

Interviewee: Asima Silva  
Interviewers: Sara Amato and Robert Vozella  
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**Abstract:** Asima Silva was born in Hyderabad, India in 1974 and moved to the Worcester area when she was three years old. Asima received her undergraduate degree, as well as her master's degree in computer science from Worcester Polytechnic University, where she was a top performer. She has five children, a full-time job as a software engineer, co-founded an outreach and diversity organization, called Enjoin Good, with her husband, and also has a local television and radio show, Perspectives, which airs weekly. In this interview, Asima discusses her educational experience at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, as well as her experiences growing up as an Indian woman in the Worcester area. She also emphasizes the role of religion in her life and shares her experiences of being a mother of five and a successful worker.

**RV:** So...whenever you're ready...

**AS:** Sure.

**RV:** The first question is: What is your full name including both maiden name and married name

**AS:** Maiden name is Asima Kafar and married name is Asima Silva.

**SA:** Perfect...so...When were you born?

**AS:** Close your ears. [To her child]

**Child:** I already know it.

[Laughter]

**AS:** So, 1974.

**RV:** Okay.

**Child:** I knew it.

**AS:** I said '94!

[Laughter]

**Child:** No, you didn't.

**RV:** Have you ever married?-and then if you-well-Have you ever married?

**AS:** Yes.

**RV:** And then...what is the name of your husband?

**AS:** So, I've been previously married, but my current husband's name is Davidson [Silva].

**SA:** So, obviously [Laughter] you have children.

**RV:** Okay, so you have children. What's-what's your guys names?

**Child:** Yasiyn [Silva].

**Child:** Asiya [Silva].

**RV:** Hi...I'm Rob [Vozella].

[laughter]

**RV:** And, what ethnicity do you identify with-family background?

**AS:** Indian.

**RV:** Indian, okay.

**SA:** Alright, so, tell us a little bit about your parents.

**AS:** My parents were divorced, which is a rare occurrence for Indians. My mother is a doctor, which is also another rare occurrence for Indians-Indian women-especially during her time. And, I was raised pretty much by my grandparents, more or less, and I don't have much of a relationship with my father since early, early childhood, so I was-I'm an only child. And-

**RV:** Were you raised here-or this is the next question-Where have you lived during your life?

**AS:** I was raised in Rutland [Massachusetts] and I moved to Holden [Massachusetts], which is, you know, not very far.

**RV:** Yeah, I'm doing my internship over there with Police Department.

**AS:** Okay.

**RV:** Detective Troy Shalvin??-I don't know if you know him. Apparently, everyone in town knows him 'cause it's a small town.

**AS:** Well, if he was there 'till like early '90s.

**RV:** 15 years he's been there.

**AS:** Okay, well then he probably was just got there when I moved out.

**RV:** Yeah.

**AS:** But, yeah, I grew up there. Everybody in town knew my mother because she was one of four doctors at the Rutland Heights Hospital.

**RV:** Yeah, oh okay. Where's that?

**AS:** It no longer exists, they closed it down.

**RV:** Oh, so [laughter]

**SA:** Alright. What was the neighborhood where you grew up like?

**AS:** It's a small town. It has no diversity. [laughter] Pretty much a white, Christian neighborhood.

**RV:** Like, a lot of farms and stuff, right?

**AS:** Yes.

**RV:** Yeah, I haven't been through the whole town, but from what I've seen.

**AS:** For a portion of my life in Rutland, I lived on the state grounds for the hospital, but the other portion we moved and built a house on the other side of town and our neighbors were at a distance, so it wasn't like a very, you know, congested town. It was a very, you know, low key, but very Christian, old-fashioned, type of town, and even though there wasn't a lot of diversity, of course, I was probably one of like three kids in the entire school that wasn't white. And I might have felt a little bit out of place early on, but after a while it just became home, so it didn't make a difference to me.

