



## Interview for Study on Impacts of COVID-19 on U.S. Muslims Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute (AMWRI)

Interviewer/Number of Interview: KN2

Date: 3/19/2021

Name of Interviewee Assigned by Researcher (to protect identity): Respondent

Year of Birth: Early 1980s

Gender: Man

Country of Origin: India

Year of Immigration: Mid-1980s

Current State in which respondent resides: [A state in the Midwest]

**Note:** In the transcript, I refers to Interviewer, and R refers to Respondent/Interviewee. To protect the identity of the interviewee, some responses to questions are not provided. In such cases, this statement will show in the transcript: Information is not being made available. In other responses, specific details that might identify the family members are omitted or made more general.

### **Abstract:**

The respondent is an Imam. Imams have the unique experience of supporting their fellow Muslim community members in many ways. This participant, a father of two, personally felt relatively unscathed by the harsh effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, he has aided and counseled his Muslim community members through the hardships they have faced on matters of financial strain, grief, social isolation, and more. Through all of the challenges his community members present, this participant has emphasized the strength of faith and advocated for the need for proper mental healthcare. He is eager and optimistic for a return back to “normal,” especially thanks to vaccinations and successful outcomes of guideline-following, but he certainly knows that we face certainty in the coming months and years.

### **Key Themes:**

Imam responsibilities, mental health, counseling, community leaders, support, optimism

**Transcript:**

*[“This call is being recorded.”]*

R: Hello.

I: Hi! Is this *[interviewee name]*?

R: Yes! *[Interviewer name]*?

I: Yep, this is she.

R: How are you?

I: I'm great, how are you?

R: Good, good, good, good. Can you hear me okay?

I: Good. Yes, I can. Can you hear me as well?

R: Yeah.

I: Great. Well, thank you again for agreeing to be a part of this study. We're, of course, just so grateful that you were willing to participate, so that we can get some specific perspectives. Um, so kind of just to get started, I have a little spiel, um, on this little script to read off, so I'll just read that to you. And then, we'll go into if you have any questions or anything like that. Um, and then we can get started with the actual interview. So...*clears throat*.

R: Okay.

I: Okay. There are many issues of concern that our Muslim communities are addressing, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are one of the pressing ones. AMWRRRI, in collaboration with faculty and students at Marquette University, have created an interview to understand the experiences of U.S. Muslims with regard to COVID-19. Our research project aims to: document the impact of COVID-19 on Muslims' daily lives, especially the fulfillment of religious obligations and communal events such as congregation prayer on Fridays and Ramadan; discover Muslim communities' engagement with social justice issues; empower and connect Muslim communities by creating a digital archive on Muslims' experiences and perspectives; and share our research findings in a variety of modalities and public venues. This research project is led by Dr. Enaya Othman, president of AMWRRRI. Dr. Othman is also Associate Professor and Director of the Arabic and Cultural Studies Program at Marquette University. This project is being supported by a grant from Marquette. If you have any questions, you can direct them to me, and I can get them to, um, Dr. Othman or you can reach her directly. Um, so once again, thank you so much. And as a reminder, um, your identity will be kept separate from your answers once we go in and analyze and eventually write up and present the data. So, do please feel free to speak as

openly to each of the questions as you are comfortable with.

R: Sure.

I: Uh, do you have any questions for me?

R: Uh, no. I'm good now, thank you.

I: Okay. Alright. Well, we will get started with just a couple demographic, background questions. So, number one, if you could just state your name.

R: [Respondent].

I: And what is your age?

R: [Mid-30s].

I: Okay. And where were you born?

R: India.

I: Okay. And when did you move to the U.S. from India?

R: Uh, I was [a young child].

I: Okay. Okay. And in terms of your national background, how would you identify yourself?

R: Oh, I think I would be an Indian American. Definitely.

I: Okay. Um, what is the highest level of education that you've completed?

R: I have a Master's degree.

I: Okay. And what is your marital status?

R: Married.

