



Oral History Project Interview

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

Interview Number: HA 1.00

Date: 2/28/2021

Gender: Female

Name: "Sarah"

Country of Origin: Palestine

Year of Immigration: 1991

Abstract: Sarah (changed name for confidentiality purposes) is a 49-year-old Muslim Palestinian-American. She is a mother of five children and currently lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She grew up with her parents and grandparents and quickly learned the importance of knowing your roots: the culture, language, and traditions. Alongside her Palestinian culture, she also prioritizes her religion as an important aspect of her daily life. She believes it has and does help her through thick and thin political climates, and she continues to practice and attend her mosque whenever she can.

Key Themes: Culture, tradition, politics, religion, family

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

I: So today is February 28th and - 2021 - and we're gonna start this interview just asking some general questions, about your background. So state your name and age and your level of education.

R: My name is Sarah. I'm 49 years old and have a master's degree in education.

I: So when and where did you complete your degree?

R: (clears throat) In Milwaukee in 2016.

I: When you were growing up, where did you go to school, um, like K through 12. Did you go to like public school, community schools, like Salam School, um . . . or any private or religious schools?

R: Public school.

I: And what was the name of the school?

R: Deir Dibwaan high school.

I: And this was . . . overseas?

R: Correct.

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

R: (pause) Um, so, I grew up, my elementary years in Honolulu, Hawaii. So we spent a lot of time on the beach. My teenage years, we spent in Palestine, so most of my time was spent either home or at school. So not much, there's not much to do or going out there.

I: Tell me about your home, your school, or some of the - some of the places or buildings that you remember a lot very fondly. And if you could describe like the rooms, like who lived there, like who shared the spaces, and what activities did you guys do there?

R: So our home was very warm and comforting. I had um, six siblings other than myself, so we're seven children, with my mother and father and grandmother and grandfather. We all lived in the same house. Uh. My grandparents shared a room, my parents had a room, sisters shared a room. I shared a room with my sisters, and then my brothers had a room. And it was very - it was a warm and loving environment.

I: Awesome. Tell me how you felt being Muslim in these different spaces, especially here in the United States, and, um, how did it feel - How did you feel like you expressed your identity as a Muslim in different, uh, in different ways, in these different places?

R: So I've been in Milwaukee for about third years. And during that time, I feel like, I was able to express my identity, as a woman, as a Palestinian woman, as a female. Uh, my hijab did not hinder me at all. I - I'm proud to wear it. I'm proud to share my culture with other people. Um, I'm Palestinian, so most people who know Palestinians, we take every chance we get to tell people we're Palestinians. So with my co-workers, who are either, you know, then they could be,

from different cultures. Always proud to share Palestinian history and culture and food with them.

I: So, you mentioned your co-workers, are you currently employed, and does this include working outside the house?

R: Yes, so I'm employed outside the house and - Some of my coworkers, um, when we meet together and have time to discuss, like just private details of our lives, it's like the best time to share something about ourselves.

I: Um, what do you do at your job and where do you work?

R: I'm a teacher, I teach middle school with Milwaukee public schools.

I: Um, are you married, and was your marriage ranged? Moving on to marriage questions.

R: I was married for, 29 years. Annd - yes, so it was arranged, um, as most marriages in the Middle East are. And, um, we could define arranged as having like parents, introduce, eligible, bachelors or bachelorettes to one another to see if they're compatible. And then there can be acceptance or denial. So, yes.

I: Did you know your spouse before getting married?

R: I did not.

I: Do you have any children, if so what are their names and ages?

R: I have five marvelous children. I have (names and ages omitted for confidentiality).

I: Um, what are their education levels? And where did they live?

R: So, it's a spectrum of - I have some children who chose not to go to college. And then I have children who have a couple of years of college but did not graduate. And then I have, um, two who graduated from college, and one on her way to graduate.

I: (pause) So the next questions are gonna talk more about your culture and how you define yourself. So, how would you identify yourself as? And which culture or cultures do you most identify with?

R: I sort of answered this question before, so I'm, um, Palestinian Muslim American. I identify as being like a Palestinian American Muslim. But I-I identify as Muslim being my first identity.

I: Do you think that the way that you identify yourself changes with where you are or who you're with, and if yes how?

R: I don't think that's the case. Uh, I think um, because of my hijab and, uh, I just have a strong feeling of who I am. It's what I'm proud of. And so that doesn't change whether I'm like at the beach or at the mosque, or at home, or with friends, or with co-workers. Uh-I'm the same person.

I: Are there certain places where you feel that you're most, um, able to express your identity, more than others?

R: Uh, I would say like I'm comfortable, a hundred percent comfortable expressing my identity anywhere I am. Uh, And I think it's um, maybe it's harder for some people than others, but I'm very comfortable expressing who I am anywhere I am. Maybe, when I'm at the mosque, I feel at home in a sense, but it's not because I can express myself more, it's just like a feeling of the mosque being a second home.

