

# SONITA

A film by Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami



2015, Iran / Germany / Switzerland, HD, 90 min., Farsi and Dari with English subtitles

**Sundance Film Festival, Grand Jury Prize and Audience Award (World Documentary)**

**Certificate PG**

**Opens 21 October 2016**

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## **SYNOPSIS**

Sonita Alizadeh, a strong-willed teenager who idolizes Rihanna and Michael Jackson, is an aspiring rapper, in spite of all the obstacles she confronts in Iran and from her conservative Afghan family. She is an undocumented Afghan refugee in Tehran, and her family has other plans for her.

In this gripping documentary, her dream of living abroad is about to come true just as her family plan on sending her back home to get married to a much older man. He would give them a lump sum of money, which would allow Sonita's brother to pay the dowry find a bride of his own. While she must now attempt to overcome numerous personal and bureaucratic hurdles to avoid what seems inevitable, the film's director, Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami is also confronted with a dilemma: should she interfere to help her or let things unfold in front of her eyes and of the camera? The film offers an incredible insight into the life of a young Afghan woman in Iran and the hurdles she must overcome to be able to live her dream of becoming a singer.

**Sundance Film Festival, Grand Jury Prize and Audience Award (World Documentary)**

**Audience Award and Doc U Award (Youth Jury), IDFA 2015**

**Youth Jury Award, Sheffield Doc/Fest 2016**

**AVAST Foundation Audience Award, One World International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival**

**Human Rights Watch Film Festival**

**IndieMusic Award, IndieLisboa**

**Audience Award, One World 2016**

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## ROKHSAREH GHAEM MAGHAMI - Biography

Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami was born in Tehran and studied filmmaking and animation in Tehran Art University. Her published essays and research include the book, "Animated Documentary: A New Way of Expression," published in Persian in 2009. Her short documentary works include *Pigeon Fanciers* (2000), *A Loud Solitude* (2010), *Born 20 Minutes Late* (2010), *Going Up the Stairs* (2011), and the animated documentary *Cyanosis* (2007).

## FILMOGRAPHY

### Feature-length Documentaries

2015 *Sonita*

### Short Documentaries

2000 *Pigeon Fanciers*

2007 *Cyanosis*

2010 *A Loud Solitude*

2010 *Born 20 Minutes Late*

2011 *Going Up the Stairs: Portrait of an Unlikely Iranian Artist*



A FILM BY **Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami**  
WITH **Sonita Alizadeh**  
PRODUCER **Gerd Haag**  
CO-PRODUCERS **Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami, Aline Schmid**  
CREATIVE PRODUCER **Kerstin Krieg**  
EDITOR **Rune Schweitzer**  
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY **Behrouz Badrouj, Ali Mohammad Ghasemi, Mohammad Haddadi**  
**Arastoo Givi, Torben Bernard, Parviz Arefi, Ala Mohseni**  
  
SCORE MUSIC **Moritz Denis**  
MUSIC LAYOUT **Guillaume Wuhrmann**  
ORIGINAL SONGS BY **Sonita Alizadeh, Sepandarmaz Elahi Shirazi**  
LINE PRODUCER GERMANY **Cornelia Kellers**  
LINE PRODUCER IRAN **Morteza Ebrahimi, Hosein Beshgard**  
LINE PRODUCER AFGHANISTAN **Ghodsieh Shahnematollahi, Sahra Karimi**  
LINE PRODUCER SWITZERLAND **Catherine Muller**  
COMMISSIONING EDITORS **NDR/arte: Claudia Cellarius; RTS Radio Télévision Suisse, Unité des films Documentaires: Irène Challand, Gaspard Lamunière;**  
**SRG SSR: Sven Wälti, Gregory Catella**

A PRODUCTION BY TAG/TRAUM

IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH INTERMEZZO FILM, ROKHSAREH GHAEM MAGHAMI, NDR, RTS Radio Télévision Suisse, SRG SSR, DR

IN CO-OPERATION WITH Arte

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© TAG/TRAUM – INTERMEZZO – ROKHSAREH GHAEMMAGHAMI 2015

2015, Iran / Germany / Switzerland, HD, 90 min

## INTERVIEWS WITH ROKHSAREH GHAEM MAGHAMI

### *In Doc 10*

#### **How did you first meet Sonita and why did you want to make a documentary about her?**

I met her through my cousin, who is a social worker employed at the organization where we first see Sonita. I see this girl who is very talented and who wants to be a singer, and I began to get interested in her. I didn't see her as a protagonist. But what was interesting to me was that she had a lot of dreams, but I couldn't see any future for her. She didn't have any documents; she couldn't travel; she couldn't do anything. So it was interesting to follow her life to see what she does with her dreams.