**RV:** Right. Now were you born in Worcester [Massachusetts]?

**AS:** I was actually born in India.

**RV:** Okay, and then, how did you come to live in Worcester [Massachusetts]?

**AS:** My mother got a job in Rutland [Massachusetts].

**RV:** Right, okay.

**SA:** Alright.

**RV:** How old were you when that happened though.

**AS:** So, I came here when I was, I believe around three.

**RV:** Yeah.

**AS:** I remember, I don't know the exact age. So, I only have very, very faint memories of India.

**RV:** Right.

**AS:** I don't really have a lot of context. My earliest memories are mostly in the United States. So, we were previously in Grafton [Massachusetts] for a couple years before we moved to Rutland [Massachusetts].

**SA:** And, where do you live in the city now?

**AS:** I live in Holden [Massachusetts].

**SA:** Holden?

**RV:** Yeah. Holden's just like Rutland right? It's like the same thing? I know there's more people. 'Cause-'cause-I always talk about this with him. The-the-police-like the jurisdiction can go to different towns. 'Cause it's such a small force, like if they need help or something. They can go to the other town. So, I know there's more people, but is it a lot more or no?

**AS:** So, people always say when I say to them I live in Holden [Massachusetts], and they go, "Oh my gosh that's like the boonies." And I look at them and I say, "You don't understand, compared to Rutland, I moved to the city." So they look at me even more and go, "What do you mean? It couldn't be more boonies than Holden." But, you know it's closer to shopping. There's certainly a lot more like you know Big Y's, Friendly's, and you know there's a lot more center of town, like type-of things to do than Rutland did. But, it was moving more into the city for me from where I was from.

**RV:** My roommate also lives in Rutland. It was a bunch of big houses, but it was back in the woods basically.

**AS:** Right, and now it's more developed than even when I grew up there.

**RV:** Yeah, so do you have any family members that live in the same area as you? Or around Worcester? Or close?

**AS:** A lot of my family members still live in Worcester county. And that's mostly on my mother's side, of course. And some of them are in other states, but more-or-less around Worcester county.

**SA:** So obviously you don't currently live in Worcester, but what is your connection to Worcester, like the city?

**AS:** I went to WPI [Worcester Polytechnic Institute]. I did both my undergrad and grad there. And you always have to come to Worcester to shop. It was always the center of where we were. And the mosques that we attend are also in Worcester.

**RV:** What challenges do you think that this city still faces? What would you change about the city?

**AS:** I think the challenge that it faces economically is that it's a great place to live, but for people who want to live with certain professions I find it challenging.

[Phone rings]

**AS:** Guys, why don't you get that. That's my other children.

[laughter]

**AS:** So, the problem is I think for someone like me who's a software engineer or people who maybe graduate from WPI [Worcester Polytechnic Institute], as well, especially--I'm going to talk about that because that's where I graduated from--the commute to jobs or the options of jobs are very limited. And, I know there's an effort to bring startups and more jobs to Worcester, but we have a long ways to go. So, the commute is what I think really hurts for professionals who want to live in and around Worcester county. Of course, some towns are much closer to the commute than other towns. Living in Rutland and trying to work in Chelmsford [Massachusetts] or Burlington [Massachusetts] or Waltham [Massachusetts] is nearly impossible.

**RV:** I live in Wakefield [Massachusetts], so I know that's far, especially with traffic.

**AS:** With traffic. And, there's no T option. There's no public transportation options.

**RV:** Yeah, it's terrible actually. It's only like an hour, but if you go when there's rush hour, it's like two-and-a-half hours.

**AS:** Yes, one way.

**RV:** Yeah, just one way. It's crazy.

**AS:** But other than that, I think in terms of Worcester, there's certain towns that I think could use some more diversity, but Worcester itself I think has plenty of diversity. I think we need more shopping areas. Because we used to have—I remember when I was growing up—this was very very young-like practically aging myself, but the center of Worcester was a huge mall. And it was very well attended and shopped at and very well known. And ever since that died in like the late '80s, or whenever it was, I believe, it just has become dead town. And I wish to kind of see that back again.

