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SODABA RAHMATY

Interviewed by: Rick Driscoll
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INTERVIEW

Q: Good afternoon. Today is August 28th, 2024. This is Rick Driscoll doing an interview with Sodaba Rahmaty as part of our Afghanistan oral history project. Sodaba, welcome.

RAHMATY: Thank you, Rick. I'm Sodaba Rahmaty, and I'm thrilled to be part of this amazing project. I look forward to sharing some valuable and impactful insights.

Early Life, Education, Working for the UN World Food Programme

Q: Well, thank you. I'm sure you will. The first area that we'd like to discuss is your life up to the summer of 2021—where you grew up, your education, and where you worked.

RAHMATY: I was born in Kandahar during a democratic period in Afghanistan, though the country was still war-torn. I grew up in an educated family. My father had a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering and worked in multinational companies and the Afghan government. My mother was a housewife but very determined. She loved learning and shared everything she learned with us. Like many strong Afghan women, my mother took great care of me and my siblings. I am the youngest of six sisters and one brother. After my father passed away when I was eight, my mother continued to support us through every challenge.

Because of the wars, my parents moved several times between Kabul, Kandahar, and Nimroz. I was born in Kandahar, but later, my father moved us to Nimroz, where he started a small business and ran an engineering shop. Nimroz is a small town where I attended elementary school.

Eventually, my mother moved us back to Kabul to pursue better educational opportunities, as the capital offered more options. I joined Alfath High School and later completed my undergraduate degree at a private university in Kabul. While pursuing my undergraduate degree, I started my career with national and international non-profit organizations. These experiences greatly enhanced my skills and perspectives, contributing to both my personal and professional development.

Q: What was your area of study? What was your degree in?

RAHMATY: I hold a Bachelor of Science degree in Finance. During Afghanistan's twenty years of democracy, I witnessed women, men, and children gaining more opportunities for education and growth. In my third year of university, I was eager to develop my skills, which led to an internship with the United Nations World Food Programme [WFP].

Shortly after, I secured a position at the WFP headquarters in Kabul, where I applied the knowledge and skills I learned in university until I graduated. I also worked as a volunteer and leader for youth and girls. I focused on business and financial support roles in my professional career in Afghanistan.

Q: Then you went to work for the United Nations World Food Programme?

RAHMATY: I started working for non-profit organizations before joining the WFP. Two of these non-profits were directly funded by USAID and NATO.

Q: What did you do at the World Food Programme? Did you cover the whole country or just particular regions?

RAHMATY: I worked in the WFP compliance unit for nearly three and a half years until December 2021. I was based at the main country office in Kabul, which served as Afghanistan's headquarters, reporting directly to WFP headquarters in Rome.
Living and working in Kabul was extremely challenging. Every day, we faced the constant threat of attacks. Civilians, students, and worshippers were frequently killed, despite claims that the conflict only targeted the government and military. Despite the fear and uncertainty, we held on to hope and refused to give up.

My office relocated three times due to ongoing threats. One major incident near the Green Village in Kabul occurred just after my colleagues and I had left work. Had we stayed a few minutes longer, we likely would have been killed. This was the harsh reality for many Afghans—living in constant danger yet striving to move forward.

Q: This was in December, 2021?

RAHMATY: Yes, December.

Q: That was after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban.

RAHMATY: Yes, that was after the fall of Afghanistan. We were working remotely before and after the fall. I moved to the United States on September 1, 2021.

<u>The Fall of Afghanistan and Getting to Kabul Airport</u>

Q: Let's talk about your time before leaving Afghanistan. Nimroz was the first province that fell, right?

RAHMATY: Yes, Nimroz was the first city to fall, surprisingly. I left Nimroz as a teenager to move to Kabul, but it remains deeply connected to my roots. It is the city where my father passed away and where he sought refuge after being threatened by the first Taliban regime.

When we first heard that Nimroz was under attack, we couldn't believe it. Nimroz, located in the southwest of the country, had been one of Afghanistan's safest cities. My family later confirmed that the Taliban had invaded the city, which felt surreal. Unfortunately, most military forces were ordered to stand down, although some resisted and were killed. My cousin was among those who fought back, but since it was an agreement, the others left the battlefield.

