

Interview 43

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: 25

Q. I would like to start by asking you a few questions about yourself. Where were you born?

A. Bangladesh.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. In Bangladesh.

Q. How old were you when you came to live in the United States?

A. Fifteen years old.

Q. Where were your parents born?

A. Bangladesh.

Q. Both mother and father. Right?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay. So you would be first generation.

A. Yes.

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

A. I consider myself Bengali.

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. I'm Muslim.

Q. Okay. How old are you now, if you don't mind?

A. I'm twenty-five.

Q. Would you mind telling me if you're an U.S. citizen or you have a Green Card?

A. I have a Green Card.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. I finished high school.

Q. Okay. And where was that?

A. It was in Queens.

Q. What is your main occupation, your job title?

A. I just work as a housekeeper in a hotel.

Q. For whom are you working? Is it a private company or a federal government agency?

A. No. It's a privately owned hotel.

Q. Okay. And what is your marital status?

A. I'm single.

Q. Do you have any children?

A. No. If I'm single I wouldn't have any children.

Q. Now I would 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. That day I was ... I was cleaning up one of the rooms. I was fixing up the beds and everything and then we ... we just heard from the other ... other housekeeper, she came upstairs, she said, "Did you just hear what just happened?" and I was like, "No. What happened?" and she says ... since we were in the room and there was a TV there we just turned it on. We had access to it. I mean, don't tell it to my boss that we turned on the TV. (laughs)

Q. I won't, don't worry.

A. But we ... we ... we saw it on TV. And she said turn on the TV because we hear that something is going on. And since we were in the room we just turned on the TV and we saw all this, you

know, chaos going on: people running around on all the channels. You know? And all of a sudden we just see the Towers go down and they ... We didn't understand what was happening. We just thought that a plane went out of control, like, that something happened. Not that any terrorist came, but just that there was some defect in ... in the plane and it was out of control and it just went and got, you know, it hit the Tower. So that's how I found out what was ... actually happened.

Q. What was your first reaction when you heard about the attacks?

A. Well, when we actually did find out that it ... we were hit by the terrorists I was, like, Oh my God! This is impossible.

Q. No. I mean your first reaction. When you heard the Towers were attacked did you know that it was terrorists?

A. No, no. I thought it was a plane that was out of control. That's ... I didn't ... I didn't think that it was the terrorists. I wouldn't even ... not until, you know, I mean, I ...

Q. So after you found out that this was a terrorist attack, did the possibility of the terrorists being Muslims come to mind?

A. No.

Q. So you didn't think they were Muslims?

A. I didn't ... I didn't think of anything. I wouldn't ... When ... Even ... even when they said that it's a terrorist attack I was like, all right, terrorist by who? But, you know, I didn't even know who Osama Bin Ladden was until September 11th. You know? I didn't even know what happened, who he was, where he came from.

Q. What is your most vivid memory of September 11th? Is there anything that stands out in your mind that you think you'll never forget?

A. I think on the TV they were showing this one part that was really, really heartbreaking and very, very ... very, very, you know, shocking to me. When the Tower was going down, as it was going down people were throwing ... jumping off the cliffs of the windows. And I think ... I can't forget that. I even saw the same picture in the TV as well as I have ... I still have the newspaper of that where the people were jumping off the buildings just to ... because they knew there's no way they're going to be saved, but just to protect themselves ... protect themselves from burning oil and metal and heat they were jumping off ...

Q. Right.

A. ...Committing ... killing themselves. One way or ... they knew they would have to die, but they didn't want to die in a severe death like that. So I think I can't forget that, because it's the most, you know, shocking, shocking. It's horrible.

Q. What were your feelings about what happened immediately afterwards, did you feel anger, pain, grief?

A. Well, I felt very .. I felt angry at ... when we did find out that it was the terrorists, it was done intentionally, I felt angry at people doing it for taking innocent lives. And you know this was a lot of despair that it shouldn't have happened. Why? And you know, there was a lot of sadness and it wasn't ... it didn't ... I didn't feel like it should have happened. You know? I mean, it was something that came out of nowhere. Everything was going fine, calm, peace and you know, I mean, it was just, like, you waking up and doing one thing in the morning and then suddenly there's a grand turbulence. You know? So that's what happened; that's how it feels until now to me so I don't see that the City has totally recovered or people have actually gone back to their routines even though they've tried to 'cause they see that it's not the same any more. It's not what it used to be before September 11th? I think it's a major, major difference.

Q. Right.

A. So nothing has come back, or I ... I don't know if it's ever going to come back to the same ...

Q. Being a Muslim do you have feelings of guilt since Muslims or Arabs were involved in the attack?

A. No. I don't feel any guilt or any ... No. I don't feel guilty at all that since I'm a Muslim and the Muslims did that because, first of all, I have nothing to do with the Arabs. Yes, they're Muslims, but I'm not ... I'm not Arab. I'm not from ... I'm not Arab. And secondly, those who take the lives of others in the name of religion are not Muslims because you're not supposed ... Our religion doesn't teach to take lives. So I totally disagree and I ... I mean, I think it shouldn't have happened.

