



Mozhgan

Hamrah, together on a journey— The Hamrah Oral History Project is a series of interviews with immigrants, refugees, and asylees in Arizona, people who had to leave home due to oppression, war or violence, pursuing their future elsewhere. These are personal accounts of life between places and cultures, exploring how we arrived here and why we left home. Listen to stories of joy, dream and emotional pain that comes with the relocation and separation. Recorded at KXCI Community Radio's Historic Armory Park Studios in Tucson, Arizona.

Can you introduce yourself?

Hi, my name is Mozhgan. I am 21 years old. I am from Afghanistan, but I was born in a city called Lamerd in Iran. Lamerd is a small town like Tucson and it's pretty warm.

Can you tell me about your childhood?

I have two siblings. I have two sisters, and we always had a very good relationship with each other and we grew up playing with each other a lot. I was a very curious child and I liked to explore tools. I loved having pliers and opening things with pliers and exploring what was inside devices.

What was it like growing up in Iran?

So there were some good things and bad things about growing up in Lamerd in Iran. It was a small town, so there was not much to do, but there was a beautiful prairie close to our home that I used to go biking with my sisters and with our neighbors after school every day.

Do you have a favorite memory growing up?

One of my best memories from my childhood was spending time with my grandma who lived with us, and she was very kind and very nice and I still remember her very much.

When did you leave Iran?

In 2013.

When did your family leave Afghanistan?

My dad was moved to Iran from Afghanistan when he was only eight months old with his mother. And my mom was, she moved to Iran with her family when she was 17 years old and their families fled Afghanistan because of the war.

Do you know why you and your family left Iran?

Because my family, we were immigrants in Iran. We were refugees. We didn't have legal documents in Iran. They didn't give us papers and because of that we couldn't register for schools and we didn't have a lot of opportunities for work and education. Also, my younger sister is ill and my family were looking for opportunities for her to get better and that's why they decided to leave Iran.

Did you face any discrimination growing up in Iran?

Yes, at a school there was a lot of discrimination from other students and also from the principal of the school I went to. Some teachers were very nice about the fact that we were from Afghanistan, but a lot of kids were not. And the worst part was for us who were from Afghanistan. We were always at the back of the class and we were always at the back of the line to get into the classroom.

How did being an Afghan growing up in Iran affect your identity?

When I was outside of a school, I didn't care where my family was from or what I am. I felt belonged when I was playing or when I was at home, but at school I always felt that I didn't belong there.

Where did you move from Iran?

We went to Turkey from Iran. We went to a border city called Urumia in Iran, and from there my family paid the smugglers to take us across the border to a town called Doğubayazıt in Turkey. And the trip was supposed to take about two hours, but there were some older people in the group with us and it ended up actually taking about 24 hours to get there. And once the police was very close to us, the border patrol, and we had to hide from them. I was about 10 or 11 years old at that time, and I remember that a lot of us, including me, slept on the stones that night. It was about 30 of us that the smugglers put into a van and it was really tight and there was no air to breathe and we had to tear apart the curtain that was above us in order to breathe. And when we arrived in Turkey, we went to Istanbul, which is a very big city and is a very difficult place for newcomers. And usually there is, people want to take advantage of people who just get here and are very vulnerable.

How was it living in Turkey as an Afghan refugee?

The first two years were not very easy. It was difficult, but we learned Turkish very quickly and my sister and I were working there, so after about seven to eight years, we felt pretty comfortable there and it felt like home and we left about 10 years after we got there.

How old were you when you started working in Turkey?

I started working in Turkey just a month after I arrived there. I was about 11 years old at that time and I worked at a tailor shop. That was the first place I worked in Istanbul. At first it wasn't very easy to work there, but gradually I learned the work and I got used to it. And there were some kids that were younger than me, as young as seven years old, who were working in that shop.

Was everyone in the tailor shop refugees?

Yes. Almost everyone in that shop were refugees and most of them were from Kazakhstan, but most of them had been in Turkey for a long time and then they had all their paperworks ready.

Did you went to school in Turkey?

No, I did not go to school in Turkey. I only took language courses in Turkey.

What was the main reason for you not being able to go to school?

Because we crossed the border and came to Turkey and then went to Istanbul. We didn't have the paperwork. We registered at the United Nations for refugee status, but they told us it would take many years for our case. And there were some issues in my family that delayed this process and after six years that I finally got the permit and paperwork to stay in Turkey, then my parents were divorced at that point and then my sister and I both had to work. We never had the opportunity to actually go to school in Turkey.

Did you experience any discrimination while living in Turkey?

Yes, me and my family, we faced discrimination based on our religion at work a lot. Me and my sister and my mother worked in the same tailor shop for many years, and because we were Shia Muslim, some of the other workers who are Sunni Muslims didn't want to be around us. For example, when my mom would go to pray in the praying area, no one else would enter that area at that time because she was Shia and to them they didn't want to be around her. And that made us feel very bad. And the area that we lived in Istanbul, there were not many Turkish people around. Actually, there were a lot of other immigrants from Pakistan, from there were a lot of Turkmen, there were a lot of Kazakhs and there were a lot of Uzbeks in our neighborhood and also a lot of Kurdish people.

When did you arrive in United States?

In 2023.

How did you arrive in United States?

So after we finally registered with the United Nation, which was six years after we arrived in Turkey, about three years after that, our case for United Nation was approved, but it happened to be at the time of the pandemic and our trip was delayed until 2023 that we arrived in Tucson.

What was it like when you first arrived here?

I came to Arizona after 10 years of living in Istanbul, so Tucson felt very quiet and small compared to there, and I got a little bit worried that I might not have many opportunities for work here when I first got here.

What has been the most difficult part of adapting to life in America?

Learning the language has been a little bit difficult for me.

How has your life changed since you moved to America?

The two other countries I lived in, Turkey and Iran, are Muslim majority countries, and in some ways the culture is very similar, so I felt very comfortable, but here it's different. I feel different, although I don't want to differentiate based on religion, but it's not the same thing.

What are some of the advantages of living in America?

The possibility that I can get an education here is a lot higher. It is hard to get a job, but I think I have more opportunities overall in the US than before.

What hopes do you have for your future?

I hope to become a role model for everyone who, like me, have had a difficult life, who has experienced a lot of discrimination for different reasons, and also have had an unstable family life, or has experienced divorce within their family. I want to be a role model for them, someone that shows that you can make it still, even if you have experienced a lot of difficulties in your life. If you never felt safe in your home or where you lived, but you can still make it and have a happy life and rely on yourself and be very strong. That's my hope.

If you could talk to Mozgan who has just arrived in US, what would you tell her? What would be your message?

If I ever meet my younger self, I would try to comfort her because I know she has experienced a lot of loneliness. I would tell her that you will be okay. And when I came to the United States

because I had already experienced Turkey, I felt a lot better. But if I visit myself when I first went to Turkey, I would tell her that don't be so lonely and you will be okay.