap. For two semesters now, students have gathered weekly to use poetry and art as another way in.

Finding the Words

Amina joined the class when it began in September 2025, looking for a way to express her feelings. “Writing poems tied to weekly themes helped me say things that were sometimes difficult to say,” she said. “Before, I sometimes kept my feelings inside. Now, I try to understand my feelings and express them instead of keeping everything inside. Writing helps me feel lighter.” She said she understands herself better now: “I learned that my feelings are important and that my voice matters.”

Froozan joined at the same time as Amina, at a point when, she said, her hope for life was fading. One lesson has stayed with her since: that saying no is also a right, one she is still learning to exercise. She traces a turning point to watching Grace, the class's instructor, speak with calm and confidence. “We are both human beings,” she remembers thinking, “so why can't I speak like her?” Little by little, she said, she found she could speak more freely and understand her own feelings better. Between this class and her English coursework, she said, “today, I feel that I have found my hope for life again.”

Both students point to the same source of value beyond the lessons themselves: each other. “Every person has their own challenges and struggles in different ways,” Froozan said. Amina called the virtual classroom setting itself “a beautiful experience,” one where shared stories left her feeling “safe and connected.”

A Structure Built for Trust

Grace, who teaches the class, is a licensed psychotherapist trained at Columbia and Harvard whose earlier work included teaching ESL to refugees and torture survivors at NYU/Bellevue. “Poetry, drawing, and creative expression give people a side door into feelings they might not have words for yet, or might not feel safe naming outright,” she said.

Each 90-minute session follows a consistent rhythm: a check-in, a theme, a poem translated into Dari, time to write an original response, optional sharing, a short psychoeducation segment, a drawing exercise, and a closing reflection. “Structure makes the space feel safe and predictable,” Grace said. “It makes sure the time is actually building something for the students, not just providing a release valve.” The format has evolved over two semesters, shaped in part by how students themselves have engaged with it.

Looking Ahead

Grace hopes to bring on additional teachers next semester so the class can expand into related subjects, including health and nutrition, alongside the expressive arts work, and to build a more structured curriculum for returning students.

Both Amina and Froozan plan to come back. “I am looking forward to learning more, writing more poems, and sharing more with my teacher and classmates,” Amina said. For Froozan, that alone marks a change: “Today, I feel

that I have found my hope for life again." As the group heads into a third semester with the additional teachers Grace hopes to bring on and a more structured curriculum, that work will continue to take shape, one class at a time.