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Oral History Interview with Syeda Parvin Akter
Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.20
Interview conducted by Liz H. Strong on May 22, 2018
at Brooklyn Historical Society in Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn

STRONG: So, today is May 22nd, 2018. My name is Liz Strong. This is an oral history interview for the Brooklyn Historical Society's Muslims in Brooklyn Project. Syeda, welcome. I'll ask you just to introduce yourself and then say where and when you were born.

AKTER: Thank you. My name is Syeda Parvin Akter, and I was born in Bangladesh in 1965.

STRONG: Tell me what you remember about your earliest memories, your childhood growing up.

AKTER: Yeah, there are a lot of memories, but if you can ask me specific --

STRONG: Sure. Tell me about your parents. Who were they?

AKTER: My parents were also from Bangladesh. And my father was a government servant, and my mother was -- actually, my mother is still a homemaker -- was and still a homemaker.

STRONG: What town did you grow up in?

AKTER: I'm sorry?

STRONG: What town did you grow up in?

AKTER: In the childhood, you know, different places. My father had a transferable job. So, first in Dhaka City then Manikganj is a different district, so it's -- then Nandganj then another district Tangail then came back to Dhaka and --

STRONG: Where was your favorite place to live?

AKTER: Actually, in the Manikganj where it's my paternal grandparents' home, and in my maternal grandparents' home in the village. That part I loved.

STRONG: Tell me about it. What was it like?

AKTER: The village is mostly like the field, and a lot of trees. And, you know, the roads are like not that -- as complete roads in the village, and there's some kind of, you know,

cars with the cow, you know, and some kind of cars with the horses. I like that part. And my -- actually, my father was a very strict person, and when we went to my mother's house, like my ma-- maternal grandparents' house, like, I became free like a free bird. I went everywhere. That is my, like, best part.

STRONG: That's great.

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Tell me about your siblings a little bit.

AKTER: I have a -- I'm an eldest one, and I have one more sister and two brothers.

STRONG: And what are they like? What were your relationships --

AKTER: My --

STRONG: -- like when you were young?

AKTER: Yeah. Relationships, sometimes good, sometimes bad. We used to fight a little.

[laughter] Yeah.

STRONG: But what -- what do they do? What are they like as people?

AKTER: Now, what they do?

STRONG: Sure. Yeah.

AKTER: No? Oh. My one brother, the eldest one, he actually doesn't want to do anything.

[laughter] Like, one time, he went to, like, in a Middle Eastern country for a job. He didn't like it, too much work there. He came back, and he was telling, "Oh, I'll never go there." And he doesn't want to do any like -- it's my feelings, whatever, if you can do, do, right? It doesn't matter, I -- I want to do this kind of job, I want to do that -- do that kind of job, no. But he doesn't want to. It's like he is very choosy. [laughter] So like his wife is a schoolteacher, so mostly, he stays home taking care of children [laughter] like that. He's a househusband.

STRONG: That's wonderful. [laughter]

AKTER: Yeah. And my sister is, like, a lawyer, attorney in Dhaka, and her husband is also a lawyer in Dhaka. And my -- another brother is an engineer. He works in UNIDO, like United [Nations Industrial] Development Organization. Under that, he's in consultation in Bangladesh, so he tours all over the world.

STRONG: Wow.

AKTER: And his wife is a doctor.

STRONG: So, are you the only one in your family to have moved outside of Bangladesh?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: So, before we get to that story of your move, tell me more about your education, what you liked doing in school, things like that.

AKTER: My primary was in Dhaka then high school in Manikganj like all girls. Then high secondary, like over here, it's till 12th grade in school, but in back home, my country after 10th grade, we have to go to college, so that is called high secondary until 12th grade. Then that is also in Manikganj then I did my graduation in Tangail District. That is called like a Kumudini Government College there. It's the girls' college. Then I -- after college graduation then I came back to Dhaka University to the master's for Bengali literature.

STRONG: Oh, wow. Was literature your main interest all along? How did that develop?

AKTER: No, actually.

STRONG: Okay. [laughter]

AKTER: It's a big story.

STRONG: Tell me about it.

AKTER: No, I was in science group, and I, actually, doing very great in my -- the result was best, and I wanted to be a doctor, so I had a chance but -- and also after that, I got a chance in a university, which is called Jahangirnagar [phonetic 00:06:10] University -- chemistry. But I couldn't do it because I -- my father lost his job, and I had to get a -- take a job to take care of them. Then I, you know, transferred from arts -- a science group to arts group to do my -- like arts group is we don't, like, have to go that much in the college then we don't have to, like, do a practical like science -- you know, study a lot like the science group. So -- but I continued my studies, and I also took care of my brothers and sisters.

STRONG: That's good.

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: So, what was I going to ask you? Oh, what was -- what was the work like during that time and supporting your family? What are your -- what are your memories about it?

AKTER: I was doing, you know, like in telecommunication department as a computer operator there.

STRONG: And, you know, what were your siblings doing? What was home life like? What are your memories of that period of your life?

AKTER: That life? Like when I was doing my job?

STRONG: Mm-hmm.

AKTER: Yeah, there, all were studying, you know, like -- like we were struggling but no complaint, you know?

STRONG: And --

AKTER: So --

STRONG: -- and everything worked out eventually?

AKTER: Yeah, kind of, everything worked out, yeah.

STRONG: When was that? That was in the --?

AKTER: My brother, younger brother was in a cadet college, you know, staying in the hostel in the college. My sister was also in a -- like homes, like, called baratecheri [phonetic 00:07:58] homes. You know, she did some of -- part of education there. Then after that, she came to Dhaka. And, you know, after my marriage, like my sister was staying with me and studying in my husband's college.

STRONG: Oh, interesting. I wanted to ask you -- before that, you mentioned when we talked on the phone that you had always been interested in, like, cultural organizations and community work and volunteering. Can you tell me about some of your early experiences with that?

AKTER: In back home?

STRONG: Yeah.

AKTER: In back home in the school, I was participating like all those cultural programs, sports. Oh, like sports, I was very weak, but still, I participated, you know? So, I didn't

get -- no prize but still I par-- participated. And then I was doing a cultural organization who is called Kalagar [phonetic 00:08:53] in Bangladesh. So, it's popular. Like in all over Bangladesh, there is a branch, branch, branch, you know, there, so --

Then in the college, I had a lot of certificates in cul-- cultural organization, participating like in this peace, competition, in the recitation, poem recitation competition -- you know, different, different part of that, mostly recitation.

So, you know, then after that when I came back to Dhaka, I was involved. Like I was doing a singing class. I was taking a singing class like music class. Then I also was involved -- another cultural organization, which is called Udichi [Bangladesh Udichi Shilpigosthe] then -- you know, some, some, some. And in my job, there was a cultural group. I was, like, part of that group.

STRONG: And what did that group do?

AKTER: You know, participates like cultural singing, like -- like chorus singing, solo singing, [00:10:00] any kind of, like, you know, different, like, occasion.

STRONG: So you like to sing?

AKTER: Yeah. Still I sing.

STRONG: You do?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: That's great. Same kind of music or --?

AKTER: Kind of, yeah. Bengali tagore song, I like most.

STRONG: What do you like about it?

AKTER: I'm sorry?

STRONG: What do you like about it?

AKTER: The song?

STRONG: What are your favorite things about singing? Is it the community?

AKTER: Like --

STRONG: Is it the -- the fun of the singing itself?

AKTER: Fun of singing itself is good. I feel better in my heart. From my heart, I feel good when I sing. And, you know, like tagore song is like -- all the songs are best, but tagore song is kind of -- most of the songs are spiritual actually.

STRONG: Oh, okay. You also mentioned your marriage and your move a little bit, so let's talk about that. How did you and your husband meet? Tell me that story.

AKTER: Actually, it's kind of arranged marriage, but like in our country, arranged marriage, parents, you know, choose first, but my part, my husband saw me first, and he liked. And he like -- like introduced me in his family, and he told his family, "Look, I'm going to marry her." Then, you know, the both family together, like it happened.

STRONG: How did he see you? How did you guys meet?

