

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

Number of Interview: KLA 1.00

Date: 4/5/2013

Gender: Female

Name: Inshirah (name changed to protect interviewee confidentiality)

Country of Origin: Syria

Date of Birth: 1964

Year of Immigration: 1988

Abstract: A highly educated woman, Inshirah is a Syrian immigrant who has seen her share of difficulty in Syria and the United States. In the interview, Inshirah discusses her decades long struggle with her identity and finding her voice. Inshirah also discusses the lives of her children in the United States, including her hopes for her sons and daughters, as well as her struggle to connect with her children. Inshirah contemplates the current Syrian revolution that has affected so many Syrian people, some of them her own family.

Key Themes: Parenting, Syrian cultural clothing and lifestyle, Syrian revolution, Differences in raising her daughter and sons

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

I: Um, this interview is for the Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Intsitude, and is with Inshirah 0. Um, Inshirah, to start off, where is your homeland?

R: Uh, Syria.

I: Syria? And what city in Syria?

R: Damascus.

I: Okay. And when did you immigrate to the United States?

R: On 198- 87.

I: Okay. And then were you the first in your family to immigrate?

R: Yes.

I: Okay. And what were the main reasons for immigrating?

R: Uh, I was married. Uh, and my husband used to study at Marquette University. And I came to join him.

I: Okay. Um, so you were married prior to moving to the United States.

R: Yeah, yeah. We- we got married on the summer of 1987, and he um, he came here. Uh, he was here actually two years prior to our marriage. And he came here on September, and I joined him like 6 months later. Um, we had problem with getting visa for me to join, so I was six months late.

I: Okay. Um, have you and your spouse lived anywhere other than Milwaukee then?

R: No, I came right away to Milwaukee, and we stayed here.

I: Okay.

R: And every year we want to- to change, but you know unfortunately, we are not able to.

[Laughs] Cause I don't like the weather in Milwaukee.

I: The snow and everything?

R: Yeah.

I: Um, and then, if you could just describe how you met your husband, and then the process of getting married to him.

R: Uh, actually, he's my relative. He's my cousin. So, but they used to live in Kuwait, and I used to see him like once a year, or sometimes once every three years, or two years, or four years; it depends. So, yeah, uh... I didn't um, have a chance to um, to talk to him a lot, but for some reasons, we just wanted to be together. [Laughs] So we got engaged and he came here. He started his uh, studying here. He was doing um, I think he- when- when he came here he was in- in North Carolina. He was there for um, maybe one year, or one and a half, before I came here. And um, then you know, it was um, you know, he wasn't in Syria when we engaged, so his mom came to my mom and they talked together and then um, you know. Um, two years later, we got married. Uh, I was in Syria. His family was in Kuwait. My family was in Egypt. So it wasn't easy for us to get together. He came to Egypt, and we- we married there. We didn't do any wedding, unfortunately. I missed this very important part in my life. [Laughs] So, we got married and he had to leave because he had to, you know, to be here in September to start his studying. And we tried once in the embassy in Cairo, didn't work. So I left to Syria and I got my visa, and I joined him in February of 1988.

I: Um, why did you not have a formal wedding with him?

R: That's uh, why I said you know, his family was in Kuwait.

I: Because of the family? Okay.

R: And my family was in Egypt. So we didn't know people, you know. But should have doing something, you know, even small. So I don't know, its um, I am not happy about this missing part, you know. And I still want to write something or, you know, cause I still struggling that I didn't celebrate [laughs] the most important, you know, thing in my life. So...

I: Okay. Um, and then, do you have any children?

R: I do have three kids. My oldest, he's 24 years old. He graduated from UWM two years ago. He's now helping his dad in his store. And uh, my, I have one daughter; she's in 9th grade. She's in Greendale Middle School. Uh, High School, sorry. And my son, he's 11. He's in 6th grade, in Greendale Middle School.

I: And then what are their names?

R: Um, my oldest, his name is Yamen. Uh, my daughter is Adeel. My youngest is Muhammad.

I: Okay. Um, and then what is your profession?