I: So you mentioned, um, that you grew up in Palestine. What traditions from your culture, do you practice? Do you use any recipes that you learned from your parents or grandparents, do you follow like anything like food restrictions?

R: So yes, obviously because I'm practicing a practicing Muslim, I don't consume alcohol and I don't eat pork. Uh, the traditions that we grew up with, I hold very dear. Mainly around Eid time and Ramadan time, I guess they're the most prominent times. Um, favorite childhood memories are one, uhh. The day of Eid Al Adha, which is the second holiday that Muslim celebrate. They-we celebrate, uhh, celebrate Prophet - the end of Hajj first of all and then also Prophet Abraham, stopping the sacrifice of his son, and sacrificing a ram or a sheep instead. And so, my fondest, earliest memories are of my grandfather, sacrificing uh, sheep uh every Eid Al Adha. And we would make, uh fried liver and uh, with onions for breakfast on Eid.

This was like a tradition, so every Eid we would have that. And then also, for - during Ramadan, just uh different varieties of food and sharing different recipes, especially qatayif, with cheese, which is like a pancake that's folded in half, uh stuffed with cheese and then dipped uh, fried or baked, and then dipped in syrup.

I: Sounds very tasty, thank you for sharing.

P; Mhm

I: Um, how and where do you find these necessary ingredients, for this traditional food, and do you expect your children tuh, make these recipes as they started growing up?

R: Uh, that's a great question so um, it's interesting that now, at some of the grocery stores, uh we can find a lot of the ingredients that we couldn't find there 10 years ago, like semolina wheat, or uh, um. There's a type of date package that I purchase that is like crushed dates and they're softened up a little bit with oil, and we use that when we make, uh date cookies for Eid Al Fitr, that marks the end of Ramadan.

And so, like items like these were not typically found at grocery stores, but uh, during, uh - in the past, I want to say like, six - five or six years or so, they've become, uh - you just see them on almost every shelf, and almost all of the grocery stores have a Middle Eastern section, next to their Hispanic section, so it's been easier to find them. But before that, we used to always purchase these items at the Middle Eastern grocery store, and in Milwaukee, years ago, there was only one, thirty years ago, one Middle Eastern grocery store.

Uh, over the years they've increased in number, and now there are almost ten of them, in - directly in the Milwaukee area, and maybe more than that, the greater Milwaukee area, like in Brookfield and Wauwatosa areas. I know the - of some that have opened up. And so, uh, recipes that I've taught my daughters, I - I - I love teaching them to cook. Unfortunately, there's not a lot of time for them to learn, because of their college and their, priorities for work. But, definitely for me, it's a priority to teach them all the different dishes and, recipes and - And put together menus that can delight guests for when they get older for any kind of gathering that they might have when they get older.

I: It's interesting to see that the communities, uh, providing more accessibility tuh, um, these cultural ingredients and how, uh, Arab communities are very fond of this change in advancement. Um, and accessibility.

R: Yeah, so I was passing by one of the grocery stores, uh recently, and I found, um . . . graffiti on uh - not the bad graffiti, but the good kind of graffiti. (laughs) I don't know if there's a specific word, it's just art or like street art, I suppose. On the side of one of the grocery stores, and I - I don't know, I'm pretty sure the owner paid to have that done, and it was just beautiful, with, uh, English and Arabic letters on there. I think there was a Hispanic sentence on there, too, if I'm not mistaken. And it was about like community, coming together and uh, it was a nice statement, to have that, on the side of a grocery store in the middle of our neighborhood, or one of the neighborhoods that are - that have a population of, Arab, Middle-Eastern, South-Asian population.

I: It's great to see that sense of community and diversity, um, in the nearby areas. Kind of going off of that, um, in - in any way do participate in cultural or religious community activities, and if so, which organizations are you active in?

R: So yes, I p - I'm a member of, um, the Islamic Society of Milwaukee, and I worship there. and I also frequent, uh, Milwaukee Muslim Women's Coalition. Uh, and they have a nice library that I like to check books out from. Although, because COVID, we haven't been get - going to these gatherings as much. But those are the um, two most places that I frequent.

I: Shifting a bit more to the political climate, um, of your history. In what ways, if any, have the political events of your parents or grandparents' homeland affected you? And how has this shape your decisions as a second-generation parent in the United States? - Second-generation immigrant parent, in the US?

