



## Interview for Study on Impacts of COVID-19 on U.S. Muslims Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute (AMWRRI)

Interviewer/Number of Interview: NDP2

Date: 3/31/2021

Name of Interviewee Assigned by Researcher (to protect identity): Respondent

Age: Mid-50s

Gender: Female

Country of Origin/Nationality: Bangladesh

Current State in which respondent resides: A state in Mid-Western U.S.

**Note:** In the transcript, *I* refers to Interviewer, and *R* refers to Respondent/Interviewee. To protect the identity of the interviewee, some responses to questions are not provided. In such cases, this statement will show in the transcript: Information is not being made available. In other responses, specific details that might identify the family members are omitted or made more general.

### **Abstract:**

The respondent is a Bangladeshi-American woman in her mid-50s who was born in Bangladesh and has worked as a physician for years in the United States. She lives in the mid-West with her husband and has two children, one of whom is an adult in college. In the interview, the respondent shared about her experience with COVID-19 as causing a lot of change, both positive and negative. One of the biggest positives was the virtual Zoom and FaceTime platforms, which empowered the respondent to create an online Bangladeshi language learning class for children across the nation. The face-to-face contact virtually was important to respondent, but even though she could attend funerals and other significant events over virtual platforms, it wasn't a full substitute for personal contact, especially during times of grief and healing. This lack of social contact was one of the biggest negatives for respondent, along with her and her husband's high risk as physicians, and the anxiety that came with their frontline work. Between increased

work hours and her online initiative, community religious events were not as salient in this respondent's life, but individual spirituality and faith still remained important for her.

**Key Themes:**

COVID-19, pandemic, Muslim, physician, frontline worker, family, virtual conferencing, virtual language learning.

**Transcript:**

I: Well thank you for being willing to be interviewed for this project, and for completing the consent form, I got that. To start with, could you just state your name, please?

R: Okay, my name is [Respondent].

I: Awesome, and what is your age?

R: [Mid-50s]

I: And where were you born?

R: Bangladesh.

I: Um, and when did you move to the United States?

R: 1990s.

I: Awesome, and how do you identify yourself in terms of national background now?

R: I am an American, born in Bangladesh, but I'm also Bangladeshi nationality.

I: Okay, thank you. And what is the highest level of education you've completed?

R: I am a physician, so doctorate in medicine.

I: Okay, and what is your marital status?

R: I'm married.

I: And, including yourself, how many adults are living in your household?

R: Three

I: And how many children?

R: Two

I: Okay, awesome, so this next set of questions is going to focus on the impact of COVID-19 on personal relationships, financial well-being, um, and health--both physical and emotional. Um, so I can give you a few seconds to think about and reflect on those experiences, and then I'll start the questions.

R: Sure.

I: Okay, so how has the outbreak of COVID virus affected you personally, um, and this is a very broad question. It could cover financial, social, or health contexts.

R: Okay, so personally the--when we first heard about the pandemic, definitely, you feel an anxiety, um, because my daughter was out of state, and in college. And, um, you know, she wanted to be home, and she had to fly, so definitely we were worried about her safety. And then, uh, also, I was worried about our [younger son], and in general our children's safety because the spring break was about to start, but there were three days of school left before the school was supposed to close. So, um, we felt that if the kids go to school for three more days, we don't know how many people are already infected so there might be a rapid spread. So, [I joined with other concerned people and we were able to get enough signatures to get the schools closed sooner than it was scheduled]. So, yeah, as far as, initially it was a--we don't know what was coming and what happened. Um, as far as people involved, immediately after COVID started I knew several of my friends who are doctors in different countries and old relatives, relatives, or friends, or friends' relatives, they have to [inaudible], because definitely it was a very sad situation.

I: Okay, absolutely. And, um, would you say that the outbreak of the virus has affected the way you conduct yourself with people close to you, including friends or family who don't live nearby?

R: For sure. Yeah, we stopped seeing each other, you know, friends and family, until we felt that it was safe. We used to travel during spring break, and we didn't, and well, my daughter came home from college and she came via plane, so we were wearing masks. Overnight, my house, my countertop turned into a clinic almost, with masks and gloves. So we stopped seeing our friends. We didn't go to anybody's house. We didn't shake anybody's hands; immediately, all the shaking hands stopped and we kept our distance.

