

In Search of Belonging

Farah Siddiqui

Farah Siddiqui is Operations Manager at Salesforce, and Co-Founder and Global President of Faithforce, the Interfaith Employee Resource group at Salesforce.

Have you ever walked into a room and been the “only”? The only woman, the only person of color, the only person with a disability? Whatever the reason, it can be an uncomfortable and lonely feeling that can leave you asking, “do I even belong here”? That feeling of unwelcome can cause voices to remain unheard and leave barriers in place between people who are different. This is why Diversity & Inclusion work is so important. There’s plenty of research that shows when people feel heard, valued and supported, they’re happier, more productive, and more loyal.

As an American Muslim, born and raised in Miami, Florida, my “only” has always been my faith. Rarely, though, did religious identity factor into any conversations on diversity, inclusion or allyship that I heard. Even though I could relate to so many stories about feelings of isolation and being judged or misunderstood for one’s identity, rarely did I see me or my experience represented or supported.

What I’ve learned is that when you take the time to hear someone’s story, learn about their struggles, see a face instead of a label, it can have a transformative impact. Stories are powerful. They can change hearts and inspire action to fight for a more just and inclusive world. It’s why I stand with the Black, Latinx and LGBTQ communities in their struggle for equality. I’ve heard their stories.

People of various faiths & beliefs can and do face discrimination, are underrepresented, and are in need of allyship, too. You may not realize it because you haven’t heard our stories. I think it’s time we change that.

My Authentic Self

My Islamic identity has been core to who I am my entire life. My parents, who immigrated to the US from Pakistan in the 70’s, were leaders of the local Muslim community in South Florida. My mother was the founding principal of the Sunday school at the local mosque my father helped build. Like so many immigrant parents, they left everything they knew and moved to America to build a better life. They lived the American dream, started and raised a family in this country while maintaining a strong connection with both their culture and faith.

My first language was Urdu. My childhood was filled with weekends spent at the mosque and summer visits to Pakistan. I was involved in Muslim youth group activities and attended annual summer camps that instilled a strong sense of community and pride in my faith identity. For me, Islam wasn’t a strict rigid way of life or set of rules I had to adhere to. It was a rich and beautiful tradition that added color, fun and meaning to my life (thank you, parents!). It was my normal. There’s never been a conflict between my Islamic identity and my American identity. It’s just me. Farah. Hi.

On Exclusion and Allyship:

I attended public school in Miami in the 80’s and 90’s. Even though I loved my culture and faith, it wasn’t always easy being the only Muslim kid in my class. I couldn’t eat the same food as everyone else. I didn’t attend any school dances or go out on dates. I didn’t wear swimsuits or shorts. And it was all for religious reasons.

I clearly remember in middle school when my parents had to jump through hoops to get permission for me to wear pants instead of the required gym shorts, and how embarrassed I felt walking out onto the field that first day with my pants on underneath my shorts (the shorts had to stay on). I remember when I faked being injured so I didn't have to run a mile while I was fasting in Ramadan, and when I missed out on a field trip to a water park because I wasn't allowed to wear a t-shirt and tights instead of a swimsuit. As much as I wanted to fit in with my classmates, and just "be normal", these experiences made me stand out. The school policies didn't always make space to easily accommodate my differences.

On top of all that, not sure if you knew this, but kids in middle school can be mean. I had plenty of moments of insecurity and fear, of shame and isolation. Thankfully though, I had some great friends, too, and teachers who did make space for me. Who didn't judge and took the time to understand me. Who stood up for me when I was too scared or nervous to stand up for myself.

Before "allyship" was a thing I knew much about, I had allies in the form of a caring teacher who let me stay in her classroom and help grade papers during lunch because she knew I was fasting. I had friends who accepted me and defended me against bullying. Some who, it turns out, felt a lot like I did because they practiced a different religion or were from different cultures, too. For a little brown girl, who had to wear pants under her gym shorts, who had a hard-to-pronounce last name, who didn't celebrate Christmas, whose parents had funny accents and came dressed in traditional Pakistani clothes to school events, and who couldn't eat the hot dogs on "Hot Dog Day" at school, those friends, those allies, made all the difference.

