

Maesha Meto

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SPEAKERS

Maesha Meto, Rimsha Syed



Rimsha Syed 00:02

Hello, this is Rimsha Syed. I am the Program Coordinator with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. The date is February 22, 2022, and I'm on a Zoom call today with Maesha Meto for the 9/11, Twenty Years Later oral history project. How are you doing today?



Maesha Meto 00:20

I'm good. I'm good. I had work today, so now I'm just chilling waiting for my lunch to cook. How are you?



Rimsha Syed 00:33

I'm doing well. Thank you so much. Would you like to start by just briefly introducing yourself and also telling us where you're joining the call from today?.



Maesha Meto 00:45

Sure. So my name is Maesha. Right now I'm working as a data analyst for the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, and I'm also a student at the LBJ School at UT Austin. And I'm calling from Austin, Texas.



Rimsha Syed 01:00

Great. So obviously, there's a lot to unpack with this interview today, but I did want to start by asking you about your childhood and those very early years of your life, as well as your family dynamic. So what can you tell me about that time?

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Maesha Meto 01:18

So I moved to the Bronx, New York when I was, I think, five going on six years old. It was actually the year 2001 I think we moved in June, or something, I honestly don't really remember. But I remember thinking that it's gonna be a temporary trip overseas to see where my dad lived, because my dad had been living in the United States for two years or three years of my formative years, and we were all in Bangladesh, me, my little sister, and my mom. So he brought us all over, and I thought it was going to be like, "Oh my god, we'll just be here for the summer, and then we'll go back, and then I'll be in Bangladesh again." But we ended up staying, and that was my summer. We stayed for maybe two months at my dad's acquaintance's apartment because they had gone to Bangladesh. And it was a one bedroom. I was staying on their bunk bed. It was the time of my life. I'd never seen a bunk bed before. And then we started school in September. I guess we'll delve into that a little bit later, but starting school in September 2001 was definitely a huge part of my life.



Rimsha Syed 02:35

Right, right. So what brought your dad to the Bronx?

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Maesha Meto 02:40

I don't think it's necessarily the Bronx that he was drawn to. I think that's just where he ended up. He got, I think, one of those - I'm not really sure what you would call it, but I guess a lottery. He got a lottery visa or something like that from Bangladesh, so he moved here for, I guess, better economic opportunity. But life was hard. I mean, my dad was living with maybe five other men in a one bedroom apartment initially when he moved here, and the Bronx was probably the cheapest place to be actually. I've never asked him about that. But because he was in the Bronx, we ended up just moving in the Bronx too, and to this day, my family lives in the one bedroom apartment that I grew up in, in the South Bronx.



Rimsha Syed 03:25

Wow. So obviously, you were very young when you did move, but what were some of those initial impressions of New York, and how was that different from anything you can remember of being in Bangladesh?

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Maesha Meto 03:40

It's so interesting, because I actually don't really remember a lot about New York and when I first moved. In fact, a lot of my childhood memories are actually set in Bangladesh, actually. I don't remember the plane ride. I don't remember that at all. But I remember the Bronx being - it was hot. It was the summer, obviously, and it was hot. I remember feeling really small, and everybody else - there were kids outside, and it's not like this in Austin, but in the Bronx, people are always outside. So I guess that's one of the first things that I noticed. I just remember kids playing outside, and I was just really shy. I obviously didn't know the language. And I guess one of my earliest memories of moving to New York was my dad introducing us to

the concept of living in the United States. I was going to school in Bangladesh at the time, I was in kindergarden or something, and he was like, "Hey, by the way, in the American vocabulary, the letter Z is actually - We would call it "zed," I think. I think that's with the British alphabet. And my dad was like, "It's not 'zed' anymore. It's 'zee.'" And I was like, "What? That makes no sense." But yeah, yeah. And then a year later, my baby brother was born. Or I guess, my now twenty-year-old brother was born. So our family just kept getting bigger.



