

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Samina Hossain, UW Madison PhD student in Sociology. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me!

**Samina Hossain**

Of course.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, so it'd be first great if you could give us just kind of the highlights reel of your education and linguistic background and what you're currently up to here at UW.

**Samina Hossain**

Okay, so you said the most important identity I have here, which is a PhD student in the Sociology department. And before this, I have a Master's in Public Policy from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. It's a two year program. And before that, I got a Bachelor's from Tufts University in a completely different subject. I started in engineering there. And then I made a 180-degree turn. And now I'm in the social sciences. And my research right now is centered on refugee resettlement. In terms of my linguistic background, English is my primary language, I would say, but I am also fluent in Bengali. And there are other few languages I've learned in the past like Spanish for about eight years. Right now. I'm learning Farsi, Persian. And I've dabbled in others. Yeah. But I don't think those are worth mentioning. But I would say I'm bilingual, which is probably why I have an accent when I speak.

**Claire Darmstadter**

So let's start with the language part. So like you said, there's some kind of main languages that you focus on, but you've also studied a lot of different languages. So can you kind of share that process of how you've kind of approached learning languages? Is it like explicit grammar? Or is it kind of picking up speaking with people in the community? Like, how does your brain organize all that? And how do you make time to practice all these languages?

**Samina Hossain**

Yeah, I'm seeing a change in how it's being taught. When I was learning Spanish, which was a long, long time ago, I was in school. We're talking the early 2000s. So almost 20 years ago, it was very, I think, I would say grammar based and vocab. Now, where I'm learning Farsi at UW, and they seem to put an emphasis on conversation, being able to just carry even a minimum conversation with someone else. I think so I would say the mode of instruction has changed in these two different experiences. How I best learn? That's sort of what you're asking, right? How do I, when it comes to a second language? I think movies help a lot, watching movies in other languages. Not only am I learning the pronunciation, also the context of how it's used. I also develop an affinity to that culture, to the people who use that language. So I think that all that helps with absorbing a different language.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And so I also know that you've done some work with an Oshkosh Professor kind of looking at refugee resettlement in the state. So if you talk a little bit about the key takeaways from that work and kind of how you're involved?

### **Samina Hossain**

Yeah, so I was one of Professor Paul Van Auken's research assistants there. I was sort of looking at the dynamics in Madison. So there were multiple sites. There was Milwaukee, there was Oshkosh, Madison. We later added Seattle as a comparison. And so I was mostly looking at Madison, how they're assisting with resettling here. There's at the time when I was doing the research, there were mainly two resettlement agencies in town. Now there's one, and I was mostly interviewing providers. I would say, my later what turned into my master's thesis evolved into a discussion about how what drives [...] because a lot of the agencies we're helping to resettle, refugees belong to certain faith communities, and by large like 9 out of the 12 government contracted agencies who have sort of like full custody or full responsibility for resettling them. 9 out of 12 of them are religious based, or faith based or ethnic based, I think there's an Ethiopian VOLAG as well. They're called VOLAGs. And my question is, why are people of one community helping resettled people from a completely different community than theirs? So, you know, nowadays you have a lot of Christian agencies helping Muslim refugees or Jewish agency agencies helping Muslim, completely different cultures and what is motivating them and through the course of my as I thought about what I've heard from other representatives of some of these agencies speak, it seems like I would say it's part of blending into the fabric of American society, it's part of learning into that that social service aspect is sort of built into the US from the very start of how our country was established, founded, a lot of it has to do with a role of the government, which provides stipends or funds to carry out this resettlement. So you have, it's a symbiotic relationship has developed between the agencies, and the government. And the government is trying to, you know, integrate people of other cultures into the country. And these more established community based agencies are assisting. It's not a very clear cut response. But I'm actually still working out what my findings are in a crisp statement.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

And so in a wonderful panel, you participated in relating to refugee students and kind of education in Wisconsin, which I'll link below because it's wonderful, and people can still attend upcoming sessions, you spoke a little bit about kind, of course offerings and curriculum on campus and how some students might not be represented, or they might be represented, but in kind of a negative way. So can you kind of talk about your ideas here?

### **Samina Hossain**

So yeah, based on what I've heard at different panel talks, so I've also attended, I sat in various, like cultural organizations, student organization meetings, so very kind of closed meetings, I sat in there and listened. And there's definitely frustration about how a lot of minorities are being represented in the classroom, that it's kind of a, there's a tension, they're both very happy that increasingly, they're being represented in the curriculum, but there's frustration about how they're being represented. So there is a tension there that we want to be represented but the

right way. I would even say there's contention within a group about how they want to be represented. It's not like there's a unified vision about this is the correct way to represent us. Even within the groups there are differences. So it's really a hard call. And a lot of it, I would say is the host, the host community, I guess you can say, the white community, I hesitate to, you know, use terms like that, but the host white community, how they're trying to grapple with how to teach about other cultures. Usually, they have maybe more recognized credentials to teach at a university, whereas minorities don't always have those credentials, even though they might have that intimate knowledge of the culture, they don't always have those, what the university recognizes as proper credentials to teach. So that's one. So basically, I think a lot of the, and the university I would say, is trying to get to hire more minorities, so that, you know, minorities are speaking about minorities instead of others. But it's an evolving process. And I can go a little further into any one of those if you want.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, I guess one question I have is you also brought up some bureaucratic barriers that might prevent students from kind of accessing these educational opportunities or being able to work in higher ed or just kind of education in general? So can you talk a little bit about some of those kind of barriers that they might face or roadblocks and how language could potentially factor in, but if you don't think it does as much, then you can leave that out?