The news was beyond anything I could have imagined. What's next? Will they take Kabul and other major cities, too? What is happening? A flood of questions filled my mind: Are we headed for a new war? Will we all die? How are we supposed to accept a new regime? What about the 20 years of progress that my generation worked so hard for? What will happen to the children who have lost their parents or the innocent students killed in schools and universities?

The period from Nimroz's fall to the fall of Kabul felt like a never-ending nightmare. Sleepless nights, hopelessness, and helplessness took over—a feeling I'm sure many Afghans who opposed the situation shared.

Q: Did the WFP have a plan of evacuation for you and other staff members?

RAHMATY: No, they didn't. Instead, they requested that everyone, for safety reasons, fill out forms so they could print documents similar to a UN passport—essentially diplomatic passports that could be used if the situation worsened. However, we never used them, even when things changed. We didn't leave the country using those documents. Before the fall of Kabul, I had already connected with resettlement agencies in the United States to ensure that my family's names and mine were on the evacuation list.

Q: So what happened on August 15th? How did you find out that President Ghani had left the country and the city had fallen?

RAHMATY: Before August 15th, from the time the Taliban took over Nimroz until they advanced to Kabul, their progression seemed almost effortless for many cities. They invaded Nimroz province on August 6th and reached Kabul by August 15th, almost in the blink of an eye. During this time, people spoke constantly about the uncertain future. Even my organization was hesitant to provide reassurance about women's work and rights in any situation.

On the morning of August 15th, a few cities were still standing before the Taliban entered Kabul. I was living in Share Naw, Kabul, and when I looked out from my balcony, the city's usual spirit was gone. Everyone was rushing somewhere, and traffic was completely blocked. When my mom returned from the bakery, she told me she'd heard that the president had fled the country, and the Taliban were entering. I contacted my work team, but they weren't sure what was happening until the news confirmed that the presidential palace was empty. This shattered my dreams and those of many others—it felt like our wings had been broken. Within a few hours, Kabul's streets emptied as everyone rushed home.

Q: That must have been a shock.

RAHMATY: After a few hours, the Taliban, waving white flags, flooded the streets of Kabul. They took down Afghanistan's largest flag from the Wazir Akbar Khan hill. My heart broke—it was unbearable. I couldn't stop thinking: How are we supposed to live under a flag we didn't choose, forced to accept whatever rules they impose just to stay alive?

Q: What made you decide that you wanted to leave the country?

RAHMATY: A couple of months before August 15th, I had been in touch with several organizations in the United States and Canada. Two of these organizations added me and my family to their evacuation lists. Of course, I was choosing an uncertain future in an unknown environment over the danger of staying where I was. On that list were my mom, my sister, and my nephew. Since women weren't allowed to leave the country without a male family member, I included my nephew, who was living with us at the time. Unfortunately, my brother and his family couldn't join us.

Q: This is two or three months before the fall of Kabul, in June or July?

RAHMATY: It might have been in July, but I'm not sure of the exact timing. There was a lot of back-and-forth discussion about the process: if we wanted to leave, what would happen, when it would take place, and from where we would depart.

Q: Did you add your six sisters?

RAHMATY: No, unfortunately, one of my sisters was part of the same evacuation process as us. She was on the list, but after the explosion at Kabul airport, the organization stopped the evacuation process. As a result, she was left behind and is still in Afghanistan.

Q: The sister that accompanied you was your younger sister?

RAHMATY: She is my older sister. She graduated from medical school in Afghanistan and was supposed to complete her residency to become an MD. However, her six years of

hard work seemed wasted when her school was shut down. After moving to the United States, she was finally able to complete her second bachelor's degree.

Q: I understand.

RAHMATY: From August 15th to the 24th, no one in my home got any sleep. Every few minutes, a new airplane would fly overhead. Each day, while I waited for the agency's call, we remained uncertain about what would happen in the next few hours.

Q: What did you do next?

RAHMATY: I reached the first gate of the airport with my mom, sister, and nephew. We were close to the airport, but not yet at the gate, waiting anxiously. Crowds of thousands—likely even more—had gathered around the airport. The Taliban were everywhere, armed and firing shots into the air. They were beating people, including women, without reason and shouting at everyone to stay away from the gate.