Rimsha Syed 04:59

Right, and is it just you and your brother?



Maesha Meto 05:03

No, it's me, my younger sister, and my two younger brothers. My youngest brother was born seven years ago.



Rimsha Syed 05:11

Wow. So you mentioned starting school in 2001, and I was wondering, in general, what kind of experience did you have going to school? Did you have any favorite subjects, favorite teachers, any experiences that stand out in that early schooling part of your life?



Maesha Meto 05:32

No, no. School sucked. So I started the first grade. I didn't go to preschool or kindergarten. So when people talk about like, "Oh my god, naptime, that was so nice," I'm like, "I can't relate." School in Bangladesh was hard, and then going straight to the first grade was really hard, because I didn't know the language. So I just remember English being really tough, and then my first grade teacher, I think she was a new teacher, so when I didn't understand something, I would just not say anything, I guess. I would just be like, "Oh, I literally have no idea what you're saying," and she'd just get upset. So my first grade teacher was not a great - and she got angry when kids wouldn't listen. She was that kind of teacher. But I do remember her encouraging me to read bigger books than I was reading at a certain point when I did learn the language. It was really fast, because I was super young, and I was taking ESL classes. But I also remember a lot of the kids being really mean. It may not have been - because we were just so young, I don't know if it was a result of 9/11. But I think kids at that age are generally just mean, so because I was different, I remember just not being - school just was not a good time. I was bullied all the time.



Rimsha Syed 06:49

Wow, I'm sorry to hear that. As you got older, what was it like to navigate your Bangladeshi Muslim identity?

M**Maesha Meto 06:59**

That's a good question. I guess I'm still navigating it. I think there's so many parts of my identity that I shut off for a really long time, and I think a lot of my Muslim South Asian friends, or even just friends of color relate to. I think for the longest time, I just didn't really want to be in my skin. I wished that I was, I don't know - also in the South Bronx, I didn't grow up around White people. I grew up around other people of color. But I think even those, there was undertones of discrimination always. For a large part of my life, I didn't really - my mom would be like, "Oh, you can just wear this salwar kameez to school when it's dress down day." And I think that was something I was super - I just didn't like that at all. I felt so off and so different. And some of the kids would also ask, "Hey, why do you always wear that? Why can't you just wear jeans and shirts?" And I was like, "I literally don't have that, but shut up." So I think navigating my skin has been really hard, and I think Islam has also been hard. But I think as I get older, the more I understand it, at least on some spiritual perspective that I struggled with for quite some time.

**Rimsha Syed 08:22**

Right. What was your religious upbringing like? Did you go to something like a Sunday school or any sort of Qur'an classes, or was it your parents that were teaching you more about the religion?

M**Maesha Meto 08:38**

I didn't go to any Sunday schools. I didn't go to any Qur'an schools. In fact, I learned how to read the Qur'an in Bangladesh during a trip there, because my mom had tried getting a Qur'an teacher for us, but he would just yell, and he wasn't very conducive to my sister and I learning together, because we were just on different learning levels. We went to Bangladesh, and I learned the Qur'an there, but I learned most of Islam from my parents, for sure. And we did Umrah when I was maybe eleven, so I got some books from Umrah, and I remember those being really inspirational for me and really transformative for me. But another thing is, I learned Islam from my peers. I grew up around a lot of Muslim people, and even though, for the most part, we didn't explicitly talk about Islam all the time, until I got to high school and there was an MSA, and then in college there was an MSA, but I wasn't deeply involved with the MSAs in general. But sometimes I would have conversations with my friends here and there about Islam, and to be honest, mostly Islamophobia.

**Rimsha Syed 09:51**

Makes sense. For those who aren't familiar, can you quickly explain Umrah, and then also how that experience went for you as an eleven-year-old?

