



## Oral History Project Interview

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

Number of Interview: HH 1.00

Date: 11/09/16

Gender: Female

Name: Hedaya Hassan

Country of Origin: Palestine

Year of Immigration: Born in the U.S.

**Abstract:** Hedaya Hassan is a 27 year-old Muslim Palestinian woman who teaches second grade at Salam Elementary, an Islamic school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Married with one daughter who is 4, Hassan speaks about what it was like to spend the majority in war-torn Palestine with an enormous family of over 100 cousins. She recalls incidents of late night intrusions from Israeli soldiers who would bang on the door in the middle of the night/early morning hours to make sure the residents were legal and if there was any evidence of participation/involvement in the war. She also recalls the severe anxiety attacks she suffered when she would see any police in uniform regardless of the Palestinian/Israeli origin. However, she believes growing up surrounded by this has contributed to strengthening her as person. After moving back to the United States one year after 9/11, she explains how scared her family members were to leave the house following the attacks. Being a second-grade teacher, Hassan shares what it is like to be able to help her students who have come from countries with war and she likes being able support her students that are struggling with the transition to The States or whose families have been separated while coming to the US. Coming from a well-educated family and having two brothers working as doctors, she believes strongly in the importance of education. She says that both she and her husband's family support discourse and debate challenging different ideas and traditions. She hopes to instill this quality in her daughter by surrounding her with diversity and encouraging her to ask questions so that she will grow up to be a well-rounded and open-minded person. She has hopes that her daughter will grow up to be a good Muslim woman, but she also realizes that a child is like a seed and a parent's job is to nurture/aid in healthy growth but after that, the rest is out of her control. In light of Donald Trump's recent election, she worries for her daughter's future because of the xenophobic rhetoric surrounding his campaign pared with the enormous numbers of supporters.

**Key Themes:** Palestine, 9/11, family, marriage, identity, parenting, education

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

I: So, I would like to start off the interview by asking you a few general questions about your background. What is your name, age, and your level of education?

R: My name is Hedaya Hassan and I am 27 years old, I am a teacher.

I: Okay, and what is your level of education?

R: Bachelor's Degree.

I: Where?

R: UW Milwaukee.

I: When you were growing up where did you go to school, like grade school?

R: Grade school, I was raised part of my life in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I moved to Palestine, that is where my parents come from. I came back when I was in high school.

I: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about the places and buildings where you spent a lot of your time during your childhood?

R: I spent a lot of time in Palestine, honestly. I lived there for almost 10 years.

I: Wow.

R: It was very difficult living there because of the war, there is war there. So, it is not like there are lots of places you go to. It was mainly, I lived in a small town where you really couldn't go much the city because of the war, you would stay very limited. So, I went to schools there, I spent it playing with my cousins. I have tons of cousins, over 100 I have. So, these are--this is like how--

I: Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like to spend most of your childhood in Palestine?

R: What was it like you said?

I: Mhm, with the war.

R: It was really nice, but it was also, well I guess because I grew up with it wasn't as difficult but at first I used to have anxieties every time I saw a police officer. Whether if it was like a Palestinian one or Israeli one because that's who we are having a war with, I would just start having anxieties and start throwing up. It wasn't easy seeing these kind of people. You know, police or soldier. It was very- but it was at the same time living in the small town you didn't experience the war as much it was more targeting cities, big cities versus you know small towns.

However, they did, they would sometimes come and go inside the house at 2 am the Israeli soldiers will come to your house and check to see if you are legal there, or if you have anything, if you are participating in the war. And that was really, you know, tough on us I would say as a kid waking up at 3 am, 4 am and sometimes you wouldn't know when they are going to be just, coming to pound on your door and coming in. So that was, kind of, not easy. But at the same, time as I said, because I was brought up with it, it made me a strong person. That later on as I grew up it became something, whatever.

I: Okay so can you tell me a little bit about what it was like being Muslim in these different places, like being Muslim in Palestine?

R: It was really- because majority there are Muslims, there are a lot of Christians there in Palestine but you know it's easy you have the freedom of course to practice freedom and it was easy and it was like as I said everyone covers and practiced the religion so it wasn't anything that was like...

I: Different?

R: Different. It was different when I came here! (laughs)

I: Can you tell me a little bit about your job? When you started teaching and your experiences so far?

