

Interview 45

This interview was conducted by The Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center (MEMEAC) of The Graduate Center, City University of New York (June 2002 – June 2003)

Gender of Respondent: Female

Age: 24

Q. Okay. I'll start by asking you a few questions about yourself.

A Okay.

Q. Where were you born?

A. I was born in New York, United States of America.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. I grew up in New York.

Q. Okay. So the other question doesn't apply to you since you were born here. Where was your father born?

A. In Bangladesh.

Q. And how about your mother?

A. In Bangladesh.

Q. So you're second generation?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay. What do you consider to be your ethnic background?

A. American-Bangladeshi.

Q. And what is your religious affiliation?

A. Muslim.

Q. How old are you now?

A. Twenty-four.

Q. Okay. And I assume you're a U.S. citizen?

A. Yes.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. Bachelor's degree.

Q. What did was your major?

A. Business.

Q. And where did you obtain your education from?

A. Baruch College.

Q. And what is your main occupation at the moment?

A. Administrative Assistant.

Q. And for whom are you working? Is it a private company or a federal organization?

A. A private company, import-export.

Q. Okay. And what is your marital status?

A. I just got married last year.

Q. And do you have any children?

A. No.

Q. Whose baby is that?

A. That's my niece.

Q. Okay. Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about how you experienced September 11th.

Where were you on that day around nine a.m. and how did you hear of the attacks?

A. Actually I was home and I ... I watched it on TV. It was before college had started so I was home watching TV.

Q. And what was your first reaction?

A. I was in such shock. I got scared 'cause my father was in ... in the city and I told my Mother: Oh my god, there's an attack in the World Trade Center. And we were trying to call my father and, of course, it wasn't going through and we got so scared. You know? And then eventually he called us, I don't know how and he said: Don't worry. You know? I'm ... I'm going to walk down the bridge. It was very scary. We were just so afraid for everybody.

Q. So what about the possibility of the terrorists or the attackers being Muslims? Did that pop into your mind?

A. That was the first thing that popped into my head. And when they say terrorists, you know, the first thing you think of is Muslims. And I was just hoping it wasn't, but it came out to be, there were Muslims that were the terrorists. I mean, they were using, you know, Islam for a very bad cause. But, you know, they used that as their main reason and cause for attacking the World Trade Center.

Q. What do you think is your most vivid memory of September 11th, something you believe you will never forget?

A. When both the Towers ... the first Tower just collapsing, just going down and down, down, down, down. That's just, like ... and all that debris and all that, like, blackness, that smoke, that just went over everywhere. That I will never forget. And people running, running, just running, running. That's the thing that made me ... that had a huge impact on me and I will never forget that moment.

Q. What were your feelings immediately afterwards? Did you feel sadness, grief, anger?

A. I felt ... first I felt fear. I felt scared and I was so ... was very upset. And, you know, I was saddened by the fact that all those people lost their lives and I felt bad for the families that were looking for their loved ones.

Q. Since you're Muslim yourself, was there any feeling of guilt involved for you?

A. In the beginning, but then I knew that that's not true Islam and that's not the way it's supposed to be. And I knew if anybody were to ask me and if they knew ... the people that knew I was Muslim, I knew how to back up myself and you know, support what I was, you know, standing for and for Islam. You know? I would be able to explain to them the, you know, the reason, that that's not the reason why people do that. You know? I can talk to them about it.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events?

A. Yes. Now I'm not so ... I mean, I was angry and upset. But now, I mean, I'm just very calm. And of course it's sad. I still think it was a bad moment in time and I know I still get sad when I see, like, clips of the World Trade Center and all those people, and especially the news when people talk about it, I mean, but, you know, life goes on. And I've moved on and I think everybody has.

Q. When Americans asked you about your ethnic background or origin before September 11th what did you tell them?

A. I told them Bangladesh-American, Muslim.

Q. How about immediately afterwards?

A. I mean, I still tell them that but I ha-- like, I stop in a way. Like, I'm, like, oh, you know ...

Q. You don't look Bengali at all either.

A. Yeah, I know. People don't usually ask me if I'm from Bangladesh. They think I'm either, you know, Spanish or something like that.