M**Maesha Meto 10:03**

Yeah, so Umrah is just a week-long - like a baby Hajj, which is a pilgrimage that Muslims take to Saudi Arabia and to Mecca specifically. I mean, I guess it spans across Mecca and Medina. But we just did Umrah for a week. And it was me, my sister, my mom, and my dad, and we

pretty much did some of the rituals that you would do at the pilgrimage, but not all of them. And I don't remember a lot about it, but I remember being in the mosque in Mecca, mostly, and I remember it being really hot. But I also remember the mosques being air conditioned, and I think for me, that was a really big thing, because I'd never really - again, I'd never grown up around mosque communities, so I didn't really go to the mosque. But in Saudi Arabia, I remember being just stunned by how beautiful it was. And also, everybody was praying at the same time, and that just felt really magical to me. And then when we also saw the Kaaba, I don't know - my mom calls it God's house. The black stone little house that Muslims do rounds around. You've probably seen some really cool pictures. But that was really, really nice. That was really cool. Except, literally, there were I don't know how many people. There were thousands of people and everybody was just rushing to get closer to it, and that was a little bit overwhelming. But I remember just feeling really at peace, almost like I've never really felt that way before.



Rimsha Syed 11:44

Wow, that sounds really lovely. So I know you mentioned that you didn't really grow up going to mosques in New York, but were there any Muslims that you were surrounded by, any friends, or any community?



Maesha Meto 11:59

Yeah, yeah. So I did grow up around a bunch of Muslims. A lot of them were Bengali and sometimes we would be invited to - actually my mom used to go to this women's prayer group, I guess you could say. They would read the Qur'an together, and then they would exchange stories of hadiths, and I would just be there being babysat, I guess. I would just sit around. But I did grow up around a lot of Muslim friends for the most part, except I think there was still competition between South Asian people, so a lot of them didn't really talk to me because I was new. At least at the beginning, but then in high school, and then in college, I made a lot of really good Muslim friends.



Rimsha Syed 12:48

Right, right. So like you mentioned earlier, we're all still sort of navigating our identities, and that's not always an easy thing to do. But I was wondering, was there ever a certain point in time where you noticed a shift in you feeling more comfortable with your identity, or is that something that you feel like you might still be in the process of doing?



Maesha Meto 13:13

Actually, I think it happened really recently for me, maybe a year or two ago. So I'm twenty-six now, and maybe around twenty-five, I started really looking at what I believe and who I am at my core. And I think that's an ongoing experience, and I can't highlight a specific instance, to be honest. But I've been doing my own research, and I think being in academia has really

helped, because it's given me resources that are a little more aligned to my social and political values, and not necessarily aligned to the Islam that I grew up with. Does that answer your initial question?



Rimsha Syed 13:58

Yes, yes. And going off of that, how has your relationship with Islam changed over the years?



Maesha Meto 14:10

It's changed a lot, to be honest. I remember having some pretty jarring conversations with some of my friends in high school that I'm embarrassed to talk about, to be honest, about homophobia in Islam. And I guess there's so many things that I've had a chance to really look at and really evaluate now. Wait, sorry, I forgot your question, what was the -



Rimsha Syed 14:36

Yes, just how your relationship with Islam has changed over the years as you've become an adult.



Maesha Meto 14:42

Yes, sorry. So for the most part, for most of my life, and I think even now it's really difficult to unlearn, but I was really scared of doing the wrong thing. And I was really, really scared of being quote unquote "bad," whatever that means. And I think now I have a more nuanced understanding of Islam. And I don't think it's necessarily good versus bad, it's kind of like we're navigating this life, and I think it's up to us to decide the meaning of it, if that sounds a little hippy. But I think it's really aligned with what Islam is at its core. So I think my relationship with Islam now is a lot more accepting and loving, and I think I feel much, much more at peace than I ever have, to be honest.



Rimsha Syed 15:29

That's really good to hear. You also mentioned how going to school, you grew up around a lot of people of color, which is not an experience that's too common for people who go to school in Texas, and I was just wondering, do you feel like you might have had a very different perspective on things if that wasn't the case for you?



