



BRYCS Parenting Conversations: Suzan, an Iraqi Mother

In January 2008, BRYCS staff spoke with Suzan about her life and experiences as an Iraqi parent now living in the United States. Suzan has 7 children; her husband died while they sought refuge in Lebanon.

Family Background

I was resettled in the U.S. in September of 2000, along with my daughter and six sons.

We originally left Iraq in 1990. There was a war in Iraq at the time, and my husband was asked to go into the army. But our kids were small then and needed their father, so we fled Iraq at that time.

First we went to Iran, where we stayed for eight months. We had a hard time in Iran because the government put pressure on us, so we left there and fled to Syria.

We stayed in Syria for three years. It was hard to find a job there because there were a lot of refugees, and things were expensive, so we finally left Syria and went to Lebanon.

We remained in Lebanon for six years. It was not great, but it was better than the other places. We had freedom to work and to support our family.

We did not have relatives in any of these countries, and these governments did not recognize us as refugees, so it was hard.

In Lebanon, we received some help from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). My husband became sick with cancer, so the UNHCR helped to pay for his medical care. The UNHCR was also helping us to pay for rent and utilities, and they paid for his funeral when he died in Lebanon. The UN also helped us with the resettlement process.

It was really difficult for us to come to the U.S. It took about six years for the resettlement process. No country wanted to take a sick person, due to my husband's cancer, so we were not resettled until after his death. My children were excited about coming to the U.S., because in those other three countries they couldn't find good jobs. But here in the U.S., they have been able to find jobs, and we are stable.

Marriage and Family Life

I come from a family of 7 sisters and 6 brothers. My husband had 3 brothers and 2 sisters. Both our families are Shia Muslim.

I was 14 years old when I got married—I was crazy. My husband and I were close relatives—first cousins—but the marriage was not arranged by our families. He was about 19 when we married.

My parents were in agreement with our marriage, because I really cared for my husband. We had been married for about 27 years when he died.

But now I think you are not mature enough to get married at the age I married. Now the custom is changing, and young people wait until they are in their 20's, and they finish their education first.

In Iraq we had to get parental approval to get married. But right now it is changing, and the boy and girl can get married if they want to, even without the parents' permission.

We were really a happy family in Iraq. We were able to take care of our children, to take care of their education, and to meet their needs. We were really a happy family.

Education

I never went to school. My mother has told me that when I was a child, I was very sick and couldn't go to school, but all my siblings attended school. My husband also went to school; he almost finished high school. Now in Iraq, educational opportunities are the same for boys and for girls.

The only thing I can tell my kids is to finish their education. That is the only thing—I cannot do anything else, because I am not educated myself. I did this in Iraq, and I do the same thing here.

My daughter went to school in Lebanon for hairstyling, language, sewing, and she also helped me at home. Our younger children were also going to school. All of the schools in Lebanon are private, so the UN paid for our two youngest children to go to school. We lived in the central part of Lebanon, where a lot of Christian Lebanese live.

My two youngest sons have gone to school in the U.S. They were in 1st and 2nd grades when we arrived. The education is really different between the U.S. and Iraq. In Lebanon, the children attended school and learned some English. But still, it was hard here at first because they could not speak English, so they started out in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

The teachers treated them differently here. In Iraq, if the kids do something wrong, the teachers will just hit the kids—that's the only way they discipline them. Here in the U.S. they have several ways to discipline the kids, or to deal with a problem.

Children

In Iraqi culture, there tends to be a preference for boys over girls, but in our family there was no difference.

My two youngest boys were born in Lebanon, but the rest of my children were born in Baghdad. They were all born in the hospital. The births were mostly easy, except for the last one, which was not that easy because I went through a lot and was depressed. My youngest son was four years old when his father died. He only has a little memory of his father. My next youngest son remembers a lot about his father, as do the older children.

