



Oral History Project Interview

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

Number of Interview: SP 1.00

Date: 1/17/13

Gender: Female

Name: Rawan (name changed to protect interviewee confidentiality)

Country of Origin: India

Year of Immigration: 1976

Abstract: Rawan, though she identifies herself first and foremost as a Muslim woman, was born and raised in Kolkata, India and is currently an American citizen living in the Brookfield area. Rawan immigrated to the United States in 1976 to live with her new husband, who was a practicing pharmacist in the Chicago area. Rawan wears clothing that identifies with the Pakistani and Indian cultures. She prefers loose and modest shirts and dresses, along with her scarf. This is not only the clothing that she is comfortable in, but also the clothing she believe is religiously important. Throughout the interview, Rawan stresses that the choice to wear modest clothing and a scarf to cover her hair is not because of pressure from her husband or her family, but for Allah. All four of her daughters have made the decision to wear the scarf with more modern clothing as well. The aspect of clothing that is important for Rawan isn't the exact shirt or pants that are worn, but that her daughters have learned and exercised the principle of modesty in their faith. Rawan is an active and vocal member of her community.

Key themes: Religion, parenting, modesty, cultural clothing, equality

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

I: Where is your homeland? Where are you from?

R: It's in India. Kolkata.

I: Is it like a big city or a small village?

R: It is one of the biggest cities in the world [both laugh].

I: Did you go to school there?

R: Yes.

I: How much school did you go through?

R: I did college also. I got my BA in Psychology and Political Science. Yeah. My mother tongue is Urdu. It's a language. One of the languages there. But I read Arabic also.

I: And what did your father do?

R: My father was a businessman.

I: And when did you come to the United States?

R: [laughs] My husband was here in Chicago. At that time, he was doing pharmacy. And after pharmacy he went [to India] in '75 and then we got married. And we came back like, maybe the first month of 1976 in Chicago.

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

R: No. I was in India [laughs].

I: Okay. India to the U.S. And how did you and your husband meet? Was it an arranged marriage?

R: Actually, it was an arranged marriage, but we knew each other. Like, my husband's father and [my father], they were friends and we knew each other. But, you know? My parents and his parents, they suggested it, and then we liked each other.

I: Okay. Okay. Did you drive at all? Did you learn how to drive in India and everything like that?

R: Actually, I had a driver.

I: Yeah?

R: Yeah, yeah! We had a driver and I never had to, you know, I never used any bus or taxi because we had a driver and car.

I: And in the big cities it is really crowded, huh?

R: It is very crowded. It is very hard to drive also there, in Kolkata.

I: So, you live now in a little bit more of a rural area, do you like the city better?

R: Yeah!

I: Yeah?

R: Actually, when I came to Chicago, and my brother-in-law actually, he sponsored my husband. At that time, we lived for a while with him. We had a very good bond of families. And at that time, he was in a suburb, one of the suburbs of Chicago. And I really liked that. Because I had come from Kolkata which was very crowded. But of course, I used to miss my parents and relatives. But slowly I got adjusted.

I: Yeah. So, what brought you guys from Chicago up to Milwaukee?

R: Oh, after being pharmacist he worked for a few years, and after we had two children my husband, he decided to go for a medical degree. In my husband's family, many of them are doctors, physicians, and he had in his mind that when the opportunity would come, he would do that. So, he went to Caribbean at that time, and then he did medicine. And then for residency, in psychiatry, he got residency in Milwaukee, so we came here in 1986, '85 I think, no '86. At that time, this daughter was born. I was expecting her [laughs]. We used to live on the north side before, and then during residency we changed a few houses, and about twenty years ago we bought this house.

I: And do you love this house?

R: Yeah, yeah. All the neighborhood and everything is very good, yeah. I like it here.

I: Did you have any ideas; did coming to the United States kind of meet your expectations? Did you have any expectations of what it would be like? Had your husband told you any stories or anything?

R: Actually, in India, or usually in Muslim and Asian countries, there is a different family concept. And here it was totally different, you know? But thank God that when I came here, my mother-in-law, my brother-in-law, he is also a physician. My mother-in-law, she used to live with him. And then we came, and then after one child we got separate house. So, this, it was a blessing for me really. Because when I see here, it is a different culture, you know? The family is separated.

I: So, you felt fortunate to come and to be surrounded by family?

R: Yeah, yeah.

I: Okay. So, do you know how far back, your husband, how far back his family came to the United States? Is he from India too?

R: Yeah, my husband is also. I told you that his father and my father were friends.

I: They knew each other, yeah.