Maesha Meto 15:55

Well, I will say, a lot of the times when I would hear my friends who have lived in - just to be clear, you're alluding to Texas being a little more - most communities being more White. Am I-



Rimsha Syed 16:11

Yes.



Maesha Meto 16:12

Okay. So I think it's not the same, it's entirely not the same. But I will say that I've had a lot of Islamophobic experiences and also discriminatory experiences by fellow people of color. I literally did not grow up around any White people, and sometimes when people talk about the things that they went through, growing up around White people - and again, it's not the same because White people obviously have privilege, and they have so many other things that people of color are at a disadvantage of having. But I definitely did not feel accepted. I definitely felt like my Bengali-ness was a little too much. I felt like my Muslim-ness was way too much.



Maesha Meto 16:57

And in the fifth grade, one of my pretty close friends said one day, she was like, "Hey, Maesha, by the way," and this was in the middle of class, people around us, and we were playing a game, I think. And she was like, "Hey, Maesha, by the way, I don't think I could be your friend anymore." And I was like, "Oh, why? Haha." And she was like, "Oh yeah, because my mom said I can't be friends with Muslims." And I didn't know what to say. I was in the fifth grade, right? I was like, "Okay, I suppose. I mean, that hurts." But I think it was different, because I didn't feel powerless, but at the same time, I didn't feel like I could be myself. So for a really long time, I tried to not be. I tried to be just like every single person around me. And it wasn't until - honestly, even in college I was doing that. I was like, "How can I be less like me?" So, really, it's been really recent that I've been like, "It's okay to be me." And I'm hoping that other kids didn't have the same experiences today, because I hope that Gen Z is a little bit more accepting.



Rimsha Syed 18:12

Wow, thank you so much for sharing that with me. Were people any more accepting through middle or high school, or did you continue to have these discriminatory or Islamophobic experiences?



Maesha Meto 18:26

I think that experience was definitely the most out-there experience that I've had. But in middle school, I would still wear my salwars, and I would bring my curry to school, and it was not accepted. And it was looked down on, and I wasn't very popular. But in high school, I was around more South Asian people, and I think that's what made the difference. Because I would be like, "Oh my god, you're just like me. Oh my god, you're just like me." And I think having that camaraderie was really helpful. So in high school, even though people would still make

jokes like, "Oh my god, hahaha, you're related to Osama bin Laden, hahaha." Those those kinds of jokes. It wasn't as out-there as it was in my fifth grade friend was like, "Hey, you're Muslim, and I literally can't be friends with you because my mom doesn't like Muslims."



Rimsha Syed 19:20

Right. Yeah, I agree that solidarity is always really important for people of color. So can you tell me a little bit about your college experience, and then your decision to move to Austin?



Maesha Meto 19:36

So my whole life, I've been living with my parents. And at the beginning of this interview, I think I mentioned, we were - and this isn't something that I really told a lot of people for a really long time, and I think I'm only comfortable talking about it because I'm no longer living with them. But it was six of us in a one bedroom apartment, right and that's not an uncommon story for a lot of immigrant people in New York City. And for a long time, I was really embarrassed about that, so it was always my goal to move out, it was always my goal to leave. And Austin, I applied to grad school in everywhere besides New York. I didn't apply in New York at all, because I knew that I didn't want to. And I could have moved out, but it would have been a bigger conversation with my parents, and I don't think I was ready for that. So I just was like, "I'll just choose the furthest state, and I'll just go to the furthest place." So that distance has really been helpful from family. And that's how I found myself in Austin, is for grad school.



Rimsha Syed 20:43

Wow. What were your initial impressions of Texas, or I guess, Austin, more specifically. I'm not sure if you've really had a chance to explore other cities. But do you think that you prefer Austin over New York, or how have your impressions of the people here and the culture here changed since you've moved?



