

Neighborhood Tales: Kuwait Under Lockdown

The Neighborhood Tales: Kuwait Under Lockdown project sprouted out of a painful realization that even as history was sure to remember the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, and its impacts on every aspect of our human life, there are some stories, some voices, some experiences that might never be recorded for posterity. In Kuwait, where history still struggles to break out of the official and mainstream narrative, there would be many who, if not completely unheard, would find their experiences subject to but an ephemeral burst of public interest in the newspapers and social media. They might be heard. But not listened to.

This project is an effort to prevent that loss. It's a community-based effort to document what we've lived through. So that we may all remember. But more importantly, so that we can act to bring change. What did we get right? What do we need to fix? Pessimism and conventional thinking come easy in crisis. And it's these two instincts we hope this project remedies against. We are guided by the belief that, no matter how challenging the times, there is always hope-- waiting for us to wield it. Hiding, in unexpected places.

MEENA - A mother reflects on her experience being separated from her family for seven months

[In this clip, Meena tells us about the moment when she came to discover that she was banned from entering Kuwait; her home...]

Meena: So on the 2nd of March we decided okay I just go for one day and come back. I'm not going to stay anyway. I'm going to go to the, from the airport I'll go to the campus, meet the faculty, see the campus, drive back to the airport and I'll be back home on Saturday morning. So I left on Thursday, late night. Friday I'm supposed to meet the school and Friday night, I'm supposed to be back in Kuwait. Friday. Saturday, early morning. 7 am. I'm supposed to be back in Kuwait. Usually when I travel, I try to prepare some food for [REDACTED]. And I said, I don't have to. Friday you guys order from somewhere. And then Saturday, I'm going to make the breakfast because I'm coming at seven in the morning. When I boarded the flight, everything was fine. Everything perfectly fine. It was Emirates flight but the flight was delayed. So instead of me getting to Dubai at 5:00 am, I got-- I arrived at 6:30 pm, 6:30 am.

Eleanor: What was the date? Do you remember? Like what date?

Meena: It was Saturday? Saturday the 6th. 6th of March¹.

Eleanor: Of March..

Meena: Yes.

¹ The Friday in question was in fact the 7th of March

Eleanor: So you got there delayed.

Meena: The flight was delayed. I would have been in Dubai at 4:00 am. But anyway I had to, I had my connecting flight at 7:00 am. So the flight was delayed and as I was landing, I was like, 'Oh my God, the flight is delayed. I hope I don't miss the flight'. When I arrived I messaged my husband and said, flight is delayed. He said just rush, rush to the gate. I was rushing. And there was this big, huge crowd at the Emirates counter. And when I saw the Emirates officer, I said, 'Kuwait'. He said, 'Are you coming from India?'. I said, 'Yes, yes.' I was like you know I thought probably okay they're waiting for me [laughing] because I'm late. I said 'Yes, yes' I ran to him. He said, 'Ma'am, can you step aside?' I was like 'I'm late'. He said 'No Kuwait has closed for Indians'. I said, 'What! It doesn't make sense?' I mean three hours back I was, three and a half hours back I was boarded for Kuwait. It's a connecting flight. I was not coming to Dubai. I was coming to Kuwait via Dubai. So why, why would they board me if they had to ban me from coming into Kuwait? So he was like, 'No, we just got the circular at 6:00 am. And it was 6.30 am. So he was like, I said, 'No, this cannot be'. I said, 'I'm half an hour, 45 minutes away. My girl is all by herself. I, you cannot hold me here'. So he said, 'Ma'am even if I board you, they will send you back'. So I said, 'What do I do now?' So I, all those emotions. There was, there was like anger first. And then it was a fright. And then I was crying and then I was strong. And then I said, 'no way I have to do something'. So he was like, you go back. I said, I don't have anyone there. I'm from Goa. I don't have anyone. He was sending me, they were sending me, Emirates was sending the flight back to Bangalore. So I was like, 'No, I cannot go to Bangalore because I don't have anyone'. So he was like, 'Ma'am, we can't do anything about it, but you can do one thing. If you have a visa. I mean, if you have the benefit of having a visa upon arrival, maybe you can stay here and we'll see, after 14 days, if the government changes the rule, the Kuwait government'. So since I had the US visa and then I could have a visa upon arrival at the airport, I chose to stay. Of course I consulted [REDACTED]. And he was like, 'Okay, it's better if you stay, don't go back, because these things might just change'. You know? It just happened. Nobody knew it happened. He woke up and he was like, 'No, no, no, I don't think, I think it's a rumor'. I said, 'No. Emirates is saying that the circular is already in their system at 6.30 in the morning'. So I stayed, I spoke to a lot of people. I spoke to the embassy, nobody was clear about it. I spoke to the immigration. The immigration said, 'You can stay in Dubai as long as you want, but we can't help you to go to Kuwait'.

Eleanor: So did you just go from the airport, like with your luggage and go to like the embassy and da-da-da or did you find a hotel? What did you do?

Meena: No, I called the embassy. I called the embassy. My luggage is still with Emirates. I called the embassy. Then I went to the immigration officer. I went to the officer, the Emirates airport manager, because I was not giving up. I was saying no I need to speak to this one, that one, so nobody could help me. I was, I was walking. I, I have on my phone 56,000 steps. I was walking for nine hours!

Eleanor: Oooh!

Meena: From one end to another. I was exhausted but I was not giving up because I knew I was so close to home. Home was Kuwait. And I am not going to just get stuck or go back. But nothing happened. I booked a hotel and I stayed there for 14 days. I thought I would stay there for 14 days. But after about 10 days, Kuwait shut down the airport. That was another shock for me. I was like, now what? I mean, they can't come, I can't go. We are stuck, away from each other. So my siblings were getting worried because I was getting a bit depressed. I was crying more than, very often I used to break down to my sisters. Of course, I was not breaking down in front of my daughter and my husband because I wanted to, I wanted them to be strong also. So my sister--

Eleanor: Where were your siblings? Who was, who was with you in Dubai? Anybody?

Meena: Nobody, nobody, but my siblings were in Goa.

Eleanor: Oh!

Meena: So I was talking to them, especially my sister and my brother.

Eleanor: So you were alone during this whole period. [Audio overlap]

Meena: I was, I was all, yeah all alone. When I decided I think that was the best to do to go to Goa. My daughter was like, 'Mama, please don't go.' Because for her, I was so close. If I go to India, I would be very far. [Crying]. It really broke my heart.

[For more stories click here.](#)

Important Note on Privacy: All narrators have given consent to the public dissemination of their recorded and written testimonies. The audio files contained below capture only a snippet from the full recorded interviews. The latter will only be made available to researchers and educators upon request. In order to protect the anonymity of our narrators, all their names have been changed, and any identifying details have been redacted. Some of the narrator's voices have also been modified for additional security.

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