

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.

NOORA - A young bidoon entrepreneur reflects on the impact of the pandemic on her community.

[In this clip, Noora reflects on how COVID-19 has only exacerbated the sense of insecurity she always feels as a Bidoon....]

Noora: Ah, I am 23 years old, by the way. Of course, like any Bidoon it was difficult to get an academic spot, I got it after a year and a half or two years of my high school graduation, that's all.

Abdullah: There was a gap after your graduation from high school, like a long gap?

Noora: Of course, a gap. This gap let's say it is the reason for the formation of my current personality. Because I tried as much as possible to avoid staying at home for a year and a half or two without doing anything. So I worked in everything. I mean if you ask me now about the number of jobs or things I've worked in, I would not be able to identify all of them because any job opportunity I received, even for a simple amount or basic salary I would throw myself in. Of course, this was all due to the idea that I did not want to be a human who does not have anything to do in her life. I worked in organizing theaters, I worked in teaching which I still do, I worked in a call center, in multiple clinics, and multiple telecommunications companies, I worked in recording voice overs for more than one news platform. I worked in a lot of things. I cannot mention all, but what I wanted to clarify is that I was not just sitting around for that year and a half or two years.

Abdullah: You said it refined your personality.

Noora: Yes, of course, because it made me--It made me unafraid of the idea of trying anything and made me bold in my dealings. I mean, it made me unafraid. I do not restrict myself to one place or a single working environment because this thing does not suit me as a Bidoon, because if I graduated from college or--I mean in my life, I will not be offered a fixed job or anything that will last for the rest of my life. So, the idea of testing myself in more than one place is what has benefited me and now, I mean thanks to Him I was able to get by throughout this year, let us say, with Corona and those circumstances.

Abdullah: It taught you that during these abnormal situations, like Corona where everything has changed, you have become more adaptable. I mean you are able to adapt to change?

Noora: Yes, I don't stop. I mean, look, Abdullah. I always say that for people like us, our situation will not improve. If I stopped, even in these circumstances, thinking that everything is delayed and life will never go on, it makes the situation even more difficult and very heavy. So, like, I must always find an alternative, that's what's always on my mind, and I always make sure that I have a plan B so that if this doesn't work, I'll move on to something else and I must find an alternative.

Abdullah: I feel that from the way you speak, I mean I'm trying to understand the way your mind thinks, that you have a plan B and C and D and that you are always trying to see the opportunities available and to adapt accordingly.

Noora: Yes, honestly without any shyness or timidity. I always say that it is not shameful. It's not shameful for a person to work, and maybe even now that I have my degree and so when I tell a person that I have a certain degree and I'm working a job in a different field they say "How? That doesn't work. It doesn't suit you." I wouldn't ever feel ashamed of working in any field or having any job. Because the reality is that this was destined, that I'm forced to work in any job even if it is not in line with my qualifications or other things.

Abdullah: You mentioned, I mean it's a great link you made when you said Corona and your year and a half or two year experience after high school, and it made you kind of qualified for an occurrence such as the Corona crisis.

Noora: True.

Abdullah: I would like to know--I mean, how has life changed since the Corona crisis? You are a fresh graduate so I'd like to create a timeline, when did you graduate?

Noora: I graduated in 2019 and for the record, I mean even during my studies, I did not stop working. As I've told you, the teaching work that just I mentioned was - I mean, I taught in some academies as well as nurseries and those types of institutes, I mean honestly, I did not stop working for them and it remained with me, and it was providing me an income, I won't say that it was an excellent income. On the contrary, I spoke earlier about how these institutions rob a Bidoon girl's every atom of effort in exchange for an extremely poor salary. I mean I have

something different and I can – sorry to say this– but I could probably earn more if I had another job. This idea was comforting to me, so when Corona came– you know that these institutes were all delayed or closed. So, we started teaching online, but you know the idea of exploitation from the owners of these projects, since it's for free-

Abdullah: Meaning they do not give you a salary?

Noora: How?

Abdullah: By “for free” do you mean that they do not give you a salary?

Noora: Yes, free is free for both parties I mean for the student who is attending online and they won't give me a salary... so always but I mean--I don't know. They make you feel like they're doing you a favor by not letting you sit and do nothing but they're still not going to pay you for your work. This whole thing obviously doesn't benefit me. I mean, I have been teaching for a while so this idea that within these few months I will not gain teaching experience and I need money because I am in crisis. I need something that benefits me and stays with me because there might be a total lockdown, or a partial lockdown, I don't know what will happen, I need money. I'm not obliged to work without monetary compensation.

Abdullah: What happened? I mean is there a follow up on this matter?

Noora: Of course, I refused to work without financial compensation-- monetary exchange. I tried to find places hiring someone to work online but again the idea was in exchange for half a salary. The idea of half a salary, I view as a joke. Bidoons do not receive anything in general so 100 Dinars, 200 Dinars. So, let's talk about 100 Dinars, when I started working eight hours, even online, I do not know why business owners view online work at home is no problem at all. No, I am delaying many matters in my life because I am working online at home in exchange for 50 Dinars.

Abdullah: Working online requires a greater amount of effort to be put in.

Nora: Yes, I agree, it requires more effort which made me realize that it just wasn't working out. To be honest, during the three months of complete Coronavirus lockdown, I was left financially dependent on my savings since I was at that time jobless. It was not only me. A few of my family members were also going through a similar situation. Depending solely on my savings was a very difficult and challenging situation to be in because I could not predict if the saved amount would be enough for the uncertain future. One of the most stressful things during that time was not knowing when things will go back to normal, or how long it would be before I could resume work as usual. And the same applies to my family. They have also struggled with the stress and unpredictability of the whole situation, especially because it made their ability to plan for the future very unclear and uncertain. As a human, God Almighty, when we start to feel threatened or unsafe, we start to think of things that I laugh about now as I remember. But at the time, no, I was thinking from a place of fear. But just to clarify a point, for the past year and

more I have been the main provider for my family. Not the only provider, but the one with the most financial responsibility.

Abdullah: Can I ask how many family members you have?

Nora: In total, we are seven.

Abdullah: Seven, meaning including you?

Noora: Seven, including me. So I'm telling you our situation, I was thinking from a place of fear, not knowing what awaits. So I'm telling you, there are funny things that I did back then, and they're funny to me now, but they weren't funny at the time because it came from a place of fear. I remember telling my family that we don't know how long our situation will remain this way so we need to buy a furnace and flour.

Abdullah: Okay

Noora: I was really scared, and I am scared for my family too. So, I wanted to secure our situation, or at least secure our nutrition, and then after that I did not know what would happen. I still clearly remember our prior phone conversation, and how you explained your family's situation with their neighbors to me. I want you to know that I proposed the same idea to my dad, which led him to visit our neighbor and suggest we all buy flour, canned food, and other non-perishable food necessities since our neighbor was going through an almost identical financial difficulty during that time as well.

Abdullah: Meaning it was not just an idea? You worked on it too?

Nora: Yes, for sure. It was not only an idea. We implemented it. Both my father and our neighbor shared the same fear of running out of the bare necessities and agreed that because the financial situation was so unpredictable it would be best to at least buy the basics like flour. Also, the fact that we have not paid our rent for three months was adding to my stress. So, without any income— even if I did have enough money in my savings to cover the full rent cost for three months, paying the rent meant that I wouldn't have had enough money to cover the basic everyday needs for myself and my family for an unknown amount of time.

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