I: Okay. So since, since the outbreak, since the beginning of this whole thing back in March, what have been your primary ways of communicating with people who are not in your household now?

R: So, you know, we have friends, some of them have smaller children. And we used to go visit them and that way we could see the children and they get to see us, but because of COVID we couldn't. So immediately I became a little innovative here (chuckles) and I started to use FaceTime. And once I started to see the kids over FaceTime, I realized, well, maybe I can use that Zoom platform, and I can actually teach the smaller children the language I know--I'm originally from Bangladesh, so there are some in the community, they speak Bengali, but we cannot go to their house.

I: Yeah!

R: After a month I realized it's time to teach the little kids. The initial first month was *just* the shock, you know?

I: Okay

R: Because we had to go to work.

I: Right

R: And when we came from work, we had to almost strip down and run (chuckles), so run for the shower. We would run for the shower and sanitize and put our clothes in the laundry right away, in a bag, and go change.

I: Sure, and um, and you mentioned that you were able to kind of adapt, you know, using technology to explain to kids, but would you--do you see any other challenges or unexpected benefits that came from this sort of shift to new communication?

R: Uh, yes! So, uh, so, as far as language learning, in the past, we had a Bengali language school [during the summer] for Bengali Diaspora--and the children of Bengali Diaspora who live in the United States and in [my city in the Midwest]. But because we couldn't do that, we tried Google Meet and Zoom. And, we were able to network, you know, when you don't have to travel to a place to take your kids to school, there were more participants than expected. So we actually were starting an online language school--and, we had about 60 kids.

I: Awesome!

R: And teachers from all around the world.

I: Right. So unexpected -- people showing up, that's awesome!

R: Yeah!

I: Besides Zoom and FaceTime, have there been any other apps or online resources that you've begun to use?

R: Oh, yes. WhatsApp, Messenger--Facebook Messenger. Uh, those became a popular way to communicate. Many people shared an Instagram too, for younger kids. Information was shared about COVID, how to social distance, and how to protect. Of course, there was the Johns Hopkins University app where they were showing the number of COVID-related deaths; so we used that too.

I: Okay. And, you, I know that you mentioned your occupation. Before COVID, how many hours per week did you typically work?

R: Usually 20 hours.

I: Okay, and did that change once, um, COVID became big?

R: Yes.

I: Okay.

R: So, um, right away, basically--personally, in my situation, I think it was a little bit different, because I was planning on two weeks of spring break, because my kids have different spring breaks. The benefit was that I was able to spend time with my children and with my family. Also, at that time, right away, we had just stopped taking routine patients for routine visits unless it was an urgent patient.

I: Okay.

R: So the number of patients was actually dropped right away--and if I were to go to work, I probably would not have any regular patient in my schedule other than urgent care, so I did not have to face that situation for the couple weeks that I took time off.

I: Okay.

R: But--but once I went back to work, uh, our hours actually changed and they became longer. Instead of eight hour day, or four hour half a day, it would be ten hour shifts.

I: Oh, wow.

R: And the reason is that we would see the urgent care patients, because urgent care was getting filled with symptomatic patients.

I: Right.

R: So there would be two different types of patients. One would be definitely COVID-related symptoms, which was, at that time known as several headache and different kinds. And then there would be non-COVID related symptoms, like patients would have symptoms.

I: Okay.

R: And because COVID is so new, you know, a novel virus? So some patients would present the symptom that may not be a [inaudible] symptoms.

I: Oh, okay.

R: Actually I ended up working longer hours then.

I: Okay, got it. And in the last month, how many hours per week have you worked on average?

R: This last month?

I: Yes

R: Uh, I usually do 22 hours.

I: Okay, and in what ways, if any, has COVID-19 affected financial well-being for you or your family, if at all?

R: We are fortunate--I am fortunate that I have a profession that I, you know, I could afford. Actually, even without seeing patients for a certain time, but definitely we had a pay cut. We had a cut in our salary, because I have a smaller family, you know, I could afford it. And of course, we reduced our spending for sure. So there were plus and minuses. Minus is that, whatever I worked hard for the year before, I worked very hard, and I was expecting that there would be an increase in my salary, and then we had to give that away, because our organization, you know, also was scrambling, and I don't want to speak badly of my organization--

I: Oh, sure

R: I know you're not going to tell my name, but [inaudible] could just keep it confidential?

