



Oral History Project Interview

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

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Gender: Female

Name: Lina Al-Nwailati

Country of Origin: Syria

Year of Immigration: 2017

Abstract

Lina Al-Nwailati is a 56-year-old Syrian woman living in the Milwaukee area. She is a mother of four, with triplet daughters and a son. In this interview, Lina describes her life and upbringing in Damascus, Syria, and emphasizes the importance of faith. Lina speaks about her family – well-educated and focused on tradition – and how they influenced her values and decision making throughout her life. Lina also describes Muslim religious practices, and briefly touches on adaptations following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key Themes: Religion, culture, education, family, marriage, immigration, Syria

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

I: I would like to start the interview by asking some general questions about your background if that is okay, can you state your name and age?

R: My name is Lina Al-Nwailati, I am 56 years old and, I'm from Damascus, Syria.

I: Can you tell us about some places or buildings that you spend a lot of time during your childhood?

R: Most of my childhood I spent in my school buildings.

I: Where in Damascus? Also can you tell me a little bit about your home, schools, or any kind of buildings that you remember from the homeland if you can describe how the buildings looks like over there who you lived with?

R: I can tell you about my home, my home was in a good place in Damascus. It's not that luxurious of a place, but it was a very good place. My school was close to my house and I used to go there walking where I remember my childhood and my friends, most of them that we continued our study together so we were together in the primary school and some of them were also with me and my high school activities as any usual children we had our sport and we used to go places together where we used to visit me and I visit them we had parties like birthday parties. I live with my family, and I had a brother and a sister. We were about 35 students in the classroom we had some of the teachers were good some of them were not fit.

I: So, have you only lived in Damascus before coming to the United States or have you lived in any other countries before that?

R: I lived only in Damascus Syria there are other places other places that I visited before visit. I was about 23 years when I went to the United Arab Emirates, I also spent about a month there I went to Turkey not for life just for the visit also visiting the United States was between 2000-2017

I: How old were you?

R: 52 and now I am 56.

I: were you the first one in your family to immigrate to the United States or did you have any other members who were already here?

R: I-I have my brothers about 30-35 years ago, when I immigrated here, I was with my husband and my children so you came here with our whole family.

I: So, after you were in the United States did you find or did family members immigrate here after you arrived or were all of them here before you came here?

R: My children came first and then I came after with my husband

I: So, are you married?

R: I was married before I come here.

I: Was your marriage arranged if that's okay to ask? Do you care to explain a little bit or arranged marriage?

R: That's a tradition there and we all believe that the it is a very good way to marry but it has developed a little bit the idea that you can meet the man maybe somewhere so I used to work somewhere my husband also work the same place so we met there and he asked me if I am in relationship or something I said no so he told me about himself and I told him about myself a little bit and then he came for a visit to my to my house the day after to talk with my family, of course and we discussed many things we met in my family's house for two times so we talked about different things and then he proposed to me and we got married.

I: Do you know anything about mahr or the sum of money that the demand is supposed to pay for the woman he wants to marry?

R: Today they don't pay money no it's just because it is an Islam that they think that we just registered in the contract in the marriage certificate and then she has to agree. but he has to have the house and the furniture of the house and she also can share in bringing something or doing something to the house because this is the place that they were supposed to live together so it's kind of an agreement between them. A man should be generous he is the one responsible to do all the stuff concerning the house.

I: Did you husband offer in mahr when you agreed?

R: He offered gold, diamonds. it was money and gold.

I: So how was the amount or the value of the gold or money was determined like how did you guys get to the point that this amount is or like this amount is gold is fine?

R: The man need to pay a lot sometimes they don't asked for anything if that's what my family didn't ask him to to pay anything for the gold he just asked me what would you like to go together and we chose something that I like.

I: So when looking for a suitable husband did your family take into consideration the wealth of the groom or his family like how much money did they have to determine how much money they would like to ask from him for the matter or was it just a specific amount for whoever came and proposed to you?

R: I don't care what they are rich people. The only thing that matters is that is he a good man so we haven't determined any amount of mahr that we want him to pay no-no this is not mahr is technically like typically used for also it's an important tradition I don't think it's an important tradition, but we have to follow this tradition. it is not that much important because nowadays women are not happy with their husband, she doesn't care whether he thinks her millions of dollars no. No. Doesn't matter.

I: What do you think the money or like what is the money usually used for lady clothes maybe or something like that, so when you're looking for a potential husband for your daughter will just be something you will take into account or like how this when it comes to your daughter?