As we waited at the first gate, I noticed the Taliban weren't just stopping locals—they were also turning away many international journalists. I saw two journalists, likely from Europe, trying to get closer to the gate. The Taliban refused to let them through and became furious when they attempted to take pictures of the scene.

Q: Was this at the Abbey Gate?

RAHMATY: Yes, the Abbey Gate. The journalists eventually left the area. We remained near the first gate, still waiting. Then, we finally reached the U.S. military.

Q: So you got past the Taliban?

RAHMATY: We were allowed through because we were all females, and they let us enter the airport.

Q: Your nephew stayed behind?

RAHMATY: Yes, he stayed behind because he couldn't pass the second gate. Once we entered the base, I saw U.S., British, and Australian camps all around us. The first person I met was a British soldier. He spoke to me and asked, "Where do you want to go? What documents do you have?" I remember carrying all my documents and letters from my previous employers, along with my UN card.

Q: You were showing them your documents?

RAHMATY: Yes, I had to, as it was a required check at the airport. I didn't know where to go or what direction to take. A soldier said he would let me speak with a U.S. consular officer inside the airport.

Q: He was a U.S. consular officer?.

RAHMATY: Yes, he was the main person in charge. I spoke with the official and explained to him that it was me, my sister, and my mom. I mentioned that my nephew had come with us but was now stuck on the other side of the gate with the Taliban, and I wanted him to reunite with us. I told him my nephew was waiting between the two gates. The officer said he couldn't leave at that moment, so he assigned a U.S. soldier to accompany me to bring my nephew back.

Q: Did that work out?

RAHMATY: Yes, they helped us and were very supportive. One of the soldiers was assigned to accompany me to get my nephew. We approached the Taliban, gave them his name, and explained that he needed to pass through the second gate so we could reach the base and leave. After some negotiations—the Taliban were initially reluctant—they finally allowed him to enter the airport.

Once we had him with us, I asked the soldier if we could go to the Canadian camp. He responded, "Why not the U.S. camp? Why are you leaving us for Canada?" I think he was a bit disappointed that I chose another country over the United States.

We ended up at the U.S. base inside the airport, where there was a tent encampment. We stayed there while they began registration, checked our documents, and completed the biometric process. Early in the morning, at 7:00 a.m. on August 25th, we boarded a plane and left the country for Qatar.

Evacuation to Doha and then Germany

Q: That was actually pretty fast compared to some other people.

RAHMATY: Yes, it was honestly fast. We left our house in the evening on the 24th and departed the country at 7:00 a.m. on the 25th. We didn't stay long. I saw many people around the airport spending the night. Some told us they had been at the airport for almost a week, with no food or anything.

When we arrived and spoke to the consular officer, they quickly put us on a plane to leave the country. It all happened pretty fast, though we had to wait in long queues to board the plane. It was a military aircraft, and I'm not sure how many people it was meant to carry, but the one we boarded had well over 1,000 people on it. The plane was packed. I couldn't sit on the ground or even breathe properly. Everyone was tired, cramped, and just trying to find a place to sit. It was a very crowded and exhausting experience.

Q: That was a lot of people.

RAHMATY: When the airplane took off, there was a seating area at the top for some U.S. military personnel, possibly observing or evaluating the passengers. As we lifted off, everyone in the airplane started clapping—they were happy. We were leaving Afghanistan. Or rather, we were leaving the Taliban, not Afghanistan itself.
But at what cost? Twenty years of progress for women and many other achievements were now lost, and Afghanistan was being pulled backward in time. Yet, despite the uncertainty ahead, everyone on the plane clapped at the thought of leaving behind a regime they did not choose. We were finally safe.

Now, we were on our way to Qatar. When we landed in Doha, the heat was intense—it was scorching.

Q: That's what I heard. It was very hot.

RAHMATY: The weather was extremely hot. There were about 10 to 20 large tents for the people, but there was no space to sleep. When we arrived around 11:00 p.m., we wanted to sit somewhere, but the area was packed with too many people. We didn't get any food that night, though we did have breakfast in the morning. There were no bottles of water, no blankets—nothing. The restrooms were filthy—super dirty and almost unusable. The entire situation felt chaotic, with so many people not knowing where they were headed.