In Lebanon, I was concerned about my children's education, because we had moved from one country to another. Over here it is the same thing, especially for my oldest children. They do not have time to go back to school because they are working to support their families.

My four oldest sons all work for a meat packing company. They were each able to learn some

English through church classes and through community college. All four have married, but only one has his wife here in the U.S. My oldest son married an Iraqi girl about five years ago in Syria; he has filed all of the necessary paperwork, but he is still waiting to get permission for her to come to the U.S. Two other sons recently married Iraqi sisters who are refugees in Syria, but they are also waiting for their wives to get permission to come to the U.S.

My daughter speaks good English. She went to college, and now she is an assistant manager at a fast food restaurant. She is engaged to marry an American boy. I am OK with that; I am happy for her.

My two youngest boys are now in middle school and high school. They are doing well in school, and both play basketball. They are really friendly with everybody, and they have not had any problems with anyone.

Discipline and Reward

My husband and I really worked together to raise and discipline our kids. Sometimes if I couldn't handle a problem, I would ask him to handle it, or *vice versa*.

When the children were small, I taught them how to respect others and how to listen to others. Now when they do something wrong, I can discipline them very easily. They respect me as their parent and they know that parents have authority.

There are different ways to discipline in Iraqi culture. Some families hit or spank. But other families don't want to do that, and they talk to them to control them, so there are different ways. In our family, we sit together and solve the problem by talking to them, or they will be grounded or will not get their spending money.

When they do something good, we have to praise them and encourage them, and sometimes we buy some gifts for them. We hug and kiss them to show affection, because this makes the kids trust us as parents and they feel like their parents really love and care for them.

Chores and Responsibility

I encourage my children to spend their time finishing their education, to save money, get married and start their life. At home they are also responsible to make their bed, clean their room, and help with cooking and cleaning. The boys also help with taking care of the yard and mowing the lawn.

In Iraq, the responsibilities were the same for boys and girls in our family. But for other families, the girls would do all of the household work with their mom. The boys would take care of things outside the house, like the yard.

It was difficult in Lebanon when my husband died, but my older boys were really good and took on responsibilities. They were encouraging me by saying, "We are working; we are going to the U.S.; everything will be OK." My boys were really tough and worked very hard to support our family, and to support me also.

Elders and Extended Family

In Iraq, the grandparents and uncles have a role in disciplining the kids. The kids respect their elders and their uncles.

The hardest thing when I left my country was leaving my family and my memories. When I am far away from my family, I have to depend on myself.

I really don't have any contact now with my relatives in Iraq, because after the war the phone numbers changed, and I don't have new phone numbers for them. I tried to find family in the U.S., but I haven't been able to find any of my relatives here.

Employment

I didn't work outside the home in Iraq, but I took care of the cooking and housecleaning. In Lebanon, our sons were working outside the home, because my husband was sick. They worked for a beverage company, delivering drinks to the market and also working at the factory. They were around ages 17, 18 and 19.

Now, I am disabled and unable to work—due to diabetes, injuries to my hands, asthma, and other medical problems—so I received Supplementary Security Income (SSI) for a while. But these benefits were cut off, because I am not yet a U.S. citizen. I have applied for U.S. citizenship, but there have been delays and I have not yet received it.

Childcare

When I came to the U.S., my older sons started working while I stayed home and took care of the house. So I didn't have a problem with childcare—I picked the two youngest boys up after school.

When we arrived in the U.S., we lived in a house with three bedrooms. After two years, we saved our money and bought a big house in a nice area.

Raising Teenagers

It's really sensitive for the teenagers at that age—to talk with them, deal with them—but you have to be diplomatic with them, and I have my ways for disciplining them.

My advice is to have a diplomatic way with them. Talk with the kids in a sweet, calm way, explain in detail, to make them like you, trust you, to listen to you. But if you just yell and hit them, that's not going to work.

They have to follow our culture and our customs. They cannot just ignore our culture. If you discipline them from the start, you will have a good result at the end, but if you do not, you will have problems.

