

5-3-2021

## Interview with Aisha Ikramuddin

Aisha Ikramuddin

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/auntiesewing\\_interviews](https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/auntiesewing_interviews)

---

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Archive at Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Auntie Sewing Squad Interviews by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csumb.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csumb.edu).

**Interviewee:** Aisha Ikramuddin

**Interviewers:** Lindsay Newey and Yasmin Ahmad

**Date:** May 3, 2021

**Location:** Zoom

**Collection:** Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Archive, SBS 322: Asian American Women's History, Spring 2021

**Length:** 00:30:55

**Overseen by:** Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

**Bio:** Aisha Ikramuddin is a former environmental health educator who has participated in anti-racist and environmental activism since her college years. She is an Indian Muslim, raised in eastern Washington, and also identifies as a lesbian, married to her wife of 20 years. She is a Sewing Auntie in the Auntie Sewing Squad and also volunteers locally to assist people in making appointments to receive their COVID-19 vaccine.

**Abstract:**

The interview begins (00:00:33) with a discussion on Ikramuddin's upbringing in eastern Washington, in a majority white environment. (00:05:05) This leads into the topic of her relationship with her religion in a Muslim family, including how traditional her family is and the Muslim community she is a part of. (00:10:25) This is connected to her identity as a lesbian and how this has shaped her 20 year relationship with her wife. (00:14:53) Next she talks about her experiences in anti-racist and environmental work. (00:23:11) Then she discusses the increase in hate crimes against Asian community to (00:25:29) her work in the Auntie Sewing Squad.

## Oral History Transcript

00:00:00

**Yasmin (Y):** So, my name is Yasmin Ahmad and I'm here with my partner, Lindsay Newey. We are both students of Cal State, Monterey Bay, currently enrolled in Professor Chrissy Lau's Asian American Women's History course. Today on the third of May, 2021, we will be conducting an interview via Zoom with Miss Aisha Ikramuddin of the Auntie Sewing Squad. So let's jump right into it. How are you doing today?

00:00:31

**Aisha (A):** I'm fine. How are you?

00:00:33

**Y:** I'm doing all right. [laughter] Okay, so, we did look over - I believe Professor Lau gave you a little, like, survey type thing to go over, and we did view that. So in that survey, you mentioned that you grew up in eastern Washington where there weren't many Indians or people of color. So what was it like growing up in that type of environment?

00:01:05

**A:** Well, you know, it was pretty rural and it was outside of Spokane, which wasn't, you know, a bigger town but, you know, where we lived, it was a very small town, like 7,000 people and very white, at the time. I went there recently - like last year or the year before - and I was surprised at how much it had changed because it really was very, very, very white when I lived there. We were probably... there were a few professors who were foreign. But really, like my high school, I can remember there were only, like, three or four people of color in my class, you know, at the most. So it was - you know what you know. So at the time, it didn't seem so strange, but we were very: it was basically, for my parents, it was more like Americans versus us. And so the race thing didn't seem like such a big deal, except for, you know, when somebody...we had an African family move into our neighborhood and then it was like, oh. But they were still immigrants, and so everyone around us who was a person of color really were immigrants also. So it was more like an immigrant versus American thing while I was growing up.

00:02:36

**Y:** Okay, you said it had changed recently. In what ways has it changed?

00:02:41

**A:** Well, when I went back, we were actually selling my parents house and they had been staying a lot with my brother in Seattle. So they hadn't even been in the house for a long time. And when we went back to help them clean up the house and everything, I couldn't believe it, there are a lot of Mexicans there. Like, half of the restaurants were Mexican restaurants. It was a small town like I said, it's like 7,000 people. So you can imagine, like ten restaurants, half of them are Mexican. So, and the rest of them were pizzerias, you know, so [laughter]... And then my sister

and I were trying to find other places to eat and we found this area not far, near the airport that was, it was all Asian. Like, Korean restaurants, Thai restaurants, I mean, that was never there before! Like, if there was an Asian it was like one Chinese restaurant and one Thai restaurant, and that was it. You know, there's hardly anything. So it had really, really changed in that we saw a lot more people of color walking around. It was just so much different.