Q. Right. So have your feelings changed since the events of 9/11?

A. I still... You know, you come back and you think about it. And I think there's many things that are happening now that shouldn't have happened. And, you know, I still feel sad. I mean, I think it shouldn't have happened because even I think, not only the Americans. Even the Muslims and even the people from all over the world, their lives have changed here, and there ... there are greater consequences that people are facing nowadays as before September 11th, so I don't ... I still feel like ... I think that if we were to go back in time and I was to reverse the clock, I would definitely make this big, you know, thing just disappear because I think this is a great loss and it has shaken the world.

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

A. I'm Bengali.

Q. And how about immediately after?

A. I still say the same. I'm Bengali.

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

A. No. I haven't changed. I haven't had ... had any feel ... change of feelings. I think I'm the same. I just ...

Q. What about politically? Has your level of political awareness changed?

A. I think a little bit. I do follow the news a little bit more as compared to before. You know? You follow what they have to say about ... I mean, like I told you before, I didn't even know who Osama Bin Laden was. But this one ... this ...you know, after the September 11th the political aspect, you know, I think got illuminated a little bit because I ... I became more aware of the political structure of the things going around the United States and as well as all over the world what's happening and ...

Q. You're more involved in the foreign policy or the domestic policy?

A. Well, I ... it's not that I'm involved in any of the policies, but I'm just ... I just keep an eye on both. I just see what's going on in the world, and whatever is going on at home back in U.S.A. So I just see, like ... I mean, I'm not a person who's just going to judge just because I live here I have to take the side of America, or just because I'm a Bengali I have to take the side of Muslims. No. I think we have to go with what is right and who is right as compared to, well, I'm Muslim and I should be with the Muslim, and I'm in America so I should be with America. No. And I think in many aspects that the Americans are right and then there are aspects that the Muslim world are right about. So you have to come and you have to make an equilibrium and balance out the problems, I guess.

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

A. I never felt out of place. I mean, I'm fine here. There's no problem for me. I mean, I'm the same person I was before and I don't think I've faced any problems.

Q. Do you think that there has been a change in the way people from the Middle East and South Asia, meaning India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, in the United States are treated since 9/11?

A. Not that I have seen. But people do complain. I mean, I don't know. I ... I read stories in the newspaper or I watch on the television that, like, now policies such as the immigration policy that they're taking out against registration and all that, I see ... I mean, I ... I ... I know about these things, but I don't know ... You know? Maybe they do have an effect. Maybe people have been affected, but I'm not aware of that or maybe, you know, I don't know, I don't see all that. Or maybe I just think that the United States is just trying to protect itself for the future. You know? I mean, obviously you've been hit one big time, you're not going to let anybody else come in and do the same thing. And, I mean, if you get hurt by a car one time, I don't think you want the other car to come and run you over again, you know, so you're going to take all your precautions. So I think that's what the United States is doing. So I'm, like, kind of liberal in that. I'm saying that, you know, they're trying to justify themselves.

Q. Have you personally experienced any backlash after September 11th, such as harassment, racial profiling or discrimination?

A. No, because my color is white and I have blue eyes so people can't really tell. I have, like bluish green eyes so you can't exactly tell from, you know, that I'm coming from that part of that region. You know?

Q. Has a member of your family experienced any backlash?

A. My ... a little bit, I would say, because one of my sister, she covers. So ever since 9/11 she stopped covering a little bit. But I'm only ...

Q. What do you mean a little bit?

A. I mean, a little bit means that right after the September 11th attack she was covering full time, but then she saw herself being eyed where she was going so she just felt very uncomfortable. But at the beginning she was kind of very stubborn and she's, like, "No. I don't want to do it. I'm going to keep on doing this," whatever.

Q Keep on doing what, keeping on the hijab?

A. Keep on ... Yeah, keeping the hijab on. But then, you know, she realized that, you know, it's not such a good idea to do it and it's not ... you're not doing it because you're not Muslim or anything so she ... just to protect yourself and not be eyed or, like, discriminated. She just kind of took it off. I don't know how long she's going to take it off for, but maybe she'll go back to it or maybe not. I don't know about that. But she hasn't been doing it ever since September 11th.

Q. Do you think that the South Asian organizations have been effective in handling the backlash against these groups after September 11th?

A. I think all the organizations are trying their best to educate the public and about what exactly happened and that it's not their fault; that the people who did this ... I mean, even they are agreed .. I think they agree that what happened is not right. And if these people did it in the name of religion to save themselves, you know I don't think the Muslims will agree with that. And they also, you know, they said that they should ... that these terrorists should be caught. We should find out who did it exactly, where is the whole, you know, operations working and we should punish them.

Q. Right.

A. So I, you know, I think they have been aware... they have been a big help of, you know, telling people what is happening and what should they do and how should they, you know, react in case of ... they ... if they've been harassed or anything, or whatever.

