

Oral History Project Interview

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

Number of Interview: RJ 4.00

Date: August 30th, 2015

Name: Anonymous

Gender: Female

Country of Origin: Palestine

Year of Immigration: Born in U.S.

Abstract: The interviewee identifies herself as a Muslim Palestinian American. Sarah (name changed for confidentiality reasons) was born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Sarah attended a private Islamic school in the greater Milwaukee area throughout her elementary, middle, and high school years and believes her family and community have a big influence in her daily life. The two most important factors that shape her life are religion and culture as well, and she identifies greatly with the two, but emphasizes the importance of religion more in living a successful life. In terms of culture, Sarah sticks to some cultural aspects such as: speaking the Arabic language at home and wearing traditional cultural clothing at cultural events and special occasions, which helps her connect with her homeland and the values instilled in her while growing up as a child. Sarah is a college student, studying biology and would like to further her studies, after she graduates with a bachelors, and continue on the path of medicine. Sarah is currently not married and would like to finish her studies before considering marriage.

Key Terms: Religion, School, Family, Culture

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

I: This interview is taking place Monday, August 30th, 2015. I'd like to start the interview by asking some general questions about your background. What is your name, age, and your level of education?

R: My name is Sireen. I am 19 years old and I am a college undergraduate student.

I: Uh where do you go to school?

R: I go to the University of Wisconsin – Waukesha.

I: When you were growing up where did you go to school public schools, community schools, such as Salam School or private or religious schools?

R: I went to a community school such as Salam School.

I: For how long?

R: I went there for... 9 years.

I: Tell me about places and buildings where you spent a lot of time during your childhood.

R: A lot of them were in school, cause it was also a community center, at home, and the YMCA.

I: Tell me more about your home, school, or some such building you remember fondly. Describe the various rooms – who lived there, who shared these spaces, what activities happened here?

R: Um I live in a home with three bedrooms, which I have five siblings, which share the space. I have a big family and that's who I remember my childhood with.

I: Did you serve in the U.S. military? If so, when?

R: No I have not served in the U.S. military.

I: Are you currently employed, which includes working outside the home? If so, what's your job?

R: I'm currently employed at St. Luke's Hospital as nursing assistant.

I: Are you married?

R: No I am not.

I: The next questions are about your culture and how you define yourself. How do you define or identify yourself?

R: I identify myself as a Muslim Palestinian American.

I: Do you feel the way you identify yourself changes with where you are and the place where you are?

R: No.

I: How so?

R: It really doesn't change, it just depends on the personality and that usually is all that matters.

I: Can you list some places where you feel you best most successfully express your identity?

R: Um in my community, in the Islamic society, and at home.

I: Are there any traditions of your religion or culture that you practice?

R: Yes the traditions, my religion, prayer, following the religion, and then um the Palestinian traditions with the clothing, also the Islamic clothing and all that and wearing the hijab.

I: Do you use food recipes that you learn from your parents or grandparents?

R: Yes I do.

I: Do you follow any food restrictions?

R: Yes, no pork, drinking, and all those restrictions we have with the Islamic faith.

I: What is your favorite food?

R: Warek dawali.

I: Uh what's it like finding the necessary ingredients here?

R: Um most of the ingredients that we get are the spices we get from overseas, but it's also easy to find them here, but they are not as good.

I: How would you describe your religious life?

R:

I: Who mostly does the cooking in your household?

R: My mom does.

I: Can you describe your kitchen and describe how it's different from other kitchens?

R: It's technically the same, with the counters, fridge, microwave – it's just the food that's cooked, you need the bigger pots and pans.

I: What language or languages do you speak?

R: I speak Arabic and English.

I: What are your connections with your parents or grandparents homeland?

R: I go overseas usually during the summer break and that's where we get to see how our parents and grandparents lived.

I: How would you describe your political participation in the U.S.?

R: I am not a big fan of politics at all.

I: Were you in the United States on September 11th, 2001?

R: Yes.