I: Okay. And including yourself, how many adults live in your household?

R: Two.

I: Alright, and any children 18 years or younger in your household?

R: Two children.

I: Okay, great. That's kind of the laundry list of demographic questions that we have. And now

we'll kind of get into the meat of the interview. So this first set of questions kind of focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on your personal relationships, financial well-being, physical, emotional health, all that good stuff. So, um, we'll be talking through those different domains and, um, you know, the experiences that accompany them. So, in general, um, you know, answer this as whatever is salient to you, how has this outbreak, um, of the COVID virus affected you personally, um, on each of those domains? So financial, social, health situation, things like that.

R: I think health wise my family and I, and I know other Muslim families as well, are hesitant to go to the gym or go or go to YMCA and go to other places. So I think going out and finding places especially in the cold to be healthy and do activities, has been certainly affected. Especially initially, when the pandemic began. And then a lot of places have closed. You know, recently I was looking at other places my children used to go to. This—we'd have some indoor fun because it's, it's mostly cold here, but uh, those places are—are closed permanently. So, so I think both options have gone down and in terms of just going somewhere because of hesitancy, that's changed. So, that's happened in terms of health. Um, and hopefully, when the weather's getting warmer, we'll be out more. Personally, emotionally, it's got an effect on everybody. And uh, kind of panic, fear, anxiety, all that has been present in different ways and at different levels throughout the pandemic. And now things seem to be turning, which is good, for the better. And then financially, I think like a lot of people, there have been changes financially. Nothing drastic for me, thankfully. But those elements are all there in some way or the other, again, specifically due to the pandemic.

I: Yeah, sure. Um, it sounds like—uh, it corroborates the idea that this pandemic is something that no one has really been able to come off 100% scot free from. It's definitely affected us in many, many ways. Um, so in terms of, um, you know, you kind of mentioned how people that you know, uh, within your community, have had similar experiences to you. So I can imagine that perhaps some of those things that you mentioned not being able to do anymore for, you know, health reasons, affected you socially as well, maybe, because maybe you were used to seeing, you know, people in those settings.

R: Uh, yeah, to a degree. I mean, socially, not just because of health, I think socially, just visiting people and people and friends and family has become a lot more challenging, you know, from hesitancy to panic to, to now a new normal, which is a virtual normal. It's had its pros and cons. But like everyone else, we have been able to navigate that, yeah.

I: Mm-hmm. Yeah. So then for, um, friends and family that aren't in your household, it sounds like you relied on some virtual means to connect.

R: Yes, definitely. That's definitely—virtual means to connect has been the way to go.

I: Have you had any sort of unexpected challenges, or unexpected benefits of using those virtual platforms to connect with friends and family?

R: I think there have been unexpected benefits. If we connect with family that's in other places, and everyone is more intentional about meeting and seeing each other virtually, then that's been good, because we then explored this virtual system before. So I think there has been a plus of just

knowing that virtually it is just possible to connect with family.

I: Yeah, almost like, at least in my personal life, I feel like in some ways, I have connected with more people. Um, just because you realize you have that available, which is great.

R: Yeah. That's true.

I: Um, this is kind of moving into a different, but is there anything since the beginning of the pandemic, you feel like you've picked up in terms of information. So any apps you've begun using, blogs you've begun to read, or podcasts you've listened to, or anything like that?

R: Nothing, uh, nothing outstanding, I would say. I mean, there's—yes, I, I, uh, think I ended up writing a book—I was able to take time, and finish, uh, the translation and a book, um, um, that I finished, I was able to do that. And um, I, there was something that came out. I just realized that...end of December, January, and it took eight months through the pandemic and that was something that I didn't have time otherwise, but because socially and everything else, it was time so. So, I find myself going back to some of the things I like to do.

I: Yeah, that's incredible. I feel like another kind of silver lining is, um, certainly the extra time to do things that we had put on the back burner or forgotten about or being able to develop new skills or hobbies or whatever it is. So very cool. Very cool.

R: Yeah.

