

# Mehraz Rahman

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Islamic school, student government, Bangladesh, University of Texas at Austin, prayer spaces, immigration, Muslim Woman Identity, Nueces mosque

## SPEAKERS

Zubia Akhtar, Mehraz Rehman

**Z** Zubia Akhtar 00:00  
My name Zubia Akhtar and I'm here with the Muslim Voices Podcast and I'm here with Mehraz Rehman. Hi.

**M** Mehraz Rehman 00:06  
Hi.

**Z** Zubia Akhtar 00:07  
So tell me something about yourself and your life, Mehraz.

**M** Mehraz Rehman 00:11  
Cool. I am from Austin. I'm currently a senior at UT, I'm studying Marketing and Plan II. I'm very involved in the Bengali community, Bangladeshi community, in Austin, ever since I was really little. [I'm involved] in the Muslim community as well - I went to Islamic school from pre-k through whenever my little brother was born and my mom couldn't take me to school anymore that far away. What else?

Z

Zubia Akhtar 00:43

So, going off of that, what was your experience like in Islamic school and [in] the Bengali community?

M

Mehraz Rehman 00:50

Yeah. For Islamic school to begin with, that was the first school experience that I had. It was very valuable to me, I think. And it was very important to my parents to instill the good Muslim values that they grew up with, starting from when I was little. I really appreciate that they did that. There were a lot of things that my eyes got opened to, in terms of how we're treated as Muslims. Because I talk about this a decent amount, but one of my earliest memories is actually 911, even though I was really, really young, because I was at an Islamic school at the time. And the reaction from the surrounding community was so violent. People were throwing rocks and stuff and they made us all go inside - we were playing outside at the time. Everybody's parents came to pick them up [and] the school kind of lost a ton of their enrollment after that. So in more ways than one, not just the values that I learned, not just learning how to read Arabic and learning all the stories from when I was young without my parents having to teach them to me. I feel like I learned so much about what it's like to be a Muslim while going to Islamic school first.

M

Mehraz Rehman 02:15

And as far as the Bangladeshi community goes, honestly, you know how some people have their school friends that they've been going to school with forever, their neighbors or whatever? For me, that's the Bengali community. They're like family because we don't really have much family here. I was born in Austin and I was one of the first kids to be born in Austin in the Bangladeshi community. So my parents know everybody and it just feels very tight knit. I would not have had my upbringing any other way. I learned singing and dancing and performed at cultural events ever since I was six or seven. So some of my lifelong friends I know - I'm always going to forever be friends with them [because they] are part of the Bangladeshi community.

Z

Zubia Akhtar 03:05

So do you think being a big part of the Bangladeshi community has to do with how your religion has impacted you? Do they go hand in hand in your opinion?

M

Mehraz Rehman 03:16

Yeah, I think that the way that Islam is practiced, for a lot of people, is very heavily intertwined in their culture. The way that Arab people practice or Indian people practice or Pakistani people practice, and then the way that Black-American Muslims practice, it's all very different at least in the tradition aspects - at least in how they celebrate the holidays, and what food they eat, and what they wear during Eid, and things like that. It's all very different [when] based on culture. My parents will tell me little folklore things like, don't do that because this, and a lot of the times they're rooted in Islam. But when I talked to some of my other Muslim friends, they're like, "What? We've never heard that." And I'm like, "Oh, I guess it's a Bengali Muslim thing? I don't know."

Z

Zubia Akhtar 04:14

Yeah, Muslim culture is beyond Islam.

M

Mehraz Rehman 04:17

Yeah, definitely.

Z

Zubia Akhtar 04:20

So going on to that, now you attend UT Austin, and you're the vice president of the student body. The election was a really big deal last year and you being a Muslim was brought up a lot during that. Do you have stuff you can say about that or your experience with the election and just all of that in general?

M

Mehraz Rehman 04:39

Yeah. So what kind of happened during the election was, I want to say, kind of a microcosm of what was going on in national politics at the time. It was very much a reflection of how divisive things are and how people on far extremes of either side felt emboldened to say their piece, felt like they had a stake in the issue.

M

Mehraz Rehman 05:17

And I think that a lot of that was to this whole student body's detriment and a lot of it contributed to people ascribing false beliefs on to me [and] on to a lot of the people that I was working with [and] on to a lot of the people on the other side as well. [It was] just kind of all around unhealthy and me being Muslim was brought up a lot.

M

Mehraz Rehman 05:43

And because of some of the circumstances around who was supporting our side versus who was supporting their side, a lot of people felt as though I wasn't Muslim enough or my talking about me being Muslim was performative or whatever else. But nobody really stopped to ask me what my beliefs were - how Muslim I actually was, you know? Nobody knew that I actually have been praying five times a day since I was 13. And nobody knew that I had been working, even long before I decided to run, on bringing more reflection spaces where people can pray five times a day on campus because I've been one of those people that have had to pray in a dirty stairwell. And I didn't want other people to have to go through that.

