



Mahdokht

Hazara woman from
Afghanistan

I am a Hazara woman from Afghanistan. We are not a laboratory. If people ask for our stories, we want to be part of what happens next to see our experiences lead to meaningful change for the people who come after us.



Finding Her Digital Voice: Mahdokht on Skills, Agency and Telling Her Own Story

From Afghanistan to the Netherlands: a journey of resilience, learning and finding a voice





Acknowledgments

This interview was conducted by Noemi Mena Montes, who is an Assistant Professor in International Business and Communication (IBC) at Radboud University and a researcher with the migration network RUNOMI. She holds a PhD in Political Communication and Migration and is an expert in intercultural communication.

The interview has been edited lightly for brevity

Before we talk about your experience in the Netherlands, I'd like to start with your life before you arrived. Who was Mahdokht before becoming a refugee?

I was a teacher in Afghanistan. I taught Dari, Farsi and English in a girls' school. Before everything changed, I also worked with women in my community. We organised workshops about women's health and pregnancy, sometimes secretly, because many husbands and fathers did not allow women to participate.

For me, education has always been very important. I believe when women have knowledge, they ask questions. That is exactly why the Taliban are afraid of educated women. If women have less knowledge, they ask fewer questions and are easier to control.

I am also Hazara, an ethnic and religious minority in Afghanistan. For many years we have experienced discrimination and violence. When the Taliban came back to power, women were no longer allowed to study or work. I was worried not only about myself but also about my daughter. I could not accept a future where girls are forbidden from going to school.

Even before leaving Afghanistan, did technology become a way to continue learning?

Yes. For many Afghan girls, online education became one of the only remaining opportunities.

Many organisations outside Afghanistan started offering online courses. I enrolled at the University of the People and received a scholarship. The biggest challenge was internet access, but also language. Most online courses are in English, so learning English became essential. I always tell Afghan women that English opens many more opportunities because it allows you to study online and connect with the world.



Arriving in the Netherlands: Entering a Digital Society



When you arrived in the Netherlands, what do you remember most?

Honestly, everything was a shock. I didn't know much about Europe. Friends told me the Netherlands respected women's rights and children's rights, so I decided to come here.

I arrived alone. During the journey I lost my phone, so when I reached Amsterdam I couldn't contact my husband or my family. They didn't know where I was. Maybe they thought I had died.

Someone told me to go to Amsterdam Central Station and find the police. It was March. It was snowing and very cold. I spent almost five hours walking around the station looking for the police because I couldn't find them. When I finally found them, I was exhausted.

The next step was another challenge. They gave me a printed map, an OV-chipkaart with some credit and told me to travel to Ter Apel. But nobody explained how to use any of it.

I had never travelled by train before. Afghanistan doesn't have trains like this. I didn't know how to check in or check out. I didn't know how to change platforms. I didn't understand the announcements because they were in Dutch. I remember thinking all the time: *I hope I don't get lost again.* I even forgot to check out with my OV-chipkaart because nobody had explained how it worked.



The Hidden Digital Divide

Looking back, when did you realise that adapting to the Netherlands wasn't only about learning Dutch, but also about learning an entirely different digital system?

Very quickly. People think that because refugees have smartphones, they already know how to use everything. That isn't true.

In Afghanistan or Iran we mainly used our phones for calls, messages or social media. Here almost everything is digital. You need to make appointments online before seeing a doctor. You receive QR codes instead of printed information. You need to navigate websites and digital platforms. People assume you already know all these things, but many of us don't.

I remember the first time someone gave me a QR code. I had no idea what it was. Later my Dutch teacher showed us how to use one during a Kahoot game in class. Once someone explained it, it became easy. But first somebody has to teach you....That is the difference.



Learning How the System Works

What helped you move from feeling lost to becoming more confident?

The first thing was English. Because I spoke English, I could ask questions. Soon I also started translating for other Afghan and Iranian refugees who didn't speak English.

Helping them helped me learn too. I realised something important: giving people a flyer or a website is not enough. Many organisations think that if they hand you a leaflet or send you a link, the problem is solved. But it doesn't work like that. Someone needs to sit with you and say: *"First you do this. Then this. Then this."* Only then can you learn to do it yourself.





STRUGGLES WITH DIGITAL SYSTEMS

- Setting up and activating DigiD is confusing.
- Apps like MijnOverheid, Belastingdienst, and IND are difficult to understand.
- Managing passwords, online forms, and two-step verifications is very challenging without guidance.

