



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: SW2

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

Date: June 1, 2021

Year of Birth: 1983

Gender: Female

Country of Origin: Saudi Arabia

Year of Immigration: 2006

Current State in which respondent resides: Wisconsin

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 interviewee pointed out the way that East/West comparisons came up in stark contrast during the pandemic. She also pointed out their reliance on internet/ apps for connectivity and that many more people were struggling with mental health and loneliness. The interviewee shared their experiences with the anti-racism activism in the Muslim community and pointed out the lack of media attention to Muslim issues and society. The interviewee found that her faith took an internal turn where she spent a lot of time in solitude and isolated prayer. The interviewee has significant concerns for a continuance and the aftermath of the COVID pandemic.

Key Themes: Increased virtual parallel community experiences due to COVID. Social isolation. Physical effects of isolation – weight gain, overeating. Reliance on apps and voice technology for anxiety and worry. Compounded isolation of being Saudi immigrant and the quarantine. Stark contrasts in how the non-Muslim faith community disregarded the Muslim response to

COVID. Many opportune moments for internal and inward reflection and worship. Stocking up on the precious time to self-reflect.

Edited Transcript

I: So just some background on the project. The idea is to document the impact of COVID on Muslim daily experience, especially the fulfillment of religious obligations and communal events such as Congregation prayer on Fridays and Ramadan. Also, to discover Muslim communities, engagement with social justice issues and to empower and connect Muslim communities by creating a digital archive on Muslim experiences and perspectives, and lastly to share these research findings in a variety of modalities in public venues. So, I'm working with AAMRRI, which is the Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute, and this is directed by a professor in at my school. So, all of this is going to be really helpful for us, so we'll just start the first section which is just with some demographic and background information. Let me turn on transcripts, live captions. Great. They should be appearing. Now. Let me just see, perfect, so that the transcript is appearing now. So first, what is your name?

R: [Respondent]

I: Thank you, and your age?

R: I'm 38.

I: And where were you born and when did you move to the US?

R: I was born in Saudi Arabia, and I moved to the US [around 2005].

I: Perfect. And how do you identify yourself in terms of your national background as an American? As a Saudi American or as a Saudi national?

R: So, I definitely think of my Saudi identity as separate from being an American. That's predominantly because there isn't like a substantial diaspora. There isn't a Saudi diaspora in America, at least, not an official one. And therefore, if I were to think about my American identity, I would say that I identify predominantly as an Arab American. Despite that being

predominantly Christian Arabs, which is not the case with me– I'm not Christian, so I think I kind of toggle between Arab American and Middle Eastern-American because I do find similarities in my experience or even my identity with non-ethnically Arab populations of the Middle East.

I: That's very interesting and informative. Thank you. The next question is about the education that you've received. What is the highest level of education that you've completed or are in the process of completing?

R: A doctoral degree.

I: Excellent and your marital status?

R: I'm married.

I: And including yourself. How many adults live in your household?

R: Two.

I: And how many children 18 years or younger live in your household?

R: None.

I: So, the next set of questions focuses on the impact of COVID on your personal relationships, financial well-being, and physical and emotional health. So, I would just like to give you a few minutes to think about your experiences with these changes that COVID has made in our lives and the changes that have been made to reduce the spread of COVID and how those changes have affected you. So, how has the outbreak of COVID virus affected you personally in terms of your financial, social, and health situations?

R: Well, I think the most substantial effect that it had on my health, my emotional health or my mental health was being deprived of my graduation ceremony. That was definitely something that, I mean like, I immediately felt the loss of, as we were quarantining around March, especially that I was graduating that May. So, it was at the very beginning of it, and everything was cancelled. I wasn't necessarily impacted by the work from home experience initially, simply

because my job had, like imposed a very strenuous and long daily commute on me and I welcomed the quarantining as you know, an opportunity to work from home, something that wasn't provided for my caliber of professionals in the organization that I was working with. And. In terms of the impact that it had on me spiritually, it was, it was very rough breaking fast in Ramadan alone, basically. You know, just within our household it was very difficult. It's not necessarily an experience that is very like, it's not a stark difference from fasting altogether in the US. However, you did have the option, when you felt like you missed that communal aspect, to just go one day or a few days in the month and break fast in, like a local mosque. Obviously, none of that was available, and then the area where I was living when they had like Eid festive, festivities. The activities were mostly around kids, and literally just like driving by and receiving like an Eid kit which was, like you know, a meal with some sweets and what not. And to me that wasn't necessarily, you know— it didn't cater to my needs. I mean, I think it was very proactive of the mosque to do that for a lot of the congregants, but I wasn't someone with children, so I didn't feel like there was any joy delivered from a you know, drive through experience.