R: Yeah, so yeah. And I have four brothers. So, one of the brothers, he is also in Chicago. And my husband's cousin and brothers, they live there in Chicago. So, we used to go to each other and have a good time. So, it was not very, not very unusual like, I was thinking that they were so distant and it's so far and I would be alone. It was not that.

I: Coming to Milwaukee you mean?

R: Yeah, so it was good.

I: It's a little bit of a drive but it's not too bad.

R: Yes.

I: Okay. Did you work at all before you came to the United States? Did you work in India?

R: [laughs] No.

I: Do you work now?

R: [laughs] No. I have five children. And my husband, he was more happy to take care of the children, to give time to them. So, it's also necessary for us to give them religious, you know, education to them. So, I tried to fulfill those kinds of things. Like I used to, when they were, you know young, I used to take them to soccer, this like basketball, soccer, this kind of activities, also. But at the same time, I used to go to Islamic center also, for my children so that they get Arabic education and Islamic education. And at the same time, I also tried my best to teach them our language, our culture, and first tell them our religion, Islam. And we are born Muslim. You know?

I: Mhmm.

R: So, this was a priority for us.

I: Mhmm. So-

R: My children, they also speak Urdu. Fluently, and they know Arabic. At least we are supposed to know Arabic, so we can at least, at least, we can read our holy book. And the second step to understand. I also know, Quranic Arabic, which I learned in India. Though, when the Arabic language, when they speak with each other I get lost. But I understand my Holy Book, the Quran. I understand that. And I try my best to teach them also.

I: Thank you. Thank you for sharing that with me.

R: [laughs] You're welcome.

I: So, you have five children! What are their ages, what do they do?

R: Okay. My oldest daughter, she is married, she's in Dallas. And the second daughter, she is in Houston. She is also married; she has two children. And the first one is expecting now– the oldest. And my son, he is in the middle. He is an attorney.

I: He's where?

R: He's an attorney! He's a lawyer!

I: Here?

R: Yeah!

I: Oh, okay!

R: Actually, he also went to Marquette. And then for law, he went to Minnesota. And now he goes to downtown, he is practicing law there. And my third daughter is this, who's doing Masters in International Affairs and Policies. This is her last semester– she will be done. She is going to Madison. And my youngest daughter, she finished her BA's, and now she is preparing for medicine– MCAT Exam.

I: Oh wow! Wow! All of your kids... did your first two daughters, they went all the way to Texas, that is so far away! [Both laugh] Did they go to college, and do they work?

R: Yeah! Both of them; they have done their bachelor's degree. But, after you know, getting married, they were engaged in their life. But they had plan to go for further education, but they are like BA's, have done their BA's degree.

I: And having a family is such a special thing that...

R: Like about two weeks ago, this winter break, we all went there.

I: Yeah?

R: Uh huh!

I: That must be nice because it is so warm!

R: And sometimes they come.

I: That's nice. So, education. Would you feel that education is something that is really important?

R: Very important.

I: Yeah?

R: Yes. In my family, like, they are you know, my husband's, all of my brothers, they have, their training is towards literature also. You know? They are masters in English, Urdu, and they, you know? Like this, kind of. And my husband's brother, he is a neurologist, and all of his cousins, they are doctors. And their children also! They are doctors. So, physicians, there are many physicians in our family.

I: Oh yeah. A lot a lot. Um, so, how would you describe, like, your normal day?

R: Oh yeah, my normal day, like when I you know, like in Islam, we are supposed to, in a practicing Muslim, for practicing Muslims, I am telling you. It is obligatory that we pray five

times. So, when I get up at the...you know...before sunset you could say. I pray, and then I read my Holy Quran. And do, you know, like some...like remembering Allah. Remembering God. And then I do my breakfast. And we cook, and you know we cook at home at least at nighttime, at the dinner time, we have all of us, we have, and we have dinner together and at home. Sometimes, of course, we get from outside also, but it is norm, our family life. And my husband, he goes to Milwaukee County, recently he got retirement, but, part-time he is doing work. He is doing part-time. So, when he comes, we wait, and when my children are available, we love to eat together.

I: And sit down all together.

R: Yeah, and our prayer also. Like me and my husband, we remind them to do that. So, after we go from this world, it remains with them. And also you know, you saw my dress; we try to follow them, like going to follow also, my daughters.

I: Be a good model.

R: Yeah, yeah. Though they wear dresses like pants and shirts, but we are not supposed to expose ourselves. And also, my daughter, I have four daughters, when they go out, in front of men, they are supposed to wear a scarf. So, they do that.

