Full transcript of an interview with

FERIAL AL KHIL KHALI

on 9 July 2003

By Lizzie Russell & Catherine Manning

Recording available on CD

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Ferial Al Khil Khali, one of the Migrant Resource Centre volunteers.

This interview is being made on the 9th of July for the Migration Museum to gather information for the exhibition 'Every stitch tells a story'. The interviewers are Lizzie Russell and Catherine Manning.

If I could ask you some questions to put in our collection of answers -

In which country were you born?
In Iraq.

Was sewing a usual part of women's work when you were young?
Yes, sometimes.

What sort of sewing did your mother or grandmother do?
My mother was a good dressmaker; I learnt dressmaking from my Mum.

And your grand mother, she didn't sew?
No just my Mum.

Did your mother use traditional designs for clothing?
Yes.

What sort of designs were they?
In Iraq the women wear special clothes, long things and long sleeves [and they do] some embroidery on the top.

Does the design on the top belong to a special area or city or does it say this woman is married or young or something?
Yes, it just depends. [It] depends in which town because there is [a] difference. There is a different design for the North and the South. The North have special clothes, they are Kurdish people completely different [to] my town But in the South and in my town, I live in the middle of Iraq. The middle and South [have] no difference. All the time the women wear the long clothes.

It was the embroidery I was thinking of.
Yes, embroidery on the top [and] on the sleeves.

[Does it] tell the city where they come from?
Yes from Najur in the middle of Iraq. It is a very big city.

When you learnt to sew, how old were you?
I think I started at 16 years.

Did you hand sew?
Yes at first. All the women when they need to sew, start [that way] with the hands at first then [move on] to sewing machines.

Did you like sewing?
Yes, it is a part of my life.

Why is it part of women's lives?
I don't know for other women but I speak for my life. Because I start at 16 I like design and sewing and all the time see my Mum sit and do some things. Because of that I think it is very, very important for every woman to learn this, especially when they have their children. [She will] need to do something for her house, her children, her husband. When I needed to do these curtains, I don't need to go to the shop, I can do that in my home it is very easy. I don't spend a lot of money just a little bit to buy the materials.

And you choose just what you want.
Yes, what I want. I think it is very good [for] every woman to do that.

Yes. When you left your country did you carry any sewing things with you, needles, threads scissors or anything like that?

No unfortunately, I came [on] the boat. It is very difficult to bring something.

Could you bring anything?

No, just the needles and threads for my way when I needed this. When I reached the camp the officers take everything from me.

Which camp were you in?

Woomera.

And they took your things from you?

Yes, you can't bring this to the camp. It is OK.

Do you sew for yourself now? Clothes as well?

Yes everything for me and my children.

Do you sew for pleasure as well? Do you embroider patterns or do you sew [to be] useful?

Because I like the sewing from the first, I learnt that from my Mum. And after that I [went] to the TAFE and learnt design I can do everything now. But because I am old now I can't see very good I can't do the embroidery, it is very difficult to do that. But when I lived in my country I [did] that a lot. But now I can't because I can't see anything when I don’t wear my glasses..

When you go to refugee families’ homes to support them [as a Migrant Resource Centre volunteer] do you ever talk about sewing with them?

Yes because I go to the sewing class with the refugees. I have the class now with the MRC at Coglin St. every Monday. I invited all these [women] to this class and when all these women come [they] learn sewing and talk about [their] problems.

Could you give us examples of the problems they talk about?

Sometimes the woman has a problem with her husband or her children, you know because the culture is different here. It is very difficult for young people to understand, especially with the teenagers, to understand the culture here. I think every mum must do that with her children and [teach] the culture. I talk about the culture in my country, I do that with my children because I have 18 years and 16 [both] teenagers all the time I talk about my experience and the culture here and the culture in my country. (break in interview)

Can you tell us about your children and sewing? That girl who brought in the coffee so kindly?

The oldest one is a good dressmaker.

She is eighteen?

Yes, because she learnt that in my country but the younger one don't like the sewing, don't like everything.

What does she like?

Oh just [to] go to school and study very hard [which] is very good. I think like go [to become a] hairdresser – I like this, it is OK, when you have finished school you can go to TAFE.

How old were your children when you came to Australia?

The oldest one was 16, now 18 because I am 2 years here. The 16 [year old] was 14 and the other one 10.

And your visa can be renewed?

I don't know, nobody is sure about this because my husband, he came here before me. He came in 1999; I came in 2001, my husband [has] finished three years
now and the Australian policy says, when finished three years must go to permanent visa, can get it after 2 or 3 months, permanent visa.