R: So, this is my 5th year so far. I started here before I graduated as a teacher assistant. This is my 4th year of being a lead teacher. Everything at first is hard. I love it, I love being with the kids I love being with the community kids because many of these kids come from places where they had wars just like my childhood. Many of these kids immigrated here and not all of their family members came with them. I actually had a student last year where it was only her and her dad who were able to come to the States. They are absolutely, they have no communication with her mom or her brother who are left in Thailand. So, I love being with these kids and experiencing, you know, sometimes trying to make them be stronger people.

I: What would you say was the most impactful experience you have had here, like with the kids?

R: Coming to me and we do not have a counselor in the building. And they have no one at home because the dad has to work to provide for that specific child so that specific child after school they go to a daycare where they are completely strangers. So, I feel, you know, I feel the honor of some of these kids coming to me, my kids coming to me, telling me you know things that's bothering me. As I said the student that I had last year, she would cry non-stop. She was a second

grader. And she was not K4 or K5 she is 7 and 8 she would start crying non-stop to the facility and she wouldn't use her words, no words. She would tell me what is making her sad, what is making her cry. Was she overwhelmed because of like the English language barrier? After that first quarter in school, she started opening up to me, in very broken English, because she would be using her words to, she would tell me sometimes, "I'm hungry, I didn't have breakfast." You know? And just having, you know the opportunity to let them open up to me, that meant a lot. And I did feel like, you know, making her comfortable talking to me about things that happened at home. Then I suggested later on, taking her to a professional counselor and she started using, you know, more words and expressing more about her feelings which was great, you know? From someone who did not really talk at all the first few months to someone who would come and tell me how happy they were at home or how happy they are feeling at school or things about their mom. You know, memories that she had with her mom the year before. Because she came straight to my class. So, I felt that was...

I: Pretty special.

R: Pretty special.

I: Okay, so can you tell me a little bit about your marriage? Like who you're married to, how long...

R: I have been married for eight years; I can't believe that.

I: Oh my gosh!

R: (Laughs) I told my husband, "I can't believe I've been with the same person for 8 years!" He's a lovely guy, we met in college. He was in the engineering school, and I was going through the PA route but then I changed to education because I didn't see myself as a PA or in the medical field, I see myself more teaching and being with kids and impacting them. That's how we met, we met in one of the UWM science buildings. We met and talked a couple times and then he, you know the traditional way, we don't date in my religion, so we came and asked my parents for my hand, in the way it works, so we can sit and talk. That's what we call the engagement period, and you take your time and get to know the person and then if you think you want to go through with the marriage, then you get married but if you think you're not ready, just go your separate way. And well, he's a really great guy, he supports me. As I said I was only 19 when we met so I was really really young and I told him education was really important to me, I don't think I want to have kids right away. I want to wait until I graduate. And he said,

“Absolutely, take as much time, as many years as you need to achieve your dream.” I come from a very educated family of you know, my dad is a pharmacist, my mom is a teacher, I have two brothers who are doctors, so education is something that is very important to us. And I graduated when I was 9 months pregnant.

I: Wow. Right on time!

R: Right on time.

I: In your culture, is the tradition of the dowry practiced?

R: Yes, we have dowry. However, a lot of people, like I didn't ask for money beforehand because I don't believe in that necessarily, but I feel that it is the right to the woman, of course.

I: Okay did you husband offer you a dowry when you agreed to marry?

R: Yes, that's something that's part of the--when you do it officially, they ask you whether or not and how much and you set it up as I said, you have to put in an amount, and it could be as small as \$1 and that is what I chose to do.

I: One dollar?

R: Yeah, that is what I chose to do and then he can buy you whatever and I feel I shouldn't get money to marry someone.

I: So, what do you think the dowry-- so the dowry to you doesn't mean as much as it does to other people?

R: Yes, because you know, some people in case of we separate, or we get a divorce that's when I get a big amount from him. As long as we are together, money should not be a factor, to me. But to other people, they think that's my right let me you know, ask for it.

I: So, were you parents involved when setting the amount of the dowry? I have talked to some women whose parents have been involved.

R: Yes, most of the time parents will be involved, we do get married at younger ages where we are not getting married in our late twenties. So, parents feel, “okay our daughter is still young, let's set the amount we know better what's in her favor.” However, as I said my parents are very open-minded where we discuss things and they're the ones that raised me that way. They're the ones who were like, “okay, money's not everything, money can come and go.”

I: So, do you have a daughter?

R: Mhmm.

I: So, would this be something that you would take into account at the time she wants to get married?

