

Interviews with Refugees and Migrants



Interview#: 2

Name: Maryam

Age: 24

Country of origin: Afghanistan

Current location: Tehran, Iran

Names and identified characteristics are changed, but the story is real.
The interview was conducted in 2020.

Hello, I am working with the Mixed Migration Center (MMC). This interview is to find out about the experiences of Afghan refugees and migrants in Tehran. If you are from Afghan community residing in Tehran, aged 18 or over, and have arrived in Iran for less than 2 years, we would like to invite you to participate! If you agree to participate, we will ask questions about your migration journey, working and living condition, security concerns and plans, among other topics. We will use the information collected to report to NGOs and other actors, so that they can develop interventions adapted to the real needs of Afghan communities in Iran.



Participation in this project is entirely voluntary and does not provide access to assistance programs or any form of compensation. Our interview will be strictly confidential and anonymous: we will not ask you for personal data during the call.

Many thanks!

How long have you been a refugee/migrant in this city, when did you arrive and where did you come from?



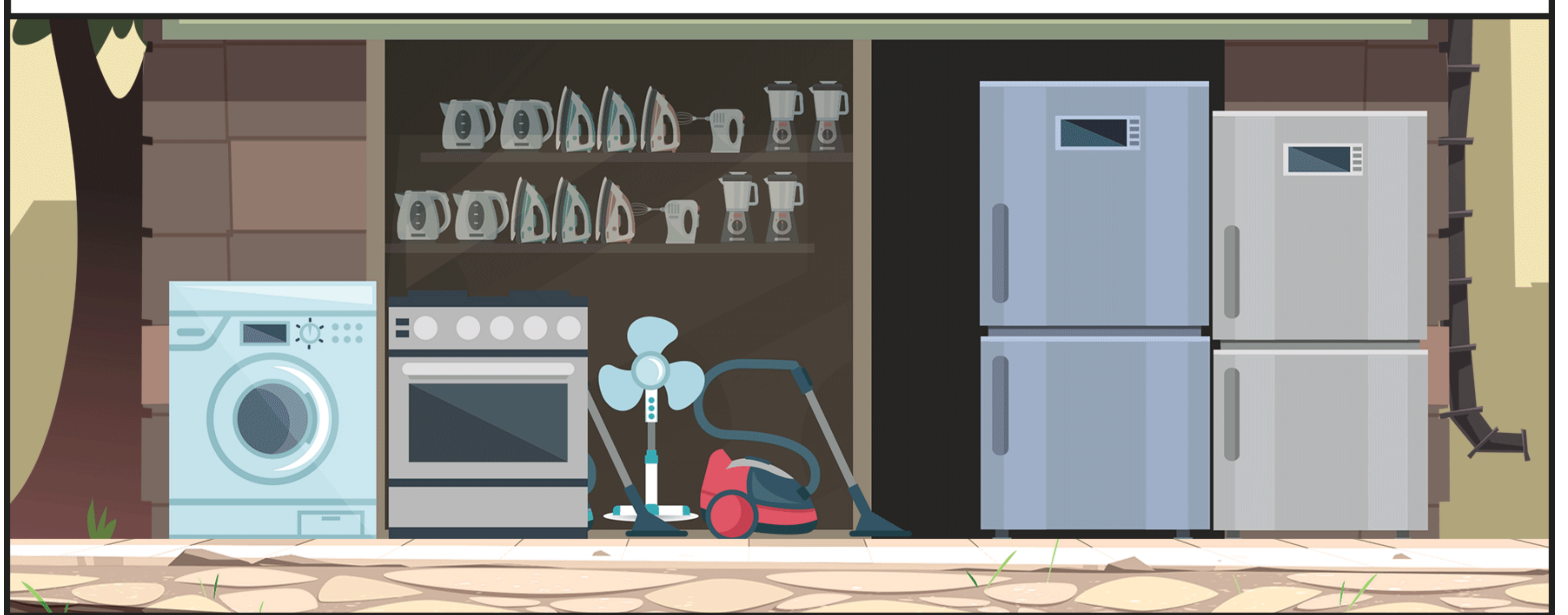
I've been in Tehran for about two years. We moved here from Kabul in early 2019.



Why did you leave your home country?



We left Afghanistan primarily because my father became unemployed, but also because of my own educational goals. My father had a homeware store in Afghanistan, but he went bankrupt and was forced to sell it.



After he sold it, a year before our migration to Iran, he tried to start up a new business. But it didn't succeed.




Then, my uncle, who has a tailor workshop in Tehran, suggested that my father should come and work with him. And so, my father, mother, brother and I, went to Tehran [Iran].



You pointed to your educational purpose. What kind of orientation was it?



In Kabul, I was enrolled at a private university, but the teaching quality there was low. Often it was a waste of time and money, so I left.



When my father told me about his plan to migrate to Iran, it also encouraged me as universities in Iran are known to be of high quality – and their fees are almost the same as in Afghanistan.

When you came did you come with a smuggler or did a smuggler organise your travel from your home country, or did you do it alone or another way?



We didn't travel with a smuggler. We all had passports and got visas from the Iranian Embassy within a few days.



It took us around a month to sell our house and possessions. My father sent the money to my uncle via hawala [a traditional informal banking system].



Then we flew to Iran and took a taxi to my uncle's house which is nearby the airport.



What about the costs of journey?



All in all, it cost about USD 900 for each person to pay for tickets, visa fees, travel insurance, and health certificate.

