



Oral History Project Interview

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

Number of Interview: SP 3.00

Date: March 12, 2013

Gender: Female

Name: Sherrie

Country of Origin: Iran

Year of Immigration: 1985

Abstract: As first-generation immigrant from Iran, Sherrie grew up in the populated city of Shiraz. Now, a dedicated mother, wife, and business owner, she spends most of her time on the weekdays working in the restaurant that she owns on Milwaukee's North side because all but one of her children are out of the house. Since the age of fourteen, she has chosen to wear the hijab even still today. For her, this is a strong connection for her to her religion and is also a statement of her identity and her homeland. She does not feel much discrimination in society despite being the only one out of her friends and family in the United States that wears the hijab. Out of her five children, she only has one daughter who has chosen not to veil herself, and Sherrie supports this decision until her daughter is ready to do it for herself. Sherrie describes the process of having had an arranged marriage to her second cousin.

Key Themes: Parenting, Cultural Clothing, Marriage

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

I: It is Tuesday, March 12, 2013. I am here interviewing Sherrie. So, where is your homeland? Where are you from?

R: Iran.

I: Iran. What part of Iran?

R: Shiraz, is the name of the city.

I: Okay! When did you decide to come to the United States?

R: It was twenty-seven years ago, it was '85, I got married, and I moved with my husband to the United States.

I: Were you married before you came to the United States?

R: No, we got married there, and then we came over. I mean, yeah, just right away we came to the United States. My husband was studying here, so he came over there, we get married, and we came to the United States.

I: And what was he doing here?

R: He is a physician, and he was a student at that time. Then he continued and we had to stay here for a few more years. He finished his residency, and he's a doctor now.

I: And did you decide to open up the restaurant yourself?

R: Actually, we opened a long time ago, and then we decided to move to this location. Yeah, at that time we had partner and we just do it by our own now, we having the restaurant— me and my son, and my husband help us too sometimes.

I: Where was the restaurant located before here on Oakland?

R: It was on North Avenue, so it was at that location, and then we sold that one, and we actually came here five years ago.

I: Thank you. Back home, was your village a big or a little village?

R: No, it's not a village, it's a big city, meaning large population. It's not the largest city of Iran, but it's a big city.

I: Did you do any education there, any schooling?

R: No, I just finished my high school, and started college here. And then I was almost getting my degree in Biology, but then I got my pregnant with my twins, and then I quit schooling and I go back.

I: So how many kids do you have?

R: I have four kids. My oldest is twenty-four and my youngest are twins, they are seventeen.

I: Okay, growing up!

R: Growing up, yeah.

I: Are they going, have they finished high school and are going to college?

R: Next year, yeah. My son and my daughter, the oldest, are in college now, and I have two in high school, they are going to college next year.

I: Was education something that was really important for you raising them?

R: Yes, of course.

I: Why?

R: Because I really want them to be good in society and successful, like their dad being somebody that is successful in his position, and he's good. Yeah, education is good. [laughs] I even went to college because I wanted to get good education, and I'm really happy that I did,

even though I don't have my degree right now, I'm still happy that I went for many years. I didn't finish it, but I'm really happy I went.

I: Sure, just a couple more questions. I see you're wearing the hijab.

R: Yeah.

I: When did you make the decision to wear it?

R: Actually, in my country nobody forced me have hijab, but I choose it myself. And even my family, they were just okay if I didn't wear hijab, but I choose it myself to have it. And I really feel comfortable in wearing this, and I never had a problem. Since I was like 14, I started wearing the hijab.

I: So, when you wear it, every day, here in the United States, you don't feel any discrimination or have any problems?

R: No, no. In the beginning, when we came, nobody knew like twenty-six years ago, people didn't know that much about hijab, and Islam, and Muslims. But now it's very, I mean, everybody knows that this is no problem. At that time, even I have good confidence, and many people they asked me, and I answered. And they were happy to know what was hijab, and they really even encouraged me to have, to keep my hijab, and I've had no problems since I came to the United States.

I: So, what does it mean for you, to wear it?

R: To wear it, this is something that my religion taught me, and I have to obey it, like praying or fasting. I feel that like, I can't say pure, but that I have a good spirit every day that I wear the hijab, so I'm happy about it. Because I chose it myself, nobody forced me, and I really wanted to

have it, and it's really something that keeps you, I think, safe in a society. And hijab is, you have to believe in it, otherwise it's not easy to have hijab. Even back in my home, everybody has hijab, but you have to believe it, I mean you have to agree that this is something your religion chose for you. I mean, and I really accept it.

I: So, you have one daughter?

R: One daughter.

I: Does she wear the hijab?

R: She doesn't, no. I mean, it's her choice. [laughs] And I will never tell her to wear it, or not to wear it. But she is still not yet ready. She is nineteen.

I: Alright. Thank you so much!

Follow-Up Interview:

I: Today is Thursday, March 21st, and I am here with Sherrie. So, last time we talked a little bit about the hijab. Is there any other cultural clothing that you wear during celebrations or anything like that?

R: Actually, in Iran not many people, but we do have cultural outfits, but in rare occasions like when they gather for like special like New Year party sometimes, they wear those like those are like villagers, they wear like the very colorful outfits, they are very nice. But not every day, we wear it, not anymore; even in Iran you don't see that. Just like kids when they are dancing and they have special celebration for different occasions like New Year party, or other celebrations related to our customs, it's not religious, it's custom. Yeah, they wear those.