**Did he get a permanent one?**

No, just another protection visa. It is very difficult but me I think I am finished after one year [more] 3 years because now I am 2 years here.

**It must be hard to plan.**

Because of that I am very sad. All the refugees now have a problem you know. Worry about everything here. Just thinking about am [I] staying here or no, or I go back to my home, it is very difficult [to] go back to my home. When I start here I destroy everything and go [off] again it is very difficult.

**Do most of the women in your group have children?**

Yes.

**So everyone has the same big problem.**

Yes, it is not easy for the Mum or Dad

**Do they talk a lot about it in the group?**

Yes [they] talk a lot about this not just in my group. They go to Centrelink the refugee women there all the time they talk about this problem because it is a big problem for every woman here is just thinking about her children and their futures.

When I came here I said yes this is a good country. I am getting my freedom here I am looking for a good future for my children but I can't find anything.

**How long were you in Woomera?**

I am very lucky, I don't stay a long time in Woomera just fifty four days.

**A long time.**

No, no because all the families that come with me, stay one year or one year and a half or two years [it] is very difficult. But when I get my visa in Woomera after fifty four days all the officers in Woomera say "You're very lucky woman, don't stay a long time" You know [in] Woomera I don't just sitting in my room. No I go to the factory, Woomera have a factory for sewing.

**Did you get paid for that?**

Just one dollar for hour.

**One dollar**

Yes one dollar for one hour.

**Sewing on machines?**

Yes big sewing machines. I do the track suits and jumpers and everything for the refugees in the camp. I go to this factory and I work.

**So in the sewing factory, you worked from nine o'clock to five o'clock?**

No, start in the nine o'clock until the one o'clock, go to the restaurant for my lunch and after that I go to two o'clock to four thirty. I finished at four thirty.

**So a lot of work and not much money.**

No, is not much money but you know you [are] bored in the camp. I can't do anything just all the time I am sitting [in] my room, it is very difficult. I say I am going to this factory, I am working and when I go to the factory [and they] see my work and she said "You are [a] very good dressmaker”. She put me as manager for all these people, Afghani people and Iraqi women work with me. It is a very lovely group, do a lot because I know when I do this, make this jumper or this track suit that is for these people that live here. I work very hard because I want to do a lot for these people.

**Did most of the women work in the factory?**
No, No just one Iraqi woman and four Afghans, young men. I don't know, Iraqi women just stay at home and cooking. Iraqi men [are] very difficult men. Sometimes a few do let the wife [leave] the home and go outside.

**Even in Woomera?**

Everywhere, everywhere you know. No I am serious because I am [inviting] the women to my class sometimes [one says] " Oh I am sorry I can't" and I say "Why", "My husband refuse [that] I go outside" [I say] "I talk with your husband because I am Iraqi and my husband is Iraqi".

**Does it make it easier that you are Iraqi and you are doing something like sewing?**

Yes because you know ……. sometimes they say yes.

**How can you explain to a husband that it is alright? What do you say?**

Because I am Iraqi [and] I live here I haven't [my] family I haven't any friends. I say I am bored [sometimes]. It is very difficult I am sitting in my home, just thinking about my country and my family and what happen in my country. Sometimes [they] become very nervous, just crying and when I talk with her husband [of] this woman, I say "Why have you refused that, because your wife needs some time to rest, some person to talk with, other persons, with the friends, all the Iraqis are the same as one family. I collect all these women around me, it is very good. I visit Iraqi families every week, I help them to go to the shops and do some things with them. [If she] have a problem with her children I talk with her children, you know I think it is very important.

**How many families do you help now [currently]?**

A very big number, because I work with the Hosanea Muslim Association. I am acting President of the Hosanea Muslim Association .

A lot of Muslim people come and have meeting every week, Thursday every week night. About one hundred [and] fifty persons or two hundred persons come to this meeting. I work with all these women when they have any problem. [They] just say "I have a problem with my husband, with my children, with my friends. I can't do this here. But I like this it is lovely to work with [and] help these people.

**Can these women learn English - are they allowed to?**

Yes, some of them.

**Where do they go?**

To the TAFE there on the Mall, other women go to the Otherway class [in] Torrens building in Victoria Square, some volunteers do that.

**The husbands are happy for their wives to go out and learn English?**

Yes, because you know in my culture [it] is different, the woman does everything for her family.

**All the work.**

All the work. The man just go outside and work outside but the woman is looking [after] her children, and her husband and her husband's family. Everything, shopping, clothing, school, everything because that is difficult when [she] stays all the time at home and don't learn English and doesn't learn everything.