00:03:45

**Y:** So growing up in that, like, mostly white community, how do you think it affected, like, your personal identity growing up?

00:03:58

**A:** Well, I think probably that, you know, we always felt like we were separate and different because we grew up in an immigrant family, and so we were very different from our peers, and you know, so we were kind of isolated in that way. And there were some Indian families in the community, but not a lot. Not in our town and, you know, we'd have to travel to see them. And so we, my siblings and I, didn't really grow up with our culture, but yet our parents were trying to force it on us, you know? So they wanted us to be like them, but they didn't want us to integrate. But there was nothing else for us, you know. That was what we were growing up with. So that was really hard because they wouldn't let us do a lot of things that normal American kids do.

00:05:05

**Y:** Right, so I'm actually also from a South Asian family. My family is from Afghanistan and I had that same back and forth, kind of, like, not integrating, but you kind of have to, in a way. Just a lot of mix up between the cultures. So if I'm correct, our cultures are fairly similar. How were your parents growing up? Like, how, I don't want, say, conservative, but traditional, like, how traditional were your parents growing up?

00:05:39

**A:** So my mother was very traditional. She wore a sari the whole time I was growing up. She never wore American clothes. And my father was a professor, so he was more, you know, less traditional and less religious. He's a scientist, too. And I think at one point he even told me, "There are a lot of scientists who question, you know, whether God exists." And so he actually told me about his little internal struggle with that [laughter] in a kind of, you know, roundabout way. And my mother was very religious, so that's what brought it on. So my mother kind of forced it on all of us, you know. But, they wanted us to grow up with religion and everything, so there was a small community like I said. We didn't even have a mosque because there were so few people. So we had this small community of Muslims who would get together and we had, like, the Sunday school for a while where we were learning how to pray and all those kinds of things. But it was hard for all of us because it was, like, so foreign, you know, we were all so

disconnected from it. So they tried to [laughter] to get us to, you know, integrate. And then some of the families were much more conservative than our family, like, my parents let my sister and me go away to school and they got a lot of flack for it because none of the other daughters were going away to school, and we were going far away to school. So that was interesting but, you know, my father really thought it was important for us to get a good education. So, you know, he did that, but then when I'd come back home, we'd go visit these other families and they'd be like, "Why are you so far away from home?" And I get a lot of, you know, a lot of criticism for it.

00:07:37

**Y:** Right, I didn't realize that your family was Muslim.

00:07:40

**A:** Yeah

00:07:41

**Y:** Mine is, too, yeah. So my parents had gotten that same thing. Like, "Why are you letting her move away?"

00:07:47

**A:** Yeah [laughter]

00:07:48

**Y:** But, that's actually really interesting how it was so small that you guys didn't have your own mosque.

00:07:53

**A:** Yeah, the mosque. I think it was after I went to college, somebody established a mosque. Even though there were universities around, I think there may have been like a small Muslim community that grew and then eventually they established a mosque in a house. But for years and years for the Eids, we'd have it in somebody's house and one of the uncles would do the, you know, sermon and lead the prayer so... [laughter]

00:08:24

**Y:** It's so interesting, it's kind of the same thing where I'm from as well.

00:08:31

**A:** The really funny thing is because our community was so small that we had non-Muslim Indians there, like Hindus there as well. And they'd come to our Eid celebrations, too, because, well, we're having a party. So let's just invite everybody [laughter]

00:08:48

**Y:** Yeah, that's actually really cool that you're able to bring together, like, different religions.

00:08:52

**A:** Yeah, it was really interesting because I didn't even realize that one of the family friends was actually married to a Hindu woman. So it was kind of a different relationship. And then there was a couple of people who were married to Americans. And so it was kind of a very diverse but small community. No, we're all kind of connected because of the South Asian thing.

00:09:22

**Y:** Well it's great that it seems to have expanded over the years. Unfortunately, it was after you had moved away for college.

