

**Oral History Project Interview**  
**Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute (AMWRRI)**

Number of Interview: MAM 1.00

Date: July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Gender: Female

Name: Naimah Mohammed

Country of Origin: West Palestine

Year of Immigration: 1984

Abstract: Naimah is 43 years old and was born in West Palestine, but immigrated to the United States to be with her husband in 1984. After immigrating to the United States, she has been devoted to family life and raising her children. Being a stay-at-home mother has kept her from participating actively in many of the community activities, be it of the Milwaukee Muslim community or the American culture at large. She does however, participate in the American elections as a naturalized American citizen, and in local issues that concern and affect her family. Although she has tried to assimilate to the new culture by learning English and speaking both languages at home, nevertheless, she has stayed true to her Arab identity by wearing her hijab and keeping up with news stories from Arabic news sources.

Key Themes: cultural identity, family life, assimilation

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

I: This is an interview with Naimah Mohammed. The interview is conducted by Martha Mahmood on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin for AMWRRI. This is interview number MAM 1.00

I: So where is your homeland? Like, where are you from originally?

R: West Palestine.

I: Um, is that where you were born?

R: Yes, I was born there.

I: And um, did you live in any other countries before coming to the U.S.?

R: No.

I: Um, where did you first come to America?

R: Um, back in 1984.

I: 1984?

R: Mmm.

I: How old are you now?

R: Forty-three.

I: Were you the first in your family to come to America?

R: Yes.

I: Um, did you come by yourself? Or were you... did you come with somebody?

R: No, I came because I was married to a person who originate from back home, but he lives here. So, that's why I came. Because my husband was living here, so...

I: So he brought you to America?

R: Yeah, yeah. He brought me.

I: Can you speak a little louder? I don't think it's going to catch it.

R: Sure. [indistinct chuckle]

I: Well, I can hear you but...

R: [clears throat]

I: Um, after you were in the U.S., did any of your other family members come to America? Like your parents, or anybody?

R: Uhhhh, yeah my brother came... after. Um-hmm.

I: And um, are you married now?

R: Yes.

I: Ah, were you... You were married when you emigrated to the U.S.

R: Right.

I: And um, was your marriage arranged? Like, did it happen through um, like your family – they brought you together or did you meet him yourself?

R: No, I didn't meet him. It was arranged. [clears throat, coughs] Excuse me.

I: Um, did you know each other before you got married though?

R: No.

I: Are you related?

R: No.

I: Um, do you have any children?

R: Yes, I have six. Five boys, and a girl.

I: And um, can you tell me their names and ages?

R: Sure. I have Mohammad, he is twenty. Wahiba, she is eighteen. Malek, seventeen. Nehr, thirteen. Sayhir, ten. And Ameer, two.

I: And um, do they all live in Milwaukee?

R: Yes.

I: What are their education levels? Like, where are they in school?

R: Like um, Mohammad, he's in um, second year of college at Madison. Hiba –she just graduate uh, this year... senior. She's going to college. Malek will be senior next year. And I have Nehr, he's going to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Sayhir is going to 6<sup>th</sup> grade. And Ameer, he's still two.

I: Um, do they have any children? Any of them?

R: No.

I: What was... What was your education level before you came to America?

R: Uhh, just finished um... like uh, middle school.

I: And do you remember the name of the school you attended?

R: Ummm. It was uh, in uh, Calendia Camp.

I: Calendia Camp? Is that in West Bank?

R: Yeah.

I: Have you received any education since you came to America?

R: No.

I: Did you work outside of the house before you came to America?

R: Nope.

I: Um, are you working now?

R: No.

I: What were your main reasons for coming to America? Like, the big reasons for coming here?

R: Actually in my mind, it wasn't like any reason except like I have to come, because you know, because of my husband. It wasn't any other reason in my mind to come here.

I: So um, did you want to come here? Like, if you had the option, would you have come here?

R: At that time, yeah. Because my husband –sure I want to come.

I: So um, did you want the American citizenship?

R: Yes.

I: Initially, how long were you going to stay in America? Like, did you have a set time that you were going to stay here? That you wanted to come back at some point, or...

R: No, I don't think my husband was like, thinking about going back at this time. Me? If I thought about it before, like when the kids was probably younger, I would've go back for like a good period of time.

I: So like a couple of years for them to spend there?