R: Of course. Because, again, I don't think you can buy money with happiness. In fact, I don't think it should be one of the rights. In fact, you know, one of the rights that my parents made sure my husband understands is him treating me nicely and never doing anything to harm me or to harm my feelings. It was more about me than just let him put lots of money. Some people they think let me just put lots of money for the dowry when that person puts a lot of money (in the dowry) he is going to be very careful because when you buy an expensive car, you're really really careful not to do anything to that car. You're really careful with it. But we think that I am not a thing that can be bought you know? Does that make sense? So, you know they put these kinds of restrictions on him, let her finish education, she should always have a say in whatever decision you're making instead of okay put lots of money, yes.

I: Can you tell me a little bit about your children, like their names and ages?

R: I only have one daughter and she is-- her name is Malak and she is going to be 4 next month.

I: That's exciting. Is she excited?

R: Very, she asks me about her birthday every single day. And she you know she is asking for a big birthday because it is her fourth golden birthday. So, she's really excited about it. She's a very good girl however she has her own personality. She argues if she has a point about something she loves to prove her point. And I know she is still too young, but I guess that's the way that I was brought up. Even my husband's family they brought their kids up to always if you have a point, you should argue it and convince us, and I don't believe like in hypocrite parent where I tell her, "oh you just gotta do this." And sometimes it goes that way, sometimes where we reach nowhere, I don't let her do things my way.

I: And since she's four she's in preschool?

R: Yes, she goes to Apple School Academy Preschool Learning. It's a private school she loves it.

I: Is it an Islamic school?

R: No.

I: No? Okay.

R: It's actually a private school that belongs to a church. And the reason, I really want my daughter to be exposed to other things I don't want her to be limited. You know? Because again that's how my parents were with me, and I don't want her to be close-minded. Because at the end

of the day, we do believe in Islam, and I always talk to her about Islam, and she is in a couple Islamic programs but I really want her to be exposed to and be with diverse kids to learn because I feel that's going to create a great person when you're dealing with people from different backgrounds and different religions.

I: Definitely. So, the next couple questions are going to be about your culture and how you define yourself.

R: Okay.

I: Which is pretty open-ended. How would you identify yourself? What cultures do you most identify yourself with?

R: Um...

I: Like in terms of religion, culture, nationality, and so forth.

R: So, I am Palestinian, like I know I was born here, and I don't have the citizenship for Palestine, but I do consider myself to be American and Palestinian first, so I think that I adapted both cultures, the American culture and the Palestinian culture. I don't consider myself to be 100% doing everything that I was brought up in the Palestinian culture same thing with the American culture. I really try to choose what is good from both cultures.

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

R: I always try to change for the best. I never think you should have a mindset where you say, "oh okay, this is who I am, and people should accept me the way I am." I always say if you can change for what's better, you should do it no matter what you are, no matter what your beliefs are, you should always work to change yourself to be the best. So, I don't really have a problem changing if you now and again if you can convince me to do so. I always willing to learn I am always willing to change for what's better.

I: Okay are there any traditions of the Palestinian culture that you practice? Like food recipes.

R: Oh yeah that's something my husband said when we first got married. I didn't know how to cook, and he was like, "if you want to make me happy, you gotta do it through my stomach and you gotta learn how to cook the Palestinian dishes." He's a really good cook and he's the one that taught me how to make it his way, so we mainly cook Palestinian dishes.

I: Do you guys cook together?

R: We do if he's home and sometimes if he's home earlier than me, he has two jobs, so he works two shifts, so sometimes it's really hard for him to stand in the kitchen and cook because I'm

waiting for him. But sometimes if he gets home earlier than me, he has no problem making a meal, you know?

I: Do you follow any food restrictions?

R: Yes, we of course don't eat anything with pork or bacon that's a part of our religion or anything that has alcohol in it.

I: What is your favorite food?

R: Oh boy, I really love pizza, I really love spaghetti. So, Italian food. Which is funny because when we first got married all I wanted to go to dinner was Italian restaurants and it's really funny because my husband was like, "oh my god, I'm over Italian restaurants!" I love pastas, I love pizza. When it comes to Arabic food, I love rolled grape leaves that's my favorite Palestinian dish. I guess so, I have more than one. I'm being like my second graders when I ask them about their favorite thing, I can't decide one food.

I: What ways in any do you participate in religious or cultural community activities?

R: So, we Eid, that's our religious holiday, we have. I always makes sure to take my daughter and even my husband and he makes sure to take off for that day, we are off, I am off because of where I work. It's an Islamic school so we go there, and we make sure to go to that Eid prayer, where all the community members are there. All of the community barbeques, festivals, I make sure I participate in that, and I take my daughter.