R: I can't tell I can't answer that question because my daughter is the one who is supposed to answer this question, but I advised her when a man is proposing. According to her he is supposed to be good in the society, has to be respectful he has to be kind of religion honest he has to guarantee a decent life for my daughter and first of all he's supposed to love her care for her.

I: What are your children's ages?

R: My daughters are 25 and my son is 21.

I: Do they all live with you?

R: There is only one of my daughters got married and she lives in another state they were studying in the Medical University of Syria, they are currently in college. They just graduated from college.

I: So, you said you one of your daughters is married right and how much involved were you and her dad in the marriage?

R: First of all, we asked about that that's man we make we make sure that he comes from a decent family he's indicated he is respectful man he is his age he's okay and that's it then she's the one who decided she was the one who decided the rest of the things they mad and she has to decide whether she likes him whether she can she can live with and interact.

I: How much do you think you and her father were involved in the marriage?

R: I think just that maybe we can save 20% but there is cheese the one who has to decide so what is her husband.

I: Is he an American or is he Syrian?

R: He born and raised in Syria then came to the United States.

I: Can you give us a little more information about his background?

R: He had his studying and life in in the same place in Damascus so he had the same background and then share the same the same memories everything was the same, so he got his education back in Syria also and then he came here additional education.

I: So now about you Lina. So how was your level of education before immigration? Did you have any career or like how did your education look like before you came here?

R: I am a university graduate. I used to work as a teacher and also a supervisor now. I supervise the performance of teachers that was my job.

I: Have you had any formal education since you got here?

R: I haven't

I: I'm going to ask you some questions about your decisions to immigrate to the United States if that's okay with you. What were your main reasons for immigrating to the United States?

R: Our country was really not okay since the incidents started there as you know that war in Syria life became very stressful and it was really beautiful, and I was afraid that my children will not be safe there main reason that we decided to eat here because we were seeking a better life a peaceful life they fly.

I: Can you please Explain how fearful was your life overseas in Syria?

R: Now it has become very dangerous and an explosion here and there may be going to get shot and you don't know where from so maybe if I hit your house and that's what happened to my house so it was really dangerous.

I: So you came here looking for a better life is that right? So, what were the things that you were unhappy about?

R: Everything wasn't happy because I was afraid something would happen. I wasn't sure if my children may die, my husband may die and we were under a lot of stress. I told you that my house was bombed.

I: Are you planning to go back?

R: I don't know I may not go back there because I don't know what it what life looks like their, things are not settled till now and my children are trying to build their life and establish a life here and they are study and establishing a life here so we also would like to stay with them at the time in so long.

I: How did you decide where to settle in the United States?

R: I have relatives here in the Milwaukee area, so I decided to come to a place where I have people I know.

I: What role do you think your education played?

R: I graduate from the English language Department back there so being able to speak my language communicate with people helping a lot so when you first immigrated to the United States what was your life look like how was it it was really hard and everything was hard trying to adjust your line here to get used to the everything here was really difficult at the beginning we had the day off today we got acquainted with lifestyle here and we try to overcome a lot of obstacles such as money where to live how to Affordable life how to how many children can complete their study their hair sorting and heart where are some of the problems that you just mentioned related to the kind of place or worked with the choosing the words for or two places we can't afford very good place and you know that not only places here are safe to live and also we're too. Was not the problem here and shop also shopping here is really easy work we had a lot of problems looking for a job hire me with no background.

I: So, do you know how to drive?

R: I haven't got my license yet.

I: How do you deal with these issues you just mentioned like not finding a place like having difficulties finding that colleges for your children or not finding the appropriate college or high school?

R: I haven't even thought of pursuing my education or training or English classes because as I told you that I can speak another language but I was worried about my children how can they pursue their education so far contact me colleges and tell them about their studying background and their education and they were kind of evaluation what they had they are back in Syrian the university and now so far they have my daughters have graduated from college and my son now is in college and when they have started there it has started.

I: I remember you saying it was an office job can you describe the workplace over there?

R: Yeah, it was it was a decent job I don't know maybe I'm not young enough to be able to understand the whole thing or maybe I needed more time maybe I'm not ready for that because I was under a lot of stress and I was not ready yet for that so that's why I quit.

I: So did your family play any role in deciding your employment status and decide you're not going to be working anymore?

R: They encouraged me to work and they made things easy for me they give me a ride to work and pick me up yeah but it was my own decision that you know nobody forced me to do anything.

I: Does your husband have had any job since immigrating to the United States? Did any of the family members play a role in deciding that your husband is the one that needs to work or was it just or how did you guys get to that decision?

R: We were really in need of his work. He had to work because otherwise we wouldn't be able to afford anything. we all made the decision all of my family play a part in the decision.