From Smartphone to Laptop

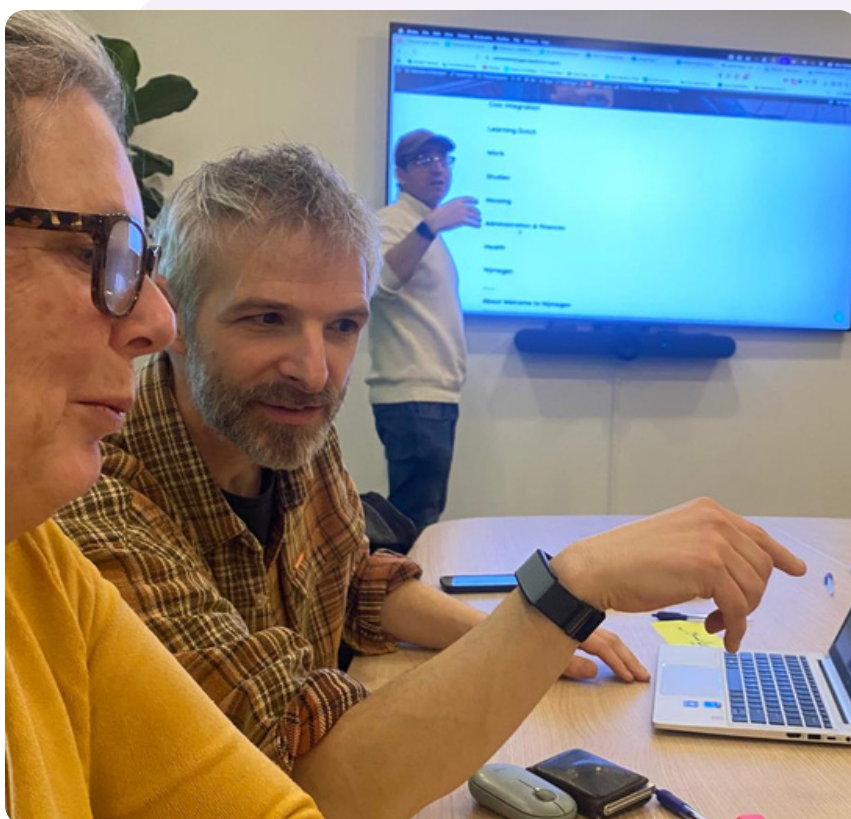
Many people think digital skills simply mean having a smartphone. When did you discover there was a much bigger digital world?

That happened during the Newcomers Programme and the Summer School at university. It was my first time working regularly with a laptop. Everyone around me had laptops. They were typing while the lecturer was speaking, making PowerPoint presentations and searching online at the same time.

In Afghanistan we mostly wrote everything by hand. I felt embarrassed because I didn't know how to make a PowerPoint presentation. I also felt different from the other students. They talked about holidays, travelling through Europe and buying clothes at Primark. I didn't even know what Primark was.

Sometimes I felt they came from another world but slowly I learned.... I learned how to make presentations....how to search for jobs online.

How to use a laptop not only for communication, but also for studying and working. That was a big milestone in my digital journey.



Technology Alone is not Enough

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refugee women

chiller



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From learner to Helping Others

At what point did you realise you were no longer only learning, but also helping other newcomers?

After joining the Newcomers Programme, I started organising workshops for Afghan women.

Together with researchers and community organisations, we discussed digital skills, finding information online and looking for jobs through digital platforms.

Many women still struggle because they have limited proficiency in English or Dutch. I think that language and digital skills are connected. Without language, it is much harder to benefit from digital opportunities. That is why I wanted to help other Afghan women feel more confident.





Feeling Heard!

As you became more involved in projects and research, did you always feel your community's voices were being heard?

Not always. Sometimes people come to our community because they want interviews, research or media stories. Then they publish something and disappear. Nothing changes.

Many refugees feel like we are treated as a laboratory. We are not a laboratory if people ask for our stories, we also want to see change.

AI as the Next Step

Today AI has become part of many people's lives. How has it become part of yours?

When I first arrived, I often felt lonely. One friend introduced me to an AI application where I could talk about my emotions. Later I started using ChatGPT.

Today it helps me write formal emails, translate information, find organisations that support refugees and search for opportunities. When I felt isolated, it even helped me find community groups and language cafés.

However at the Digital Newcomers program at Radboud University, I also learned about privacy. Before attending workshops, I didn't know that sharing personal information with AI could have risks. Now I avoid entering my name, address or phone number. AI is very useful, but we also need to know how to use it safely.



Finding my Voice Online

Your digital journey didn't stop with learning digital skills. Today you also use digital (media) platforms to speak publicly about Afghanistan. What has that experience been like?

Today I use TikTok and other platforms to talk about Afghan women and education. Social media has allowed me to build a network with people all over the world but it has also brought new risks.

Some Taliban supporters attack me online. They tell me to stop speaking. They threaten to find me, that is why I protect myself. I don't always use my real name. And sometimes on Tiktok and social media, I hide my face with stickers and also I replace my voice with music. These are strategies to stay safe while continuing to speak because after everything that happened, I don't want to lose my voice again.





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