

Interview with Ms Zainab Rezaei

Interviewer: Fatima Framarz

Question: Welcome, Ms. Rezaei! Welcome!

Answer: Thank you, I'm very happy. Thank you for inviting me today for the interview. My name is Zainab Rezaei. I was born in 1962, in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. I am Hazara. We have four sons and one daughter, and all of them are married. I studied in Iran, and I am a midwife.

Question: When did you migrate to Iran?

Answer: Our story is like this: when we were in Bamiyan, I was about nine years old when I lost my mother, and we lost my mother in a very tragic incident when the kuchis attacked our area while I was still little. Someone spread a rumor that my older brother had been killed. My mother, who had just given birth, went out looking for him, fell into the river, and when they brought her back she was sick for about a year and a half and then died. That was a terrible incident. After that, we became migrants and went to Kabul for a while. From Kabul, because of these problems with the kuchis, we migrated to Herat, and from Herat to Iran. We lived in Iran for some time. Then in 1993 we went back to Afghanistan, when Najib was in power, I think. After that, when the first Taliban came, we fled again and returned to Iran. Then in 2001 we returned again to Afghanistan and went to Bamiyan.

Question: What do you remember from your childhood, the traditions that were common, the stories you used to hear?

Answer: Yes, our childhood, as you know, especially for people living in Afghanistan, particularly Hazaras in the central regions or villages, was not a happy childhood that I could describe as very joyful. We did have a large family, and our family was good, but the environment of society and the region created a traditional family structure. I was one daughter and I had six brothers, thank God, and all of my childhood was full of hardship. As I said, I lost

my mother at nine years old, and after that there was no woman in our house to take care of the others. There were even three younger brothers left behind, and I, at nine years old, took care of them. I used to go with them, cook food, wash clothes. This is how people's traditions were. I remember that at that time girls was not going to school at all. Only boys were going. People even paid money to keep boys from going, because they needed them for work. It was not that they said, "Don't go so you stay uneducated"; they said, "Don't go, work." Work as a shepherd for the family, farm, gather grass, gather firewood. Those things were common. I also remember the people's traditions: there was a lot of oppression and authoritarianism against women at that time too. People thought they were doing women a favor by not letting women go outside or girls go to school. They said they were doing something good. That was our childhood. It was not very pleasant. Adolescence was similar too.

Question: The traditions that, for example, your mother or grandmother passed on to you — you said that even though you were nine years old, you had to care for your three younger brothers after your mother died — were those traditions forced you to take on that responsibility? Was it more of a feminine role? What was it that pushed you?

Answer: Well, as I said, in those days, the traditions that were common in the region made everyone think that if a family had a girl in the house, that girl was responsible. Her age did not matter; whether she was young or old did not matter. She was a girl, so she had to cook, sweep, wash, and care for the house. It was not that someone directly told you to do this, but the traditions themselves created it. The traditions made even me, at nine years old, think that it was my duty to do these things. I had to wake up early, gather the children, give them breakfast, take them out, wash them. Even we ourselves thought that this was not something to question; it was a duty that we had to do.

Question: Did your parents ever tell you how they met and married? And can you compare that to how you met your husband and married? How traditional was it, or how much was your own choice?

Answer: I remember. My father later told the story that he had a first wife, and she was somewhat rebellious and did not respect the family much, so my father separated from his first wife. That was how things were in the old customs: they would say about a woman everywhere that she was a thief, or that she had stolen something from the house and sold it. In those days, it was common for women to take a little grain to a merchant and get dried fruit and other things to eat, because there was no money. Then they would say, “No, she is a thief; you must leave her.” He left her and separated from her. Then, when he became acquainted with my mother, it was not that they fell in love or got to know each other directly. My mother had an older sister, and my father, according to this story, would say, “I admire you,” for example. My aunt would say, “No, no, I am older than you; that makes no sense. I have a sister, talk to her.” He would talk to my mother’s sister, who would then go to my mother, and the proposal would go through. In fact, my father had not seen my mother at all. Then the families made decision and gave my mother to him, and later my mother gradually told me the story. My mother was very tall and my father was short. She said, “I had never seen you. If I had seen you up close, I might not have accepted you, because you were so short.” That was how my parents met — very traditional and in that old style.

As for me, after marriage there was no comparison at all. We used to say about the proposals we had that my father would say this one was good, another was good, and I would say, “No, Baba, what are you doing? Are you selling sheep, saying this one is good and that one is good? Whenever needed, I myself will tell you who I want.”

Question: So you definitely married in Iran? Please tell us about that.