R: Yeah, for them to, you know, get to know the cultures and religion better, and the language. Well, at least if you... if we went there from like five years to seven to eight years then probably that's good enough. When they're young, then if they want to finish their education here, that's... that would be better.

I: Um, but what changed your mind? Like, why couldn't you -?

R: No, I did. It's not a matter of changing mind, but I didn't thought about it then. I didn't thought about it then.

I: Alright. So at that time, when you first came, you were like: "okay I'm going to stay here".

R: Umhmm.

I: When you came to the U.S., how did you choose where to go? Like, why Milwaukee?

R: Like for the second time, it's not my choice. Like where my husband is, that's where I have to be.

I: That's where he was?

R: Yes, he was here.

I: Um, have you lived in any other places though, in the United States, since you first came?

R: No, same place.

I: Always Milwaukee?

R: Same state.

I: When you first came to America, what was your life like? How was it like, living in America? Was it different compared to like, overseas?

R: Ummm... [long pause] Maybe like uh... Not really a big difference, except like uh, maybe like you have more friends here to go and come, and uh... more places, maybe. That's about it, but...

I: So did you have any problems in America? Like, was there any issues that you... um, such as for driving, did you know how to drive before you came?

R: No, I didn't know to drive and I didn't drive like, right away. Way, way like at least ten years after I was here, I drive. Then uh, probably the major one was the language.

I: The language?

R: Umhmm.

I: Like talking to the Americans?

R: Umhmm. Umhmm.

I: So um, you started driving ten years after you came. Why did you want to start learning how to drive?

R: Well actually, my husband doesn't want me to drive... [chuckles] at first. And then, after that 'cause he'd seen it –that with the kids and you know, they need to go to the doctor's, to school, this and that... Too many things, you need. So, when he find out like or believe it's necessary that I'm... then he let me drive.

I: So um, can you describe the effect it had when you first learned how to drive –on your family, like did it make things easier?

R: Yeah, actually yeah. Sure, sure it make it easier. Um, you know, for you 'cause before you need somebody take you and it's hard, you know, to keep asking your friends and relatives –

take me here, take me here –so it’s nice, you know, to go whenever you want to go, you know. And uh, where your kids want to go, it’s much easier and to take them places and to go.

I: When you, uh, because you mentioned that the English, the language barrier –did you take English classes?

R: No.

I: No? So how did you learn English?

R: Um, like I used to have American friend. Actually she was married to Arab guy –um, she teach me a lot. And then they told me that TV is a good way to learn and you know, if you read the newspaper... so um, that’s, that’s the way. Then after that, you know, my kids too -they start going to school and homework and this and that...

I: And so you learned from them?

R: Yeah, I learned from them more and more.

I: Um, when you were in America, who was most helpful to you? Like who helped you –you mentioned your friend, were there other people who were helping you like, drive you around, like that?

R: Yeah, it was like my friends –I have like, a bunch of friends, most of them are from back home and relative too, I have some relatives, so... they were helping me.

I: And um, what role –what kinds of jobs has your husband had since you’ve been in America?

R: Um, he have like, a supermarket.

I: And um, did uh –how’s your family, how did your family work with your husband with his job? Like, is there a family thing, a family decision-making, or helping him in the grocery store, that kind of thing? Do you know what I mean? Um, like is there any decisions that you make with your husband about the store or...?

R: Ummm...no, not really. [indistinct agreement/understanding]

I: So it’s up to him. So it’s like you’ve never worked in the store with him or anything?

R: No.

I: Okay. What schooling did your husband have?

R: School?

I: School... like you said, you went to middle school.

R: Yeah, he finished high school.

I: Overseas?

R: Yeah.

I: Okay. And this is just a question on parenting. In what ways do you think boys and girls should be raised? Is there a difference between how you raise a boy versus a girl?

R: You know, a long time ago in my days, I think uh, it was like a difference. Or back home, you can say, or old generation, it was. But I believe, I believe the new generation now, that they don't want to be raised differently. They want to like, have the same thing, same right, same freedom but I think there's limit to that too. You know, I don't believe 100% girl and boy should be like uh... I mean, with education, it should be the same. I believe 100% it should be the same, but like for other things, like you know, coming and going...

I: You mean like, social behavior?

R: Yes, social behavior should be a limit for the girl, you know.

I: And what sports do you believe that girls can play?