R: Um, I graduated from Damascus University. I have a degree in Arabic Literature. So when I came I used to help in- in Summer School and Sunday School. And then when they started fulltime Islamic school like 10 years ago or 13 years ago, I used to go help them as a volunteer and then as a part-time teacher and then—for three years as part-time teacher—and then on 2000, I joined them and I was fulltime teacher at Salam School.

I: Okay.

R: I taught uh, Arabic and Quran. And I stayed till 2008. But on 2007, I uh, I joined UWM and I was part-time instructor over there. And still I'm- I quit on 2008 from Salam school, and I'm still working at UWM.

I: Okay. And then, um, what is your husband's profession?

R: My husband um, as I said he came here, he finished his studying. And then uh, he was, I think he worked with uh, what uh, John- Johnston Controls. And then he- he worked with Sprint Company. And then, I don't remember, he worked with many companies. And then after uh, September 11th, he lost his job. So he was without job for two years. And then he start his own business. He's uh, right now, he's um, he has computer store. He fix- he fixes uh laptops and all this stuff.

I: Okay. Um, you mentioned after September 11th, he lost his job. Um, was it- what were the reasons behind him losing his job? Um, was it as a result of it, or-

R: You know, to tell you the truth, I don't know exactly. My husband is [laughs] he doesn't speak. You know, he doesn't talk about many things, and this one of them. [Laughs] So he lost his job. Um, I don't know if its you know, has something to do with 9/11. But obviously, it- you know, because he lost right after, few months or maybe less than months after 9/11. So we never discussed this, but he was so, you know, unhappy that he lost his job. And then he started to do few things by his own- you know, himself and you know. He worked for a while in Chicago. He started- he built a building, but it wasn't good. [Laughs] Good project, so we lost what we saved till that time. And then he- here, he has now, has a store. I think he started um, not sure, maybe five years ago, six years ago. And he still.

I: Okay. Um, initially you planned on- you told me you only lived in Milwaukee since moving to the- to the US but you would like to move somewhere else. Um, did you initially plan on only living here for a short time? Was- was that the plan between you and your husband then?

R: No, it wasn't- there was no plan to... Um, no, just we always, um, say that we want to move to another state. But I don't know, its um, you know, for me, I still consider myself I'm not... you know, I'm Syrian first. So... [laughs] I don't know but, since I came, I didn't want to go back. And at the same time, I'm not fully enjoying being away from my country. So, its um, it's a conflict feeling that I'm not, as I said, enjoying being an American citizen. And at the same time, I didn't want to go back at any time in my life. Since I left.

I: Okay. So given the opportunity, would you go back?

R: Right now, you want me to go back? [Laughs]

I: Not right now! [Laughs]

R: Uh, I really want to go back because I really want to do something. Hopefully, God willing, things will get better. And its very painful right now. The situation over there is miserable. And I don't know, its uh... you know. Its such a hard time, you know. I don't know how to describe my feelings but yeah, absolutely, I would be interested in the future, to go back, to do something for my country.

I: Okay. Um, I know that Syria is part of the Arab Spring. So you mentioned with the situation and everything, now would not be the best time to go back, but um, has any of your family been affected by the Arab Spring? Any like, direct relative or distant relatives?

R: Uh, actually, um, my cousin lost her son. We lost one distant relative from my mother's side. And one of my relative lost his two arms. And most of my family- family members left their homes. Uh, originally, my father's side from Douma City. And its officially gone right now, unfortunately. So all of them left their houses, and moved to Damascus. But right now, even Damascus is not a safe place. So they keep moving. You know...

I: Um, do you have any family living outside of Syria then at the current moment?

R: Um, I have just my cousin left to Egypt.

I: Okay.

R: But most of my family members choose to stay there. I don't know if they will be able to stay in- in Syria. But nobody is talking right now about you know, leaving. I don't know.

I: Um, do you have any other family in the United States?

R: Yes, I do. Um, my sister, my brother, both of them are in Michigan. And um, my sister lives with me. She was married, and then she got divorced. Uh, and she lives with me, since she- she got divorced six- five years ago.

I: Does your sister have any children?

R: She has, uh, two daughters. But they- both of them are with her ex-husband.