Q. Oh, okay.

A. Or, you know, but I ... I always ... no, now I'm like, okay, Bangladesh. You know? And they think, oh, you know, terrorists, you know, whatever.

Q. So have your feelings towards the United States changed since September 11th?

A. Yes. Before I used to think that they were this power that no one can do anything to them. But as you can see, they ... they can't even stop ... they can't stop things like this from happening. Even the United States can't stop it, so that's ... that's one thing that's not as protective and, you know, it's like, you know, anything happened. If something happens in the Middle East it's going to affect us. Before, like, you know, some people used to think, Oh, no, no, no. That's not going to affect the United States. That's over there. But, now everything affects everything else. So ...

Q. Has your level of political awareness changed in the U.S.?

A. Oh yes. Now I know all the termin--like, most of the terminologies, especially in the news you tend to hear more stuff so you are more aware of the politics.

Q. Are you more into the domestic policy or the foreign policy?

A. Both. You have to be because it's ... You know, foreign affects domestic in a way. Like, if you go into war, that's going to effect the domestic market. That's going to... You know? So everything is interactive with everything else. So ...

Q. Do you feel a sense of belonging in the United States? Do you feel at home here?

A. I do, but then, of course, one day I do want to move back to Bangladesh.

Q. Oh yeah?

A. Yeah.

Q. Oh, that's interesting. Have you always felt at home here? Have you always felt like this?

A. Before, no. Now I want to go back home because, you know, it's not as safe as being ... especially for Muslims it's not safe.

Q. Oh, okay.

A. You can always have, like, that ... you know. People look down now at Muslims. They don't, you know...

Q. Did you think about moving back to Bangladesh before September 11th?

A. No, not really. No I didn't, but now I do.

Q. Is there a change in the way people from the Middle East and South Asia are treated ever since September 11th?

A. Oh yeah, definitely. Now they're treated ... I mean, I see the way people look at Muslims and I see the way they ... they are treated. There is a huge difference after September 11th.

Q. Can you explain?

A. They look at them like Oh, you know, they're backward people. They're not, you know, ... They're terrorists. They don't lo-- You know? Those kind of things. You can tell.

Q. Have you personally experienced any discrimination or any type of backlash?

A. No, no, no, I haven't.

Q. At the work place or school? Anywhere?

A. No. No. I mean, when I do talk to them, like, if they ask me, I do kind of feel like, oh, you know, they look at me like, oh, she's from Bangladesh, Muslim. You know? But that's about it.

Q. Have members of your family experienced anything?

A. No, not really.

Q. Do you think that the Middle Eastern and South Asian organizations have been effective in handling, the backlash against the community?

A. Somewhat, but not really. I mean, how much can they do actually. You know? They can't protect you. But then, there are some core organizations that they, you know, put out the word and you know, and ... and they try to help the Muslims. You know? They give out our pamphlets and everything. But that's about it. I don't ... not that I know...have seen.

Q. Do you think that these communities have been effective in mobilizing the community?

A. Not really, except for, like, once, one or two of them. If you have a protest maybe, you know, like sometimes they have protests at Time Square, you know, they did praying. That's about it.

Q. Have you joined any ethnic or religious organizations?

A. No. No.

Q. In your opinion, what is the nature of the relationship between your religious and ethnic group and others in the United States at this time?

A. The difference ...

Q. Yeah. Do you believe that, like, the Jews and the Muslims or the Hindus and the Muslims, do you think these communities are more harmonious and tolerant of each other or do you think they're more oppositional and strained?

A. I think they're more oppositional and they're ... they really ... they separate each other, definitely, and they, you know? Even with our community, we ... we try to help other Muslims. I mean, it's the way with any community. They help their own kind of people first. And then maybe they'll, you know, work with other people. But they first work with themselves and they try to help themselves out first. I mean, they work with their own organizations.

