

When I left Iran - “I can’t help but remember those years when I see refugees being turned back at the US border due to Trump’s Executive Orders”

Wednesday 22 February 2017, by [NAMAZIE Maryam](#) (Date first published: 7 February 2017).

The below is the unedited piece for #Iamamigrant campaign.

I left Iran in 1980 with my mother to go to India to continue my education after my school closed down. My mother was meant to settle me in and return but stayed when things got worse. After a few months, my father and 3 year old sister joined us. I was 13.

Things were changing quickly in Iran after the Islamists took over and crushed the hopes and dreams of the Iranian revolution. I can still remember the ongoing executions on TV, the bodies of women being blacked out with markers on magazine covers, Islamists coming to my school to segregate the boys from girls in the playground whilst we ran circles around them, and the dirty looks I got from hezbollah-types for not being veiled (it hadn’t been made compulsory yet).

The day I left with my mother was not meant to be the last time I ever saw Iran, or my grandmother, or some of my closest family and friends. If I had known I would never be able to return, I would have paid more attention to the little details. I would have hugged my grandmother more closely. When she died, we could not even return for her funeral.

In May 1983, my mother, sister and I arrived in New York, three days before my 17th birthday (via India and Britain where we were not given residency). The immigration officer confiscated our passports at the airport but let us in temporarily. What a relief to see my father again; he had come earlier to prepare for our arrival.

I’ll never forget the day we got to our new home. It was early morning when we arrived at our flat – or at least that is how I remember it. There were mattresses on the floor and a TV in the living room – that’s it. My father took us to Pathmark, a supermarket near us, where we gawked at how big it was and that it was open 24 hours a day.

From that day on, my parents worked hard – starting from scratch; sometimes treated so unfairly. I joined university, whilst working part-time, and my little sister started school. It was difficult for the first few years, especially for my parents. But we were one of the lucky ones. Our family was given a lifeline when we were granted US residency and later citizenship – that piece of “paper”, which is often a matter of life and death, and the difference between being labelled legal and “illegal”.

I can’t help but remember those years we moved around trying to find a place to call home when I see Iranians and refugees being turned back at the US border due to Trump’s Executive Orders. The insecurity and fear still returns whenever I cross a border where I often have to remind myself that my papers are in order.

I moved to Britain in 2000 where I now live and campaign for human rights, secularism and freedom of expression and belief. My retired parents still live in Yonkers, New York in the same flat; my sister teaches at a Yonkers public school.

Though I have lived outside of Iran more than inside it, it is still a part of who I am. But so is Britain where I now live and so is the US where I feel just as much at home when I return to visit my parents and sister.

Home for me is definitely where one lives and loves and struggles.

In this day and age, migrants and refugees are often criminalised and dehumanised, and deemed “different” but the only real difference is that piece of paper. Move beyond it and we meet where our common humanity resides.

Maryam Namazie

P.S.

* On February 9, 2017:

<http://maryamnamazie.com/when-i-left-iran/>