AKTER: Actually, he used to live in London. Over there, he used to work in a restaurant. The restaurant owners, they were husband and wife. They were my relatives, and they heard about me. And when he came, you know, like he saw me in their house in Bangladesh.

STRONG: So, he was visiting them and --

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: -- he ran into you?

AKTER: And I was talking when he was in London. They introduced me in London. I was talking to him in London, and he sent me a picture, and I sent my picture there -- like that.

STRONG: And what did you -- what were your thoughts of him when you first met? What did you -- what did you think he was like?

AKTER: It's really two, three times we met, not that much thinking. And that time, you know, mostly, my mother liked him -- mostly my mother liked him. He spoke to my mother, and my mother felt like he's a very good person, so --

STRONG: So, she --

AKTER: -- mostly --

STRONG: -- recommended him?

AKTER: Yeah, yeah, mostly my mother.

STRONG: Tell me about your wedding.

AKTER: Wedding, about like where? In Dhaka and in a Chinese restaurant. Yeah, it was in December 25, 1990.

STRONG: And where --

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: -- where did you live after that?

AKTER: In Dhaka.

STRONG: In Dhaka?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: For a little while?

AKTER: Yeah. He was a lecturer in a college, so --

STRONG: He's a lecturer?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Oh, interesting. What did he lecture on?

AKTER: English.

STRONG: Yeah?

AKTER: Yeah, English literature.

STRONG: And where did you live, and what was your life like?

AKTER: It's good kind of, like, you know, like joint family is sometimes they're bad, sometimes -- most of the time, good, but I couldn't feel anything. Like, you know, like very quick, I got pregnant with my son. So I was so sick, so I [laughter] couldn't feel my, you know, marriage life that way, you know? Then after my son was born, and my husband came to America, so --

STRONG: How come he went to America?

AKTER: Actually first, he came to a conference in San Francisco, so -- and after the conference, he, like, thinking -- he will stay here, he was thinking.

STRONG: And what kind of work did he do here while he was here?

AKTER: Well, he used to work in -- first, he used to work in a restaurant, and after that, he worked MetLife Insurance Company, and after that, like, he's working off and on. He's, kind of, a little sick, you know? Like after his father -- you know, the news of his father's

death, he got sick. Like three months, he didn't talk to anybody, and he was hospitalized. After that, he is doing his job off and on, like not continuously. Like mostly, I'm, like, supporting my family, like, since my daughter was born.

STRONG: To these days?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: So initially, how long were you two living apart? You were in [00:15:00] Bangladesh and he was here, how long did that last?

AKTER: It's three years.

STRONG: Three years?

AKTER: Yeah, it's kind of -- yeah, three years. Yeah.

STRONG: So, what did you do during that time? Did you live by yourself? Did you live with family?

AKTER: Sometime -- most of the time, I was living with my mother -- you know, my mother's family. They -- they used to live in Dhaka, too, so it's, like, very close, you know? So, I used to live with them. Sometimes, I -- my, like, mother-in-law, their family. Like --

STRONG: What -- what was life like then? Do you have any stories or particular memories?

AKTER: Yeah, there are a lot of memories but, you know, like sometimes good, sometimes bad. It's okay.

STRONG: So, how did you, eventually, decide it was time to come and join your husband in the United States?

AKTER: Actually, it was not my decision. It was my husband's decision.

STRONG: So, he was ready?

AKTER: Yeah. He was actually.

STRONG: Did you think that he might move back to Bangladesh rather than you --

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: -- living here? Oh, --

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: -- I see.

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Okay. And -- and why did he decide that living in the US would be better?

AKTER: Actually, during that time, you know, like his college, the principal was calling him to go back to Bangladesh to -- like otherwise, he -- he cannot -- he was, actually, like on his -- what is that called -- kind of, like on vacation, something like that, you know?

STRONG: Mm-hmm. A tourist visa?

AKTER: No, no, no, in the college.

STRONG: Oh, in the college.

AKTER: In the college --

STRONG: He had a sabbatical or time off?

AKTER: No. In the college, like his job was continued, but he was, like, you know -- like what is that called?

STRONG: Leave?

AKTER: Leave. Yeah. So, the -- the principal was calling him to go back, "Okay, come back and join, you know, your job. Otherwise, I cannot -- take your job. It's not -- it's 50-50 government -- 50 percent government and 50 percent private, the college. Like, you know, there was a board, you know, they can fire him. So, the principal was calling him to go back, but he didn't want to go back then he lost his job. So, you know, he doesn't have any other choice to go back, so he stayed here and --

STRONG: And do you know why he chose to stay in the US? What he -- what he wanted to do or what he liked about it?

AKTER: There was some kind of, you know, political issue in the college. You know, there are two political parties in there, you know. Like he was supporting one political party, and the other political party was controlling the college.

STRONG: And he didn't want --?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Oh, wow. So, tell me what moving to Brooklyn was like for you and for your young child?

AKTER: Actually, when I came here, my husband already was living here, right? And he -- you know, he had a house, and I came here and started living in Brooklyn.

STRONG: What was it like? What do you remember about your neighborhood? How it was different from where you used to live?

AKTER: In the beginning, like I was living in East New York in the first time when I came here. So, the building is a six-floor building. You know, the only -- with my family, only three families are from Bangladesh, so all are American, and, you know, all are very good people. Like I came here -- I -- I -- like in back home, I used to talk English, but not like American people. I can communicate with them. So, you know, I didn't do any work. Like in the summertime, I always went outside with my son and talking to the people that the people are very good. Yeah.

STRONG: Tell me about the kinds of people that you met.

AKTER: Yes, all are like American people.

STRONG: And -- and very different? What were you learning from them?

AKTER: Oh, learning? You know, one thing is a really funny thing, like, I learned that is -- I don't know. You want me to tell? Like across this -- like [00:20:00] behind my building, there was a clinic, right? Then I went there, like I took my son there, and they sent me financial department. So, I was sitting in a room. The person like -- like -- you know? Then the lady was telling, "Okay, miss, miss, now this, that. This -- this the thing," right, she was telling. Then I -- I told her, "Okay, okay, excuse me. I'm not a miss. I'm a missus." [laughter] Then she was telling, "Oh, okay, in America, actually, when I call -- sometimes see some people, we just, you know, like, called, like, you know, miss. It's not like you were miss or missus."

STRONG: Mm-hmm. [laughter] So, little things like that?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: What was it like being away from your family who you had been living with previously? How did you adjust? How did you make friends?

AKTER: Oh, where?

STRONG: When you came to Brooklyn.

AKTER: Yeah. Like, I, actually, went outside and talked to the people, you know, like all the people. Like it doesn't matter in -- from -- is from my country or not. I say hi, hello to everybody, so --

STRONG: So, it wasn't hard being away from people that you knew, friends and family?

AKTER: Sorry?

STRONG: So when you moved to Brooklyn, you moved away from your family who had -- you had been living with. You moved away from --

AKTER: In Bangladesh?

STRONG: Yeah, frie-- friends that you knew. And I'm, sort of, wondering what that was like being away from them. And, yes, you talked to people that you met on the street, but how did you make new friends?

AKTER: Yeah. Sometimes, you know, I meet them in the school mostly, my daughter's school, my son's school. You know, I talk to them. And in their school, like my -- from my son's school, I was participating in PTA [parent teacher association]. I was participating on the -- another one Learning Leaders. You know, I was assisting with the teachers. So, like school, you know, whatever they're doing in the school, like I was participating there. I meet them. I make friends with them, like that.

STRONG: Oh, that's good.

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Tell me a little bit about what East New York was like when you first came here as a -- as a neighborhood. What are some of the places you remember? What was it like?

AKTER: Yeah. East New York, I used to go to C-Town for shopping, I remember, and then the clinic, I remember, yeah. I remember my son's first doctor in America. Her name is Miss -- Dr. Bumathe [phonetic 00:23:00] from Burma, yeah. Like Burma is now called -- what is that called -- Rangoon -- Yangon, you know? So, I remember her still. You know, I remember her one advice still.

STRONG: Her advice still?

AKTER: Yeah, about my son.

STRONG: What was her advice?