I: Right, so it sounds like missing your graduation impacted your social network and, and celebrations of your achievements and also that having Ramadan without the support network of the congregation and community was also a new and perhaps alienating experience?

R: Yeah, yeah, because Ramadan is probably the single most communal manifestation of Islamic rituals in the US. It's like a spiritual retreat for everyone, and to have had that limited was, I mean, I wouldn't say that it was excruciating— again as someone that spent many Ramadan's in the Middle East, or back home, I wouldn't say that Ramadan here in the US is even as vibrant as I'm used to it. But I feel like there was this like somewhat dim light and now it was completely extinguished by COVID.

I: And did you have significant financial impacts? It sounds like you still were able to maintain your job and shift to working from home, but were there any other financial impacts that are notable?

R: No, no. I mean, I, I did end up losing that job, but it wasn't necessarily directly tied to the initial stage of COVID, it was towards the end when I needed to quarantine out of state.

I: I see. Thank you. The next question is about how the outbreak of the virus has affected the way that you conduct yourself with people close to you, including friends or family that live in other countries.

R: So, it enabled me actually to spend much longer time on, you know, on Zoom, on FaceTime, Google Duo with friends all over the US and also back in the Middle East, because everyone was quarantining, and all of the sudden people were forced to have this ample amount of time. And I felt like it increased my connectivity with other people, but also, I'm someone that is a very social person. I tend to study in cafes and public libraries and sometimes just sit outside of, I don't know a smoothie shop or it's just like you know, to watch people like whizzing by— I obviously didn't have that and therefore we created a lot of virtual parallel experiences. So, we had a few weekends of happy hour with coworkers. I had other types of meetings with friends from my Graduate School, so I would say the café/library experience took a whole new form, you know, in virtual terms or reality.

I: Great, thank you. Since the virus outbreak, what are your primary ways of communicating with friends and family who are not in your household?

R: So, initially I would say the first six months it was strictly virtual and then when it was a little bit safer to meet, I met a couple times a few times actually with a few friends in a park; we tried to distance, even outdoors.

I: How lovely. Yeah, thank you for sharing.

R: Sure.

I: If you're using any new ways of communicating with others or connecting with others with friends or family, coworkers, students, or clients, please describe any challenges or unexpected benefits you have experienced.

R: I wouldn't say there was a lot of challenge. The only challenge I think was coordinating with, you know, such huge time zone differences, but aside from that, it was natural. Again, I feel like in a way, someone who has been living far from home friends and family, I have been accustomed to this whole virtual reality or virtual hangouts long before the pandemic, if

anything, I started feeling like people in the US were generally more aware of that reality being a non-pandemic related reality for many, you know immigrants or international students so I wouldn't say it was anything new. It was just like, interesting seeing this society finally grasp that. You know?

I: Right, I see that makes sense, and because of your background and technological abilities, adapting to the technological features was not really challenging for you because you had experience with them already.

R: Absolutely, absolutely.

I: Super. During the pandemic, were there any apps that you have begun to use or blogs that you have begun to read or listen to? If so, would you please share their names with us?

R: I definitely started listening to more audiobooks, so Audible was definitely, you know, a platform to spend a lot of the time that I had on hand, and I would say, I wouldn't say that there isn't necessarily a new app. I'm someone that's definitely heavily app and Internet dependent even before the pandemic. I would freak out if I didn't have Internet service for two hours— I literally will freak out. But I would say that it enabled me to spend longer periods of time with those apps so audible is one. I was also using PDF2 voice reader application— I forgot what it was called. It was voice dream or dream voice. Something like that. Yeah, it's Voice Dream. I was listening to that a lot, definitely for my school readings. I was using Google Duo a lot. Was it because now I was using it with friends, not only with family members, everything that was school related? I spent a lot of time on Zoom so I would say those are predominantly what I have been relying on.

