

*Arash Zarbakhsh*

My name is Sara and I am 60 years old. I lived in Iran for about 53 years and moved to the United States seven years ago. I grew up in a regular family. My father was a butcher and my mother was a housewife. I have four younger brothers and three younger sisters. My mom died after she gave birth to my youngest sister, at that time I was only thirteen years old. Her passing was very difficult for all of us. She played a major role in the family. Everybody in the area knew her for her kindness and caring. At that age I was put in charge of everything at home; from washing clothes and cooking to taking care of my younger sisters and brothers since I was the oldest child. This made my life very hard. Six months later my father married my aunt. The customs in Iran were very restricted for females. We always had to dress in a way that no parts of our body would be visible besides the face and hands. In addition, unmarried girls were not allowed to go out of the home without a valid reason, and if they had to go out one of the male members of house would have to escort them. After my mom passed away, my life became even harder. I was all on my own.

I went to school only up to fourth grade. After that, my parents did not send me to school because I had to help my stepmother, who was sick and could not do much work at home. Unlike most kids, I loved school and reading books to help my education. This would encourage me to learn on my own during my free time. I had a principal at school by the name of Sanaz, who I always looked up to. She was very kind to me and anytime I needed help on my learning she would be the one to help me. She was very patient and taught me almost anything I wanted to know at that time. She always said to me, "you are very smart and if you continue your education you'll be very successful." These words helped me to always have a good feeling about myself throughout my life. I still remember the advice and positive feedback she used to give to me. I wish I had continued my education to contribute more to my society.

I had an aunt from my mother's side that I always tried to make my role model. She was a hard-working woman and would always tell me to be positive and to never give up. Anytime I felt depressed and could not continue with the pressures of life, she would console and encourage me that it could have been worse than this. She was always there for me and I tried to follow her footsteps. She was the person who would remind me that I am important and guide me to act the way I should as a female. I would discuss any problem or question I had in life with her, especially about being a woman because she was the only woman that I felt comfortable to talk to about anything.

My uncle from my father's side, Jamshid, was the head of the family. Everyone in our family respected him and we would always listen to him. When I was fourteen years old Jamshid forced me to get married to a man who was eighteen years older than me. I did not like him and as much

as I begged my father to talk to my uncle he would say “he is the head of family and he never make mistake in his decisions.” After marriage, I was not happy with my husband and life. My father-in-law and my two brothers-in-law were living with us and I had to do everything in the house including taking care of my father-in-law, who was sick at that time, washing clothes, cleaning the house, and cooking for everyone. I had to draw water from the well and wash each article of clothing by hand. During the winter time my hands would get numb in the cold water and after all that, I did not hear even one thank you from anyone for whatever I had to do.

I had three sister-in-laws. One of them would meddle and fuss a lot in my life. I had to babysit for her children almost four days a week. It took me a few years to become pregnant. Due to hard working and life pressure, I had a miscarriage. About a year after that I got pregnant again and had a baby girl. She was very beautiful and cute but my husband’s family did not like her. They wanted me to have a boy to keep the name of the family going. Therefore, they started treating me worse than before. My father heard from others how my husband’s family was treating me and when he asked me if what he heard was true; I had no choice but to deny them all. Even though I had such a miserable life, I did not want to divorce; I had a daughter and she needed a father. Fortunately after one year, I had a baby boy and that brought light to my life. Five years after that I had another boy. At this point in time my father-in-law had already passed away and my two brother-in-laws got married. Life was getting a little better. I had my family to take care and less people were involved in my life.

My husband was very stubborn and hard to deal with. In addition, it was very hard for us to understand each other. Looking back at it now, I believe this was due to the age difference between us. From what I remember we never went out together for lunch, or for a walk in the park. All he would do for the home was go to work and bring home money. I had to do everything from shopping to raising children. Even though I had grown up in such a hard way, I tried my best to raise my children in the best way possible with lots of comfort for them. I taught my sons how to behave with women, and have respect for them. I also trained my daughter to look up to men and honor them. I would always tell my children that they should study hard and become educated. Most of my focus was on my daughter to be educated since after all she is the one who raises the children. I believe if a mother is educated, that will have a tremendous effect on her children to have good behavior and become interested in following education to a university. In this way they will be more useful for the family, which would lead to a better society.