#### **Can you discuss how you became a "character" in your own documentary? I get the feeling that you did not want to be a part of it, but you felt that had no choice. Is that correct?**

Yes, I didn't want to see myself in the movie. That's why you became a documentary filmmaker: you want to film *other* people. But when the NGO wasn't going to help her, and I was thinking it's important that I have to help her, I had to reflect the production process and my decision. So it was important to be a character, or it would look like her problems were solved in a magic way if we didn't introduce myself. There was no other way. I was really thinking. We couldn't just record; we had to interfere.

#### **More generally, do you think documentary filmmakers should always remain objective, and only follow their "character's" lives? Do you think it's important not to interfere? If so, why?**

Whether they are interfering or not, they should show it. So what's important is to be authentic. There is also a point where if you can help someone and it's easy to change things, then you should. In Sonita's case, we could have gone back with her to Afghanistan and shot her forced marriage, but it wasn't fair to leave her like that. But some disasters can't be helped. Once I was working with someone who was a junkie and a schizophrenic, but I couldn't help him.

#### **Can you talk about the making of the "music video" in the documentary? Was Sonita involved in the creative process?**

We worked on it together. After her mother left, she stayed with me and we worked on it together. The ideas were not all her ideas. We really worked hard on it together, we talked about the story, and the images, and she had some ideas and I had some ideas. Then I put it on YouTube and it went viral.

#### **In some ways, your documentary completely changed Sonita's life. Are there any ways that you think the making of the film has changed your own life?**

Yes, the film also changed me. I had the experience for the first time to change somebody's life, which also changes your life. I've never supported someone for a long time; so it was like the experience of having a child. I also saw the power of dreams, and how dreams can be powerful. Because, for me, most of her dreams, at the beginning, seemed kind of funny and impossible. But she had the right to dream: and that changed my attitude about life.

Published in *Doc 10*, 18 March 2016

## ***In Indiewire by Eboni Boykin***

### **Please give us your description of the film playing.**

Making “Sonita” was a journey into the depths of society to understand poverty, immigration, war, identity, sexism, tradition and human values versus filmmaking conventions.

Sonita Alizadeh is a force to be reckoned with. With a poet’s soul and an activist’s passion, Sonita uses her rap lyrics and powerful voice to fight child marriage. She speaks out for the rights of girls and women to choose their own destiny. Sonita’s advocacy began with herself as a teenager, when she created a video to protest against her own impending marriage. The song was written from the viewpoint of her young friends, who were also about to be sold, and it is becoming a rallying cry for many girls across the globe. She succeeded in avoiding a marriage and embarked upon a journey to end child marriage [all over] the world.

While growing up as a refugee in Iran, Sonita met me, and over three years, I documented her remarkable story, which became this film. This film also led to life-changing opportunities for Sonita. Starting with her impoverished childhood on the streets of Tehran, where she finds her voice through the power and beauty of rap, her life takes an unexpected and near-tragic turn when she is almost sold into marriage as a child bride. The film then journeys with Sonita as she uses her music to bravely escape that fate and forge a new path to fulfill her dreams.

### **What drew you to this story?**

I met Sonita through my cousin, who is a social worker working in a nonprofit to support child laborers. Sonita’s ambitious dreams and her self-confidence in spite of the horrible situation she was living in drew me to her story.

### **What was the biggest challenge in making the film?**

Whether I should interfere in Sonita’s life or not. If I did, what would happen to the authenticity of my movie?

### **What do you want people to think about when they are leaving the theatre?**

I want them to think about small changes they can make happen.

### **What advice do you have for other female directors?**

I really don’t have advice. I can’t advise such a diverse group of people, whose problems are so diverse. How can I advise a Danish female filmmaker in a way that it will be useful for an Iranian or Iraqi female filmmaker?

### **What’s the biggest misconception about you and your work?**

They always ask me if it is difficult for a woman to make movies in Iran. Harsh censorship makes it difficult for all Iranian filmmakers, but being a woman does not make it more difficult. There is some misunderstanding, and [mis]taking Iran for Saudi Arabia. Also, there is a tendency in the media to magnify the “problems in Iran,” but my movie is focused on the Afghan tradition of selling girls. In spite of having an Islamic regime in Iran, 20% of fiction-feature filmmakers and 35% of documentary filmmakers are females, according to the Iranian Cinema Guild.

**How did you get your film funded? Share some insights into how you got the film made.**

Grants from Germany, Switzerland, USA and the Netherlands. TV channels from Japan, France, Germany, Switzerland, Korea and Taiwan were involved too.