I: Okay. Um, how did the divorce affect your family?

R: It did affect um, me, personally, and my family because she moved here and she's living with us. Um, you know, culturally, we have to take care of each other. So she lives with me and, she has some issues, health issues too, so I have to take care of her.

I: Okay. Um, in terms of parenting, so you have two sons and one daughter. Have you- in style- in your style of parenting; have you treated your sons differently than your daughter? Or what is your style?

R: Actually, I know I am from- from Arab countries. You know, from Syria. And you know, maybe we have this issues back home, but um, I'm very glad I didn't experience this, you know. Even we- we are um, five sisters and two brothers. And we, you know, when I was young, we were four- four sis- four girls and one boy. But my family never ever treated us differently. So we didn't have- I didn't experience such thing. It's the opposite actually. My mom used to take care of us, her daughters. And she, most of the time, you know, uh, kept forgetting about my brother. He used to be very nice. He's still a very nice person. So, we- we didn't suffer. Or we didn't experience this before, and I don't think, um, it's the opposite actually, in my family. Cause um, my oldest son is extremely nice person. He's really really nice. So I don't have problem raising him at all. He's never raised his voice above mine. And I never, you know, remember a day where he, you know, yelled at me, or raised his voice. And I have the same, my youngest is ve- extremely nice boy. But my daughter, she's kind of, you know, stubborn, so we have to, you know, to be easy on her. So I don't like to be tough with her. Because I think she's now going through a time that we have to understand that she's growing up. And she's, you

know... um, she's moving from childhood to adulthood, so um, we wanted to- this period to be as peaceful as it should be. So... we don't argue with her a lot.

I: Okay. Um, as far as—since your daughter's in 9th grade right now, so she has a little bit of time—but as far, um, like college or moving away from home, what do you hope that your- your daughter and your younger son would do in that sense?

R: Um, I don't know, she's still young. I didn't think about this issue before. I- I don't know, um, let me tell you the truth. I really don't like the idea of moving away from family. And um, but sometimes uh, I really don't like the idea of, you know, um, preventing um, kids from, you know, seeking a better future or a good um, study. Um, but, I don't know, I feel I'm guilty that I really wanted my daughter to be, to understand her culture better or more, and her religion in a better way. So in this part, I think I'm not doing a good job raising her the way I thought I will. So I'm still maybe, I mean, I still I'm not sure 100 percent, but I feel that I didn't do my part to- if she ask me that she will—if she stays like this—if she will ask me in the future that she might- she wanted to leave um, away from me to finish her studying, um, I'm afraid that I will not be able to say yes. Um, but, I'm not sure.

I: What about your younger son? As far as moving away.

R: As I said, he's still very young.

I: Yes.

R: You know, I didn't think about it. But, you know, my son, he- he studied in this state, he studied at UWM. But he moved. He- he wasn't living with us. He moved- he- to live with his friends, very close to the campus. Um, still I told him, stay with me, I really want to have enough of you, before you leave me to your wife. So I kept telling him every week, when he used to come, you know, I missed you, I really want you to stay with me until I, you know, tell your wife

to take care of you. So I want to take care of you until you got married. And he used to laugh, you know, we are having fun, you know, studying and I'm close to the campus, and you know, I wanna be on time. So...

I: Okay. Um, and then I don't know if you've thought about this in the future, but um, what kind of husband or wife are you looking for your children?

R: Um, I always pray that God, you know, that Allah (Mighty and Majestic), you know, grant-will grant him somethi- somebody who's really good person. I don't have, I don't specify with like, I don't want her to be um, I prefer that he chose a Syrian young woman. But maybe, you know, I'm open, you know, with this part. I just want to make sure that, God willing, he will find a good wife. A good person regardless of the nationality. But I really prefer that she's Syrian.

I: Mhmm. And then for your daughter?