00:09:30

**A:** Well by the time I got to high school, there were enough Muslim women in the university that my father taught at. They had an exchange program with the university in Pakistan. And so there were a number of Pakistanis. And because we were South Asian, too, you know, we hosted some of them and we spent a lot of time with them. So one of the women connected with all the other Muslim women at the university and they had this little small group of my sister and I started going to their meetings even though we were in high school and they were in college. And actually, I think we learned a lot more about Islam from them, you know. And also because they were Malaysian, I think, Pakistani, it was, like, interesting cross culturally, like, how different the religion was and how, you know, it was interesting [laughter].

00:10:25

**Y:** That's so cool. So with the, like, different intersectionality, because if I'm not mistaken, you also identify as a lesbian, correct?

00:10:32

**A:** Yes.

00:10:33

**Y:** Okay, awesome! So how do you think that, like with all of your intersectionality, with your religion, with your culture being exposed to all these other cultures as well, it seems your sexuality, how has that been like - how has navigating that been for you throughout your life?

00:10:56

**A:** [Sigh] Well, it's interesting because of, you know, the difficulties with my parents in terms of, you know, our culture in the first place. And then, you know, we already were hiding a lot of things, you know, you're hiding a lot of what you're doing because they wouldn't approve. So,

you know, when I was in college, it was like they weren't a part of my life in that way. I didn't know, you know, I didn't explain to them what was going on and so my mother found out by accident, my father never really...we never explicitly said anything to him. But, you know, I'm sure he kind of had an idea, so [laughter] you know, I don't know. But my mother...sometimes I think she forgets, you know, because now she's okay with it. My wife is Lebanese, so she's from a Muslim background, too, and we often joke like, "Well, you said Indian doctor, you said Muslim doctor, you didn't say that it had to be a man, right" [laughter]. I used to joke all the time about that well they did get a Muslim doctor [laughter]. So that actually helps because she's Muslim and she's, you know, she is a doctor. So my mother is kind of a hypochondriac so that kind of helps with things [laughter]. But we don't really talk about it much. And it just kind of, like, eventually they just kind of got used to it. And I live so far away from them that it hasn't been so much of an issue but, I mean, I live so far away from them because of that partly, you know, because I don't know how to integrate them. It would have been difficult if I lived very close to them.

00:12:55

**Y:** So are you, sorry if this is too personal, you don't have to answer, of course, but are you and your wife, like, close with your family? Does she also go to family events and stuff like that?

00:13:08

**A:** She has gone and we visited them. And we're actually going to Seattle in a few weeks to help my mother and my brother move. So she's coming for that.

00:13:23

**Y:** Okay, cool. Kind of going back to your college experience, you said that, like, your parents weren't entirely around in that way, so you had a little bit more self-expression, I'm assuming. You also mentioned that you had lived away from home. How do you think your experience would have been affected if you'd stayed closer to home? Like, what do you think would change?

00:13:46

**A:** I think I'd probably be married to a guy now [laughter] like, the pressure was so strong! I was like, there's no way to get out of it, you know? You know how the immigrant communities are. You can't escape anything and they put so much pressure on you. So I think it would have been very, very, very hard to not conform. Yeah, so it would have been a very different life, I think. I mean, a lot of times we feel really lucky, my sister and I, that my father really cared about education so much that he would let us go.

00:14:35

**Y:** Do you think that, like, maybe your relationship with your parents would have been different as well if you were there? Would there be any sort of resentment possibly if you had stayed at home?

00:14:49

**A:** Oh, yeah, definitely. Yeah, definitely.

00:14:53

**Y:** Okay so, in the survey that Professor Lau had given us as well, you said that you had first started getting involved with anti-racism organizations and environmental causes while you were in college. How did you get into that? Like, how did you get involved with it? What brought you to it?

