

## The girl confronted by the Taliban in Bamiyan

The story I want to write is difficult for me, as it reflects the story of my life—a girl born in one of the worst times and under unfair conditions, a life full of bitterness.

This bitterness stems from the fact that I had no influence or fault in choosing my circumstances, yet I am judged—harshly and unfairly—through the lens of gender and ethnicity. As a girl, I should have the most basic rights in life, but, unfortunately, I am denied even those. This harsh reality is so bitter and tragic for me that I drown in thought for hours. The bitterness of my story—and the stories of millions of other girls in every corner of this land—has grown even more bitter under the Taliban.

When I was little, I heard the name “Taliban” on my father’s radio, which was always tuned to the BBC. The reporter always spoke about them with urgency. I didn’t understand what was being said, but I could tell from my father’s fixed gaze on the radio and his unbroken silence that it was nothing good. To me, the name “Taliban” held no meaning.

For me and my friends in that small village, our teammates and toys were more important than anything else. I never understood the truth about the Taliban because that truth was full of humiliation, stoning, executions, whipping, and forcing women and girls into the darkness of their homes.

As I grew older, like the suffering of the people around me, I came to realize that life was more than just toys. But I wish I hadn’t grown up. I wish I could have kept those toys, those happy friends, and the freedom to laugh out loud without judgment or wear what I wanted without fear of a veil. I learned, however, that life does not always follow human wishes.

The 15th of August marked the beginning of a new era in the history of Afghanistan—a dark and regressive era in a history already full of twists and turns.

During this period, all the values and achievements we had struggled for—including women’s and girls’ rights, especially the right to education and work—were transformed into suffering. These rights had been gained through immense effort, challenges, and sacrifices. Terrorist attacks, targeted explosions in schools, mosques, and educational centers—particularly against the Hazara community—had plagued us, but we persevered.

In March 2021, I began working as a field vaccinator for COVID-19 in Bamiyan province, one of the safest yet most deprived provinces over the past 26 years. It was a great opportunity to serve underprivileged people. However, it wasn’t long before we heard the sound of Taliban boots in the city. The tragic story of August 15th began, and everything changed overnight.

Our task was clear: My team of three—my coworker Sima, our driver, and I—was scheduled to visit the village of Qoli Haydar. On the way, we were surrounded by ten armed men on motorcycles, carrying white flags. They blocked our car, and fear gripped us as we shouted, “Why are the Taliban here?” I begged the driver, “Please don’t stop the car, just keep moving.” But the men surrounded us and demanded to know: “Where are you going? Who are you? What is your relationship with these girls?”

The driver, trembling with fear, answered, “They are COVID-19 vaccinators. We’re headed to Qoli Haydar village.” One of the men ordered, “Get out of the car!” The driver complied, while Sima and I remained inside. They ransacked the vehicle, taking everything, including the vaccine carrier and ice packs. One of them, puzzled by the ice packs, asked, “What are these?” The driver explained, “It’s frozen water for keeping the vaccines cold.”

One of the Taliban opened an ice pack, drank the water, and remarked, "Wow, cold water!" He shared it with the others, laughing, "Look at them, traveling with such luxuries as cold water." I whispered to Sima, "If they drink the ice packs, the vaccines will be destroyed." She begged me to stay silent, but I couldn't. I stepped out and said in a hoarse voice, "This water is not drinkable; it's for keeping the vaccines cold." The men laughed loudly, mocking, "You eat or drink whatever you find!" and threw the ice packs to the ground.

Another man sneered, "Shameless girls! How dare you work with men without a mahram? Thank God your corrupt government has fallen!" Panic boiled inside me, and dark thoughts swirled in my mind. I looked around, but there was nothing but the burning sun, towering mountains, and trees. Suddenly, one of them called the others away, saying, "Let's go conquer the district. We'll deal with these sparrows later." They sped off on their motorcycles, and we breathed a sigh of relief.

We hurriedly packed our things, got back in the car, and made our way to Qoli Haydar village. When we arrived, all the villagers had gathered in front of the mosque, their faces filled with fear and worry. After introducing ourselves, the village elder informed us, "The government has fallen. The Taliban have overtaken Kabul."

I immediately said, "We should return to Jawqol because there's no mobile network here, and I'm worried about my family in Kabul. I might never see them again." But the villagers warned us, "The roads are too dangerous now; the Taliban may still be nearby."

Despite our fears, we managed to vaccinate 45 men and women. As time passed, my anxiety grew. I insisted, "We have to get back to Jawqol. My family will be worried about me." When we finally reached the clinic, we discovered that all the employees had fled.

My father called me, and I told him, "I'm coming to Kabul." But he replied, "Stay where you are. Don't worry about us. The roads are too dangerous. When the situation improves, I'll come to you." Sima returned to her home, and I was left alone in the village. It was incredibly stressful—being a young woman without a mahram in an unfamiliar place. Yet, it was also an opportunity to connect with the women, girls, and people of the village on a deeper level.

Every day, I struggled to comprehend the situation and repeatedly asked myself:

Where did the government go?

Where did the commandos go?

Where are the NATO forces and the United Nations?

How was it possible for a group of men to emerge from the mountains and deserts and ruin the fate of millions in the blink of an eye? Unfortunately, there was no government, no men's government, no United Nations, no human rights—only a dirty game in which everyone pursued their own interests. Women and girls were the primary victims of this political power play.

In the end, the Taliban shattered my dreams.