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Hello and welcome to Origin Stories, a podcast by the Immigration Policy Lab that explores migration through research and storytelling. I'm Adam Lichtenheld, IPL's executive director. Across the world, migration has become one of the most contentious political and policy challenges of our time. With branches at Stanford University and ETH Zurich in Switzerland, the Immigration Policy Lab generates rigorous evidence and innovative solutions to help policymakers make more informed decisions on immigration.

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We also try to highlight the human stories behind the data. Our guests in this episode are Mona and Yeganeh. Yeganeh is a PhD candidate in the Operations Research Group in Management Science and Engineering at Stanford. Mona is an assistant professor in the Department of Statistics at the London School of Economics.

[00:00:52:464]

Mona graduated from Stanford in 2020 and Yeganeh in 2022. We'll let them take it away.

Hello, Yeganeh.

So I'm Mona. I was born in 1990 in Tehran in Iran. I studied mathematics in my bachelor's and my master's degree in Sharif University in Tehran. And then afterwards I had the chance to moved to Stanford basically for my graduate studies to the Department of Statistics at Stanford.

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Yeah, that's it. So my name is Yeganeh and I also was born in Iran in 1995, and then I did my undergrad in Sharif University. We were both from the same undergrad and I moved to Stanford in 2018 for my PhD. I finished my master's about a year ago, 2022, and now I'm trying to finish my PhD.

[00:01:48:360]

Yeah, I guess, I remember when I was in high school, I first met you, but I didn't really meet you but it's a very fun memory to think of it. There was this math camp at Sharif University that you were one of the only female students organizing it.

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And I always remember your name as a cool math female person to look up to. I was very happy to actually meet you at Stanford.

Yeah, I guess when we were in Sharif, we had a tiny bit of overlap. I definitely saw you and also I heard about you when you were applying to Stanford.

[00:02:29:835]

But it was great to get to know you when you arrived at Stanford. And I think we clicked quite easily and quickly just after you arrived, which was thanks to maybe your social skills, I would say. I guess one of our first serious kind of get-togethers was our first hike.

[00:02:51:192]

It was my very first hike. It was actually a very good thing about Bay Area that before coming to Bay Area, I wasn't really into outdoor stuff since Tehran is like a large City with tall buildings. It doesn't like really have that much of outdoor space. And then, here you were the first person invite me to go on a hike.

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And then I was just found that activity the best thing to do on weekends. It was so much fun. Now that we're talking about Bay Area, what were your first impressions when you came here in the US and like Bay Area or California in general?

I would say something that was very strange from the very beginning for me, and I couldn't figure out why it is so strange, and I didn't know what is going on.

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It's like even I couldn't call it as strange. I remember I would describe my feelings about Bay Area in a very vague way to my family. And they wouldn't understand what I'm talking about until my mom got a chance to visit me end of 2016. And maybe my first impression about Bay Area was now I can put a name on it.

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The architecture is sort of very different from what I used to, sort of scattered, not really connected. And that made me have a very, I would say maybe tough is a bit too harsh of a word for it, maybe it gave me a tough time to get to settle down and know my surroundings.

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Because just the architecture, the way the cities were built was not really walking friendly. I could not just walk from let's say Menlo park to Palo Alto, it would take forever. But this was the strange thing about it. But of course the nature was lovely and the fact that you are very much in contact with nature, I really loved it.

[00:04:44:934]

How about you, I'm curious what was your?

For me, I think I definitely is very different, the architecture here is very different from of a large city like Tehran. But I actually liked it because this is going to sound a bit funny, but I was a big fan of Sims when I was growing up.

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And all the houses there look kind of like Palo Alto in some way. In the beginning when I arrived here, as I was moving in, I felt like I'm just moving into one of the Sims houses, like in the Sims like in Stanford campus. And I liked it.

[00:05:16:816]

I see.

Yeah, I guess I like the architecture and it was very hard to move around, that was actually right. The first thing I was started to do when I arrived here was to figure out to get a driver's license, that was my top of the to-do list.