Answer: We were in Iran. I was in my third year of university when my husband’s family came to ask for my hands in marriage. Of course, there is a relationship between our families: my father was related to his father through a cousin on his mother’s side. They said that so-and-so had come, my cousin’s son had come, and he had asked for your hand in marriage. I said no, until I finish my studies I have no intention of marrying. At that time we were the same age. Because I was a girl who had taken on responsibility in the house from age nine, I thought all

boys were little. He looked very ignorant to me. I would tell my father that I had seen the boy playing marbles in the street. How could I trust him? He said that at that age he played marbles, he would not do anything else.

Acceptance was very difficult. My father spoke for a few minutes and said, “They are not letting us as alone; let’s answer to them.” I said, “Until I make my own decision, I will not let anyone tell me what to do and what not to do. I need to know him.” After that, our acquaintance lasted almost four years before I answered that yes, it was good or bad. Later I thought to myself, and I said that my husband’s education degree was lower, only up to diploma level, while I had finished university. But that did not matter to me; what mattered was how to build a good life together. He was in migration, he worked, he had studied a little as well, but he worked. In the end I realized it would not work otherwise, because in Iran there had been a lot of drug addiction among the children of migrants. At least he was healthy. If I rejected this after four years, I thought maybe God would not let me fall into the hands of an unhealthy person. Those fears were there too. So we married, and thank God we had a very good life. We have five children from the marriage: four sons and one daughter. My children are successful. We migrated many times and moved these poor children from place to place. We took them to Afghanistan, to Iran, back to Afghanistan, back to Iran. And now they are here in the end. They did not pursue higher education that much. My daughter completed her higher education in Iran and then came here and studied nursing, and she currently is a nurse. All four sons established a construction business and thank God they are successful.

Question: What would you like to share about migration life? Of course, if you migrate to Iran, and now to Canada, there are differences. There they see migrants as guests and as extra people who take opportunities away from them. You finished high school there and then university too. You were probably looking for work before going back to Afghanistan. What was the situation like? What was life like as a migrant?

Answer: Migration is hard in any form. Especially when you are not that young. My migration to Canada happened when I was not young anymore. Here, everyone kind of got depressed if

they had to migrate at this age. But I was not like that. But if we compare it to migrating to Iran, I went there at the age of 10 or 11 — that is like earth and sky apart. In Iran, you were not counted as a migrant in the sense of being welcomed somewhere. You were more like someone who had been forced to occupy a place and had no other choice. Then, during our time, after the war, when the Iranian government changed and Afghanistan was also in war, some things came in: documents from the United Nations were given to migrants, and that opened the door for education a bit, so people went to study. In general, I think migration from Afghanistan was a golden opportunity for the Hazara people wherever they went. Golden because Hazaras got educated and in every corner of the world — whether in Pakistan or Iran, and of course in Western countries — there was no loss in leaving Afghanistan, because Hazaras had no property there and no political power either. When they migrated to Iran or Pakistan, because we are hardworking people and have also valued education, both girls and boys among Hazaras gained an education, and that became the greatest thing. If I compare my own family, when my father migrated and we were seven children: six boys and one girl. When we left Afghanistan, none of us were educated, not even my older brother. And all of us became educated in Iran and now, I think, our seven families each have about five or six children, and they have expanded. Those are the blessings we learned, whether we wanted to or not, from being forced into migration. If we had stayed in Afghanistan, others would not have allowed us to become educated.

Question: You said the Iranian government changed and the opportunity for education became available. Which government changed?

Answer: When we went there, Iran was under the Shah.

Question: Did Afghans not have the right to study then?

Answer: No, not then. Afghans did not have the right to study. When their republic came and those changes came, Afghanistan went to war. The Russians invaded Afghanistan, the war started, the mujahideen started, and then the unrest began after the war. That was when the United Nations intervened there and said that these Afghans who had come to Iran could not go

back to Afghanistan, so they gave them some papers so they could live there, and we received them and went to school. I went to school as an adult. That is how things changed. Otherwise, there were no changes in Iranian morals or law that would have accepted us. For example, all my children were born there in Iran, but in every document, they were written as Afghan. Even their United Nations cards said they were born in Bamiyan. They had actually been born in Iran. The change was not that we could say, "Because this child was born here, he belongs to this country." It was not like that. Later, compared with then, when I came here, I had all rights: work, freedom to speak, and nobody in the street or bazaar pointed at me as an Afghan. Nobody pointed at me as a Hazara and a woman like it was in Afghanistan. That was not the case. There were many differences. Hardship existed everywhere. We suffered a lot in Iran, and we suffered a lot in Afghanistan too. Here too we started as laborers. But I am happy that at least we were respected. That is the difference.

Question: You said that at one stage, before the first Taliban period, you returned to Afghanistan from Iran. Where did you stay there? How long did you stay? What do you remember from that period, and what was it like to live in Afghanistan as a Hazara?

