



## Sonita

Two-time Sundance Film Festival award winner *Sonita* tells the inspiring story of Sonita Alizadeh, an 18-year-old Afghan refugee in Iran, who thinks of Michael Jackson and Rihanna as her spiritual parents. Sonita dreams of becoming a big-name rapper, but for the time being her only fans are the other teenage girls living in a Tehran shelter. But her family has a different future planned for her: as a bride she is worth \$9,000. Female Iranian director Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami poignantly shifts from observer to participant in Sonita's story. An intimate portrait of creativity and womanhood, *Sonita* highlights the rarely seen intricacies and contrasts of Iranian and Afghan society through the lens of an artist trying to define the next generation.



**Recommended for ages 10+**

**Themes:** creative expression; coming of age; social change; resilience; woman's rights; inequality; self determination; international

**Director(s):** Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami | **90 min** | **Documentary** | **2016** | **Country:** iran | **Language:** English/Persian/Dari

**Official film website:** [www.wmm.com/sonita](http://www.wmm.com/sonita)

### SET THE STAGE | THOUGHT-STARTERS

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Afghan refugees constitute the most numerous refugee group in the world. Since the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001, close to three million Afghans have settled in Iran, but many of them are undocumented. These immigrants, like Sonita, do not possess any legal form of documentation, like passports and certificates, that would allow them to register as legal residents in the country. As a result, they are not afforded the same governmental rights. However, Afghan women have more rights and educational opportunities in Iran than in Afghanistan.

#### WORDS TO KNOW

- **Documentary:** A type of film that attempts to explain reality.
- **Refugee:** A person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.
- **Dowry:** Property or money given by a bride's family to her husband upon marriage.
- **Cinema vérité:** A filmmaking style characterized by realistic documentary pictures that avoid artistic effect and are generally made with simple equipment.
- **B-Roll:** Supplemental or alternative footage intercut with the main shot.

For more film terms, refer to the PCFF Film Glossary ([pcffri.org/FilmHub](http://pcffri.org/FilmHub)).

### TALK ABOUT IT | DISCUSSION

- Social media plays a key role in Sonita's journey from Tehran to the United States by providing an outlet for her creativity to be shared with people from a variety of different cultural backgrounds. Could Sonita's dream of becoming a rapper have been accomplished without the help of media websites like YouTube and Facebook? Why or why not?
- While Sonita's life is controlled by extreme circumstances of war and the push and pull between traditional and modern Afghan and Iranian cultures, there are many parts of the film showing her as a normal, pop-culture-obsessed teenager. In what ways did the filmmaker try to make Sonita seem relatable? Did you identify with her? Why or why not?
- Throughout the film, Sonita's music is seen as a catalyst for social change. In what ways can music help increase awareness of social justice issues? Are there any musicians you listen to who discuss political or social problems in their music? Do you think about those artists differently from others?
- From an ethical perspective, most documentary filmmakers choose not to interfere in their subjects' lives so as not to alter the reality of what they are capturing. What do you think about the director's choice to put herself into the film and help Sonita? Would you have done the same thing in this situation? Why or why not?
- How would you describe the relationship Sonita has with her mother? What are some possible influences on their relationship? How is their relationship similar to or different from your relationship with your parents?



Clues and Cues

#### Pay attention while watching

- Notice how the differences between the traditional and modern cultures are portrayed visually and narratively throughout the film.
- Think about the role social media and global media play in the film and in what ways they directly affect Sonita's journey.

## GET CREATIVE | EXTENSION ACTIVITIES



For Activity Reel details, downloadable storyboard template and more, visit the the Film Hub website: [www.pcffri.org/FilmHub](http://www.pcffri.org/FilmHub)

### • Writing Prompt

**Materials Needed:** Pen, paper

Social media is important in promoting Sonita's music and message to people around the world. Thinking about what parts of Sonita's story stuck out most to you, imagine Sonita is doing a concert at your school. Write a press release to announce the concert and convince people to come. How would you promote Sonita's story to an audience? Are there aspects of her story to which others might relate?

### • Making a Passport

**Materials Needed:** Pen, paper, markers, photographs

In the film, Sonita and her classmates create their ideal passports. Using paper, pens and a photograph of yourself, create your own imaginary passport. Is your passport from the US or another country? What countries will you have visited? After you finish your passport, share it! See if you can find any connections among group's creations.