Q. What do you think members of your community can do to improve these relationships?

A. I would think, first, to make all of the communities aware of each other's religions, practices, and you know, work with that. I mean. But then again, you do have these ignorant people that don't want to work with other religions. They just want to stay with their own kind. They don't want to deal with that. So you have to work with those people. Plus try to get them together. That's going to be kind of difficult. But I think if they really work at it, they could ... it could be accomplished.

Q. What do you think that other Middle Eastern organizations or other South Asian organizations can do to improve the relationship, apart from, like, the Bengali community?

A. First they can, you know, like, the head leaders should talk to one another. And then they can talk to each other and see what they can do. Like, for example, you have, like ... like, with a priest or, you know, or whatever, or, you know, they could talk to one another.

Q. Given your understanding of the South Asians and the Middle Easterners here after September 11th in the United States would you still encourage these people to emigrate to the U.S. after what's happened?

A. Of course I would.

Q. Why?

A. Because this is still the country of the free. And no matter even if you get discredited, you have your rights. And that, I think, is one of the best things. But that's only if your financial situation is really bad. If you have a good situation in your country and you're fine I wouldn't recommend coming. I mean, why? But if you ... you feel, like, I can get more money; I can build on that, then definitely come. But with legal status.

Q. Yeah. That's very important now.

A. Now, don't come if you don't have any legal status.

Q. Alright. So far we've spoken about the negative consequences of September 11th. Do you believe that there was anything positive that stemmed from September 11th?

A. People tend to cherish life more now. They ... they seem to, you know... I think that's the main thing. And Americans, they ... they got together and they, you know? And even New Yorkers, they seem to help each other out more.

Q. How about more visibility of Islam and Muslims. Do you believe that?

A. Yeah, of course. People now want to know about the religion. They want to read books. They want to ... they want to know what it truly is. And now the Muslims and Islam is more out there. People know, okay, when they meet ... Oh, I'm a Muslim. Oh, yeah. We know. It doesn't mean they know the correct definition, but they know something.

Q. Right. Why do you think the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon happened? Do you believe that the Arabs or the Muslims hate America?

A. I wouldn't say that, but I think the main reason why was, in my opinion, they probably thought ... well, even Osama Bin Laden said: Oh, you know, America thinks that it's a world power. They can control everything. But look. They can't control this. And they want to show them? Look we can ... we can, you know, do it even to America. You know? They wanted ... They want to prove themselves. That's, I think, why ... was the main reason why they did it.

Q. What do you think that the U.S. can do to resolve this problem of terrorism which is directed against it?

A. You really can't do a lot. But first of all, of course, security. That's the main thing. They can do that. But how much can you do? I mean, you can do as much as possible. But, of course ... I don't know what. The main thing is they have to work the relationships with the foreign stuff. Like, foreign policy, I think they have to rethink about it, you know, 'cause you have all these people in the Middle East and all that, they're angry. They're, you know, they're like ... they want to attack. This ...

Q. Why do you think they're angry?

A. Because they want ... American want ... United States wants to control their countries. They just walk in and say, okay, da-da-da-da. They don't want that. And they took over their own leadership and they ... America controls that. And they don't want that. It's like, you know, you know,

imperial power coming over and taking over your country. And they don't want them controlling that so they're angry.

Q. Have you traveled after September 11th?

A. Yes. I went to Bangladesh.

Q. So how secure did you feel, like, with the security measures and everything?

A. I think it was pretty secure. Like, they looked at everything. I mean, they don't let anything in the plane. They checked every little thing, baggage, everything, so it was pretty secure.

Q. Do you believe that these attacks could have been prevented?

A. Yes, definitely. Definitely. I mean, of course, first of all, you know, they ... I don't understand how those hijackers brought, like, those knives and all those things ... You know? How can they do that? I think if they were more aware of what was going on and if they had a procedure in the plane, like, a device, something like that in the plane, this wouldn't have happened. They wouldn't have ... the hijackers wouldn't have taken control of the plane. You know? They ... they would have had something else, like maybe, like those buzzer guns or whatever. And they should have done something like that.

Q. Are there any other issues or points you'd like to comment on, which we haven't covered in this?

A. No. I think we covered everything.

Q. Okay. Well, thank you for your time and cooperation.

A. Thank you.

Q. Thank you.