I: And then you mentioned, um, you know, of course, everyone has had some sort of financial implication from this pandemic, but that the situation was not too drastic for you. Uh, what does that kind of look like?

R: Uh, it was nothing, you know, nothing to be concerned, or nothing that was initially concerning, I think it's just, um, uh, a lot of people that I knew, initially were financially, more restricted, but then things kind of bounced back quicker than expected, I think. So. So it was not a long-term concern for me, or for the people that I know in any way. Everyone, you know, that I know or, or in the Muslim community, at certain socioeconomic levels, of course, are doing well, and those who have lost their jobs have—have lost their job. So...and in terms of my profession, and in terms of my connection to the community to answer on their behalf, I think it's—it's still a concern, but thankfully, it has not been a very big concern.

I: Mmm. Mm-hmm. Yeah, that uh—I mean, that's always kind of the best answer, you know, it can range from not so bad to super, super, super bad, um, even to detrimental levels for some individuals. But I'm glad to hear that you've come out relatively unscathed, as well as the people that you know, personally. Um, did you...

R: And we're not—you know, sorry, as a community, as a community, we're not immune to whatever else is going on. So...

I: Sure.

R: So this was happening. Mm-hmm.

I: Yeah, absolutely. Do you feel like at any point, either in your personal life or in your role as any imam, were you relied upon for financial support by people?

R: So my role is not to provide financial support. My role is to provide emotional and spiritual support. And I've been doing that, uh, throughout the pandemic in different ways. Yes, some of the people who have come to me, who have sought emotional support and spiritual help, have had financial changes for them that have created problems. But I have had to deal with that. And—and it's not a—how do I say it...it's not an ever present feature. It's not a ubiquitous feature of the pandemic. But yes, it has presented itself in different ways amongst the families that I have counseled.

I: I see. Yeah, that actually kind of goes into some of the questions that we have for you, specifically, as imam, and the, um, perspective that you have there. So you mentioned that um, that emotional support that you provide to members of your community and of your congregation. Um, tell me a little bit about what some of those cases look like, like what people came in asking you for help with.

R: Um, I mean, [people] have come to me asking for help with just coping with changes or families where...especially families with younger children and middle school and high school. Not so much those at college level, but in different ways. But, you know, students learning from home, not being able to focus virtually, not being able to attend school properly, because it's all virtual and not in person, missing out being with their friends, um, and constantly being at home with parents in kind of “being-yelled-at mode,” as they say.

I: Mm-hmm.

R: So all that contributed to families having to navigate a new emotional pattern and new emotional things that have come up. So that's happened for students and families. For college students, I think just worrying about the economy, worrying about their field, their jobs, because those things are—uh, now we're feeling the impact of those changes economically, and some, some, some avenues of work were open for them and careers, and some of them have closed. So, the students are just navigating that in a different way, so there's some anxiety there for them.

I: Yeah. So um, in terms of religious practices for these community members that you've been able to connect with, how has the pandemic shaped those things? So for example, like with institutions and mosques closing, maybe not being able to participate in group prayer, things like that.

R: Yeah, that has been a big feature. I mean, Friday prayer is a big element in the weekly religious life in Islam. And, and that has been restricted, but thankfully, it's gotten back in. And even with, with social distancing, and spacing, and masks, people are trying their best to, to be able to be present with each other spiritually and socially. So many services have just been not happening, um, simply because there's no room or space, or the numbers are just not, um...And people are just trying to do everything virtually. So it has taken away something. But it has also

offered the virtual option, uh, of doing everything virtually, which, which has made some more interested or given some people more time to be able to engage and—uh, engage and learn more about their religion.

I: So it sounds like, um, at least in your case, you've noticed that you've been able to take advantage of those virtual platforms, in not only your personal life, but also as an imam in leading your community and getting them the connection that they need with one another and with their faith.

R: Yeah. Yeah. To a degree, definitely, yes.