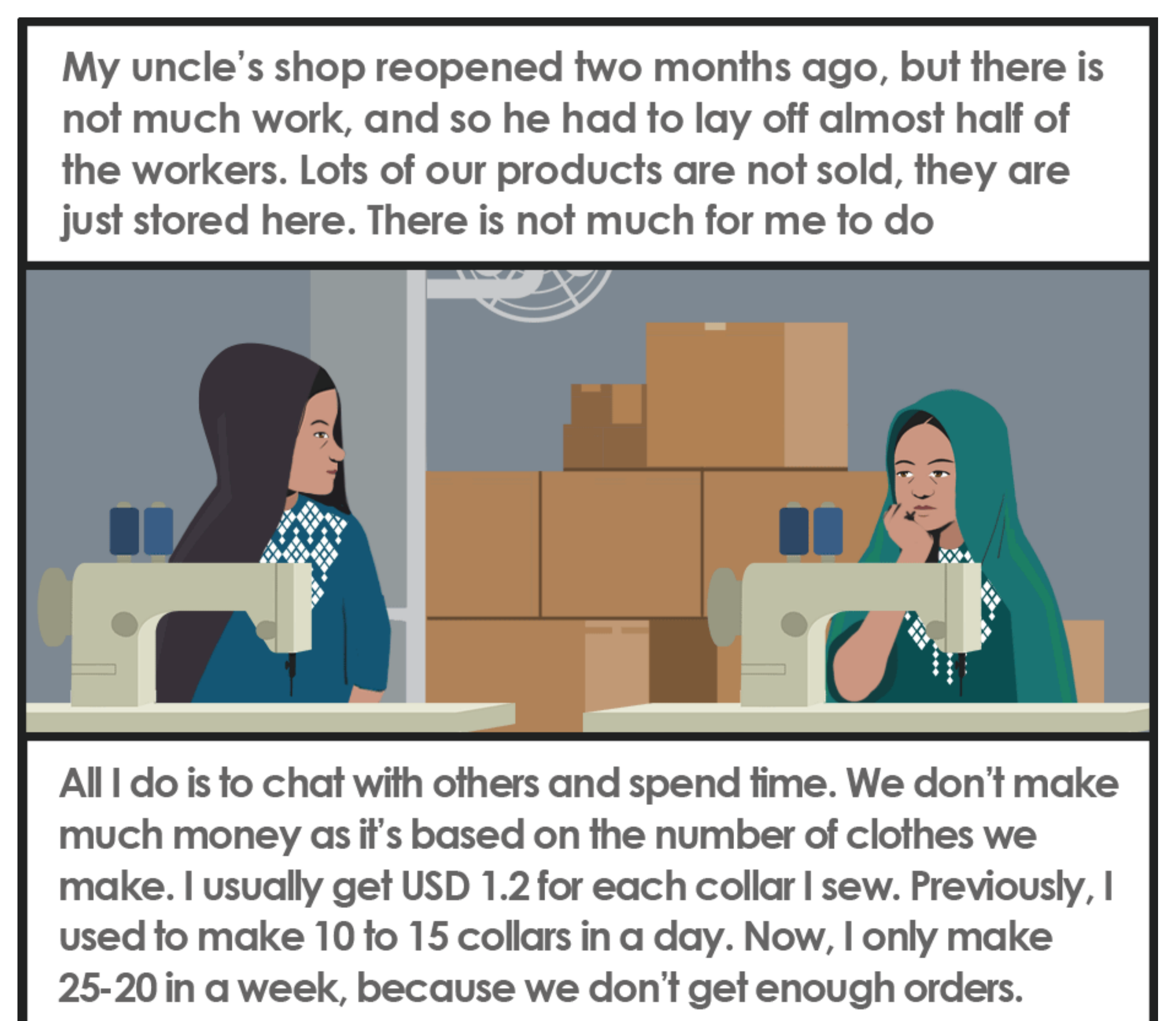
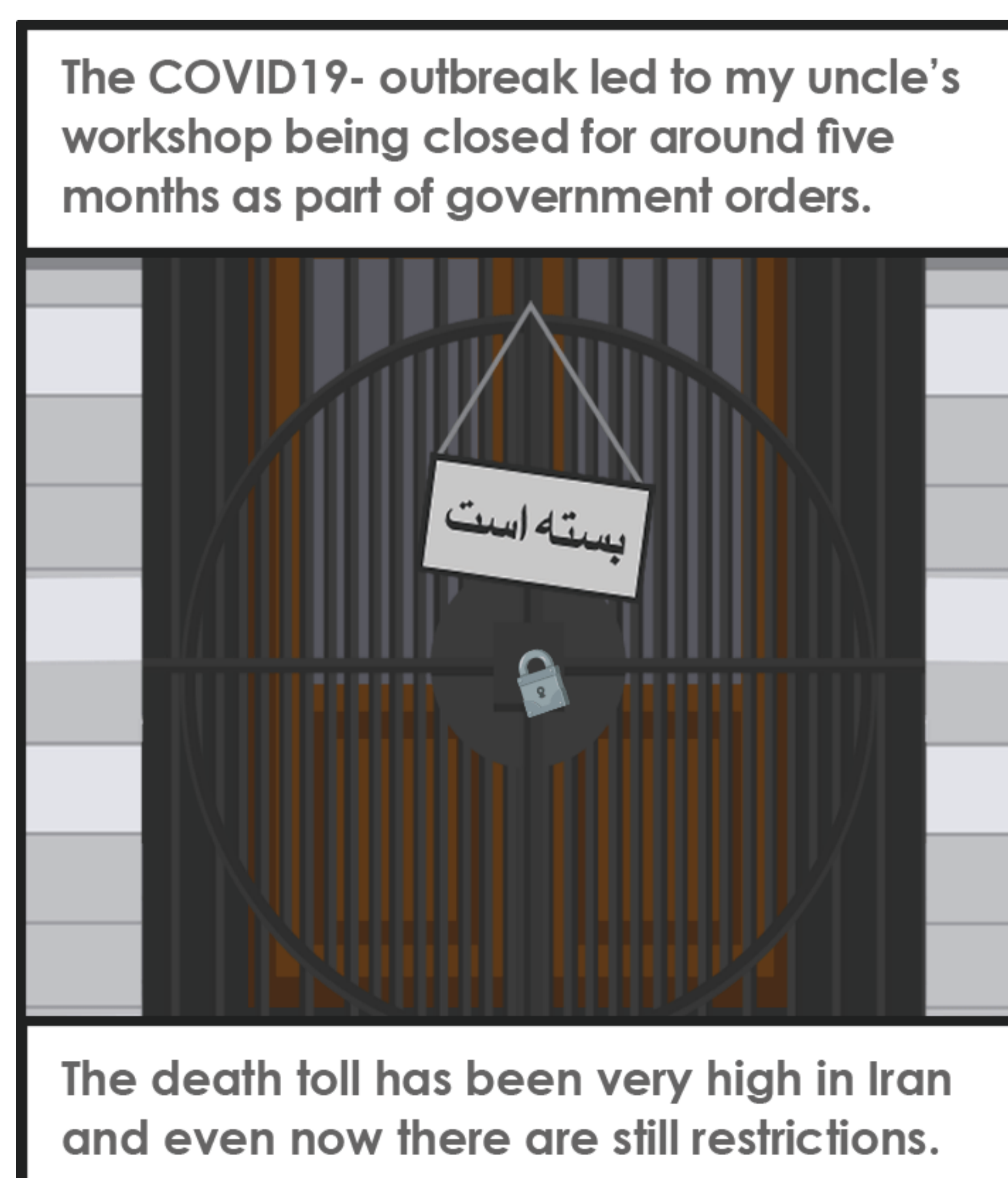
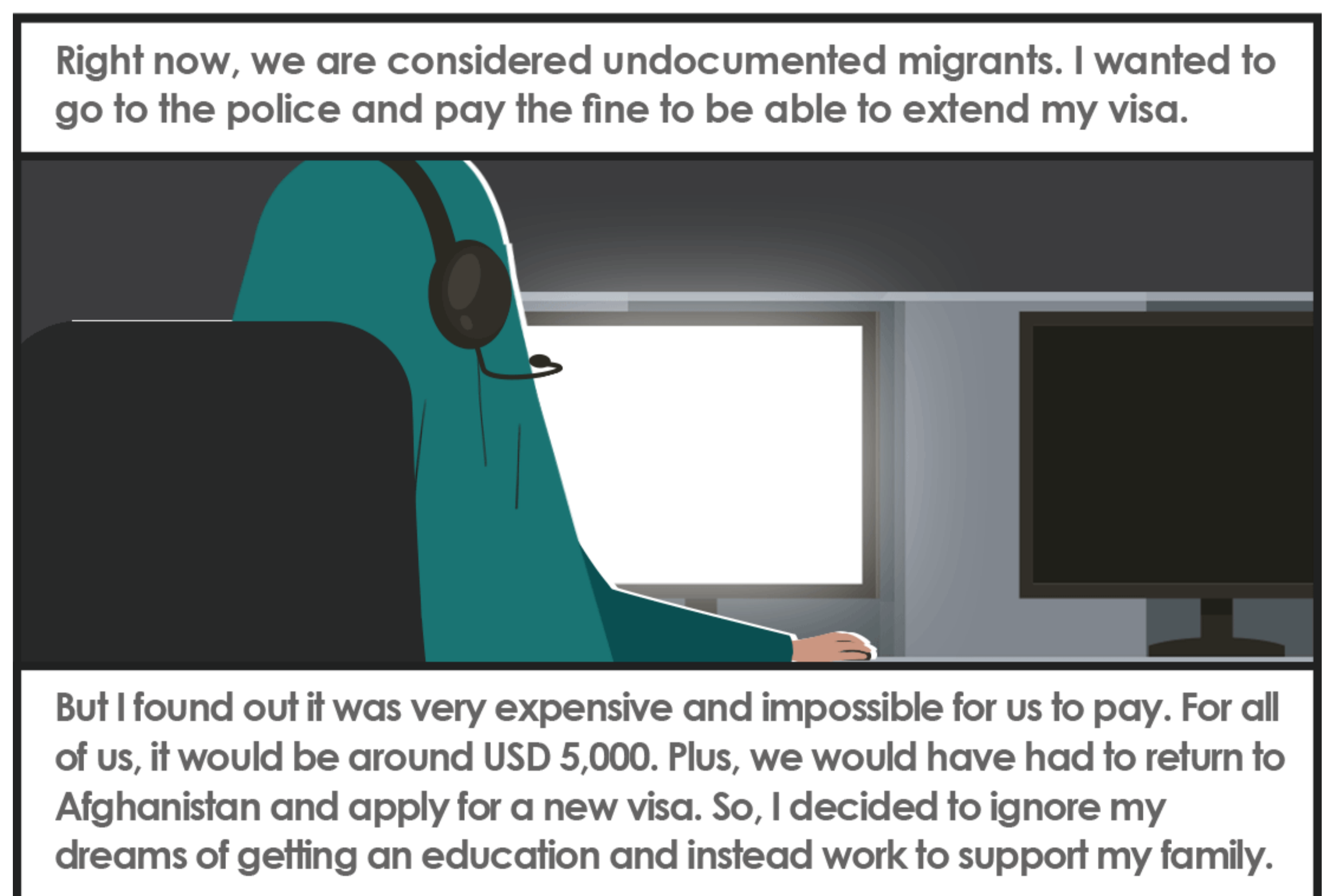