Answer: In those years when we were still in Iran, I was part of a group of women activists for women's rights. We worked together in Mashhad.

Question: Were all the women Afghan?

Answer: Yes, all of them were Hazara. We worked under one umbrella. We had decided that if we went back to Afghanistan, we would continue our social activities. Personally, when I went back, I thought that if Afghanistan now had Najib as president and things were good, then when we went back we would continue. But we did not go beyond Herat because there was a border. We stopped in Herat and bought land there. We wanted to build something, and at that time the governor of Herat was Ismail Khan. Ismail Khan would not allow Hazaras to build on land. He said that whoever came from wherever should go back to their own place. "You, from Bamiyan, from Jaghori, you Hazaras, go to Hazarajat. You have no right here. Either take Tazkira (national

identity card or residency papers) here and do military service, and let your children serve in the army.” It was no longer a time for military service (doing military service law was no in effect anymore). Those things had changed. It was the oppression of that region itself: a rogue governor would stand up and say, “Go back to your own place.” At night people would raise the walls of their houses, and in the morning his soldiers would come and destroy them. That was one issue. Another was that I had started my social activities in the region and we stayed in Herat for only about eight months; after I had been working for eight months, the Taliban took over. When the Taliban came and took Herat, they were looking for those people to arrest them. Again, we found someone by night who took us back to Iran. We fled and went to Iran. If they had caught us, they had killed several well-known people the Taliban had captured, in a horrible way.

Question: When you returned to Iran, what kind of work did you do for the next four or five years you were there?

Answer: When we returned, our goal had not really changed, because we had not lost everything; we had a house in Iran back then, but we had sold our home and spent the money in Herat, and when we came back we returned empty-handed. We survived in a rented house without carpet and without dishes. Our only goal was that my children should go to school, and that was very difficult. It was very difficult. Schools would not accept them and would say, “You handed in your documents, you went away, they are cancelled.” But because I had become somewhat known, through the parties and organizations in Iran that worked with migrants, Afghan parties, Hazara parties, I went through them and got a letter saying that because we had fled from the Taliban, our children should be allowed to go back to school. They gave us a document, a temporary paper, saying the children could return to school. We started with great difficulty. After the children had gone to school there for a few years, we learned again that they (NATO) came Taliban were destroyed, America had come and struck them, and Karzai had come to power, so we went back. This time we went to Bamiyan. We went straight to Bamiyan. Then came the story of the ten years I spent in Bamiyan. I was there for almost ten years. There too were the same activities. Because I was a midwife, I went to Bamiyan Hospital, which was run by Aga Khan, Karim Aga Khan’s organization (Foundation), and I was employed there. I started

working there and, while working in the hospital, I also did social work and legal work with women. All of this was voluntary. At the same time, I was also the head of the local council. So I was very active, especially for the poor women who had rights and needed those things. Over those ten years, I did so much that if I had been a government, I could not have done that much for the people.

Question: You said before that you got a letter from migrant parties in Mashhad, Iran. By parties you probably mean civil activist groups or something like that, because migrant parties...?

Answer: They were political parties that had offices in Iran. Hezb-e Wahdat had an office, Harakat had an office. We mostly worked with the party that was ours, for example, other ethnic groups had other parties. There were many political parties with offices in Iran. We worked with Hezb-e Wahdat because it had an office. We went and got a letter from them. When we came back, because our children needed to continue studying and go back to school, we got a letter from them confirming us. We got approval, and then the Afghan council in Iran, the council for migrants there, accepted that letter and gave us a document.

Question: During the ten years you worked in Bamiyan, as someone living in the community, alongside your social and work activities for women, what traditions and customs were important to you? For example, we can mention Nowruz. How important were holidays, or deaths, burials, mourning, and such matters? How much did you like participating in them?

Answer: Of course, everyone in every region has their own customs and culture. We have both good and bad traditions; we have both good and bad cultural practices. Among the pleasant customs are the times when we come together, and the weddings you mentioned. Weddings were held, and I remember that I held my daughter's wedding in Bamiyan. I carried out the arrangements the way I liked. One day I saw a group of elders gathered in the region, and they were very upset with me, complaining that I had done something wrong. I was surprised at what wrong thing I had done. Because I thought, "It is our wedding, not yours." They said, "You don't know the custom of the region. We gather the elders one night before the event here, prepare

