



## *WFP Knowledge Retention Interview*

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*Negar Gerami*

## Key words

Iran, monitoring, logistics, programme, negotiations, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Türkiye, Country Director, Resident Coordinator, efficiency, generalist, passion.

## Summary

In this interview, Negar Gerami discusses her 24-year career with WFP, which began in 2000 in Iran. She started as a national officer tasked with setting up a monitoring system and soon shifted into logistics during the Afghanistan emergency post-9/11, establishing a humanitarian corridor through Iran. Despite having no logistics background, Gerami successfully navigated complex negotiations with the Iranian government, which involved the sensitive transit of US food aid through Iran.

Over her career, Gerami held various roles, including Country Director, and Resident Coordinator ad interim. She briefly served as interim Country Director in Türkiye following the devastating 2023 earthquake. Gerami credits her success to clear communication, a focus on people, and a willingness to embrace challenges. She emphasizes the importance of field experience for all staff to understand the impact of their work.

Gerami also discusses the challenges of being a young woman in a male-dominated field and advocates for persistence, self-belief, and avoiding self-censorship. She stresses the need for generalists who can adapt to multiple roles, especially in resource-constrained environments, and encourages young professionals to pursue their careers with passion and dedication.

## Full text transcript

*Thank you so much for honouring our invitation. We really appreciate all these years of service. How many years has it been?*

24, Close to 25. Yeah. I joined in 2000.

*That's a lot of years of experience.*

It's almost 1/4 of a century.

*Yes. Could you take us through maybe some of the roles you've held throughout these 25 years?*

Yes, sure. So I started out as a national officer in programme in the year 2000 in Iran. I was selected to put together a monitoring system for the Iran country office. That was in February of 2000. And a couple of, I would say like six months into my start of my tenure at WFP, we had the Afghanistan emergency. And at that time, I was then requested to look into logistics. So without having any logistics background, I started to look into setting up the humanitarian corridor passing through Iran. It was 2001 after 9/11. So that is when I actually got acquainted with logistics and had to very quickly step up and start a humanitarian corridor through Iran. Involved a lot of negotiations with the government and just being out there.

So I then carried on with the dual responsibilities of both programme and logistics and, worked my years in Iran, worked my way up to deputy country director. And then in 2008 I took on the responsibility as a head of office, so Country Director and was the only national in charge of an active country programme in all of WFP. So, I did that for more than 15 years and very recently I moved out of Iran and so for an interim period in, back in 2023, I was in Türkiye as a Country Director ad interim. It was just after the earthquake of Türkiye, Syria. So I served there for six months and since September of last year, I've been in the regional Bureau in Cairo, working as a programme, as a head of programme there. So, I've not had a very, let's say, conventional career. Like I've spent most of my career inside of my home country. That was for personal

reasons as well as professional. I felt that I could progress in my career and yet stay at home. So that worked out quite well for me. And just about a year and a half ago, I went on to an international career.

*It sounds like a lot of experience. And you talked about having to do this corridor, now six months (into your career)?*

I was a year into WFP basically when I had to start negotiations, it was 2001. So Afghanistan was in dire need of food. And at that time, Pakistan as a corridor, I mean, there was a need for an alternative way of transporting food into Afghanistan. Iran has very well-established infrastructure, but it was just not used because it also had rigid custom formalities and systems in play. So we just needed to negotiate with the government to give us access, to give us the permission to use ports and rail and all of that. And it was quite a political issue as well, because it was US food that had to transit through Iran. So USAID bags and marking, and the Iran US relationship has not been the best for many, many years. So that required additional negotiations and permissions and authorisations. So that sort of put me front and centre with, with the very high-ranking government authorities and it was quite operational as well.

*So I guess it either means we had the need and you had to step in, or, of course, it also means you had already shown that you were quite at that level to be able to be put in this in this situation. Could you talk a bit about how you were able to really get yourself to really be seen to be able to handle such a position, considering that there's a lot of people coming young, and they feel they are not able to be recognised for such a role.*

True, I think you've got to be very persistent, and you've got to believe in what you're doing. And I have to say as a woman, it was a double, let's say impediment. And I was a young woman, and logistics is predominantly a male environment and was in Iran as well. So dealing with the shipping authorities, with custom authorities, with different entities within the government. But the needs were so great, and the imperative was so real that you just do what you need to do. And I think when you yourself are convinced, I think you can convince other people as well. So, you've got to believe in it. And our mandate is just so, so clear and simple and understandable for everyone: we need to feed people. And at that time, it was very much at the forefront of everyone's attention. So I'm not saying it was easy, but it was also enjoyable. And I am always up for a challenge, and the throughput through Iran was amazing. We simultaneously I think used three ports, multiple means of transportation, road, rail, bulk, cargo, backing, operations – really full on logistics response during that time. So that was also very gratifying in the end.