I: Yes, of course.

R: Um, so, yeah, um, there was a cut in my salary. On the other hand, the good thing is that normally we would fly, we would go on vacation for spring break, and we didn't have to go, and so our expenses went down then.

I: Oh, okay!

R: You know eating out in the restaurants, and stuff like that.

I: Okay. And then, this is moving to COVID crisis, how has it affected physical and emotional health? And can you think of any challenges that you have faced in these areas?

R: Uh, so physical and emotional, as I said, it was tougher with lots of unknowns, lots of not knowing what is going to happen, right?

I: Right.

R: Whether I will catch it, whether my husband's a physician also, whether he will catch it or give it to each other. Also there were a lot of things up in the air then. So, you know, we were considering being in different rooms, away from kids and stuff. So that is the emotional, and what was your other question?

I: Uh, sorry, yeah, just physical health, if any physical ones?

R: Physical ones, uh...mmm, we were not able to go to the gym, so we were not able to exercise, and it was cold here in [the Midwest], but we walked outside --well, in other words, actually, it was good that we had a lot of outdoor time even though it was winter and cold. Personally, we eat healthy, yeah, so it was fine.

I: Good. Uhm, what strategies did you use--I know you mentioned a little more on the emotional/mental health side. What strategies did you find helpful to cope with these?

R: I found communicating with family, friends, and relatives very helpful. I actually made it a point, just like you know I shared with you, having the language school, because I felt these little children, they were stuck in the house. They're not going to their school, and their parents, I--when I was speaking with one--or, a few children's parents, to enroll them to the school? I found that the parents were very anxious because some of the parents are homemakers, and their entertainment was meeting friends and, you know, having party in the house and they were then really anxious not to see each other or friends. Some of them are, you know, they're cooking food and dropping it off in front of people's house. Some of them are so anxious they wouldn't even accept any food containers or bags, in case it has some germs in there.

I: Right.

R: So there were different things, but personally I relied mostly on connecting with people via phone and FaceTime and looking at the faces of people. So that's helpful.

I: Right. (pauses) Okay! Um, and then this next section--we'll be moving to the next group of questions, and this is going to explore the impact of COVID on religious practices and beliefs.

R: Okay.

I: Okay, so have you been able to, and how have you continued any religious traditions during the pandemic? I know that last March, Ramadan fell right after the start of the pandemic --so if you could, yeah, just discuss any impact it had.

R: So, there are religious places where people go to pray during the Ramadan and people fast all day, and then they will go to the mosque to pray together and break the fast. Usually in other years there will be people from the community of all different cultures who share the same religion. They will go and take their kids, the seniors will go, and they will at least break the fast together and sit together and eat together. Last year, that didn't happen. The mosques were closed. And, people just stayed home and did it among themselves and within the limits of the family members.

I: Okay. And since the outbreak, have you been able to participate in any virtual religious activities?

R: You know, good question that you ask, because now I remember. Unfortunately, some people died, and I did attend several memorials via Zoom.

I: Okay (pauses)

R: One was [outside the U.S.].

I: Sure--

R: It was the virtual platform actually opened me up to meet other people or hear other people. Because people who I attended the memorial of lived in a different state and city, you cannot go there, you cannot hug the family member, and you cannot console them like typically being there. So there was kind of a little distance, so it kind of was strange, you know?

I: Right. Absolutely.

R: Normally if it's a friend or relative who passed away, we would go, try to visit, be in their house, but here, you cannot--even one of my relatives, he passed away, and his children were not able to reach home because of COVID, and they were not able to be there to bury the father.

I: Oh, no, that's very sad. I'm sorry to hear that.

R: Yeah

I: Okay, so this next question is kind of about--have local religious leaders, have they drawn on Muslim scriptural sources or historical sources at all to kind of help cope with the COVID-19 crisis?

R: You know, personally, I am not in contact with the religious institutions all the time. I kind of go on rare occasions, or on special occasions when there is like Ramadan--but like, even with the COVID, my understanding is everything is closed, so I am not in contact with anyone, so what I see via WhatsApp. There are different communities, like physician community and among the



physician community there would be other non-physician community there would be many religions, but also Muslim people involved in there. What I noticed is that people are actually sharing a lot of information, trying to educate people. Some people have a misunderstanding and wrong information, so people are just trying to share information to education others. So that's really good.