How did you pay it?



The money we got from selling out furniture paid for this.

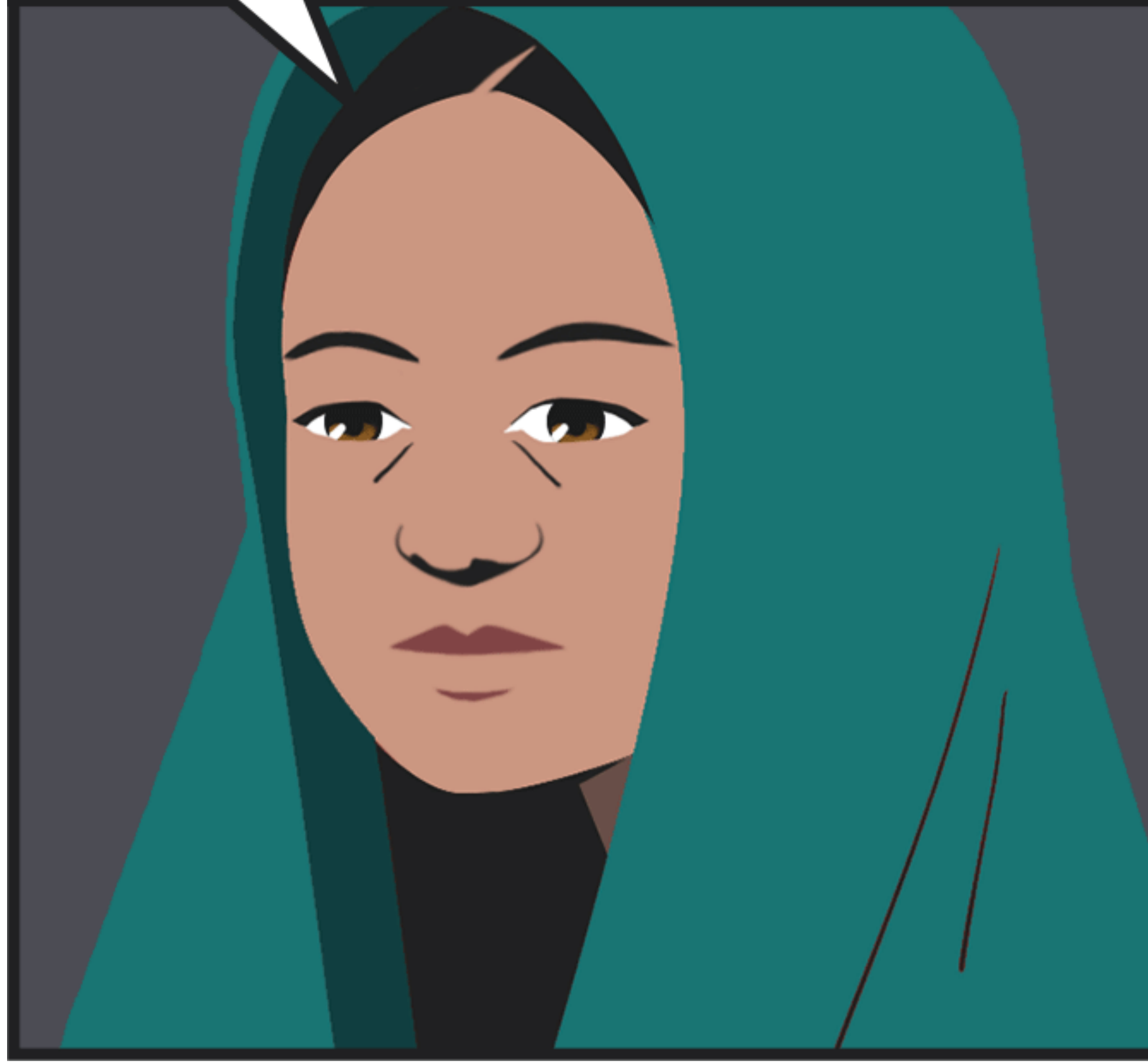




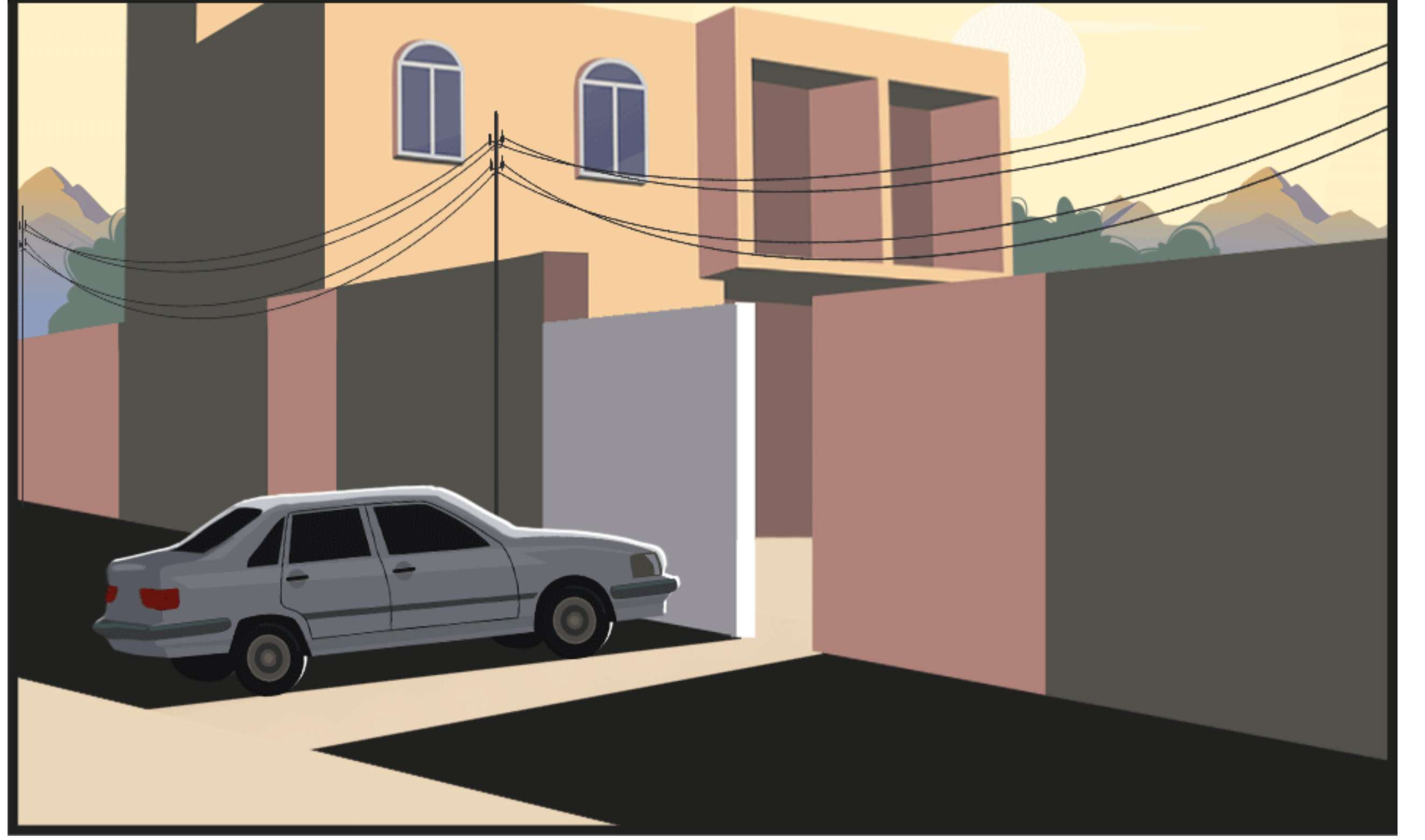
Where do you stay and is that a part of the city where other migrants and/or refugees stay?