R: Um, the same actually. She keeps saying that, why I can't marry an American, you know. You know, what do you mean by American? Muslim American? She says uh, doesn't matter. I say no! It matters a lot! So, um, I'm afraid, you know... My son, my oldest, he's um, I sent a few time to Syria when he was young. And uh, I feel he's um, he- he's really very close to me. And um, you know, his visits to Syria made him uh, culturally very aware of you know, the Arab culture. Um, and I feel he's 100 percent Syrian and 100 percent American, so he's enjoying both cultures, and that's what I like about him. Uh, actually, when he went there, and he spent- I sent him three years during the summer vacation. And every time, he- when he used to come, he say Mama, why we don't stay there, you know, I liked it there and... But the last time he went, uh I think he was 20, 21, he enjoyed it there, but he said that I missed America. I want to come back. So but in general, I like that he likes uh, Arab food, Arab culture. Now he's very in what's going on in Syria and he- he- he feels the pain, the people, you know, of the people. And I really like

this part that's he um... He thought of going even. He said, you know, I'm gonna go write about what's happening, and you know, because his English is very good, it's his first language. And he studied journalism, so he said, you know, I want to go there and to write about what's going on. Even if he will not go, but I like that he thought about it. So, that's about my son. So he reads Arabic, he speaks Arabic fluently, he's, you know, even when he went to Syria, my family—all my relative—told me you did a very good job raising him. Because you know, when he used to be there, everybody said that we feel that he's one of us. We didn't feel for one moment that he's, you know, he's born- he was born in the United States, and you know, he lives there. So, I really liked this part that he's- he's very very Syrian. When, especially when he's among them. Um, even when I used to prepare his luggage, he used to say Mama, don't but any shorts! I say, you know, you wear your shorts at- in the house. He say no, Mama, men over there don't wear shorts! [Laughs] So, I really like this part, that he's aware of the culture over there. And um, when he was in high school, he was, you know, I almost lost him, I felt I lost him for two, three years. But again, he, you know, suddenly, I don't know how actually, but my husband kept reminding that you know, he will come back to us, don't worry, because, you know, we raised him the right way. And I think my husband was right. He- he- he is now very close to us. And he understand what we are going through and... He's a son and a friend for me.

I: Um, and then, would you say that he- he lost his way because of the American culture, or because being raised in America that, would you say?

R: Um, he was um, you know, like many American kids who wanted to, you know, try things. Um, actually, um, we weren't tough on him. We really wanted this period to go without leaving any um... Um, you know, because most of the Arab families lose their kids during such...

I: Such ages?

R: Yes. [Laughs] So they keep telling them, no don't uh, and you know, try to spy on them and all this stuff. No, we didn't do any of them. And I don't know if this matters for you to mention, um, but you know once, I was- he was supposed to pick me up from school, he was um, fixing my car. So, an hour away, he told me, Mama, you know what my friend, his name is—he told me what his name is—he told me that you know, everybody likes Sister Inshirah because she's very nice person and she never fights with anybody, or talk about anybody. It was [laughs] just a few minutes before he picked me up from school that, you know, one lady from the school told me, or one parent—I was meeting with her—she told me that you know, my son, they saw my son in a places they shouldn't be there. So I was kind of sad, and when he picked me and he told me about his friend, and what his friend told him about me, I said, hopefully you will do your best to make me proud if people talk about you. Before that I told him, are you happy to hear you know, what your friend said about me? He said of course, Mama! I was extremely happy to hear him say- please make me proud and make me happy. I didn't tell him that you know, whatever the lady told me about him. So, we kept this policy, you know, his father and myself, you know, that we don't want confront him with things he's doing. And we kept reminding him that you know, its just time. But I was very tough on one part that I told him don't do anything in my house that I don't like. If you want to smoke, not in the house. If you want to do anything, not in the house. So be away from my house and from, you know, people—Muslim people—because I don't want you to hurt their feelings. So yeah it was just two years, and then by himself, without any influence from us, at least, that you know, he started to think about you know, the way we live and... So thanks God, it didn't take long time. So I really want my daughter now to- to be um, you know... She doesn't write Arabic, I really want her, and even this part doesn't- it makes me kind of angry because I teach Arabic. [Laughs] And her father- I didn't tell you about my

father's side, we talked about... He owns a store, but he- he teaching at the University. He- he teaches at- he used to teach at UWM. I think he taught two years, and he's teaching right now at um, UW-Madison. He teach Arabic culture. So I teach Arabic language, he teaches Arabic culture, so I really want our kids to be better. And to understand their culture and their language much more. Hopefully, I don't know, maybe the cr- the what's going on in Syria is you know, consuming us. Sometimes I feel I just wanna run away from myself. I don't know if- its- um, I don't feel comfortable. Nothing- nothing brings comfort to me. Whatever I do, I feel, I'm not enjoying any kind of food, any kind of- I don't know, its my life. I'm not- very distant from being normal.