When my daughter and my oldest son got to the ages of fifteen and fourteen, they decided to leave Iran and come to the United States for more opportunities of a better education. My husband did not want them to leave. However, my son said “I am not going to have a good future in Iran.” The reason he said that was because there was a custom in Iran that the son would take over his father’s business and he did not like this job. Finally, they ended up leaving Iran and they said to me “we are going to prepare everything in America and bring you there to live with us.” Now I had only

my youngest son with me who was ten years old.

My husband was renting a small store and about eight years after my children left to America he got in a fight with the owner on a very small issue and the owner threw him out of the store. He could not find another job so he was home most of the time. As a result of that he became an angry person; uncontrolled, depressed, and on any small thing he would start arguing and give me a hard time.

My daughter got married in the United States and my son became a successful businessman. They asked us to come to America and live with them. My husband disagreed at first since he was an old man and did not know any English. However, I talked to him a lot and with the situation that we had which he could not make money, he was convinced to come and live with our son in America.

My life changed by coming to the United States. My son prepared almost everything for us to come. He bought us a house next to his house and furnished the house completely. Even though my education was up to fourth grade, I always liked to read. Reading would make me calm. I liked to read health magazines and learn more about my body; this way I can take care of myself better and eat more healthy food. The good thing is in Los Angeles I have more opportunities to get these magazines than in any other states, since there are so many Persians around here. This way I have access to more books written in Farsi, since my English is not good. About four to five hours a day I also watch Iranian TV programs and movies. Most of the Iranian channels show either movies or talk shows with experts in different fields. I mostly watch the talk shows with experts and doctors in the health and science field. I watch movies but only the romantic movies. I don't like action or violent movies. My youngest son started going to college and now he is going to medical school. I started going to a private institution to learn English. However, it did not last long since my husband was home the whole day and wanted me to stay with him. We tried to send him to an adult daycare but he refused to go. Now I am happy since I spend most of my time with my grandchildren who are very cute and lovely. They come over almost every day and keep me busy. It is such a pleasure to have them around me.

I believe marriage is a two-way road you give and you get, which is something I never had in my own marriage. One should always try to communicate and compromise with his or her partner and try to work things out and solve the problems of life together. One should not be stubborn in marriage life and give all the pressure of life to the other side. The spouse should also not have such an age difference since this will cause a lack of understanding. The marriage should be out of love and kindness not by force and influence of others.

My grandmother would tell me stories of her life of how women had to do everything for their husbands and how men had full control of life. Women had to do cooking, cleaning, washing, and basically everything else around the house. My grandmother use to say once a week she had to wash clothes from morning to night. But today, the life style has changed and it has become a lot easier with all the technologies like washing machines,

dishwasher, vacuum cleaner and etc. Women are working inside and outside of the house and they share life together with their spouse.

I think it is very important that men and women have equal rights in most cases. Gender equality is very important for me since I did not have that when I was growing up. Men and women should have the same rights and ability to go to school and to work outside the house. However, this does not apply to every single situation, since men's and women's ability of doing work is different from one to another. For example, in most situations women are better in multitasking and can do several things at once but with less accuracy; however, men usually can do only one thing at once but they can do it in better way. Therefore, there should be a difference in the rights but not to the benefit of one side only or putting one side down. I believe in the United States there is gender equality and men and women are treated mostly equal in most areas such as education, however, there are areas that remain heavily slanted towards the males of our nation such as income and political representation. As we see there has not been even one female president in the United States, but there is improvement in that for the last election we had female candidate, Hillary Clinton, who ran for presidency. That by alone shows that women are moving in the right direction and in a few years we can have exactly the same right as men!