We live in a house in Baqer Abad. There are both Afghans and Iranians living here. It is better than Afghanistan.



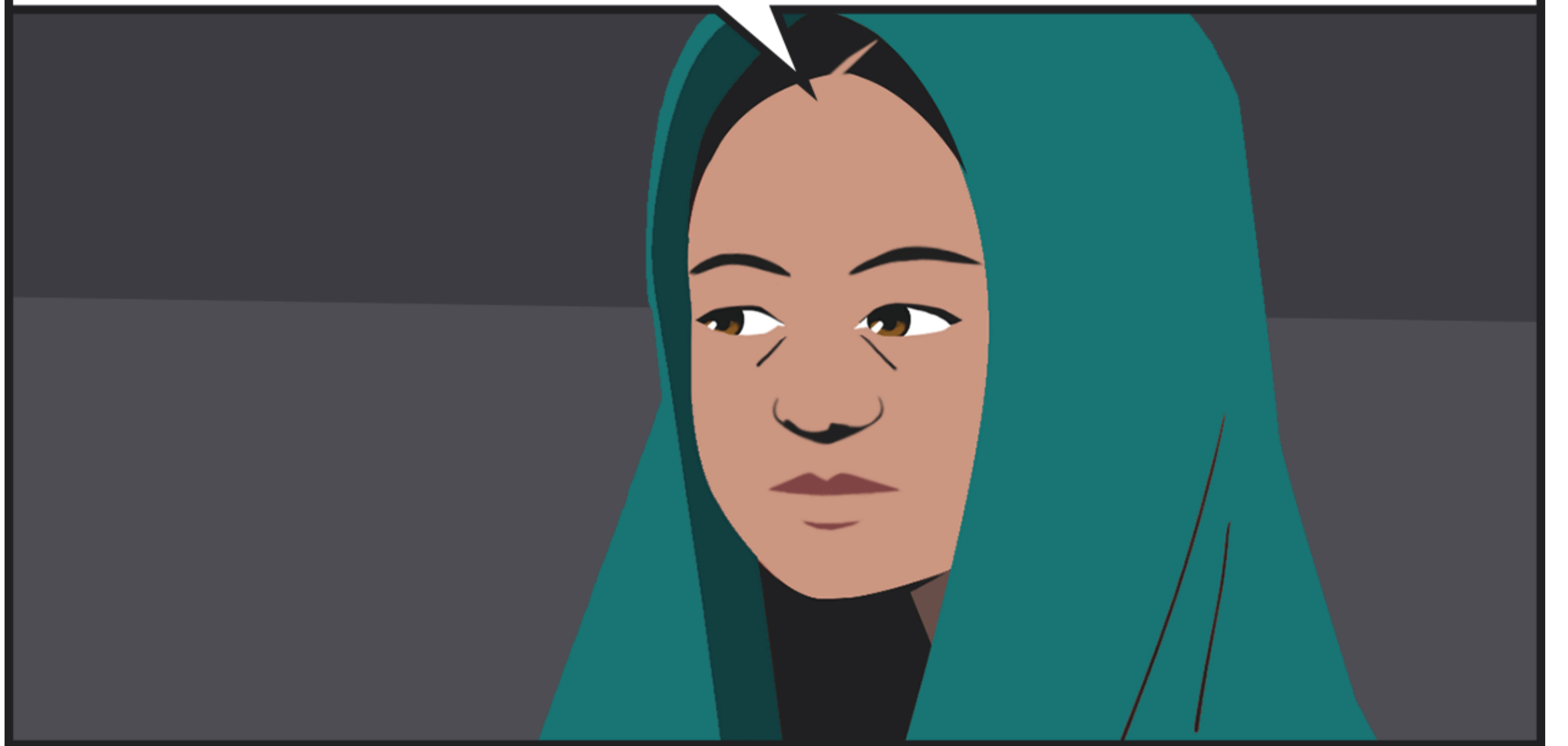
At least we have water and power services 7/24. There is a school and a hospital here. It is generally safe here, though there is a problem with high levels of crime and robbery, like back home in Afghanistan.



Do you have documents that allow you to stay in this city?



Initially, when we came, we had three-month visas, and could stay here legally for that time. After that, as our visa expired, we have become 'undocumented migrants'.



Are you living a bit under the radar and a bit insecure that you might be caught and given trouble? If you have that feeling how much does it dominate your daily life?



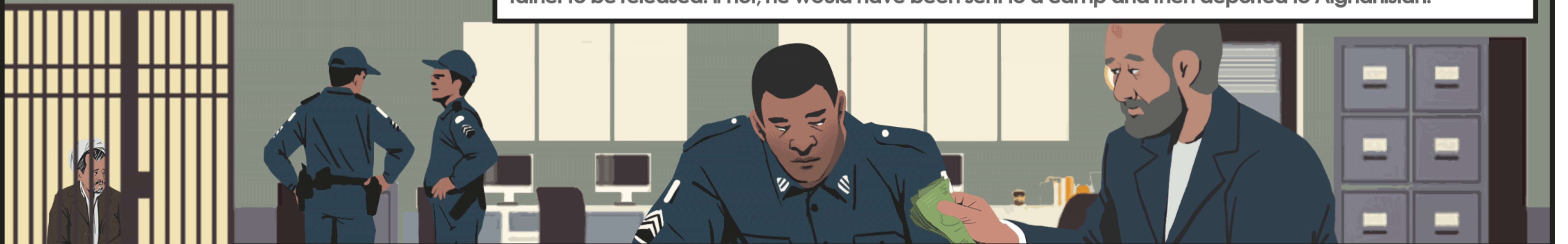
Life without legal permits is tough. We always need to be careful when commuting. People with no documents can hardly go anywhere, except their workplace. They do not have holidays, cannot visit shrines, hospitals, schools.



They are deprived of everything. The only thing they can do is to live and work under fear. Even if you get a good job, they pay you less or exploit you because you are undocumented. You cannot complain. The police will not listen to you.

It is so difficult for my father, because our experience is that men are more at risk of deportation. The police are constantly patrolling and stop Afghans to ask for our documents. If a person does not have a document, he or she will be taken to the police station, and from there to a deportation camp (urdugah). Most of the police officers ask for a bribe in return for release.