*Yeah, sounds like yeah, I mean that that operation went quite well.*

It did it did.

*Wow well, Congrats.*

Thank you.

*I think I'm already learning a lot. And I see also that you've occupied all these different roles like you said, you were not necessarily coming to the WFP to logistics, but then you were able to easily adapt and fill such a role. And after that you've also occupied different roles, leadership roles. What would you say are some of the core skills that really allows you to be able to fit into all these different roles?*

I think communication is key. You've got to communicate clearly your messages. You've got to be a people's person. You've got to make sure that you're understood and that there's a two-way communication. I think throughout my career, whatever I've done, it's always been about people and keeping the focus on the people that we serve, because that is really at the heart of everything that we do. I think I've felt most fulfilled whenever I've been in the field, whenever I've had interaction with the people that we serve. And when I was Country Director in Iran, one thing that I was really adamant about always was that every single staff member in our office had to

travel to the field, had to get to know our operation. It was a refugee operation. So we were serving refugees from Afghanistan and Iraq, living in camps in quite remote areas. And when you sit in an office and you're doing finance, you're doing admin, you're in the enabling services, you're supporting the operation. You don't necessarily get to see the effect of the operation on the people in the field. So that was one of the things that I- because I started out as, I set up the monitoring system, so I had to travel to the field, I had to sit down with the people that we serve, break bread with them, talk to them, understand what it is that they need and to feed it back into the system. And I felt this was really an eye opener. This was very educating. So I've always felt that this is needed for every one of us.

And I got amazing responses from our staff who when they actually did travel to the field, when they did see the people, they felt so much more fulfilled in what they were doing. Because you connect the dots, and you connect with the people. And that people connection is really, there's nothing can replace that in my opinion, nothing can do that. And it's been really fulfilling, rewarding. Some of my best pictures are when I'm sitting in the classrooms with the girls, we had an oil for education scheme for Afghan students, girls who because of the cultural barriers back then, the schools were available inside the camps where they were not attending school because the families did not value education too much for the girls. I mean, boys were always sent to school, but girls not so much. So that brought about the programme that we had was very small, but actually quite impactful. So we gave as an incentive to the parents, a tin of oil in lieu of sending their girls to school. And when you see the girls being educated and they were thirsty for knowledge, they really like being in school. And when you see that, and you see like that's the intervention WFP has and throughout the years. And I think one of the nice things about staying in Iran for so many years was that I saw how these girls grew up and actually, had a little bit of a better future. I wouldn't say that it was completely life changing, but it definitely opened up new horizons for them. More options and the self-confidence, the awareness was very, very gratifying. It was really lovely.

*So, you said communication. If you were to recommend to people in WFP who are starting up, who have ambitions, communication is key. Is there any other skill you'll see it really helps to take you through different environments and that can really help succeed. I think you've already also talked quite a bit about your passion and the way you connected your work with the people and making sure that that was driving you to actually to do work and make it more effective. So is there any other skill you will say?*

I think you have to be eager to learn. You have to embrace new opportunities and have a thirst for knowledge. That's really important because we grow, and we learn every day. I think learning is a process that will remain with you until the very end. I'm learning every day and I'm already 58 years old, but still, like new environments, new opportunities. So one has to be open to embrace opportunities. I've had a number of, conversations, especially with young women in our profession. And I have a daughter who's 28. And I've always felt we need to empower each other, and women are a little bit more reserved. We have this thing that unless you're 100% sure of what you're doing, you won't actually do it. I think we've got to believe in ourselves, and we've got to be willing to embrace challenges, not shy away.

*Yeah, no, absolutely. And just on the same topic of like, you have a daughter. And in terms of for women, I mean, you've had you've been through all these positions and you've like you mentioned, it's not always the same treatment that is given to women, which is not right. So what do you think as some of the things that could maybe be done better, and are there any recommendations you think that can be put in place to make the women that are working in the WFP to be more effective and to be able to do their work the same way as any other staff?*