food in the region where we live, and give food to the elders. Then we share with elders that ew want to hold the ceremony this way, what can do to help us?” They said that would plan to help with everything. For example, there were some young people who might cause trouble or disturb the event, so they gathered them, talked to them, and prepared the food. They brought cooks and servants. All of that was done by the people. I really liked that. What a good kind of participation! I apologized and said I did not know this custom because I was very busy and not used to such things. They said, “It is fine, since you said it, fine. We will come tomorrow.” The whole program was handled by the elders; each of them took on one part, such as where to get the dishes, where to get the carpet, and where to arrange the men’s and women’s areas. They planned everything. I really liked that program and that culture of solidarity. They also had bad customs, of course, and we were unhappy with those. One such culture was the heavy dowry tradition. For example, when a daughter was given in marriage, the boy was told that he had to prepare these things. If you had so many relatives — uncles, maternal uncles, aunts — you had to give money to each one, pay a share to each. That was a culture that, if one didn’t have it, the boy would have to borrow money. Bring so many cows, so many sheep, so that tomorrow they can slaughter them and feed the people. Those were bad cultural practices, but overall, the people also had a very good culture. For example, in the matter you asked about, funerals and mourning: people would gather very well. If someone was poor, they would collect money.

Question: If a member of their family died?

Answer: Yes! If a poor family lost a member, others would gather in a circle of help so that the ceremony would go well, the burial would go well, and they would not suffer further harm. Those were very good cultural practices.

Question: How were the holidays?

Answer: Holidays had both a religious and a social aspect, but the religious aspect was more prominent among the people. For example, Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr were celebrated joyfully by the people. No one objected, because they were religious holidays. But Nowruz was divided

into two camps. Some people really liked Nowruz as a holiday, as the beginning of the year or as spring, as the start of a season or a new year. Others used it as an excuse, like the mullahs, to object among the people and say it was not ours and should not be celebrated. This created division and caused problems.

Question: What did the mullahs usually object about?

Answer: They said that Nowruz was not ours, it belonged to other people, and gradually the idea spread that Nowruz had come from non-believers. In the last years we were in Bamiyan, people celebrated Nowruz with a very big festival and a gathering. The boys and girls would gather, play dambura, dance, and recite poetry. But then these people interfered and said it was not ours, it was non-Islamic, it was this or that, why are you doing these things?

Question: They also held another festival every year. What was its name?

Answer: They often held the Silk Road Festival. In Bamiyan they held it in the summer. It was a festival that foreigners also supported. Their intention was for people to gather, be happy, remember their culture, and for the youth to show themselves. That was the idea. But again, it ran into those same problems; it kept running into the same objections that such things should not be held, and once again people were stripped of them.

Question: Do you remember these same holidays, Nowruz, weddings, from your childhood too? What were they like then?

Answer: I remember childhood, because I said I left Afghanistan at around 10 or 11 years old. I remember it, but not in a way that I have happy memories of having a holiday or anything like that. We did not have that. What I remember is that in those days, when Nowruz came, people made red halwa, gathered at the minbar (mosque) Or they gathered, bought a sheep, slaughtered it among themselves, divided it, and cooked it. I remember people gathering at the mosque and praying. I remember those things, but as a child I was not directly involved.

Question: What stories, songs, or proverbs do you remember hearing from your father, since your mother was not there?

Answer: My father was a very talkative man and told us many stories. People called them narrated tales, legends. I do not know whether they are true, but they were very interesting. May God have mercy on my father; he told these tales a lot. He told stories. I remember that when we were three younger children and three older ones, at night, when my father came home from work as a farmer, tired and exhausted, we would gather and ask him to tell stories. There was no electricity or anything else at that time. We would light a kerosene lamp and say, “Tell us a story.” The poor man would begin telling stories. In the middle of the story, sleep would overcome me, and I remember he would say that a “barzangi” came and went. Then I would ask how it came and went. He would say, “oh, I fell asleep.” He told very sweet stories. Later, Jawad Khawari, who I think lives in a European country, had written and collected stories in a book. He had come to Mashhad and recorded one story from my father. These are the stories he used to tell us in Afghanistan.

Question: Could you mention one of his stories briefly that you remember?

Answer: Of course! He told many stories. I remember that I especially liked the kind of story where at the beginning he would say something very long, something like: “There was and there was not, there was a Creator, there was no earth, there was no pasture, one came idle, ready for eating, sick for working.” That always pleased me because it was the opening line of every story, its introduction. Then he would say something like, “There was no pain in the heel, no dust behind the heel, he came and came, a kind of nonsense, the poor fellow’s elephant got stuck at the feet of a mouse.” I really liked those things. I would say, “Go on!” He knew many proverbs too. Several of the proverbs I use myself now were from my father. He would say that whenever a matter came up, so-and-so pulls the colt of a fox because of helplessness. At first it was just a little proverb from me; later I would say, “He is speaking the truth,” and in any situation I would remember that he was right. About people who, out of loneliness, rely on someone else who is not truly reliable — that person is not a proper person either. He would say, “So-and-so pulls the

colt of a fox out of helplessness.” The meaning is: if, for example, we think politically too, I often thought in Afghanistan that if you said, “Vote for so-and-so,” and a president came, there was no other acceptable person. But there was not really another person to vote for. He would say we are forced to take this one. In other words, he meant that since you do not know even a dog properly, this fox is fine too; let’s go with this one. Something like that.

