

Oral History Project Interview
Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute (AMWRRRI)

Number of Interview: EC 1.00

September 28, 2015

Interviewee Name: Leena (name changed to protect interviewee confidentiality)

Interviewer Name: Eleanor Cammarano

Gender: Female

Age: 57

Country of Origin: Algeria

Year of Immigration: 1999

Abstract: As a first generation immigrant from Algeria, Leena grew up in a smaller community with her time split between life in France where her Christian mother lived and Algeria where her Muslim father lived. In her religion the children always take the religion of their father, so she herself grew up Muslim. Her marriage was arranged and had three children, and moved from Algeria with her daughter to Milwaukee Wisconsin where her father lived. She experienced some adjusting to living in the United States, however with her families support she was able to learn English and decided to stay. She has her green card and is hoping to gain citizenship soon so that her husband and two other children can come to live with her. It should be noted that there is also a translator who is present within the interview and occasionally explains Arabic words to myself as that I have no understanding of Arabic, and my interviewee felt limited by her understanding of some English vocabulary. The translator was arranged by my interviewee and helped me by translating some terminology exclusive to the Arabic language, and vice versa.

Key Terms: significance of faith, distinction of culture and religion, parenthood, marriage, cultural roles of men and women, and her involvement with the Islamic Society and Community Center of Milwaukee which she calls her "second home".

Note: In the transcript, I refers to Interviewer, and R refers to Respondent/Interviewee.

I: [initial background noise from interviewer setting up camera and translator assisting interviewee in establishing paperwork]... May I ask are you a first or second generation...immigrant?

R: First [Translator looks towards interviewee for confirmation also stating she is a first generation immigrant].

I: Excellent, Do you mind if I ask you some questions?

R: Yes! Yes of course go ahead.

I: Excellent, where is your homeland?

[Translator: from which place you came?

R: Africa, Algeria.,yes

I: And this is where you were born?

R: I born Algeria

I: What are some of the places and buildings you spent a lot of time at during your childhood...School..Church..

[Translator: School?]

R: Yes, school, and Mosque.

I: Tell me about your home, what buildings do you remember fondly?

[Translator: What buildings do you remember of your childhood? When you were young?]

R: In Paris, my mother.

[Translator: her mother's French]

I: Oh excellent, really. In Paris then?

R: Yes.

I: Where you lived did you share the spaces with your family? Did you all live in Algeria together? From France?

R: Yes, yes, I share together with my family and my mom.

I: Excellent, did you live, you mentioned, in other countries before coming to the US, was Paris first?

[There is, in the background, the sound of prayer, as that the interview was conducted in the Islamic Community Center with also includes the Mosque, we sat in the office of the top floor where the women's prayer center is located]

R: Yes.

I: And then Algeria?

R: No. Algeria and then Paris because I was born Algeria and then go Paris and then I come here.

I: [Chuckles] Oh! Multiple places?

R: Yes

I: Excellent, How long did you live in France?

R: [Pauses]..Almost all my life you know, yah.

I: How long did you live in Africa?

R: Then I go back married, you know, marriage,

I: Oh excellent, we are going to get to that a little bit later too, I'm excited. When did you come to the US?

R: um..1999.

I: 1999?

R: Yes.

I: How old are you now?.. you don't have to say if you don't want to.

R: no no, 57 now. Yes.

[Both interviewee and interviewer pause to laugh]

I: Where is it, when you first came to the US, where did you come to first? Was it Wisconsin or?..

R: Yes, Wisconsin,

I: Wisconsin first, Did you come with your whole family or?

R: No I with my daughter.

I: You daughter?

R: Yes my Daughter, she is 21 now.

I: Nesrin right? [Daughters name] excellent I talked to her.

R: Yes! She come three years with me now...to this country

I; oh that's my age as well..and so your family..did your family stay back at the time in Paris.. or

R: Yes my dad he stay here, but he die here, yes...ya.

I: Oh..are you married?

R: Yes, ya.

I: excellent and you married in Paris, France?

R: no, Algeria

I: In Algeria.

R: yes.

I: And you were married when you came here, so you came after the marriage?

R: yes.

I: was your arranged, marriage arranged or no?

[Translator: was your marriage arranged or love marriage?]

R: just, just like this

[Translator: arranged, arranged]

R: It was just like this, come vacation, women, it's like this. You know, back home? [chuckles].

I: and in Algeria or in France more?

R: in Algeria.

I: and did you know your spouse before you got married?

R: what do you mean?

[Translator: did you get to know your husband before you where married?]

