

SADIA: “Afghanistan is a great country but at the same time, living there is very difficult because at any point, anything can happen”

MEGHAN: *That was Sadia.*

She left her home country of Afghanistan six years ago when she was 10.

She’s now 16, and this summer, along with the rest of the world, she watched as the Taliban moved in and took over the country.

Since then, the safety of residents, especially women and girls, in Afghanistan has been top of mind.

On this episode of “Relief, Development and Podcast,” we’re bringing you two stories of women from Afghanistan who left their homes and started over in Canada. We aren’t using their last names for security reasons because they still have family in Afghanistan.

We wanted to hear from them what it has been like to for them to watch this crisis unfold as people who had left but still have loved ones there.

I’m Meghan Mast, sitting in for Scott Campbell, and this is Relief, Development and Podcast, a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

First is Sadia’s story.

She starts by sharing what she remembers about Afghanistan before her family left.

SADIA: I was 10 years old when me and my family moved to Afghanistan. And I remember mostly everything very well. In Afghanistan, like, everywhere you go, there's always a street food. Like, like in the streets, when you're walking there smells of the food. And it always makes you want to buy it and eat it. For example, the soups, and especially the kebab and everything. There are lots of good memories— being together with all my cousins, uncles, aunts and grandparents at the same house.

Mostly I miss all my family members that are there our house that we all used to live in together, and the neighbourhood and the street foods. And I miss hearing the ice cream guy selling the ice creams that we used to [get] almost every day. And my parents would say if you guys all go sleep, and when you wake up, we'll get you ice creams, and they did it every time they would wake up, they would get bags of ice creams because we were all lots of cousins. And we would get lots of ice creams. And I missed that a lot.

Every day was great and fun, and never thoughts of leaving, but only enjoyed our childhood.

MEGHAN: *Sadia remembers there were challenges though too, especially for women, who didn’t have the same rights as men.*

SADIA: To give an example of the things we would go through is an example of my second older sister Zora, who was 10 years old and was treated very badly while going grocery shopping, such as being called a bad person only for not wearing a hijab. I remember when she came home crying about a guy outside who pulled her who pulled her from behind, pushed her and told to go wear a hijab. She was

very affected by this at that time of age. And not only her, but there are millions of girls in Afghanistan, that are going through this and even worse every day in their lives.

There are lots of other examples that I can give of why we left Afghanistan. But because of safety and security reasons, I am not able to. Our lives were in danger.

We decided to leave Afghanistan for a better future and a better life. And we moved to Turkey, stayed there for three years and left Turkey on July 5, 2018. And that's when we came to Canada, we were in Turkey. And I remember my dad was praying with my mom and grandparents. And I noticed and went and said what happened? Because they all looked very happy and excited. And my dad told me, thank God, we finally got good news. And in my head, I knew it was good news about us moving to Canada. And he said to me, we finally got the date of our flight to Canada, which is on July five. We were all super excited and super happy and couldn't wait for the time to arrive, which was about one month or few weeks.

MEGHAN: *MCC helped facilitate the sponsorship with Sadia's uncle and members of Rockway Mennonite church in Kitchener, Ontario. The church found the family a place to live, furnished the house and filled the fridge with food.*

SADIA: Me and my family are very thankful to all of them, and always appreciative of them for everything that they have done for us. We have found a community here and actually some of our neighbours currently are from Afghanistan, and also some Afghan neighbours that are like a block away. And in summer, we usually meet in the park. And it's always nice to have people from your home country to communicate with.

MEGHAN: *The situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated since Sadia left with her parents and sisters.*

SADIA: Most of the people have lost their jobs, and don't have the ability to take care of their families. Most of Afghan people outside of Afghanistan are trying their best to help those who are in Afghanistan by sending money as much as they can to help Afghans and their family members such as us too. And we hear this from family members when they call us. And it makes us very upset and makes us worry about them whenever we hear it.