Question: Something like choosing between bad and worse?

Answer: Yes, bad and worse. Another proverb he always used was: “work does not need force, it needs method.” He always said that. He said that when you do something, find the method; do not force it. Find the method, find the plan, and then the work becomes easy for you. He said work does not need force, it needs method. I really liked that. He knew many proverbs and many stories. I used those same things with my children from time to time. Even now my children say, “Oh, you said it like that.”

Question: When you returned to Afghanistan for the second time, what foods, crafts, or work were part of your family’s daily life?

Answer: In our family or among the people?

Question: Both your family and the people.

Answer: As for the people’s crafts, you know that in Hazara regions one of the sources of income and one of the benefits for the people is their handicrafts. Their first source of income is their own work and later it becomes income. For example, carpets that they themselves use were made from sheep’s wool. They would also make things at home from milk and yogurt and other items for their own use. Later, when we went to Bamiyan and many changes had come, women sold these things and earned money from handicrafts.

Question: How did they do that?

Answer: In Bamiyan we had many women's markets. They brought carpets made by women, bought them, and sold them. Hand-sewn clothes were brought to the market and sold. They even brought chaka (cured), qorut, and yogurt to the markets and sold those too, making money from them. That was how it was. But in our family, personally, we did not have any of that because we had no livestock, no cows, and nothing like that. Later I thought we should set up a chips factory, and that idea was also based on the thought that Bamiyan potatoes, which people cultivated, should be used in another way. I intended to expand this. I had made a long-term plan for myself, but unfortunately, I could not stay in Afghanistan and had to leave. That departure also had its own story, why I left. If you remember, in 2009 a law called the Personal Status Law for Shiites came out in the Afghan parliament, and both foreigners and the people protested against it. That law had been brought forward by a Shiite office, by Mr. Mohseni (Mohammad Asif or Sheikh Asif Mohseni), and the proposal was taken to parliament, which accepted it and had it officially published as law. The law had many articles, including some that I remember we protested about, especially articles concerning women. One of them said that if, under the Shiite personal status law, a husband disappeared for ten years, the wife had no right to leave; she had to stay and wait, without receiving any living expenses, to do whatever she had to do and remain there. That was one of its bad aspects. Another was that custody rights fully belonged to the husband, not the wife. If you had a child, the husband would get custody in the case of separation. We protested these things. I was in Kabul at the time, participating in a training from the Kabul hospital, when this happened. We gathered with a number of women and protested. After the protest, we went back to Bamiyan, and there was an uproar. In every mosque they gave speeches against me, saying that so-and-so had spoken against the Shiite believe, when that was not the case. But I still did not stop; I said, look, this is something people are saying, that is all it is. But in 2010 I ran as a candidate in the parliamentary election from Bamiyan. I ran independently; I said I would test myself. I had understood that I would not win votes, but I would test how aware people had become: whether they would vote for me after the things the mullahs said, or whether they would vote consciously themselves. Unfortunately, I did not win, and I was also very badly defamed. It even got to the point where a mullah gave a speech in the mosque saying we should go and burn Mrs. Rezai's house. Fortunately, people stopped it and said no, do not do that,

because at that time the governor of Bamiyan was Habiba Sarabi; do not do it or she will arrest you, what will happen to you? Then I saw there was no way forward; I had to flee. Otherwise, I had built that factory and thought long-term that I could expand it and make it international. But unfortunately, I fled Afghanistan.

Question: In the community where you lived, how was your Hazara identity expressed?

Answer: Bamiyan is mostly Hazara anyway. Bamiyan is mostly Hazara. Now let me tell you that today nobody can deny your identity, and nobody can say that we are not Hazaras. But there was a time. There was a time long ago — if we go back — when we came to Kabul from Bamiyan in the early days, people in the streets and bazaar would say not to walk there because they would hit you as a Hazara. And the insulting term they used, “Hazara mush-khor (mouse eaters),” would run through the streets. We were children. Now, in the second period when I returned to Bamiyan as an adult, no one could deny our identity or say I was not Hazara. We would say with great pride that we were Hazara. During the democratic governments that came to Afghanistan, if Hazaras were not allowed to move forward — because people themselves were pushing forward through force, that was political — in public or in the regions, no one could say no. For example, during Ashraf Ghani’s time, I remember I was in Canada when they wanted to introduce quotas for the Kankor (national university entrance exam.) That was something that showed Hazaras were people who, if we did not stop them, would fill all the universities and take all higher education. That was why they said because there are many Pashtuns, we have to set quotas so they do not get as many places. Those were political things, but in the rural regions, no one could deny your identity or what you were.