### • Person of Interest

**Materials Needed:** Camera (or cell phone camera)

Documentary filmmaking provides a nonfiction account of some aspect of reality. Many films, like *Sonita*, follow a character throughout his or her daily life as a means of providing insight into a larger situation or scenario. Pick a friend or family member you find interesting, and film a day in their life. Think about what styles you want to use in telling their story (i.e., what type of camera angles, what types of questions you ask them). If you don't have a video camera, take pictures to correspond with your subject's interview.

## MAKE CONNECTIONS | ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Select from the following resources to complement the film and inspire further discussion or programming.

### BOOKS

- **Adventures in the Lives of Others: Ethical Dilemmas in Factual Filmmaking**  
by James Quinn  
An examination of some ethical dilemmas experienced and questions posed by directors of documentary films.
- **Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture**  
by Hisham D. Aidi  
A fascinating look at the connection between political activism and music among Muslim youth around the world.
- **One Day We Had to Run: Refugee Children Tell Stories In Words and Paintings**  
by Sybella Wilkes  
Three refugee children from Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan use words and pictures to tell their stories about fleeing from their war-torn homelands to reach safety in Kenya.

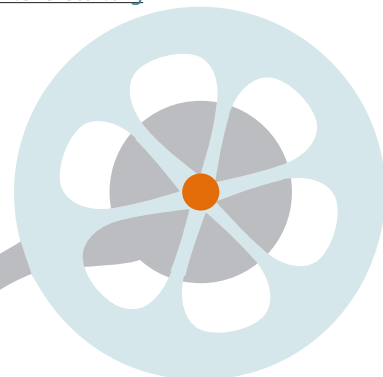
### FILMS

- **Louder Than a Bomb** (2010)  
Four high school spoken word teams in Chicago prepare and compete in a citywide poetry slam competition. The documentary captures how language becomes a powerful release and source of community for these students.
- **Q.U.E.E.N** (2016)  
A young woman uses rap as an outlet to publicly talk about abuse received from her mother's boyfriend. (short film)
- **Salaam Dunk** (2012)  
This documentary follows the day-to-day lives, dreams and frustrations of the women's basketball team at American University in Iraq.
- **Wadjda** (2013)  
Ten-year-old Wadjda challenges deep-rooted Saudi traditions in a determined quest to buy a bicycle.
- **No One Knows About Persian Cats** (2009)  
After being released from prison, two young musicians in Tehran try to form a band in the city's illegal underground music scene before leaving the country.

• Indicates PCFF festival selection

### LOCAL CONNECTIONS

- **ZuKrewe**  
A hip-hop performance troupe comprising 20 to 30 young artists dedicated to spreading knowledge through the art of rhyme.  
[youth.as220.org/programs/livearts/zukrewe](http://youth.as220.org/programs/livearts/zukrewe)
- **Girls Rock Rhode Island**  
A volunteer-based nonprofit that uses music creation and critical thinking to foster empowerment, collaborative relationships, and the development of healthy identities in girls and women.  
[girlsrockri.org](http://girlsrockri.org)
- **Everett Dance Company**  
An intergenerational, multicultural company of professional artists that creates original concert works and video productions, carries out a wide range of educational programs, and mentors new generations of young artists.  
[www.everettri.org](http://www.everettri.org)



## BEYOND THE FILM | RELATED INTERNET LINKS

- **The Guardian article about child brides in Afghanistan:**  
[www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/18/zahra-yaganah-afghanistan-child-bride-author-light-of-ashes-book](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/18/zahra-yaganah-afghanistan-child-bride-author-light-of-ashes-book)
- **Documentary project for refugee youth:**  
[thedocumentaryproject.org](http://thedocumentaryproject.org)
- **Discussion on ethics in documentary filmmaking:**  
[www.documentary.org/magazine/how-close-too-close-consideration-filmmaker-subject-relationship](http://www.documentary.org/magazine/how-close-too-close-consideration-filmmaker-subject-relationship)
- **History of Afghan refugees in Iran:**  
[www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/05/afghan-refugees-leaving-iran-160511103759873.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/05/afghan-refugees-leaving-iran-160511103759873.html)
- **Interview with the director of Sonita:**  
[vimeo.com/191925756&sa=D&ust=1481162958308000&usg=AFQjCNFC7OR44Mv3bxamxjEEed6gKb0xjsQ](http://vimeo.com/191925756&sa=D&ust=1481162958308000&usg=AFQjCNFC7OR44Mv3bxamxjEEed6gKb0xjsQ)

