

Rutgers Around the World - Episode 10: Ifrah Akhtar - Muslims Abroad

[HOST, MUSIC UNDER]

HOST: The following is a production of Rutgers Global.

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HOST: Welcome to Rutgers Around the World, the podcast with the finger on the pulse of all things global at Rutgers!

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Today we hear from Ifrah Akhtar, who graduated from Rutgers University in 2019. During the summer of 2017, Ifrah studied abroad in Seoul, South Korea. She had some amazing experiences as you would expect, but also faced some challenges as a Muslim woman, including being abroad during Ramadan, a holy month in the Islamic faith during which Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset.

These experiences studying abroad inspired Ifrah to develop a resource for other Muslim students seeking a global experience, leading to the creation of her guide called, "Muslims Abroad."

In this episode of Rutgers Around the World, Ifrah talks about her study abroad experience and her Muslims Abroad project. This is her story.

IFRAH AKHTAR: My first time studying abroad was going to South Korea for a month, and I think the one big motivator for me, it was definitely, there's this quote that says that in order to learn your culture, sometimes you have to leave it, and I feel like we live in this bubble here in the United States, and especially me. I'm the first person in my family to go to college and I have two younger sisters who are sitting in the back, so I feel like I really had to pave a way to kind of show them that, hey, you can literally do anything when you go to college, anything you wanna do.

I lived on campus, this is like an hour and half away from where I live, and it might not seem like a lot, but it seemed like a lot to my parents, so like the whole idea of me leaving the country was insane for them, but I can definitely say that one big motivator other than leaving my culture to learn more about it was definitely that the world is your classroom.

As a religion major here on campus, there were things I was learning about, principles, theories; we were learning about Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, in the classroom, but when I was actually

abroad in Seoul, there's this class I took called Living Religions in South Korea, and we actually visited a christian church in South Korea, we visited a mosque and I didn't even know there was a Muslim population in South Korea. They have this beautiful mosque that sits on a hill that you can see downtown Seoul from it, and being able to take what I was learning in my classroom and my undergrad and applying it not through just principle and doctrine-wise, but seeing how Korean Islam is different from my Islam or American Islam, definitely opened doors for me mentally and also professionally because I'm still friends with the people I was in class with during my Ewha trip and I also made lifelong friends while I was there as well.

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IFRAH AKHTAR: Pursuing study abroad or global study, it does open your horizons more. You realize, yeah we're all connected through social media, but when you're actually there in that space, it's completely different from liking a picture of South Korea online, and I feel like it's important for you to be in that space because also half of representation is just showing up and I feel like even if you show up in your space or in a global space, it's really important for you to not only build your identity and to see, hey, maybe in the future, I could see myself living in South Korea, so I feel like that's why it's important for you to think about these things, not just like oh it's just study abroad, like think about how it can impact you personally, professionally, and academically.

So for me, I talked a little bit about the challenges that I had, which was like navigating the food scene in Korea, and then also finding a place I could pray because I had to do Eid prayer somewhere, so thinking about stuff like that. But the main challenge for me that I like to focus on is talking to my parents because if I didn't have those initial conversations with them, I don't think I would have gone abroad, and this is where I want to talk a lot about support systems. You mentioned too, like a community or support group that can back you up, and I was very lucky that I worked at the Study Abroad office. I was a work study student there so I was like placed there coming in as a freshman here at Rutgers, and being in an environment and seeing, I'm sorry I don't want to trigger anyone, but for me personally, I always thought that study abroad was a thing white people did, like rich white people, you know, that had access to money. Again, I don't want to offend anyone, but coming into the office, I saw people of all different types, different races, different cultures coming in and actually pursuing study abroad. So I think the first layer of me breaking into oh, I can actually do this, was seeing those students by working in the office, and then the second was definitely that I worked with Kelly and Christina and everyone there, the staff at the office was very supportive and I told them I would love to study abroad, but I don't know what my parents would say. Me living here on campus is already a huge thing for them, they honestly didn't like that I was coming here to Rutgers, so she said what are your parents so concerned about? And I know two things, like I'm a woman. It was my first time going abroad on my own. Also, they don't think, like Korea is not a muslim country, so they were fearful of what people, like would I be able to eat? How would I be able to

survive there for a month, and I think, I sat down and I had to do research, so that's one thing that I really want to say, do your research because it's one thing saying I'm going to study abroad and actually showing them instead of being all about talk, so I feel like when you actually sit down with your parents and say this is why it's important to me, these are the steps I'm gonna do to make it happen.

