

Sonita's director: why I paid \$2,000 to stop a rapper being sold into a forced marriage

By Homa Khaleeli

Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami set out to make a film about an Afghan refugee performer – and ended up helping her escape

Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami does not look like a woman with a saviour complex. Blunt, self-aware and quick to mock her own heroics, she just seems a little too sceptical for a fairy godmother. Yet, during the three years she spent directing her latest documentary, the Iranian film-maker ended up paying \$2,000 to “buy” her teenage protagonist’s freedom.

Sonita follows the life of an Afghan refugee in Tehran. She dreams of becoming a famous rapper, but her mother and brother have other plans – to sell her into marriage in Afghanistan. So the 40-year-old director steps in, giving the family cash to delay the marriage. At first reluctantly and then with single-minded determination, Ghaem Maghami directs her subject to safety. By the end, Sonita Alizadeh has travelled to Afghanistan and on to the US to take up a scholarship, without her family’s permission. A glance at [her Twitter account](#) shows she has surpassed her own ambitions – performing in front of everyone from Chelsea Clinton to Laura Bush.

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But how did an unsentimental, seasoned director end up playing so fast and loose not only with cinematic convention, but with laws, borders and customs? “I can’t film people who are suffering for something I can afford, when they are giving their life, their story, to me,” she says firmly. What about a film-maker’s duty to be an objective observer? She shakes her head. “It’s always a lie. You are never a fly on the wall. You are always an elephant in the room. You change everything with your presence. I don’t believe objectivity is important, or even happens. Human stories are always subjective and personal. The film-maker decides, creates.”

Ghaem Maghami never expected Sonita’s story to have a happy ending. At first, she had no plans to shoot her at all. When she met the wide-eyed 17-year-old, who idolised Rihanna and the Iranian rapper Yas, it was as a favour to a cousin who worked at an NGO for child labourers and thought the director could help Sonita find some music training.

“She didn’t want to say hello or thank you,” says Ghaem Maghami, which didn’t exactly make her “an attractive documentary character”. But soon Ghaem Maghami – whose previous films have looked at outsider artists, including a schizophrenic street painter – was intrigued by Sonita’s determination. “She wanted a voice,” recalls the director, “even though she was too shy to say her name. She said that as a child she used to like pop music but she had ‘a million things to say’ – so needed rap.”

One of three million Afghan refugees believed to be living in Iran, Sonita had no identity papers and was unsure of her real age. She had fled the Taliban as a child (in a heartbreaking scene, Sonita recalls her father and brother being held at gunpoint). She stayed in Iran with her sister and niece but, without papers, could not go to school. Instead, with characteristic pluck, Sonita bartered and begged her way to acquiring whatever skills and knowledge she could. “She found a woman volunteer in the mosque where she cleaned who helped her to read and write,” Ghaem Maghami says. “They had no paper or ink – they would write on the wall or the windows with their fingers.”

She took up karate but, without identity papers, could not gain her black belt. She excelled in photography but could only enter competitions under someone else’s name. When Ghaem Maghami began filming, it was the discrimination Sonita faced that fascinated her: Afghans in Iran are often stereotyped as dirty, a danger to women, a threat to jobs. “They are living in a kind of segregation in Iran,” she says. “Afghan men, you only see working. Afghan women, you just don’t see. Iranians don’t know much about the reality of their life.”

Soon a more pressing issue took over: forced marriage. For Ghaem Maghami, it seemed a shocking practice. But for Sonita and the Afghan girls at the NGO that supported them, it was an everyday reality. In one scene, Sonita casually asks a recently engaged girl: “Did you agree, or did they beat you?” She is told: “They beat me up first.” At other times, they discuss their “bride price”, something Sonita angrily says makes them sound “like sheep”.

“It was an issue all her friends faced,” says Ghaem Maghami. “She knew it would happen to her. She just didn’t know when.” The answer comes 30 minutes in, when Sonita’s brother tells her she must return to Afghanistan to be married so he can use the money to buy a wife himself. We see Sonita – and then her teacher at the NGO – begging her mother to forbid it, but to no avail. Yet Ghaem Maghami insists that blaming the family for being mercenary is too simplistic. “Sonita’s mother is as loving as any other,” she says. “She is in a bad situation. If you are struggling to survive, no one can say you care only about money. You have to live.”

Early marriage is considered a way to protect a girl’s honour, the director adds, but the opposition in Afghanistan to educating women is another factor. Only 18% of Afghan women are literate, compared to 45% of men; in Iran, it’s 82% and 91%. “One of the reasons girls get married early is that they don’t have access to education. Families don’t see any future for them. They didn’t understand about Sonita’s music – it was like a joke for them. They didn’t understand her plan for life.”

There was only one way to free Sonita from a forced marriage: to pay up. But it wasn’t the first time Ghaem Maghami had stepped in to the story. In an early scene, the young singer, along with her older sister and nine-year-old niece, are evicted from their home. The director helped them find somewhere else. It was interventions like this, she says, that created the trust between the pair, meaning Sonita finally opened up.

But even just paying part of the bride price was a drastic move for the film-maker. “If you pay for every problem, you will never have a movie,” she says, letting out a smoky laugh. “The crew blamed me because they said Sonita didn’t seem worried. She could see in my eyes I would pay it.”

Off-camera, in events that weren’t included in the film, things became even more dramatic. Sonita’s brother-in-law was a brutally violent drug addict. When he was released from prison he tried to sell Sonita’s niece into marriage. The police answer was to suggest deporting the whole family. Once more, the film-maker offered an escape, sheltering the little girl until her mother could move them away. Sonita, who had always protected her niece, moved in too, but did not escape unscathed. “He saw Sonita in the street and tried to kill her,” Ghaem

After helping Sonita make a music video called *Brides for Sale*, the director made sure her activist friends shared it widely. It went viral and the young singer was offered a high school scholarship in the US. But first she needed a visa, meaning she had to return to Afghanistan. If she failed, she could not return to Iran. The pair also decided not to tell Sonita’s family about their plans. “I was very worried,” the director says. “But I didn’t know what else we could do. We were on a highway with no exit. There was no turning round. All we could do was drive as fast as possible.”

The gamble paid off. Sonita, says Ghaem Maghami, is happy in her new life, while her family couldn’t be prouder. “They can see she is successful and respected,” says the director, who hopes her film will change attitudes to refugees worldwide. “They can see she has a future.”