**RV:** Where was that, where all the shopping was?

**AS:** It was in the center.

**RV:** Oh really?

**AS:** It was where, you know, they had done it a few years ago, where they had a few stores also open up. What was it, the Galleria?

**RV:** I think I know what you're talking about.

**AS:** But even before then, it was much much more. And we just kind of lost that.

**RV:** Yeah, there's nothing really around here besides the Auburn Mall.

**AS:** Yeah.

**RV:** Auburn [Massachusetts] has a mall, but it's kind of crappy.

[Laughter]

**SA:** Alright, have you seen any other changes in Worcester [Massachusetts] over time?

**RV:** I guess good or bad, right?

**AS:** Yeah, I think, I think I'm more aware of the diversity, which is a good thing. Before, I think there was, but we weren't really as aware of it, but because of the political climate, and what not,

I think we are more aware of it. We're more sensitive to it. Like I said, we need some more increase and betterment in terms of job situations in and around Worcester and maybe a little bit better transportation. I know we have the T, but maybe more options of the T at different towns, instead of just, you know, either Worcester or Westborough [Massachusetts].

**RV:** I know that at this school, they don't even really have public transportation, like if you want to get to—I think they have a bus that comes and goes to Blackstone.

**SA:** They have one bus on Friday.

**RV:** And it goes to Blackstone, but I'm talking for kids that commute and stuff, they don't have any sort of—I mean I know that if you're commuting you usually have a car, but they don't have any transportation—public transportation—that goes through here.

**SA:** Yeah, they don't.

**RV:** Besides if you get your own Uber.

**AS:** Right.

**RV:** Which anyone can get anywhere, that's not just, you know what I mean?

**AS:** Right.

**RV:** So, next one: What distinct characteristics make Worcester [Massachusetts], the place that it is?

**AS:** Well, I think, first of all, we're the second largest city in New England. Second, I think we have a lot of historic value to the city. A lot of great structures and buildings and history that, you know, that aren't in other towns. And great schools, right? I remember having a conversation with my husband a couple years ago. I have older children and I have younger children. And so, we were thinking if we move, where would we move to? And, my requirement to him was, you know, I personally—and this is just a personal thing—I don't want my kids to necessarily dorm in college. And I can get into why that is later. And for that reason, I want to be in a commutable distance of really good colleges. And so one of my requirements to him was: give me a city or a place that offers, you know, a diversity of education in terms of majors and within all commutable distance. And that's almost impossible to find. That you can live comfortably with a family and still have it within a commutable distance of colleges that are well known. Like nationally, well known. Not just within their local area. And, it's a very difficult requirement to satisfy. So, in the end after he searched and searched, he goes, "I guess we don't have anywhere else to be other than Worcester county. So, if we move, we're going to move within Worcester county."

**RV:** Yeah right? There's somewhere between six or seven schools? Just around this area.

**AS:** Right.

**RV:** Which is a ton.

**SA:** That's really good. Alright, what do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally?

**AS:** I think they've been positive. Especially since we have all these schools, we have UMass [Medical] that's a teaching hospital. We have the history behind us, so I think in terms of how women have been treated, it's definitely been better than some of the other places. And I think that's probably why I feel most at home around here.

**RV:** This one, this gets into education, I know you said WPI, so I guess that takes that out of here. But, did, did you pursue any educational programs or vocational training?

**AS:** Nope.

**RV:** And, yeah that's it for that one. Did you attend graduate school?

**AS:** Yes, at WPI.

**SA:** What were your challenges in education, if any?

**AS:** I don't think I had challenges, I actually did a lecture last week at WPI and it was about social activism in the STEM field. And, I was fortunate actually because, in my major—I'm a computer science major—at least even when I did it there wasn't a lot of women in the department. And, you would think that there might have been more discrimination or bias or whatnot, but that is not what my experience has been. So I would say, in my experience, I've at least—maybe it's a bubble at WPI, I don't know, it's always been positive. So, even though I was probably one of two females in every class, I did not feel like I was necessarily treated differently, or treated with favoritism, or, you know, treated incorrectly.