I: Great. And could you share with us the employment that you had before? So, before the COVID outbreak, were you employed, and if so, please specify your occupation and the number of hours per week you worked.

R: So, I was working full time, so forty hours a week and I was working as a translator data curator. So, I was basically doing linguistic language services, if you wish, and also processing

data that had to do with Arabic.

I: Interesting, and in the last month on average, how many hours per week did you work? And I think the month that they are referring to and this is about April.

R: I definitely worked full time in April of last year.

I: Great, thank you. In what ways, if any, has the COVID-19 outbreak affected you or your family's financial well-being?

R: I wouldn't say that it did because I did have the option to work from home. My husband, however, did have a second job because he was working two part time jobs at that time, and he lost one of them because [the place had to shut down due to the quarantine and little business]. So, I wouldn't say it impacted me, but it definitely impacted my husband.

I: I see and what kind of help have you received? I imagine this refers to financial help.

R: Obviously, all of like everyone that lost their job during the pandemic depended on their unemployment services, so there wasn't anything out of like the norm.

I: And do you have any current needs at this time?

R: No, I wouldn't say that.

I: And what kind of help have you given to others, including friends, family living in the US or other countries? I imagine this also refers to financial needs.

R: Yeah, I did not contribute financially. I wasn't asked to contribute financially to anyone. And so, if it's only about if this question is strictly about financial help, then the answer is I didn't provide any financial help to anyone. If it means if it, you know if it includes other forms of help, then I definitely spent a lot of time processing a lot of anxiety, a lot of loneliness that many of my friends, especially that were single friends or people that are living away from home needed. I felt like I was definitely receiving more phone calls and texting back and forth, then I typically did before the pandemic, despite being still a highly connected individual. I do have a wide circle of friends and I'm constantly communicating with them.

I: That is really helpful to hear. Thank you.

R: Yeah.

I: This question is about your physical or emotional health during the COVID crisis. In what ways has the COVID crisis affected your physical and emotional health, and what challenges have you faced?

R: It definitely impacted my physical health as to you know, much like many people that struggled with weight gain during the pandemic. It wasn't helpful for me at all in that sense. I would say as someone who was very— like I'm a typical Middle Eastern germaphobe, and that really, like the fear of every surface— you know because that was at the beginning, right? When you could catch it from, you know, every surface, just made it made it extremely uncomfortable for me to go outside. I also felt like that it was very much, it was much easier for me to adhere to the mask mandate, while other people and typically and sadly, who are outdoorsy people that completely disregarded that because they are out in the open. You know, and the world is like their running track. It was just very stress-inducing for me, so I would go out, I guess either for very quick sprint, but you know not as frequent, so I would say that the pandemic has definitely put me back in a very uncomfortable space of overeating, and not really exercising, you know? Or even getting any physical activity. So yeah, that was definitely a bad effect of the pandemic.

I: And were there any connections between this physical health effect and the emotional health effect or emotional health effects on their own?

R: Absolutely there was. There was a sense of gratification, I guess that came from cooking and baking and preparing all of these things and unlike on average days where you go to the office every day and, or go to class or whatever, you couldn't take those extra twenty or thirty cookies or whatever, you know any type of sweets, any types of food, leftover or even portioning it. I didn't mean leftover— like portioning what you make so that you can share it with friends and coworkers. I had that avenue completely— as you know, our culture is a culture that is very strict about wasting food, so you ended up cooking for the cooking process, but then having to consume what you cooked, you know which in some instances where you know high caloric intake because you didn't want that to go in the waste bin, basically, so that was a very weird

dynamic that it really— it took some adjusting, you know to know that no, I'm now cooking for two, there are no coworkers that I will be able to share these with there is, you know, so it was it was definitely a learning curve for me.

I: I also had the problem of extra muffins and cakes. Yes. Yeah, I feel this very closely. Thank you and most strategies have you used to cope with these challenges, physical challenges or emotional challenges.