I: Because of the- what's going on in Syria?

R: Yeah. Because of the suffering of the people. You know, not my immediate family. My immediate family lost a lot. But they still you know, in houses, and they still eat, and drink, and you know. But I'm troubled with the people who lost you know... Who left their houses and they live in the street, or in- near country, so its um, its very bad situation. Especially you know, there's no- nothing in near future that this situation will be any better so... So that's what hurts.

I: Um, I know you said not in the near future, but do you hope for a better future in like a decade or so? Do you think that is possible?

R: Oh, I want it to be today, right this minute. So I really don't wanna shift it to... [Laughs] I don't know, its- I have big hope that thing will be better, God willing. Um, because it wasn't good. It wasn't good cause you know, we left. We left Syria for me 25 years ago. I wasn't happy when I left. Not because I will be away from Syria; because I was mad at everything. I was, you know, young when Hama- Hama crisis happened in 1980s, and it was miserable in Damascus, you know, during that time. So it affected in- in many different ways. So, when I used to- I

visited Syria twice since I left, and I was mad at the two times I was there, you know. I really like Syrians and everything, but I used to- to say shame on you, you know. Its not the way I wanted to be- to you know, my country to be the way it was. So- so right now, I don't know. It was- I said it wasn't good, and I really hope that it will be better in the future. And I don't know, its um, my cousin disappeared two, four years- four days ago with his wife. Its very painful, I don't know if we can you know, come over all this difficulties quickly and start to do something for our country. I don't know if anybody lost his son, or his son, or her daughter, or you know, if we have the ability to go- to go back to normal life. So, but I'm not mad at Syrians anymore. I felt that I was wrong, they surprised us with their brave, and- and I don't know, I don't know. I know we have many in our country, many... I don't wanna even call them human. Its less than human. And whatever they do right now, its not big surprise for me. They proved they do even worse before. They can do worse, but I'm very very happy with the- with the majority of our people over there. I don't know, I asked my husband, if you were there, are you going to, you know, go for demonstration and know that you know, they might catch you and you know, torture you to death. He said I'm not sure about myself, we are not sure if we can do it so people over there proved to be great people so since we have this asset, I think future, God willing, will be much better than what you know, used to be before.

I: Um, I just wanted to ask you a couple more questions about 9/11. Um, after it had happened, did you notice any changed in attitudes towards to you and your family? Um, any examples or anything like that?

R: From whom?

I: From neighbors, strangers...

R: In general, I don't have very bad experience. I used to teach at Salam school at that time. Uh, I think we had many people came from um, the churches and many different places to you know, support us and say good things about us. And uh, it was very nice of them. We did receive many threats from different people that they will, you know, bomb the school or do something to our students. Um, it was such um [laughs] difficult time actually. I- I just started to write yesterday because I'm not feeling well right now at all. I went to the emergency room twice a few days ago, so I thought of writing things. It will make me feel better. I just wrote yesterday the- you know, on the day of 9/11 when Peter Jennings, you know, was talking at 10:30 it was—it was I think 10:30—that you know, FBI were looking for uh, people who speak Arabic. You know, at that time, you know, I was teaching Arabic so I thought, oh, I'm teaching more than a language. And I start to look differently at things. Um, I was the department head of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Salam School and I- I think I did one of my- on the best think I did in Salam School. We had contest- Islamic Studies contest, contest, and I think it was you know, good Muslims are good citizens. And you know, students has to- had to write about this, you know, how to be good Muslims and good citizen at the same time. And we have another um, writing was about um, American Muslim, the challenges, and it was very good um, activity, where we had integrated curriculum. Where we you know, a Social Studies worked with Arabic teacher, with Quran teacher, with English teacher, for the students to be able to produce a very solid um, writing in the contest. So, it was really good. Um, when I used to travel to attend workshops, yeah I can tell that- they didn't bother me with anything, but you know, when they used to see me from far away, you know, they get ready and be ready if anything happen, you know. So they, you can tell, um, uh once I- I was leaving to Washington D.C. to attend a workshop, and here at the um, Mitchell Airport, is it?