AKTER: It's kind of contradictory. Like, you know, my son was getting too much sick then like coughing, cold. Then like my friends over the phone, I was talking to them about my son then they were telling, "Okay, get him a flu shot." Then I asked her, you know, "Doctor, give him a flu shot." Then she was telling, "Oh, you want to depend on a flu shot? You want --? Don't. Let him, like, get immunity in his body without a flu shot." [laughter] But, you know, like after a few years I'm working with the doctor's office, I feel like, you know, we have to get a flu shot.

STRONG: Okay. [laughter] So that stands out?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: What neighborhood did you move to next in Brooklyn?

AKTER: Next, I moved for -- I think I lived there six months, I believe, six to eight months. In Nostrand and Bedford, over there, six months, yeah.

STRONG: And what do you remember about that area?

AKTER: Yeah. I remember. And I made a friend, but still, I remember her. I'm looking for her, and sometimes, I search, you know, Facebook by her name, so, you know? She was working like a Jehovah's Witness, you know?

STRONG: Oh, really?

AKTER: Yeah. She -- in the, like, summertime, [00:25:00] most of the time when she came, we -- like maybe half an hour, we talk like in front of the house, the stairs sitting.

STRONG: That sounds wonderful.

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Then where did you move?

AKTER: Then I moved to Sunset Park area, like Ninth Avenue is --

STRONG: How was -- how was that neighborhood different from places you've lived before?

AKTER: This? Sunset Park area is mostly people from my country and mostly people are Spanish-speaking people, you know, that time. So -- but in East New York, like the three families I mentioned were from Bangladesh, and in Nostrand and Bedford, maybe two, three families from Bangladesh, so you know, mostly American and -- but in Sunset Park, like mostly from Bangladesh and, oh, Spanish-speaking people. And some--

sometimes people, like Spanish-speaking people made a mistake. They come to me and started talking Spanish then I started learning a little Spanish because they were talking to me. They are asking me something I don't understand. At least, I can tell them like, "Okay, no se habla Español," you know? Then they will understand, I'm not [laughter] from their country like that. And a few blocks away, there is a Chinatown mostly, you know, people from China, and I used to shop there. You know, still I go there for shopping.

STRONG: Nice. Tell me about what your kids were learning in school. I mean, as you were active in the public schools -- what kind of classes did they like? Were the teachers good? What was that like?

AKTER: My son was having a little problem from -- in the school, like, you know, when -- when he went to first term in kindergarten in the school in Nostrand and Bedford. So over there, his teacher was very good, but he -- he doesn't want to -- like he was very, you know, like, [inaudible 00:27:30] you know, very close to me. And when I like, you know, left him in the schoolroom, he -- he just ran to me from the class, and, you know, like -- and he was crying, crying and screaming a lot. Then his teacher came out from the class and was telling, "Okay, you stay in the auditorium. If he -- you know, like he makes anything bad, I'll call you," you know? Then like a few weeks probably, I -- I had to stay in the auditorium to adjust him in the class. He couldn't make it.

And then, he came to Sunset Park area, there was a boy. He was very quiet, my son, and in this -- like in the Nostrand and Bedford school, you know, the teacher was complaining, "Oh, he can't -- he doesn't talk. Probably, he doesn't understand English." So then in -- in -- in the home, we really don't speak that much English. We speak Bengali. So that when the teacher complained that, "Oh, probably, he doesn't understand English," so then we started talking to English with him. And, you know, like the -- everything, like at the study, you know, or whatever, you know, we started talking with him in English. Then -- then the teacher was telling, "Oh, I, you know, like, found out, he just catches very quick. You guys are talking English, right, in -- in the --

the -- in home?" Then I told the teacher, "Yes." Then the teacher was telling, "Okay, don't -- don't do that, don't. He will learn English in the school, but if you talk in English at home then he will forget your language," so, you know? Then little by little, he picked.

But Sunset Park school, there was a problem with another kid. He -- he was beating him. He was beating him then he didn't want to go to school. Then every time,[00:30:00] he doesn't tell. He doesn't tell what -- what's going on, what's going on, then he doesn't want to. That time, he didn't to tell what's going on actually, why he didn't want to go to school. Then we were asking -- we're asking then he told that is the problem. Then we went to the -- first, we went to the vice principal then the principal and then they will -- you know, the principal told, "Okay, we'll watch what's going on." And then, you know, they solved that problem.

STRONG: What about your daughter's experiences in school?

AKTER: My daughter's? Also, you know, she started pre-K -- the -- both children, they were very shy. So, you know, the first time, the teacher -- you know, she didn't participate. She didn't -- she didn't want to participate, like very quiet, very shy, sitting in a corner. Then the teacher asked me, "Okay, you come to the class. Stay in the corner, so she -- she will not see you, and you will just observe what's your daughter doing." Then I observed. Like I was shy, but I participated at everything.

But I saw like, you know, she was sitting -- all the kids were singing with the teacher, you know, like -- like kid's song, you know. Every day, they -- like, the teachers, you know, sing with that kids. So singing, she -- she didn't participate in those things, you know, and she was sitting quiet then I was thinking, I have to do something. Then, you know, I was talking, and I was putting her in the, like, singing class, in Bengali singing class then dance class, you know, little by little. And, you know, school part, I was -- all the [inaudible 00:31:58], I was with her, and I was telling her, "Okay, do this." You know everything, like participate in this and that, like that.

STRONG: Did you find cultural classes for your son as well or mostly just for your daughter?

AKTER: No. He used to sing with my husband. My husband sings, so he used to sing with my husband, but, you know? But little by little, like when my daughter was born, like, you know, my husband was in the hospital, you know, three months. So that time, I couldn't find any school for him. And when he, like, was like a big boy then he doesn't want to go any places. I was asking, "What do you want to do?" Like he want -- one time, he wanted to play drum, I bought drum for him, like two, little, little, you know, in Bengali song, you know? You still remember? Two like drum, called tabla? And then after that, okay, I was asking, "What, actually, you want to do? You want to learn guitar?" Then he said, "Yes." Then I bought a guitar then I found a teacher for him, but he didn't want to go. Like -- and then now, he wants to go. I, like, found another teacher then -- like same school like the Bangladesh performing arts school, same school. They have a guitar, they have a keyboard, you know, dance and sing also. So -- And he's telling he's going to start like that.

STRONG: How did you learn about BIPA [Bangladesh Institute of Performing Arts], the --?

AKTER: The teacher, actually, lives two blocks away from my house, but her school was in Queens. So, it was Astoria, Queens. It was really hard for me to take there the -- then, you know, I used to take my daughter there, and she doesn't want to learn music. So a few months -- after a few months, like, I put her on different dance school like Pierre Dance Academy [phonetic], a different dance teacher. So, you know? Like -- but my main focus was this dancing school, you know, because I heard about and then I compared both.

So, the beginning one, actually, it was -- cost me much. Like every performance, I had to buy jewelry, clothes, everything, and also teachers, you know, the salary. But this dance school, only the salary and the jewelry, costume, everything, the teacher provides, and we have to give her back, so, and the salary was, you know, like less than her. [00:35:00] And I was, you know, telling her, "Okay, open a dance school in

Brooklyn. Oh, please, [inaudible 00:35:07] open a dance school in Brooklyn.” And first, she started in her house, you know, then I brought her that dance school from here.

STRONG: This is Annie who was teaching in this --

AKTER: Annie Ferdous, yeah.

STRONG: Yes, okay. I thought so.

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: So, when you moved to Kensington, was that around the same time that your husband got sick and your daughter was born?

AKTER: Yeah, that time, he was sick, too, but I came to Kensington, I was eight months pregnant. End of my pregnancy, he was hospitalized twice, and after my daughter was born, he was hospitalized once. Like every time he went to a hospital, three months, two months, like that, not less than two months, like that.

STRONG: Wow. So, he wasn't able to keep a job during that time?

AKTER: No.

STRONG: No? Not at all?

AKTER: Mm-hmm.

STRONG: Did you want to go back to work? Were you excited to go back to work?

AKTER: Who?

STRONG: You when -- when you started working again.

AKTER: No, I'm working.

STRONG: No, I know, but at that time, you hadn't been. You've just been --

AKTER: Oh, at that time?