Question: Do you remember how your family interacted with other communities, non-Hazara communities? And with the Hazara communities that lived in your neighbouring region, how were the relations?

Answer: In general, relations with non-Hazara people were relatively good. It was like that between people. It was not as if, for example, if we had a Tajik neighbor, we did not know them

or they did not know us, especially since I worked in the hospital as a midwife in the maternity department. Many people from other districts, from Qandak and other districts that were non-Hazara, would come and find me and speak with me. We had good relations with them. But at a higher level, as I said before, politically these things became problematic; they could not be ignored.

Question: Have you or your family ever faced any particular problem because you were Hazara during the time you lived in Afghanistan?

Answer: In the beginning, yes. We said that the area where we lived in Bamiyan, where we lived the first time when my father was alive, had a lot of kuchi lands (pastures), and the kuchis would come with force and power and do whatever they wanted with people's lands — meaning they would eat the crops people grew with the camels and livestock they had. I remember when the kuchis came in the year we left, there was a war and Daoud Khan was in power. The kuchis themselves said that Daoud Khan had told them to eat the Hazara lands. If your sheep cannot eat it, then you yourselves should graze it with your teeth. That was very surprising to me, very painful. We had these problems in the early periods of childhood. But in the second period when we went back, unfortunately the same things were still common in Hazara areas. Consider that when the democratic government had also come, the Hazara people had voted for those people and, unfortunately, elected them. Still, the kuchis would rise again. Of course, not in Bamiyan, but in Behsud and other areas they were oppressing people. As a Hazara I remember we once went to Kabul for an association of Afghan midwives, which had been formed together with associations from other countries like the United States and others. At one of those meetings, there were two midwives from Kandahar. When one of our girls from Bamiyan, a very capable midwife, received a prize and answered all the foreign guests' questions, the Kandahari midwife said she was not very happy that Bamiyan had grown so much. There I understood how much work people were doing.

Question: You mentioned another issue earlier, about Ismail Khan, because you were Hazara and he did not allow you to build your own house in Herat. What happened to the land you had bought there?

Answer: We never built on the land. When the Taliban came, we left again and the land remained undeveloped. During the time of Ismail Khan, the night when we would have gone up, during the day it would have been overturned, so we did not build. That is how it was; we were living in a rented house. After the Taliban came and we fled, and later when things changed and Karzai came, when we went back again we sold it — that land. We sold it because by then Ismail Khan was no longer there. We sold it and not at the price we had bought it for then. We let it go.

Question: Please tell us why you decided to migrate from Afghanistan to Canada. What was the reason, and what was the journey like for you?

Answer: In Bamiyan, as I mentioned earlier, I was almost an active social worker and political activist and, also, active among the people, and I got into trouble for several things. One was the protest we made against an anti-women law in Kabul, which was wrongly interpreted, and people said I was anti-Islam and anti-religion. When I returned to Bamiyan, there was a huge uproar. After that I ran for parliament in 2010. And there, because I did not get votes, in every region of Bamiyan where I went, I heard people saying, “You are the one who said you came out against religion?” No, I said, by God, I did not come out against religion. Well, because of that I was forced to leave Afghanistan. When I had a project, through that project I had submitted a list in Kabul to the US embassy, and they accepted me for a training in the United States. I came to the training in the United States, then decided not to go back. Although that decision was very hard for me, because I had just begun to understand what homeland meant. I did not really have a homeland in the usual sense. Only in those ten years in Bamiyan did I realize that the people themselves must build this homeland. But I was forced to leave because of my children, just as at one time I had told the story that my father had to leave Afghanistan because of the kuchis. I too had to leave because of my children, because there the children would be ruined. If one day they burn my house, if one day they take my children’s life away, what would I do here? I came, and

I did not go back. I came to Canada. What was interesting here is that when I came to Canada, I did not know English. When I told some people I was going to Canada, everyone said I did not have a visa, that in order to get into Canada you definitely needed documents and that the border would not let you through. I decided no, I was coming to Canada. I liked Canadian law more, especially regarding women. Then I came to New York, took a train from New York to Toronto, and settled here. Although this path was not especially difficult for me, I made it through. I came here and for the first five years I was alone. Even though I did not know the language and did not know anyone in Toronto, I was alone for the first five years. I worked, studied, went to school, and learned English, hoping that one day I would start midwifery again, but I could not. I had to give up that career. I started cooking. In the way that Afghan women, and especially Hazara women, are good cooks, I started doing that too. I said I would do this. Then after five years I asked for my family to come. After five years my family came. Then my children got married, everyone brought their wives, and that is how I stayed here.