**No wonder sewing is useful.**

Yes, sometimes is very good. Sometimes I go to the second hand and find some sewing machine for these women and it is very cheap and good.

**Who makes the machine work - sometimes the machines in the second hand [shops] are not so good?**

No I am do that because I am work with the Mary Magdelene Centre, two days in the week, it is part of Anglicare and they have a secondhand shop. In the morning I
am working [as an] interpreter at the Centre, [in the] afternoon I go to the secondhand shop. When I find good things, not just the sewing machines, blankets, clothes. I call my friends or any families who need [these things] and say “Yes, I find something and it is very good. You can come or if you want, I [can] bring this for you”. [They] say” It is OK I want this or you can bring”. I have [a] car I can do this.

**Your community is lucky that you can do this.**

I love my communities I am working with two communities all these are Iraqis the Hosaneas Muslim Association is not just for Iraqi people, Iraqi, Afghani and Iranians. It doesn't matter all the Muslims come to the Hosaneans. But the other [part] of my job is public relations in Iraqi community culture. I work there just [especially] for Iraqi families, but I love all the people as much as my own. Families from my country or not, it doesn't matter.

**The Migrant Resource Centre has all sorts of Migrant families and Refugee families, you are involved with that as well.**

Yes, I am working now with MRC .4, two days a week. I am helping families especially new arrival families. When they come here they don't understand anything, [they] can't speak English, they can't understand the policy or the rules here, it is very difficult sometimes.

**How many languages do you speak?**

Three, Arabic, Persian and English a little bit. I very [much] like the languages I want to learn a lot about the language because when I can speak a lot, I can help the people. I hope to do something for the refugees because I am a refugee.

**Your children speak English and Arabic? Two languages?**

Yes, very little Persian just learn this in the camp from the Afghani people and the Iranians in the camp but [they] understand what people say.

**Children are so quick.**

Yes because now they can speak English very better than me (laughter) with Australian accent. Sometimes they say "I don't know what you say Mum." I can't understand because it is very quick.

**I meant to ask before when you were talking about the sewing group you run at MRC. Is it mainly Iraqi women who come to that or other women as well?**

Afghani women [and] sometimes I have African women who speak Arabic because sometimes I explain the sewing in Arabic and other times in English. It is not bad I think it is good experience when you work with a lot of people with different cultures you learn everything from these people. I sometimes learn some things from these people, I can't understand last time but now I know of the Africans culture or the Afghanis culture. But all this is not a lot different it is just a little bit. But with the Australian it is a big difference.

**Especially with [parenting ] the children?**

Yes, but all the time when I talk with my children or the Iraqi families I say, you can learn the Australian culture besides the Iraqi culture. You can take the good things from two cultures and put the other things aside, just take the good things. These good things help you to [have] a good life here.

**That is a wonderful way to look at it, but it is very difficult for some people to do that.**

But when you talk all the time about that it must be [that you] can take something I am saying. I am lucky because I have good children they understand everything, when all my children are here [in] the night time their Dad talks about this.
Just they [need] to be careful when they take it from my culture and the Australian culture, now the Australian is your culture

**But the rules are so different.**

Yes but [they] can take the good things, choose what is good and what is bad.

**Was it more difficult for your boy than your girls, to choose the things?**

My daughters, no I haven’t any problem with them.

**Sometimes it is harder for the son, sometimes it is very difficult.**

Yes, because he is a boy and he wants to go with his friends outside and stay [until] nine or ten o’clock in the night. But I am checking all the time my son, with my mobile. “Where are you? What are you doing? Is your friend with you?” (laughs)

**Wise Mother.**

Yes because my son talks [on his mobile] all the times [when he is] outside “Mum, I am here now, I am with my friends” but I know all his friends all these Iraqis. [He] has Australian friends and Japanese in his school, a lot of Iraqis with him. I haven’t a problem I think, I am comfortable [with] this.

**Do you have anything else you want to say, for the tape for the Migration Museum?**

I think just I want to say all the refugee women need a lot, a lot of help [from] every office here, not just the Migrant Resource Centre, from everybody because they haven’t anybody here. [She] has lost her family and her country, it is not easy to start here again because [of that] she needs very kind people.

**Do their neighbours become friendly sometimes?**

Sometimes yes, why not. I have a good neighbour here. Sometimes knock [on] my door and say “Hello how are you?” The [other] neighbour is very new here just one week I think.

**Everyone needs help.**

Thank you very much for telling us all this, it is very kind.