



Interview for Study on Impacts of COVID-19 on U.S. Muslims

Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute (AMWRRI)

Interviewer/Number of Interview: NDP3

Date: 4/20/2021

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

Age: Early 60s

Gender: Male

Country of Origin: U.S.

Current State in which respondent resides: 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 in his early 60s and was born in Illinois and has spent most of his life and career in an urban area in the Midwest. He recounts most of the impact of COVID-19 relating to his social life, though many of his extra-professional engagements, which include statewide interfaith dialogue and keeping in contact with various religious communities, moved easily to an online format. During the pandemic, this sustained contact with various religious communities and authorities meant informing his own local Islamic center and Muslim community of updated safety guidelines for religious gatherings and worship. Social interactions were a big part of this respondent's life pre-pandemic, and while he has adapted especially in terms of technology in the realms of profession and religion, the lack of social interaction, especially when it came to family, has been an especially salient part of his COVID experience.

Respondent has strong beliefs about social justice: Muslim communities have to work with other faith communities and any other willing partners, to stand up for social justice. He also advocates for people getting to know each other on a grassroots basis – to counteract the hatred that is so easy to maybe come to pass when somebody doesn't know someone, and then they're just vilified by others or viewed by people as the 'other'.

Key Themes:

Interfaith dialogue and work, family, expressions of faith (e.g., calling his mother daily, practicing social distancing, facing trials/challenges), social justice responsibilities, and breaking the cycle of hatred and vilifying the “other”.

Transcript:

I: If you're ready, we can jump right into the questions. Um, if not, if you have any questions, I can answer them now.

R: No, go ahead.

I: Alright, sounds good. Um, so just state your name please.

R: My name is [Respondent].

I: And what is your age?

R: [Early 60s].

I: Where were you born?

R: Illinois.

I: And how do you identify yourself in terms of national background?

R: I'm American.

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

R: Graduate school.

I: What is your marital status?

R: Married.

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

R: Two (2).

I: Okay, and how many children eighteen (18) years or younger live in your household?

R: None.

I: Okay. This next set of questions is going to focus in on the impact of COVID-19 on personal relations, financial well-being, and then physical and emotional health. Um, so if you want, I can give you kind of thirty seconds to reflect on the last year? Uh, and just kind of the changes that have happened in these areas.

R: I'm ready, go ahead.

I: Okay, sounds good. Okay, so how would you say the outbreak of the COVID virus affected you personally in terms of financial, social, and health situations? So you can pick any of those, or address all three.

R: I would say, financially, um, given the fact that I am a [professional position], most of my clients have struggled. I don't think I want to [disclose any further information about this].

I: Okay.

R: With clients, some of them have struggled and it has actually caused me to experience a little bit of a decline in my own revenue. Because of their own inability to pay. Uh, socially, things are a lot different. We do not socialize with anyone outside of immediate neighbors, uh, basically—at least at the height of the COVID restrictions. Now, I got my shots, a couple of months ago. But I would say this—even during the height of the COVID, I did not see my kids who do not live with me, except in an outdoor setting. Uh, and uh, two of them actually do not live in the area so I did not travel to see them, it was just one child that I was seeing who works in the local area. And, uh, I was unable to see my mother for more than a year. She lives in a skilled care facility in Minnesota, and they were under lockdown for more than a year. Uhm (pauses), alright, so financially, socially, and (pauses) what was the third one?

I: Uh, in terms of health, physical or emotional health.

R: I'm—I'm okay. I mean, I did not like not being able to see certain members of my family. I found that disturbing, but uh, I would not say that uh—I mean mentally, I'm fine. This is just, uh, you know, if you're a Muslim, I mean, this is just another trial, or challenge, and you should do what's right and what's right in this case is to wear masks and socially distance and not risk infecting other members of the community as well as members of your own family. I would also say the socialization that I had with friends, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, lunches, dinners, meeting people at other places, visiting family, including visiting in-laws, you know were almost completely eliminated during that year.

I: Well, and this is directly related to my next question, which was, what became your primary ways of communicating with people who were not in your household?

R: Professionally, uh, there were a few clients that I absolutely had to meet with face-to-face, at certain times. Other than that, professionally a lot of meetings would have been done face-to-face or done by Zoom or other video conferencing means. So I wouldn't say that the amount of communication—work communication—decreased; it just took place over the internet rather than face-to-face. I would also indicate that, in my profession, there are certain events that need to take place on a face-to-face basis. All of those events have been indefinitely delayed or at least have been delayed by a year. That also had some impact on my business work and revenue.