By early morning, we had managed to get some rest and eat breakfast. We spoke with a few officers and asked when we could leave for Germany because the conditions were unmanageable—there wasn't enough food, no blankets, no space to rest, and far too many people. The officers informed us that there was one flight leaving for Germany, and if we wanted, we could take it. So, my family and I boarded that plane, and we flew to Germany.

Q: What happened in Germany?

RAHMATY: When we arrived in Germany, we were told that the conditions would be much better and more organized. That's what we had heard. We asked the staff working there if we could have a place to rest because we were completely exhausted after the journey from the 24th to the 26th. We desperately needed a place to stay and catch our breath. However, we had to wait from noon until around 2:00 a.m., just sitting in a large, open area. They gave us blankets because the weather was freezing, and we didn't have any warm clothing. We were all starving and worn out from everything we had gone through.

Q: Was this in an airplane hangar? Were you inside a building or were you outside?

RAHMATY: When we arrived in Germany, we were directed to an open shelter near Ramstein Air Base, set up like a large waiting station with thousands of chairs. The area was fenced and heavily guarded, but it wasn't a tent. We waited there until 2:00 a.m.,

exposed to the cold, with only a couple of boxes of water available. It was too cold to even drink the water comfortably.

I went up to one of the guards at the gate and asked if we could get any food because we were starving. I vividly remember the distress in his eyes when he responded, “I don’t know when you’re going to get food. Don’t ask me. I have no idea what’s happening here.” Unfortunately, we didn’t receive anything to eat until early in the morning when they distributed some boiled eggs and bread. Even then, there wasn’t enough food for everyone, and families with children and babies were in an even worse situation.
By the afternoon, they announced that a few buses were coming to take us to the military base. Finally, we made it to the base.

Q: When you got to the base, were you separated from your nephew? I heard that the men went to one part of the base in Germany and the women went to another area.

RAHMATY: The base was enormous, with hundreds of buses streaming in, packed with people like us who had fled everything. As we stepped off the bus, officers handed out jackets and blankets, trying to shield us from the freezing cold. They told us that men and women would be separated, and we were escorted to different sections divided by high military fences.

Our section was filled with a mix of small and large tents. Each one had heaters that tried to keep the chill out, but they didn’t do much. Bathrooms were scarce, and food was even scarcer—just a bit of bread, barely enough to keep going. Everyone looked tired, hungry, and uncertain.

I was led to a large tent with rows of military-issued beds. The tent was cramped and suffocating, and I could not sleep. There were spiders everywhere, crawling around, and it felt as though the world had shrunk into darkness. I sat in the middle of it all, surrounded by thousands of people crushed by exhaustion and fear. The reality of leaving everything behind hit me like a wave. I began to wonder what kind of future we were headed toward. I felt a deep sadness and desperation that was difficult to shake.

Around 4:00 a.m., I couldn’t hold it together anymore. Panic gripped me as I stumbled out of the tent. I made my way to the small clinic on the edge of the base, where they were tending to urgent cases and pregnant women. I’m grateful it was there when I needed it. The staff checked my vitals and reassured me that it was a panic attack, brought on by all the sudden changes. I sat there for a while, trying to catch my breath. Everything felt so far from home, but at least I had made it through another night. Later that day, we were moved to a smaller tent.

Q: During this time, were you in contact with your colleagues from the World Food Programme? Were they also getting out or were they still trapped in Kabul or what was happening with them?

RAHMATY: Many of my colleagues were still trapped in Afghanistan. I knew one person who had escaped, but she remained in Doha longer and had not yet reached Germany. Most of my colleagues were still stuck in Kabul. On August 24th, as I headed to the airplane, I texted them to let them know that I was leaving the country. I did not know what would happen after that, but I promised to get in touch.

Once we arrived in Qatar and later in Germany, we had no Wi-Fi or internet, which made communication difficult. When I reached Germany, I still couldn't connect. I called my brother and asked him to send me enough credits to turn on roaming data. With that, I could finally text the nonprofit that had placed us on their evacuation list to let them know we had arrived safely.

As soon as I turned on my phone, I saw ten to fifteen messages from the organization. They had sent instructions, telling me when to leave home, where to go, and what to do. I responded that we had arrived in Germany. Their reply was brief, but reassuring: "Good. We had you on our list, and now you should be fine. You'll go through the humanitarian parole process."