MEGHAN: *That worry has intensified since the Taliban took over Afghanistan. Sadia remembers where she was when she heard the news.*

SADIA: I was in my room when I heard my parents talking. And they mentioned the Taliban. And they sounded worried and shocked. I went through the living room and saw that they were watching TV and confused. I asked what happened. And my dad said that the Taliban are taking over, I was very confused. And it was unbelievable to me, when I saw on TV, the Taliban with their tanks and the way that they were dressed up and their weapons in their hands. And since then, every single day, I would hear something new about them. Because every day in a short period of time, they would keep taking over each region. And the one that shocked me the most and made me worried was when they took over Kabul, which is the capital city, Afghanistan, and which was the city that we and most of my family members lives in. We were all very devastated when we saw the Taliban take over the country, I felt super sad, and worried for my family that still lives there. And I felt very helpless.

PAUSE

Times are very hard in Afghanistan right now, because we hear it from family members every day. There are families who have lost their houses and jobs, and now are living in tents in streets during a very bad winter and need the help to be able to feed their kids.

There are lots of hopes that me and my family and so many other Afghans have for Afghanistan. First of all, everyone hopes for peace in Afghanistan. Everyone hopes for equal safe happy Afghanistan where, basically hoping for happiness, equality, freedom, education and many more wishes for Afghanistan, and everyone that is living in Afghanistan, especially women who have gone through a lot of difficult times, and hopefully it will end.

MEGHAN: *That was Sadia who is 16 years old, now living in Kitchener, Ontario.*

Next is the story of Najja, who is in her early forties today.

She left Afghanistan when she was seven or eight years old in 1991 and she still remembers the smells of home.

NAIJA: The thing, like, the most thing I remember most is my childhood. You know, in winters when there was a snow at night, so with other children, like my with my cousins, we was used to go outside to play. And during the winters when there was a snow, there was a special smell in that way that that smell, I cannot forget, like sometimes when I go out in Saskatoon, when we have a snow at night, I just like feel the same smell sometimes. So I just stand when I just a smell that then I just closed my eyes, I feel like I'm back at that same time. And that smell takes me out the same day, which we were like, there was one night we was playing, I feel like that's the same night and I'm back there, you know, it's Oh, very powerful.

MEGHAN: *When thinking about her childhood there, Najja remembers burying something important under the tree outside her home.*

NAIJA: It was a ring, it was my mom's ring. So I remember it's still in there. if I go back, and I'll definitely go and see if that tree is still there. Because when we was coming back, I forgot to take out that. So I know it's still there.

MEGHAN: *The time leading up to her family's departure from Afghanistan was chaotic and stressful. She forgot to dig up the ring and bring it with her. People were being kidnapped and conflict was ramping up. Her father arranged to send Najja, her mom and siblings to India. She had to say goodbye in a hurry.*

NAIJA: "I remember I was like a little kid. And you know, what I just went into my, into the washroom. And I just talked to the walls that they might remember I told the walls "ok I'm going, I'll come back". Because I was not able to like I was shy to cry outside, in front of my family. So I just went into the washroom and I just cried for a second. And then I said to the walls "OK I'm going now, then I'll come back""

MUSIC TRANSITION

And that I think sooner after I left, we left Afghanistan, the Taliban came to Afghanistan.

MEGHAN: *Her father, still in the country, was attacked by the Taliban.*

NAJIA: And we didn't see him for a long time. So we were just with our mom. So she just, she was the woman like who didn't know the language too, like when we was new that she doesn't know anything like Hindi language. So we just survived a lot. A lot of problems in India, we faced a lot of problem, financial problems. My mom was only single mom and my dad was in Afghanistan.

MEGHAN: *During her time in India, Najia met with other Afghan people through her work in the mental health field. She saw herself and her own experience in many of these people and their stories.*

NAJIA: Everyone had the same problem, you know, everybody was in a problem with this bad situation. They just had like a kind of anger in them. So that's just because of that, that situation when there is fight and you see every minute somebody is dying in front of you so differently. You change you know.

MUSIC TRANSITION

MEGHAN: *Najia and her family stayed in India for many years. And then four years ago, [they](#) moved to Canada, sponsored through MCC's program by Wildwood Mennonite Church in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Since she's arrived, Phyllis, one of her sponsors, has become a big part of her life.*

NAJIA: I talked with Phyllis like a lots of time, we sat for hours, we just talked about Afghanistan about different stuff.