Question: You said you did not know the language. What belief helped you succeed?

Answer: The belief I had was that in all these hard years, wherever I went and migrated, even internal migration is migration. I got through it successfully. Wherever I went, I made my place, built my community. I was almost not above everyone else, but I was also not behind anyone. That belief carried me forward: I can do it. How can I not? I went and started school in my first year. I went to the elementary classes that teach the alphabet. Then I went to adult school. I studied there for three years. Then when I took the exam to go to university or college and study again, I did not plan for university; I wanted to study at college and take midwifery, but there was no such college. It was a problem! And for university, I had to attend fully. And my Iranian certificate was not accepted either. And when that happened, I went to a couple of bridge courses, short-term courses. I went for a while, thought for a week or two, and saw that this was really hard for me. Because when we studied, we did not study in English. My English was not strong enough. Another thing was that I was very weak with computers, so I said no, it all has to be done with this. Then I gave up. I said no, I cannot. I came and took a job in the place where I now work.

Question: What does being a Hazara mean to you today?

Answer: Today, being Hazara is an honor! For me, as a person from Afghanistan, as a woman from Afghanistan, today being Hazara is an honor. Hazara women, Hazara men, Hazara elders, Hazara youth — you do not see anyone who does not think about culture, progress, and education. All of them try. They try both for the progress of the community and for the progress of the country. I remember that in Afghanistan, when democracy (post 9-11 period republics) came and the law said do not grow opium, Hazaras did not grow it. When they said do not carry weapons, Hazaras given up on their weapons first. When they said come to the ballot box, Hazaras went. When they said fill the universities, Hazaras went. Hazaras were the ones who obeyed democracy and obeyed the law, but still people felt bad about these things and asked why it was like this, why should they progress like this? Today I am proud that I am Hazara.

Question: So, can I conclude that being Hazara today means struggle and effort for progress for you?

Answer: Yes! Very much so. In every field. Even now our non-Hazara friends in Canadian society say, “Why are you still working at this age?” My answer would be what should I do, If I do not work? They would say that the government gives you money; just stay home and pray and read. I would be like, no, we were not raised like that. I tell them that we Hazaras grew up like this: day and night we ran for a clean and halal bite of bread and got it and ate it, so that we would not be a burden on the government or on society. We were taught that. Now I teach that to others too. That is why we say being Hazara is an honor.

Question: What traditions do you hope Hazara youth will preserve in the future, especially those born and raised in Canada? They are Hazara but Canadian.

Answer: In my view, the first step is that the future generation, the generation that grows up here, should consider being Hazara an honor. Because many of the communities they grow up among, these young people also think of other non-Hazara Afghans as just Afghans, all mixed together. We have seen many people who do not say, “We are Hazara”; they say, “We are

Afghan.” First, every family should say that Hazara is an ethnic group, a proud ethnic group of Afghanistan, and that must be preserved. Second, the Hazara language and culture must not disappear. They should be taught in the family. Because you and I know that a part of the human brain, if you have your mother tongue, your mother dialect — by mother dialect I mean a Persian language that we have, no, it is a regional dialect. These things make our children grow up smarter, more active, and prouder. That is why these things should be taught in the family. My children, although born in Iran, all three of them speak and also play dambura. When we were in Iran, we had a neighbor, outside of the issue, who lived across from us. He was Hazara too, but I think he had an Iranian identity card, and when he would come from our house, he would tease me, saying that my child was born in Iran, and I would say, where is your Koshira (shoes)? I say this jokingly. We are Hazara. He would ask, “Why did you teach them that?” What do the Iranians understand? I would say, what do I care what the Iranians understand? We speak among ourselves. Or for example, my child would call out, asking where “Kiin” is. We had a kind of bread that we called kiin bread. He would object and say, “Why did you teach your child kiin?” These things must not be forgotten by the generations. That should continue. Pride!

Question: What advice do you have about hard work?

Answer: Hard work is something I think is in our blood; I do not think it is something that passes from one generation to another automatically. For example, my family’s father was a hardworking farmer who fed his seven children and handled other life matters too; that passed on to the seven of us. And we passed it on to our children, so now our children are also hardworking, though not automatically. I think it is something that happens when, as a person in the home, you make a lot of effort. I said a Hazara never becomes lazy. Whether little or much, it does not matter. And because it goes from generation to generation, it moves forward by itself. I do not think it needs advice; it is something rooted deeply.

Question: What message would you like to leave for the future generation from yourself?

Answer: As a Hazara, as someone who has seen and traveled in parts of several countries, my advice to the future generation is that they should be honest with themselves, honest with their ethnic group, honest with their work, honest with their life, and this honesty will be the place where success in life begins.