Maesha Meto 21:06

So I haven't gotten to see much of Texas, and I think that's a fault. I really want to, because I hear really good things about Houston. I hear really good things about their food, and I really miss good ethnic food. I really, really miss that. My first impression of Austin, it feels so long ago, but when I first moved here, it just seemed really quiet. I wasn't used to that. I'm used to noise every hour of the day. If I leave my apartment at 3 AM, there's gonna be people there. And that, to me, feels safe. But in Austin, I didn't feel so safe, because literally, there was nobody ever outside. People are just inside all the time. But now, I really, really appreciate that. I feel like the opportunity to slow down and really just have my own space and have my own privacy has been really a game changer for me. And I have found some really great friends in Austin. So for quite some time, I feel like I was like, "Oh my god, this is just a temporary place, because I just can't seem to make community here." It was really hard for me to find Muslim friends, people who I could really celebrate Ramadan with. And now that I have, it feels much

more like home. And it was hard. It was hard to find community here. But now that I do have community, I feel like this is a great city. Maybe not as diverse as I would hope, but I think the city itself is cool, and it's a great place to have friends and hang out and be young.



Rimsha Syed 22:38

Right. Yeah, I think moving to a new city where you don't know anyone is always a very brave thing that I feel like people are able to do. And I was just wondering if you could tell us a little bit about that process of finding community for you, where you felt like, "Oh, maybe it's not so lonely here after all." What did that look like for you?



Maesha Meto 23:00

I can't remember my very first Muslim friend here. But it was easier for me because I am going to grad school, and my first year, there was no pandemic in sight, so we had our orientation in person. And I socialized, with people, and I met some really cool people that I stayed in touch with for the first year, and then we're not friends anymore. But I think even that introduction to like, "Oh, there are people here who are just like me." Whereas in New York, we have certain ideas about red states, so I was a little nervous first moving here. I guess I didn't mention that before. But yeah, I was nervous moving here, because I was like, "Oh my god, guns." Whereas it's so silly for me to think about now, because I'm like, "People have guns everywhere." I mean, it is a concern in general, and I think it's definitely a source of paranoia for me. But that was my very first idea of Texas, so moving was a little was tough, but when I did, I was like, "Oh my god, this feels a little bit like New York, just a little more quiet. A little more quiet." So I joined Bumble BFF when I was like, "Okay, I need to make a little bit more of a community here." And then I met some really great people through there.



Rimsha Syed 24:22

Right. Yeah, thanks for sharing that. What are you in grad school for, and, I guess, where do you see yourself five years from now?



Maesha Meto 24:30

I am currently in grad school of public policy. I unfortunately can't think five years in advance. But this upcoming year I accepted a job to be a consultant, so I guess career-wise, that's what it's looking like for at least the next year. And then I'm not really sure what happens after. I'm hoping by my fifth year, I'll have traveled a little more. I'll have more of an understanding of who I am as a person. And I don't know, I think the second thing that I said is the most important to me. I think at my twenty-sixth year, I'm doing a lot of self-discovery, and it's been really helpful for me, and also really anxiety inducing, and really hard. But I hope that in five years, I'll have a better understanding, and I'll be like, "Wow, that was cool."



Rimsha Syed 25:18

Right. Yeah, so okay, moving over to, I guess, the more serious part of this interview. Being as

you're from New York now living in Austin, Texas, I feel like you may have a unique experience of growing up in a post-9/11 world. So is there anything that you can recall about that time period, about how your parents or siblings or communities reacted initially to 9/11, and any visible, I guess, changes that you observed early on after 9/11?