I think the organisation empowers women. I think we all play a role. I can't sit and wait until the organisation does something for me. I do have to work with the organisation together and I have

to say the organisation has had my back throughout the years and has put me out in positions where it's not easy. We should not be self-censoring and not put limitations to ourselves. I believe in myself, the organisation believes in me and together we can make a change and changing mindsets does not happen overnight. I think it's all of our stories. And again, like logistics was also in WFP a male dominated environment. And I remember back in, I mean, it was- we had just been introduced to e-mail systems and all of that. And of course, when you are sitting somewhere in a country office and you're communicating with headquarters or other country offices or regions, it's just a name on an e-mail. We didn't have pictures back then or anything. So, I remember the first regional logistics meeting that I attended, I think in 2001 or maybe 2002. And of course, I had communicated with a number of people and my name is Negar. So not many people can know if it's a man or a woman. And back then we didn't do he, him, she, we didn't do those things. So it was just Negar. And when I went into the meeting and I looked younger than my age, I would introduce myself and I did get, quite a number of startled faces. Oh, you are Negar. I thought you were a man. And, like, yeah, no, I'm not a man. I'm a woman. But that that mindset, I think has completely shifted within WFP as well. So it's equal opportunity. I think it is. We have to, we have to be bold about what we do.

*You mentioned self-censoring. What is that? Could you speak a bit more about what it means not to be self-censored.*

Censoring is when you stop yourself from taking on new challenges because you either think that you're not up to it or that it won't be perceived well, I think it's fear of failing more than anything that puts you back. And it's a constant struggle. At least for me, it has always been, like I have to because naturally, I would think maybe I shouldn't be doing this. Or maybe, like, maybe it's not the right thing to do. And then I'll have to push myself and say you do not- don't self-censor. Worst thing you fail. You, you pick yourself up and you move on. And that I think should be the force behind everything. If you stop yourself, you're not doing yourself any justice and you're not doing yourself any favour. And you always have to think, what is the worst thing that can happen? Worst thing is that I will fail. Is that the end of it? No, it's a learning experience and it's a journey.

*That's a lot, a lot to digest right there. But I just want us to just maybe take a pause on some of these questions and maybe look a bit more into some people you may have come across in the WFP who may have been inspiring for you, probably as you were progressing in the career. Are there people who were like mentors or who were inspiring or who were examples or people you met along the way who you still remember for one reason or the other because of some skills or some values that they had?*

I think, I mean, I have a lot of a lot of mentors and a lot of people that I've looked up to throughout the years.

*And I'm sorry, I should say more importantly, what you learned from them.*

I don't want to name names because then I would, I wouldn't do everyone justice because again, it's been a journey for me, and I've had so many amazing men and women that I've looked up to throughout the years. I think more than anything, I've learned from the people that we have served. It sounds a bit cliché, but it is really true. My most recent assignment was in Türkiye. It was just after the earthquake and it was, it was really one of the most devastating earthquakes that the country had ever, ever witnessed. And I came at a time when, just in the aftermath and the people who really inspired me were the staff there who had each suffered either a personal loss or had known someone who had lost someone. And, just the whole, the magnitude of this catastrophe. We lost staff and we had staff who had lost their family members. And yet they were out there, and they were serving and they were helping. And, like I could as a little bit of an outsider, I could see that they were burnt out. They were fatigued. They really were, it was post-traumatic stress that they were suffering, yet they wanted to continue. And that was for me the

ultimate, to see that amount of dedication, commitment. And it becomes even more personal when it is when it is close to you. That for me has remained and will remain, and I was there only for six months, but those six months were just pivotal in my life. The way that I saw the healing journey of the people of Türkiye throughout those six months was it will remain with me until the end of my days.

*What I'm hearing is even if like, of course, we always talk about what the staff goes through in an emergency, the leaders, the people who are managing these situations also have to find a way to draw strength. And for you, you really drew a lot of strength from seeing this staff and how they're also pushing through. Would you say that it sometimes gets difficult in terms of delivering on WFP's mission? And because, I mean, our work is clear. We want to save lives, we want to change lives. But are there times when you maybe found it to be very challenging and you felt that is this, our mission can be very difficult to achieve. And let me also say, how do you keep motivating yourself even in the face of maybe some, some of these challenges?*

I think again, it's the simplicity of our mandate. It's the fact that what we do is especially in emergency situations. And I've worked most of my career on the saving lives rather than the changing lives where you can actually see the results of your work. And it is when you see a community thriving, when you see that the work that you're doing is actually yielding results, that tangible difference that you make in a life of even one person. I think that is really what fuels you to go on and to continue. In the changing lives agenda, I think it's, it's when you see longer lasting results, when you can see that you are actually not helping one person, but a community, a generation, a wider cascading result. That is also that is also something that that will give you a lot of the strength to continue.