I: How would you describe your religious life? Do you attend the mosque on a regular basis?

R: No (laughs) I am very, very busy however, I do pray 5 times a day. And what is so cool about our religion is that you don't have to go to the mosque to be a religious person. I try to go to lectures whenever I have the time. But I am busy, but I don't go daily but I am a practicing Muslim. I pray 5 times a day that's what every Muslim should do. I do fast during Ramadan, I do read the Quran, so I do try to practice it, but when it comes to going to the mosque every day, I don't do it.

I: You're a busy woman. What languages do you speak?

R: Arabic and English.

I: And the Arabic that you speak is the Palestinian Arabic?

R: Yes, it is the Palestinian accent.

I: Okay so your parents were raised in Palestine and you grandparents were as well?

R: Right.



I: Okay, so are your cousins still living in Palestine?

R: No, I only have one uncle that lives and his family lives here. But most of them came here for either work or they got married here. Then came for work, education. So, most of them are here? Very few of my family still lives there. My mom's side of the family lives in Wisconsin and my dad's side lives in Pennsylvania.

I: So, you guys are kinda split?

R: Yes, almost everyone is here now.

I: Do you still keep in contact with the small amount of family that is still in Palestine?

R: Not really. It's really hard with the time changing. But on Facebook I guess we do.

I: It's easier to do over Facebook, that's really helpful. Do you read the daily newspaper? Or like on your phone?

R: Yeah, I do.

I: What sections do you like the best?

R: The crossword puzzle (laughs). No, I mean, I like politics and reading about things around us because I'm always curious about what's going on. I also like the economic section.

I: Mhmm, it is interesting. How would you describe your political participation in the U.S.? Do you vote for just the presidential election, or do you vote in the congressional, senate?

R: No, I really like to go vote when there is a chance because I feel like every vote counts and yeah that's the least I can do. That's about it though.

I: Did you vote yesterday?

R: I did, and I was really bummed out when I like...

I: Yeah, last night was tough.

R: It was tough.

I: When it comes to candidates who are from your own culture or religion (which it doesn't happen too much here) but how would that affect your decision? Like if someone was running for office that was Muslim or Palestinian.

R: I will never look at whoever is running about their background you know? Whether they are Muslims, Jews, Christians, in fact when Sanders ran, he's Jewish and as I said, we have clashes between us and the Israeli people, and they're Jews too. So, I didn't take into account, oh we're in a war with them, I always look at the mentality of the person running, what is he going to bring to us as Americans aside from other things. So, if that Muslim person or Palestinian person

running if he's a great person, to me, he's going to bring great things for the country, I will vote for him. If he's not, I don't think I am going to give him my vote.

I: So, with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict do you do any sort of awareness, like do you participate in any organizations here to help with the political situation there?

R: I kinda do and I don't. There's this organization called MAS, Muslim American Society. They basically work on lots of the conflicts that affect the Muslim countries and affect the Muslims in different countries and under this organization there is the AMP, I don't know if you know or if you heard of it (American Muslims for Palestine). So, in fact, they have conventions. I always try to attend these conventions where they always talk about how we can improve the situation in Palestine. So, there is a convention at the end of this month around Thanksgiving time.

I: Were you in the United States during the Gulf War?

R: No.

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

R: No.

I: 9/11? You were in Palestine?

R: Yes, I was still in Palestine, but I came the year after.

I: Did you feel any repercussions?

R: My brothers, they were here for college and my cousins were here and we were really really terrified of the outcome that's going to affect the outcome of the family that's already here.

I: Where did you get your support after that?

R: Nowhere. With each other but nowhere. With my cousins, they were scared to leave their houses because of them covering. They would let their husbands go because you can't really tell if that person is Muslim or not, but she was like, "we were terrified." I have cousins who live in New York and Jersey, they said that we were really, really scared to go anywhere. And it's all about the media and the media was everywhere and was like all about, "oh my god it's Muslims" when something bad happened they directed it towards Muslims, not the extremists that do bad things.

I: So, what are some cultural understandings of Muslim men and women in marriage?

R: Cultural understanding of...?

I: Like women's roles in marriage.