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Maesha Meto 25:57

I thought about this question for quite some time, and I think for me, I don't have a lot of memories, I guess, what you would call before 9/11, because I moved two months before 9/11. So all of my memories that I have about discrimination and about Islamophobia are things that are normal to me. I don't really know being a before. For me, I think, as a not visible Muslim - as in I don't wear a hijab - so I don't think people would know that I'm Muslim, unless I say it out loud. But my dad has experienced some pretty terrible Islamophobic things, but none that I've witnessed except, for instance, one. He was walking me home from school. I must have been in the fourth grade. I don't remember, but I was young. These boys in the school bus were like, "Oh, go back home. Go back to your country," for a really long time until the green light finally came, and then they left. And my dad just ignored it and walked, and I just felt so scared. I was like, "Oh my god, Dad, does this happen to you all the time?" And he said, "Yes." And this other time, we were walking into the hospital, and a really tall man spit in his direction, and he was like, "Fuck you." And I was like, "Oh, wow. Huh." And then later on, I heard stories from my friends who were hijabis, and they've had their hijabs pulled off on the train, and they've had really blatant Islamophobic things said to them, and obviously, bodily harm by smacking your hijab off in public. And yeah, yeah, I guess that is what happened.



Rimsha Syed 27:54

Yeah, it's so unfortunate that these experiences are so common across the board. I guess another thing I wanted to talk about is, well, kids who grew up in Texas, we learned out 9/11 through school by watching videos that were often really problematic. And I think it's especially common for Muslim or South Asian students to become a spokesperson for those conversations whenever we do get around to learning about 9/11, even if we have absolutely no idea what 9/11 even was prior to that. So I was curious if this is something that you can relate to, and what sort of information you've received about 9/11 through grade school.

M

Maesha Meto 28:47

No, that sucks. I can't imagine what that must have felt like, and that's terrible. And I know that some of my friends have had those experiences, but fortunately, I have never. I did learn about 9/11 from school, but for quite some time, I actually did not go to - I guess I did go to public schools, but they were specialized programs, so I think that might have sheltered me a little bit. But my brother has gone to public schools his whole life, and he has had experiences where, for instance, the teacher was like, "Hey, Shakir I want you to taste this chip for me." And he was like, "What? Okay, I guess I'll taste this chip." And then it turns out that it was - you know those fried pork rinds, those chips? And that's what it was. And he was like, "I literally didn't know, and I don't know why he offered me this, but I guess I had pork today." And I was like,

"Wow, that's insane." And he talked about it years later. He didn't talk about it the day of. So all that is to say, I did learn about 9/11 in school, but I don't think I've had, or I don't remember any of these instances, happening to me.



Rimsha Syed 30:06

Right. And do you remember what sort of descriptions or more details of these lessons about 9/11?



Maesha Meto 30:15

No, no, I don't, no. On the day of 9/11, we would have assemblies, and they would say the Pledge of Allegiance, and they'd talk about our troops. But besides that, I don't really remember much else, to be honest.



Rimsha Syed 30:34

Right. And how do you feel about the way that 9/11 is focused on in the media, and have you observed any changes over the years with that?



Maesha Meto 30:49

I have not observed any changes. When I learned to be critical of the news and of media, which was in college, I noticed, like many other people probably notice, that the media only talks about 9/11 itself, which was a huge tragedy, it was terrible, and I can't imagine how those families who were impacted still feel the loss, right. But also, what I learned in college was the other side of the war. And there were really horrible stories about Guantanamo and about the war when it first began, and how poor farmers were just pulled off the street, right, and they were like, "Hey, you're coming with us." And then they were blindfolded, and then they were just transported to a facility where they were tortured. These are things that I learned about, and I wouldn't have learned about if it wasn't for a particular class on 9/11 that I took. And I don't think that that's changed. I think it's every year, we hear the same rhetoric. That's not to minimize the experience of people who lost loved ones in 9/11. I think that's a tragedy in itself, but also to not acknowledge the United States's place in perpetuating violence and harm that's honestly ongoing, right, is terrible. And it's not something that I see on the media in any year, and if it wasn't for social media, I don't think that I would have known it as deeply either.