One time, they arrested my father and took him to the police station. When he called us, I immediately called my uncle so we could go to the police station and try to get my father released. Some of the policemen there were just continuously insulting us. It really affected us. In the end, my uncle managed to pay enough for my father to be released. If not, he would have been sent to a camp and then deported to Afghanistan.

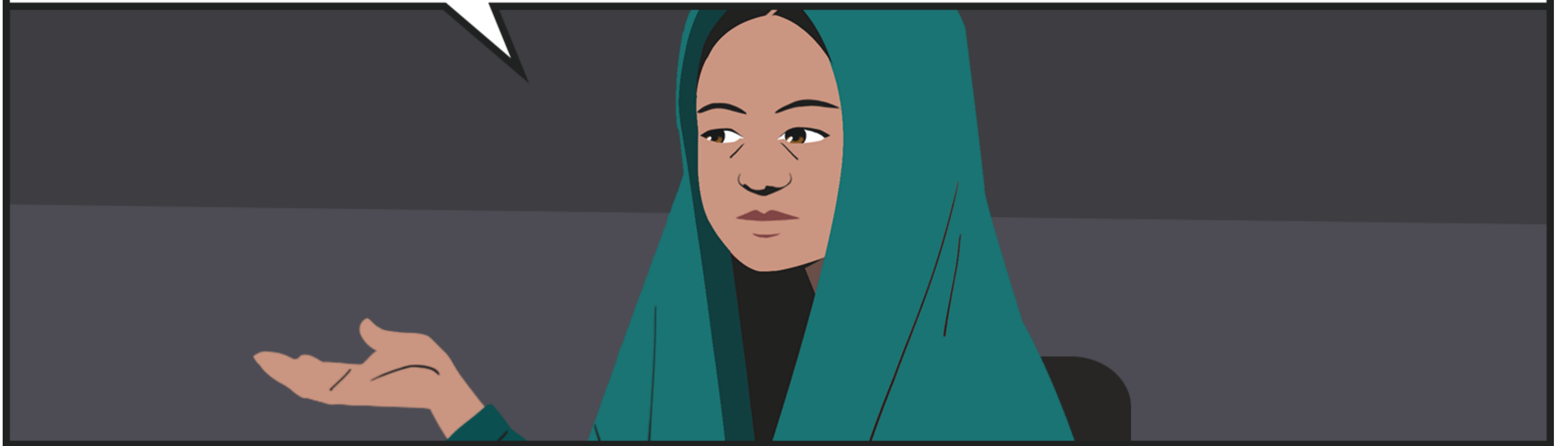


Having the right papers makes a huge difference. Not having that leaves us with a feeling of deprivation. Back in Afghanistan, despite insecurity, we could go to university and walk freely on the roads. But here is different. Whenever we go out, we keep our heads low to avoid attention and questions about documents. We also try to stay off the main streets where there is more police.

Do you know any member of your community that was arrested, detained or deported? What is their current situation?



I know of two people from my community who were arrested as they had no documents and were taken to a camp before they were deported. They are in Afghanistan now. Usually, when Afghans are arrested, we notify each other and try to contribute what we can to pay the police to not send anyone to the camps.



More Afghans have been arrested in recent months, especially in Tehran. There was a time when there were no raids on construction sites. But things have changed, and foreign workers no longer feel safe there.

Under what circumstances were they arrested? What are the offenses they are charged with?



They were arrested on their way to work due to missing legal documents. Afterward they were taken to the camp and then to Mashad [Iranian town on the border to Afghanistan].



I think they stayed in a camp there for three to four days before they were deported.

Have you benefitted from assistance to survive in this city or do you survive without help or assistance?



The only assistance we got was from my uncle and some of our community members.



They lend us money when we have financial troubles. They also helped us find a house since we knew nobody else here.

How does the community support people who have newly arrived in the city?



The most important assistance for new migrants is being helped to find a house to rent and a job.



Those who have relatives can get help from them with housing, paying the smuggler's fee, rent and things like this. If they have no relatives, they will find an Afghan to show them a place.

What about assistance from local authorities, INGOs or NGOs or any kind of civil or religious associations?



No. I have not seen any of them helping Afghans. The Afghan associations are only those with religious affiliation who organise activities in the months of Muharram and Ramadhan. That's all they do. In some places, these associations introduce the needy and poor people to wealthy charities and businessmen who can help.



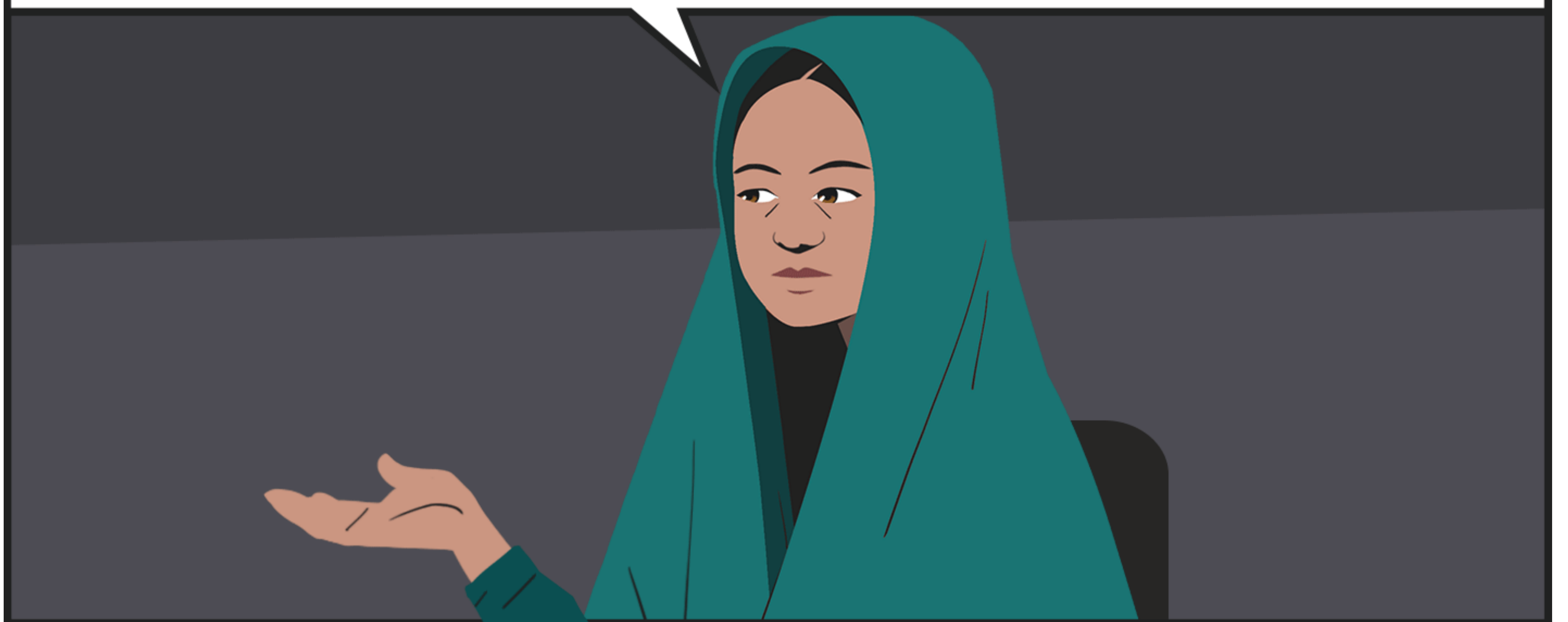
Sometimes, European or Australian Afghans send money to poor households. They channel money to associations who then distribute it to migrants.