[00:05:33:191]

Yeah, I would say for you, Yeganeh, this was definitely one of the things that would kind of put you out or like make you shiny compared to other people that you were super quick at getting your driver license. We were all super impressed.

I got good guidance from you.

[00:05:53:547]

My to get a driver license and get a car after the first summer of this year. But getting a car changed my life just going around here. What I found surprising about coming to here wasn't maybe the architecture itself was kind of cultural differences. And I couldn't at first associate it, if the cultural differences is because it is a Stanford, a specific thing, a Bay Area thing, or a US thing, because I was kind of getting exposed to all of them at the same time.

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For example, one thing that was really stressful for me, in the beginning, was that maybe it took me a year to kind of cope with it was that I felt like everybody was, even though they were friendly, they were super competitive in every aspect of their life. If you would go to a party with your lab mates, they would talk about a sports that they do.

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I remember vividly somebody would say, I do biking, I did like cross country like last year. And what do you do for a sport? And I said, I don't know, I like swimming. And then they asked, have you competed in, I don't know, in college or have you got the medal?

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And I was like, no, should I have those? Just this is an example that I felt like people really excel well in whatever discipline that they choose. And I think kinda that's a Stanford thing, that cultural difference between the countries. But that really stood out to me in the beginning especially that I was used to being in more chill environments.

[00:07:20:950]

Right.

That people take it easier.

Right.

Yeah, I'm curious to know, how was it for you?

Yeah, I would say, as you said, for me, one of the things that from the very beginning, it was very obvious how much of a difference there is in kind of the culture that I'm coming from or the Stanford culture, let's say.

[00:07:41:629]

Because as you said, we come to Stanford, we cannot say this is American culture or west coast culture because it's very international at the same time. Okay, maybe it's also very much influenced by the American or West coast culture as well but we cannot really pinpoint it, maybe.

[00:08:00:406]

One of the first things was that in the first or second quarter, we had course works quite a lot. And in my department, in my batch, one of my friends from Iran, I was lucky that we kind of got to the same department and program together. And we were the only two among the 10 of us who would start working on the problem set the latest, and we would always submit just one minute before the deadline.

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This is for me was very different because back in Iran, I was ahead of everybody else in terms of being like doing things ahead of time, being organized and super motivated to do things very regularly. But I realized that that level of being organized is just totally different with what is the expectation or norm at Stanford.

[00:08:55:299]

Exactly I had the same experience.

That I remember the first homework piece set as we had and we wanted to work on it as a group of first year PhD students here. And I think it was two or three days before the due that they had a group meeting and I was like, okay, of course I had three days, I don't have to even look at it.

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And I came to this group meeting with other PhD folks and everybody have almost done the homework before it and I haven't even downloaded the PDF and I felt that's what we are going to do, download this PDF and read through the question. I mean like for everybody else it was just like one question that they were stuck with and I was feeling so embarrassed.

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I was always the organized person in Iran and now yeah, like we have even like Persian time in Iran that like we go to gatherings and parties and I were late. But that was what I was used to, I was like, I'm ahead of everyone if I like just go on time, and then it turned out to be like not true here.

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Now that we are on this topic, I wanna see what do you think that does immigration has changed your viewpoint on life or your relationships in a meaningful way or a significant way that you can think of it?

Yeah, that's a very good question to like it changed a lot about me.

[00:10:16:726]

I think seeing these like cultural differences, even small things as like approaching deadlines, or some bigger things about like taking, how would you manage stress or what's your beliefs or your faith? There's like huge differences between Iranian and Americans. And just to see that you can live well in both of like this, having any of these mindsets you can be a good person, you can live well, had like made me think what would define a good person.

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Before coming to the U.S., I would think certain things are just the right thing, I wouldn't even question them. And I was just like, if you're a good person, you should do ABCD, and if you don't check all those check marks, maybe you wouldn't fit. And then just seeing that data structure isn't necessary to be a responsible human being, made me to rethink of my values and also being more acceptable to all, people who have different values than me.

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And it changed me definitely a lot. I think I'm a lot more open to hearing other people's ideas and understanding what they think. And immigration itself was very hard for me, especially the first year. First few months, it was mostly excitement of a new place and getting used to the English itself.