I: That's awesome. Um, so that's, you know, obviously a huge part of your response and fellow leaders in the Muslim community, uh, overall, their response in, you know, handling this pandemic. Are there any other ways that you feel like leadership, um, that you work with, or that, you know, have responded to those, you know, very unexpected challenges?

R: I am a big proponent of, uh, the awareness of mental health and providing resources to people for their mental health. And, uh, so—so, so that's been, that's been important. I think, whatever was keeping us busy, has given us now time to reflect and kind of look at the resources. So yes, myself included, and other community members have looked at the resources for those who may be struggling emotionally, mentally—connecting them to places where they might, they may find help for counseling, for therapy, uh, for social connections...these things we always wanted to do, but this pandemic has really brought that to the forefront. And I am a big proponent of resources for mental health, and I'm happy that we were able to cover some ground and find some resources and be able to point people in the direction that they need to and kind of follow up with them. So that's been good.

I: Mm-hmm. Yeah, that's wonderful. Of course, I appreciate that as a future mental health professional myself, um, that that was something that you found that people really needed, and you were able to provide them with.

R: Yeah.

I: Um, and, you know, kind of going back to the idea of shifting to, you know, mostly virtual events, um, you know, group prayers, things like that, um, do you feel like the community members at all pressured you and/or like other leadership, to remain open or to break those recommendations so that they could be in-person, or were most people kind of cool with that transition?

R: Uh no—they follow the rules, and there was no pressure or even desire to stay open when it was understood that this was detrimental to the, to the health of the community, and it would not be good for spreading the virus. So no, there was no pressure from any side. There was, there was a lot of understanding because, excuse me, the community, a lot of them work in the medical field, a lot of them are *cuts out* or such. So there's more of easier understanding between Islam and science. The relationship is a lot more harmonious.

I: Well, that's very nice to hear. Um, and, you know, it also calls for a lot of reliability and resiliency, which it sounds like you're—at least the community members that you know are productive. Um, in terms of, you know, students that you have in your institution, um, you know, it sounds like that was also virtual—and how was that experience for those students?

R: You mean, in terms of—uh, yeah, I mean, in terms of religious service? Or kind of school?

I: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Um, you know, school, or I'm sorry, religious education, uh, that sort of thing. And kind of the engagement therein.

R: Um...I would say the religious education is there. I mean, for children at a certain age, they need their peers. Uh, and when they don't see them, then they don't really focus and it's harder for them to absorb the religious education. So that's been a challenge. But I think that's not specific to religious education. I think schooling in general is facing that challenge of distraction, with remote learning, especially for children. So that is something that, uh, that is hopefully now changing. If people are getting vaccinated, and they are kind of meeting each other if they're all vaccinated, that's been a plus now, but, but throughout the pandemic, it's been a challenge for them to be able to learn.

I: And then, you know, if you were providing, you know, it—it sounds like you talk a lot one on one, perhaps, or small group on one, with members of your community in a sort of counseling format, but in terms of, um, any religious lectures or sermons that you have facilitated or that you have witnessed over the last year, um, how does that content kind of change, just given what's going on in the world right now? Or what was maybe highlighted that was not as much before? It sounds like perhaps mental health was maybe more on the forefront? What else?

R: Yeah, I would say mental health or other religious themes would help people cope with the pandemic, right. Um, sense of community...I mean, it's the same kind of elements that are present usually in religious discourse, but more focused toward or more in the language of the pandemic. Um, so generally, that's—that's been the issue: Resilience, strength, prayer, intentional community, and connection. All those things are, I would say, certainly present.

I: Yeah, absolutely. And do you feel that as a leader yourself, you were able to tie that into the tenets of Islam in general?

R: Yes. I would say so.

I: Yeah, that's wonderful. Um, and so, you know, maybe you have a specific example, maybe not, but, um, what sort of ways do you feel like you encouraged your community members to cope when they were feeling those, uh, really dark places, of, you know, anxiety, maybe grief, fear, isolation?