R: no.

I: no? ok. And then you said you do have children..

R: yes I have three

I: Nesrin,

R: and two boys,

I: Nesrins whos 21, and the two boys, what are their names?

R: Hadier (Sp?)

I: and how old is he?

R: he is 33

I: 33

R: and Abudadule (sp?) hes 26.

I: and what are their education levels; high school..college..

R: my kids? College, finished college.

I: Oh excellent,

R: and my daughter is in college

I: Oh excellent, do your children have any children? I know Nesrin has a son?

R: Yes, she has son.

[Translator: no the other kids, one other has a son/daughter right?]

R: yes,

[Translator: her other daughter]

R: Oh my son, he have a little boy baby.

[Translator: yes baby boy]

I: aww... what was your level of education? Before you came to The States?

[Translator: did you go to school?]

R: here?

[Translator: no, there]

R: oh there, yes.

I: yes there, ok

R: yes I finish just high school,

I: High school, there?

R: yes I don't finish umm

[Translator: that's ok,]

I: no that's fine, no, that was uh, just so I get my facts straight, that was in Algeria?

R: yes, yes,

I: um, did you receive any additional education since coming here? Or was it just the high school?

R: Nothing

[Translator: nothing]

I: did you work outside of the home prior to coming here?

[Translator: before coming over here did you work outside ever?]

R: In Algeria? No, never. Because you know my country, it's like not women, it's not outside like all the time you know? Its home. Yes.

I: and then, um, you started working here (The Islamic Community Center of Milwaukee)

R: yes ISM (see above) yes.

I: and was that, how many years?

R: how many years....its almost five years.

I: 5 years?

R: Yes

I: oh excellent.. do you mind if I ask you some questions about your decisions to immigrate to the US?

R: sure!

I: excellent, what where your main reasons for coming here?

R: I come here a visitor, visit my dad, so I stayed because I have two sisters American, another American, he want me to stay here, so I stay with my daughter she grew up my daughter liked school here, we love here!

I: oh excellent, when did you father come here?

R: oh long time, long time, over 35 years my dad he come here.

I: Oh wow,

R: his autman friends you know (spoken to translator).

R: yes, long time, 35 years, after 35 years he died.

I: yes. Let's see, So you moved with your family and you ended up just settling here, uh, what made you settle in Milwaukee, was it that your father lived here?

R: yes.

I: Just being close to family?

R: Mmmhmm.

I: Did any of your other relatives end up coming over? Or just yourself?

R: No,

I: Just you and your father?

R: yes.

I: Um, lets see, for some of your early experiences here in the US, what was life like?

R: life was hard a little bit,

I: Hard.

R: Then little by little I'm ok.

I: mmhm.

R: then I go visit Algeria, and I can't wait to come back here, because here...

[Translator: she likes it here]

R: Yes, I like to stay here.

I: What where some of the difficulties when you first came here?

R: yes, uh,

[Translator: what was difficult?]

R: It's hard... English. My English. Now I'm happy because I speak a little better. This is important. My English is not really really good before. Just to look people, so it's hard for me, ya know? So language was the biggest thing for me.

I: I can understand. So with the obstacles of language, what were some problems related to where you went to go to pray, live, and shopped, did you have access to the comforts of home when you came here, or did it take some time?

[Translator: When you came here was it difficult right away?]

R: Not really, not really too much. Don ya know I stay more and more I like it.

I: Your father, when you needed something to go and shop...

R: My dad. Before he died he helped me so much. He took me everywhere he showed me everything, ya know? After he died, *claps* yeah, ya know. It's nine years now he died.

I: It sounds like he helped a lot to make it less difficult. When you arrived did you learn how to drive from your dad?

R: You know I drive but I was a little bad! I can't, I can't do it. I'm jealous of people who have a car and drive but I can't risk it!

I: I don't blame you!

R: Yeah, I think my dad too, he never drove.

I: Really?

R: Yeah for 35 years, yeah my mother, my stepmother would give him the keys and said "go! You have to drive!" he would try but he could never drive it! *laughter* yeah.

I: Did you husband learn to drive when he moved here with you?

R: No my husband is actually not here.

I: Oh not here?

R: No. Not here. He's in Africa. After my citizenship where my husband is gonna come. Because I have a green card now.

I: Oh ok. Um... When you were learning English, did you pursue any education, training, classes, or did you pick it up...

R: Just from people! Yeah, I never go school. Like that. Yeah.

I: What role did your family have in the decision of you coming to work here? Does your daughter come here for school?