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But then the winter work was the time that hit me that I'm here and I'm kind of alone in some sense, and I can't go back to see my family, everybody's gone. All Americans are into there visiting their family, most of the other, even immigrant students are visiting their family.

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And it's only probably a few other students like me that have visa difficulties that they can go back. And that time was like, I have actually immigrated, I have to make this place home. And this is not just a temporary place, I'm at least going to be here for a few years.

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And just going through those hardships made me to realize when somebody else is having a hard time, trying to understand them better.

How was it for you, Mona?

Very similar, I would say, as you explained before leaving Iran, I had a very maybe molded idea of what is the right way of doing things, what is the wrong way of doing things.

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And then when I moved to US and I saw these many different ways that people are living, and are kind of very much compatible, I would say. Even if the ideologies are clashing in terms of theory, people are in practice living happily. And in some cases, people who are very different in terms of their beliefs are kind of friends together and manage to put those clashes aside and be colleagues and good friends, that hit me quite hard.

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And I really appreciate this opportunity that I got to see that there are these many other ways of living, there is not really a defined way. And this also changed the way I would think about myself, that, okay, I have all these other options in front of me for the future, it's just infinitely many.

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So I should not kind of stress about what is the situation right now. And the other thing that I think was very interesting was that it gave me a perspective on my own culture. Living in Iran, some of the cultural points, I would take them as granted or I would be blind to them.

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I would not see the negative or positive or practicality of them because I was just living in those kind of cultural practices, and for me that's life. Moving out of Iran, I realized that I could see them from further viewpoint, kind of zooming out and see a big picture.

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And first of all, I could see the negative points that are maybe slowing down the progress in Iran or making the life harder. And also I would see the positive points that maybe I used to take them as granted or not appreciate them. And I think we discussed this together, this is something that maybe you should either be super intuitive about your life, or this is something that you get via immigration, that this living outside of this frame.

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Because when you immigrate, you are leaving a framework that your own native country is providing you, but you don't necessarily fit into the framework that the host country is providing for you. So you are kind of now at a free soul that can pick what are the things that I can grasp from different cultures, and I really enjoy that.

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Of course, it came with a good amount of cost and difficulty, but I think it was it.

Exactly, I think it gives you the opportunity to choose the best of two words in something.

Exactly.

And just to give an example of a thing that I liked about it that I didn't know was that, we have this concept of tarot.

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It could be sometimes mean lying in a way. So, for example, if I'm eating in front of you, eating my lunch, I would offer it to you first. That's like the norm, or if I don't like, I would invite you to my home, if you are close to my home, it doesn't necessarily even if I haven't planned for it.

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So we have that concept, Step and it's very normal in Iran and that have some bad parts about it that you might want to lie to people because it's just normal. Just for example, you don't mean to like give your food to someone, but you just say it.

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But it also has some good parts of it that I didn't know, that they're good actually before coming to the US. It kind of makes you to like care in a sense for other people or at least show your care and if they're in it, they will help you, and here I guess people are more straightforward.

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And at first I found it a bit like sometimes like cold in a sense, not very being very approachable. But at the same time there was other stuff that I find it a lot better here, for example, I guess we are like a lot less individualistic than Americans.

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That's my perception of Iran, we think of each other as a group more even, for example, if I see someone in the street crying in Iran, there are I guess 10 people helping them or asking them if they can help them. And that could also mean that we cannot mind our own business at the same time, it could be very judgmental of others, so that's the negative side.

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When I was in Iran, I would think a lot about what other people would think of me. For example, even in classroom, if I'm asking question I would or do I feel dumb if I asked them. And then I came here, I felt like people aren't that judgmental.

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I can be as dumb as I want and maybe one person make a joke out of it, but it's like it's not the norm and most people would encourage you to do your own thing. If that doesn't hurt you. Yeah, I'm curious, Mona Azadkia, during these years, what was your hardest moments or the fondest moments that you had at Stanford or.