R: Wow, that's a - that requires a very detailed answer. Growing up we used to hear a lot of different stories from my grandparents, and my parents about, uh, the times that they lived in. And after I got married, I would hear stories from my mother-in-law and father-in-law, and uh, sister-in-laws. And even till today you meet people, and they would talk about what happened in 1967 for the palic- Palestinian exodus - or, or uh - I mean 1948 with the Palestinian Exodus or 1967 with, uh, the loss of, uh, some land as well. So, it - it affected - it affected me in a way, that it just, uh. I guess built in us a sense of resilience. And that, we can, be proud of who we are,

that we're not extinct or diminished in any way and we can still be able to share ourselves so that we *do* feel that we exist.

So, my father growing up, would tell us about when he travelled to – he actually traveled to Brazil before coming to the US. And so, he had a lot of stories about his travels along the way, and how he wound up in California and married my mother. And then, uh, my mother also, would tell us, stories about the old times in Palestine and how things used to be back then, and I myself grew up in Palestine, so I was there before the first Intifaada of 1987.

And that was when things were, very peaceful, but at the same time, uhh, there weren't many civil rights for Palestinians. And so after the Intifaada, there was also, we also experienced like, uh, a lot of unrest during the 1991 first Iraqi war, and how that affected Palestine in general and the, surrounding areas. So, we went through a lot of political unrest ourselves as well, not just parents and grandparents.

I: H – How would that, um – how did that make you feel in terms of your future in your aspirations, um, in the aspect of moving to the United States?

R: Well, I – I can't hide the fact that at some point, some people were at in a state of despair, like they actually saw the end was so near, and they feared for their lives, uh, because of the situation that happened right after the – or during the first Iraqi war, and how that affected Palestine, um. So, I'm sorry, can you get to the – can you answer – ask the question once more?

I: Yes, so I was just wondering, um, in the political, climate that you described that was very, um, uh, much of a turmoil. How did that affect your aspirations –

R: Oh, yes!

I: in the aspect of moving to United States?

R: Mm. So there was a sense of despair at the time. Um, but after that, um, and after my marriage we decided that we wanted to, just, uh, continue with our lives and come to the States to, uh, better our education and also find a means of supporting ourselves financially. And so, um, that was a great decision.

I: Continuing on with the, um, questions about political, um, topics, how would you describe your political participation in the United States as a Muslim voter?

R: I have to say like for the longest time, I did not participate in any type of voting. And, I don't know whether it was just, um, not being in the habit of being invited or feeling the need, or the . . . What's the right word I can use here? Just the accessibility to be able to vote, because I grew up in a time where Palestinians in the West Bank did not partake in any kind of voting. And so, we were – we did not have any type of voting rights whatsoever. So when we came to the US and, were encouraged to vote in the US elections, it was – it just didn't feel like it was a natural thing to do, so it was something that we never participated in. And it was only until my d– my, uh, eldest daughter graduated college and encouraged us to, and when she graduated, she was, uh –or did she – I'm sorry. When she graduated high school, and turned 18 and was eligible to vote, *then*

all of a sudden, she became, uh, very vocal on the topic and she actually encouraged us to vote for the first time, which we did.

I: So what elections, uh, did you have the ability to – to vote in?

R: Uh, so we voted for – in the, uh, Obama election, the second time around.

I: When it comes to candidates who are from the religion of Islam, or from uh, your culture and uh, being Palestinian, in what ways does that affect the way that you – the behavior, um, of your voting?

R: I'm not sure I understand the question.

I: So if you see that a candidate is Muslim, such as yourself, or Palestinian, does that affect the – the voting behavior that you have –

R: Definitely.

I: towards the election?

R: Like, uh, I don't know if, um, it's not supposed to be a factor like you always want to vote for the best candidate or the – the person who has the best, qualifications for the job, but it's definitely a factor like I would – I would want to root for the for the guy who is, uh, going to support my beliefs and – not my beliefs, I'm sorry, but my – um . . .

I: Your values.

R: My values, right and what I see –

I: You're inclined?

R: Right, so, like you would want someone who shares the same ideals and virtues as you, to be in places where they can make decisions that align sort of with your values.

I: Mm-hmm. So –

R: That doesn't negate the fact though that we, uh – like I'd vote for the, most qualified person – regardless of faith or culture.

I: So with the recent, um, movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, with regard to social justice, uh. Do you have an opinion on what the Muslim community in Milwaukee should be doing, or Muslim communities in the United States in general, uh, with regards to these issues such as racism or Islamophobia in general – um, or specifically, or violent against uh, minority citizens?

R: Um, I think, uh, I can speak about like my com – my immediate community, I know that they tried to, participate in several protests. And, uh, sponsored several of them, and held several of them, and marched with a lot of people, or a lot of other organizations and partnered with other organizations, uh, which I think is a step in the right direction, um. However, sort of – sort of disappointed that, you know conversations like this don't take place unless it's like black history

month like January, February, and then the rest of the year, this topic is like not spoken about at all and . . . So that's kind of discouraging but yeah. I think they should – we should be doing more as a community to support these groups.