R: Well, besides awareness of mental health, I think just spending time talking to people and spending time assessing them and supporting them in general. You know, just the general tools that are there to use, both in religious learning and in chaplaincy have been very useful. I mean, nothing specific comes to mind besides saying that the idea is to encourage expression,



acknowledgement, and to say “okay, if you need help, here's the help that you need to get”, and making it more intentional about community online -- so, that's helped.

I: Yeah, absolutely. I think, you know, kind of like we were talking about in your personal life, I mean, it has opened that online door even further than it maybe already was, which I think is maybe a silver lining of everything that's been so dark. Umm, what sort of long-term impacts do you imagine might come out of this in the next few years? Like, for example, do you think that there might be any programming or events that you offered online that you might never go back to in-person? Or do you feel like things will just go back to in-person as soon as possible?

R: I think the, the feeling right now is the latter.

I: Okay.

R: People want to go back to in person as soon as possible, but I don't know six months down the line, what it will be to be honest.

I: Sure.

R: Long term is hard to figure out what this thing.

I: Sure.

R: So as, you know, as things open up, and people get vaccinated and the laws change and the rules change, in terms of congregation, then people will be more confident. It will take time, but people will be more confident in, in, in coming back to in-person, especially for religious events throughout the religious calendar. Now, some people may not do that, due to health concerns, but I think most, given the opportunity, will take advantage of that.

I: Mm-hmm. Yeah, absolutely. And it sounds like something you're probably looking forward to as well as a leader.

R: To a degree. If it's done correctly, yes.

I: *Laughs*. Yes, absolutely. Yeah, we actually, uh, one of the questions, um, kind of wrapping up is, what is your stance regarding the COVID vaccine. But I can tell that that's something that it sounds like is important to you—to make sure that individuals are getting vaccinated, especially as hopefully things can start transitioning to, quote, normal.

R: Yeah.

I: Um, do you or other, you know, leaders that you may know, have any specific ways that you're maybe encouraging, um, members of your community to get vaccinated or informing them about how they might go about that?

R: Yeah, there are different needs for education. People are being pointed to the right direction to

where to get vaccinated, and those who are in the healthcare industry are getting vaccinated through their job. And then the elderly parents can get vaccinated, so that's slowly, slowly happening. But then the question remains, you know, how long is the vaccination good for and what's going to happen six months down the line? Those questions, I think, for everybody remain open.

I: Yeah, absolutely. If only there were a clear answer. *Laughs.*

R: Yeah. We can't see into the future right now.

I: Sure. Sure. Um, well, you know, that's kind of the end of the list of questions that I have. But in general, I'm wondering if there's anything else you would like to return to or speak more upon, uh, before we kind of wrap up?

R: I think, yeah, I mean, I think, in general, resilience is important. And, and all of us have been strong in ensuring that we can overcome this pandemic with proper education and knowledge and following the guidelines of the experts. So I think that's a part of the faith for me as part of the religion and as part of where we are, so that's going to be very good. And I'm hoping and praying for the best for the future, especially for [young adults] who may be uncertain about their career that they chose and where they're going. So, so I am hopeful. I'm optimistic.

I: Yeah, absolutely. I think, uh, at least in my time, as an interviewer on this project, something that seems to be a common theme is that faith has been in a lot of ways a huge strength. And, um, I think that really speaks to the tenets of Islam, and, um, that idea that you can, you know, overcome tough, challenging situations.

R: Yeah.

I: Yeah, absolutely. Well, you know, I'm really grateful for your time this afternoon. And, you know, if any of the individuals that you know in your community are interested in participating, you can absolutely send them my way, and we'd love to speak with them as well.

R: Sure!

I: Um, if you have any more questions, or you want more information about AMWRRRI you can go to the website, it's [amwrrri.org](http://amwrrri.org).

R: Mm-hmm.

I: Or email me or Dr. Othmann, but as of right now, I'll let you go and just thank you once again for your time.

R: Sure, you're welcome. Thanks. Take care.

I: Alright, well you have a nice weekend.

R: You too.