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Unfortunately maybe I don't know, maybe my brain is structured. The funnest moments are not standing out maybe because also there was many of them, and so I would say on average I had a very good time. Many little things that I really appreciate and also bigger things, finding new friends, definitely enjoying a lot of time with Iranian non Iranians.

[00:18:04:662]

Getting to know you, for example, cooking times together, all those friendships that I'm happy and lucky that they are continuing. One of my fondest activities or happiest times was when I get to know the Stanford Cycling Club. And especially it kind of, I was lucky to get to know it soon enough because it was maybe a little bit before start of the pandemic.

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So I had an activity, for the lockdown time to go out and have physical activity with friends and also enjoy the nature. But unfortunately I have a very big, big heart moment that stands out quite sharply. And that was at the very beginning of President Trump's term, when he decided to put this travel ban.

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And being Iranian, Iran was one of those five countries that was included in the travel ban. And this was extremely hard time, not only for the Iranian community and not only for the other four countries in that list, but also the fear was very much spread through the Middle Eastern people.

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And also my friends from for example, India or China, they also felt like the whole international community of students are suddenly unwelcomed. Yeah, that was really tough, I would say. And it created a lot of problems, long lasting problems. It was a loss, I would say, for Stanford and not only for myself, but also for all the American universities, that had Iranian or other international students who were affected because professionally, there were many conferences that I could attend technically.

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But this travel ban kind of stopped us from going outside of the US and therefore we couldn't professionally grow as much as we could. And I would say that this was very harmful to the whole scientific community in the US, in some sense also on personal level. For example, I had my sister's wedding that unfortunately, due to this decision of President Trump, I could not attend, and I would say in my family life it creates quite a big problem.

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So yeah, that one was not good. But I'd say at the same time I got to appreciate my friendships with all the Iranian friends that I had at Stanford, because we could support each other mainly because maybe the other people were not as much aware of the severity of this issue.

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When you are not in a problem, it maybe looks like more of a fantasy or imaginary situation, and you cannot really have a good grasp of what is exactly going on. But at the time I really appreciated the community of Iranian students at Stanford, that even by joking around we kind of supported each other to go through these tough times.

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Yeah, but aside from that, to be honest, all the other hardships turned into happy memories. I would say this was an exception, all the other things, they had positive learnings afterwards. And how about you, how, how about you, Yeganeh? What was your happy and saddest memories?

Just a follow up comment on the, the travel ban, I was in Iran when it happened and I remember vividly in university.

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We were watching the CNN and some people started crying, because they already applied for US universities and they were like, we are not going to go there. And that affected many potential students decision to come to the US in our year. There weren't many from my cohort HRIF that applied for US university compared to like European or like Canadian universities.

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Yeah, it has outside effects, but for me personally, Stanford, the hardest memory that really stands out is the beginning of 2020, and there were a series of events that happened. I remember vividly, the first day of January was really fun, I was like, it's a new year and 2020 sounds like a cool year, numbers are like, I was very excited for the year.

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And then exactly the day after, there was a threat of war between Iran and US and that was really hard. I remember people were sending memes joking about getting drafted to the third world War and I wasn't even finding the memes funny. I was like really stressed, I was thinking of what would happen to my family if there's a war, and what should I do?

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I'm in the US as Iranian, should I go back? It was so much stressful and then I thought, as I was thinking, this is the hardest moment. The week after, there was an airplane crash which was sent down by Iranian missiles. And in the airplane there were 13 of our 13 Sharif alumni, that I was friends with two of them, and it was really hard.

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I read the news like 6 am and I just don't remember how I went through the days, and it took me a long time. And not just me and all people around me that I also talk with them, through all of the hardship that I had processing this sad event that happened.

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But as you said, I think I still haven't processed that event to be honest, but there was a upside. The bright side of the hardship was that brought us together in a sense. I would say not just Iranian friends, but also I found it easier to connect with friends that are coming from countries, that have been through war situation before or they had hardships in.

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Countries or their parents have been through those experiences. I had a friend that their parents were in Vietnam War, they had friends, and those were even though they haven't gone through the experience, they would check on me frequently. It was just very hard for me to see people care, and I got very closer to those friends.

