

Hello everyone, my name is Mahyar, and I am an Iranian-Canadian psychotherapist living with my family in Toronto, Canada. First of all, I want to thank you all for joining this heart-warming witnessing call. It means a lot to me and to the Iranian community around the globe. This is the time that we need our voices to be heard, and show the dictatorship in Iran that Iranian women and men are not alone and more importantly no one can rule with brutality and oppression in this world, and I am absolutely sure that sooner or later love, unity, and solidarity will take its place. This movement is far from over.

I need to say, I feel honoured to be here and be representing my fellow Iranians. But at the same time I am very anxious because I know that whatever I say will not do justice to what people have been experiencing for the past 44 years in Iran.

I myself was raised in Iran after the revolution, and my first childhood memories are mostly about running down the stairways to the basement of our house with my parents and grandparents after hearing the sirens due to the bombing of Iraqi jets in Tehran. A war which lasted for eight years.

Due to the very strict religious laws, as a child I experienced Iran as a country where we had to keep two faces, The first was how we could be with our family and friends inside our homes and behind closed doors, and the second was how we had to be outside in public. I remember my parents serving alcohol when friends came over, and we would listen to western music such as Bob Dylan, and the Beatles, but I was told that in school I should never ever speak about these things and we all very well knew what we could and couldn't speak of. We also knew the consequences if we spoke about what happens in our homes. Getting arrested and whipped, to just name a few.

As a teenager, getting arrested by the police was always a possibility that we carried with us every day. Getting arrested for a simple colourful t-shirt or a certain hairstyle, for being seen with a female friend, for attending a house party, for listening to pop music, for basically being a teenager... and it would be even much much worse if you were a woman.

As time went on, nothing got better, the police became harsher, the political and religious oppression became stronger, the economy is collapsing, and living costs are skyrocketing. As a result, people were realizing that unfortunately Iran is no longer a place to live in, and therefore, immigrating to other countries became a priority for many many Iranians.

**MARYAM:** For the same reasons, with the hope of creating a better life for ourselves and our future children, my wife and I immigrated to Canada. We were the lucky and privileged ones who were able to do so.

But leaving a country which you have grown up in, leaving everything you have achieved and created for yourself, your parents, loved ones, friends, your support, your work, and

having to start from scratch in a new country as an immigrant, is surely not an easy journey.

Pause...

But we are here now... able to tell you a story... the story of the collective experience of the Iranian people, and specially the Iranian women, and I want to share a brief history of the struggles the Iranian people have faced and their bravery and resistance to this day. This does not include all events that brought pain and suffering to the people of Iran, but are the ones that may have been more influential in the path to today's events.

Iranian women are strong, they have always been the forefront of any political movement in Iran, especially the ones that have been successful. The Iran Revolution in 1979 was no exception. Many Women, regardless of their belief system participated in the revolution, hoping to bring a more just, free and democratic government to rule the country.

**MAHYAR:** Soon after they ousted the Shah, the revolution turned against them. And Khomeini took power. They had underestimated the strength and organization of fundamentalist religious forces and were soon marginalized with Sharia laws imposed on their basic human rights including child custody, the right to divorce, to study, to leave the country and to work. Amongst those were strict dress codes and mandates regarding covering their hair.

As time passed, involvement in the Iraq War, pursuing the development of nuclear capability and the resulting sanctions and their impacts, meant many couldn't provide for their families. 2 jobs weren't enough. Many lost family members due to medical equipment and medication shortages. Political and religious discourse was restricted and whoever opposed the conduct of the regime was imprisoned, tortured, raped and executed.

Since the beginning of the Islamic revolution, there have been several significant waves of large protest movements, which were quickly silenced by the regime. In 1999, a peaceful protest at Tehran University was violently suppressed by the paramilitaries, resulting in 300 hundred people wounded and thousands detained. In 2009, another wave of protest began in response to the regime fixing an election to re-elect Mahmud Ahmadinejad. It became the biggest political movement since the Iranian revolution and brought men and woman back to the streets.

26-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan, an aspiring musician, was shot and killed in Tehran while protesting, and the video of her death shook the world. Agha-Soltan's death became iconic in the struggle of Iranian protesters against the government. Many more were killed, imprisoned and tortured in following days.

In 2020 a passenger plane was shot down by the Iranian revolutionary guard. Of the 176 passengers who were killed, 146 were Iranians. This outraged the Iranian people as well as the international community. Iranians continued to struggle with massive economic hardship from international sanctions. The government tripled the gas price in one day igniting street protests that quickly turned violent. The government shot down the internet and brutally murdered 300–1500 people in the street in 6 days.

I want to emphasise that the Iranian people never stopped trying. PAUSE I spoke about women and men being oppressed by the regime and sharia laws, this never meant they were helpless or hopeless. They struggled and fought back, many with the support of their brothers and partners and fathers, and raised children who are more educated, more informed, more courageous.

**MARYAM:** Which brings us to this past year...

Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman, was taken by “morality police” in Tehran because a bit of her hair was showing in public. She was beaten and died in their custody. The innocence of this young lady and the cruelty of the Iranian regime has deeply broken everyone's heart. To the point that Iranians are saying ‘enough is enough’ and have united in this historical movement from north to south, from east to west, shouting in streets of Iran ‘Women, Life, Freedom’. X2

This time is different... Iranian people, specially women and the young generation had shown a great deal of bravery, burning their scarfs and dancing in the street as a symbol of women's right and freedom. They organized the protests in the streets literally looking death in the eyes.

More than 500 protesters including 70 children have been killed by the regime since the start of the protests. Close to 20,000 have been imprisoned, and the regime is using them as hostages, sentencing them to death and executing them when it fits their purpose. Many have been kidnapped, raped, tortured, and some have committed suicide after they were released on bail. We are no longer looking at a protest, this is a revolution. Although the government has been able to reduce the intensity of events... we believe this is a fire still burning under the ashes... the ashes of hopes and dreams burned... the ashes of

the most beautiful children of the world, buried. PAUSE We have given back to the graves the liveliest sounds and the most joyful souls. We need to make their death mean something. We need to sail through darkness together into the light." This is not over... in just a few weeks on September 17<sup>th</sup>, Iranians around the globe will mourn the anniversary of the death of Mahsa Amini...and then Hadis and then Milad, and then Kian and then Elahe and then all of the 500+ brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers and children we lost... we will not cry... we will fight...

We are mourning, we are outraged, we are at war!

This started as a women's revolution with their brothers, fathers, sons by their side. We are resilient, we are hopeful, and we are fearful. Our fallen need us to remember them and our brave youth in prison need us to shout their names...

Please please be their voice.

I invite you to watch this video with us. This song called "Baraye" was written by Shervin Hajipour and quickly became the anthem for Women Life Freedom movement. In the early days of the movement, a trend started on Twitter that started with the word "baraye" meaning "because of" in English. In which Iranian people were listing why they are participating in this movement, what are they fighting for... Shervin made that into a song... let's watch...

Thank you....

### **Short Bio of Mahyar and Maryam**

**Mahyar Zaud** is a registered psychotherapist, with more than 17 years of experience in working with trauma and PTSD. He has consulted social enterprises internationally to develop trauma informed programs and workshops, and to implement trauma-informed organisational culture.

**Maryam Sabzevari** is a Senior Planner Urban Designer at the City of Toronto and a Professor at Seneca Polytechnic. She is also a mother and a Yonge Iranian-Canadian passionate about her homeland.