I: Okay. Well, and in these, uh, new ways—or, not necessarily new ways, but, you know, you mentioned Zoom and some other online platforms—what challenges or unexpected benefits did this new, uh, technology use pose for you?

R: Well, I also am heavily involved in interfaith work, and those meetings and events also took place by Zoom. I think that one benefit was actually that more people were able to attend some events, while other events had to be cancelled in their entirety, so there were pluses and minuses. I do not have any technology issues, so the fact that I had to connect with people over the internet for face-to-face events was something that was not impactful to me.

I: Okay. Are there any other sorts of technology—you know, apps that you've begun to use or perhaps blogs that you've read or maybe some new podcasts that you've listened to over the last year?

R: Well, I don't think so. I mean, professionally, I follow different blogs, and any blogs that I might follow socially have remained largely the same. The only thing of course is you have to pay more attention to the health news, because it guides you in your decision of what you can do, meeting people.

I: Right—absolutely. And this next set of questions kind of has to do with your employment, but I know that you mentioned—we can retract the profession—or, redact, excuse me, I keep saying retract. Um, but if you could just tell me how many hours per week you worked on average, before the onset of the pandemic?

R: 35.

I: Okay. How many hours on average in the last month did you work per week?

R: Oh, in the last month? Uh (pauses), 25.

I: Okay. (Pauses) You touched on this, on financial well-being> Have you or your family received any sort of help, financially?

R: No.

I: Okay. Were there any needs that needed to be met or are currently present?

R: (pauses) Uh, I think I might need more specifics—

I: Oh, it's—

R: There were issues especially in maintaining close contact with family members that could not be overcome because of COVID. The kids, my two children, do not live in town, and my mother in the skilled care nursing facility situation was on lockdown. So I mean, there was more communication by phone, and (chuckles) of course, non-face-to-face.

I: Sure.

R: I'm not sure that drives at your question.

I: No, no, that absolutely covers it. It's quite a general question, it's kind of standalone, so I think anything is really fair game. And this next question is, you know, what kind of help have you

given to others, including friends or family, living in the U.S. or any other country? So I think by 'help' it's just any sort of help? Uhm, yeah—I'll just leave that up to you!

R: Oh, I try to keep family members, clients, uhm, and people advised of the most current CDC recommendations. I mean, part of my work includes, has included, going into a healthcare facility for a client, and keeping them advised of what is going on. In addition to that, I'm also participating in the leadership of the Muslim community in [the state where he resides]. I have tried to keep leadership of various Islamic centers advised of the most current CDC recommendations, as well as what other religious organizations have chosen to do about having in-person worship—uh, returning to worship—or, uh, or their advice on dealing with certain issues that come up in religious practices such as funerals and marriages.

I: And this actually perfectly transitions into this next group of questions, which we'll be exploring: the impact on religious practices and beliefs specifically. So, I know you just mentioned your role in leadership within the Islamic community — in what ways have you continued religious traditions or any other religious programs that are important to you during this time, or what changes have there been that you have seen?

R: The greatest impact in my own personal practice is I do not attend the compulsory Friday prayers. By my own reasoning, I believe there is an exemption, and one need not attend the Friday prayer for various reasons. In addition to that, I would also go to a mosque to pray at other times, uhm, as would my wife, and we don't, we have not done that, except on occasions that we knew the mosque would be virtually empty. So, in other words, we would not attend evening times of worship, but we would come by during the day when we know it's likely there would be less than a dozen people in the place of worship. In addition to that, there's our month of fasting, what Muslims call the month of Ramadan. It was my practice to go every night and break the fast at the mosque, at a community meal that would be held at the mosque or at the local community, the local Islamic community center. And, last year, Ramadan, I did not do that at all, and this year Ramadan I am not doing that at all, again, because I believe, for various reasons, that it's not time yet for people to attend large indoor gatherings.

I: Sure, and have you or your wife participated in any virtual religious activities, like has there been a virtual element at all?