R: I would listen a lot— I would listen to anything that I could listen to that brought me joy. Be it a book, or sonnets recited by some of my favorite voices. I would also listen to a lot of again, put on reciters that I really, really react beautifully to their voices and ways of their recitation. There were a lot of times where I spent just listening to a lecture on like Udemy or Lynda.com or even just use like some like you know, coloring books, whatever that gave me like an outlet. And usually, to me it was you know, working with my hands and just hearing pleasant things. Oh, and also there was this meditation app that I absolutely love because it also focuses on voices and is not necessarily just you know, the breathing and whatnot. And I absolutely love that app. I really relied heavily on, especially, I would say in the evening, and they do have a segment, I think that was like bedtime stories— but obviously for adults, so that was that was a very helpful app.

I: That's so interesting to hear. Thank you for sharing. The next section is about the impact of COVID on your religious practices and beliefs. How have you continued your religious traditions? For example, the Friday prayer, Ramadan, Eid, and other religious programs during the COVID pandemic. If there have been changes in what you do or how you do it, please discuss these.

R: I would say that I'm definitely more of — I'm more of, when it comes to worshipping, I'm more of the monk than I am a congregant, in general. I found that that isn't necessarily the case with a lot of you know, members of the Muslim community that I've encountered here in the US; there is this heavy reliance on Mosque and cultural centers to you know, evoke some kind of, like shared ritual. In Ramadan, that's definitely important because we have, like a non-mandatory but definitely much observed ritual of it's called Terawih, or the night prayer after the fifth prayer of the day— the mandatory prayers and those are usually done, you know, in larger groups. I

definitely missed that, however, again, just because there's a stark difference between the recitation abilities of prayer leaders or Imams here in the US in comparison to what I'm exposed to back home, I wouldn't say that there was something necessarily— how do I say this? Like, I wasn't necessarily missing on quality because I have been missing on quality since 2006 when it comes to the recitation and proficiency in the feeling. But, to have again, that very, you know, small avenue terminated altogether, definitely didn't have a good impact. You know it's just Ramadan, I mean Ramadan, pandemic or no, pandemic Ramadan in the US is a very lonely time, has always been a very lonely time for me. As I said, a lot of centers, a lot of communities rely on existing diaspora, and I was always a minority in these places, when I went to the Afghan mosque, when I went to the Pakistani mosque, when I went to the Indian mosque, when I went to the Egyptian mosque. You know that there was always this group that isn't me or my people. They were my people by ties of like, you know— a shared creed, a shared ritual, but I was never able to experience a Saudi Ramadan in the US, and that was the reality pandemic or no pandemic.

I: I see this is very interesting. Thank you for sharing. Since the outbreak, have you participated in any virtual religious activities?

R: There were a couple of religious talks that I attended. Again, for me, like accessing the YouTube channel, or the website, or the books of scholars that I would say are a little bit more seasoned, was a more rewarding option than just listening to something that was put together with the best of intentions for creating that, you know, congregation experience. But I would say that like it wasn't really substantial knowledge, it was just like being in a space of remembrance of, you know, a shared spiritual state and that was, you know, that had its own rewards as well.

I: Yes. So, this next question might have been answered already, but I'd like to ask your thoughts and feelings about practicing your religion virtually. What did you like or dislike about it?

R: I mean, what I disliked about it is the compounded isolation as I said, but also it wouldn't be fair to say that I didn't feel that sense of isolation even when I was participating again, because typically in many of these events I'm a group of one. But then, you know when you get to

coordinate with friends or other community members, and we do like an Eid brunch together, after we pray Eid all together, then there is a little bit of festivity, and that definitely was completely shattered. I think in other ways it made me feel a little bit - it made me long for my family more because other people were definitely capitalizing on having family - Eid events in their homes as opposed to driving with their family to the mosque, and I didn't have that, it was just like you know, me and my husband and, you know.

I: Yes. Thank you.

R: Of course.

I: The next question is about any historical sources, scriptural or otherwise, that you have used to understand the crisis with. So, the full question is as follows: have your Imams or religious leaders drawn on scriptural or Muslim historical sources to help community members understand and cope with the COVID crisis. If yes, please describe an incident of this.