Eventually they did say oh, you can, as long as you're able to pay for the majority of it, so that was like a plan for me. They were more open to the idea now, now I just have to figure out the fundraising, and then thankfully with the Gilman Scholarship I got from the Study Abroad office and some money I saved, I was able to make it a reality. But again, just having a support system and doing your own research is really important.

Also, one thing you mentioned about the community that I really liked; before I was about to go abroad, I shared this news with my professor, one of my religion professors here, and he was like oh, I've traveled in South Korea a lot. He was able to connect me with people who he knew in Seoul, like Muslim people that he knew that might be able to be points of contact for me, and also while I was in Ewha, one of my professors there for the religion course, he actually made islam a part of the courses curriculum, like there wasn't a chapter about Islam in that course's syllabus for the summer, but he made it because he wanted to show not only the class, but me, that there is a muslim scene on campus. So I feel like it's very important when you see these gaps, or these things you want to know more about, to share your ideas with support people or professors just because you don't know what it can take you to.

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IFRAH AKHTAR: I think what's so important to finances is that if you start doing your research, there is so much money out there available to students, especially minority students and even religious students. There are certain scholarships out there available to Muslim students that want to study in the arts or want to do anything STEM. Also, reaching out to your local mosque like you mentioned, sometimes you'll be able to throw you money. The important thing about fundraising is that you should try to apply to a lot of opportunities or scholarships as early as you can because even if you get a hundred here, two hundred there, all of it that will add up and can total significant costs, especially if you're going to a country, like for Korea, the dollar there is really strong, like when I was there for the whole month, I ate out every single day, every single meal. I was pretty much able to go to a restaurant and eat. It's what your currency will translate to depending on where you're studying abroad to.

One thing I really want to say that's valuable is not to be scared of scholarship applications because if you're able to communicate your story; I know I did struggle with the Gilman Scholarship, it's hard to talk about yourself, but if you're able to share why you're passionate, especially things like why this will affect me academically, professionally, personally, they really

want to see your side of the story because at the end of the day, the people that are giving you money, they are investing in you. Another point I want to share is to get creative with it. I know at the study abroad office there was like, I've heard sometimes like students can start Gofundme campaigns or share a Paypal link with their friends. Like I said, any money can help because it can pay for a Visa, it could pay for your luggage and stuff like that. Just doing your research and being creative about money and not letting it weigh you down is really important, also promoting the study abroad office a lot, but they really did help me because Kelly, she's one of the financial coordinators at the office, going to her and talking to her, she will sit down with you and look through all your financial aid, all your finances and make a plan because I really didn't think I was going to be able to fund it, but working with her and seeing what I would have to do really helped make it a reality.

So one thing I can say is that I identify as a Muslim American woman, and when I was in Korea, my religion isn't painted on my face, so what people will see me as is oh, you're an American.

When you travel, that's the first thing, even if I really wasn't thinking like oh, I'm an American too much in my mind, so I was surprised that when I was in Korea, people were like oh, you're an American. The question I got the most was, why did you pick Trump as the president? I got that from so many people, like people that would sell food on the street would ask me that, like I don't know how to answer that question. So I feel like when you travel, you realize that there's so many layers to your identity, like it might not just be what you're thinking in your head, like oh, Muslim woman. It might be like you're an American Muslim woman, or you're an American Muslim woman who's parents are from Pakistan and Kuwait. People will see you differently. Some people didn't even think I was American, they thought I was Italian or something else and I was like, ok, and I was talking to another student, she couldn't be here today, I would have loved her to, but she is in the brochure, she's one of the student stories, and she said that when she traveled to Morocco, she was like oh, it's a Muslim country, she'll be able to fit in there, it'll be easier for her, but she said, to the Moroccan people, she wasn't Muslim enough.

You have to think about that. Even in Korea, the Korean Muslims I encountered, the major question I got was why don't you veil? And I know that's a personal choice for a lot of people, so people are going to view you in very different varying lengths, and I feel like it does impact how you view yourself because, like I said, I've had friends that are like oh, I'm not Muslim enough or I'm too Muslim. You have to think about that when it comes to identity too, in global spaces especially.