**RV:** That's crazy because this school is what? 65% girls.

**SA:** Yeah, that's crazy.

**AS:** Well, they've improved their numbers. But when I went it was like one to nine ratio.

**RV:** This school was always more women. Right? I think it was.

**SA:** Yeah, I'm not sure.

[Laughter]

**AS:** Yeah. And different departments had more girls, than other departments. So, I don't even know what the ratio was. I'm just computer science, so.

**RV:** Right, upon finishing your formal education, what did you see as your options?

**AS:** Because of the quality of education that I had and I was one of the top performers in my school I had a really good GPA and I graduated with high distinction, so in terms of opportunities, I had good opportunities. Of course, when I graduated with my undergrad, the economy had dropped, had just fallen. So, I [laughs] probably didn't have as many opportunities as I could have if that wasn't the situation.

**SA:** Alright, what support networks and mentoring have been important to you.

**AS:** There's been a lot of support networks actually. During my college years definitely a lot of the professors were accommodating. Like for example, my older kids, I used to bring them to meetings. And, they'd be doing homework on the side, while I would do meetings with my professors. And, so, and they were completely fine with it, even though it's not traditionally done at WPI. You don't see little kids around campus. And then I think in terms of now, currently, one of my best mentors has been Margaret Watson. She was one of the deans at Quinsigamond [Community College]. I met her because she was also on the School Committee, the Wachusett District School Committee, and I ended up just befriending her, coincidentally and has been a great support and mentor. If I could be what she is, I'd be a very accomplished person.

**RV:** Now, just getting into work. What was your first job?

**AS:** First full-time or part-time?

**RV:** Like right out of college?

**AS:** So, right out of college, I had joined a startup. Which was nothing to do at that time. But, sixth months later the economy fell, so so did the startup. And, I went back to my professors and I said, "Okay, you had offered me a TAship for doing my grad, can I kind of do it now?" Because I felt like the the job situation was so bleak out there that it's probably better for me to spend time on furthering my education, which I was going to do anyway in a few years, in a couple years, so might as well do it then and wait for the economy to recover. And, luckily, I ended up getting a slot for being a TA and then I just did my master's and then by that time the economy had slowly recovered.

**SA:** What other jobs have you had and what do you do now?

**AS:** Other jobs, I've always been a software engineer. And I'm still a software engineer.  
[Laughs] That's what I do now.

**RV:** Yeah. [Laughter] And how did you come to do this work? Okay, you said that just school.

**AS:** Yeah, just school.

**SA:** What has this work meant to you?

**AS:** It's meant that I can provide for myself. Part of my motivation was to make, to be able to provide for my kids. I was a single mother at that time, still going through finishing up my undergrad. I was married by the time I started my master's, but still it was tough because the whole point of affording and raising kids is very expensive. And, so my motivation has always been, I wanted to be independent enough, but be able to provide for my family. So that's been my biggest motivation and I think the reason why I've been able to do it as long as I have is because with work people say do what you love, and what I liked about doing what I do, is once I start coding, or once I start programming, or once I start designing, I lose complete track of time. I could be doing it for eight hours straight and not even realize that eight hours went by. When I was in school doing it as an undergrad, I'd sit at the computer at eight at night and I'd realize at six in the morning—wait a second, the entire night went by. And I thought to myself this is wonderful. People say you have to work eight hours or ten hours a day, isn't it wonderful if you go in and you do something that you don't even feel like it's eight to ten hours it felt like it was one because you enjoyed it and that's the reason why I think I'm still a software engineer.

**RV:** That is awesome! What are your or what were your responsibilities in terms of house work and child care?

[Laughter]

**AS:** Everything! My primary responsibilities are that I do extra work with my kids at home. I usually am the taxi driver to their extra curriculums, of course my husband. I taught her multiplication in first grade [Pointing at daughter]. And so of course my husband helps but I take on the brunt of the educational part of it making sure they did their homework and doing the extra stuff to make sure they are further ahead. In terms of cooking I do the cooking and I also do most of the house cleaning myself. I know a lot of people hire people. So yeah, I deal with most of the responsibilities. I mean my husband does all the outside work like he'll do the lawn and he'll do the driveway and different things around the house that need fixing.