R: (pauses) The only thing that I do participate in is, I mean, I will play programs that are recorded, or streamed across the internet. So, for example, on Fridays, our day of congregational prayer, it's my prayer to stream a lecture or a sermon at the same time I would have otherwise been attending a mosque, before I say my individual prayer, at home. On the other hand, other than streaming recorded programs from the mosque, and representing my mosque in a local interfaith group, which requires Zoom meetings that have been going on for the last year plus, I—my practice is—I'm not doing anything else virtually.

I: And how would you summarize the importance of these virtual elements in addition to or supplementing your practice, personal practice?

R: Well, I think that the one benefit is that there is more online content that can be streamed, and it can be watched at a time that is personally convenient to me, rather than having to be at a

specific place at a specific time. So there actually is some benefit in increased use of technology to make a lectures and teaching more widely available for the personal convenience of Muslims in [my city]. On the other hand, the drawback is that there is a lot of benefit associated with doing things as a community in person, but we just have to understand that during a time of pandemic, the best thing to do for the community is not to put the community at risk by engaging in close personal contact with one another.

I: Thank you, and how have you found, maybe within your own faith, or maybe leaning on, um, religious leaders, how might scripture be helpful in kind of coping with and understanding the COVID-19 crisis, or has that been something that has been important to you?

R: I would say that the COVID pandemic has had no real impact on my level of faith—

I: Okay

R: --in the extent that, I mean, we are taught in our scripture that things happen that will be a trial or a tribulation and that we're supposed to be patient and use our reason and intellect, to deal with matters, and so—even though the pandemic clearly is a challenge, it's just another challenge, not unlike other challenges, and quite frankly—so I mean, in a way, the ability to face a new challenge and overcome it is actually that is good, spiritually.

I: Sure—and that is actually the last question in this section is, you know, how, if in any ways, has your prayer and religious practices played a role in how you understand this pandemic—and that kind of touches on it—but would you like to expand on that at all?

R: Well, again, it's a matter of religious teachings contained in our scripture and in our prophetic sayings about, not only that you will face trials and tribulations, that you should patiently persevere and try to overcome in that way, but also, that you should do what is best for your community and, in this case, doing what is best for your community during a time of pandemic is to stay at home.

I: Thank you, yeah—

R: I mean, I don't honestly see a difference—I believe that my staying at home, and staying apart and trying not to spread the pandemic, is actually an act of worship. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' or, in the Islamic formulation, 'Love for your neighbors what you would love for yourself.'

I: Sure, absolutely. (pauses) Yeah, in this, uh, this kind of commitment to others, and social welfare and everything, this is kind of the focus of our next set of questions, well, specifically, it's going to be Muslim community's engagement with social justice issues, mostly focusing on the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. So, I was wondering, how has your mosque or Islamic center responded to the calls for social justice raised by the Black Lives Matter movement and other racial equity movements?

R: Uh, the Islamic community has been fully engaged through interfaith in supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. So, for example, the Islamic community has endorsed or been a co-

signor of statements issued, for example, condemning many of the mass shootings that have occurred, including the Jacob Blake shooting in, uh, sorry, I can't remember—

I: Kenosha

R: Kenosha, I think? Yeah—

I: Yeah

R: As well as other incidents, uhm, that we put out, we participated in putting out an interfaith prayer document shortly after the death of George Floyd in Minnesota—it's just—we participated in the anti-Asian-Pacific Islander violence rally as well. So we've been—and we've participated in marches, as well, with other faith groups, a lot of which occurred during the spring and summer last year after the George Floyd matter. So, the community has been heavily involved from a standpoint of participating in statements, deploring racial hatred and violence against African Americans, as well as other ethnic groups, and participating in protests, outdoors, of course, during the pandemic, with masks, and the like.

I: Absolutely. And uh, what do you think Muslim communities in the U.S. should be doing with regard to social justice issues, perhaps—and these issues could be racism, Islamophobia, violence against, um, women, against Black people, Hispanics, the LGBTQ community, if any of these issues, uh, especially you know, pertinent, you know, what would you like to see the Muslim community doing?

R: Well, again, because I have a leadership in the interfaith organizations as well as in the Muslim community, I think that Muslim communities have to work with other faith communities and any other willing partners, to stand up for social justice—you know, all of those areas. Now, obviously, some of those areas are more directly concerned with the Muslim community's own self-interest, but they have to also be involved in other issues as well. So for example, my community is part of [a coalition], which seeks to pass reasonable gun legislation, to partly address some of the gun violence that we've been seeing. We also strongly support getting people to know each other on a grassroots basis – to counteract the hatred that is so easy to maybe come to pass when somebody doesn't know someone, and then they're just vilified by others or viewed by people as the 'other'. Once you know somebody personally, I think it's a lot harder to objectify the person as some 'other' who may be, uh, you would be okay with inflicting violence on, and that should not be okay.