I: Can you tell me a little bit about places or buildings where you spend a lot of time after or during the years of your immigration here in the United States?

R: In Milwaukee it's not enough for us as we are six people so far.

I: Can you tell us a little bit about how these buildings are different from the one that you had into it like did you notice any differences or like differences in the buildings?

R: Activities here are much bigger on my children. They had their rooms, but your way only lives in two bedrooms in an apartment with two bedrooms. We don't have problems such as snow that we have to shovel the snow during winter. You don't have such problems when you are able to manage online classes here.

I: So, the next few questions are about marriage if that's okay with you. How are women viewed and what is their typical role in the house or outside the house and at the same time how does that change from Men's views and like what do they do outside inside the house?

R: Women nowadays are all educated and they even know when they are married and have children they have their role as a housewife but men are not like them so men do not participate in the housework as men to hear men there are still they still depend on women most old things that are related to the house to the children just a few of them share in such things but the whole roll that concerning that children and the house and do the housework.

I: What are some ways in which you balance your faith and your American identity and how can you find the balance living here in America with everything being different than your home country and having your faith and religion?

R: I don't think that this is there's any problem concerning my faith and I still have my faith, I practice all my religious traditions we pray we go to the mosque yeah and we also deal with the American people in all respect, and they respect us and their respective about religion and the way we are the way we address so I don't have any problem.

I: How do you say your religious upbringing contributes to who you are today?

R: Practicing my religion helps me becoming a very decent women, honest, believe in God believe that whatever happens to me I can go back to God and pray. When finally giving you the best that I deserve, and he would take care of me and my family and I would except that as much as I keep being a very good human that's great.

I: What does marriage mean to you?

R: It is sharing life with someone who you can depend on with someone who you can love someone who can depend on someone who can have fun with someone who can be your friend your lover someone whom you can cry on his shoulder when you're sad someone who can share in your happiness.

I: So, do you think that education income or social class contribute to your decision or your parents' decisions about your husband?

R: Education means a lot he needs to have a good income but nobody knows what's coming in the future they may become wealthy they may not know.

I: Acceptable that's pretty cool so give me some information about your marriage/wedding like how many days or like who did you invite to the wedding or how did the ceremony go just like basic information about them if you don't mind?

R: Yeah, it was a very usual sermon that we had a place and that place was decorated with flower table chairs. We invited people who are friends, relatives, playing brothers and sisters, everybody was happy for us. We had the cake and then everyone had the same ceremony, but some families may not even have this wedding because they are short of money or because the groom isn't there or he's somewhere, that's when they wouldn't have any wedding ceremony, so it doesn't matter anymore.

I: What are some cultural barriers that you have faced or someone you know faces because of their decision to marry someone from outside their group whatever it is authentic background or religious background or something like that?

R: That's the main thing now other thing that I believe that people who wants to guarantee a good life together they have to come from the same background because this would help a lot.

I: Do you think any kind of career would play a normal role in raising up the children even if they have a full-time job?

R: She can become a part-time job and then she can marry and she can take care of her children

I: would you ever consider marrying a person younger than you like even if it's just a thought you'd like for your children to rise and if yes how many years do you think it should be between the girl and the boy?

R: What I believe that women usually they get older before men so I think that men should be older that's my belief and how many years it takes to be 2 years but not more than 7 years.

I: How about someone younger than you, would you consider marrying someone who was born and raised outside the United States from the homeland?

R: yeah, I'd like that If I can find someone but it is difficult here I can't understand I can't understand them well.

I: When it comes to marriage do you think have the final word to make the decision is it the mother is it the father is it both of them?

R: I think it's the one who is getting married maybe my daughter or my son and then me and my husband we can just give an advice so they have the final war to decide where they want to get married to they can give an advice but sometimes they prefer not to interfere

I: What are your ideas about dating?

R: It is okay today but at home in front of the mother and the father we can meet at home but not outside.

I: What do you think about the internet Facebook social media for auto and Muslims in America, do you think communication size such as cell phones texting and like all other social media platforms made it easy for males and females to make the decision to marry?

R: Some people very open and very honest and they don't hide behind telephones or social media others are completely different people and when it comes to reality they are not the same person, but as I said before that day that we date inside our parents house we need their opinion we talk as much as we talked in front of them but we don't believe in dating outside on going out alone or maybe having a relationship for a long time but as for dating that is fine.

I: In your family there's any restrictions and processes like is the process difference between the oldest daughter and the youngest daughter like does the older need to get married first before or don't have such a thing?

R: Even though my daughters are all the same age.

I: So now we're going to ask some questions about parenting in what ways if any do you think boys should be raised differently from females?