I: Definitely. Um, going more off of the political climate, um. Were you, living in the United States during the Gulf War?

R: Which one?

I: The one in the early 1990s?

R: I was living in Palestine at the time like I stated early.

I: Okay. Were you in the United States on September 11th of 2001?

R: I was.

I: Um. How did your experiences after 9/11, um, change the way that you felt about being in a Muslim American in terms of your identity?

R: I think that was like the most scariest day for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Because, Non-Muslims were afraid of, like Muslims and why is this happening and the Muslims were afraid of the backlash and, you know being, uh. I guess like, uh, being – being put in a position where now they have to defend themselves indefinitely for something they didn't do, which is still going on. Um. But I can speak for myself, like that was one of the scariest times of being a citizen in the US, and I can still remember that day, because I was teaching at school. I was teaching at a private Muslim school at the time. And I walked into – we had a day care area in – within the school, so I had, two children in the daycare. So during my break, I went up to check on them and the daycare had a television set going at the time. And, the news was on breaking news. And it was just, uh, a moment that's unforgettable, I'm sure for all. And so, it affected all of us in a way in our – in the sense that, uh, we knew that there would be a backlash or outrage and anger and uh, we ourselves were shocked and said and uh. . . Like speechless, for the longest time. But, um, I guess I'm grateful that I haven't been a victim of any kind of racial, kind of –

I: Injustice – Or?

R: Yeah, or outrage or –

I: Violence? Or anyth–

R: Violence. so I'm very fortunate in that sense.

I: Did you feel that you needed a sense of support, uh, during that time and if so where, uh – from where did you get your support?

R: At the time we were – very close with like my husband's family and, um, my family live in Milwaukee as well, so we just I guess supported one another and, um, just kept in contact with them – at one another making sure everyone was okay and, um. Telling each other, you know words of encouragement and support. And that was helpful.

I: Thank you for sharing your experiences about the political climate. Um, And about history. I'd like to switch the topic, uh, of marriage if that's uh, if that's okay with you. In your culture, as a Palestinian woman, how would you say that women are viewed and what is their typical role?

R: Uhh. To be honest it's – not you can't generalize, because somehow households, the woman is submissive, and you know her voice doesn't matter and she's always in the kitchen. And then other households, the woman's the head of the household and she's telling the husband what to do. And her – she's bossing around everyone, so it – you can't really generalize

I: Mm-hmm.

R: As it is with all cultures, I think. You know, every culture has a sense where you know, some women are going to be submissive and – Think that their place is in the kitchen. And then others will think their place is in the workplace, and it becomes a personal choice that they take part in and they participate in. They decide for themselves and they move on, but the problem happens when the choice is taken away, and she's forced into like a, a life of, I don't know. Just, uh, cooking and cleaning and housekeeping. Or if she's forced into a life of working as well, like it can be either or.

I: Understandably. Do you think this is – the same can apply about the role of men in the Palestinian culture?

R: Yeah, sure. Like I stated earlier like you can't generalize. Some people when you say like Middle Eastern man, they you know – an image of like somebody violent pops into their minds for some reason. I don't know whether it's a result of movies and cinema or books, or whatev – what have you. But like, there's a general kind of idea about a certain culture, and like it's – to stereotype people in that matter, is not like – it's not fair. But I would say like a Palestinian woman when you – in our culture when you say like a Palestinian woman, the ideal woman would be someone who's wearing her cultural dress. She's just baked bread, and bread is – she's carrying the bread, uh, from the taboon, which typically it was one or two in the neighborhood, and women would go and – and bake the bread there, and then carry the bread on trays on top of their head to carry that home with them. So that's what I think of when I think of Palestinian woman.

I: Thank you for sharing. Um, in terms of your upbringing, uhm, as a Palestinian woman, how do you – and how does your religious or ethnic up bringing contribute to, uh, the woman that you've become today?

R: Umm. I think it's made my life richer, in a sense that I know my roots. And I've had like traditional experiences and I value those traditional experiences, like olive harvesting time. You know, that's an experience while you're picking olives, you don't think about, “Oh this is great.” You think, “Oh this is – this is hard. I can't wait till all these these olives are picked and done with, so that we can just go home.” But the experience, afterwards, I mean the – the memory and the – just the whole learning experience and the family get together and just working as a family to complete a task is like, uh. It's priceless. So, memories like that are – things like that, I really

value, and it molds you into a person who is resilient, who values tradition, values culture, and wants to give that to their own children.

I: Gotchu. Thank you for sharing. Umm. Uh, as for marriage, when it comes to this topic, um. Who do you think makes those decisions, in terms of who, um. In terms of – solidifying – solidifying the, uh. Let me phrase that. When it comes to marriage, who gets the say, for a –for uh, the affirmation of the marriage?