STRONG: So, when you started --

AKTER: Actually --

STRONG: -- again.

AKTER: Yeah, yeah. That time, I first started because, you know, I have to take care of my kids, you know, my family. So first, I -- I was looking for a job. I was asking different people, “Okay, find me a job because I have to take care of my family. My husband lost the job, and he is hospitalized, so,” you know? Like then, you know, people also helped

me. One person told me, "There is -- they're hiring in the 99 Cents store" then I got four months over there. My daughter was only, I think, four, five months old, and it's one block away.

In the lunch break, I just ran to home, you know? Like when my -- I was pregnant with my daughter, I had a very, very good doctor, you know? Like every time I went there, he -- he came to the waiting room, hugged me, and took me to [his] room. And one thing he, you know, was telling every time, "Okay, promise me you will breastfeed your daughter, you will breastfeed your daughter," so, you know? Then that four months, you know, every day like in lunch break, I just ran to my house to breastfeed my daughter the four months. Then like -- like that store was too busy and -- you know? Sometimes, you know, like I got sweaty and my pressure got high, you know?

Then I went to the doctor. The same neighborhood, there's a do-- an Indian doctor. So one time, I went there. My husband was sitting in one place, and the doctor was examining me, and he was asking questions, and I was answering in English, so -- you know? Then he was -- I didn't know that, like, he was looking for a girl for his office. So, he was asking me, "Oh, where did you learn, what did you study?" this and that, you know? Then he was like -- you know? Sometimes, you know, like luck favors, right, you know? And sometimes, I believe that. And I was not looking for a job to him, but he was offering. Like, "Oh, you are -- you speak good English, so you are different than like, you know, other people -- most of the people in this neighborhood. They speak --" Like I don't speak that much Bengali. I understand, but most of the Bengali people, they try to speak in Hindi, so to understand me, you know?

Then my husband was just joking, you know? My husband was joking, "Okay, if you feel that she's smart and speaks good English, give her a job." Then, you know, the doctor was telling, "Okay, leave your number, you know, I'll call." Then after one week, I got a call from the doctor, "Okay, come," and then he was telling, "Okay, you have to

take a training for two weeks,” you know? Then I tell, “Okay.” I told, “Okay.” Then I took one week training, and the -- the person who was giving me training, he was a doctor from Bangladesh. And he was telling to the boss, the doctor boss that, “Okay, she doesn’t need two weeks training. She got whatever -- she got in one week, so you can give her a schedule.” So, I get -- I got a schedule from the doctor for part time [00:40:00] and then after six months -- I think six to one year -- I got fulltime like -- you know? So, yeah, that’s starting from the doctor’s office and --

STRONG: What kind of work do you do? Office work --?

AKTER: Everything.

STRONG: Everything?

AKTER: Everything. Everything. I got a certificate for phlebotomy and EKG technician --

STRONG: Oh, great.

AKTER: -- for municipal college. You heard about that a long time ago around Jay Street and Bo-- something like that. The school is no more. It’s like close to ASA [phonetic 00:40:37] College, the municipal college. I got a certificate from that college -- school so then I do the blood drawing, the phlebotomy, and EKG, and also, like, everything in the doctor’s office, and also I do the billing. First, I learned the manual. The doctor -- Indian doctor, he taught me how to do. He brought me a book and then when he started electronical billing then I started doing billing shortly -- billing for the doctor.

STRONG: And did you like working there? Did you like --

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: -- your coworkers?

AKTER: Yeah. I like it. It’s my -- in my head.

STRONG: It’s in your head? What do you mean?

AKTER: Doctor’s office job is in my head. In my head means if I, like, want to do, and others are probably, “I cannot do this.” This one, [laughter] I love it.

STRONG: Good.

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: And it sounds like it just -- it happened. You wouldn’t have guessed otherwise?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Well, you wanted to be a doctor, right, when you were young?

AKTER: Yeah. Yeah.

STRONG: So, this fits your interests. Who was taking care of your kids when you started working?

AKTER: Actually in the beginning, my husband and my son. You know, my -- my daughter in -- in her, like, you know, two years, actually, most like not -- the kid in that days, you know, they stay in the crib, right? My daughter used to stay in the stroller with a belt because, you know, my -- my son, like, was in the school, right? So my husband, he couldn't -- if my daughter runs, you know, he couldn't, like, take care of her, like do what he has to do that time -- like my husband, that time. So, you know, like, you know, kind of hard. But when my son, you know, comes from the school, like --

STRONG: Then she could get --

AKTER: -- after the --

STRONG: -- out of the stroller. [laughter]

AKTER: Yeah. My son, you know, I taught him, like, what to do for her, you know, but the changing the diaper [laughter] he didn't want to do.

STRONG: [laughter] When she got a little bit older, did she come with you to things that you were working on and --?

AKTER: Yeah. Most of the time, she stays in the working place.

STRONG: Okay.

AKTER: I gave her a notebook, "Okay, do your job," and most of the time, she stays with me.

Because my daughter, you know, this doctor, he, actually, let me --

STRONG: He let you bring your kids?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: That's good.

AKTER: Not my son, my daughter.

STRONG: Oh, your daughter?

AKTER: And the doctor, that doctor loved me and my daughter like anything. And, the doctor -- doctors -- that doctor, all kids, they were a doctor. You know, the doctor's daughter is a doctor, his son-in-law is a doctor, son is a doctor, daughter-in-law is a doctor, all the -- like everybody. And the eldest son was a radiology oncologist. You know, he lives in Texas.

Like every birthday, I had to celebrate, you know, because of them. I had to celebrate my daughter's birthday because of them. Because like, you know, like doctor was telling, "Okay, how many people did -- you invited, 70, 100?" He like, you know, like, ordered ice cream cake because in the summertime. Ice cream cake for 100 people and, you know, gave me a receipt, "Okay, pick it up when you like -- like to pick it up."

And like, you know, that his son in -- in Texas, son and my daughter -- you know my daughter, you know, came to my house and the doctor, you know, they -- he called his son, and they talked [00:45:00] secretly what my daughter wants. And the son, you know, orders -- my son -- daughter's -- like whatever she wants, like Barbie, or a Hannah Montana, or -- what is that other things? You know her times, everything big, big house, big, big, like, toys, and, like, her dress, everything, their son ordered, and, you know, he put the date August 3rd, okay, deliver August 3rd. And August 3rd, from the morning, like deliver after deliver, like, boxes. Like three, four, five boxes, you know, came for my daughter. And after that doctor passed away, my daughter didn't celebrate her birthday.

STRONG: She doesn't celebrate her birthday anymore? Oh, my goodness.

AKTER: Yeah, that doctor passed away, and he was in the hospital six months that 2011, you know? Then the birthday time, August -- you know August 3rd, that doctor was in the hospital, and I was telling her, "Okay, I want to -- I want to celebrate your birthday," then he -- she was telling, "Okay, let doctor comes back -- let doctor come back then I will celebrate." But he didn't come back.

STRONG: Oh, my goodness.

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Where did you go after he died?

AKTER: When he was in the hospital, actually, his son who's an orthopedic hand surgeon, he was taking care of everything. Like office -- I was closing. He -- he told me that "My father is not going to come back, so we have to close the office." And then it took, really, four, five months to close, you know, a longtime medical office to medical record, everything. I had to, you know, do -- computerize all the, you know, patients' name, address to send them a letter, you know? We were working together, doctor's son, doctor's daughter-in-law, and me, and my whole family, actually, working in the office like --

Then I know another Bengali doctor. Like he's a pain management doctor. Yeah, his whole family was that Indian doctor's patient. He, actually, was telling me -- you know, I don't know. Sometimes, it, like, happens, you know? Then that doctor was telling, "Okay, across the street, there is another Bengali doctor. He was looking for an experienced person. So, you want to -- you are interested to do?" Then I asked, "Yes, I can do in the morning time because with the Indian doctor, I work in the evening -- afternoon to evening time." So, he introduced me with the Bengali doctor just across the street, and I started working in the morning time.

