



Oral History Project Interview

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

Number of Interview: RA 18.00

September 20, 2012

Name: Lena

Gender: Female

Date of Birth: Unknown

Country of Origin: Pakistan

Year of Immigration: 1990's

Abstract: The interviewee chose to remain anonymous and will be referred to as "Lena." She was born and raised in Pakistan where she received her master's degree in sociology. During her interview, Lena talked about her fond memories of going to school in Pakistan and her eagerness to learn from her caring teachers. She initially came to the United States to visit her brother and after volunteering at Salaam School, Lena accepted an offer to teach at another school and stay in the United States. The remainder of her interview focused on the effects of 9/11 on the society around her, as well as the role cultural clothing plays in her everyday attire and special occasions such as weddings. She experiences feelings of comfort in her cultural clothing and describes her daughters' traditional weddings that both took place in Pakistan.

Key Themes: Education, career, culture, clothing, 9/11, teaching, arranged marriage, traditional wedding

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

I: I am conducting this interview on September 20th, 2013. Okay, so first I’d just like to start by asking you some general questions about your background. Where is your homeland?

R: It’s Pakistan, Lahar is the city.

I: And is this where you were born?

R: Yes.

I: And then can you tell me about places and building where you spent a lot of time during your childhood?

R: Like, my father was a government server and we used to get the like the official homes from the government. So, we were living there, and we were going to the government schools, and then we grew up then after, you know sometime my father and my mother they had a house they build it up because you, usually you have to get it constructed, so it was done like that and then we were living in our own house after that. Then, my father retired. Usually, our homes are like, for example, my house that where I was living was like five bedroom and five bathrooms, and it was double story and we had the living room and this is how it is, it wasn’t huge, but it was a very comfortable home. And usually, people over there they are not extraordinarily rich, but they like to have their own homes, and it’s a joint family system, people live together. When I got married, I lived with my in-laws where my sister in-laws were there, my brother in-laws were there, they were married they had their kids so we were living together like a big family.

I: How many siblings do you have?

R: I have two brothers.

I: Okay. So, can you tell me a little about your school when you were growing up?

R: We went to a school that was like in that colony where we were living, and it was the government school. And we went there, and we started from, like, kindergarten and I did my high school from there and it was like, it was a very nice school. It was a school building it was nice, teachers were really very caring, and I don't remember that there was any teacher who was like not teaching, she was, they were really concerned about our education. And I was kind of keen to learn so I did good in my class, and this is how I did my high school from there and that's it.

I: Did you go further in your education?

R: Yes, after that I went to college and basically in our society like so many years, thirty years ago or thirty-five years ago, people were like, if a girl is done the high school, she should get married. This is what my parents were thinking, but I wanted to go to college and learn some more and get some more education so I did my bachelors. And after that, my father didn't want me to go any further, but I wanted to do my masters, so he let me. And I did my masters, then it was not a good idea to work for women so many years ago, but I had asked my father that if I will do my masters I will go for a job as well. So, I started working and it was a very good experience. I mean it was it was not that many people in my family were working, but I was one of two or three who were working at that time.

I: What did you get your masters in?

R: I did my masters in sociology.

I: Okay. So, what kind of job were you working?

R: Basically, that sociology is kind of a research work that how to conduct a research. So, my first job was with a family planning association, and we conducted ourselves with the help of two or three doctors and in a clinic those women who get their surgery— what happens after they get it done, they are psychological, social, economic, and their family life, how it is going after the surgery. So that was around for a year we conducted interviews, we went and met them those

people, their families, how they were doing, what difficulties they were having, that was a very interesting job for me. That was my first job and after that I worked in the same when this research was over, I worked for the same company like, family planning association I was working as a PRO there, public relations officer and then I mean I was doing different kinds of jobs.

I: Yeah, where did you go to get this education, was it back in Pakistan?

R: Yes, in Pakistan.

I: Did you live in any other countries before coming to the U.S.?

R: No.

I: And what year did you immigrate to the U.S.?

R: I was living with my father after my mother died, and my father was planning to move to America with my younger brother because my elder brother was already here. And when my father was working on that, he wanted me to move to America also. So, that was a time when I started thinking about moving to America and then my brother, elder brother who was already here, he was very sick and I came to see him because I was the only sister, and I really wanted to see him, and he was really, really, very sick so when I came here the visa was for six months or something [phone ringing].

I: Do you want me to pause this?

R: Yes please. So, when I came here, my brother's wife was working in Salaam School and I was, you know my brother was feeling better and I just wanted to kill my time, so I started doing the volunteer work in Salaam School. And I was doing there and they just asked me if I'm interested in the work and I said okay, let me try. But by the time I decided, they had stopped some kind of immigration thing, so they sent me to another person. She knew the principal of their school, she asked me to go and meet another principal that was in downtown. So, I met that

lady and she right away hired me, and she said that I will get the job, but it will be after the summer break. But in the meantime, I had the time to process my visa and all that. But I had just come with a few things to be here for a little bit of time, but then I had to, you know I got the job, then I worked hard on it, this is how I started.

I: How old were you when all this was happening?