R: I'm not sure I understand. Like the marriage is a done deal?

I: Essentially. Like who – who gets to – who gets to say, um. Who gets the final word? The mother? The father? Both of them?

R: It depends on the family. I mean, if uh, the mother has the dominant personality, then it would be the mom. I've know – um, mostly the dad, but I've known families that, with the mom has a dominant personality so she's gonna say, "Oh like there's – over my dead body, my daughter is going to marry this person or that person." And this – the same can be said for families where the dad has a dominant personality. And I think it depends on the compatibility of the two families and whether like the – the father of the groom, can. . . I don't know. Get along with, I guess. The father of the bride and both of the . . . Uh, young people like each other. But I guess it just – it just happens, I guess naturally, in a natural sense.

I: So something –

R: It sounds kind of like, put together, in a way, but it's very – it's more organic than – than one might think.

I: Mm-hmm. So a lot of people in the Muslim community think that it's becoming a bit harder to find, um, their future spouse. Do you believe that the internet, uh, and social media platforms make it easier for Arab and Muslim Americans to meet their future spouses?

R: Well, I definitely agree that it's becoming harder to find a potential spouse. I guess, um. And it's – it's funny because like, transportation is not an issue. Because you find like, everyone has a car; they can go anywhere, and like money is not an issue, for most people. They can always like travel and meet new people. But, um, I guess when it comes to social media people, are a little reluctant because they don't want to put themselves out there, and – and seem desperate enough to be using a social media app. And add to the fact that like parents – I know a lot – the majority of families, parents would go berserk if they knew their children were using social media apps. Because they feel like that is the unnatural way of meeting people and that is the inorganic or unorganically of meeting people. And that, um. It's not a matter of control to them, it's a matter of pride. So, to them like, you should not be advertising yourself out there. And there are a lot of, um. So that's a cultural perspective, but I know that a lot of religious perspectives are actually, kind of encouraging, uh, young people to go that route. So as for my personal opinion on it, I don't know. I have mixed feelings about it. There a lot of, cons, but they're – they're also pros. I think most of the cons are that, like it's harder, uh, to make sure that the other person is actually, what you're looking for in a spouse. And it's harder to check up on, because it's harder to find people who know the person.

So, I don't – we don't know who's doing the fact checking on that. But, if – for people that it has worked for, I wish them all the best, and if it worked for them, great.

I: Thank you for sharing your opinions. So you mentioned that some parents have different, um, preferences for how their children, um can find their future spouse. I was hoping to move on to some parenting, um, topics. In what ways do you think that boys should be raised differently from girls, if at all?

R: I don't think that like there should be a difference in raising, in either of the, uh, sexes but, in our culture, it's just typical for like the female or the daughter, or the girl, to be doing more of the –helping clean up with another. And the son could be working as well, like helping clean up, but you know, gender roles are pretty defined, even in like non-Muslim culture where like the – the boy might be doing more of the lawn mowing and the, cutting grass and taking out the garbage. Uh, as his sister would be like doing dishes, or doing the laundry. So, it's pretty – it's typical gender roles, and not necessarily divided by religion.

I: Kind of going off of that, what do you think are some major issues that concerned you when raising your children? Um, given that you raised them overseas.

R: I think for me, as a Muslim woman, in the US, raising children. Uh, I want to say that I have a lot of gratitude for God who helped me, because if my children are considered righteous and good, and uh, are able to be good people, and service humanity, then that is all by the grace of God, it's nothing that I have done personally. But after saying that, like that was my – my most wanted, uh prayer, is that for my kids to be righteous and service humanity.

I: Um, so a little more on that. When you were helping your children to decide on their careers, or major in college, to provide for the community, what role did you play in leading them to choose the career?

R: Um, I would say I played a large role. I wish I had played a smaller role and just like, took a back seat, but I – Because that's like, what a good mother, father, parent is supposed to do, like let them explore their – their own skills, and hobbies, and interests. But I felt like, um. Because I'm their parent, and I know them the best, and I know their skills, like I would know what my daughter or son would be good at, better than any computer-based program out there, that – that's gonna help them select their profession, which was what high schools were –

were having students do, and are still having them do, which, uh, you know, there's no fault in that. It's just – I took it upon myself to kind of guide my children in a direction where I think they would have that set of skills, to be able to – to participate in a certain field.

I: Understandably. In what ways, if any, did your own parents influence, uh, your career choice or your major in college?

R: Um, my parents, never, spoke on the topic. like they would ask me what I wanted to study, but they – They kind of, just let me choose freely. And I went to college after getting married anyway, so it wasn't like a topic that was normally discussed.

I: Did they encourage you to work at all, or did they discourage you from working?

R: They never encouraged me directly, but like, my – my parents would always say like, they would value work, and they had good work ethic, so I took that from them.