### **Samina Hossain**

Okay, yeah, no, that's a good question. So some of the panel talks, and also my personal conversations with — so these are mostly students of refugee backgrounds whose parents probably came as refugees. Occasionally, they themselves came as refugees when they were very young. And a lot of times I think the university requirements and the distribution requirements can hinder progress. So we have quite, I think, very demanding requirements when it comes to language-related courses. So like, composition related courses can be demanding, I would say, based on what I've heard, we can be a little more flexible about what we require of students, not everyone needs to be you know, Mark Twain or Shakespeare. Other people have other ambitions, other interests. And you know, we don't have to ask everyone to compose very elaborately and that can delay, that one course that's very composition-heavy can delay someone who has probably had most of their primary education abroad, occasionally in a refugee camp. So that's something I found to be a delay. A lot of states have age limits. So I think your question is about higher ed. So higher ed, it doesn't have these age limits. But high school, which proceeds coming into college, has a lot of age limits about when someone is qualified for public education. So when some students can age out, so if they're beyond 18, they have to get a GED, which you have to pay for, which is not as valued in the job market. So that can sometimes unnecessarily, I would say, delay. But something we should also keep in mind is that a lot of these jurisdictions and stipulations about age limits, these are the outcomes of negotiations on a public policy level, you know, there, we have to keep in mind that a lot of the policies were making are very contentious, and they're compromises some people are not such a fan of paying so much money for public education. Maybe this is a way, I don't know the history of age limits, but maybe this is a way we got some of those people to agree to — so we

have to keep all of that in mind as well, how these policies are compromised. Those are a couple of examples.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. And I, you know, the point you talked about with, like, you know, these rules, they're set in stone, but also they can be flexible sometimes. And there's been a couple of interviews that I've been talking with people kind of about this fact. And we have this flexibility, but it's not necessarily advertised, or students don't really know that they can do that. So I guess do you feel like at UW if there's a student who might have a non traditional background, or they might, you know, be growing up speaking languages, but it's not like recognized in coursework, do you feel like there's knowledge that they can kind of try to play with the system? And is it like, you need an advisor on your side to kind of advocate for you? Do you feel like students can advocate for themselves? What does that kind of look like here?

**Samina Hossain**

Okay, yeah, so I, myself, am not aware about all the resources. And I did get a sense of this in that panel that I'm referring to. So for example, I think there was a little bit of a debate going on at that talk about the Writing Center, why aren't students using that Writing Center. So sometimes students don't even know about, as you said, that's a good point about resources being there. Or even if they know there's stigma attached to places where you get extra help for where if you're not good enough, that's where you go. I think a lot of students express unhappiness that teachers, instead of building a one to one relationship with them, and they'll say, they'll just direct them to this office, that office, oh, you can help get help for this, which is a sign that UW is growing, you know, they're paying attention to all these details. But with all these offices growing, I think students sometimes feel estranged from their immediate instructor because they're just being sent off to all these offices. But yeah, I would agree with you that there's probably not always enough knowledge about what resources are available, advisors could, I think, be better. I also sometimes feel that advisors are not always giving their 100%. When it comes to sometimes they have so many advisees, so many students. And that's a problem if they have so many that they're not able to do their job very well. Because, yeah, mentorship, that kind of advising is a lot of both time and I would even say emotional energy, you really need to care about the student, and they're just so spread thin. I don't think that they have that emotional bandwidth to care and search out the right solutions for that one student, I would say that's the problem.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And so now looking at Madison, either in the university bubble or outside it, compared to other places you might have lived or studied. Do you feel like the city is generally hospitable and supportive of individuals who speak more than one language or a non-English language? Or just kind of depend based on the language you are speaking? Or what's that kind of like, from your perspective?

**Samina Hossain**

I would say definitely very tolerant very, you know, celebrates diversity and trying to find, accommodate different kinds of learners. So I'm also a TA and I'm seeing this growing in the Delta program, which is a teaching. I don't know if you're, yeah, so it's basically another office. I really like the programs they do. They do a bunch of workshops year round, and I see them giving more and more attention to non-native students. And I've been attending some of them. They're very good. I would agree that Yeah, Madison is pretty friendly. I also heard and I don't know if you've heard of, I think his name is Hassan. He's Sudanese. He works on multilingualism, promoting multilingualism. So, he's someone he's one of the people I talked to for my refugee resettlement project. That's when I learned that this is a project going on. Yeah, so from my encounters with people, I would say Madison's very friendly.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. And then the last question, so we tell little kids and adults too all the time that speaking more than one language is a superpower. So can you give me one reason if you can boil it down, you can answer in English, you can answer in another language, you can kind of mix the two. Why do you think speaking more than one language is a superpower?

**Samina Hossain**

I would say your eyes are opened to other cultures, entirely different cultures. Because with translation there is always I mean, it's a cliché, but there is some information lost in translation. So if you speak more than one language, like right now I'm learning Persian, and so I'm watching more Persian movies and learning about some of their you know, because right now, our relations with Iran is not very good between the US and Iran. And so just learning about that culture, that society aside from politics, aside from what the people, I think, that's why your eyes are open to. Yeah, I would say that that's very different worldviews. I think what's more important is that when you know other countries, you know, other ways of thinking. And you grow humble, because you know that your way of thinking is not the only or best way to see the world.

**Claire Darmstadter**

For sure. Oh, thank you so much. I think your perspective is so valuable and others will learn a lot. So thank you, and I hope you have a great rest of your day.

**Samina Hossain**

Well, thank you so much. It was really good meeting you and I hope the rest of your project goes really well.