I: Mhmm.

R: Um, so I was co- going through the- the luggage area, so he- he when he saw me, the policeman saw me from far away, so he was doing like this, you know [looks more alert and laughs]. I don't know my scar, you know, ring- rings at his brain, maybe. But he didn't say anything. They take a longer period of time to look at the, you know, the ID- my ID, but nobody bothered me. I have one, two experience... Um, an old lady, I was entering Sears store, and she was you know, go home! I said, I'm home! If you wanna go anywhere, you may do that. Um, but I wasn't home. I- I didn't feel, I was confused about my identity. I- I was confused if I belong here or to somewhere. Because I left Syria because of this feeling, I wasn't sure about um, I wasn't feeling comfortable over there, so we came here for a better future, for- to enjoy more freedom, to enjoy um, our lives and then what happened. Of course you know, put very big question mark on each- each one of us. So we have to prove we are citizen. So it wasn't good experience at all. Especially my brother-in-law was working with um, Muslim American University or something, so I was every day, at the end of the day, if nobody called me and tell me he was arrested, I was you know, good, I didn't hear anything today. So, it was such a, such a difficult time. And my- my brother was- has no- wasn't legally here, so and he was working with my brother-in-law, so every day I was afraid that they will, you know, send him back, you know, or you know, jail him or you know... So, it was tough time, I don't know why Arabs always go through tough times. We still suffering right now.

I: Um, and then I just wanted to ask you about your religion. Um, so you are Muslim? And um, you wear the hijab? Um, does your daughter wear the hijab as well?

R: No.

I: Okay. Um, what- are you involved in the, in the Islamic community in Milwaukee, in the Greater Milwaukee area?

R: As I told you, I used to teach at Salam school. So I was actually, very involved [laughs] being in the school you know, around Muslim people every day. For more than 12 years. But since I left six years ago, I don't go very often. Right now, I'm doing a study so I went back to school after six years. Um, I really, you know, what's happening in Syria make me- makes me feel I really have to do something for the Muslim community here. Um, so right now, I- I went back last week- or not last week, three weeks ago. And I want to do a study about um, the classic Arabic, you know, how to teach Arabic. Because I really want our kids to- to learn Arabic the right way and I really want them to enjoy their um, culture. Their heritage culture, and heritage language, and I really want to help and um, because I do believe our kids don't like Arabic and um, the way they have been taught is not the right way. So right now, I feel that you know, helping in this area, it helps me to be- to feel better actually because as I said, you know, we are going through a very tough times. And um, I really wanna do something I feel I'm helping somebody, or I'm helping my community, or I'm helping um, especially I taught there, and I feel that its unfinished business because I learned a lot since I left them and- and I feel I- I can help somehow.

I: Um, as far as your children go, do you want them to identify more with their Arabic culture or with their religion?

R: Um, culture. Um, there are many good things in our culture, I really want them to try to you know, um, I really want them to be good citizens. Good people. I really don't want them to do things that we do it in our culture, but is not- its not good thing to do. So, I'm very open you know, my husband and I, um, we discuss things and but with our kids, we try to show them more