R: I was mother of two kids, the girls were with me, like I'm talking about– I was maybe forty, forty-five, at that time.

I: Okay. So, when did you get married?

R: I got married in 1980.

I: And how did you know your husband before you married him?

R: It was completely arranged marriage, I didn't know him.

I: So, can you kind of walk me through that arranged process, and how it was brought up to you and all that?

R: Usually, you know, when people want their son or daughter to get married, if they have some match in the family, they prefer that. But unfortunately, there wasn't any match in the family for me because of the age and then somebody, like my in-laws, they had asked somebody to find some girl for their son and they were our neighbors. So, the neighbors talked to my mom and asked if they like they can ask them to come and meet you guys, and then you can decide. So, this is how it actually started through different people. Then they came and my husband's mother, and her daughters, and son came and they met my family and all that so that was when they decided that yes, this is a good match.

I: Okay and what are your children's names and ages?

R: My daughter is like 28 and 30, two daughters. One is Sana and one is Aminah.

I: And what are their education levels?

R: Sana had done her high school and she went to college, but she has not completed her college. But the other daughter, the elder one, she got married she stopped going to school, and now she's doing her bachelors now, again. But the other daughter, because she has a son now, she is not working or she is not going to school.

I: Okay so did you work, you said you got the job at Salam School, when you immigrated to the U.S.?

R: Yeah, I was volunteering there but then I got the job with another school that is also a Muslim school.

I: So, what was your role at that other school? What was your job?

R: They hired me as a teacher.

I: Okay, what subject did you teach?

R: First of all, they started me with the middle school, and they wanted me to teach them English. And after that, I was not very comfortable with those middle school students, so I requested that if I can get you know, younger children. So, they gave me fifth grade after that, fifth grade all the subjects. And then, I just wanted to go through all different age levels, so I started with the first grade then, and I took the same children to first grade, second grade, and then third grade. Then I came back to first grade, so this is how like I'm still doing. Last year I was teaching K5 and then now the same kids are with me in first grade and next year I would like to go with them to the second grade like this. So, I'm with this school since eleven, twelve years I assume.

I: Okay so next we are going to move to questions about September 11th. Okay, so were you in the United States on September 11th?

R: Yes.

I: What do you remember from that day?

R: I was in school, we were having classes, and suddenly they the principal came to the classrooms, and she rushed and told us there has been some kind of incident and everybody has to come out the classroom and we have to watch the TV. So, the classrooms were all gathered in a masjid because it's a Muslim school, so we have a big hall there, everybody gathered there to turn on the TV, and they showed how this incident has happened and that was a very sad thing for all of us. We were all feeling really bad about it, and that was the time when, you know this was the first time when I realized that this thing should not have happened. There are so many things happening where this was. Those were innocent people, I mean they had done no harm to anybody, and those people who were in that plane, they all lost their lives and whatever they wanted to gain— I don't think they were right in doing that thing. That was very, very, sad thing to do. I don't think this is jihad, I'm not a scholar or anything, but I don't think Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, would have allowed such a thing if he was alive at this time. So, this is to me this is not jihad, definitely not.

I: Did the atmosphere at the school you teach at change at all after?

R: Because majority of the teachers are Muslims, the kids, majority of them are Muslims, and when we go out, we cover our heads this is the scarf we have to wear all the time in the school. But after September 11th there are some incidents where people, the women who stopped their car at red lights they were pulled out of the cars, and people beat them up. So, our Imam, who is the leader, he told the women if you don't want to wear your scarves just to be safe, you should not be wearing scarf when you are driving your cars. But when you enter the school, you can wear the scarf inside and not to wear outside, so that you are not harmed by those people who are really, really, aggressive and you know they are trying to show their anger but yes, we followed that.

I: So, this was happening near the school?

R: Not in the school, but the news that it is happening around. But I did not hear it on the TV or anything, but its word-of-mouth, people are doing this. So, this is what the Imam actually decided.

I: So, did a lot of the teachers follow that then?

R: Not all of them, they said that we don't want to go outside without the scarf. But I think for a day or two some, because it was a time when you really don't know what do, you know?

Everybody was so upset, so that's the reason that some of them did try to take their scarves off and tried to cover their head very casually, not the proper way you tie your scarf, so this is the change they managed.

I: And what was your personal decision when it came to that?

R: Basically, I do not wear scarf outside the school, so it wasn't any of my already.

I: Yeah, okay how did you feel at the time of 9/11 and the months that followed?

R: You know, at that time when it happened, it was like kind of feeling insecure that people will be thinking that we are with those people who did it because we are Muslims. And it was kind of scary, it was kind of sad for me, and it was like I wanted to, wanted people to know more about Islam and know more about what our teachings are. It's not what they see, you cannot generalize, okay if some people did something so all the Muslims are the same, no it's not like that. So, I wanted to convey this to different people, so this is how it started. Our Imam, he started those that were non-Muslim students and non-Muslim teachers, we had special classes for them so they could come and see that whatever happened had nothing to do with what Islam says. So that helped the other teachers to get whatever they had, some kind, so they feel better after listening to the Imam.