R: I think they should be raised the same but I feel that society makes it easier for boys to do whatever they want.

I: So when you first came to the United States how were you involved with your children's education like who helps them doing homework but likes activities?

R: I was really involved specially with me my son's because he was still in school and high school since last year I helped him because I can speak English I interacted with a social activity is kind of because in his first year I wasn't here but I was able to contact the school and call them and they were very helpful and we're very well.

I: Do you have any particular fear for your daughters that you didn't have for yourselves?

R: My daughters are fine because my daughters are old enough and can take care of themselves because as I said that they were in the University there to make it there to make good judgement about good things and bad things I had to choose to kept an eye on him for a little while but now it's okay as the other girls as I said before that maybe the boys need to follow a little of restrictions for boys more than girls, sometimes it's really hard to force them to do what you want what is good for them but it was not bad for us, the only thing is that sometime he was with his friends and stay late and that's something I don't like.

I: Did you play a role in deciding what major or career-wise?

R: They made by themselves I played a role in that maybe for next generations they should let their children choose whatever they.

I: What kind of husband or wife would you like to find for your children?

R: I believe that she should be from the same culture from the same maybe from the same home now those are really important to me the next one's going to be about the culture and how you define yourself so first cousins are going to be some people say themselves.

I: In terms of their religion, very culture, their culture and so forth how do you see yourself? How can you identify it?

R: I'm just following my culture according to how can you identify yourself as for my age I came old here I still relate myself to my country my culture but maybe for my children they tell themselves to their religion, maybe for the country they have started to feel themselves as Americans as they are Muslims but they consider themselves now as American because I'm all done and on my memory is my everything that I have done if it's related to my homeland so maybe because I'm old but I wish the best for the United States I can like

American because I live here and I wish the best for America for the American people because I was able to come and live among them and have a safe flight here.

I: Can you tell me about what language you speak at home dinner? Do you speak it like 24/7 with your kids or do you guys use a little English?

R: Just a little English now here do you attend any mosque or on the regular basis and because of COVID-19 we weren't able to go maybe once a week or once a month and that's it.

I: How would you describe your political participation in the United States?

R: I don't I haven't because I'm still on my green card but I cannot participate so you have to make the right decision I can watch people I can watch their life and can watch whether they are happy with what their sufferings is that man who wouldn't guarantee that the best life for them because I have become one of them up here now I am not even though I'm leaving here as an American citizen so I can feel them I can understand their suffering.

I: what did your community do in responding to the situation from the social injustice Race by the Black Lives Matter movement about George Floyd?

R: Yeah most of my children's friends and mine now they have all the short solidarity with BLM and George Floyd.

I: Have you gone back to visit Syria since you got here?

R: I just go some of friends there I haven't visited my homeland since, I'm just thinking of my house there.

I: Does anyone live in it now, also how to encourage your family to go back home to visit or come live here we're talking about like the rest of your family that are back in Syria have you encouraged them to come here and visit?

R: I encourage them when they have no other choice. as they are suffering so that's the only choice, but no one would like to live his house and being my age.

I: Thank you for sharing your experience. Now I would like to switch the topic to culture clothing a little bit. If that's okay with you, how do you feel when you wear them?

R: When I wear it I feel like I remember the old days back in Syria but most people when they go to the mosque they wear them.

I: So you said you put the scarf to cover your hair is that right okay how does religion plays a role in that how do you think religion played a role in affecting the way you dress?

R: These are the instructions of what my religion ordered us to do: you have to cover your hair and body.

I: As a Muslim woman, how do you feel when you wear a hijab?

R: I feel very proud how so because it tells that I am Muslim and I'm really proud to be a Muslim because it's a very great religion all in an everything that that word means.

I: Did your mother wear the hijab do you think she passed that down to you or who got you into wearing it?

R: I have had the idea like that before it happened and kept thinking about it until I finally decided to.

I: Do you think your daughters got that passed them or do you think they made their own decision?

R: I raised them as Islamic people and taught them to be aware towards the Islamic instructions. They knew that one of the instructions in our faith is that the girls should wear hijabs you should cover every part of her body shouldn't show it and then they decided after they have the most of the instructions they decided to wear the hijab and we discussed that many times and I made sure that it's their own decision and that that you would really want to do it so then I agreed because they were really younger than me when they made that decision.

I: Is there's anything about your history that's left that you would like to tell us about or like your homeland or your experience here in America?

R: The only thing that I miss there and here are my friends and my job I used to meet a lot of people there and I used to have lots of friends I missed all that.

I: Thank you for having us.

R: You're welcome.