There is an Arab charity organisation here which is funded by a wealthy Kuwaiti, and they bought a building and provide housing and food to widowed women and their children. I haven't seen any other government or non-government organisations helping migrants here.

Any new needs you or other Afghans near you since the COVID-19 crisis and police raids?



Now, the most urgent need is money to pay rent. I know some households and other Afghans who cannot afford their rent because their jobs are gone. Lots of households cannot afford food also. Previously they were working so at least they were able to buy bread.



Now, they do not have even that. So, the number of Afghan children begging has increased during the pandemic. For families with no male head of the household, the situation is worse. Women who were previously working on farms or at the factories have lost their jobs.



So, now they are all at home and have no means to buy food, pay rent or access health services. For those who receive remittances from Europe or elsewhere, their situation is usually better, because if they receive USD 100 it takes them a long way here.

Do you feel the city makes it easy for you to be 'part of the city' or do you feel a bit on the outside of the city's life?



I am not part of this city. I do not feel a sense of belonging to Tehran. No Iranian accepts me as a human being.



They all see us as foreigners who are supposed to leave this city today or tomorrow. I like this city because it is beautiful. Iranians may enjoy it, but the city cannot solve my problems.

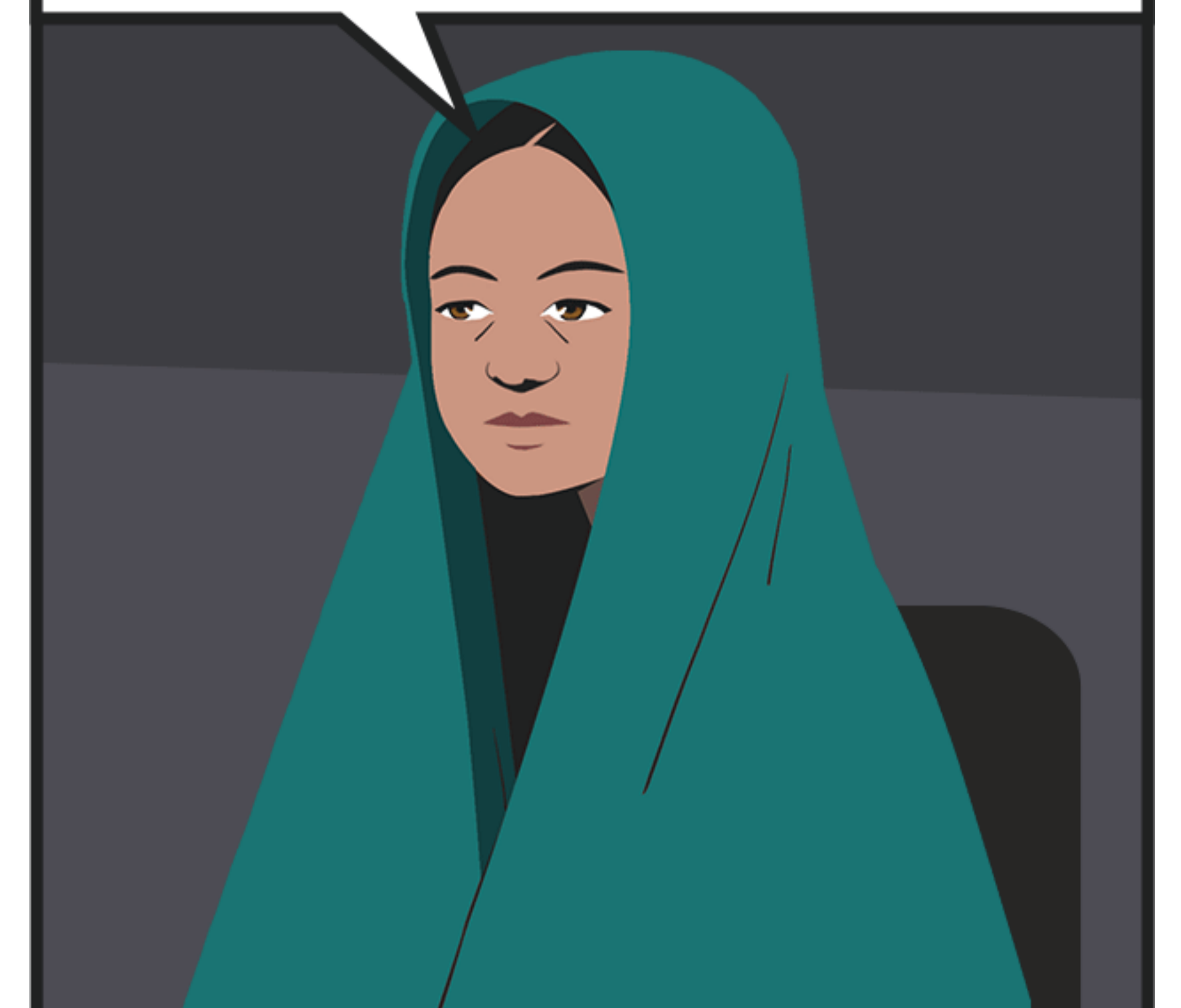


When an Iranian sees me as a stranger, then I feel like I am a stranger and do not belong to this city. For us, it is enough to work, get money and wait for what will happen in the future.

Do you feel the city authorities and services have made any efforts or offered facilities to make migrants feel part of the whole city or do you feel excluded? If you feel excluded, is this in the areas of health and education or even in the area of access to open spaces, restaurants, places of entertainment etc.

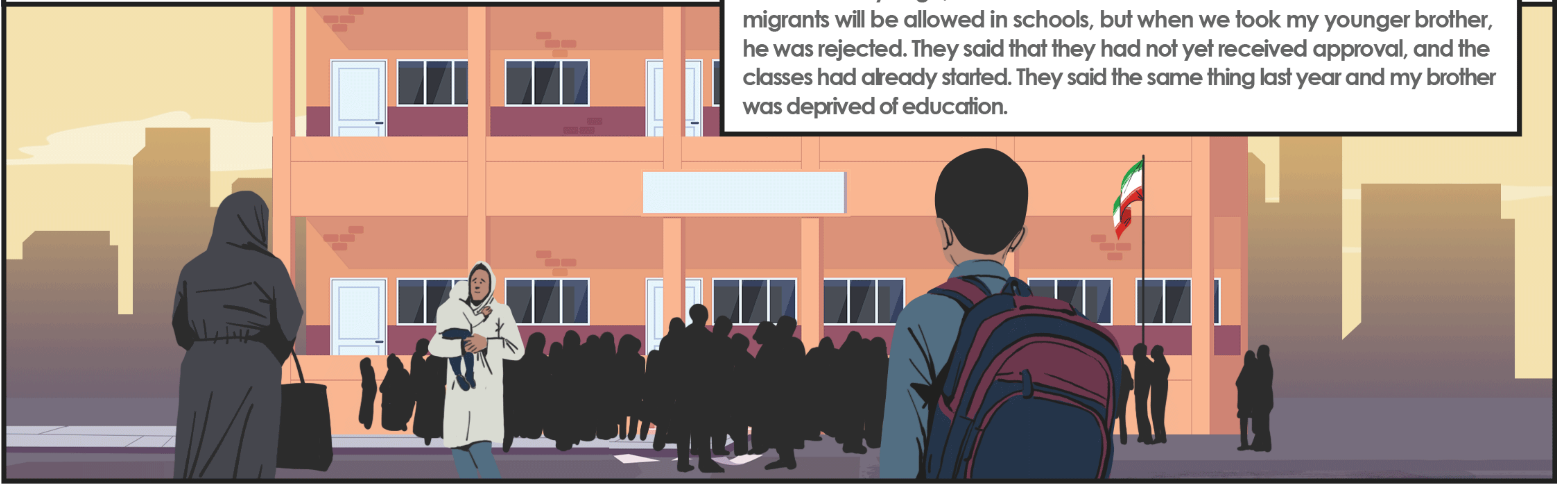


The Iranian authorities are worse than the people of Iran. At least it is possible to talk to civilians, but never with government officials.