We stayed in Germany for a week. Compared to the larger tents, the smaller tents were a bit cleaner. However, there were no showers or even mobile shower units. Some of us ended up washing our hair in freezing cold water just to feel a little cleaner.

After a week, we finally boarded a flight to the United States. I believe we were on one of the first flights to be relocated from Germany. After that, the flights stopped, and Afghan immigrants were stuck there for several more months before the process resumed.

Arrival in the United States

Q: You flew to Dulles Airport?

RAHMATY: We finally arrived at Dulles Airport on September 2nd. That night, we stayed at the Dulles Expo Center, where they began organizing where we should go next. The decision seemed to depend on the available space at camps in different states—each camp had a limited capacity for the number of people it could take in.

By early morning, a bus arrived to take us to Fort Pickett, near Richmond, Virginia. There were a lot of people, but they provided essentials—food, blankets, sheets, and beds. They even distributed clothes to those who needed them and had a clinic on-site.

We stayed at Fort Pickett for two and a half months, from September to mid-November. It was a long time, but during that period, they gave us multiple vaccinations and conducted thorough background checks. They even asked for our social media accounts and emails if we had any. Finally, on November 14th, we left the base, ready for the next chapter of our journey.

Q: Did they give you a choice of places to go?

RAHMATY: At the beginning, we were interviewed twice to determine where we wanted to go and if we had any family in the U.S. we wanted to stay close to. We shared that our main choices were Virginia, Maryland, or California—states with large Afghan communities. These places felt familiar, and we hoped to be sent there.

Despite our preferences, we were not assigned to any of those states. There was a lot of speculation at the base about the difficulty of securing housing. We were told that if we did not accept the states they suggested, we might have to stay at the base even longer. Every day, lists were posted on the doors with names and ID numbers, informing people when to report for case updates or details about leaving the camp. We checked these lists daily, hoping to see our names.

One day, we finally saw our names. We immediately went to the officers coordinating flights. During the orientation, they informed us that we were being sent to Nashville, Tennessee. I didn't know much about Nashville, but I remembered that one of my former colleagues from the World Food Programme lived there. That thought gave me some comfort. At least I would know someone in the area.

Soon after, a bus took us to the airport, and we boarded a flight to Nashville, Tennessee. We were ready to begin the next chapter of our journey.

Q: What happened when you arrived in Nashville?

RAHMATY: At the Nashville airport, as we were checking out, we were approached by two people. They introduced themselves as case managers from the International Center of Kentucky, a resettlement agency based in Bowling Green, Kentucky. They showed us their IDs and called out our names, explaining that we were going with them to Kentucky.

When they mentioned Bowling Green, Kentucky, I was taken aback. "What do you mean?," I asked. I knew Kentucky was a different state. "Weren't we supposed to go to Nashville, Tennessee?" The two case managers exchanged a glance and said, "No, we don't think so. We have your cases, and that's why we're here to pick you up." They explained it was only about an hour's drive from Nashville to Bowling Green and that they had their car ready to take us.

Still confused, I asked, "Why can't we stay here in Nashville?" There was a brief conversation between them before they said, "You know, we have your cases. If you want to stay in Nashville, that's your choice." But with no clear plan or resources to stay, we ultimately decided to head to Bowling Green with them. The next leg of our journey had begun.

<u>Resettling in Bowling Green, Kentucky</u>

Q: You choose to go with them?

RAHMATY: Yes, we went to Bowling Green, Kentucky. It was about an hour's drive, but to me, it felt like a year. The night was dark and quiet, and the car headlights barely cut through the darkness. I sat there, lost in my thoughts, watching the shadowy outlines of trees and unfamiliar roads pass by. I didn't know where we were going or what to expect.

I kept asking myself, Where are we headed? What is Bowling Green like? Will it be okay? All I knew was that we were moving toward another chapter of uncertainty. After all we had already been through, I braced myself for whatever the coming days would bring.

Q: Were you the only family going on this trip or were they picking up other families at the same time?

RAHMATY: There were no other families with us at the airport—just us. Later, we met other families in Bowling Green, but they had all come from different airports. Bowling Green is a small town without its own airport, so people had to arrive through places like Indiana or other parts of Kentucky.