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And that year actually led to pandemic after, which was, again a whole new heart that was for the whole world, but at least we were all in that together.

Yeah, but later, I guess I found peace with my friends and with family, I could just talk with them through it.

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So the fun moments were all those little happy memories that I can think of, like all the get togethers or the game nights that we had. It was just like a moment to escape from the sad events that happened.

Yeah, I remember when that shutdown of the airplane happened, and disbelief that, first of all, it took basically three days for the Iranian government to confirm that they actually did this, and it was not just a airplane crash.

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And then we get together and to remember your friends, we made halvah. Yeah, and that was nice, and I should say that was the best album we make together, yeah. Yeah, but as you said, I think these hardships, I mean, I hope no one goes through them, but maybe the getaway point from it is that you get to connect to other people in a deeper level.

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Yeah, I don't know. Some people are just made food and offer it to me or other just being nice that I know that maybe you find it hard to take care of yourself, I can help you with that, and that meant a lot. And it's just hard to reflect on the hard days, but also I have to really cherish that, like I was lucky in the right community here.

[00:26:04:578]

True.

Yeah. So with all the ups and downs, did your understanding about your own identity shift through the immigration years?

Yeah, a lot, I think I would say I have changed drastically. When I look back to before the years of 2015, when I moved out of Iran and moved to US and immigrated, that person is a totally different person in many aspects.

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I have changed a lot, maybe I hope so that I have became a little bit less judgmental. Thanks to this openness of the Bay Area or Stanford American culture that has more of an acceptance toward different ideas and beliefs. And also I feel like, this is something that I can pinpoint it maybe to Stanford.

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Life at Stanford especially, the quarter system is quite fast-paced. If you don't follow your coursework with the pace that the class is going, you fall behind very quickly. After a lot of practice, of course, this made me to realize that maybe this is the right way of approaching life in the sense that I should not really plan to put, I don't know how to exactly say.

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Maybe some years before, if I wanted to do something, I would say that, okay, there will come a time that I have this chunk of good amount of time that I can dedicate it to do this activity. And now I realize that I don't need to have like 10 hours of free time in a free week so that I can dedicate to learning a new language or music or watching a movie.

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I can just do everything all together just by being a little bit also more organized and realizing that time is really valuable and planning is making things possible. Seeing, as you said, these people who are excelling at many different things, one of the takeaway points from observing these people was that they are not necessarily geniuses at all different aspects.

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They are people who are good at appreciating the value of time and the value of their life. So they don't let the opportunities go, they catch them very casually. If there is an opportunity to watch a movie or to go for a run or to talk to someone about some scientific topic, they just do it in the moment.

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They really live their life in the moment. I think I have tried to become a little bit more like that.

But I get this advice in the beginning when I started at Stanford from an older grad student that you should reflect on your week. And like on your months at the end of the week, some months and years because like Stanford is so fast-paced, otherwise, you don't understand is going by.

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But about my own identity, I think the thing is when you immigrate, you're kind of starting a new life and you can kind of decide what you want to be in this new life. And I really kind of made that decision everly in the beginning. So there were things that I didn't like about myself in a step in Iran and I wanted to change it.

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It was kind of in my to-do list in a sense, but it's hard to do it especially socialized. So for me, for example, I was really considered super introverted person. I guess if you ask my friends from undergrad or high school. And I kind of like being outgoing, but I find it a bit hard.

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And then I came to the US I wasn't good at the language, but I was like, it's fine. People understand I'm an immigrant, and I just tried to be out there, I just tried to participate in different activities. I tried to organize different activities. And I kind of added that aspect of personality to myself, knowingly.

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But there were also other stuff that I was a bit less aware about, like things that are changing in my personalities, like the judge being, judgmental or not, I wasn't really aware of it. But when I look back about or when I talk with friends that I haven't caught up with for a few years, and they tell me, you have used to be so judgmental about this topic.

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But now, you're so often, both sides of the controversial views, and I'm like, yeah, that's right, I have changed. But then this thing that I can make a new me because of immigration was really big to me. There was just like little things that I wanted to change that I find it easiest to change.