Question: Is there anything specific that gives you hope about the future generation, or on the contrary, worries you?

Answer: Yes! Everyone has their own concerns. My current concern for the future Hazara generation is that, because they have mixed with other communities, and some people deny their identity a little, the concern is that others will again work on the minds of these young people. There should not be any program to brainwash people again. That is one of my concerns, especially for those who live in Islamic countries. My hope is that the Hazara generation is progressing very quickly. In the years since I came here — it has been 14 or 15 years in Canada now — I see that in many Western countries and countries outside Afghanistan, our young generation is even sitting in political seats. That gives me a lot of hope that this progress continues. In sports, in politics, in academic education, our youth are moving forward. That is hope, and it makes me very hopeful that our generation is creating real pride. Of course, everyone also has their own worries.

Question: What message do you have for other Canadians? What would you like other Canadians to understand about Hazaras, their history, and their culture?

Answer: My clear message to non-Hazaras and Canadians, and even non-Canadians, is to go and study. They should know the Hazara generation from the beginning. They should know Hazaras from the time Abdur Rahman did what he did, from the time of democracy in Afghanistan and the honors Hazaras brought then. They should know Hazaras from the times they were targeted in every terrorist incident. They should know Hazaras at the time when, in all the happy ceremonies, they want to be happy, want to be joyful, and want to have noticeable progress. If

they study, they will see how many Hazaras outside Afghanistan are active. They work day and night to get somewhere. That is what I expect from them: to study.

Question: Is there anything I did not ask that you would like to add yourself?

Answer: What I want to add is that we should tell the younger generation that Hazara social activities should be given more work. It should not be treated as something that is simply handed to us and we carry it out as a project. It should be done much more than that, so that Hazaras become known.

Thank you!

Hazaragi or Hazaragi-leaning terms in order of use

- مام خوش شدم — “I became very happy” / “I was very pleased.”
- مره دعوت کدید — “You invited me.”
- استوم — “I am.”
- د دنیا امدیم — “We came into the world” / “We were born.”
- کوچی‌ها — “Kuchi nomads,” a nomadic Pashtun group in Afghanistan, often mentioned in historical land conflicts.
- او نا — “those ones” / “those people.”
- بچیکچا — “small children” / “little kids.”
- کالن / کلانه — “big” / “older” / “elder.”
- چیشله — “marbles” or a marble game.
- هزاره موشخور — a derogatory phrase used against Hazaras; roughly “Hazara mouse-eater.”
- کار زور کار ندره، درد کا دره — “Force has no effect; method/skill does.” The sense is: don’t force things, use the right approach.
- نقلای اوسانه — “folk tales,” “legendary stories,” or “storytelling/recited tales.”
- دبله بام — likely referring to a communal rooftop or gathering spot; in context, a place where people gathered to pray or celebrate.
- قروت / قروتی — dried yogurt products; **qorut/qurut**, a traditional Afghan dairy food.

- چکه — likely **chaka**; thick strained yogurt, often used as a food item or condiment.
- کین — a local Hazara term for bread or a specific type of bread in context.
- جارو پارو — “sweep and clean.”
- ایسو — “here” in some Hazaragi speech.
- ریزه — “small,” “little,” “young.”
- بنده خدا — literally “God’s servant,” used affectionately as “the poor man,” “the poor fellow,” or “that person.”
- دمی — “this much” / “that much” / “so much,” used for emphasis.
- دای سن — “at this age.”
- اوږو — “that way,” “like that.”
- موکد / چپه موکد — “raised it up / turned it upside down” or “built it up / tore it down,” depending on context.
- هویت — “identity” or “presence” in the sense of social identity.
- قندک — likely a place name, a district or locality in Afghanistan.
- هزاره‌گی / هزاره‌ی — “Hazara-ness” / “Hazara.”
- دمبوره — the **dambura**, a two-stringed Afghan lute associated especially with Hazara music.
- حلواى سرخ — “red halwa,” a sweet dish traditionally made for celebrations.
- میله / مله — “festival,” “fair,” or “gathering.”
- هلو / غوغایه — “uproar,” “commotion,” “chaos.”
- بچای مرع — likely “my poor children” / “children left vulnerable,” depending on the exact local pronunciation.
- دایره کمک — “circle of help,” meaning a group that collects money or support for someone in need.
- دُرد کا — likely the Hazara pronunciation of “method/way” in the proverb; the sense is “skill/approach matters more than force.”
- شاغلی — in context, a messenger or informant; the exact sense may vary by local usage.
- سرپرست — “caretaker,” “head of household,” or “guardian.”
- مفاد / سودا موکد — “sell” / “trade” / “make a deal.”

- **مخصد** — likely “purpose” or “intended.”
- **هزار یوم** — “I am Hazara.”