I: Okay, um. Going a little bit more off of your life growing up, when did you first start to drive, and how did your parents feel about your driving? Were they supportive of you?

R: So I – growing up in Palestine, like there weren't many families who owned their private cars or vehicles. Uh, our family was one of very few who owned a vehicle and, uh. Even fewer, uh, families had their children driving the vehicle, because it was like a family vehicle, so my father drove it all the time. And so I didn't learn how to drive until I got married and came to the US, I was 20 years old.

I: Thank you for sharing. Um.

R: Was there a part B to that question? I don't remember.

I: It was just uh – were you – how did your parents feel about you driving, but seeing –

R: Oh, yeah.

I: as you already married –

R: They were reluctant, because it was a family vehicle, so not much encouragement there.

I: Understandably. So the next questions are a bit more about your parents. Could you talk a bit more about them, who they are, um, and their current status if they're still working?

R: So, my parents are not working. They're together. My mother is . . . 70 years old. My father is . . . 79 years old. And . . . Yeah, they're – they lived a very full and rich life. They raised seven wonderful children together. Three girls and four boys. They tried their hardest to raise us as productive people. Uh, even when I was little – I'm the eldest of the seven children. And so, there was a lot of expectation put on me. Even when we were little, like I remember being five years old. Like I said before, earlier, we grew up in Honolulu, until I was maybe about nine years old. And then, my parents made the decision to take us, uh, back to Palestine and have us live there. Being – or seeing that my father was an only son, so – of the family – so his parents relied heavily on him, to be responsible for them, and for their health and their productivity. So, we all went back. That – you know – from ages five to nine, uh, my parents taught me Arabic. So, to read, and write, and spell, and speak. You know that – because there were, at the time, in our community in Honolulu, there was maybe two other Arab –

Families of Arab origin. And we were all related to – so it was – just basically me and my uncles – us, and our uncle's house, and . . . my mother's cousin, with his family and children as well, so we were the only people on the island, as far as we knew, who, um, were of Middle-Eastern descent living in Honolulu. And so, based on that, of course, there were no schools that could teach us reading and writing Arabic. And, my parents were very adamant that this was something that was a priority to them, that we *should* learn Arabic letters and learn how to write them together, and loop them together, and uh, read. And so that was very important to them, and you know, I'm very grateful that they, instilled in us, you know, the sense of – the importance of

learning and seeking knowledge. And you know, to teach us another language at a very young age, is something like I can never repay them for. So, when we did go back to Palestine, you know, we hit the ground running with the curriculum, that was there. So, they were very hard workers and they – My mother and father like I said earlier, like we had our grandparents living in the household with us, so that enriched our lives even further, like to have my grandparents with um, different experiences, a different generation. You know, it had its ups and downs, and whole push and pull at times. Because of the age difference, you know, they would like to do things differently, but it's also a learning experience and a rich one that, you know, can't be duplicated.

I: Thank you for sharing your experiences. Uh, you mentioned that, your parents, uh, immigrated. Um, could you specify *when* they immigrated?

R: So, my father. . . immigrated when he was. . .15. He went to Brazil. Uh –

I: What year was that?

R: That was 19 . . I want to say. . . 56, if I'm not mistaken.

I: Approximately? (laughs) It's okay.

R: 1952?

I: 1950s.

R: 1950s.

I: Yeah.

R: And then, uh – Yeah, my mother immigrated when she was 12. So. . . 19 late 50s.

I: To Hawaii?

R: No to – actually to California, that's where –

I: Oh, right.

R: My parents met. That's where I was born, actually.

I: Um, what is their level of education?

R: Um, my father does not have a high school diploma, but my mother does.

I: How do you think they identify themselves, similar to the question I asked previously. And what makes you think that?

R: I –I can't speak for them, but I would think they would identify as Arab-Muslim.

I: Um, do you remember any specific historic events, uh, such as a great depression or major wars, um, in Palestine, that your parents would, uh, bring up, as you grew up with them, and how did your parents respond to them?

R: Yes, definitely 1948, Nakbah. . . And um, that's mostly a question for them, but – At the time they said that they – everybody just ran. They ran for their lives, they fled the village, um. You know, you hear – they hear stories or they, they actually told stories of some families, who had more than one child, they couldn't carry everybody, and they only had one horse, so they – or donkey. So that they – you know, they – some, were like – it was very difficult for them at the time. And then my husband's . . . eldest brother – so my mother-in-law, actually. She gave birth to my husband's brother – Or eldest brother during that time, as they were fleeing, so they had to stop. like in a cave somewhere, so that she could give birth to that child. So, there's a lot of trauma, and a lot of stories that are related to that incident.

I: Thank you for sharing that. So, you've already mentioned a bit about, uh, your grandparents and your experiences living with them in Palestine. And we're hoping – I'm hoping to ask a few more questions about that. Uh, did any of your grandparents immigrate to the United States?