R: We do believe in the man having the, he is the um, how can I say it, I don't want to say that the man is dominate but we do believe that the man is the superior when it comes to marriage. And woman in the relationship and the reason we believe that the men have the superiority is because when it comes to emotions. Not decisions, but emotions and the way that sometimes the way us women, we tend to be a little bit more emotional when it comes, that is just a natural thing, I guess. Women are more emotional than men and sometimes people can interpret that wrong where they think that oh because he is a man, he gets to do whatever he wants to do but that is not what Islam meant when they said that they are superior. They meant that emotionally sometimes you need someone to help you need both, but they are stronger when it comes to emotions that's what I wanna say. We don't believe that they should be the decision makers, or it should be an equal voice but at the same time, they tend to be stronger emotionally than us. And sometimes you just need someone to be there and to have a backbone supporter I guess in the relationship.

I: How does your culture deal with dating? Not a thing?

R: Not okay. That--yeah.

I: How do you think the internet like Facebook and social media have helped to made it easier for Muslim and Arab men to get to know each other, do you think it's helped?

R: Oh yeah, it helped a lot. Because now people are talking through Facebook, you know they are messaging or even phones they are messaging over the phone and there is nothing wrong with that as long as you are not going alone with that person to a place that it's the both of you.

I: So, you think that it has made it easier for people to find each other and that communication has helped?

R: Yes definitely.

I: Okay let's see, okay so parenting. Are you planning on having more kids or just your daughter?

R: I am planning on having one or two.

I: Okay, what are the major issues that you are concerned about with your daughter?

R: Living under this crazy world. I woke up to really bad news today. And I do believe that's it's not up to the person that people elected, it's not only him but the fact that so many people voted for someone like him that scares me. Like people around us now having this mentality in 2016 is really scary to me. You know?

I: In what ways do you think that boys should be raised differently than girls?

R: I'm going to apply the same rules that I apply to my daughter to my son as well. Yeah.

I: Okay so we have one minute left. I'm sorry, there are so many questions. Can you tell me a little bit about why you decided to wear the hijab?

R: I decided to wear the hijab because I think for modesty. I shouldn't show my beauty for anyone, it's kind of like my protection. Hijab is protection and also, it's something that you are asked to do in the Quran. I some people say that you have the freedom to decide, I don't believe in that. Being a Muslim of course, I am not judging anyone else. But in Islam, in Quran it's one of your things that you are obligated to do to wear the hijab to be modest. It's like you know asking you to pray or fast we do this as Muslims, it's the same. It's one of the things we've been asked to do. Some people don't pray, some people don't fast, in any religion. You can practice everything but in what-what's-you know it's something that you have been asked to do so I have been trying this.

I: When did you decide to start wearing the hijab?

R: You should start wearing the hijab when you first get your period. That means that you are old enough, you are going to start getting sins and you know good deeds and I first decided to wear it when I was 14 years old.

I: Do you think that you will encourage your daughters to wear it?

R: Oh yeah definitely.

I: And if she had push back or said that she didn't want to do you think that would be something that be tough or?

R: Definitely. But all you can do as a parent is teach your kids and bring them up to something. It's like a seed you do what you have to do to make it grow the healthy way and then when they grow up...

I: It's out of your hands?

R: It's out of your hand. You do the thing when you're young. I'm trying to bring her up and explain to her a little more about religion and why we do things that we do. And maybe when she grows up, she...

I: Do you think that men and women are held to different modestly standards when it comes to like, women wearing the hijab, do you think they are being held to the same standard?

R: No, because women can be more attractive than men with your hair, doing your hair or showing parts of your body. You are more attractive to men more than when men are showing their hair or showing specific parts of their body. And that's how I feel. That's why they are not held to the same standards. That's why women cover, and men don't cover.

I: Do you think that that's fair?

R: I do because I feel, again, females are more attractive than males and that's why it's that way.

I: Okay just some closing questions. Is there anything else you would like to add, like anything we didn't cover?

R: Hmm not really.

I: Okay do you think that there are any particular services that the Arab and Muslim Research and Resource Institute should provide for the needs of your community?

R: I'm not really familiar with that. I know there is the Research Institute here, I should be I guess more active and look it up more. I am not really familiar with what they do and the things they don't do. So, I really can't answer that.

I: So, do you have any other family or friends you think we should interview?

R: Are you just interviewing women or interviewing both?

I: We are kind of expanding but any Arab or Muslim woman who immigrated here or whose parents immigrated here.

R: You are interested in those? Let me think.

I: If so, you could even send me their contacts.

R: Yes, I could ask them and text you.

I: Okay that would be perfect. Okay well thank you for your time and energy and for sharing your experiences with me.

R: You're welcome. I hope I was...

I: You were great! Yeah, you have given us valuable information about your life and your history and stuff like that so thank you for doing this.

R: Thank you for your time.

I: Of course.