**Name your favorite film directed by a woman and why.**

“The Blue Veiled” and “Nargess,” both directed by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad. These movies look at the situations of women with the understanding of the situations of men in regards to class, the economy and social dynamics.

I don't like it when some movies, women or feminists refer to men as evil and women as victims. Patriarchy is an economic, social and cultural system with its own dynamics and mechanisms. Individual men are not to blame.

Published in *Indiewire* on 22 January 2016



## INTERVIEW WITH SONITA ALIZADEH

By Claire Marie Healey in Dazed

**What was going on in your life when you first met Rokhsareh?**

**Sonita:** When I was around 14 I was working as a cleaner at a gym. Cleaning at that age was really hard for me. I was looking for a way to share my feelings with others. First I tried pop music, and I was always writing pop... but I couldn't fit all my (feelings) in pop music. Then I tried rap – I realised it was the best way to share important messages and that I could say more through it. I wrote my first song called "Child Labour", and through that song I met Rokhsareh's friend, and Rokhsareh told me she can pay for my music because I didn't have money to work with professional musicians. After a while, she became interested in my life and started following me with her camera. At the beginning, it wasn't the best relationship. It took a long time to trust her and be comfortable with her.

**Do you think it is important that music is political? Should music always send a powerful message?**

**Sonita:** Because music comes from inside of somebody, people can feel it very well and people can (feel a sense of) contact with it. It's a powerful tool for social change because you can reach many people and you can share your feelings through words, and through your music videos. Because most people listen to music, I think it's the best way to assert social change.

**Did you have much opportunity to listen to music when you were a child?**

**Sonita:** No... I wasn't even interested in listening to music! I don't know what happened for me to become a rapper! I just wanted to say what is inside me. And now I have more favourite rappers, singers than when I was in Iran. Back then, I was working and I didn't have time to listen to music, or I didn't have internet to find new singers.



**Who are the musicians and artists that you really find inspiring?**

**Sonita:** I like Eminem's style, and Missy Elliott. I really like M.I.A.

**Yes! You seem quite similar in the ways you send powerful messages through music. What do you love about performing rap music on the stage, how do you feel during a performance?**

**Sonita:** When I'm rapping I become very emotional and people can feel it through my face. I like it because I'm rapping about something that I saw happening to girls or women. Because I rap, music changed my life, so I think I have to use it to help other girls.

**What's your creative process when it comes to writing lyrics?**

**Sonita:** Every song is a long process. First I have to write a story for it, and then to make it into a song, I have to make it short and then shorter – so it's not easy! At the beginning the lyrics (run to) like five or six pages, and then I have to choose which words are the most powerful.

**The "Brides For Sale" video is very powerful. Do you feel that when you're performing like that and you're expressing these angry emotions, that you become someone else? That you're looking down on yourself doing that?**

**Sonita:** When I'm rapping about something like child brides, because it almost happened to me, I will become another person who is really angry and who wants to scream. And when I'm rapping about war or about women who can't share their stories, again I'm another person, so it has different angles.

**It's a great scene in the documentary when you're looking at your video blow up on YouTube, and reading all the supportive comments. Do you feel like social media and the internet has a big part to play in how young people express themselves?**

**Sonita:** The biggest impact. Because of social media now so many people know my story, which is the story of many, many girls in the world. Every year, 50 million girls are forced into marriage, and my story is the same as them – but I was lucky and I could escape it. So social media helps me to change my life and the director helped me to prove myself to my family and to the world. I think we can do anything with our social media, without social media the world would be very, very small.

**What is your hope for the future? Do you think it's possible to incite a big change in society, or is more about individual girls finding power for themselves?**

**Sonita:** What I'm working towards is to end child marriage, because I was one of them. I want to end child marriage because I lost some of my friends, and my niece maybe would be next. So I'm trying to help people to know that child marriage exists so they can help my vision and help other organisations who are already working to end child marriage. And I really want to help families, because families love their daughters... and if they are doing this to their own daughters it's because they don't know another way. They need to know there are new ways and new possibilities for their daughters.

I want to work in communities, even with religious leaders, to help change these traditions. Right now, I'm on spring break and I don't do any fun things... But I'm happy because if I want to stop child marriage I have to accept this hard moment. It's not always easy. (But) because I said I want to change the world I should work for it, not just talk about it. I don't want to be a musician forever, I want to keep going to school and become a lawyer for women's rights and also use the law to help women.

Published in Dazed in March 2016

Support Sonita's campaign to end child marriage at <http://www.sonita.org/>