R: So, I would say that there were a lot of posts on social media on pages of Imams and there was also a lot of television— not televised, sorry— like, shared sermons where we are actually talking about prophetic teachings around quarantining, basically back when there was a plague during the time of our Prophet. And, it's, it's very interesting because, again, that that to me was like a very stark contrast, when you literally saw all of these churches all over the country, especially in conservative areas, vehemently disagreeing with, you know, quarantining, and that you know “God will save them and that you know, nothing will harm people that are, whatever, in congregation” and it was like the exact opposite when it came to Imams and the Muslim communities. And it wasn't just you know in one state, it was in various states, East Coast, West Coast and everyone was actually talking about their the prophetic teachings around quarantining in the time of any epidemic. And, it was sad that it required something like a pandemic for such contrast to be highlighted for those who are paying attention. Because often in the greater distorted American narrative of Muslims and Islam, there was yet another, you know, because you know were “backwards” or “anti-scientific”, according to them, obviously— and then it took a pandemic to really show who were the scientifically consistent? You know, people that maintain and upheld spirituality during one of our most blessed seasons. You know, like

Ramadan, literally, that's like a spiritual high that sustains a lot of us for the rest of the year, until you know the next Ramadan and then to see honestly people kind of like, flipping out and like you know, whining on media about like you know, "our church, our choir or this or that"—it was just like it was, it was—I mean, I felt bad for them because obviously they were grieving a loss, but at the same time I was like—I cannot believe these are the same people that assume they know the authoritative voice over characterizing my faith, and you know my fellow worshippers as anti-scientific and backward and stuck in the twelfth century, you know. And I was like—"who's stuck in what century now?" And then you remember that it's not nice to travel down those internal paths, and then you say you know Astaghfirullah—like you know, "may God forgive me" and then you kind of, you know, stop yourself from thinking about that, but if anything, that was definitely a positive highlight, but sadly, it wasn't a stark contrast that found itself through conventional media outlets because we all know how biased the media is in covering anything related to Muslims.

I: Right, I have heard of those passages and historical contexts for similar lessons in dealing with the pandemic, and I found it very interesting to see how these ancient ways of intertwining social health needs and spiritual religious needs were made in unison. So those are important lessons that I think were able to support the Muslim community today. So, the next question is about your personal practices. In what ways, if any, have your prayer and religious practices played a role in how you understand and cope with COVID-19.

R: I'm again, I'm more of a monk than I am a congregant. I'm someone that—there is a private space that we are encouraged to enter, to perform worshipping, and that's called kalwa and that means, you know, solitude. And it's not really—I don't necessarily have to hike up the highest mountain, and you know, crawl into the most remote caves to enter that space. It's definitely a very educational and a very intentional space, and I felt that with the pandemic there were a lot of moments when that was just an unlimited supply of that of an opportune time to exercise that. So, I would say that I was definitely far more self-centered and focused about my spirituality. There was a lot of reflection, and usually the reflective forms of worship are very delicate. Because, you know, they have been encroached upon by this crazy nine to five you know, unnecessary commute time like—it was the exact opposite of what time management from a

capitalistic ideal is about. And you know, you kind of capitalize on that because you know that—who knows when the next time that this capitalistic ideal is going to grant you such kind of free time? And that was kind of like this space that I was that I found myself in. It was some kind of spiritual high that I just wanted to, like, stock up on basically.

I: That sounds lovely, thank you. This question is about how the pandemic has affected your religious beliefs or faiths. In what ways, if any, has the COVID pandemic affected your religious beliefs or faith?

R: I would say it solidified it, because there was a representation of a lot of shared values that outside of a time of crisis, we don't necessarily as a collective Muslim, you know, global community get to reflect on. And, again to me, that the adherence to the scientific interpretation of plague and contamination and isolation and quarantine like it was very rewarding space for me to be in scientifically but also socially. I was hearing of a lot of sad incidents that made me think. For example, like there was an increase in domestic violence and that made me worry because I felt that there are certain societies where such practices are going to be ten times more violent and sanctioned, you know, in a crowded system than it is in, you know the Western Hemisphere. So- but then, oddly enough, England was one of the highest countries in reporting a reported domestic violence, so you know, again, it's just, it just puts all of these contrasts you know of East and West, North and South. It really challenged them, so it was definitely a huge learning experience for me.