R: Yeah, I believe they can play sport, even not like all guy sport, but some sports and that's what my daughter did. She was involved in basketball and tracks.

I: When you first –with your children, what involvement did you have in their education? Like um, were you helping them with their homework, and taking them to school or whatever?

R: Oh yeah, sure. Like I help with whatever I can. Like with homework, if they need to go anywhere to get stuff for school for homework, projects... They need to be at school at that certain time, and this, I always help with that.

I: And were you involved with like, teachers? Parent organizations, school activities? Like, did you join the parent-teacher things?

R: I believe I did, for a little bit of time, not a lot.

I: In the beginning or later, do you know? Like, when they started kindergarten and more on that time?

R: Yeah, not as they're older.

I: Can you tell me all the schools your kids have been in? Or just like middle, high school?

R: Yeah, sure. They were at Honey Creek Elementary and Morse [Morris?] Middle School, Rufus King High School, Greenfield Middle School, Greenfield High School and Allendale Elementary.

I: And um, what was the reason you sent them to these schools versus other schools?

R: First, like cause first you choose the... as elementary you choose the school closest to you, convenience. And then, for middle and high school you try to choose like the best schools, or what you think is the best, where they can get the best education. And what sometimes what teachers are meant for the kids, you know? So that's how it is.

I: And who in the family decides like that? Do the kids decide, or do you decide? With older ones, like with high school? Who decided which high school they wanted to go to?

R: Ummm... both. Like the kids and the parents agree, then we go ahead.

I: So like the kids had a choice...?

R: Oh yeah, umhmm.

I: What were some of the issues, major concerns that you had when raising your kids? Like having your kids in America, what were some of the things you were worried about?

R: To tell you the truth, like um, probably the first thing, probably the safety. With all the things you hear, you know, and uh, safety first and then you know, the problems that you always afraid of if they have bad friends, they might get them involved in you know, bad things like drugs or these other things or... But you try your best, you know, to keep them away from these things and thank God, thank God they managed and... thank God we don't have problems so far.

I: Do you have any –was there any concerns you had for your daughter versus your sons? Like any worries you had for your daughters, or your daughter versus you know, the problems you were worried about for your sons? Like um, religiously or anything like that?

R: Umm, sure always I worried –that all things always on your mind. Um...

I: But like, for your daughter, was there anything different that you worried about for her? Like, coming into high school, that kind of thing or anything like that?

R: Yeah sure, you worried but you know, kids are... Because the schools are you know, mixed and you don't want to deal with anything, you know, of your daughter being you know, with the boys or this kind of stuff. But I think by the time you are like being in the high school, I think you can tell if you know, how she's thinking and which way she's probably going to take, 'cause you know, you always try to talk to her and to... I don't think I was that much worried when she went to high school, no.



I: You know you mentioned that you feel that basically for boys and girls –that really shouldn't be a difference when it comes to education and stuff like that. In raising your children yourself, did you treat them any differently? Like, was there anything different in how you raised them? Like you said that the old way, um, like the old generation believed there is a difference but you yourself don't... [indistinct interruption]

R: You try your best not to...

I: Not to do that?

R: Not to do that, but still I think you still feel, you still doing it... [indistinct agreement?]

I: Were there any problems that came with your children? Like did they have, especially with their teenage years, were there any conflicts that you had, like you would be: "I don't want you to hang out with these people or...?" Do you know, like, was any big issue that you didn't feel your children should do that they wanted to do?

R: Not really.

I: Not really? Like I know that some kids, with the Islamic religion, you know they're like: "you're not supposed to date" and stuff like that but I know most kids end up still, you know...

R: I understand what you mean.

I: But you didn't have those problems?

R: But for mine, so far, no. I didn't have any of those problems.

I: So when your children were deciding, especially Mohammad since he's in college now, on their careers or college, did you have any role in helping him decide or did he decide everything on his own?

R: Usually he decide on his own, but I try to advice him... like giving him: "probably this should be good for you"... but in the end, I give him like an opinion, but... in the end I like him to make his decision and to study what he thinks he wants or he loves or... you know. I don't disagree with his decision but I can give him advice on some points and add something.

I: For eventually them getting married, what kind of husband or wife do you look for for your children? Like what kind of life for your children?