**RV:** Yeah that's like my mom and my dad.

**SA:** How have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, roles and interests in your life?

**AS:** A lot of time management. So I have a full-time job, I have five kids in total, and I also co-founded, with my husband, Enjoin Good which is an outreach and diversity organization which we do a lot of work with. I also volunteer with the Burma task force. I also have a local tv and radio show that I do which airs weekly. And I'm also the vice president of communications for the Muslim Caucus which we founded about a year and a half almost two years ago. And I'm also on the Wachusett School Committee now. So I think it's like, I don't know if it was training through high school that I've always did the most amount of courses I could do with the most amount of activities I could do. I think it just formed my personality of, as my husband says I always have to be productive. And I think that's what gives me satisfaction so I'm always juggling around and multitasking so monitoring of they are doing homework but I'm also doing something on the side while that is happening so it's been a juggling act but we've been able to do it up until now.

**RV:** I wish I was like that. What do you think the pros and cons are of the path that you have chosen?

**AS:** That's a good one. The con is that I don't know how to relax which I need to work on. I noticed that I couldn't even have a movie turned on at the house without me having a laptop where I was doing something either being with the volunteer work I do or work I do or something. I want to get something done, always. So the concept of carving out two hours of nothing is a very hard concept for me to do and I think I have to learn how to relax. Which is a huge thing. I think at one point and people have warn me that I might get burnt out but I've been like this for so long. I'm afraid I may because I know some people have different quotas. And also sometimes it's a struggle between health and what I want to do. The pro is I feel like i'm accomplishing things but the con is that I feel like I'm not accomplishing enough.

**SA:** How do you feel about the choices you've made in your life? Do you have any regrets?

**AS:** Yes and no, I think in the end as I look back, my choices made me who I am but then I also look back and I think if I stood my ground how my life would have changed which I don't know how it would have changed, but if it might have changed to at least the easier path. So for example my first marriage was an arranged marriage. My family, obviously immigrants, then it was still the custom to arrange a marriage. When I say arrange a marriage I mean it wasn't as arranged as it might have been maybe 20 or 30 years before that time where you never even saw each other until the wedding day. But mine was arranged in the sense that he was in India, I saw his picture, I had talked to him for like five minutes on the phone. I was not interested at all, but I was not given a choice but it was something I had to do. And I wish I had a choice. I wish I had figured out some way and I really, honestly don't know which way I could have figured it out but I wish I had figured out some way to make a stand and say no I don't want to do this because it made my path to get my education much much harder. It took away three and a half years of my life where I wasn't able to do what I wanted to do. I was kind of stuck in a relationship that was very physically violent and emotionally abusive. We tried to raise three kids in that environment and giving up my education because of it, it just felt like I went 15 steps back. So I

look at that and sometimes I say—but at the same time because of that I knew never to give up and because of that I think I was able to open my mind. I don't think that we realize as we are growing, especially growing up in an isolated environment with ethnicity or be within a town you don't realize some of the unconscious bias you put on yourself and some of the restrictions that you put on yourself or put on a restriction that doesn't really have to be there. So what I mean by that is growing up in an Indian family I always assumed I had to marry Indian because it was just ingrained in me that's the way I was raised. Of course I went to school and had friends, but I had to marry an Indian and I think going through that experience forced me to ask myself do I have to marry an Indian? If I hadn't gone through it, then I wouldn't have been open minded enough to give my current husband an opportunity. It gave me a chance to say yeah this is possible because sometimes we put restrictions on ourselves that don't have to be there but all those experiences open up your mind to other things.