I: Yes, certainly thank you. The next section is about social justice, and these questions focus on the Muslim communities' engagement with social justice issues. As a result of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, how have your mosque or Islamic Community Center responded to the calls for social justice raised by the Black Lives Matter movement?

R: So, there are so many layers to this question, so I will try to answer them in a different order. The very first one that I want to say is the most impressive form of solidarity around social justice causes in America were always, always in my experience, presented by the Palestinian American Muslim community and also non-Muslims. Solidarity with the natives of Northern

America, native tribes have always been something that I have seen many Palestinian activists, despite the different levels of religiosity, you know, not like, not all of these organizations are arranged around, you know, faith-based communities, but mostly about shared cause. And I saw the Palestinian American and the Palestinian diaspora in America activism front and center always when it comes to even migrant workers from South America, and definitely Natives, definitely condemning colonialism, condemning settler colonialism, especially because this is something that you know— a theme that has been impacting the Palestinian reality for over seventy-three years. And it's also something that's been muffled and suffocated by you know, your average coverage of Americana every day. So, I cannot stress how monumental the contribution of the Palestinian Community in social justice for me as an Arab American Middle Eastern American has been. You know, academically, starting with Edward Said, to all the way to a local professor in San Francisco Bay Area— Doctor Bazian and who is the founder of the center of Islamophobia Studies as well. So, I wouldn't be doing this question justice without highlighting this monumental and substantial role of Palestinian activism. The second thing is, I would say that to witness the murder of George Floyd on media outlets, time and time and time again made it like, made it mandatory to highlight that because there is a lot of - the original response was “oh, the person that called the business owner that called the police on the counterfeit bill was a Palestinian business owner,” and even though the employee that actually made the phone call was not an Arab employee or Arab American. So, there was always that, you know, and then when that noise kind of like, was a little bit more quiet, then there was a lot of initiatives about tackling anti-Blackness in many non-European descent communities in the US, including Arab Community, Persian community, definitely Desi, Indian, and Pakistani, and anti-Blackness, I would say now is a theme that has also found its way to the rhetoric of the Muslim youth that definitely want to arrange themselves against that and calling out any anti-Blackness and discriminatory measures that we have in our mosques in the representation of, you know Black or African American Muslims because also those are a group that Americana doesn't speak of. In America, you will hear a lot about Doctor King, but you will only hear one-sixth of that about Malcolm X— and there was a reclaiming of that, and it was a beautiful space to be in because many African American Muslim and non-Muslim scholars were actually dedicating time to highlight the existence of Muslims from early days of slavery in the US. So, it was a very

painful, but it was a very informative space to be in, because it was no longer just a group of hyper focused individuals that were speaking about these motifs. It was everywhere, and you couldn't ignore it because ignoring it meant that you were siding with the oppressor, which is Islamically a value that is always and constantly challenged. You should never side with the oppressors. Even if you're not capable of changing that, you should at least have an internal rejection. You should be ethically separated and opposed to all forms of oppression.

I: Yes, this is very helpful to hear about. Thank you. These lines of intersectional solidarity. Between the Muslim community, Black Muslim community, and Black Lives Matter. This last question you may have answered already— in what ways, if any, have you or your Muslim community showed solidarity with Black Lives Matter.

R: Well, I would say that again there was a very good turnout in terms of participating in various marches of solidarity. There was— I would just say that like whomever that was already active in the Muslim community was immediately on board with being active during the Black Lives Matter. I would say, like central, you know, like their dominant point, there was definitely a lot of social media activism in terms of sharing, in terms of forcing people to talk about a subject that they didn't necessarily want to talk about or felt like it actually caters to our communal needs. It actually reclaimed that space and it said “no, this is actually far more front and center than you guys have been made to view it as such.” So yeah, I would say whoever was active just amplified their activity level.

I: Thank you, this is the last question in this topic on social justice. What do you think Muslim communities in the US should be doing with regard to social justice issues? For example, issues of racism, Islamophobia, violence against Muslims, blacks, Hispanics, or the LGBTQ plus community.