R: To tell you the truth, like sure I prefer same culture, same religion. But in the end, if that didn't happen, as long as they're happy with their life, then that's the life... I can't force them if they're against it.

I: You would prefer same culture, same religion, but if they don't...

R: Because actually this make me... life a little bit easier to deal with, but doesn't mean it's not going to work if they're difference. Because I know a lot of people do. Some work, some didn't work, but um, yeah myself, I prefer, as I said, just my opinion, but if that didn't happen, then they can make their own decision.

I: As long as it's a good person for them...?

R: Oh yeah, sure, sure. As long as they know they're going to be, live happily and that's the right choice they did... I'm not going to go against it.

I: So this is like a general question, but it's about how you look at yourself today; how do you identify yourself or define yourself? Like if somebody were to ask you: "Who would you see yourself as?", what would you tell them? Like with culture, religion, everything... what's the one defining thing that you feel is most important about you?

R: Probably the most important thing I would like, describe myself is like, I'm a good mother. I live my life mostly for my kids, my husband, and uh....

I: So being a mother is most important to you?

R: Umhmm.

I: And um, just for you, why do you feel that's most important? What about that, compared to everything else people define you as, why is that the most important thing?

R: Probably because that's what I did in my life. That's the most work I did. Maybe for some other people they get education, get a good job or maybe they think that's more important to describe themselves but for me, since I didn't do anything like, outside the house, being like in school or college or job, then that's what I describe myself as. A mother, or at least I did my best to be. A good mom, you know, raising good kids with good education and like make them good people, person... I think that's the goal I'm reaching for and when that's happened, I'll be so happy and I'll be proud.

I: But outside of that, what cultures do you identify yourself with?

R: Culture?

I: Yeah, like do you see yourself as Arab?

R: Oh yeah!

I: But you also identify with American culture? Or do you see yourself only in Arab culture? Like you've lived here for a while, but you still feel separated from the American culture?

R: Ummm, just maybe some points. Other than that, no... like you're...uh...

I: Like you're part of it?

R: Yeah, you're part of it.

I: But would you say, you do identify yourself as Arab more?

R: Umhmm.

I: What languages do you speak at the home, in the house, with your children?

R: Actually both... because my kids, you know, mostly speak English. Then, that's mostly what I speak. I try, you know, to mix both language in the house.

I: Do you speak English with them or do you speak Arabic with them?

R: As I said before, well, probably like who doesn't understand any Arabic, then much English with them depending on you know... but yeah, both but mostly English with them.

I: How would you describe your religious life? Do you attend the masjid regularly, do you participate in some of the community activities?

R: Both this, no actually. I don't remember I ever go to the mosque to pray.

I: So you don't -?

R: I prefer... Maybe because my busy life, I would say. That's what I'm thinking sometimes, maybe in the future when all the kids grown up and there's nothing much responsibility... Maybe like uh, you can be involved in the community, in the Muslim community more than that. Probably like helping, go to the mosque more... but at this time, I would say I'm like a decent good religion person. I pray, I practice my religion...

I: But you're just not able to act, participate in the active community?

R: Yeah but I pray, I wear the hijab... and good.

I: How would you describe your political participation in the U.S.? Especially since you are Palestinian, and you have American citizenship, do you vote regularly? Do you vote?

R: Yeah, I vote.

I: Do you vote in all things? Or do you vote just in the presidential? Like there's also the Congress, the Senate, the Mayor elections... but I personally don't vote that much in those.

R: Yeah, me too. Usually just vote the presidential and like, the community things -if they like decide something about school or... I would. I vote that too.

I: So, if it's stuff that you feel like it affects you, you're interested in it politically, like it's stuff that affects you –do you participate in it politically? In the sense that... like you said, like if it affects school...?

R: Yeah, affects uh... that involving my kids, or the neighborhood or the community, I would vote and say my opinion and vote on it.

I: So this could be for anybody, but like, say for the President, if it was a candidate who was running for President was of Palestinian origin, um say like if I was running for President, I'm Palestinian and Muslim as well, would you vote for me? Like, does being Muslim or Arab have an effect in how you vote?

R: Well...

I: Would you feel like it had an effect? Like if a man who was Muslim was running for President, would you vote for him versus the other guy?

R: Probably I would, but depends on that person too. Not like anybody, even if he's Muslim or Arab...

I: So even if they were and saying: "I want all this bad stuff", you wouldn't vote for them because they're Muslim?