**RV:** Do you consider yourself active politically?

**AS:** Yes.

**RV:** Ok! I'll ask this next, have you been involved in volunteer or community work?

**AS:** Yes.

**RV:** What group did you work with?

**AS:** So I co-founded the Enjoin Good.

**RV:** What led you to co-fund this organization?

**AS:** Well I co-founded this organization because it's sort of a multi-factored organization. My husband wanted to do something that had to do with volunteer work and community organizing and building bridges and coincidentally right around this time my third child she was discriminated by a teacher in the district and I felt really insulted because this was my county my home town and I saw what's going on. I didn't recognize what was happening and I realized at that time because I went through all the phases of talking to the teachers in the department head, the principal, the superintendent and all of their reactions honestly shocked me. So to combat that I encouraged my husband's idea of this and said why don't we do this and try to do diversity trainings to different schools and so that is kind of how I got involved in that.

**SA:** Are you involved in any other organizations?

**AS:** Yes, I'm involved in the Burma Task Force, I got elected to the Wachusett School Committee, I co-founded along with two other people the Worcester Daughters of Abraham which we just had a meeting last night. And I have other organizations that I work with but I work with a few others.

**SA:** What role has religion played in your life?

**AS:** A huge role.

[Confidential Health questions redacted]

**SA:** What are your experiences in accessing quality affordable healthcare?

**AS:** I think the fact that our healthcare is going up where it's becoming an access to only elite is really concerning because if the society overall isn't healthy everyone is ultimately going to suffer.

**RV:** Who's health are you responsible for besides your own? Talking about your family member.

**AS:** Right now I don't have anybody else other than my kids and my husband.

**SA:** How do you get through tough times and what kind of thoughts keep you going?

**AS:** You asked me if religion played a huge role and that's one of the things that keeps me going because in Islam, we are taught that this life is a test. It's about how good can you be even in extreme circumstances and do you still have faith that it's going to get better in the end but your going to learn something from this experience. And that can be hard while your going through something to keep reminding yourself of that. But in Islam we all believe that even though your life is a test and everybody gets tested in their own ways some people are given certain gifts of patience or what not and they are tested with that and other people are given other gifts and they are tested with that so whatever you are tested with we believe that god is testing you to what you can handle and god will never give you anything that you cannot handle. Even though there might be times where you think you can't handle it, yet I have to remind myself that I wouldn't be going through this if I couldn't handle it and there's going to be something that either comes out that I won't understand right now but I will understand later on in my life. And so reminding myself of that is what helps me get through things.

**RV:** How do you define the success in your life?

**AS:** A lot of hard work and praying!

**RV:** And has the definition changed over time?

**AS:** Nope! Just a lot of hard work and praying. [Laughter]

**SA:** Based on your life experiences what advice would you give to woman of today and future generations?

**AS:** I think the best advice I could give is never to give up. And if you think there is something right or something needs to be changed or there is a purpose to our lives, each one of our lives and everyone one has some purpose to fulfill. I was always taught by my grandfather whatever you do—and this was obviously coming from a religious background—we are required as Muslims that whatever you do you do your best in. Whatever your best is I don't care if it's even to doodle your best. Or if you're going to do your career, do your best in your career so whatever path you choose and no matter how minuscule it seems I would suggest just putting your 150% to it.

**RV:** One of the last questions. Now that we are working to tell a fuller story of the history of woman then has been recorded in the past what should we be sure to include.

**AS:** In terms of history in woman in Worcester [Massachusetts] or just generally?

**RV:** Generally

**AS:** I think a lot of—and this might be coming again from my background—of what I feel is we don't highlight all the contributions that Muslim woman have done globally and internationally and nationally. Many people don't know that the first university ever formed in the whole world was by a Muslim woman in Morocco. Many people don't know that Muslim women held government high titles back in the day in terms of government and treasurers and governors and what not and I think when we don't know that women in history—even if it doesn't just mean in our country but generally speaking--than we lose out on motivating women all around the world.

**SA:** Is there anyone else we suggest we talk to?

**AS:** Probably Margaret Watson.

**RV:** I knew you were going to say that. [Laughter] That is all we have to ask. Thank you for answering those! Thank you so much!

**SA:** Thank you!