Rimsha Syed 32:32

Yeah, I definitely agree with that. I feel like now when we're talking about 9/11 through media, a lot of it ends up being more propaganda than more [in the direction] of, like you said, the US's role in perpetuating wars and violence. That's very much still ongoing. And I guess it's just hard to wrap my mind around the fact that that's not something we talk about.



Maesha Meto 32:57

Yeah, it's insane, because so many things were covert operations, right. And, again, I would not have learned about this if it weren't for my one teacher. And it's insane, because it's not as though it was one or two covert operations where one person was harmed, right. The word collateral damage was a result of 9/11, right? And it's like, "Okay." I don't know the figure in my head, but hundreds of thousands of people are dead today because of how the US responded. I wouldn't even say responded. I wouldn't call it a response, I would just call it fear-based tactics in the guise of national security, to just be violent and kill Brown people.



Rimsha Syed 33:49

Right, right, exactly. So do you feel your personal sense of security changed because of 9/11? I know that a little bit earlier, you mentioned how you didn't even know a before, because you moved here so briefly before 9/11 actually happened. But I guess another way to frame this question is, do you feel like 9/11 and all of these policy changes and the war made you more hyper-aware towards certain social issues?



Maesha Meto 34:28

Could you actually ask that question one more time?



Rimsha Syed 34:31

Yeah, sure. So because I do know you personally, I know that you are interested in various forms of activism, which I would definitely love to hear about. And I was just wondering if maybe all the changes that came with the 9/11 were part of the catalyst that got you interested in some of these issues.



Maesha Meto 34:52

Maybe. I guess because I hadn't learned about 9/11, or I should say I really learned about 9/11 and the War on Terror until my junior or senior year of college, I don't know that it's had a direct impact on my social activism. But definitely after I learned about it, I was scared. I was mad. And actually, because I was never a part of mosque communities, I didn't even know how mosques had been impacted by surveillance until that time, which honestly, I think I grew up really, really sheltered from 9/11, and I'm not entirely sure how it happened, but I'm thankful for it. But at the same time, my community was suffering, right, my community. And my dad, he was a mosque-goes, and so he would sometimes talk about surveillance. And I'd be like, "No, no, no. No way. There's no way that -" It was happening under our noses all the time, and I just was blissfully unaware. So I don't know that 9/11 has had a direct impact on my activism, because I think I've always been an activist. But it definitely impacted the way that I saw, for instance, the FBI, or the United States government. Yeah.



Rimsha Syed 36:21

I guess surveillance is another thing that I did want to actually talk about, so I'm glad that you brought that up. But before we talk about that, tell me a little bit more about your activist history, and what were some of the catalysts that brought you into organizing, and what are some of the social issues that you feel passionately about?

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Maesha Meto 36:39

I my politics is very straightforward. If there's one person that's oppressed by something, I'm going to be rooting for that person. So I guess I've always been interested in social, political, and racial policy, but I'd never quite considered that for myself, because I was pre-med for most of my life, because my parents wanted me to be a doctor. But what got me into the organizing space was actually taking a class called Women in the Law. One of my professors are teaching it over the summer, and we're still really good friends. And I learned about incarceration and the disparate impacts that it has on women in prison, so I was like, "I need to do something about incarceration." I think incarceration was a very first social issue that really moved me, and I wanted to do something about it. So I joined an organization in New York that worked on policing issues. And now I'm an abolitionist, but the organization focuses on reforming police, and doing that work was pretty eye-opening.

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Maesha Meto 36:44

I learned about a lot of policing tactics in New York City that are ongoing, even though some of the news might say otherwise. Not with the new mayor, of course, but throughout Bill de Blasio's mayoral terms, he's enacted some pretty terrible policies that were under the radar. So people were like, "Oh my god, he's doing such great things," and we were like, "No, no, no, no. No, he's not. He's exactly the same as any of his predecessors." So yes, incarceration was my very first, and then I was interested in foster care. And I'm still interested in foster care and how that system is completely, completely, so messed up. But I right now, I'm just in school. So I'm not really doing any activist work, but I still feel pretty moved by the foster care system. In fact, Texas has one of the worst, just in case you did not know.