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Does these changes maybe affect the way that you are in touch with your family or your friends that are still in Iran?

So with family, I've been talking with them with my parents every day or every other day at most. There were things that come up that we haven't discussed in years.

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And then when we talk about it again, for example, about religion, religious beliefs specifically, that are not surprising sometimes. But I guess I'm very lucky that my family are very open to understanding whatever my rationale is, as long as I'm happy with it, they try to understand. And with friends, it's sometimes more both, If I haven't caught up with them that frequently, especially when I came to the US in the beginning, I used to talk with people in Iran a lot.

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And then I realized I don't have enough time to make social connection here. So I wanted to try to make new friends at Stanford. And those were times that I would talk with a friend for six months, and then after six months, we kind of feel like we are both different now in some ways.

[00:31:44:815]

But, yeah, I'm curious, how was it for you, Mona?

Yeah, for me, I'd say family the same, because I talk to them very frequently. I think some of my changes, it was very visible for them because just through discussing topics of the. The day they would see how I have changed.

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Unfortunately, I would say maybe this travel van again affected this part because I literally didn't get to see them for more than four years. So going back home after four years and some months, I realized that being together under one roof, that's different in terms of communication. But again, fortunately, they are very open, relatively, and they care about happiness, so they understand these changes.

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And also, I try to communicate that this is something that I think I have done it or have changed for good, hopefully. With friends, I find it sometimes a bit awkward, especially with those that, as you said, I'm not in contact with that much, because I think what they have in mind is the 2014 version of me.

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I'm not sure if we, for example, have a discussion on a heated topic, how would it go? Like, probably both sides would be shocked or surprised.

So for someone who is just starting this journey with similar backgrounds, do you have anything you want to pass on to them?

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I'd say it's gonna be amazing. The only thing is that they should maybe follow your style a little bit more in terms of being quick and accepting the changes more quickly. I think just try to find a community that you can share some hobbies with and yeah, take care of yourself in all sense and try to.

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I think being happy is very important and valuing that, being mindful about what you are doing is also very important because as we said, it's very fast paced. After two quarters, you may feel like, my God, two quarters have passed. What have I done or what is the plan?

[00:33:58:978]

And this might be a scary moment. So I think it is very important to have a little bit of flexibility and sharpness when it comes to making decisions and also not be shy asking for help and mentorship. I think maybe something that is a bit of a characteristic of Stanford is that there are amazing mentors out there.

[00:34:23:444]

It's just you need to go and really ask them. This is our task to go and bug people to help us and guide us.

Okay, I definitely profited from mentorship a lot when I started. And there were many people that were so nice, but they wouldn't take the initiative.

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And you would just have to ask them. Don't be shy. That's like the main thing. But there is also this other stuff that it's really fine to feeling kind of behind other people. When you start here, there were a lot of barriers, like the language barrier. There also differences in the academic style.

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We didn't have that much of a research experience. Coming to Stanford and many other people that did undergrad in top private universities or like top universities in general. In the US they had like amazing research experience. It's fine to be behind all of them. But if you get this is like, easy advice to say, but hard to do it in practice.

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Try not to compare yourself with others. But it's also fine to feel behind. It takes some time just to pick up with English if it's not your first language. For me, it took me six months to just starting to realize other people talking in English. What does that mean?

[00:35:36:243]

And then I guess also take some time to get used to all the cultural differences between research and in general life. So it's fine to not feel okay during all those times. Just let yourself feel sad at some point then I guess. Mona, do you want to say where you right now?

[00:35:53:696]

Yeah, so I graduated in 2020. Then I moved to Switzerland. I did two years of postdoc at ETH in Zurich, which, thanks to my first immigration experience, was much easier. I knew what to do almost, and it was very smooth. I got to appreciate the changes more than what I did in my first experience.

[00:36:14:844]

And now it's been about three months that I'm in London. Started a job at London School of Economics and I'm enjoying it.

Yeah, do you have any final words?

No, I guess would say to people that are following the same steps, try to have fun as much as possible.

[00:36:34:432]

Anyway, life is short. Take advantage of the time here. That's it.