

Salima's Unsatisfied Life.

By Sarah Schulman · Project Apeldoorn Starter Project · February 20, 2014

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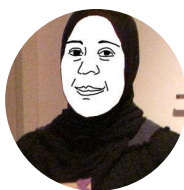
Summary

The heat is on high. And the wedding channel is on mute. Salima had the wedding she wanted. But not the marriage she dreamed. A little over a year ago, Salima lived in a rural village in Morocco. And now she lived in a Woman's Shelter in a suburban city of Holland. Trying to learn Dutch, even though she never learned to read or write Arabic.

Salima was on the precipice of two more big transitions. A move to her very own house, and the birth of her son. That meant leaving her only good friend. Another woman she met at the Shelter. Salima's network wasn't big. With the exception of a cousin living in Holland, and her social worker, she knew no one. And yet she did not want to return to Morocco. She wanted a different life for her son.

Salima's story gives us some clues about how to help her build that different life for her son. Whilst services focus on the bricks and mortar, and the language qualification, how might they help to build her natural networks? And really feel part of her new community?

Cast of Characters



Salima 24 and pregnant. With her first son. She'll name him after her father - back in Morocco. Salima has few other regular 'characters' in her life - besides a friend from the shelter and a cousin she sometimes sees. Many days are very solitary.

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You can find this story at: www.inwithforward.com/stories/salimas-unsatisfied-life



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Context

We drink tropical juice, served from a silver platter, alongside our Big Macs and fries. On the counter sit two more cartons of exotic juice and two unopened bottles of coke. Salima has returned from a weekend with her cousin. 90km away. Money is tight. But her family help out where they can. Buying juice and meat. The products that don't often come in the weekly box from the Voedselbank. Salima needs energy for two. She is five months pregnant. Her bump hidden under her billowing black Chador.

We've brought McDonald's to Salima's house for dinner. Along with an Arabic translator. Our first hour together we ate, watched TV, and shared pictures of our own families. I brought a framed photo of my grandmother, and asked Salima about hers. We use artifacts to try and get the conversation going. What did Salima bring with her? What objects does she miss? We find focusing on objects is an easier way into deeper conversation.

Salima wanted a better life for her child. A life with two loving parents. Unlike what she experienced back home in Morocco. With the kind-of stepmother you read about in frightening fairy tales. She had hoped marriage would be a way out. Of the poverty. She would move to a country where kids get to go to school. Unlike her. Who never learned to read or write.

Salima's first months in Holland weren't what she expected. Instead of sharing a house with her husband, she shared a small room. At the back of her in-laws house. Where her husband would drink and beat her. When he wasn't drunk, he was high. Taking "pills and injections to calm down." One night, after 3 months of abuse, Salima's in-laws called the police. Salima spoke to a social worker. With the help of an Arabic translator. And she left for the shelter at Oosterbeek. That very night.



Salima has been at the Shelter for nearly two months when we first meet her. She's watching a Moroccan video online. The music fills the small barren apartment. There is nothing on the walls. Only a small stuffed toy on the couch. For when she looks after her friend's daughter. Her friend lives in the unit downstairs. She too is Moroccan. She too only speaks Arabic. She too had a husband who was on the drink and drugs. She too is raising a child alone in a new country.

★ A history of domestic violence legislation in Morocco can be read here: www.stopvaw.org/morocco

Soon, Salima will move. 30 minutes away. To a house she's found. She won't be near her only friend anymore. They will have to talk on the phone. And she'll be too far away to attend the language class she's been taking for the past two months. Public transport is expensive, and with the baby coming soon, she cannot get around as easily. She wonders what else will change in her life when the baby comes.

What would it take for Salima to feel confident parenting her son in a totally new context - where she's not familiar with any of the health or school institutions? How could we help women new to the country experience first-hand these systems so they better understand how to navigate them, and are better equipped to guide their children?

Her Words

I THOUGHT I WAS IN A BAD DREAM. When I got to Holland. I had expected to move into my own house, have a good partner, have kids, have a satisfied life. That's what I thought Europe was about. But now I am waiting to get a divorce. My baby won't grow up with a father.

STILL, IT'S BETTER HERE than in Morocco. I lived with my dad and my step-mom there. There was no work. I cleaned. I cooked. It was not a very good life at all and I was never comfortable.

PERHAPS I WILL CALL MY SON HASSAN. After my father. He is going to be the first grandchild for my father. I speak to my father on the phone sometimes. He just says he wants me to have a healthy baby.

THERE ARE LOTS OF RULES here around money and benefits and housing. I get 30 euros a week for groceries. But I will have to pay this amount back. My social worker helps me to read all of the papers, fill out the forms, send documents to the lawyer for the divorce.

FINDING HOUSING that fits is difficult. My social worker tells me she wants me to do it on my own. But this is hard because of the language. I have asked my cousin to help me look too.