When we finally made it to Bowling Green, the case managers took us to a hotel they had arranged for us. We stayed there for a week while they searched for a more permanent place for us to live. One day, our case manager told us that a landlord was considering renting his house to us, but he wanted to meet us first. He wanted to see us in person before he made his decision.

The landlord came to the hotel, met us, and after a brief conversation, he said, "Okay, they look normal, so I will rent this house to them." We were relieved and grateful. We thought that maybe, just maybe, we could start to feel safe. But fate had other plans. We moved into the house, hopeful for a fresh start, but not even two weeks later, a tornado tore through the area and stripped our home. It was like the storm had come for everything we had just started to build.

Q: A tornado? What happened?

RAHMATY: We had finally settled into our new home after a long and difficult journey—Kabul to Qatar, then Germany, and finally the Virginia base. It was a relief to cook our own food and feel a sense of normalcy after all those challenges.

One week later, though, around midnight, alarms went off on our cell phones. Heavy rain, thunder, and flickering lights added to the chaos. The alert read, "Tornado, tornado, find shelter immediately."

We didn't know what to do. In Afghanistan, we were used to facing earthquakes and explosions, and we knew where the shelters were. Here in Kentucky, we were unsure if we should stay put or find shelter elsewhere. We didn't know who to call or what the safest course of action was.

Q: So, what did you do?

RAHMATY: We stayed in the hallway overnight, listening to the sounds of the storm as the tornado hit. A tree fell on the house and caused damage, and by morning, the neighborhood looked completely different—many houses had been destroyed.

Our case manager came to check on us, and with no electricity and repairs needed, we had to leave the house. We stayed in a hotel for five days while they fixed the power and replaced the windows. After everything we had already gone through on our journey to the U.S., this tornado was another heavy challenge. At the same time, we were still waiting for our employment authorization cards so we could finally start working and move forward.

Q: You came in under humanitarian parole? Were you P-1 or P-2 cases or something else?

RAHMATY: Yes, humanitarian parole as P-1 cases.

After we received our employment documents, I finally began working. My first job was as an interpreter at local high schools, helping newly arrived Afghan students navigate their new lives. They needed support to understand their teachers and classmates, and I was glad I could bridge that gap for them.

Bowling Green was a small town, and we were the first Afghan community to settle there. There weren't many job opportunities, and it was tough to find work that matched my background in international organizations. Even so, the town welcomed us. One day, the mayor of Bowling Green invited us to meet him. He listened to our journey and offered any help he could.

Q: Did the World Food Programme keep you on their payroll or had they stopped paying you?

RAHMATY: When I arrived in the U.S., I was still technically employed by my previous job in Afghanistan. However, the challenges of working across time zones became too much. They had restructured the department and even offered me a promotion with new opportunities. But the catch was they wanted me to return to Afghanistan.

There was so much uncertainty—Was it even safe to return? After weighing everything, I made the difficult decision to resign. It wasn't easy, but I felt it was the best choice for my family and our future here in the U.S.

Q: I understand. What happened next?

Moving to the D.C. area

RAHMATY: After resigning from my job in Afghanistan, I had to rebuild my career in the U.S. I managed to land a job as a Universal Banker at Truist Financial Services, which aligned well with my education. I was eager to grow and work my way up, and I also took on a part-time consulting role with Catholic Charities of Louisville. After a year at the bank, I transitioned to working in the accounting department of another company.

However, things changed when my mom became homesick. She longed to be part of a larger Afghan community, and convincing her to stay in Kentucky was difficult. Ultimately, we made the decision to relocate to Virginia, where we knew there was a strong Afghan community.

The move came with new challenges. I needed to find another job and transfer from the University of Louisville's online MBA program to a school in Virginia or D.C. My sister and I spent three months job hunting, attending interviews, and weighing our options. Eventually, I received two job offers and chose to accept one at George Washington University. I was also able to transfer some of my MBA credits to GW's program, allowing me to continue my education. With that, we took the next step in our journey and moved to Virginia.

Q: Congratulations. When will you graduate with your MBA?

RAHMATY: I will graduate from GW with my MBA in the spring of 2026. Moving to Virginia and attending George Washington University felt like the right decision for both my family and my future. It's been a long journey, but every challenge has helped me grow personally and professionally.