So, after closing that doctor's office then I start working with another doctor, a Bengali doctor's office. So that doctor was new in the practice, so he was telling me -- he works in a hospital, but in the medical practice. He's very new, so he was asking me to, you know -- like training other people and organize the office. So I started working. I worked there for two years then I started work with the pain management doctor for two days in far, like in Jamaica, in northern part.

STRONG: Oh, wow.

AKTER: I was going Friday and Saturday, and in the -- my neighborhood, like, actually, the same block. So in the morning time, I was working three days. Then another doctor, I

used to work with him. Like in the Indian doctor's office who trained me in the first time, he become -- became a doctor in here. So like, you know, USMLE [United States Medical Licensing Examination] -- then back home like in medical graduate, over here, they have to go through the USMLE test, right? So, he became a doctor, and he was also looking for an experienced person then I started. In the same block, my -- like two, three minutes walking distance from my house. In the evening, I started working with him.

STRONG: And in addition to your job, how did you become involved in community organizing and things like Desis Rising Up & Moving [DRUM] and organizations like that?

AKTER: That time, in -- in the beginning with DRUM, actually, every meeting, they [00:50:00] had on Saturday in the beginning. So, it's Saturday. I didn't work that time, so I could make that time. Then like I work in the evening time. So, most of the conferences, they had in the, like, morning or eleven o'clock. Like we also face like in borough hall -- what is that called? What building is that? Like all -- we are doing press conference then in Jackson Heights, wherever we are doing. Most of the time, we -- we -- like DRUM, you know, is -- we used to do in the morning time. Like in the rally whatever in the daytime, so I could participate there.

And with DRUM, like there were some English classes, you know, from the people who, you know, come from Bangladesh. You know, they don't know that much English, so DRUM provided English classes. I was taking the classes. So -- and also, you know, there are some things -- you know, some outreach we did. You know, I love that part, talking to different people and working, you know, like low-income people. Like, you know, in some people, they got less salary, which we spoke to them. And -- and also, you know, like I -- in the beginning, I was a member then I became a leader there, like, because of my participation. Then after, that I became a board member there, so you know? And they -- actually together, we opened a branch in Brooklyn for DRUM. So, we

are working in a -- like a different thing in here every month our meeting. And, you know, we are doing here.

And the Bengali cultural, actually, I like to do that. I love it. You know, I think that, you know, the job I'm doing for taking care of my family, you know, I love it though, but that is for taking care of my family. But the cultural chi-- side is taking care of my mind, you know, my heart. You know, I feel -- you know, my -- back home, in my family -- I don't know -- no one was, you know, involved with the cultural thing, like kind of conservative people. You know, my grandfather, you know, one time, like there was a party for my brother, so, you -- you know, like circumcision time. In here, the circumcision, they do like the bi-- birth time, right? In back home, it's really hard -- a hard thing. I don't like that thing. So when they grow up, and they do it without anesthesia, it's very hard. I don't want to talk about that.

But one time, we had a party there, but we feel like we are going to hire a band -- you know the band party? What is that called like with the drum? The -- like we used to call it band party. But in the -- while waiting there with the drum, they sing and, you know, with the flute, with the trumpet. You know, there is a group?

STRONG: Mm-hmm.

AKTER: We wanted to hire that. We wanted to hire like, you know, the mic, loud song, you know? But my grandfather was telling, "Okay, if you guys do that, I'm going to go out from the house. I'm going to leave the house. I don't want -- I will not stay in the party." Then my grandfather hired, like, you know, like -- like Islamic song, the Muslim song. You know, that party, they hired like that.

STRONG: So, people in your family were a little more conservative, but you love --

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: -- music and culture and things like that?

AKTER: Yeah, yeah.

STRONG: How did you first hear about DRUM? [00:55:00] When you -- did you go there for services initially? Did you go there --?

AKTER: Yeah. I had -- actually in 2005, '06, like one of my friend used to go there. And at that time, I had a little problem with my job and then people are telling, "Okay, then, you know, probably, they will help you about that job, and they will do some counseling about that." Like that. Then I think I went there. I went -- somebody I knew, she took me there I think. This is the way we -- you know, one person took me then I -- I took a lot of people there, like that. It happens like that, so yeah.

STRONG: So, you found them helpful, and how did you decide to get involved?

AKTER: Actually, I always want to do something besides my job to involve, you know, to feel -- like to spend better time, you know? So, all the time, I don't want to stay home except job and doing, you know, all the housework, cooking, everything. You know, I have to do something for myself.

STRONG: And what did you like about DRUM particularly? What -- what made you want to work with them?

AKTER: DRUM, actually doing their job. You know, in the beginning, we actually -- you know, they have a lawyer, you know, like an immigration lawyer, and they have like -- what is that called? Like working --? I don't know what kind of lawyer, but it's -- they do help the people who, you know, cannot get a proper salary from the job and, you know, they give less salary. You know, like they -- that lawyer helped the people. I forgot what kind of lawyer the --

STRONG: Is it like labor rights or something like that?

AKTER: Working lawyer or something. It's a different kind of. One is called immigration, one called family lawyer, and another one is --? I forgot, actually, that -- this type of lawyer, but they have different kind of lawyers.

And, like, we used to do -- you know, for, like, some undocumented people, they used to be -- in the beginning, they used -- they used to provide a lawyer who actually takes

less payment from the client because of DRUM refers. You know, after that, like that time was -- director was Monami Maulik. You heard about her?

STRONG: Mm-hmm.

AKTER: Monami? Yeah. I think she's now in Harvard. And after a few years, like when DRUM got some funds, you know, then they have their own lawyer. So, they help people, like some -- you know, people like in deportation center, they provide the lawyer, you know, like -- like the immigration lawyer. And sometimes, you know, we actually, you know, do the press conference. We used to do -- we did and still, you know, press conference for the people, like who was in the deportation center about their family members, you know?

And we worked for school surveillance, you know? The police surveillance, we used to work for that. And then we used to work for the -- the MTA [Metropolitan Transportation Authority] -- MTA, the token. Like school students, they get the free, you know, MetroCard? One time, the MTA was telling, oh, they will not provide the MetroCard then we fought for that and we owned for that, you know? And so many things we did.

STRONG: Tell me about the -- yeah, because there's a lot of things you guys worked on. The surveillance issue was 2011 thereabout? When -- when were you working on that?

AKTER: After that.

STRONG: After that?

AKTER: After that.

STRONG: So, what -- what was that like?

AKTER: And also, we --

STRONG: Was it rallies? Was it talking --

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: -- to politicians?

AKTER: We did press conference. We did the rally. And this is recent. It happened -- you know that, [01:00:00] like the Muslim ban. The DRUM went to even JFK [John F.

Kennedy International Airport]. They did the -- the rally. They did the conference protest, you know?

STRONG: Were you at JFK when that happened?

AKTER: No. I didn't go.

STRONG: No, you didn't go?

AKTER: I didn't go. I had work.

STRONG: Right because it was --

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: -- in the evening.

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: What was it like going to rallies? Had you been to press conferences and things like that before DRUM, or was this your first?

AKTER: Before DRUM, no.

STRONG: No?

AKTER: No, no.

STRONG: What were your impressions of it? Or what did you think about it?

AKTER: I like -- I like that.

STRONG: You liked it?

AKTER: Yeah. I like to do something for not only myself, so for other people too. You know, from my school life, I was thinking, you know, like one life, right? I want to do something for the people. But I didn't have that much chance to do that, but whatever little chance I'm getting, I want. I do that.

STRONG: Do you bring your kids to rallies and press conferences too?

AKTER: Yeah. My son doesn't go that much but my daughter always. She was raised in DRUM.

STRONG: What does she think about it?

AKTER: She is with DRUM. She's a youth leader.

STRONG: Oh, she's a youth leader?

AKTER: Yeah. She's a youth leader.

STRONG: That's wonderful.

AKTER: Yeah. She did DRUM's documentary. Whatever rallies, whatever action they have, she has cameras, and she, you know, video, do the -- those things, and she makes short, short documentary for that.

STRONG: What was it like bringing a kid to -- to these events, and how old was she when she first started coming?

AKTER: She was -- 2006, she was, actually, five years old?

STRONG: Five years old?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Were there other mothers with -- with children there or were you --

AKTER: Yeah, --

STRONG: -- one of the only --

AKTER: -- some of them did bring their kids.