I: Can you tell me what the scarf means to you, and to what you've tried to help your children with?

R: Okay. It's like a...it's a kind of modesty. Like you can see in any religion, even in Christianity, when you will see Mary, she is covered. But by days and time, people forget, but in our religion, like in Islam, we are supposed to cover. And there's no, there's nothing like in Israeli, I'm supposed to wear this. This is called? But the only thing is that we are supposed to

cover – this is important. Like, if I wear dresses like you, it's fine. But we are not to expose ourselves. That's the difference. And this is like cultural dress, which is very modest, and I like it. I usually, when I go out, I wear my jacket and a scarf. But my daughters, when they go out, they wear modest dress and also a scarf. This is important. So, me and my husband, and me because I was at home, so this was my duty, that I tried to instill these kinds of things in them. And, uh, I can say by the help of God, I could do this. They have tried to practice.

I: Thank you. Thank you for sharing that. So, is there an Islamic center close by? Do you have to travel far?

R: Actually, from the beginning, I used to go to ISOM which is on Layton. That is the main, you know, center. So, I go there. But there are also some that are on the North Side. And there are two actually in the South Side, but usually I go, like every Friday I go to ISOM. It is called Islamic Society of Milwaukee. It is on 13th and Layton. I go there. It takes about 15-20 minutes.

I: Okay.

R: And in the meanwhile, you know, sometimes they have like some speeches, or some scholars are coming, or this kind of event. We go. Like my children also go. And, you know my husband and my son they also go for Friday prayer. They have arrangement with their work that they are supposed to do this, because men have to go on Friday, at least in the Mosque.

I: At noon?

R: At noon, yeah. Like about, yeah it is about one o'clock.

I: We have services at Marquette too, and that is why I know that.

R: Uh huh. So, you are familiar?

I: Just a little bit. [laughs] Did you have any obstacles when first immigrating to the United States; did you face any challenges with everyday life or with trying to do anything? Or was the transition pretty smooth?

R: Not really. Sometimes, you know, like being with this scarf, sometimes you know. But nobody bothered me, I can say. But it's not easy also, you know. Especially for my, when my daughters they used to go to school, high school, college, university. And when my two daughters they went to, these youngest two daughters they went to Divine Savior– it is a catholic school, but they never had problem. Believe me, they never had problem, and they used to go with the scarf. Yeah. And for the high school, and my oldest two daughters they went to Brookfield Central. And sometimes, you know the children, they say something like that. [laugh] Like, something which you don't like, like wrapping towels around you, or something like that. But it was not very serious, it is okay. But they were in Brookfield Central, they were, I don't know if somebody else was doing. But maybe with the time of second daughter there were one or two. But first daughter, the oldest daughter, there was no one in Brookfield Central with the scarf. So, she had sometimes problems, but she was very active, my oldest daughter also in Islamic Center. And my neighborhood also is very good, very nice. I go and walk in my dresses, and they're always, you know, it looks like they are welcome and very friendly. I never had that kind of problem.

I: Okay.

R: Yes, good.

I: Do you remember where you were on September 11th, 2001?

R: Mmhm. Mhmm.

I: Where were you?

R: I was here.

I: At home?

R: Mmhm.

I: And what was your reaction?

R: The reaction was that it was not something good, that innocent people they were killed. Nobody will like that.

I: Right. Right.

R: No.

I: And do you remember if there was any tension following September 11th, in the way you were treated or that your children going to school, did you notice anything?

R: Actually no. Not me. Not our family. Actually, I remember when my two daughters they were at Divine Savior, they were high school, it was so nice of the principal, like uh, she announced that there are some, because there were some other also girls who used to wear scarves, in their high school time, like my two youngest daughters. And they announced that we don't want anything like which is, which is you know, what kind of, like offensive to them. Don't say anything like that, they announced. And they didn't have any problem, because after this

announcement, also you know, the children they behaved, you know like, so I didn't have, really, I didn't have any problem.

I: Thank you. Thank you. I want to go back to the clothing. During celebrations, during weddings, do you wear any special things or special colors that you save for celebrations?

R: Oh yeah! It is like we have two festivals, main. Like [unintelligible]. These two, like after Ramadan and after fasting we celebrate. And you know like, after two months we have other celebrations. These two are festivals which we celebrate, and we go out and we meet our friends and our relatives. But also, like even during the holidays, or when you celebrate your vacation, we are not supposed to drink, we are not supposed to, like what would you say, like dance or expose yourself to men. No. And we go to the Mosque also; we go to different places also; we go to dinner for, you know, to you know, remind each other. During the Ramadan time, we are very busy. We invite each other, and you know, we fast. All my children also fast for thirty days.