R: I honestly and sadly feel like there's a lot that is being done, but it's done in a very smothered fashion you know? Again, I cannot basically even talk about social justice without constantly referring to my region's singular, most important cause and that is the Palestinian struggle. The thing is, there is a lot of activism, Muslim lawyers, Muslim professionals, Muslim academics, Muslim activists, Muslim average day, just you know, citizens— have been talking about

Islamophobia for a very long time. There's a crazy amount of solidarity also from our Sikh brothers and sisters because they too have been victimized because— you know, to a bigot, a Sikh man appears apparently as a Muslim man, and there has been a lot of work. Yes, it's probably not everywhere in the media, but then, since when do you get media coverage that is in favor of anything, you know, Islamic or Arab or people of color in general? So, I mean it's really a very peculiar place to be in because there are a lot of events and there are a lot of initiatives. And there are a lot of outlets for such things to happen. But there isn't much celebration of it. There isn't acknowledgement of it. If anything, there is the exact opposite. There is this constant demonization of our existence, of our impact, of that the affect that we have on this society and other societies and that we've always had. Since you know, like, if you want to trace it back all the way to the Iberian Peninsula. There was always this like smothering of a narrative and you have it all the way from like, news anchors like Wolf Blitzer all the way to comedians like Bill Maher, you know? It's infuriating honestly. I'm glad to see that many Muslim and non-Muslim Arab or Middle Eastern activists are constantly pushing against that, but the thing is we can't just keep dancing in the dark. You know someone needs to show up and see what kind of performance, what kind of representation we're putting out.

I: Thank you, it's our hope that this work will help to publicize the efforts that the Muslim community has been making this whole time and to make known and aware the kinds of organizations and groups that are active in many causes. So, thank you for your contribution to this project. We have one last section about inspiration and hope this is the last section of the interview. Many of the questions so far have been about difficulties. And hard times. Yet even during difficult times, good things happen in life. The next set of questions is designed to explore that aspect of your experience. What was your most uplifting experience since the outbreak of COVID-19? Something that inspired hope or happiness?

R: I think how people were all of the sudden more attentive to other people's mental health and emotional well-being and health the needs of those two, you know, often marginalized, you know, forms of well-being. I felt like because many of us were basically sent to our rooms to think about what we've done, created some type of like a shared consciousness around emotional struggle and a mental health struggle and loss and grief and all of these themes that we were just

constantly trying to distract ourselves from. So, to see people more attentive to one another, someone reaching out and saying, “Hey, I’m not doing well here, I could use a little bit like you know. More friendship, even if virtually you know or even between coworkers you know, I’m really struggling to focus on this task alone. Is there anyone could help me on this project or could double check my work or something like that?” There was a willingness to do that that I haven’t witnessed in the crazy rat race. And that was an uplifting note for me.

I: Thank you and what is it that you are looking most forward to doing? Once COVID has abated or you get a vaccination?

R: I honestly find the post-COVID phase to be scary a little bit. There is a comical and an ironic resemblance between the Spanish flu, and like the way that people dealt with their own personal responsibility for themselves and for their communities, that was exactly replicated with COVID. I find myself a little bit afraid of witnessing how people will take a shared experience that is as substantial as this and throw it down some memory hole. So I find there is a lot of anticipation on my end about such events reappearing in our modern history, I also find that I can’t stop thinking about how there was a lot of time to chart out further exploitative work practices, you know, and denial of visas and denial of more integration of international students and stuff like that due to this pandemic— that enabled a lot of people to make a lot of countries make a lot of exclusionary policies. I won’t be lying if I said that I’m actually afraid of the current face. The highlight of it is definitely the vaccination. But I’m very, very alarmed by the social ramification of what we had to endure for the past, -you know eighteen months maybe now, I mean sorry, fifteen months or so.

I: Yes, thank you and is there anything else you would like to share or tell me about your experience with COVID or your family’s experience with COVID?

R: I think it’s pretty much what I have shared already. It was really just the impact on my physical health and trying to recover from that.

I: Great, thank you so much for your kind cooperation and may you and your loved ones stay healthy. Thank you.