R: She goes school here. Yeah. My husband he helped me so much, then my green card came in, he meant me to work like regular working.

I: What kind of jobs does your spouse have, in Africa, does he work there?

R: No. He's not working.

I: Do you mind if I ask some questions about marriage?

R: Sure

I: In your culture, how are women viewed, as the typical role, both in Africa, and I would say the American culture? That you've kind of experienced?

[Translator: What do they expect from a wife? In Algeria?]

R: In Algeria? You respect so much. Husband you have to respect. Anything you have to do anything a husband told you, you don't say no. You have to say yes. You know, because in Islam it's husband. You have to respect your husband.

[Translator: Is it different here?]

R: Here it's a bit different. Here you can control yourself. It's freedom.

I: How are some ways that you balance your faith and the American identity?

R: There's really no difference.

I: How did your religious and ethnic upbringing contribute to who you are today?

R: Islam it helped so much. You have to pray, You have to ask, you have to accept you know...

[Translator: It's strength.]

R: Strength.

I: What does marriage mean to you?

R: Marriage, sometime we said, it's good to finish your religion.

[Translator: She means it completes your religion. Because it keeps you away from doing any sin.]

R: Something bad, you know, you can be good.

I: What factors play into the role of marriage? For example, some characteristics that you might look for in a husband? What would you say to your daughter, if she's looking for a husband?

R: No, my daughter is a bit different. Not like me! So if she love him, she can see him and come ask her, she said "mom, I love him, I want to marry him." It's a choice. It's HER choice. If I said this is my choice it's not gonna work. No. Here, it's not gonna work.

I: When you were married, what were some of the characteristics your parents looked for in a husband? For example, nationality, was close by, things like that?

[Translator: How your parents pick your husband?]

R: They pick? He come ask, so they said you're going to marry this husband. You can't say no to parent, you have to respect your parent. If your parent say "this man is good for you" you never say no.

[Translator: What did your parent look for?]

R: Looked for good muslim, good, you know, good person. And that's it! Good religion, religion is very important. Because you have this stuff, very good man. He take care of you.

I: Would you move because of marriage or relocate? Is that something you ever had to consider? If he was from somewhere farther away, would you go with him? Or would he come stay with you?

R: No, I'm here, he wait for me. He is really patient. You know how many years? Almost 18 years!

I: That's gotta be difficult living so far away. It must be really hard.

R: Yeah.

I: Do you ever get to see him?

R: Yeah every year I visit, him and my two kids. My son is married. It's okay. Just like I stay with my daughter here. Yeah.

I: Would you tell me a little bit about your wedding and some of the ceremonies?

R: The wedding, it like you never meet him, you never see him, it's a little bit difficult. Then little by little he's your husband. You have to love him, you know.

I: The love grows?

R: Yeah you have to. Because it's your husband now.

I: How did you feel when you were waiting to meet him that day?

R: The first day? It's a bit difficult you know.

I: You were scared? Were you pleasantly surprised when you saw him the first time? Was he handsome?

R: No I saw him first time when he come and asked.

[Translator; did you like him?]

R: You know, after my kids I say he's dad of my kids. You have to love him because he's dad your kids. You have to respect him. If you respect him you love him more.

I: Can you tell me a little about the ceremonies? I know my professor that organized the interview said there were multiple parties?

R: Yeah yeah yeah , it's 3 days. Yeah it's a Henna, a friends party, and then a marriage. Big wedding.

I: How would you say the ceremonies are similar or different... was your daughter married here?

R: Yeah it's a bit different. Oh my god, big big difference. ...In Algeria, my country, they ask if she is a virgin, you wait. It's very important that the girl is a virgin. Very important. If you don't have a virgin, a husband, he won't accept you. Here it's different my daughter, she's married, she take him hotel they don't care, it's different here.

I: Were your parents very protective?

R: Yeah,

[Translator: That's why she's very protective also of her daughter.]

I: How open are your parents when it comes to marriage outside the religious group? I know when you were growing up, was there an option to marry outside your faith?

[Translator: Could you marry a non-muslim, over there?]

R: No, no.. you can't. you can't. Women she can't. Man he can, because he can ask her to become an Islam, but a husband, no.

[Translator: Basically, because the kids take the religion of the father.]

I: Ok

[Translator: So that's why a man can marry a Christian woman and she can keep her faith. Or a jewish woman. She can keep her faith but the kids will be raised Muslim]

I: Would you say, I don't want to say tradition, but that part of the culture, is that different here?