I: Oh man. That's, that's so impressive.

R: Thank you.

I: A test of faith. Yeah, for sure.

R: Thank you.

I: Did you have, going back to your daughters, did you have any concerns with your daughters that you didn't have with your sons? Did you have any concerns with them growing up in the U.S., or anything like that? Going to public high schools?

R: Actually, in Islam, we are not, we don't think the girls are inferior from boys. It is not like that. The only thing is that, like, suppose like if I send my son at eleven o'clock at night, and he's coming, going to some bad places, like where the drinking is going to start, and this kind of thing, meeting with girls, this is also not allowed to boys. You know? And the same with the girls. But with the girls, it's more important because, because you know. The girls are, you know men are, what can you say... like suppose a girl is driving from Marquette to here, there are so many incidences which they cannot help with that, right. So, in this kind of thing, we differentiate. But not like, because they are boys, they are superior, and the girls. Like when we eat dinner, I always ask my son, you also have to share with the things like to put your plates out of the table. And my, you know, like helping.

I: Housework kind of things?

R: Yes, yes, yes. It's not like there this kind of. So, in Islam, it is not like. But though, it is a bad picture nowadays. They say that the women are suppressed. It is not true, right? What I can say, I think Islam gives more freedom to women. I think this is an honor that my husband, he asked me to take care of the children, you know. And my husband, he is responsible. In Islam, a man is responsible for woman. But she, so, you know like, she has to also fulfill his, you know, her duties. And the same with men. It is not like, that if she is at home and she is working too. I am also educated. So, you know, it is not like I am inferior, so I am working at home. It's not like that. And my husband, he always gave me honor, he always respected me. And so, I do.

I: Thank you.

R: You're welcome.

I: Thank you. So, I want to ask then, how closely do you relate your religion with your clothing? Is Islam and the scarf, are they really closely connected? And being modest, are those things really closely connected?

R: Yes! Uh huh! I told you, that like if my daughter, she has, excuse me, can I call her? [calls her daughter in Urdu] Like she wears in a different way. I am wearing my Indian-Pakistani, you know, dresses. But the main, you know, she goes out also with this dress. So, this is different from this. It is not just that she has to wear this dress, right, but the important thing is that she has to cover her head, and she is not supposed to expose. [Speaks to daughter in Urdu] Like, she is asking some question, regarding your dresses?

I: Yeah, clothing and religion, and how closely done are they connected for you and your family?

R: [daughter speaks: Oh yeah, we kind, you know like, of have a concept of modesty, so, we try to wear looser clothes, longer shirts, cover our hair, so we can do that by wearing like cultural clothing, or kind of you know mixing it with western style clothing, which we get long shirts, or looser pants, you know. Each one has its own personal style too, but that's what...yeah.

[Rawan]: This is my personal choice, that I like this. And they also wear sometimes, but the main thing is that you are supposed to cover yourself.

[daughter]: Yeah.

I: Thank you, thank you.

R: Yeah. [mother and daughter speak softly in Urdu]

I: Umm...I think that is, oh, one last question. Oh, just kidding a couple more questions.

R: Oh! Uh, she has...[leaves to get food tray] I'm sorry I didn't see that!

I: Oh, those are for me?

R: Yeah, yeah. This is for you.

I: Oh, thank you so much!

R: You are my guest. You came for first time to my house.

I: I really appreciate that! I really, thank you so much! How do you identify yourself? How would you say, what are you?

R: Like I am, American citizen. But American-Muslim citizen [laughs].

I: So American would come first? And then Muslim?

R: I am Muslim. I can say Muslim. And wherever I go, I mean, I have citizenship. Then I can say, if I am citizen from India, then I will say I am Muslim from India. I am Muslim, but from America. You understand?

I: Yes. Thank you. Do you, what language do you guys speak at home?

R: We speak Urdu.

I: Okay.

R: We speak Urdu. It is spoken in India, Pakistan...

I: And do you speak English at home or...?

R: Yeah, yeah! My children when they get along, they speak [English]. But we try to speak to them Urdu. Urdu, because, this way, their generation will forget. Like my granddaughters, when we Skype them, I always instruct them, my daughters, that they speak in Urdu. They speak your language, because they have started, you know, she started going to school, and in school they pick up like that. So, when they, it is, you know, anywhere, any language can be spoken, it is not prohibited. So, my daughters, my children, when they get together, they always speak English. Actually, the English they express in a better way. But we try to maintain it where you have to speak Urdu also.