She helped me a lot. And my everything and till now, whenever I gave her if I have any problems, like, she just immediately come and help me, you know, I never expect that from anyone in my life. Like, she's the first lady who helped me so much. You know, she's just like, my, like, she's just like, my mother, you know, she's wonderful woman. And she helped me so much with my, like, every way, you know, so when I came new, I didn't know anything about Saskatoon. So she she did everything for me. I can't say what, like everything she did for me, you know. And still, she is doing like, whenever I call her, she just come in one call. And she helped me for that, you know.

MEGHAN: *Najia still has loved ones in Afghanistan. She worried about them when she found out the Taliban had taken control of the country.*

NAJIA: Oh, that was a very horrible moment for I think for all Afghan people. Oh, it was very hard for me too. I can't say like, it was very hard for me, I wasn't able to sleep all the time watching news, and then calling my families to see how they're feeling and how they are. And I asked them, there was a scary there was hiding. Like, there was a scare going outside. So everybody was hiding at their home. And there was announced that if somebody have young girls at home, like daughters, so there was gonna take them to Pakistan and make them marry some Taliban head or what I don't know. And especially I was watching all the time. The airport cases what's going on in airport. So that that was a very hard moment for me.

MEGHAN: *Najia often thinks of going back home. We asked her what it would mean to her to be able to go back to her childhood home to retrieve her mother's ring that she had buried under that tree outside where she would play when she was eight years old.*

NAJIA: Oh, my God, it's so much. It's so much. I just I didn't, you can understand that why I didn't forget that from 91 Till now, from 1991 When we came, so I just remember to go back and take that off from there, you know, I just when I when I just go to bed at night, I always think of my home. And I always think that I'm, I'm just going back and I just go on that route. And I just go like near in front of my home.

And I just tried to enter. And sometimes most of the time I dream about that. I like like I can't tell you how many times in a month. But I always dream about my home. Actually, my my home country is a great place. And it's beautiful. We have everything over there only just I don't want anyone to think that we are we don't have anything with this fight and it's broken. I just want everyone to think that's what I think about that. Because now when you talk about Afghanistan, everybody is sorry about that, though. Sorry. Afghanistan is a very bad situation. I don't want to hear that. I just want to be normal. Actually, I don't. I want people to talk normally about like people talk about different other countries. So I just want to talk normally about our country not always sorry about our country. Afghanistan like we have beautiful country. We have lots of resources. We have lots of fruits. I'd never seen those fruit outside. You know the best fruit I think and our culture. We had great celebrations there. For me. It's beautiful. It's still, it's same thing.

Music

MEGHAN: *That was Najia, sharing her story of leaving Afghanistan.*

That's it for this episode.

While Afghanistan has been top of mind lately, there are millions of people around the world who've been forced to flee their homes. If you want to learn more about how you can support people in these situations, check out the show notes.

Next month -we'll hear from Kaylee Perez, the migration and resettlement associate for MCC's Peace and Justice office. She'll share about what it's been like in the world of refugee resettlement in the last couple years.

If you like this podcast, consider subscribing and even rating it. This helps people find us.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded and produced by me, Meghan Mast on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation and also produced by Christy Kauffman on the traditional land of the Anacostia and the Piscataway.

The head producer is Emily Loewen.

Thank you to Sadia and Najia for sharing their stories today.

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks and take good care.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

Show notes:

To learn more about how to become involved in sponsoring refugees in Canada, visit:
<https://mcccanada.ca/learn/what/refugees>

In the United States, there are many ways to get involved in welcoming our new neighbors through church sponsorship, fundraising for legal and housing support, and advocacy in your local community. To learn more about how you and your community can welcome, contact MCC's Newcomer Connections Coordinator, Charity Stowell, at welcome@mcc.org.

Additional resources:

[Peacebuilding to address forced migration](#)

[Why do people leave home? Understanding the root causes of migration](#)

[Conflict prevention, grassroots peacebuilding best way to help Afghan people](#)