I: That's good, yeah. And on a personal level, you know, have your own practices or prayers played a role in how you understand COVID?

R: So basically, I pray at home. I pray at home, and the prayer is, it's basically, "I believe in one God" and I will just pray the prayers in my own mind, so, you know, I just pray when I can. And sometimes, [inaudible] Islamic prayer practice may be a little different, you have to have a special prayer mat and stuff like that. But, because of the work hours, [inaudible] in my head are not necessarily, you know--of course, yeah, it was affected a little bit, but I will not be in a corner of the room doing the prayer mat and stuff like that.

I: Right. And would you say that the pandemic has affected at all your faith or your beliefs?

R: Uhm, I don't know, I still believe in one God, so (chuckles). I don't know if I have this right, then, in answer mode.

I: No, that's okay, yeah! Okay, awesome, and so that wraps up that section. Um, next section is about um your local Muslim community's engagement with social justice issues. Um, and so um, how has your mosque or like the local Muslim community responded to Black Lives Matter movement or any other recent social justice movements?

R: Personally--I am sorry, but I am not aware how local communities have responded. It has been so busy, as you can imagine, with what we put in hours and kids. So I think I did not even get time to catch up on emails. So if there was any email, I cannot answer that, for the community.

I: For sure, no worries! So this next one is, and again, you don't have to answer at any point, if you don't want to, just let me know. What do you think Muslims in the United States should be doing with regard to social justice, or, is there room within your own religious tradition to kind of inform social justice issues?

R: So yes, I think this is a very important question that you ask. I believe, um, Muslim community--and not only Muslim community but any minority--they need to stand up for their religion or their culture, and because at the end of the day we are all human beings. This is all our world mission that we share together, and if we are not able to do that, that can impact people's wellbeing, psychology. So, yes, people need to speak up, but you cannot do it alone. You need to be united -- you need people to be united, you need support from friends, family,

workplace, and community. I should say. I find it very important that our friends, our relatives and neighbors get an opportunity to know the person who is of a diverse background.

I: Absolutely.

R: Education is so important. If we don't know, how do we know what is good, what is bad, who is good, who is not, you know? People might have biases, they might have misconceptions. Misperceptions might be wrong. There could be misunderstandings, so education is very important.

I: Sure, absolutely. Thank you. And then, we are in the home stretch here, last section. So this is mostly about uplifting kind of stuff. What would you say was the most positive or uplifting experience since, uh, the outbreak of COVID-19? Something that inspired hope or happiness?

R: Oh, the vaccine, right? (laughs)

I: Yes (laughs)

R: Yeah, having the vaccine is wonderful, you know, getting access to the vaccine. Oh, I have to say that we are fortunate that we live in a city where we were able to get the vaccine; we didn't have to wait too long. So that is very helpful. Yeah, and also neighbors even, and friends, and family -- when you share common goals, it doesn't matter what religion they're from, but physicians came together. Workplace, I have to give a lot of credit to my workplace too, their priority was safety, and equity and equality, so I appreciate that. It helped a lot.

I: Wonderful. And what is the thing you are most looking forward to doing once COVID-19 is-- once we sort of get back to normal?

R: Go on vacation! (chuckles)

I: Go on vacation! (chuckles)

R: You know, I should say, one thing I didn't mention to you is that we fly, we try to go out of country or try to go to different states--but we *did* travel, during COVID, by car. So, but, we went to places that, like, we wouldn't normally go, like, um, what do you call it? Like natural resources, but driving. So, yeah, we would like to go visit friends and relatives, and you know, I'm looking forward to that.

I: Absolutely.

R: One other thing I didn't share with you and I didn't know if it fit within your questionnaire or not. My sister lives in [another country], and you know I didn't see her for more than a year. And my mom couldn't see her daughter because the borders are closed.

I: Great, so I'm sure she's looking forward also, to visiting her.

R: Yep!

I: Great, and actually, that is the end of the survey! If there's anything else you want to say to me, you can say it now, otherwise I'll shut off the recording if you have nothing else.

R: Well, I thank you so much for taking time to do a survey, and it will be, I'm sure it will be interesting to know from different people how their life was, and I would like to get a follow-up in the future, if possible!

I: Yeah, absolutely! And I actually have a survey, like an anonymous post-survey for you, but absolutely, I'd love to follow up with you about the outcome of this.