★ A background paper on The Netherlands Housing Market - and the social housing corporations that Salima is going through to find an apartment can be read here: ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/publications/economic_paper/2012/pdf/ecp_457_en.pdf

IT'S STRESSFUL to set and achieve goals all the time. There is not enough money to take the courses, or get what I need. And it's very hard to achieve things here when you don't speak the language.



Oliver Burkeman’s new book *The Antidote* explores what the relentless focus on setting and achieving goals - particularly in situations with high uncertainty - can be counter productive. Were we to apply this thinking to Salima’s interactions with her social workers, her sessions might unfold differently. With more of a focus on identifying risks, overcoming fears, and living in the present - rather than just planning to live in the future.

I WANT TO LEARN the language. Here in Holland, everyone has their own life. Their own work. Their own responsibilities. To be able to do anything, you need to learn the language.

I USED TO GO TO SCHOOL 4 DAYS A WEEK but now it’s 2 days a week. They changed the rules and they won’t pay for as much anymore. I owe [the council] 600 euros for my courses. That’s a lot.

WE STICK TO OUR OWN KIND at the language course. There are people from Iran, Senegal, Somalia, Morocco. The Moroccans sit together. The Africans sit together. There is not a lot of mixing. We do 2 hours with the teacher. An hour at the computer. An hour waiting.

How could we learn from places like the [Kahn Academy](#) about what makes a good adult learning experience?

PEOPLE HELP THEMSELVES. Everyone is busy with their own thing. That’s why I am very thankful that there is the shelter and that they try to help.

MY BRAIN IS ALWAYS ON thinking about things. It’s hard to express myself and what I need. When I move, I will need to find a new doctor and hospital and course. It’s a lot. My focus is really on preparing for the baby. I don’t feel pressure to get a job or volunteer yet.

A WOMAN’S PLACE IS IN THE HOME I think. Unless the husband can’t provide. Then the woman has to. I do think people should work and not expect government handouts.



I WOULD LIKE TO assist children. It seems like an easy and nice thing to do. I really love children, I am patient, and I think children love me too.

A GOOD DAY IS... All of my days are the same right now. As a Muslim, I prefer Fridays.

IF I COULD I WOULD do outdoor activities. But, I don’t know how to ride a bike. I would also like to garden and be doing sports so I don’t get too fat. If I had money, I would go to the hair salon. And go dancing. Maybe I would make friends.

I WOULD GO TO A COMMUNITY DINNER to meet people. I could make couscous.

A DUTCH FAMILY would be nice to have around, if they are like me. If they have the same religion and values. I don’t know any Dutch families.

We tested 8 early ideas with Salima. Ideas that we’d heard from other women, and from our reading of the international literature. Ideas like ‘Adopt a Grandparent’, ‘Community Dinners’ and ‘Lending Circles’. We had no ideas what these ideas meant - we just used the titles to spark a conversation about what they could be. The goal was to get a sense for what Salima found attractive, and what she was turned off by.



We used prompts to help Salima talk about activities she’d like to add to her week, and those she’d like to take away.

My Take-Aways

Importance versus Intensity of Language Learning.

Salima perceives the language as the biggest barrier to her new life. This is the message she consistently hears from her worker and from Werkplein [the Benefits Office]. And yet beyond her course two days a week, there are few resources to help Salima. At the shelter, she speaks mostly Arabic and watches Arabic TV & films. She has no Dutch friends. When she moves to her new house, she will be too far away from the language school. Given the importance of learning Dutch, how could we create more immersive and effective language experiences? What could we learn from ESL immersion programs for children?

Divorce but no justice.

Salima is seeking a divorce from her husband. The process is full of paperwork. But little sense of justice. This is a theme Salima’s friend downstairs, talks a lot about too. The women’s lives are thrown up in the air. But not their ex-husbands. How could the divorce process be less transactional? And more about ‘righting’ a wrong?

New culture but no introduction.

Salima has been in Holland for nearly a year. But beyond learning the language and filling out lots of paperwork, she has no sense of what Holland is about. She perceives the culture as very much about individual responsibility. And has little sense of what the 'collective' means. How could women like Salima become more a part of the culture - and learn how to raise her child with influences from both cultures?

Help versus independence.

Salima's social worker wants her to be independent. To fill out paperwork on her own, and start to navigate the system by herself. Salima finds this stressful. When is independence important - for which kinds of activities? And what's the line between independence and help? When is interdependence actually more important? How could we be clearer on the distinction between the two?



Sarah Schulman

Sarah is a sociologist who likes to split her time between living rooms and state houses. She's worked with governments in 6 countries to try and change how policy is made and evaluated. From 2010-2012, she co-ran InWithFor and worked with The Australian Centre for Social Innovation to launch 3 new social solutions, including the award-winning Family by Family. She's got a Doctorate in Social Policy from Oxford University, and a Masters in Education from Stanford University. This is Sarah's fourth start-up org. Get in touch at sarah@inwithforward.com!