I: How did you feel at the time of 9/11 and the days or months that followed?

R: I don't remember the exact day of 9/11, but I remember like the year after that, my parents were um scared to usually let us out of the house on the day of 9/11 because there were a lot of attacks towards Muslims and a lot of the Islamophobia going around.

I: Uh since 9/11, in what ways if any, has your life or interactions with others changed, as you got older?

R: It really didn't change much, it's just always – I feel like it depends on the person, it depends on people – on how you treat people, if you treat them good, people will always treat you good back.

I: Thank you for sharing your experiences. I would like to switch topics to marriage. Culture and religion are intertwined. What are some ways in which you balance faith and the American identity?

R: Ummm.... Just, I usually do the stuff as an American person would and then combine it with the faith on the side.

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

R: Um it has a lot to do with what I am and what I believe in, um my parents raised me to believe in certain things and do certain things and I follow what I was taught.

I: What does marriage mean to you?

R: Um marriage is a religious duty, which is always um put as a safe guard for a person um it and it's also a social necessity.

I: What factors do you think play a role in marriage?

R: Umm... (Pause) next question please.

I: What are the first characteristics you look for in a husband? So in the future when you get married. Would like homeland, nationality, village, um Arab or Muslim, play a role?

R: Um of course Muslim would be the most important thing and somebody that has faith and somebody that um will bring security and faith into the home.

I: Would education, income, or social class contribute to your decision or your parent's decision?

R: Um not really, it just depends on who the person is, if they're good. That's all that matters.

I: Would you move because of marriage or relocate because of marriage?

R: Um yeah, if it's somewhere nice, why not. (Both laugh)

I: What factor might play role in your decision to relocate besides it being nice? Would family and relatives nearby play a role?

R: Um it would be nice to stay around family, but if his family is living somewhere else, that would play a big factor into relocation.

I: What marriage ceremonies and rituals are most important to you? Like from... how you were raised? Is there anything like from your family that they do something when people get married or it's nothing?

R: It's just the first the engagement, the henna, and then the wedding. That's the most important stuff in our culture.

I: Uh how open are your parents – how open are your parents when it comes to marriage outside the religious group or national group?

R: They are very strict about that.

I: So why would it be a problem?

R: With the religious, just because it's prohibited in Islam for a woman to get married to somebody outside of the religion, but the nationality I'm not sure.

I: Who among your parents would have a hard time when it comes to marriage outside of the national community? So like, if they were not Palestinian let's say.

R: I think both of them would.

I: What is your current major?

R: I'm majoring in biology.

I: Uh why did you choose it?

R: I love science and I chose biology since I want to go into medicine and it's a good way to prepare for the MCAT and all that.

I: Uh would this decision impact the possibility of having children in the future?

R: Yes it would cause umm there's a lot of years to put into education for um medicine.

I: Um is there a major or a career that you would not choose because it might reduce your marriage opportunities?

R: No.

I: Interesting. Would you consider marrying a person older than you? If so, how many years should – how many years should it be between you and your partner?

R: Umm it should be at least – the most six, seven years.

I: Why so?

R: I don't know. I feel like somebody would be kind of out of my generation if they are older than that.

I: Would you consider marrying a person born and raised outside of the U.S.? Like for instance, not a Palestinian American, but just solely Palestinian, like from Palestine.

R: It just depends on the person umm and their goals in life are and everything.

I: When it comes to marriage, who have played – who would play the major role in the decision making?

R: First of all it would be my final decision, but my dad – my parents would have um the bigger decision into it too.

I: So the final word would be both of your parents? Or would it be your mother or father? Or both?

R: It would be both.

I: What do you think about dating?

R: It is prohibited, so I don't go through that route.

I: Uh do you think the Internet and Facebook and or social media has made it easier for Arab and Muslim Americans to meet their future spouse?

R: I feel like a lot of Arab and Muslim people have been using Facebook and social media to find one another, but I don't believe in that.

I: Do you think communication types such as cell phones, texting and Skype made it easy for males and females to get to know each other before making the decision to marry?