[Translator: no it's the same because it's based on the religion]

R: Same same, it's not different no, it's same.

I: Would you consider marrying a person younger than you..

R: Yeah my husband is younger.

I: Oh he is younger, okay.

R: Two years.

I: Two years younger okay. Ok well that answers that. How about someone who is older than you? Is there...

R: It's ok, it's really not that different. It's same. You know.

I: When it comes to your marriage, who makes the most decisions? And I know your husband is still in Algeria, even examples of your mom and dad?

R: My grandma. Not my mom not my dad. My grandma. She's a Christian, she lives in Paris, my dad he live here. After my marriage I have baby, my dad come visit me. So my grandma was the main decision maker.

I: This is an interesting question, especially since you have a daughter, now what do you think about dating?

[Translator: Would you allow her to go out with men?]

R: No! This is why I have big difficulty! Big difficulty! No this is why sometimes we have fighting, he said "it's my wife, I have to take her out" I say no after marriage, after marriage. Now she married now, go. Now my daughter says mom your married go ask your husband. Because she's you know, her mother everything.

I: How is marriage in America different from your parent's way of marriage? Um, we talked about arranged marriage, we talked about the roles of mother and father, do you think it's very difficult, just the dynamics?

[Translator: Do you think man and woman here is different from there?]

R: Yes, big difference. Man back there said you work, me home, here yes. Is big different husband and wife here.

I: This is a good one. Let's discuss if that's okay with you a little bit about parenting. In what ways, if any, do you think boys should be raised differently than girls? You have two sons and a daughter, do you see that you are parenting different between them?

R: Same. My boys and my girl are same. I don't have any different, yeah.

I: Um when you first came here to the US, how were you involved in your children's education?

R: Here. Yeah.

[Translator: She was very involved]

R: Too involved!

Laughter

R: I go inside the class, ask the teacher what's she doing for homework, I said I'm gonna graduate not my daughter!

I: Sounds like my mom! What was your reasoning or decision in sending them to this school? Is this where you came for worship as well?

R: Yeah

[Translator: Yeah, she graduated from here]

I: What were some of the issues you faced when raising your children and do you think your husband also faced those issues?

R: Sometimes she said "I don't like my life. Why mom? I hate my life" Why, you are healthy, happy, with me everything I give you? I don't accept it.

I: So the culture shock?

R: I'm like dad and mom here. I'm scared to go out. But now she is married and has child and says thanks mom. Because I was stupid and little but now she has child and know. I'm right!

I: Did you have any particular fears for your daughter that you might not have worried about with your sons?

R: Yes, more protective of my daughter more than my sons. Because my son, he don't grow up with me he grow up with family, her dad. He's, it's ok. Everything is ok with my boys.

I: What kind of husband did you want for your daughter?

R: Just good man. Good muslim. I don't need more money, too much money or anything. Just be a good man for my daughter. That's it. You know? If he's a good muslim I'm sure he's gonna be good family. She's a teacher!

I: Oh excellent! How would you call your identity? When you identify yourself, do you look at yourself through the eyes of religion first or culture first?

R: I think religion. That for sure. Yeah.

I: What language do you speak at home?

R: Arabic.

I: Did your daughter learn Arabic too?

R: Yeah because she has friends here, She speaks Arabic very well. English and Arabic. I speak French and Arabic, my English is not really... good.

I: No it's good! It's very good!

R: Thank you.

I: How would you describe your religious life? Do you attend the mosque regularly?

R: What do you mean?

[Translator: Yes she does, all the time.]

R: This is my second house

I: In what way do you participate in the community activities? I know you work here, that's a pretty big activity.

R: It's like my family here. If I go somewhere I missed all over. I miss them all of them. I can't wait to see my family, you know.

I: How would you describe your political participation here in the US?

R: Like what?

I: Do you vote for the presidential elections?

R: Sure, yeah. Yeah. Yes.

I: Mayors, things like that... excellent.

I: When you look at candidates, what for you is an ideal candidate?

R: I want the country to be good. Anything good.

I: Have you been involved in any community..

R: Not yet. Not yet. Because I'm not a citizen. Maybe next year.

I: Do you read the daily newspaper, watch television news?

R: I like news. I like to see what is going on in Wisconsin. I like news.

I: What are your connections to the homeland? Do you often return to the places you grew up in?

R: Yeah, when I go visit my grandma, I visit family.

I: Where do you like to go when you go back home? Is there anything specific that is a favorite to you? A restaurant, a store?

R: I think with woman back home, she doesn't go to restaurant or store, she stays with family. Cooking. Everyday you know someone to eat there. Not restaurant.