R: Yes.

I: Um. What are the names of the – your grandparents?

R: So, uh, one of my grandparent's name is Adnan, and he actually served in the US. Army. So he immigrated in the early, early like, early times.

I: Mm-hmm.

R: And then my other grandfather immigrated to Brazil first, and then to Puerto Rico, and then came to the US to California, after my parents got married, and lived with them for a couple of years.

I: Um, are you aware of the kind of jobs that your grandparents had before immigration, and do you know, how, uh, they paid – To be able to immigrate.

R: Uh, to be able to immigrate, I'm not sure on that, but like, uh, the different jobs they had, mostly it – during that time, they would, uh, everybody from Middle-Eastern culture that they were associated with, and they themselves worked in like, vineyards. So they worked as like, either helping the farmers, or, you know, collecting the produce. And it's funny, because like I – I joked around with them once, that they may have met, like Cesar Chavez was at one point, and didn't know about it.

I: (laughs)

R: So, yeah, mostly in the vineyards. And my mother actually worked for . . . GE for . . . three years. General electric company. And . . . yeah.

I: Mm-hmm. Are you aware of the reason that your grandparents decided to immigrate to United States?

R: Everybody at that time, uh, immigrated to . . . for financial reasons, because like, with the new occupation – you know, it just made their choices so limited. And if they – if people there didn't already own a business, or already had something going for them they could get an income from,

it was very hard for them to start something. Because of the restrictions and requirements, so they – they chose to immigrate to have, uh, some sort of income. (coughs)

I: Where they also immigrating to possibly seek political asylum, or was Palestine, uh, politically, um, okay at that time?

R: I don't know of any of my relatives who – who sought asylum.

I: Okay. Um, where did your grandparents settle?

R: In –in the US?

I: Yes, in the United States.

R: Mostly California.

I: And what city did they settle in?

R: Oakland.

I: Um, do you know any jobs that they had, after they immigrated?

R: Working in the vineyards.

I: Mm. Um. Next, I'd like to switch topics and, uh, talk a little bit about cultural clothing, as you mentioned before, about the role – uh, or the typical Palestinian women. Um, can you explain some of the traditional, cultural clothing that you have, as a Palestinian, and, um, how many different types of clothing do you have?

R: So, I have, uh, beautiful thoubes, they're called thoubes, which is like a cross stitch dress, that is belted at the waist, with, uh, different designs on them. And usually, you can tell like, uh, where a person is from by, the dress that the person is wearing. Cuz each town has its unique colors and styles and fabric. And colors of thread and colors of, uh, fabric, and how they're stitched together, it's just different. And you can tell that, you know – you can tell that it's different, and it's unique to that location. So, I myself own, uh, several of the thoubes. Uh, I've gifted most of them to my daughters and I hope that they wear them and continue to uphold that tradition. And. . . yeah, it's a – it's a valuable piece that uh, once you put it in your closet, you just – you're proud of.

I: Can you speak a bit more to uh – the traditional or cultural clothing and –and, uh, what it means to you, and why you believe that it's important?

R: It's a part of identity. So, when you – when I wear the thoub, and I wear the belt that goes with it. It –

It's a connection of generation – from generation to generation. So it's – I share something similar, they're a similar – there's a . . . Common denominator between like me and my mother, and my grandmother, my great-grandmother, and my ancestors, because they've all worn the same – not necessarily the same pattern, or the same . . . uh, fabric, but the same . . . just the

same um . . . Idea, and the same kind of identity, is to have that thoub and wear it in a certain way.

I: Could you specify when and where you wear these thoub's?

R: Mostly to weddings.

I: Mm-hmm. Do you think that religion plays a role in your choice of clothing on a day-to-day basis and how so?

R: Most definitely. I mean, I – if I have to think about what I'm wearing before I leave the house, then that means I have to change my clothes. Because if I'm not . . . comfortable. . . And at like – by comfortable, I mean, like I know that I'm – not 100% comfortable with the level of modesty that I've decided to wear that day, then I have to change.

I: Speaking a bit more about, um, your love for traditional, cultural clothing, was there a person in your life who influenced you to continue to wear, uh, this type of clothing?

R: Yeah, definitely. Uh, my aunt, um . . . was well known in town for her beautiful dresses, and so, like she wears them, more often than not. And so, like she's definitely somebody who's influenced me in that sense.

I: So you mentioned that you passed down some of your dresses to your daughters. Um, did your mom wear any traditional dresses, and if so, did she pass any down to you?