I: And so, your hope then is that you can preserve that language?

R: Yes, yes. But, Arabic is more important for us, so they can read the Holy Book, and they understand the language. And if it is not in Arabic, then at least in English, they understand. So, I always try to take them to Sunday school. Actually, I was one of the teachers also in Sunday school, and for ten years I used to drive with them, and teach the children also, and take them to the classes.

I: Did you enjoy that?

R: Yes. I had a good time. Yes.

I: Good. Good. Do you follow politics at all in Wisconsin or the United States or anything like that? Would you say that you are politically active?

R: [laughs] I am not politically active.

[daughter]: But you vote!

[Rawan]: Yeah, but I always vote. I always go for vote, yes. I always! I never miss it [laughs]. Whoever I like, I do it. I'm aware of that, what is going on. My husband, my children, they are aware of the politics, and we go for election; we vote.

I: Thank you!

R: You are welcome.

I: Have you been involved in any community activities outside of Sunday school?

R: Yeah, actually. Voluntarily, I go sometimes to teach, and sometimes, you know, we have a kind of like gathering for after two or three weeks. Every two or three weeks or once in a month, I go and do my, you know like, some kind of discussion about religion, about our ways of life to promote our religion, and how to know our religion, because many of us, they don't know everything, but because I tried to learn. And I have learned from India also and from here also. I know Islam, so I try to teach them, also as like a topic, we do sometimes, suppose about honesty, for example, or modesty. So, they pick up, it is in Urdu, so they pick up the topic, and then I go, and I try to educate them.

I: You speak in front of groups of people?

R: Uh huh!

I: Do you like it? Does it make you nervous at all?

R: Not really. [laughs] Yeah. Like, sometimes, there are like about thirty, forty, fifty, these are all women, in one house. Sometimes in my house, sometimes in Brookfield, you know, like some of the houses, sometimes in south side, sometimes in north side; I do that.

I: Thank you. Where were you, so were you in Milwaukee during the Gulf War?

R: Mhmm!

I: And was that a difficult time for you, or did you have any troubles through the Gulf War or anything like that?

R: I don't think so, you know. We didn't have any problem, but it's natural you know. Sometimes you get, you know like, a kind of fear sometimes. But, in real really in my neighborhood I never had any kind of problem that somebody, you know, mocked you or somebody named you or anything like that.

I: Thank you.

R: Mhmm. Excuse me [Asks her daughter what time it is].

I: I just have a couple more questions.

R: That's fine!

I: So, what do you think is the biggest misconception about Muslim or Christians from Arab countries that immigrated to Milwaukee, what do you think is the biggest misconception?

R: Can you repeat once more?

I: Sure, sure! So, for Muslim-Americans, like first generation immigrants, what do you feel is the biggest misconception that people have about that group of people?

R: Oh! Okay. For example, like if somebody is practicing and they have come, and they are wearing a jacket or a scarf, they have a kind of, like I heard from people that some people they have misconception that they are kind of suppressed, and their husband wants this. It's not like that. It's not like that. I think this is the question that you are asking right?

I: Yeah!

R: Women are not suppressed; it's a misconception. And regarding like rights of women, even in heritage, when after husband dies, they have, you know, they get from husband's property also, and also, you know like, distribution about properties between girls and boys. And for son, in general I'm telling you, for son we give more because of the girl, they get from father, so you know. This is the difference. [Calls for daughter] I think she can explain to you better. [Asks and explains question in Urdu].

[Daughter asks]: What was the question?

[Rawan]: Just a minute. [Explains in Urdu]

[Daughter]: So you're asking about misconceptions about women...? I like what she was saying about the concept of just women, it's a standard to just associate Islam with suppression of women, which is completely not the case. How we were raised and stuff, we are, you know, in terms of access to whatever our brothers have access to; that was all the same, in terms of education, all those things. So, yeah. Even working and stuff. I mean, yeah.

[Rawan]: But I think the western people they have a kind of misconception that we are...um...

[Daughter]: That women are treated badly by the men in their family?

[Rawan]: Yeah,

[Daughter]: Which, of course you know there's, there's no monopoly on that amongst Muslims, it's a man who treats his wife or his daughters like that, it's in every community.

[Rawan]: It can be happening in every community, yeah!

[Daughter]: So, I mean but to say that that's because of Islam, it's complete, like it's a complete contradiction.

I: Thank you! That was my last question, for the record. So, I'm going to turn this off...