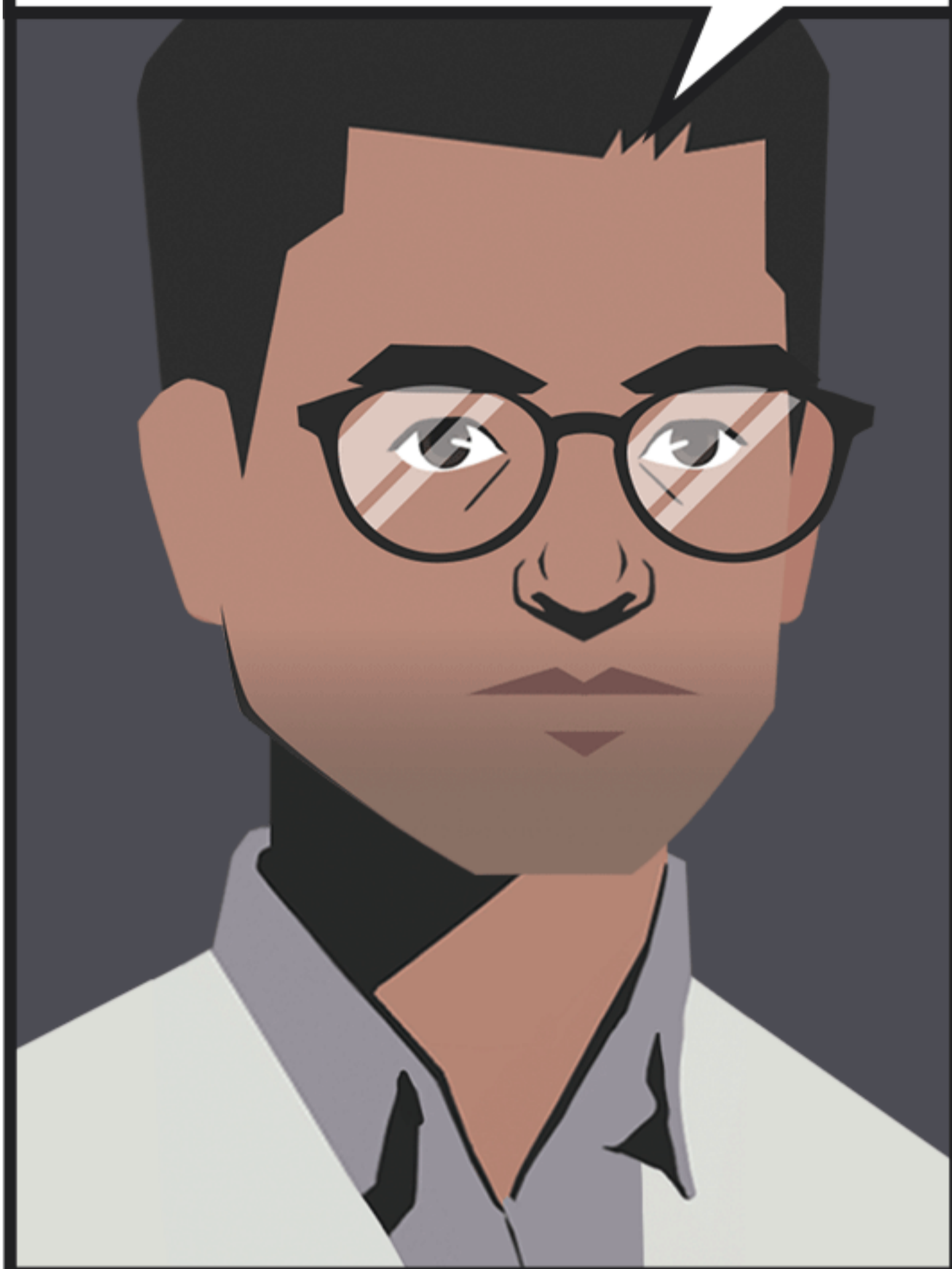


The situation of those who have documents might be better. Their access to higher education, hospitals, and schools might be better. But for undocumented migrants, the situation is the same: we do not have access to anything.

Just a few days ago, it was announced that the children of undocumented migrants will be allowed in schools, but when we took my younger brother, he was rejected. They said that they had not yet received approval, and the classes had already started. They said the same thing last year and my brother was deprived of education.



Do you observe any change in the attitude of local people here towards migrants since the COVID - 19 crisis began? How was it like before?



No, there is not much change. Fortunately, we were not the cause of COVID-19.



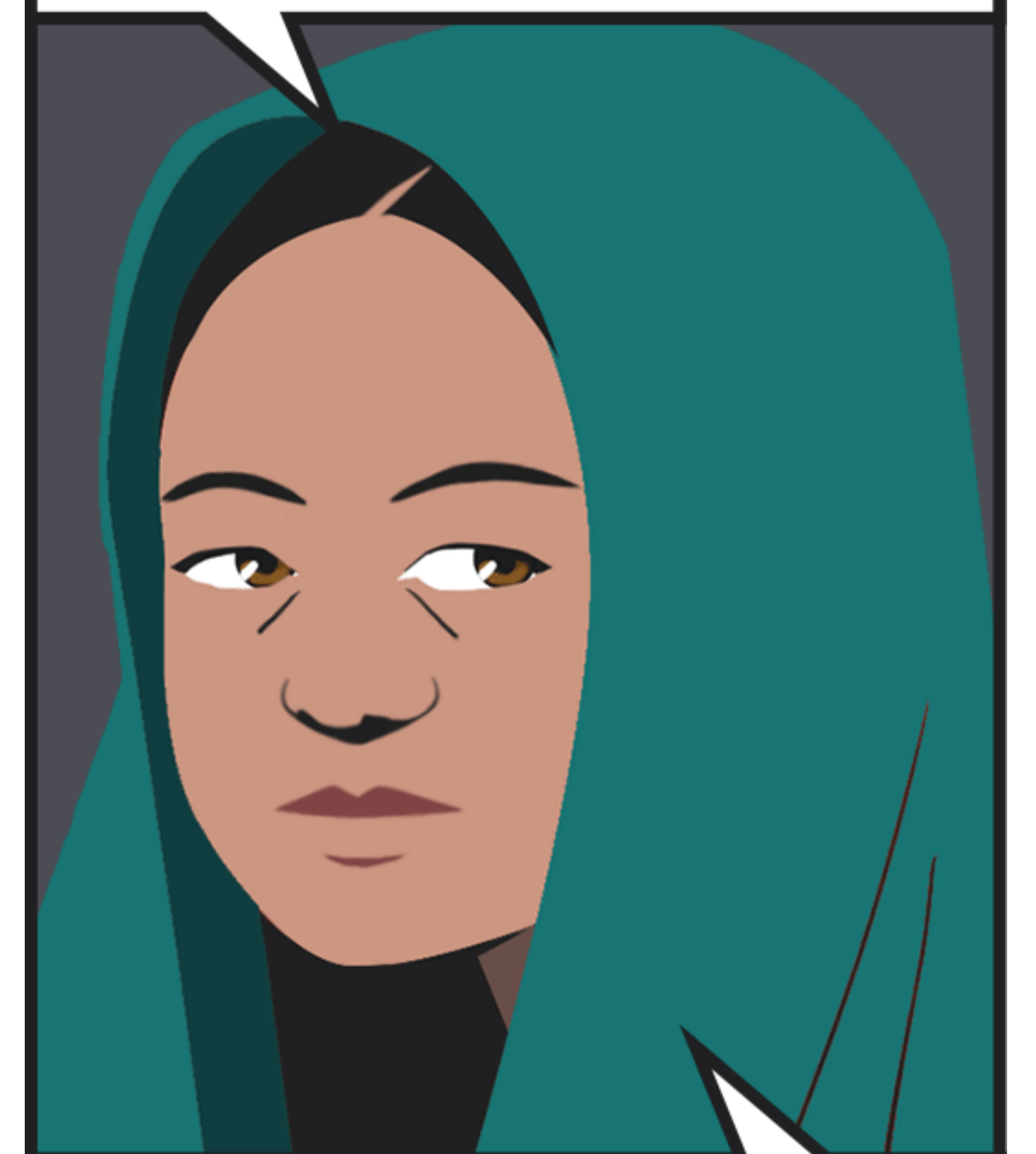
Otherwise we would never know what could happen to us.