M

Mehraz Rehman 06:45

And people ascribing their own beliefs of how Muslim you are was not new. It's something that, because I don't cover [my head] and things like that, people, non-Muslim or Muslim, will all make assumptions about how I practice or how I don't practice.

Z

Zubia Akhtar 07:06

So going off of what you dealt with, do you think you felt more treated [wrongly] by the Muslim community or by non-Muslims for being Muslim?

M

Mehraz Rehman 07:18

Actually, I will say that up until the election, I would have never said that I felt treated wrongly by Muslims. Because at least until they got to know you, people will always make assumptions on how I practice based on how I look or because I don't wear a hijab and things like that. But until the election, I never felt actively [that] Muslim people were trying to tell me how I believe. And before the election, and still, non-Muslim people will probably discriminate against me or make assumptions about me more than Muslims do, still. But at that point in time, for that brief period of time, I did feel very much like the Muslim community was not - was just very misunderstanding where I was coming from.

Z

Zubia Akhtar 08:21

So going off of that, a lot of people had these assumptions about you. But did being

Muslim play a role in you wanting to run and make change on the campus?

M

Mehraz Rehman 08:31

Yeah, absolutely. Muslim issues and immigrant issues and working with refugees, mostly from Muslim countries, those are things that I've been passionate about for a very long time. One of the main issues that I was working on, even long before I considered running for this position, was bringing reflection spaces, more reflection spaces, onto campus because I saw a need for that. I literally saw so many people praying in kind of sub-human conditions, almost. And I did not think that was right. So a huge part of the advocacy work that I want to do and wanted to do and want to do in the future has to do with the fact that I'm Muslim, and a woman, and Bangladeshi, you know? That didn't change at all.

M

Mehraz Rehman 09:27

I have no hard feelings towards the Muslim community. I still go to Nueces mosque whenever I can. [I] went still over the summer while I was fasting for Iftaar a couple of times. [I'm] still involved in the Muslim community in Austin, that's where I'm from. I mostly probably go to North Lamar or Manor mosques because that's just where my family goes more often, but yeah.

Z

Zubia Akhtar 09:54

So you mentioned being a woman also. Do you think being a Muslim woman has impacted you differently than a Muslim man would have been impacted in the same position that you are today, in the public? As you are the vice president, and just going to UT, and your aspirations and goals?

M

Mehraz Rehman 10:15

That's an interesting question. I think that, yes, being a woman, just generally it's been very different than it would have been if I was a man, regardless of whether or not I am Muslim. Because a lot of these spaces are very dominated by men and it's kind of hard to get your piece in - or just as the attitudes that we have been kind of indoctrinated with from when we were young. I constantly feel like I should be taking up less space or I constantly feel like my questions aren't as smart, so I shouldn't ask them, or the comment that I have to say is probably not that insightful, so I shouldn't say it. At the beginning of my term, I especially saw that because I was in meetings with all men administrators, and then all men student leaders as well. And as we went along, probably a

month or so in, I realized some of these questions that some of these people were asking, I don't even have those questions because I already know the answers to them, you know? So it's not that I don't know enough, it's just that sometimes, these people are more assertive than I am. It's not their fault and it's not mine. It's just the way that society has raised us to act.

M Mehrnaz Rehman 11:49

So I have slowly but surely been getting over that. I'm still not assertive by any means, I don't think, even though I would like to be probably a little bit more assertive. But I have found my voice in a lot of these meetings with administrators and with people who can make a difference in what we can get done as student government.

Z Zubia Akhtar 12:16

Thank you so much.

M Mehrnaz Rehman 12:16

Yeah.

Z Zubia Akhtar 12:17

Awesome. Finally, I was just wondering, what does being Muslim mean to you?

M Mehrnaz Rehman 12:23

That's a good question. Being Muslim means a lot of things to me. It's really one of the pieces of my identity that means the most. It's something that I deeply think about at least five times a day when I'm praying. It impacts the way that I act, not just because the things that I act will send me to heaven or the other place or whatever. But because there's so many things that are taught to us in Islam that have to do with empathizing with others who are less fortunate than us. I really think that my main philosophy in life, which is using the privilege that I've been given to at least try and help others, comes from Islam.

Z Zubia Akhtar 13:24

Thank you. So is there anything else you would like us to know? About your work or about Islam, just Muslim-ness, or anything?



Mehraz Rehman 13:32

Yeah! Well, for those of you who go to UT Austin, good news! The engineering reflection space that we've been working on for the past two years is finally going to happen. It should be up by after spring break. It'll be in the ECJ building. I forget the room number, but really exciting. We just got that news last week.



Mehraz Rehman 13:56

Besides that, to everybody who feels less Muslim than they actually are, or they feel guilt for needing to be more a certain way, to go according to their parents' beliefs, or their friends' beliefs, or whatever, just know that you can define that for yourself.



Zubia Akhtar 14:22

Well, thank you so much.



Mehraz Rehman 14:23

Of course. Thank you.