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IFRAH AKHTAR: When I was in Korea, I got the very unique opportunity through Instagram. I met these Korean Muslims through Instagram and that seemed shady at first, but they were students that were born in Korea and they were Muslim and there were also some students that were studying abroad from Kazakhstan, and there were a couple of students studying abroad

from Arabic countries, and we were able to sit together and have a meal, and they all shared their experiences with me about what it means for them to be Muslim in Korea.

One of the experiences that really struck me was her family was very strictly Catholic and when she came out to her family that I'm going to convert to Islam, they were very against it, like her relationship with her mom is severed. So she said I got learn more about what the Korean Muslim scene looked like because I feel like as an outsider going in, I'm like oh, a mosque, and I can feel at home there and I can, but their version of Islam is different because it's implying the culture too, and I feel like when you travel, it's sometimes easy to forget that, like your version of Islam is not going to be their version, and listening to her experience did make me feel grateful that I'm glad my relationship with my mom isn't severed or stuff like that. So I feel like identity, everything impacts you, but when you go abroad and you realize that there are so many layers to it.

I think a lot of it for me personally was when I came home and I was able to sit down and like really go over what was this experience for me, what did this mean to me. When I was presenting at Diversity Abroad, I also was part of their global student leadership summit, and we had a seminar there where it was unpacking your study abroad experience more than saying oh, it was amazing. What made it amazing? How did it impact you? All the goods and bads, and I feel like it's important to do that anywhere you travel when you come back to just sit down and reflect. How am I different now from before I went? How has this enriched my experience and what has it done to me? A lot of it for me was when I came back, while I was there, I was in the middle of it so I didn't have time to process it, everything was just happening really fast. When I was able to actually sit down and think about it more, that's when I started to have epiphanies and stuff.

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IFRAH AKHTAR: I haven't traveled to a Muslim majority country, I mean have when I was younger, but that's too early for me to really think about these things, but I can say that one of my friends, Naaz, when she traveled to Morocco, she said that she thought it was going to be easy because it's a Muslim country, but she said it's really hard because people will still look at you as an outsider. Even though she's Muslim, she was American, like she wasn't Muslim enough, and she said it's very difficult because when she would go out into the streets of Morocco, people didn't see her as Muslim, but when she would be in her class, like on her study abroad program, she was the only Muslim there, and whenever they had questions about Islam and what was going on in Morocco, they were like oh, let's ask Naaz. Since it's hard being that token Muslim in that class or in a global space, especially if she is in a Muslim country, so again there's a lot of like complexity to work through when you are studying abroad in a Muslim country.

For me, going to Korea, since it's obviously not a Muslim country, I feel like there was a lot of more camaraderie in the smaller minority community there with the students that I sat with and we had dinner with, how it feels to be a Muslim in Korea. But again, for me the biggest thing was the food. I knew in Korean to say I didn't want meat in my food, but they would be like why? You're so skinny, eat more. I'm just like no, you don't understand. It did get to a point where I was just like, I would have to just take the meat out or request vegetarian. So I feel like it's what you also make of the experience. If you have family in the Muslim majority country, then you're going to get a completely different experience than if you were traveling on your own. I also personally think it probably is a bit more challenging to navigate your Muslim identity in a Muslim majority country because that's one thing that will really be challenged.

I think that one really important thing that we have to consider is even though we're so connected throughout social media, we have to think, there's an algorithm that runs that thing. It's very curated what you see and things you see on the news, certain perceptions are formed about other countries and you won't break past those perceptions until you actually go to those countries. What you might know about Korea, what you might know about the Middle East might be very fueled by what you interact with on a daily basis through the news, through the media, but when you're there, you're able to form those connections and your own perspectives on your own, and I feel like that's also one really big important thing we have to do in studying abroad. It's to form our own opinions, like just don't sit there and let the TV feed you. Go out there and learn on your own. When I was in Korea, I was able to see different parts of religions there. I was able to make friends, like I said. I also, while I was there, I was able to do a market research study for some product they were launching in the US. So just these little things, you never know what's going to happen. I feel like it might be romanticized, like oh, study abroad, go travel to this country, but actually doing it and realizing that it's a journey, not just a one time destination thing, it's just so important and very enriching for you personally too.

HOST: Thanks to Ifrah for sharing her experiences with us. For more information on Ifrah's story or Study Abroad at Rutgers, be sure to visit our website: global.rutgers.edu.

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That's all for this episode of Rutgers Around the World. Join us next time as we discuss all things global with members of the Rutgers community. Thanks for listening."

[MUSIC STINGS]