What are the good things about this city that make you want to stay?



Especially when you compare it with your home country and/or other cities you may have passed through in transit in your migration.

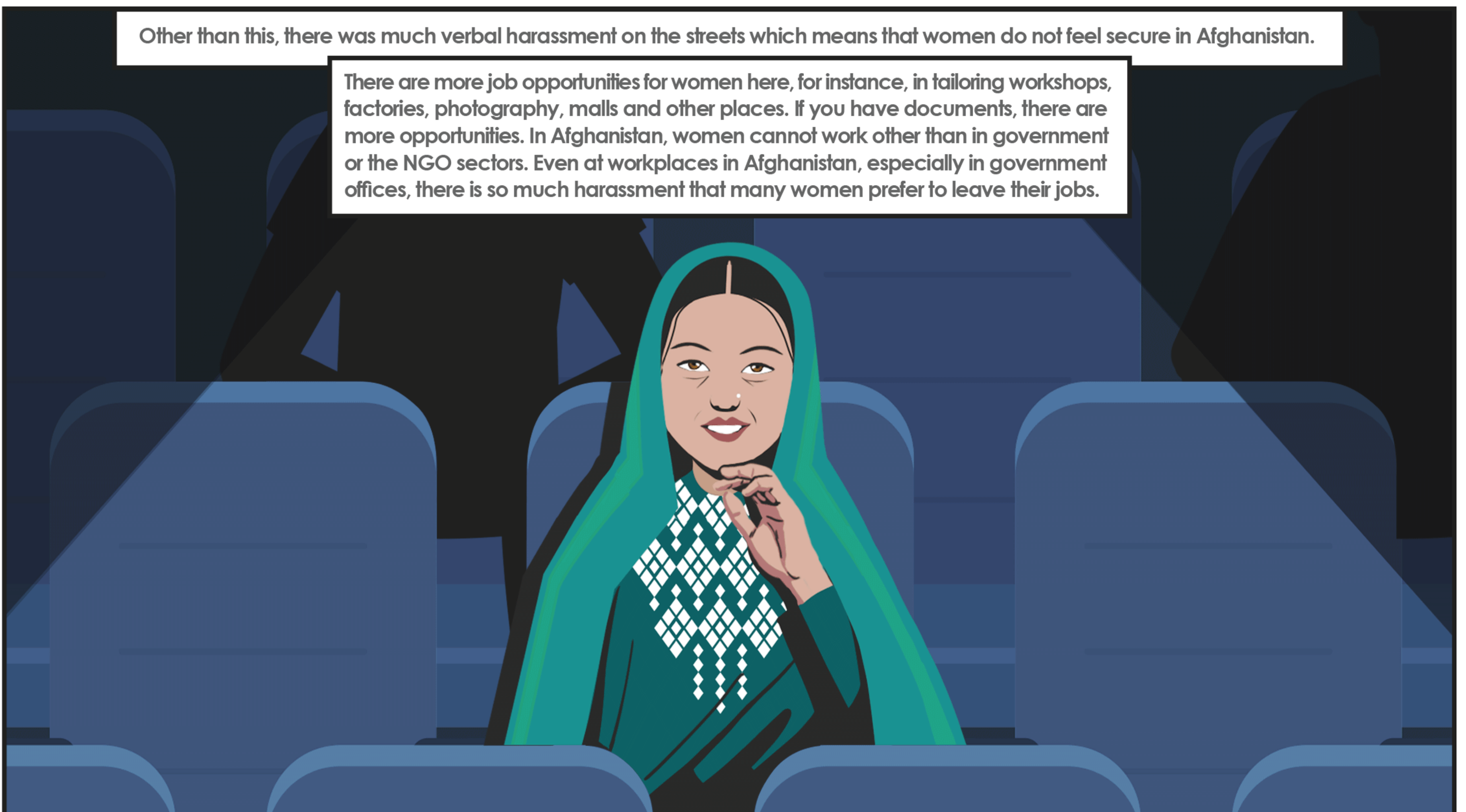
There are more restrictions in Kabul for women compared to here.



In Kabul, families monitor what their daughters do, when they go out, with whom and where.

Other than this, there was much verbal harassment on the streets which means that women do not feel secure in Afghanistan.

There are more job opportunities for women here, for instance, in tailoring workshops, factories, photography, malls and other places. If you have documents, there are more opportunities. In Afghanistan, women cannot work other than in government or the NGO sectors. Even at workplaces in Afghanistan, especially in government offices, there is so much harassment that many women prefer to leave their jobs.



There are also more entertainment opportunities here. For example, I have been to the cinema with my friends two times, whereas there is no cinema in Afghanistan, even for men. It was the first time in my life I ever went to a cinema. It was an interesting experience, a great hall with a huge number of people watching a movie together. Men and women sitting side by side. Visiting the cinema is a good memory. This is something that an Afghan woman does not get to experience in her entire life.

How have you contributed to the city?



Honestly, I do not know. I do my job. And I do not have more interaction with the Iran society to understand what I can do for them.



Do you have any friends/ family members from your home country that are planning to come to Iran? Why do they make that decision?



Our relatives always used to come here, usually for work, but also for visiting relatives. But now, no one comes because of COVID19

But I am sure when the restrictions are removed and visas are again issued, that a lot of Afghans will again travel to Iran.



For temporary or permanent?



Both. Some come illegally to work, some for education, some are tired of Afghanistan and want to stay in Iran or another country for good.



What were the reasons you remained in this city? How long do you plan to stay?



We have no plans to leave here or to return to Afghanistan. The main reason is my father. He says that all our relatives and community are in Tehran and therefore it is best for us to stay in this city so in case we have any problems, we can receive assistance from them.

Once there was talk of going to Turkey, but my parents do not have the courage to make the journey because we don't know anyone there.



Would you like the reader of your story to know anything extra or special about your life in this city, something we haven't mentioned?



Tehran is a big city and the population of Afghans is high here. Almost all come here for work and with no legal permits. There is still a large number who have come via legal pathways to access education and health services. In many cases their relationship with Iranians is better, because they came earlier on and some of them were even born in Iran. For this reason, they understand the culture better and the behaviour of Iranians.



On the other hand, undocumented migrants must hide like criminals and live a hidden life. Despite this, there are many opportunities I have that are not available in our home country. Especially, for me as a woman, Afghanistan was not a place to live for me. While I was there, I didn't realise that I had such a miserable, restricted life. Now, that I am here for a while, I understand what is happening to Afghan women. Probably in Kabul, Mazar and Herat, girls and women can go to school, but outside the big cities, life is completely rural and traditional. Women do not have the right to have an ID card. I have not seen an Iranian girl who has not gone to school. Even the poor Iranian girls who work with us in the workshop go to school without fear and laugh out loud together on the streets. For this reason, I am happy that we came to Tehran. There are many difficulties, but still, it is much better than Afghanistan.

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