than lecturing them. So, my husband is better than me in this area, he's very relaxed. And he never, you know, he's never nervous or you know, he tries his best to if any of our kids ask about anything, you know, to explain, but not to explain everything because he said they will figure it out. So, he's more relaxed than me. You know, my- my daughter always said, you know, don't expect me to wear hijab. I keep telling her, you know, I know you will, I'm not worried because I know you will, but my husband doesn't like this. He said tell her, okay, don't wear it if you don't want to. Don't, you know, confine her, that you will in the future. She's still you know, if- if she hears you know, this sentence, will not feel, you know, she feels somehow that we are after her. So he- he doesn't like this thing, you know. Just a smile, just tell her do whatever you want. But you know, at the same time, because we really want her to wear hijab. We really want her to be um, to be good Muslima. So he tries his best, you know, to show her indirectly about people, you know, good people, successful people, they wear hijab and they do good things. So hijab is not, you know, does not prevent her to do whatever she wants to do. But at the same time, he really doesn't want her, you know, doesn't force- doesn't want to force her to do anything. So he's more relaxed than me. I always say, you know, come pray! I want you to pray! But he says, that's enough if we pray in front of her. She knows. I don't know its um, hopefully he- he's doing the right thing. Sometimes I feel he is, sometimes I feel, he should be more strict, you know, with a few things. So I don't know, we- we feel we did a good job with our oldest, so hopefully our youngest will be as good.

I: Okay, um, and then the last thing I want to talk about was cultural clothing. Um, do you ever wear like galabiyas or aabayas?

R: Um, no. Uh, actually, [laughs] you know in Syria we don't wear galabiya, we wear manto.

I: Mhmm, Mama has a lot.

R: Yeah, so in Syria, I used to wear manto. Because it wasn't acceptable not to wear- not to you know, we had to wear manto. Um, when I came here, my husband said, I want you to wear jilbaab. I never wear jilbaab before, so his mom brought- I think bought me two or three jilbaabs. And when I came here, I wear them for a few times, and I felt [scoffs] no. I didn't like it. Because I didn't wear jilbaab in my country. So right now, I wear long skirts with you know, long sleeves, and I wear hijab. And sometimes I wear, um, pants, with something you know up to here [motions to upper thigh]. I think that's enough. I'm not with the idea of wearing hijab and specially covering faces. I think its um, go beyond what we want people to know about us or to feel comfortable, you know, being around um, it doesn't help, in my opinion. Covering faces and all this long things. I do respect people who want to do these things but personally, I wish they don't because it doesn't help.

I: It doesn't help the Arab identity, or?

R: Um, I don't know if the goal of doing things, if you want to understand it Islamically, that we had to do this things to protect ourselves, to um, to be modest, to be um, so we can be modest without covering our faces. Um, we can protect ourselves without wearing very long things. And at the same time, it make us closer to American people. I think you know, wearing very long and covering faces build walls between us and them, and it doesn't help us to look good. I'm not saying you know, we are working, you know, or this is our um, you know, our intention to do whatever we do, to look good or not to look good, no I'm not saying this. But its very important that you know, to feel people, to feel um, not to scare or not to bring issues not that important. Um, so covering but in a, I don't know how to say... Like, in a balanced way, helps us and you know, um, I don't know, maybe that's enough. [Laughs]

I: Um, why did you stop wearing the manto when you moved here? Was it for that same reason?

R: It's the same reason, you know... You know, we have to be smart if we understand our religion the right way, we have to be smart in this life. We wear jilbaab over there because that's the culture of, you know, that's the Syrian culture, that they wear j- manto over there. So no problem if we do, if we wear manto over there. But here, I felt I'm odd. Its you know, okay, so what manto exactly bring, what does manto bring for me? To cover? I can cover with something else. So I felt wearing manto hurts more than [laughs] benefit me personally. Or you know, make people comfortable around me. So I- I thought you know, and I really feel the same with wearing jilbaab or cover faces. We have to be smart, you know. To think beyond clothes and pieces of things to put on our bodies. We have to be modest, we have to cover, yes. But there are many ways to look good and to be modest at the same time.

I: Um, so the outfits you described before, is that what you normally wear to work, at home, when you're out, um, like at the grocery store or something, is that always the same generally?

R: What do you mean?

I: Do you normally just- like, when you're working, do you wear the like long skirt and the long sleeved shirt as well as at home?