00:15:18

**A:** Well, when I went to college, I went to Bryn Mawr College, and when I went there, it was, like, late 80s, I went there '87 and it was just the beginning. They were just starting to really focus on getting more diversity in elite colleges. And so, I mean, there were even, like, quotas and, like, they were really trying hard to get more people of color in these schools. Right. So they had, like, a pretty diverse Asian community because, well, where we come from, educated families, you know, education is very important. And so there was actually a lot of it, interestingly, I think there was more of a class issue among us then because so many of them came from wealthy Asian families. And so there was kind of a little bit of a class divide there, but there were a lot of Asians or a lot of South Asians or a lot of East Asians and they were starting to get more Latinas and Black students, but it was still very, very small. And so there were a lot of racial issues. You know, even that first year when I was there, there was a movement to try and get more, you know, resources and more help and to bring in more students. And so um I was starting to get involved with that. We wanted a more diverse faculty. We wanted them to provide more resources and bring in more students of color. We even had a sit-in at one point. There was a big movement on campus to change things.

00:17:33

**Lindsay (L):** You, you also mentioned that you got involved in environmental work as well.

00:17:39

**A:** Not so much when I was in college. That was more when I was in graduate school, yeah.

00:17:44

**L:** What kind of environmental efforts did you get involved in?

00:17:49



**A:** Well, I went to graduate school at the School of Public Affairs and University of Texas at Austin, and I did some coursework and I actually worked for a senator for a while. I was an intern in her office as Texas state senator. We did a lot of stuff related to the water issues in Texas and also public transportation, high speed rail, and that kind of thing. So that's where I got involved. And then I spent a year in Egypt because I was thinking of going on to do a PhD in Islamic history. And I spent a year in Egypt working on my Arabic. I subsequently decided not to do that and I came to New York and I ended up working at an environmental organization. So, you know, [laughter] it just kind of happened. [laughter]

00:19:04

**L:** Yeah, yeah. What kind of environmental organization was it?

00:19:09

**A:** It was called Mothers and Others for a Livable Planet. The work was mostly about pesticides in agriculture and there was a lot of work. Before the national standards came out, we did a lot of work on organic and bringing about the standards. There was a member of our staff that was on the committee that helped develop those standards. And we did a lot of stuff with integrated pest management and apple farms in New York state. We also did a lot of environmental health initiatives like, you know, nontoxic baby care and, and lead in paint and, you know, like a lot of different, both urban and non-urban, but we tried to do a lot of social justice stuff. We'd partnered with Greenpeace on some things and we did a broad variety of things. [We asked] how can consumers change things? We did a lot of things with plastics and, you know, like the baby bottles and all of that kind of stuff, we worked a lot on that kind of thing to get rid of those kinds of, like, environmental health issues.

00:20:40

**L:** Okay, going back to your college experiences with these organizations, were there any personal experiences of racism or prejudice that kind of led you to get further involved in these organizations?

00:21:01

**A:** Not like anything really specific. I think it's a feeling of alienation and not really belonging, I think, is how I got involved. You know, I started connecting more with people of color when I went to college because I didn't have that experience, and so I think that probably a lot of it was related - you know, my getting involved - was because this was a community I felt a part of that I hadn't felt before. One of my friends in my first year was Puerto Rican and then later, another friend of mine who is African American, started doing a minority orientation program for incoming freshmen. So one of my friends was involved with that and so I became friendly with a lot of the people who were working in that. And so, you know, it was nice to have that community of, like, so many different people from different parts of the world. It was the first

time I met all these people from different parts of the country and who had such different experiences.

00:22:33

**L:** Yeah. Earlier, you mentioned that a lot of the work that you were doing at that time was trying to get a more diverse staff at the college. Do you think that having teachers from different backgrounds really benefit people in, like, learning this sort of stuff?

00:22:52

**A:** Oh, absolutely, yeah. Absolutely. Definitely. And also, I mean, you know, their concerns that, you know, the way they approached the curriculum was gonna be different. You know, they had like different perspectives. So.

00:23:11

**L:** Now, part of the reason why we're doing these interviews and why this class that we're taking right now is so important is because there's been a lot of anti-Asian hate crimes this year. And there's specifically been, like, hate crimes towards Indians and Sikhs. Do you have a particular reaction to that?

