

# I fled the *TALIBAN*

*Zohre Esmaeli and her family crossed borders  
by foot in search of a better life*

**C**owering in the corner of the mosque, I heard them before I saw their shadows: a group of soldiers, shouting in Russian, with rifles slung over their shoulders. Cracks of light seeped in around the rugs covering the windows, but it was enough to see them grab hold of some of the men in our group, including my father, and drag them outside into the freezing winter air. The women left behind – including me, my sister and stepmother – screamed out, terrified of what they might do. When they finally returned, the men looked dishevelled and shaken up, and I later learnt the soldiers had strip-searched them in the street, in search of money. It was humiliating for us all and one of the worst moments of my life. But risking our lives was a price we were willing to pay as we made a perilous journey to a better future.

Growing up in a traditional home, my childhood in Kabul, Afghanistan, was strict. My mum died when I was two and I was raised by my stepmother and father, with two older sisters and four older brothers.

When the Taliban came to power in 1994, my life didn't change drastically. But their presence created fear within the community. I wasn't allowed to leave home without a male relative. And even at nine years old, I had to cover my face with a chador – a piece of fabric covering me from head to toe – in public.

My family didn't suffer directly at the hands of the Taliban, but we heard of people getting arrested, beaten or worse, for things like wearing nail polish or having a relationship.

We started hearing more and more about people fleeing Afghanistan and the Taliban and my parents became increasingly worried about our future. In 1995, three of my brothers fled and found refuge in Germany

and four years later, in 1999, Dad decided, for our own safety, we should escape there too. We had to contact smugglers who would arrange our journey for an astronomical price. I wasn't allowed to tell anyone and couldn't say goodbye to my friends as we feared the Taliban would find out.

Dad asked everyone he knew for money, collecting enough for the six of us, plus my sister's two young children, to make the journey: almost £4,000 per person.

The night we fled, I was sad to be leaving home. But as a curious 13-year-old, I was excited to see the world too. Carrying a sports bag each, full of clothes and valuables, we climbed into the back of a pickup truck, hiding under blue tarpaulin for the next two days until we reached Mashhad in Iran. We were terrified we'd be found and sent back home to face the Taliban.

**'We were terrified we'd be found'**

## Walk to freedom

In Iran, we stayed the night in a small room – all arranged by the smugglers – with a gas stove, a chair and four beds, before we took a bus to the border. Then we boarded a train to Moscow, using fake passports, and were taken to a mosque. For two weeks, we sheltered there alongside other refugee families. Rugs covered the windows and the stench of urine hung in the air. There was one clogged toilet and no shower.

My memories are hazy, snatched moments but I remember the Russian soldiers storming the mosque and dragging the men outside. My excitement had long faded by then, and I felt anxious all of the time. The smugglers told us to be ready at a moment's notice, so I slept in the three pairs of trousers I'd brought.



Zohre fulfilled her dream to be a free, independent woman

Next, we travelled through Belarus, Ukraine and Hungary, partly by car but mainly for hours on foot. We ate whatever we could find – often lorry drivers would offer us food, or if we were really hungry, we'd eat fistfuls of snow in an attempt to curb our hunger.

After Hungary came Slovakia, followed by the Czech Republic, where we had to cross a river after wading knee-deep through a field of snow. The smugglers pulled us across, four at a time, using a tyre and ropes.

Weeks and months passed. We were all exhausted, weak and hungry as we walked for endless hours. We never knew how long





Aged 13 and on the run from Afghanistan

with other families, I was happy. I felt safe and that meant everything.

Finally, we moved into our own home as the government allowed us to stay and we went through the official process to seek asylum. But Dad was still strict with me – I wasn't allowed to ride a bike, go swimming or to the cinema. I craved independence.

### Another escape

Then, when I was 17, my sister announced she'd found a man for me to marry. I didn't want to get married – I was too young. But despite my protests, my family were adamant and I knew that my only option was to run away.

So one night, while everyone slept, I packed a small bag and fled to a children's refugee camp, before making my way to Stuttgart by car, where I stayed with a friend. Over the following year, I made a new life for myself, doing so many things I'd dreamt of – swimming, trips to the cinema and playing badminton. Luckily, I had a little money saved up and my friend helped me out a lot. My confidence grew and I contacted a photographer to take some modelling shots. In 2003, aged 18, I signed to a modelling agency and was sent to Milan, London, Rome and Paris on various jobs. Seeing my first fashion advert at Stuttgart train station, I was proud of how far I'd come.

But I never forgot my family and in 2004, I contacted Dad. In the years that followed, he accepted my choices and understood my desire to be an independent woman.

Leaving Afghanistan and making the journey to Germany changed my life. I wanted to help others, so in 2016, I created Culture Coaches, an organisation supporting refugees coming to Germany from all over the world, and in 2018, I also set up the Zohre Esmali Foundation, providing classes for refugees and teaching them German in their mother tongue.

No one chooses to abandon their country, home, family and friends. It is desperation that leads them there. We all have the opportunity to make a difference and help others, and after everything I've experienced, that's exactly what I'm doing.

we'd have to keep going before we'd reach Germany. But we were hopeful that every step was taking us closer to safety and freedom, where my brothers were waiting for us.

Six months after leaving home, we reached our destination. From my hiding place in the back of the truck, I glimpsed out the window and saw the black, red and gold stripes of the German flag fluttering outside. We had arrived. We were free.

The driver left us at a petrol station, where my cousin met us. At his flat, I took a bath first, watching the water darken as I scrubbed my skin. The following morning we went to a refugee camp and for the next two years, a converted shipping container was our home. While it was cramped, with two rooms between us as well as a kitchen and bathroom we shared



Working with refugees for the German Red Cross