R: Uh, actually, I don't wear hijab at home, but today we have somebody is visiting, so I wear hijab at home, but usually of course I don't [laughs]. And I don't know if, you used to live in Syria, we do care about our- what we wear, and you know. And in the Arab country in general, but specifically in Syria, we do care about the way we look and what we wear, especially at our houses. So I don't cover at the house, and I do believe that I have things in my closet, you know, that many people in America don't have. Very fancy things. So when I go do shopping, I mostly- I wear pants, I feel more comfortable wearing pants and or jeans, and you know, a long-sleeved

shirt. More than skirt, I- I keep all my long skirts and for the work, and I do wear what Syrians wear. Its skirt with- I don't know if you know what it is...

I: The- the pleats? Yeah.

R: Yeah, so I feel I still do that because you know, it very comfortable when you sit. And doesn't give you, you know, you don't look big when you wear them. So, I do have my own style, but I thought- but I think its not an odd- very odd style. [Laughs] I don't know, many people stop and say oh it's a nice skirt! Oh, thank you. So, yeah, I worked one- I worked for one year at Marquette University.

I: Okay.

R: And it was very good experience for me, but they wanted to have a- um, fulltime instructor and Enaya was ready, because I'm still studying. Enaya finished. Um, but we worked together for one year. And I think I was the first Muslima who wears hijab at Marquette.

I: Oh, really?

R: And I was the first at UWM too. Now we have many. Now we have many TAs and- but I was the first lecturer who wears hijab at both Marquette and UWM. So I'm happy about this part.

[Laughs]

I: Good. Um, is there anything else, before we turn off the recorder, is there anything else you want me to- to tell me about your history, your family, anything like that?

R: Um, just one thing. Because we do have many good things in our culture, but at the same time we do have things that we have to think about. Um, one of the thing that we have to think about is uh, we don't read a lot and we don't write, specifically. And I don't know if this a culture or a something we had um, as a result of the undemocratic regime. Because you know, especially in Syria, when I was 18, till I left 24, um, we didn't dare to put our thoughts on paper. So we were

really afraid of saying anything that the government doesn't want us to say. So in general, our culture does not um, encourage us to write and to talk about how we feel. We always want to satisfy you know, people around us. And not to say things out of you know, normal, what people normally do. So in a way, I feel that it didn't help me in my life. I always wanted to think, should I say this? Is it acceptable? And when I reached this age, you know, especially when the revolution started in Syria, I said, I have to be liberated too. So I'm working now on, you know, talking more freely about how I feel, about things I missed. I don't know if you noticed when I talked about what I missed you know, when I got married, I said why didn't say I wanted to be this way or that way? You know, especially during the wedding and the marriage that we want our families to take care of these things. I don't know- it used to be this way. I'm not young, I'm almost 50.

I: You don't look almost 50.

R: Oh, thank you. [Laughs] Even I feel miserable right now. So yeah, so 30 years ago, it wasn't acceptable to discuss these things. And it wasn't acceptable to you know, I think now things changed. But you know, for me I really feel that I missed many things. Uh, I really want my daughter to be nice, and you know, to think about people around her. But at the same time I really want her to- to be more open, and to express her feelings in a way that, you know, make her feel more comfortable and live um, in a better way than the way I... You know, because I really feel that my husband is a good person, and um, he's really very educated person. Very nice. I told you that I didn't suffer, or that I didn't go through things that many Arabs, you know, like dealing differently between boys and girls. I didn't experience this when I was little. And at the same time, you know, when I got married, my husband is very nice. And he- I think he's very quiet and I want him sometimes to talk more and to get angry, to do something. He always very

quiet, very peaceful. And I feel I'm luck, um, you know, with many things in my life. But at the same time, I really feel that I missed a lot by being very quiet, and by being, you know, not to have enough courage to talk about how I feel. And you know, when you don't talk and when you don't express your feelings, people don't understand you the right way. So hopefully, the revolution will make things better. In a way that, you know, we don't silence our feelings and our opinions and uh, it was miserable. Hopefully the future will be much better.

I: Okay, um, what year were you born? Just so I have a timeline.

R: Uh, when?

I: What year?

R: What year? 1964.

I: Okay. Okay, thank you.

R: You're welcome.

I: Okay, then I'm just gonna turn this off.

R: Sure.