*And I want to also come to this point, you talked about how you were at one point, the only national head. I just want to maybe go a bit deeper into the dynamics of that, because we know that this is not necessarily always the case. Did you see this in any way to be beneficial or to be advantageous in helping you to deliver?*

Well, it was advantageous in the sense that I had been working in Iran for many years. So the, the government knew me, trusted me. They understood me because language is a barrier and building trust is also something that the Iranian government needs a bit of time to do. So it was advantageous in that sense. But at the same time, it's breaking norms and it's being a little bit the odd one out. So it was a challenge and I, as I said, I like challenges. I don't like the straight and narrow path. But I became very well established, and I was not only the Country Director, I was also the, the Resident Coordinator ad interim. When the Resident Coordinator left, I was again the only national who actually managed to get into that Resident Coordinator pool and served as Resident Coordinator ad interim in between the two Resident Coordinators being a part of the diplomatic community and having those interactions. It was very enriching and also helped I think with the mandate of WFP.

*And maybe following up on that. Is there any maybe recommendations you may have in terms of how maybe operations could be more efficient? If you had to maybe make some changes in, whether it's in policy or in operations and you had maybe two changes you could make or just one change, which one would it be?*

I would have to think about it. Off the top of my head, I can't tell you. I mean, I probably would make a lot of changes, but I'd have to think about it. This isn't something that it can just come like that.

*I understand, I understand. But maybe to also rephrase it in terms of, I mean, while you've worked all these years, are there some points of inefficiency that you've come across, of course, that that this is really something that happens with a large organisation like ours because it's a huge operation. It can't be perfect, but it is some of those things that you've had to deal with over and over again that of*

*course it may not be possible to be fixed outright, but are there some of those that you have really had to navigate around.*

I think for me, it's always been about efficiency, and it's always been about making the best of the resources that you have. I ran a very small country office, but I think the key to our success was it we double and triple hatted as long as it's allowed to do. I mean, with a whole conflict of interests and whatnot, like the segregation of duties understood. But if it's all about efficiencies is about making the best use of the people that you have. And I've always been an advocate for being more of a generalist that rather than a specialist. I think we tend to become very, very specialised in what we do, and we have subspecialties. I think if we are generalists, we can achieve more with less. And in this environment of austerity and reduced resources, I think the key to making the best use of the money is to be able to maximise on the resources that you have. So what I've always advocated for that I've always been a proponent for making the best use of your money and pushing the norms a little bit.

So I think in, in that area, we could perhaps improve. And I think we're doing, we're making strides in that area because we're forced to do that, like we can when you talk about the reduced funding levels and you still have them, the needs are still there, even greater than before. Yet the world is in a different place. And we have to make sure that we make the best of the of the bucks that we have. And I think any challenge like this can be turned into an opportunity and into optimization.

*Yeah, no, absolutely. And it took me a while to actually understand the generalist and I don't know if I got it correctly. So generalists, you mean we have to look at other ways that we still fulfil our mission, which may not necessarily be the traditional?*

I think it's, it's the ability to do multiple things. So if I'm just specialised in one area, then I would, I would only be able to do that. I don't know, like let's say an example of, if a doctor can treat a patient and if and if you have, I don't know, a broken finger, a doctor can treat that. You also have a hand doctor, and you have a foot doctor. And, like all these subspecialties. And if you, if you go into that subspecialisations, perhaps you can't actually treat more. And I think what we do is more general rather than super specialised and we tend to become super specialist in what we do, whereas if we're more of a generalist, we can perhaps reach out more and achieve more.

*You're a big believer in WFP's relevance.*

Absolutely. I never looked back. I was like when I've never thought that I would want to go to another organisation or do something different. Again it's like one of those things where you, you, it clicks with you and it's just there, it becomes a part of your DNA.

*All right. I think that is that is a good note to kind of round this up. And maybe the last piece of advice we want is maybe for young women who are starting their careers, for everyone, in fact, any professional, young professionals who are starting their careers, is there any word of advice you give them to help them to kind of encourage them to be committed?*

I think passion is very important. Anything that you do, you've got to have a passion for anything. And our work and our career is an integral part of our life. We spend most of our waking hours at work. So if you don't actually enjoy it, then it's a chore and you don't want to do a chore day in and day out. So I think if you feel fulfilled, then it's the right choice. If you don't, it's probably not the right career for you. And I do believe that you have to have that extra passion in order to also make things happen. And if you don't have it, then, yeah, not everyone needs to be in the humanitarian sector. But if you are, it's not a job. It's a way of life.

*Yeah. No, absolutely. And thank you. I think I've already kind of also caught some of that passion for talking with you today, Negar. Thank you so much.*

Thank you for this opportunity. It's been a great pleasure. Thank you.