Rimsha Syed 37:51

Right, yeah, thank you for sharing that. And going back to surveillance, these experiences that your dad has spoken of are so common, unfortunately, across mosques all over the country, but I guess, especially in New York City, in particular. Instead of these mosques being safe spaces, there are just numerous cases of law enforcement-backed spying and these counter-terrorism efforts that are very poorly placed. And I was wondering, do you feel that's left Muslim communities with fear and distrust of the government in the US?

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Maesha Meto 39:30

Oh, a hundred percent. A hundred, hundred percent. I could not tell you if there's no surveillance today, right? Even today, I'm like, "Oh my god, should I cover up my webcam?" Because literally, who knows can be spying right now, right? So yes, it has, I think, left the

Muslim community with suspicion and reason to be suspicious, right. And I guess a hyper-vigilance that maybe wouldn't have been factor if they hadn't experienced this surveillance firsthand.



Rimsha Syed 40:05

I totally agree. So how is 9/11 talked about, if talked about at all, amongst your peers?



Maesha Meto 40:14

It's not really talked about, to be honest. Or at least, I should say, it's not talked about now. And I think this is a good thing. I think being in our communities with people who understand us and are in solidarity with us, we're not necessarily focused on, or we don't talk about, 9/11. We are like, "Hey, what's going on in you life?" And I think that's nice. But I think on social media, when it is 9/11, I do see a lot of people, and I'm myself one of the people, who post about the war on terror, and I think that's how information about 9/11 is spread today. But I think in person, we don't necessarily focus on talking about 9/11, even on 9/11.



Rimsha Syed 41:06

Yeah, so obviously, all these experiences, and ongoing traumas, and Islamophobia are a ongoing healing process for many visibly Brown Muslim people. And one thing I like to ask is, what is something that brings you comfort or healing?



Maesha Meto 41:24

Ooh, I like that. Comfort and healing. I think, for instance, I know you. So during Ramadan, which is coming up in two months, I think, maybe a month and a half, I think what brings me comfort is celebrating that with people that I know and love. Ramadan isn't something that happens every other day, and I think it's a really hard, hard, hard thing. It's really difficult for me to do every single year. But when I have community to share that with, and when I have dinner with you and other people, it feels really good. It feels really nice to just sit around the table and talk. And sometimes about Islam, sometimes spirituality, but other times, it's just like, "Hey, this thing is happening. This thing is happening. Have you watched this show?" And I think, for me, that's healing, is being among community and talking over dinner or talking over coffee or something like that. And I'm really excited for Ramadan, I think that's going to be - now I think my community is much bigger and stronger, so I'm really excited to invite people over for iftar and maybe even go have sehri with people, that would be really nice.



Rimsha Syed 42:31

Yeah, I love that, and I'm excited too. So one last thing that I wanted to ask today is, is there anything we've already talked about that you would like to expand on? Or any piece of advice, words of wisdom that you would like to offer? Seeing as this interview will be archived, and

people might be listening to it tomorrow or a hundred years down the line, is there anything at all that you would like to say before we close out?



Maesha Meto 43:03

This is a lot of pressure. I'd say, for me what's been really healing and revelatory, I hope I'm saying this right, has been doing my own learning and doing my own research. And if anybody is out there listening to this, not feeling sure about their footing on Islam and what it might mean at its core, I'd say just do your own - maybe don't use Google, because some of it is the same rhetoric, but I'd say read some books if you can, or listen to a podcast, and that might be healing for you too.



Rimsha Syed 43:50

Yeah. Okay, thank you so much, Maesha, for your time today. I am going to go ahead and stop the recording.



Maesha Meto 43:57

You're welcome. Okay.