I: Do you have any other family members back home, I know your husband, your two sons...

R: Yeah all my family, husbands family, all the family.

I: Um, lets see... Were you in the United States during the gulf war?

R: No.

I: Do you mind if I ask you about some cultural clothing? Do you have any traditional or cultural clothing that you wear regularly? The baya, sari?

R: Baya, on Friday because there is special prayer. On weekday I like to wear it like this because it's easier to work.

I: Do you wear them regularly, I know you said every Friday or so...

R: Yeah or if there's a party.

I: Um, how do you feel when you wear them?

R: I feel like very comfort very comfortable.

I: What does the traditional cultural clothing mean to you? How is it significant?

[Translator: Why do you like to wear the Baya?]

R: Because I'm feeling like, a Muslim, you know? Because if I go outside I'm feeling like Muslim. Feel different big difference.

I: What role does religion play in your clothing?

R: Modesty.

I: Who influenced you to continue wearing traditional clothing? Was it fellow community members?

R: Actually when I come back home I don't wear it. I see more here. More and more. Because I came in, I'm muslim, I pray, I don't know I love it so much. Because all my friends I don't wear a hijab back home.

I: What does the hijab what feeling when you put it on what feeling do you get?

R: I feel good! Like if I don't put it on, I don't know... I don't have... clothes? If you don't cover your head, you feeling like you don't have clothes!

I: Did your mother wear traditional dresses?

R: No.

I: Where do you get your dresses from?

R: From anywhere, a gift, you buy it...

[Translator: We have a lot of stores now]

R: From back home. I buy a lot of gift too back home.

I: Did you pass on any of your clothing down to your daughter?

R: Yeah, when my daughter was 12 years old she said "mom I want to wear hijab because everyone is wearing it" I said hijab is not joke, if you do it, it's forever. Not for two days or three days you take it off. She said "mom please" She went. I didn't force her to do it! So she do hijab with her friends here.

I: I have just a couple more questions to ask if you have a few more minutes.

[Translator: She's almost done]

I: Yeah sorry! I just have 5 more questions.

I: How did you feel, or how did your experience living here change after 9/11? Did you feel any change in the culture here?

R: Yeah during that time I feel very bad for this that's true that's too bad you know. That's too bad!

[Translator: Did your life change after 9/11]

R: I think, it's ok. We stay like before. Nothing changed. Everybody,

[Translator: Everybody she mixes with are still very nice to her]

I: Did your interactions with non muslim friends, neighbors, teachers, did that change?

R: No, I think I'd say it's same. They are friend. If I have a neighbor that is non muslim, I love him like I love other muslim people. It's nothing different, You know. For me it's nothing. That's their country and my country and that's it.

I: When times do get difficult, where do you find your support?

R: From Allah. From god.

I: Alright, I've got just two more three more questions. Is there anything else about your history or culture that you would like to share? The interview is going to go into a database for other Muslim women to hear some of the stories.

R: If I told you my life you are gonna do a book on my life.

[Translator: Just anything you want to share]

I: You know, it's I grew up with my mom, then my grandma she take me from my mom, then I live a little bit with my grandma, you know my life is like this. I didn't live with my dad and my mom.

[Translator: She didn't have a typical childhood]

R: Yeah, I'm good, I'm good, that's why I my daughter I don't like her to go anywhere.

I: Um, if you could give advice to young women like your daughter, what piece of advice do you think you'd give them?

R: Any young women? I don't know, be good, don't do something stupid, I see girls here, I'm like mother, if you taught them not to do something and they don't it's good. That's it!

I: Excellent. Well that'll do it, that's the whole interview. Thank you again, so much. Thank you so much for sharing your time with me.

R: It's good it's good.

I: If you have any photographs, documents, anything that you want to share, we are going to have an exhibit at the Haggarty art museum at Marquette University. I'll follow up with contact information to you about that.

R: Okay okay it's no problem *laughter*

I: If you do think of anything, this is the permission sheet, and just the address to send it to. Or email. It's up to you.

R: yeah yeah yeah

I: Is it okay if I have any further questions can I call you sometime?

R: Oh yeah sure!

I: Ok excellent!

R: You have my number right?

I: I do have your number in my phone. If you have anyone else who is interested in being interviewed or participating, just let us know.

R: So for you, you're done right?

I: Yes, yes. Alrighty let me just pause this and we're good. I think we got it. Thank you so much!

R: Yeah no problem. Thanks good luck! No problem anytime!