R: Yes definitely. So, my mom not only wore the dresses, she was like a dress designer, herself. And people would come to her, and ask her to like – um, menjil. It's called to menjil is to put the different pieces together. So, the basic, traditional Palestinian dress has, uh, different pieces. So, there's the front and the back, and then there are two sides. And then the sleeves. And then you have the front, we call it kabba, so that would be like the chest piece. So, these are the basic pieces, but now like they have designed more – different pieces because they can be stitched together, using like a . . . very special unique way. And so she's the person who stitched the pieces together. And so, they would come to her to stitch the pieces together for their thoub. And also, later on, she learned how to make the – we call it shikka, which is the traditional . . . headdress. Uh, that has gold coins from one ear, to the other ear, going on top of the head. And the gold coins can either be real, or they could be fake. And mostly, for the bride, who's going to wear it for her wedding, it's, uh, it's a fake one, because that would match anything that she wears. And then the seamstresses would sew the top piece of that headdress. And it's a process to put it all together, and it's a . . . very beautiful piece.

I: Thank you for sharing. Um, so the next couple of questions are about your perceptions and your beliefs towards people, um, with disabilities, so a bit shifting of topics.

Uh, Do you think that people with disabilities can lead lives that are fulfilling, as people who don't have disabilities? And generally speaking, do you think that there's a sort of, um, prejudice towards people with disabilities in your community, especially the Muslim community?

R: Uh, I have not witnessed any, like prejudices. But I know that, um, for instance, uh, growing up, when I was younger – growing up in our town. Um – When you say community, you mean here in the US, or do you mean like uh . . . ?

I: Just the general Milwaukee community.

R: Here in Milwaukee, no. But I – like I felt like growing up in Palestine, like uh, over there people with disabilities don't really have much support. There are organizations and schools for you know, uh, sped students and you know, that could support them, but at the same time – (burps) Alhamdulillah – Like even local municipalities don't support – like you can't go anywhere in Ramallah, you know, with a wheelchair, unless you're in the street, you know, that defies the whole purpose of like, uh – and we're talking about physical disability here, but uh. . . Yeah, like yeah building codes. . . Non-existent. So that – all of these factors, I think, affect, like uh, disabled people, whether they're, you know, physically or mentally disabled in any capacity. You know, that – they don't find support even like in that sense.

I: Do you think that some of the – some of these topics are considered taboo to talk about and most Arab or Muslim families, and if yes, why do you think this is so?

R: Uh yes, some people are reluctant to talk about topics like this, and I think, for the most part it's um . . . Just avoiding negativity, because they – not that I'm – I'm not saying that, you know, somebody has a child, who was disabled or, has special needs is, you know, a negative thing, it's just – I guess it's something they don't have enough education about, so they choose not to discuss.

I: Thank you for sharing your opinions about the topic. Um, I have a few questions about how COVID has impacted your religious practices or beliefs. Um, how could – how have you continued your religious traditions such as Jum'a, Ramadan, Eid, uh, or any other religious programs, during this pandemic? And if there have been changes in what you do, or how you do it, uh, can you kind of describe those – changes?

R: So, COVID has affected everyone and, uh, anyone. And for our family, the biggest change was last Ramadan, not having anybody over, or us going to anyone to have iftaar together. That was the most drastic change, and also Friday prayers, you know, we can't go to – Now, so – people – the Friday prayers are open for people, but uh, a lot of people choose not to go. So, I haven't been to any lately and, uh, yeah. So, just limiting the, uh, visits to mosques and religious areas.

I: Thank you for sharing. Um, in what way, if any, have your prayer and religious practices played a role in how you understand and cope with COVID-19?

R: I think as a Muslim, it's our belief that anything that happens to us is good for us, whether that be good or bad. That's a firm belief that we have and uphold. So, if it's bad uh – in our opinion – it – it's, and we are patient with it, then it's good for us in the long run. And if it's something good, then we thank God for it. and that's also good for us.

I: Thank you for sharing your beliefs. Um, I have a few closing questions, as we end off the interview. Is there anything else about your history that you'd like to tell me, that I haven't asked you about already?

R: No, I've shared more – most of this, with you, than I've shared with anyone in a long time.

I: (laughs) Thank you for sharing, then. Umm. Do you have any other family or friends you think that we can interview for the Arab and Muslim Women's Resource and Research Institute?

R: No, not at this time.

I: Um. Lastly, do have any letters, old photos, notes of any kind of documents, awards certificates, diplomas. that you think would help us understand your family history? And do you think we could have a copy of it?

R: I can search for some.

I: Yeah, we'd appreciate that. Um. Well, that's it on my part. Thank you so much for your time and energy, and for sharing your experiences with me. Um, you've given, uh, AMWRRRI, uh, much valuable information about your life and your family history. If you need to contact me, you can do so. And. . . if I have any additional questions for you, I can definitely contact you again. Thank you so much!

R: Thank you.

I: All right, have a great day. This is the end of the interview, um, of Sister Sarah.