Q: And the rest of your family, your sister and your nephew, how are they doing now?

RAHMATY: My sister had been studying medicine in Afghanistan, but when she arrived in the U.S., she couldn't get her transcripts. Despite that setback, she managed to transfer some of her credits to Western Kentucky University and continued her education. She earned a second bachelor's degree in social sciences and public health. Afterward, she worked for a company that supported Aetna and Medicaid before transitioning to her current role as a Certified Human Services Coordinator with the Fairfax County government. My nephew stayed in Kentucky when we moved to Virginia, so he didn't relocate with us.

Q: He stayed in Bowling Green?

RAHMATY: He stayed in Bowling Green because he currently works for a resettlement agency in their legal department, so he chose to work there. However, my mother, sister, and I moved to Virginia.

Recently, another nephew, who had a Turkish passport, joined us in the U.S. The situation in Afghanistan was desperate—there were no work opportunities and no path for him to pursue his education after graduating. Now, he's living with us.

I still have two sisters and one brother living in Afghanistan. Life has completely changed for them since the fall of Afghanistan. One of my sisters is a successful OB-GYN surgeon, but she's now facing many challenges under the new government. She was on the list for evacuation, but after the Kabul airport explosion, she couldn't make it out.

Q: Have you got your green card?

RAHMATY: We went through the asylum process because that's what we were instructed to do. Our asylum case was approved in just 45 days, which was surprisingly quick, and everything went smoothly up until now. However, I'm still waiting for my green card. We filed for our green cards around this time last year, and it's been a year with no updates. So, we'll see how things progress from here.

Q: Do you have plans to petition for your sisters in Afghanistan?

RAHMATY: I'm hoping to bring my family here because life in Afghanistan is very hard for them. I'm doing everything I can to help them, but it's a difficult and uncertain process.

Q: And is your mother happier now that she is in a bigger Afghan community?

RAHMATY: My mom is much happier now. Living close to other Afghans has given her a sense of community and belonging. She's made friends and enjoys going out with them, which has been a significant part of her healing. She's also enrolled in English language classes and has formed friendships there as well. Watching her dive into her homework with so much passion, especially after decades away from school, is truly inspiring. It's heartwarming to see her rediscover her love for learning and build a new chapter for herself.

Final Reflections

Q: Do you have any final reflections on all the things that have happened to you and your family?

RAHMATY: I don't know where to start. The other day, I was talking with my sister about how it's almost been three years since we came to the United States. It feels like I've been here for ten years, carrying the weight of responsibilities on my shoulders. In these three years, I've grown so much and learned so many different things. Adjusting to new places was a challenge, and the culture shock was overwhelming at times. There are moments when I feel a sense of lost identity tugging at me—a feeling of being caught between where I am now and the country we left behind, a place that once held our dreams but was taken from us. My heart and thoughts are in Afghanistan, as my siblings are far away, and I long to reunite with them, though I have no idea when that will be possible.

We arrived in an unfamiliar place, knowing no one. I had to put myself out there—talk to people, make friends, and get to know the community. Starting over again when we moved from Kentucky to Virginia was especially hard. I had to find a new home, a new job, and a new school all at once. It felt like beginning all over again. However, I'm grateful that the move to Virginia wasn't as intimidating this time because I wasn't starting from scratch—I was starting from experience. I feel like I'm on the ladder of my life, taking steps upward. There's still a long way to go, and it hasn't been easy so far.

As a final reflection on what happened to my country, I believe that women and girls should not pay the price by being barred from school and education. I hope that what happened to my country never occurs to any other nation. May the world live in justice and peace so that no one has to leave their home for an uncertain life.

Q: But you're making progress.

RAHMATY: Yes, I'm making progress. Every step forward feels like more than just my own—it's a step taken so I can help others who need me. Even as I study here, I carry the voices of millions of Afghan girls with me—girls who are denied education, who dream of a future they can't yet reach, and who deserve the freedom to live their own lives. I'm grateful to be living the life I once envisioned for myself, but their hopes fuel my purpose. I want to use all that I've learned to uplift future generations and step into a role of leadership that drives real change. There is still much ahead, but I am becoming the person I need to be—the voice they deserve and a light for those still waiting to be seen.

Q: Thank you.

End of Interview