R: Yes it does cause um when the first thing we do the qaryat el fatiha, the guy and girl can talk to each other and they get to know each other more before doing the marriage contract, which is helpful to find out information that you did not find out the first time you sat down the first – with the person.

I: Do you think community events, centers, weddings, are where people tend to see potential spouse and proceed from there?

R: Um a lot of those events do – are good places where people do find one another.

I: What things made – make marriage in America different than like for instance your parent's way of marriage overseas? What differences would it be than having it overseas or having it here or just like the time or the generational differences?

R: (No comment)

I: Would you think in a family of more than one daughter, marriage restrictions and processes would differ from the oldest daughter to the youngest daughter?

R: Um no they do not cause um a lot of people these days it doesn't really matter which order their daughters get married, even back then the same thing, it doesn't matter which order.

I: Now let's discuss parenting. In what ways if any do you think boys should be raised differently from girls?

R: Um especially in the Arab community, um boys should be raised to be more helpful. It's usually the girls more who do all the cooking and the cleaning and the boys don't really learn more of the cleanliness and helping out, so that would be a really good way to change.

I: The next questions are about your life growing up. What aspects of your parent's homeland and culture did they keep as you were growing up?

R: What do you mean by that question?

I: Um what cult – like what from the Palestinian culture have you kept when you were growing up here in America? Since it's very intertwined between like the American and the Palestinian culture and some – and being Muslim at the same time, so...

R: Well mostly the language, we – my parents like us to speak Arabic at home and then there's the food, which we keep from the culturally aspect, the clothing, and um there's um set up in the house with like different Arabic um decorations and all that in the house over here.

I: What languages do your parents speak?

R: They speak Arabic mostly, and they also speak English.

I: So the language spoken at home, it's just Arabic – not English?

R: Mainly Arabic, but we do speak – we do speak English to each, but it's mostly Arabic.

I: Did your parents encourage you to work in their stores or elsewhere? Or did they discourage you from working?

R: Um my parents did not encourage me to work with them in their stores, they actually encouraged me to work elsewhere instead.

I: Uh when did you first start to drive?

R: I started driving um at the age of 16 and I had my own car by then too.

I: How did your parents feel about your driving? Were they encouraging or discouraging?

R: They were really encouraging me into driving.

I: Uh did this play into helping your family? Since they are encouraging, like helping out at home.

R: Um it did, it helped out, like I was able to get more stuff, pick my brothers up whenever they needed me to, and all that, so it helped all together.

I: How would you describe your parent's involvement in your education? For instance, helping with homework, being part of parent/teacher organizations, and helping with after school activities.

R: Um my parents would help out with some of the homework, but um, and they usually use to go to the activities at school, but other than that they weren't in the organizations.

I: Uh in what ways, if any, did your parents influence your choice of a career or major in college?

R: Um my parents really didn't influence my career in college, they just encouraged whatever I decided to do. They were just very supportive.

I: Uh in school or college, are you involved in a religious or cultural organizations?

R: No I am not.

I: If – in what ways, if any, did religion or culture influence your choice of friends?

R: Well I went to Salam School, so that had a lot of um influence on my friends, who they are. Since I went there from childhood to the end of high school, the friends I made there are the ones that I kept.

I: When choosing your marriage partner, what's the importance of religion or culture?

R: It's very important.

I: What's most important?

R: Uh... religion.

I: The next questions are about your parents. Who are your parents?

R: My parents? Do you want the names?

I: You can answer it, however you'd like.

R: My parents are Tahseen and Samira. They were both married – they were both born overseas, my mom was born in Jordan and my dad was born in Palestine and they lived there, until they were in their 20s, after they got married they came over here to the states.

I: Uh what's their current status? Still working or retired?

R: Uh my dad is still working, my mom does not work.

I: So you said that they immigrated, about when did they immigrate? Or you don't remember?

R: Uh they came here, my dad came here about 25 years ago, and my mom came here after they got married, which was 17 years ago.