In 10th grade, after some serious soul searching, I decided to wear a headscarf (commonly referred to as a *hijab*). I was just 16 years old. When my mom saw me with my hijab on, she asked if I was sure. I was. It was nerve wracking, though, that first morning. My faith, which I always carried with me in my heart, I was now carrying very visibly on my head.

I vividly remember crying in my car before school because of how nervous I was. I had no clue what my friends would say or how they would treat me. But I was firm in my decision, so I walked into class and waited for the stares and the laughs and the questions. To my surprise, what I was greeted with instead was, "Hi Farah! You look so pretty!" (*Cue tears*). Sure, there were questions (which I happily answered), and sure, I got some stares (to which my friends would respond "WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?!"), but overall I wasn't treated any differently. Once again, kindness and allyship were what I experienced.

On Belonging ... and Not Belonging:

In college, I learned the value of belonging with my involvement in a faith-based Muslim club on campus. Our focus was on creating a space where Muslim students could find community away from home, make friends, celebrate and learn together, as well as try to dispel stereotypes and misconceptions around our faith. When you're not like the majority of people around you, building connections, having a community where you belong, and knowing you're not alone, is empowering. I thrived in college because of it.

Allyship. Belonging. Community. These may not have been the words I used back then, but they defined my childhood and young adult experiences growing up Muslim in America. The allyship of my classmates and teachers in grade school taught me the importance of kindness and empathy at a young age. The belonging I felt in college built up my confidence in my religious identity. And the constant support of my family, friends and community throughout my life filled me with the courage to be proudly me.

After 9/11, that confidence and courage wavered.

Not too long ago, I participated in a group discussion centered around our 9/11 experiences. There were five of us sitting around the table recounting what we remembered from that day and how it impacted us. I was the only Muslim. Turns out my experience was a bit different from the others.

We all recounted the incredible shock and sadness we felt, as well as the strong sense of patriotism that followed as the country banded together, flags flying high. I remembered that too, but I also remembered being scared to leave the house with my hijab on. I remembered the glares from strangers at the mall. I remembered the mistrust and anger directed towards my community, the barrage of negative news, the negative depictions on TV and film, the rise in Islamophobia and hate crimes against people who looked like me. I remembered the heightened anxiety of going in for an interview and being worried about what people thought of me because of the hijab on my head. Are they scared of me? Do they trust me? Do they think I'm oppressed? Should I just take it off? Thoughts that run through my head even today as I walk into work in an office with hundreds of people, none of whom look like me.

I decided that taking off my hijab, changing who I was to try and fit in, wasn't the answer. Instead, I went back to the lessons my parents taught me and focused on my own actions and how I treated others. Let my actions speak louder than any piece of cloth on my head. "Muslim" didn't have to mean foreign, terrorist, or backwards. It could mean Farah, coworker, friend.

Why Faith Inclusion Matters:

These lived experiences are the building blocks that have shaped who I am and are the reason I'm so passionate about faith inclusion in the workplace. It's incredibly personal for me.

I don't need data to show me why faith inclusion and belonging matter. I don't need the numbers to show the impact lack of religious accommodations or support for our faith identities can have on employee morale. I don't need it because I know what it's like. I knew what it was like as a child being an only in school, and I know what it's like as an adult being an only in the workplace.

I know what it's like to be worried about how others will treat me because of how I look and what I believe. I've felt the anxiety of trying to find an empty room or stairwell to pray in, hoping no one walks in on me. I know what it's like to attend company picnics and have nothing to eat because there are no halal or kosher options on the menu. I know what it's like to feel obligated to come in to work on a religious holiday so I don't miss an important meeting. I know what it's like to celebrate alone. I know how it feels to have no support or acknowledgement at work when my community is hurting. I know how it feels to wish people understood me but being too scared to talk about it.

I know how it feels to not belong.

And I also know how amazing it can be when we go all in on inclusion and allyship and actually make room for our different faith identities. When we make it safe to not only talk about, but to celebrate our differences. When we realize that it's not about religion and what we believe, it's about the simple fact that we have beliefs. And that those beliefs can impact how we live and how we're treated. It's about it being OK to believe different, to look different, to pray different, and making space to accommodate those differences. It's about leaving your comfort zone to get to know someone from another background, another culture, another religion; to be open to hearing their story; to be an ally.

It's about finally belonging.