I: And did you say it was more common in the villages?

R: Yeah.

I: Than in the city?

R: Yeah, than the city. The villagers, they still, they wear those, but not in the city. But people in the city for, it's just some occasions they wear those too, yeah. It's because they're colorful and different. That's why they wear them.

I: So, did you wear any back in Iran?

R: No.

I: So, you didn't bring any over here or anything?

R: Actually, I brought one from when I was a kid, somebody gave it to me. And we used it in churches for celebrations. I donate to the place, so they used it, and that's it. My daughter, she's nineteen, she wore it once to take a picture, and she liked it, but she doesn't wear it anymore. She's older now; when she was young, she liked it so much. Yeah, just for fun [laughs].

I: So then, how did you meet your husband?

R: Actually, my husband is my second cousin, but he was here, and I was there. We didn't see each other for five, six years. And then he came to Iran to visit his family. And then we met, and we got married after a few months, yeah.

I: Yeah? So, it was a pretty quick process?

R: Pretty quick, yeah.

I: And then how soon after you got married did you come to the United States?

R: Actually, we went to Dominica for a few months for his education, and then after it was, we were there for almost fourteen months, and then we went back to Iran for a month just to visit our family, and then we came to states.

I: And then did you come right to Milwaukee?

R: Chicago. We went to Chicago and then we were there for three years. He was a student there; he was doing his residency, and then we had our first child over there, and then we moved here. He was a doctor at that time, so he had to work here. So, we've been here for a long time after that.

I: So, the moving of locations, that was related to his job?

R: His job, yeah.

I: Okay. Why did you live in the Dominican for fourteen months?

R: Dominica, because he was a student.

I: Okay!

R: He was a student. He was in medical school, so he came from there actually to Iran, and we met. He was in the states, and then we went to Dominica for like a year and a half, he was a student. Then he decided to come visit his family, and that's where we met. And then I went back there, we were there another year, and then we came to the states, actually for fourteen months after that, yeah.

I: So, who initiated the marriage?

R: Actually, our family, they talked, but we knew each other. When he came, I went to visit them, and we saw each other, and he asked his mom, can we talk about marriage, and then we ended up getting married [laughs]

I: So then, with your kids, I want to ask if you had any, because I know you have boys and a girl, if you raised them, if you tried to raise them equally, or if there were some things that you felt comfortable with your sons doing that not your daughters, or vice versa?

R: Actually, because my daughter is very mature, and very good, I feel so comfortable with her. I trusted her all the way, so she's very good. Of course, we, it's in our culture that we treat boys a little bit different, you know? But here it is not different, so I try to be same to her, but it's sometimes it end up, you do different, you know, to your son. You give them more freedom, maybe they can do whatever, but then for your daughter, you're more worried all the time. So that's how it was. But she's very good, so I'm happy that she's very mature and she has no problem, and she's in college now. So far, she's been very good.

I: Were your kids active in high school?

R: Yeah! She was very active. My daughter was the most active, and she was a student counselor for high school. And so, she was very active at that time, for two years at least, the last two years. She was doing organizing all the different occasions, like proms, you know, and stuff, so she was very active. And they pick her as a student counselor; she was there, head of the student counsel. Yeah, and she's still active in college too.

I: I want to ask about your associations here in Milwaukee. Do you have a certain place that you like to go and worship?

R: Yeah, there's a few places, but there's one place that I go. It's like, it's not church, but we gather, and we do our praying there, so that's nice that we have a place, and we gather.

I: Do you have a lot of friends here?

R: I do, I do have many friends since I moved here. I met them, and I'm still friends with them for like twenty two years, at least.

I: Okay. And are they also immigrants, or...?

R: They're all immigrant, yeah, they're all Iranian and they move here. Some of them, they move to Milwaukee before us, and some they after, like few years one or two years after. So, our kids are very, very close friends with them, like sister and brothers, they're very close. And we live, fortunately, we live very close to each other too. We live all on the North side, so the distances like one or two miles away from each other, so it has been good that we have each other. Like a small family like together, we get together once or twice a month. And if we don't have time, we do like potluck, we cook something, and we get together, and we enjoy it.

I: Do those women, do they wear the hijab?

R: No. No. Actually, I have one friend, she lives in, not in Milwaukee, she wears hijab, and not, no.

I: And so, do you feel, that the fact that you wear the hijab, does that create any sort of separation?

R: No. Not at all, no. We are all very close friends, like sisters sometimes, they have different ideas. I mean, I believe in that. I mean, each person can be different, even two people, maybe they're twins, but they live together, but they have different ideas. But most of the religious part,

we agree all. Like we do our praying, we do our fasting all together. I mean, we are all the same. Just hijab, maybe they're not comfortable having hijab here. It has nothing to do with personality. We like each other's personality, so we can be friends, I guess forever [laughs].

I: So then, yeah, for you, wearing the hijab, do you feel that it's harder to do it without having a support group of friends, or do you think that because it's closely tied with religion that you do it anyway?

R: Actually, they're good with it. They don't, they're supportive too, you know. They don't wear it, but they're supportive too, and they don't care that much that I have hijab, but they're okay with it. Yeah. So, I'm comfortable.

I: Okay! I think that's all I wanted to ask you today.

R: Thank you!