I: Did you, as teachers, kind of talk to the children? Like, I mean the younger children that didn't really understand what was going, did you talk to them and fill them in on everything going on?

R: Actually, the principal said that she will talk to everybody. So, she did that because she wanted that whatever is being told, it should be from one person so that there is no confusion—somebody saying something different. So, it was always that they gathered in the assembly hall, and she talked about it and the Imam talked about it most the time

I: Okay do you think now that we are in 2013 the mentality has changed from 9/11, do you think it's not as strong as it was before?

R: I think so it has changed, because to my understanding after that people have taken more interest in knowing our religion rather than before that, because when they were being told that this is— we do not call it a jihad. So, they started thinking what it is, who did it, why did they do it, so I think now more people know more about Islam and their teachings then before 9/11.

I: Okay, so I'm going to switch over to cultural clothing then. So, what are the names of the cultural and traditional clothing that you normally wear?

R: Right, this is we call kameez, this is we call shalwar, and this is we call dupatta, so these are the three pieces that we wear. And there is another dress that usually Indians wear it called a sari. It's one big long cloth, and we wrap it around, and then this thing is side of it is on your shoulder and you can cover you head, and you can wrap it around yourself. So, that is basically two main dresses. But for the wedding the bride she has to wear a different kind of, they are usually two kinds one is called lehenga, that is one like a big skirt its very loose big skirt, and then there is a short shirt on it, and then the big scarf on the head. And another one is we called it gharara, it has not just one skirt, it has two legs, but they are very loose. But you wear it in different two legs, and then again, the short shirt and the same dupatta. So, these are usually the wedding dresses. I can show you in the picture what I mean, and this is but the others, the other guests they can

wear shalwar kameez, they can wear a sari, but usually there is lot of embroidery on it or a lot of stuff that makes it very sparkly. So, that is the part of our wedding dresses.

I: So, the three pieces that you're wearing right now, is this something you'd wear just on a daily basis?

R: Everyday, yes.

I: And what about the man at a wedding, what does he normally wear?

R: In Pakistan, usually they were the same shalwar like us, but its white and then they have the shirt that is not like very long, it's a loose shirt. Full sleeves, loose shirt, and they wear it. And then, they wear, the groom has to wear something over it that is kind of a very fine cloth. And then, he was to wear a big hat on his head and that is special dresses, for the groom. And usually, men over there in the office they were pants and shirts, but at home, when they come home, they were the shalwar and a kind of a shirt.

I: Okay, so is there any kind of special meaning behind what the bride and the groom wear? Is there any special meaning to it?

R: It is the just the tradition.

I: Tradition, yeah. Okay, so how do you feel when you wear them? Maybe the everyday three pieces.

R: We feel very comfortable.

I: Yeah, does it play a role in kind of keeping you connected to where you were born?

R: Kind of, yes. But because we are so used to wearing these dresses, like we feel at home when we are wearing these. Like whenever I come back from work, if I'm wearing pants and a shirt, I would like to change it right away. But if I'm wearing shalwar kameez, okay, I will change it at night.

I: Do your daughters wear them too then?

R: Not that often, no.

I: And were your daughters born in Pakistan?

R: Yes.

I: Okay, and why is the cultural clothing so important to you?

R: Because we have been wearing these forever. And another thing is that it covers us properly, compared to the pants and the shirts. And this is the only two reason I like, but I don't mind wearing the western dresses– not the dresses, dresses, but pants and shirts. I wear the sweaters and all that, but I feel more comfortable in these clothes. But when we go out, I prefer to wear pants because I'm sure that people, when they look at us, not everybody is that they don't care, some people do care and they just give us a look. I don't think is a good idea to wear these dresses to go out.

I: So, you said one of your daughters is married right now, or both of them?

R: Both of them are married, but one is divorced. Her husband is in Pakistan, and she was here, he doesn't want to come here she doesn't want to go back so they divorced.

I: Okay, so what were their weddings like? Were they very traditional too?

R: Very traditional.

I: Yeah, were they both here in the United States?

R: No, we went back to Pakistan.

I: Okay. And why do you think, why did you choose to go back to Pakistan for the wedding?

R: Because the groom could not come here, he didn't have a visa.

I: For both of your daughters?

R: No one my son-in-law was already here, he was working here so I preferred because my elder daughter was having problems going back and coming, you know, and the husband didn't want to come here. And then they had, you know, clashes, so I thought it's better if I find somebody here who doesn't have that problem.

I: Yeah, so what did you daughter's wedding gowns look like?

R: Very traditional, the same gharara, or lehenga. One of them wore gharara, one of them wore lehenga, so it's very traditional. My elder daughter wore a red color, but my younger one wants lighter colors. So, it was kind of beige and green but it was all full with work, all very sparkly work on it.

I: Where do you usually get these kinds of dresses?

R: There are very special shops where we can get those.

I: Is it back in Pakistan?

R: Yes, but it is available in Chicago too.

I: Okay, and does religion play a role in how you dress?

R: Kind of yes, we are supposed to be— our body should be covered, and nobody should be able to see the woman's curves, you know. We are not wearing something over our clothes, but still the clothes are not very tight. It is better if you wear those.