STRONG: So, she's been going since she was five years old?

AKTER: Yeah, yeah.

STRONG: That's wonderful. Tell me about the community connections. You know, did you make friends through DRUM? Do you go over to each other's houses? Do you know each other's kids?

AKTER: I -- not that much. Actually, we meet in the DRUM. Like DRUM has a party sometimes, and DRUM has a picnic. You know meet there, but we actually don't have time to go, you know, in their houses.

STRONG: Yeah. Between work and everything else?

AKTER: Yeah, yeah.

STRONG: Yeah. [laughter] Tell me about some of the other organizations that -- that you've been involved in, in Kensington.

AKTER: Other organizations, actually -- what is it? Except BIPA, most of the time, I used to work in the school, the PTA, the -- you know, assisting with the teachers and I was in the part of the -- what is that called -- the leaders, board leaders? What is that called in

the school? I forgot. And another thing there, the board decides what to do in the school, and that was -- what is --? I forgot. I keep forgetting a lot of things.

STRONG: Not the PTA, but it's something else?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Is it like budgeting decisions for the school?

AKTER: That -- yeah, yeah, yeah.

STRONG: Okay.

AKTER: That is another thing. Like the leaders something. Learning Leader is a different thing for assisting the children earlier. I got three days training for the Learning Leaders, and I got the card from them to assist with the teacher. So, mostly in the school then with the -- the Bengali organization, yeah.

STRONG: So, you stayed very busy?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: What are your -- what are your hopes for Brooklyn, for your community and neighbors? How do you hope life will improve, and what would you like the future to be like?

AKTER: Actually -- what I'm going to tell -- I like them to participate like the community. But my community is, like, mostly a little conservative, I think, you know? So, it's -- they don't want to participate. They are busy with kids, you know? So, there's -- you know, they -- they participate in the school event like potluck dinner or, you know, the Bengali New Year celebration. You know, I [01:05:00] ask them.

And we have a ladies' club. I call them, and I tell them like, you know, "We have a ladies' club, come join with us, participate with us." So, I'm -- I'm telling them, I want them to participate, you know, you know? Then like I want them -- like I -- I have some friends, like, through my daughter. You know, like my daughter's friends' mothers, you know, I -- sometimes I meet them. I tell them to come, you know, like not staying home all the time with the kids.

STRONG: Tell me about the -- the ladies' club a little bit. What was the idea behind that when it got started? What did you hope it would become?

AKTER: Actually, we tried a few years with the participatory budgeting. We tried a community center for -- in the Brooklyn, in our neighborhood, Kensington, but we didn't get that much vote for that in the -- like participatory budgeting. So after that, you know, like Annie apa [sister] was telling one day, "Okay, we couldn't get that, so still we can start a ladies' club, you know, like it's --" Then, actually, Annie apa's house is a bigger house, and the big living room, so we have very good opportunity to have a meeting there, so, you know? Then Annie -- I told Annie apa, "It's a very -- I was thinking about that a long time. It was a very good thing." We meet together and something -- do in the -- this neighborhood, so, you know? We -- we're having a meeting, and we are thinking then talking, and asking, getting, you know, decision or idea from the other members what we have to do.

So, we did like [inaudible 01:07:13], in our country, celebration. Like we wear a yellow color or a red color and eat things like that in her house. Then we had [in] PS 230 cafeteria, a pitha show. Pitha means like different kind of Bengali cake in our tradition, you know? So, there was a competition there and, you know, the -- then we gave a prize money for four participants.

And after that, we did know your rights, you know, that DRUM actually, you know -- you know, provides that but organized -- we at the Brooklyn Ladies' Club organized it. So, the main speaker was Kazi Fouzia from DRUM. And after that, we -- together with the Brooklyn -- no -- the Bengali -- Bangladesh Association -- what is it -- BIPA, performing arts of --?

STRONG: Mm-hmm.

AKTER: That one, together, we celebrate the Bengali New Year. And now, the next one -- we had a meeting, and we'll have a meeting on the 28th, the next what we are going to do. We are going to decide what to do. And we, actually, wanted to do, kind of, fitness

center for the ladies. And also, my idea was to provide, you know, like spoken-English, free classes for the ladies.

STRONG: And what are you learning people come out of their homes for? I mean if people are conservative and they mostly stay home, what kinds of -- of all these events and, you know, the trainings --

AKTER: They participate. You know, the Bengali celebration, New Year celebration, they participate-- participated. It was very wonderful. They participated.

STRONG: Good.

AKTER: In Kensing-- in Avenue C Plaza. It was happening in Avenue C Plaza.

STRONG: So, for celebrations people tend to come out?

AKTER: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

STRONG: Are people as interested in, you know, these talks, and learning English, and things like that?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Okay, good. So, you're having really good success with your goal of getting people to come out and do more?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: That's exciting. And this is a relatively new ladies' group, right?

AKTER: Yes.

STRONG: Just the first couple of years?

AKTER: Not a couple of years. A couple of months, I believe.

STRONG: A couple of months?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: So, how are you hoping it will grow? What do you see as its future? [01:10:00]

AKTER: Yes, it -- it has a very good future. We're having new -- new people. Every meeting, we are having new people.

STRONG: That's great.

AKTER: Yeah, and I'm out -- I'm calling them. If I meet outside, I tell them that "We have a ladies' club, come."

STRONG: You know, one thing I haven't asked you about yet is your religious life. Can you tell me a little bit about your relationship with your faith?

AKTER: I believe in Islam, and I learned -- one second, please.

STRONG: Mm-hmm.

AKTER: In the beginning, I'm a Muslim because of my birth. My parents are Muslim, right?

So, like when parents are Muslim then kids, they will take Islam, right? So, in the beginning, I learned Islam, and my mom taught me how to pray, how to read the holy book, Qur'an. And in the school, you know, I studied -- what is that called -- Islamic --? It's a religion book. Every year, we had exam, so I was very good. Whatever I studied, you know, with the, you know, meaning of this. The Arabic, you know, our religion is like everything is Arabic, so we learned those things with the meaning, you know.

Then in the seventh grade, I learned Arabic with the grammar too. Only for one year. I forgot the grammar. But the prayer, when we pray, you know, five times a day, and then I know everything. And, you know, I know everything, our prophet. And in the fasting time, actually, I tried, but I couldn't do it because, you know, I get very sick. So, in 30 days, fasting only --

STRONG: Pause just one moment.

AKTER: Sorry.

STRONG: Okay, sorry. Please continue.

AKTER: That's okay. Okay. Only -- like one time, I remember I did 13, you know? So, I couldn't make 30 days, never. You know, like two days, I'm okay, but the third day, I get very, very sick. I couldn't do it. But I -- I know my daughter is fasting, my husband is fasting, my son is fasting, and I teach them, you know, how to pray, so --

You know, I believe in, like, Islam, and I believe in, like, the Almighty. But first -- all of them first, I want to become a good human. So by heart, you know, I want to become a good human then religion, my -- my opinion, you know. Religion doesn't come first to

me. I'd say humanity comes first to me, so -- you know? Also, I teach my kids the same way.

And I learned in -- like college graduation, I learned Islamic history, like three parts. That was three parts Islamic history, and I actually studied a lot that time to, like, make notes for different writers' books. I studied Muslim philosophy. So in Muslim philosophy, there is -- one philosopher say it this way then another philosopher say it a little different way. So, it's kind of, you know, like day by day, like, you know, something modified and sometimes things -- misinterpretation, you know? So, sometimes, I go with the logic, you know, what my logic says. So, I'm kind of that person.

And the five times pray, I believe in that, but actually, I couldn't get time. You know, it's a good exercise also. You know, five times pray is not only pray. It's, like, a kind of meditation, you know, and a kind of exercise also. I feel that way. But I cannot make time. [01:15:00] After doing six days of work and when I go home, I have to clean the house, I have to cook, I cannot make time for that. And I celebrate, you know, like our two Eid --, you know, that Eid, like religious festivals?

STRONG: So, were you able to make time for prayer before you went back to work in the 2000s, or was that shift after you started working that there wasn't time?