Q. Have you joined any ethnic or religious organizations since September 11th?

A. No, I haven't.

Q. Okay. In your opinion, what is the nature of the relationship between your ethnic or religious group and others in the United States at this time? Do you think that the relations are more tolerant and harmonious after September 11th or they're more strained and oppositional?

A. I think they're more strained and oppositional, I ...

Q. How so?

A. I ... I don't think people are harmonious any more. I think people are kind of scared. I mean, you're ...

Q. Of each other?

A. Of each other. I mean, you can't trust anybody. You know? Just like, say for ... for example, if you can't tell where they're from, you know? ... I mean, you're deceived by them, then what are you going to do. You know? So I don't ... I see people are much more to themselves. They keep to themselves. They're not as liberal as they used to be back before 9/11. So, you know, I think they're kind of keeping to themselves ... a lot of people are becoming opposed of the Muslim world. I mean, they categorize the entire Muslim country as being Arabs, which is not so, but that's how they see the world, I guess.

Q. What can members of your community do to improve the relations between these ethnic or religious groups?

A. I think these members, they should hold, like, small seminars or they should, like, print up some small pamphlets or whatever and hand them out to try to, like, just make the public aware that what exactly ... I think they have to teach the people what exactly the religion is; what exactly does the religion say and all these things that other people use to defend ... The fact is not true. I mean, you

know, they're considered to be just as criminal as the other people think. We consider them to be the same thing. We don't consider that they're heroes. They ... if they've done something wrong like that, that means they should be punished.

Q. What can the Middle Eastern and South Asian-American organizations do to help improve these relations?

A. Well, if these organizations have an access to TV or television or something ... You know, I ... I mean, over here in New York they have and it's one of the biggest ones, they have these small community calendars. They should ... these organizations should hold meetings and they should, you know, tell, like, the ... like, small channels about, "Oh, we're having this meeting," if you can promote them. Tell the people to come here to be educated, to ... to ... to let out your anger, your feelings or how, you know, whatever, whatever happened happened: how you're feeling, and you should ... they should just do that and try to make ... I think they should ... they have to communicate, interact with one another and try to just tell people exactly what the religion is because people have misconceptions. They don't know exactly what the religion is, so whatever they see or whatever they hear they tend to believe even more in it than knowing exactly where it's coming from.

Q. After September 11th, given your understanding of the status of the Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrant groups here in the United States, would you still encourage people from these countries to come to the United States?

A. Oh, that's a difficult question to answer because now that the situation that we see I don't ... I don't think it's that easy just to come here to ... I think, well, everybody should come from all over the world, but it's not as easy as it used to be before, because before, people ... you know, since something like this never happened you could always come in and blend in. But now people, when

you come in, people are more aware. I mean, like I told you before, if you get hurt once, you don't want to be ... get hurt again so people will never forget this. This was a very tragic event that took place. It's not something small. You're not talking about two or three lives. You're talking about five thousand peoples' lives. So considering that, it's not something very small. It's such a big thing in such a big city that took place. I think it's ... people won't be welcomed in the same manner. Yes, they're going to keep on coming, but I don't think they will be welcomed. It's ... it's not as much as going to be shown to them, but the, you know, the way the people are going to be acting with the other people or, you know, the expressions will show ...

Q. Okay. So far we talked about the negative consequences of September 11th. Do you believe that there were any positive consequences?

A. I think the only positive consequences that comes into my mind is that people started to think: if this happened here how do people feel in the other part of the worlds where these things happen every day.

Q. You really think people started thinking about that?

A. I don't actually think they started thinking about that but I think that did ... they know at least a little bit that, well these type of things not only happened here but this happens everywhere. I mean, everybody thinks that this will never happen to America, you know, but they kind of like have this ...

Q. If you think that people started realizing that this is what happens all over the world then why did America attack Afghanistan? Why is it thinking of attacking Iraq then? Do you think that there was more visibility and an improved understanding of the Middle Eastern?

A. No. No. It's the same it's always been ... it always was.

Q. Okay. Why do you think the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon happened? Do you think that the Arabs and the Muslim countries or in the Middle East hate America?

A. I don't know.

Q. You don't know?

A. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to say because maybe the ... I come from Bangladesh and in Bangladesh we don't have things like this. In Bangladesh, coming to America is a big thing. You know? So I'm not Arab, like I told you before, so I wouldn't be able to say. Maybe the Arab people do hate America. I don't know what to say. But in Bangladesh, this is not the concept.

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

A. What is the question again?

Q. What do you think the United States can do to resolve this problem of terrorism which has been directed against it?

A. I think you guys, I mean, the United States should sit down and try to negotiate with all the countries that want to bomb, you know, sign up a bond of bringing down the terrorism, you know, and exclude those countries that don't want to cooperate, you know, and then try to work out something together, rather than one person just taking a step--extreme step--for example, going and bombing Iraq. You know, but it should be, like, a group collaboration and we ... they should try to resolve it, because I think fighting back doesn't help, I think fighting back just brings the fire higher.

Q. Okay. Are there any other issues or points that you would like to comment on which we have not mentioned?

A. I just want to say to the world peace on earth. Live happy, enjoy and that's about it.

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

A. Thank you.