R: Oh no.

I: So have you, outside of a Muslim community, do you participate in other community activities apart from your own community?

R: Um, no, not really.

I: Do you read the daily newspaper?

R: No.

I: Do you –how do you get your news?

R: Um, I... from the TV.

I: What kind of shows do you watch? Do you get Al-Jazeera and all that stuff?

R: Yeah, yeah I watch more Arabic stuff than uh, yeah, than the American.

I: But do you watch American?

R: Yeah, I do.

I: Do you watch the local stuff too? Like for Milwaukee area? The local news?

R: Yeah, oh yeah yeah.

I: Do you have connection with your homeland? Are you able to visit?

R: Uh, yeah... Went to visit like, five years ago.

I: Um, do you still have relatives there?

R: Oh yeah, more of my relatives there.

I: And do you still like, talk with them daily or on a... like a regular basis?

R: Uh, yeah regular basis, yeah. Keep communicate.

I: Have you ever encouraged your family to come to America? Like anybody from there, like: "I think you should come to America"?

R: Uh, no 'cause I don't think it's like any necessary reason for them. But I'm here for some, you know, for some reason but when it's no –when it's no really a good reason or a reason there for you to be here, I don't think you should like, leave your homeland.

I: In what ways, have political events in your homeland affected you here? Like, we're Palestinian. So like, do any of the issues happening there affect you here? How do you feel about some of the stuff that's happening there?

R: Uh, yeah sure 'cause you know, that's –your family there, and your people. And sure what's going on there, sure it's going to affect you... I thinking about it all the time. And I don't like to see something like that happen, probably not just there, probably anywhere else on the world. You just like to see, you know, peace alone in the world.

I: Do you um, have you taken any action for any of these issues like um, have you donated money or anything for some of the Palestinian causes or...?

R: Actually for both, no.

I: Or have you like worked in any like protests or anything?

R: No.

I: But besides television, how do you get information about Palestine? Like, how do you know what's happening there? Like-

R: It's just from the news, mostly. The Arabic news and once in a while, you get the newspaper. I read the newspaper from the Arabic store here and you know, there's some news too reading here... So once in a while, you just –but mostly from the Arabic channels, you know.

I: So as we come to the end of this, is there anything else, by your history in America that you would like to tell me, that you feel is important that I haven't already asked you? Like anything you would think it's very important to tell a new Muslim Arab woman who is coming to America?

R: I think like, as I said before, if it's like necessary for you to leave your hometown to come America or probably anywhere else around the world –if there's a good reason, then you should do it. But if there's no, no need to, I think you should live in your homeland and uh, no matter what.

I: Um, so are there any particular services or resources that this program I'm working with, the Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute should provide to meet the needs of the community that you belong to? Like is there anything you think we need to do to help the community better? The Arab and Muslim community?

R: Um, maybe more –how you say it –maybe more um, [brief pause] teaching more about cultural, religion and places for socialized with each other and like, meeting once in awhile as a community and discuss maybe some matters affecting kids or the community, more basis for fun for kids get together for this and that. I have heard that they probably do have some like that, but mostly I don't know because I didn't go to the mosque or anything. But mostly, I heard about it after like, after like I think um, they don't do like enough to let everybody knows that they have this and that. And that's the time before I had for all like the Arab and Muslim community here, so I wish like they can change that and they be, you know...

I: Just uh, do you know anybody else that would be interested in being interviewed? That I should like, try and contact? That you think their story would be useful...?

R: Yeah maybe I can give you like a name or probably two I would recommend but that depends. I don't know what their answer might be. I can recommend some people for you, sure.

I: Okay. And just lastly, do you have any pictures of you when you first came to America that we could borrow and make a copy of it and give it back to you? That would be like, useful, you know as a historical picture in the 1980s...?

R: Yeah maybe, sure I have a bunch...

I: Maybe like whenever you...

R: Sure, no problem.

I: So, thank you for the interview...

R: Thank you, thank you

I: This is um, very important because like I told you on the phone, there really is like, no history about the women in Milwaukee. Would you like a copy of this interview? Would you be interested in me giving you a copy...?

R: Yeah sure.

I: And that's it, if you need anything, just like call me, I'll give you my cell number... so if you need anything else, just let me know.

R: Okay, thank you.

I: Thank you.