AKTER: Before that also, I prayed, probably, once a day or maybe twice a week, not five times a day. Like, I was not that much like, "Oh, I have to do that, I have -- must do that." Like, I was not thinking that way.

STRONG: Mm-hmm. What about your husband and your children, what are their relationships?

AKTER: My husband does five times. He prays five times. He is fasting. He reads the Qur'an.

STRONG: And your children?

AKTER: My children is when they have time, they can -- like that. Not like, "No, you have to do first time, I know, except other thing, you have to do that," no. Like one time, my son

had some kind of problem, you know? Like he was, like, going to the mosque 5:00 a.m. in the morning to pray, you know? Like one -- one is 5:00 in the morning, the five times -- then 5:00 a.m. in the morning, and he, you know, couldn't go to school. Sometimes, he missed his school, and his teacher -- he was in ninth grade. His teacher called me, "Okay, we have to talk to you about your son." And I went to the school and the teacher and the social worker, they were sitting together telling, "Okay, your son is having this problem. He's -- most of the time, he sleeps like that on -- on the table, and he cannot concentrate, like that. He cannot see the board, like that." What is happening to him? You have to --

Then I -- you know, I sat with him and I was talking with him, "What is happening?" Then, you know, my son was telling, "Oh, I have -- I want to --" I was telling, "Okay, what you are doing that? Why you are going five o'clock in the morning to pray, and you cannot go to school, sometimes you sleep." Then he was telling, like, "Mommy --" first dialogue, "Mommy, are you Muslim?" Then I just stopped for a while. Then I asked, "Why you were asking that?" Then he was telling, "Mommy, as a Muslim, you cannot miss any -- any pray, nothing. If you miss one time prayer among five times then after death, 70 snakes bite you." Then I was asking, "Who told you?" And he was telling, "Okay, the -- Mulana [phonetic 01:18:22] told me."

Then I was telling, "Okay." In my language, I call baba, like son. Like, "Baba, listen to me, this time, your first thing, you have to do your study. If you sleep, if you go late, if you missed your school, you know, you're not going to pass, you know? So this time, you know, the first thing, you have to study. Okay? And, you know, this is not true. It's our belief that after death 70 snakes will bite if you miss namaz, but this -- this is our belief. This is not a true thing. If you believe it, that's okay. If you don't believe it, that's also okay. But first, you have to go to school. You ca-- if you miss -- if you want to pray, I don't want to -- I don't want to tell you not to do -- don't pray, no. If you want to pray, there is a system. You can do later, but this is the time to pray like in the -- like five

o'clock in the morning then at daytime then afternoon time then evening time then, you know, nighttime. There's a time for prayer five times, but there is a system that if you miss one namaz for your important thing, you can do later. That's called qaza, qaza namaz called in our -- you know? [01:20:00] So, you can do that. So, if you want to pray, you know, if you -- you sleep and you go to school, you study, and if you want to -- if you miss any time, come home, and do it like that." You know, I had to talk like that two, three times then my son was okay with it.

STRONG: And he was able to stay awake in class?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: And -- and how has that carried with him now? Does he feel more comfortable fitting these things into his life?

AKTER: He's okay. He -- you know, whenever he feels he is doing. You know, he prays, and he is doing first -- his first thing, you know, like that. Not like that, "Oh, this is the first one."

STRONG: Mm-hmm. I'm also curious how you -- you said for you, your humanity comes first and --

AKTER: Yes.

STRONG: -- being with the others comes first.

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Tell me about how you -- you teach that to your children. Do you have a similar story for that?

AKTER: Yeah. I teach them the same way.

STRONG: Just talking to them about it?

AKTER: Yeah, to -- to --

STRONG: Show them --

AKTER: -- respect all the religion but humanity is first.

STRONG: Do they -- you know, do they encounter people from different religions through school, and did they have questions for you about that or anything?

AKTER: One time -- it's related to a little religion. Like in my daughter's time, like, you know, in first two, three years, like, she didn't eat lunch, and she cries. And, you know, when she, you know, came home then I -- every day I ask, "What did you eat?" and then she said, "Oh, no, I didn't eat anything." "Why?" "Oh, the other kids were telling it's not halal." You know about halal, haram, right? So it's not halal. Then I was asking, "Why it's not halal? Did you ask them why it's not halal?" So, they don't know why it's not halal. So, I asked my daughter, "Ask them why it's not halal. So, don't listen to them. They bring their food, their house. I cannot give food from my house, see. The other kids except the people -- like other kids, your friend Emily, your friend Stephanie, they eat those things. So, why you cannot eat that?"

My religion, you know, like doesn't accept pork, right, so you -- the school doesn't provide -- the school, the cafeteria doesn't provide pork -- pork in the school. A long time ago, my son's time, they -- occasionally, they used to give pork, but they separated. They told I eat -- tell them that my son doesn't eat pork, beef, so the cafeteria, they knew it. They didn't serve him. But other food, okay.

I told my daughter, "There, Stephanie is -- so the halal, haram is me, for myself, I separate. Like the food you eat, you don't become sick. That is good. That food is good. It's -- it's not rotten, so you can eat it except pork." So, I feel that way.

STRONG: And she was okay with that after?

AKTER: Yes. She's -- yeah, she was okay with it.

STRONG: So at home, her preference is still halal if she can, but if she can't, she doesn't worry?

AKTER: No. I don't -- I don't actually go for halal and haram.

STRONG: Oh, okay.

AKTER: No. I don't -- we -- actually from my childhood, like we know that we cannot eat pork, and I told them that we cannot eat pork. They don't eat pork. But we eat in McDonald's. We eat -- eat in KFC, so --

STRONG: I see.

AKTER: And we buy chicken from the supermarket, so I'm like that. My kids are -- I'm raising them like that.

STRONG: So, this is just something she got from her friends?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: This doesn't --

AKTER: My husband used to, you know, like, you know, scream with me, "Oh, you are a nastik." Nastik means -- I know -- you know what nastik means? Nastik means those people who don't believe in God. In my language, it's called nastik. Then my husband was telling, "Oh, you don't pray? You are nastik." Then I -- husband -- I asked my husband, "You know what is the meaning of nastik? Nastik is don't -- they -- those people who don't believe in God, but I believe in God. I believe in Allah. Yeah, there is one there. [01:25:00] So, why you are telling me nastik? I don't pray because I don't get time or I don't feel to, you know, do. Every time I have -- like I'm very tired from my job when I come home, and I have to go -- like do also -- wash everything and do namaz. I don't feel like --"

STRONG: Yeah. Well, thank you for telling me about that.

AKTER: Okay.

STRONG: Tell me more about your neighborhood and Kensington. You mentioned participato-- participatory budgeting, you mentioned the Avenue C Plaza. How is your neighborhood changing, or how do you hope it will be different in the future?

AKTER: Yeah. They are changing, but I think not -- like little by little, they will change, not fast, you know?

STRONG: How do you hope it will be different in the future? What do you hope it will change into?

AKTER: Yeah. When I -- we used to do like anything in Avenue C Plaza, like people, you know, don't want to come. I don't see -- like I -- you know, before, I didn't see it like the women coming. But now we are seeing, the women, they are coming. They are coming. They are watching what is happening. They are -- they have interest, so yeah.

STRONG: That's really good. Congratulations. I know that was one of -- [laughter] that was a goal of yours.

AKTER: Yeah. Yeah, thank you.

STRONG: What else should we talk about? Is there anything that I -- that I forgot from the list? I'm looking at it over your shoulder. No? Is there anything you would have liked to talk about that we didn't get to discuss?

AKTER: If you ask me any question, [laughter] I don't know.

STRONG: I think I've asked you all the questions.

AKTER: Yeah?

STRONG: So I guess, just thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate hearing your stories and your memories of Brooklyn.

AKTER: Okay.

STRONG: And I look forward to being in touch with you as the project progresses, so thank you.

AKTER: Okay. Thank you very much.

STRONG: All right. Great.

[Interview Interruption]

Strong: So, Syeda was telling me one more story just as she was out the door. Tell me about your experiences with the local mosque in Ken-- Kensington and sending your kids there for classes.