00:23:39

**A:** I mean, they're part of my community, it really makes me you know, it's interesting because... how do I say this? It kind of comes and goes and, like, all the attacks against the Sikhs go back, you know, here in New Jersey, we had a lot of that right after 9/11 because, you know, people didn't distinguish the Turbans from Muslims. And so they were attacking Sikhs and... but, like, Indians in general. So it just, you know, the attacks lately, I mean, you kind of go back to that point, and then it was kind of scary because it was very anti-Muslim and then Indian people and Muslim people were getting attacked. Things got better, but now it just goes back and forth, you know, I live in a community that has a lot of Indians, so you don't feel threatened because there are so many Indians here. I live a couple miles away from this huge Indian area where, you know, it's like all the stores are Indian. It's known throughout the East Coast. Tree Road, everybody knows where that is. [laughter] So, it's just there's so many Indians here that, like, it's hard to imagine these things happening, but it is happening, you know, that, like, obviously so...

00:25:29

**L:** What drew you to the Auntie Sewing Squad in particular and getting involved in that?

00:25:38

**A:** Well, I was already making masks and we were trying primarily - I had a couple of friends who were doing it, too - and we were trying to get the masks out to vulnerable communities. And so, you know, we had been able to send out to a variety of places here in New Jersey and, you

know, first started with health care. But then we started expanding out and the pandemic wave kind of settled down here, and it was, like, better here. So, well, where else can we send these masks? And I was looking and looking for other organizations because a lot of the mask organizations were primarily focused on health care, I think. So I just happened to see an article about the Auntie Sewing Squad and I'd been looking for a group just like that. That was just like perfect, exactly the kind of people and the same ideas, you know, or the same concerns. So I was very excited when I found them. [laughter]

00:26:48

**L:** Do you think that joining and interacting with this group has sort of provided, like, a sense of community and connection during COVID?

00:26:58

**A:** Oh, yeah, definitely, definitely. Yeah, I mean, 'cause you're so isolated from everybody and like I said, like, it's just like a very caring community. I think, you know, everyone was so isolated and everybody was really trying to help each other in the group, and so, you know, it's been really good.

00:27:29

**L:** So you mentioned in the first email that you left to help your wife with her practice. What had kind of led you to that decision to help your wife with her medical practice?

00:27:49

**A:** Oh, well, you know, circumstances. [laughter] A guy I had been working with in New York City...I actually was about to start another job at an environmental defense fund. And she had a situation where she had to leave her job and I said, "I can help you start your practice." And that's just how it happened, you know, it just happened and I didn't think it would be for so long. It ended up being, you know, I couldn't leave basically. [laughter]

00:28:28

**L:** And how has the pandemic kind of affected, like, your plans or what you've been doing and kind of going forward with your job and what you kind of do?

00:28:42

**A:** Well, actually, Iwe actually sold her practice right before the pandemic started, thank God. [laughter] I don't know, like running a medical practice during the pandemic, you know, was pretty terrible. So she actually left and she's working for a pharmaceutical company and I have not started working again. I was gonna kind of figure it out during the pandemic and, well... [laughter] So I'm not currently working and I don't know if I will, you know, I don't need to. So, I don't know. I mean, I'm doing a lot of volunteer work. You know, I'm doing the masks and I

also got involved with a volunteer group that was booking vaccine appointments for people, you know, like seniors, you know, anyone who couldn't find an appointment and this group was mostly for our town. And for once, I feel like my volunteer efforts really meant something, because I found out yesterday or the day before that our vaccination rate is 68 percent. So, you know, so at least that my little tiny, like, town in New Jersey, at least [laughter] we are reaching herd immunity here.[laughter] So.

00:30:09

**L:** That's wonderful, I love that.

00:30:11

**A:** Yeah so, and the group that I joined to do this work is very similar to the, you know, Auntie group - we're a very, like, caring group who just wants to help everybody, so...

00:30:25

**L:** Okay, is there any, like, final sort of thoughts about, like, your experiences or anything about the pandemic, or anything else you'd like to share to close out?

00:30:39

**A:** No, not really, I don't think so. [laughter] I can't think of anything.

00:30:44

**L:** Okay well, it's - it's been very nice interviewing with you. I loved to get your perspective, it was really nice talking.

00:30:53

**Y:** Absolutely.