

courage

It's tough growing up as an Iranian refugee in icy Finland

©UNHCR/United Kingdom



"I can use my experiences as a refugee to help others understand the truth behind the issues involved, and gain an insight into how it feels to be a refugee." Baharak Bashmani

In the late 80s, aged just nine, I had to flee the turmoil in Iran with my family and escape to Pakistan. Then, after nearly four years of living there we were told by UNHCR that the family would be resettled to Finland. It was a moment of relief and excitement; living in such tough conditions -- with no hope for the future, no secure home and the constant risk of persecution by the Iranian government -- is not easy. As a 13-year-old, the thought of finally moving to a new country sounded amazing. My parents were also looking forward to finally leaving, but were more cautious about the challenges ahead. I should have been as well.

The first day in Finland was, to say the least, strange. I woke up and immediately went to see what my new surroundings looked like. I went outside and was surprised by how fast people talked, and the way they seemed to take deep breaths while speaking. I ran back upstairs explaining to my mother that everyone had asthma! She tried to explain that surely the entire population could not have asthma, and in any case it is not infectious. But still it took me a while to believe her, because people talked really fast, and kept taking very deep breaths as they talked. I actually have that "asthma" myself now when speaking Finnish, because that's the way it is usually spoken. So my mother was wrong!

It was soon time for school. I was really excited to see my new school, and had this naïve idea that I would make lots of friends and have a great time. How wrong I was. Straight away I was singled out as the refugee kid, and was soon made fun of on a daily basis. It didn't help that I didn't speak the language, but I could still understand when I was being made fun of. You don't need language skills to realize that you are not liked; what makes it worse, and shatters your self-esteem (especially as a teenager), is what's behind the jokes: your hair and skin colour, and all the prejudices that go with the stigma of the word "refugee".

I was determined not to let people see my despair, so I had to gather my courage and prove people wrong. But it is hard to stay strong day after day when your self-esteem is being eroded little by little. During my time in middle school, which lasted for three years, I always sat alone at the school cafeteria; nobody would sit with me because I was a refugee. For the same reason I was always the last to be picked for any group work or team sport – and I was always having chewing gum thrown in my hair and snow balls hurled at me.

No, it isn't easy for a lonely teenage girl with no school friends to understand why all this is happening to her. My parents knew about my difficulties but I did not want to trouble them, as I felt they had enough problems of their own to deal with. So there was hardly anyone to talk to or confide in. But I believe nothing lasts for ever, though at the time it felt like eternity. So I simply decided that I would be fine -- I would get through this stage of life and move on.

Nowadays I can look back at my harsh times of growing up in a foreign country and see how it has made me the much stronger person that I am today. I feel that I have overcome all those difficulties of integrating into a new society, with its new language, culture and customs. These difficulties have helped me to believe in myself and to ignore people's prejudices. And I can use my experiences as a refugee to help others understand the truth behind the issues involved, and gain an insight into how it feels to be a refugee.

Currently I am doing an internship in UNHCR's London office. Because of my background not many people even believed that I would finish high school. So to have made it through university and start gaining work experience has proved those people wrong.

Instead of listening while others told me how incapable I was because of being a refugee, I decided instead to set my own goals. Today I have achieved some of them, though I still have many more things I want to achieve. But I have proved that is possible to integrate into a new society, to preserve one's ethnic identity, and most importantly, remain true to myself.

courage