I: Sure, absolutely. Well, thank you. And then, we are in the home stretch. This is the last section of the interview. So, the first question is: What was the most uplifting experience since the outbreak of COVID-19 -- maybe something you observed or that happened to you that inspired hope or happiness?

R: Related to COVID?

I: It doesn't necessarily have to be, no, just during that time.

R: Uh, I can't really pick one thing.

I: Sure, and that's okay.

R: I, uh, (chuckles) let's see. I would—I'm going to pick three things.

I: Sure, okay!

R: I don't know if you want that or not.

I: No, sure, absolutely, go ahead!

R: Personally, in my own faith, during Ramadan, there is a practice that the community gathers for evening prayers during which the Qur'an is recited one-thirtieth each night, so the Qur'an is recited to completion during the month of Ramadan. I've done that myself -- last year I completed it, and God wiling this year, I'm doing it again. So that was something that I had never attempted in my life, so for my personal faith practice, I'm very happy with that.

I: Sure.

R: Uh, personally, because I couldn't see my mother, and I've had a practice before, I'd only call her sporadically. Now I call her every night. I mean, it's just something, Muslims are supposed to—it's, again, it's a faith aspect as well, I mean, that one should take care of and honor one's parents, and during COVID when you can't see your mother, and I know nobody could see her, but I mean, my mother was lonely. That—that was very important to me. Uhm, I think I'll leave it at those two.

I: Sure, thank you. And, uh, what is the thing you are most looking forward to doing or seeing or anything, once, you know—I know they say it might not be the same normal, but, once we get "back to normal" (quote/unquote), what are you most looking forward to?

R: Oh, I think getting together with family. I know that's rather generic, because I say it that way because I've seen my mother once now. She had her shots, I had my shots, and I was allowed to be in her room for two hours

I: Sure.

R: (chuckles) So I'll see her again. And I've seen, one of my daughters I traveled to, the one who's closer. And I hope to travel to see my other daughter that I haven't seen for a year.

I: Sure

R: Because one is, one requires a plane flight, and the other is just a long car trip.

I: Right

R: And then getting together with other, more extended family members, cousins and the like. So that's all under the category of what I'm looking most forward to is seeing a lot of family members again.

I: Right. Absolutely. (Pauses)

R: Because—let me say this. Because part of my work has involved going into a healthcare situation in which there was potential exposure for COVID, and it was necessary. I felt it was necessary that I stay away from my kids and my mother—not that I could have seen my mother anyways, because she was under lockdown—but it was important for me, I did not want to, I mean, I was at risk of infection, so I did not want to take the risk of infecting anyone else. Now, thank God, I know from my antibody testing that I didn't get COVID, now I've had two shots and, you know, we'll see where it goes from here. You know, my personal viewpoint is that we're not out of the woods on this at all. I mean, not everybody's been vaccinated, the infections are going up, more variants are appearing, another variant could appear that could be resistant to the shots that we have, more contagious, could be more deadly, and now is not the time to prematurely celebrate the end of the COVID pandemic. And that's why my practice is still affected, and why—my religious practice—that's why I will not go to mosques to participate in indoor activities. I will attend a funeral outside, and I have attended funerals outside, but I will not go into a crowded building.

I: Sure, sure. (Pauses) Well, that is the end of the question bank, and I was wondering if there was anything else you want to tell me, or expand on anything that I asked you earlier?

R: Mm... (pauses) I would say in the social area, we have declined invitations to have, to meet people when there is an indoor setting, even for our neighbors who we otherwise socialize with outside. And, you know, it was a long winter (laughs).

I: (laughs) Yeah.

R: So, you know, winter in [the Midwest]!

I: Of course, of course.

R: I mean, obviously, socializing outside is easier during the spring, summer, and fall, and it's really kind of difficult in the winter

I: Especially when winter lasts, you know, so long.

R: Right

I: Absolutely, I'll be sure to add that. Awesome, well, thank you, thank you so, so much, sir, and I will stop the recording here.