AKTER: Okay. My kids are small, little that time, so, you know, my son was in second grade I think in 19-- I think in 2000 or 1999. I used to send my son in the mosque, and, you know, like the -- my son, one time, came was telling the teacher was asking salary, and he didn't want to go back. And, you know, he was actually learning a different Bengali accent from there. And because of the salary, my -- didn't -- my son didn't want to go. And my daughter's time, like, actually, you know, my home is surrounded two, four, five mosques, my house, so it's not that far. So, I sent my daughter in there --

STRONG: Which mosque did you send her to?

AKTER: Darul Jannah.

STRONG: Okay.

AKTER: So, you know? So, the girls who were teaching the kids, you know, about the Muslim -- about Islam or religion. So, I asked them, "I want to go inside." Then they didn't let me to go in the beginning. They were telling, "No, moms are not allowed." Then I told them, "I want to see what you guys are teaching them." So then, they let me in. Then I was sitting two days then I felt that, you know, this is not the proper way they were teaching. You know, like the first grader or second grader, you know, step by step, they have to learn about Islam. So, you know, they are teaching in the first grade what will happen after death -- after death. So, in the first grader or second grader, you know, they will not understand those things. So then I felt like no, it's wasting of time.

You know, I'll teach my kids about Islam first, what I know. I cannot tell that I know a lot, but I know some. So, you know, I know about the prophet, you know, I know about Is-- Islam, so I know about the Qur'an. I know some about my religion, and I know how to read Arabic. So, you know, I started teaching [01:30:00] my kids at home, you know, Arabic, so they know how to read and write the Arabic alphabet. And some of the words they learned, but they forgot now because of -- they don't have practice. Also --

STRONG: Didn't you mention also, that they used to do memorizing the Qur'an, but they didn't necessarily teach what it meant? Was this in your local mosque that they did that?

AKTER: In back home, you know? Like, you know, like, Qur'an hafiz, to memorize the whole Qur'an is the big thing, you know, like they are a very respect-- respectable person who does that. But they, actually, didn't learn the meaning. They memorize it, but they didn't learn the meaning. And, you know, if they don't know the meaning, only the recitation, it's not the whole thing. That I -- I feel. I believe it, you know?

So nowadays, you know, they're also, you know, learning the meaning in Bengali and English too. There is a Qur'an with the Bengali meaning and also English meaning. So nowadays, it's improving, those things.

STRONG: So, is this -- this is what they're teaching at the mosque in Brooklyn, not back home in -- in Bangladesh? I -- I got confused, sorry, while you were me telling that.

AKTER: No, no, no. Nowadays, they are -- and back home too.

STRONG: Oh, and back home too?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Okay. But also here?

AKTER: In here, in the mosque --

STRONG: So, the kids who are --

AKTER: -- they have --

STRONG: -- learning you know --

AKTER: -- they have teachers like in here, America. They are American-educated people.

They know good English and good meaning, so they could teach the kids. You know, the kids are going to, like, school in here, so if they teach in English, they will understand better. So now, they are doing that, but before, my kids' time, my kids were little, the teachers were from Bangladesh, and over here, you know, they talk in Bengali. They couldn't talk in English. So, you know, my kids, they didn't learn that much, like sitting there and, you know, like talking to the kids like -- like that.

STRONG: Right. And so in addition to, you know, teaching them at home so that they could understand better, you also, kind of, disagreed a little bit with how things were being taught?

AKTER: Yeah. Yeah.

STRONG: Right? You also told me a funny story about arguing with your mom. Do you want to share that one too?

AKTER: Actually, I told that, you know, sometimes I, you know, believe in, like, doing with the logic thinking or believing with the logic, you know? But my mom is -- she believes like as a Muslim, whatever we have in the Qur'an, we have to believe it as a Muslim, right? Like if you don't believe it, you are not a Muslim, right? My mom told, right.

But I had an argument with her one time. My mom was telling, oh, about jinn and evil like Satan. It's in Qur'an, I know. Like Satan, evil, I know about that. I read about the Satan, you know, like the Eve -- Eve and Adam's time, we call Adam and Hawa, what happened. You know, the Satan -- Satan, you know, like, you know, because of Satan, Allah sent them to the earth even Adam, like Adam and Hawa. So I know about that, but I don't -- the real Satan, like, around here with us and jinn with -- with us, I don't believe in those things.

Though my mom was telling, "Oh, jinn, it's in the Qur'an, you have to believe it. Otherwise, you are not a Muslim." Then I told my mom, "No, I believe with logic. My logic says there is no jinn and Satan," you know? [laughter]

STRONG: And so, these are -- these are arguments you had when you were young but also still --?

AKTER: Still, still, yeah. Like, you know, sometimes, one thing, like it's -- one time, my like my second-- my secondary education time, like tests, before tests, you know, our parents, like moms, they like -- they feel like, "Oh, like, oh, do -- read the Qur'an, read the du'a then you will feel good. You'll be good in the exam," like that. And my mom -- one time, my mom brought -- write -- wrote a du'a from the Qur'an, a little piece of paper, and fold it, and put it in a little -- [01:35:00] called ta'wiz. You know about that?

STRONG: Mm-hmm.

AKTER: I don't know. Ta'wiz? She put it and she was, you know -- you know, tying with my hair. I mean then I was asking, "Ma, what are you doing?" "Okay, this one will, you know, concentrate your studies. That's why I'm putting it in -- in here." I was saying, "Mommy, no, put it away. If I don't study -- with these, I'm not going to do good in my exam. I have to study. I have to study then I can do my exam. With that, no."

STRONG: Yeah. [laughter] So that's the logic again?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: It just makes sense to study and then do better?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Anything else come to mind?

AKTER: Oh, if I start going there -- [laughter]

STRONG: You start to leave, you'll think of something.

AKTER: -- then I will -- again, I will remember something.

STRONG: [laughter] All right.

AKTER: A lot of things, you know, we cannot finish in a day, a lot of things, a lot of memories.

STRONG: What comes to mind?

AKTER: Nothing. A lot of things. We used to, you know, go to -- the Eid time, we used to go, you know, Eid day like the male person, you know, they have to pray, but the women, they don't allow to go to pray Eid day. But over here, there's a difference. When I was little, I felt like I -- we -- we knew those things -- that women are not allowed to pray in the Eid day or in the mosque. But over here when I came here, there is another experience I have in the mosque. Women are going. In the Eid day, the women are praying, you know?

STRONG: So you get to go? You're included?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Do you -- do you go, and do you like going?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: And you bring your daughter?

AKTER: Yeah.

STRONG: Good. Anything else or is that --?

AKTER: Yeah, a lot of changes -- you know, a lot of changes. Like probably, I have to sit another day with you. [laughter]

STRONG: What's one of the biggest changes that comes to mind?

AKTER: Yeah, this is the biggest thing, like, you know, like women, they -- they are respecting the reli-- you know, women. That is the biggest thing like women can go to the mosque and -- even though they cannot pray together, but still, they can go to the

mosque. They can pray in the Eid day, and also the other -- other things they are doing in the mosque. Yeah, that's a big thing. But in back home, we cannot even think.

STRONG: Yeah. How do you hope it will be different in the future? You know, do you hope that men and women will be able to pray together or that things will continue to progress that way, or do you think that this is good the way it is?

AKTER: This is good the way it is. Yes. Something -- you know, we want equal rights. You know, from the DRUM, I -- I learned, we want equal rights, but men and women, there is a little difference, a little, you know?

Like my son -- my daughter fights with me. If I -- I let my son go out, you know, at ten o'clock or eleven o'clock at night -- at night, or twelve o'clock at night. I don't want to let my daughter go out then she fights with me. "Why you, you know, make a difference? You are --" My daughter was telling, "Oh, why you make a difference between my brother and me?" She doesn't want to understand. There is a little difference between men and women.

STRONG: Mm-hmm. All right. Well, if nothing else comes to mind right now, thank you for -

AKTER: Thank you.

STRONG: -- sitting down again, even though you --

AKTER: Okay.

STRONG: -- had your coat on and everything.

AKTER: That's okay.

STRONG: And, yeah, we'll talk soon. Thank you.

AKTER: Thank you.