I: What is their level of education?

R: Um for both of them, some high school.

I: How do you think they define themselves?

R: Can we skip this question?

I: Sure. (Laughs) Did they use to mention their homeland?

R: Yes, they mention their homeland all the time.

I: In what ways?

R: They mention it when they're talking about politics or when they are talking about back in the day or all – any of that.

I: Okay, thank you. The next questions are about your grandparents. Did any of your grandparents immigrate to the U.S.?

R: I believe that both of them came here, they went back and forth between Palestine and the United States.

I: Do you remember the names of your grandparents that immigrated to the U.S.?

R: Yes.

I: What are their names?

R: Ayoush and Aziz.

I: Uh from where did they immigrate and when?

R: From Palestine and probably in the 1980s.

I: What was the reason for their immigration?

R: I really do not know.

I: Did they immigrate alone, or with other members of the family?

R: They use to come with their kids.

I: Do you know where they settled? Like in Milwaukee or...

R: They use to come to the Milwaukee area.

I: Next I'd like to switch topics and discuss cultural clothing. Do you have any traditional or cultural clothing for example a thobe, dishdasha, abaya?

R: Um yes I have a lot of theyab, which we wear to the weddings or henna parties that occur here.

I: Uh do you remember how many you have? Or about how many you have?

R: As of now, I'll say I have about 4 or 5.

I: When do you wear them?

R: Um to any events that has to do with culture or to the wedding events like to hennas.

I: How do you feel when you wear them?

R: It just brings out my um Palestinian side out more and they actually look really nice and beautiful, so.

I: What does the traditional or cultural clothing mean to you? Why are they important?

R: They show who you really are and where you come from and it shows your identity as a Palestinian.

I: Who influenced you to continue to wear the traditional and cultural clothing?

R: My parents and the community that I live in.

I: Did your mother wear the traditional dresses or does she wear the traditional dresses?

R: Yes she wears them all the time, um she either wears the abayas and she also wears thobes.

I: Uh did she pass any dresses down to you?

R: I – actually she did pass one down to me and I made it into my own different style, but like the um embroidery on it, I kept it the same.

I: Have you purchased any, any on your own?

R: Yes I did

I: Do they look like the dresses your mother wore or are they more modernized?

R: Umm the ones that I got are more modernized.

I: Where do you get your dresses from?

R: Um when I travel down back to Palestine, I usually buy some and you could also buy some here. You can get them from the Arabic clothing stores over here.

I: Would you pass them to your children?

R: Yes, especially the handmade ones.

I: Why would you pass them on?

R: Because you know they have that more special meaning to them, like you picked out what kind of designs you want and it's just more special.

I: Is there anything else about your history that you would like to tell me?

R: Uh compared to the American lifestyles, uh us Arab have bigger families, like I come from a huge family and my grandparents are – my dad has nine brothers and four sisters and that has a big influence, it's cause most of the people you hang around are your cousins and your cousins children and your uncles, like most of them immigrated to the United States, so most of our

family is – keeps on getting bigger and bigger and bigger. We can make a whole city if we want to.

I: Wow, interesting. Are there any particular services or resources that you think the Arab and Muslim Women's Research Institute should provide to meet the needs of communities to achieve? Do you believe there's anything?

R: Do you mean like having more mosques and like um...

I: Um... I guess. Or is there anything like organizations to help Arab and Muslim Women or just um counseling centers or anything really.

R: I feel like a lot of Muslim women that immigrate from overseas do not know the English language well and um I think we need more services for them to learn the language better, so that they won't have that boundary of not speaking the language and like being embarrassed to speak the language because they know so little of it, just getting the education would be really helpful for them.

I: Do you have any other family or friends you think we should interview?

R: I can give you a list of people.

I: Thank you very much, I appreciate that. Lastly, do you have any letters, old photographs, notes, or any kind of documents (awards, certificates, diplomas) that you think will help us understand your family history?

R: No.

I: Thank you for your time.

R: You're welcome.