Values

Respect is an Iraqi value that I want to pass on to my children. At home, they have to respect their elders in the household. At school they have to respect their teachers. That's really important in our culture—elders and those with authority should receive respect. Everything in my culture—I want my kids to know it and to practice respect with those around them. Day by day, I teach them things about my culture.

I think there are similarities between my culture and U.S. culture, like making donations of time or things, helping orphans and needy families. The educational system is really good over here, without discrimination. The laws really protect us—we feel safe, we don't have to be afraid.

September 11th

Before and after 9/11, people in our city were really nice to us. Our neighbors came to visit us after the tragedy to show that nothing had changed. We heard from friends in other places that some people were angry with Iraqis, but people here were very nice to us, and we didn't really feel anything bad. We were really against what happened on 9/11.

Greeting

When we greet one another, we say "Salam aleykum" [peace be upon you.] If the woman is close to you, you hug her and kiss her two or three times on the cheek. Men will shake hands.

If you are greeting between genders, you would just shake hands. If you are close relatives, you might hug, but not kiss.

Advice

When I came to the U.S., everything seemed different. The most challenging thing was the language, but the children went to school and learned English. And the resettlement agency helped them find jobs here. I have also been able to learn some English.

I want to advise all the Iraqis with families that you have to send their kids to school, and you have to work hard, because you have to depend on yourself. You have to go to work, because you cannot depend on welfare.

Hopes and Dreams

Especially for my two youngest children—I hope they will get good degrees in their education, graduate from school and be doctors or engineers, because their brothers did not have these opportunities. My youngest son wants to go to a military school to become a police officer, and his older brother wants to become a racecar engineer.

My hopes for Iraq are that it will become a stable country where people are safe, and that Iraqis can return safely to their families.

I also want to thank the American troops and the American people that have helped us and our country. I want to thank everyone who helped us to come here to the U.S. and to stand on our feet. I want a bright future for Iraq, so that eventually everything would be stable over there.

But even if the situation is better in Iraq, I don't think we will go back.

Discussion Questions for Refugee Serving Agencies

1. What do you know about the processing of Iraqi refugees for resettlement in the U.S.?
 - a. BRYCS resource list on [Iraqi refugees](#) (pp. 4-5)
 - b. From the U.S. Department of State / Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration
 - i. [The United States Humanitarian Assistance for Displaced Iraqis](#)
 - ii. [U.S. Refugee Admissions Program \(USRAP\) Frequently Asked Questions - Iraqi Processing](#)
 - c. From RCUSA

- i. [Compilation of recent Summaries, Reports and Backgrounders on Iraqi refugees](#)
 - ii. [Web page on Eligibility for U.S. Resettlement](#)
2. Suzan mentioned that she was age 14 at the time she married. Occasionally, “married minors”—a married couple where one or both spouses are below age 18—come through the U.S. Refugee Program (USRP). How would the case of a married minor be handled in your state, and what laws or regulations would you need to explore?
3. For what federal benefits are refugees eligible, and for how long?
 - a. [RCUSA Web page Post Arrival Assistance and Benefits](#)
 - b. [USCRI Resource Guide for Serving Refugees with Disabilities](#)
4. What educational or vocational opportunities are available in your community for youth who arrive as older teens, and how are teens oriented to the U.S. school system?
 - a. [BRYCS Spotlight article, Welcoming and Orienting Newcomer Students to U.S. Schools](#)
 - b. [BRYCS Toolkit, Growing Up in a New Country: A Positive Youth Development Toolkit for Working with Refugees and Immigrants](#)
5. How would you advise someone with refugee status who wanted to bring a spouse to the U.S.?
 - a. From USCIS,
 - i. [Application Procedures: Settling a Spouse as a Derivative Refugee in the United States](#)
 - ii. [I Am a Refugee or Asylee, How Do I...Help My Relative Get Refugee or Asylee Status in the United States?](#)