

**LIN-  
MANUEL  
MIRANDA**

**LINDA  
SARSOOR**

**LAURIE  
HERNANDEZ**

**ANJELAH  
JOHNSON-  
REYES**

**PADMA  
LAKSHMI**

**ISSA RAE**

**WILMER  
VALDERRAMA**

**KUMAIL  
NANJIANI**

**RAVI  
PATEL**

**UZO  
ADUBA**

**DIANE  
GUERRERO**

**AMERICAN  
LIKE  
ME**

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE  
BETWEEN CULTURES

**AMERICA FERRERA**

**MICHELLE  
KWAN**

**LIZA  
KOSHY**

**JENNY  
ZHANG**

**GEENA  
ROCERO**

**FRANK  
WALN**

**ANNA  
AKANA**

**ROXANE  
GAY**

**MARTIN  
SENSMEIER**

**BAMBADJAN  
BAMBA**

**RANDALL  
PARK**

**KAL  
PENN**

**CARMEN  
PEREZ**

**AL  
MADRIGAL**

**TANAYA  
WINDER**

**CARMEN  
CARRERA**

**JOY CHO**

**JOAQUIN  
CASTRO**

**AULI'I  
CRAVALHO**

**RESHMA  
SAUJANI**

**JEREMY  
LIN**



**Linda Sarsour** is an award-winning racial justice and civil rights activist, seasoned community organizer, and mother of three. She is most known for her intersectional coalition work and for building bridges across issues and racial, ethnic, and faith communities.

# Linda Sarsour

I WAS BORN INTO a community of radical love. It echoed through my home and down the streets of my neighborhood. Sunset Park was a noisy, happy place, filled with Palestinian, Dominican, Mexican, Ecuadoran, and Honduran families. A place where families and neighbors were one in the same. You did for your neighbor just as you would for an immediate family member. You knew their names, what they liked to eat, what music they listened to, and who they prayed to. Your block was your home. Your hood was your village. I didn't know at the time that this kind of love could be considered radical. Unusual. Powerful.

I am a Palestinian-American Muslim woman who wears a hijab. So I've been made painfully aware that some people ruffle when I use the word *radical*. But when I describe the loving place I grew up in, it is a word that truly applies. Brooklyn is a place I love like a human being. It is the place where I learned the meaning of radical love.

I was my mother's first child, born in a hospital in Brooklyn, delivered by a Muslim Palestinian immigrant, Dr. Ahmad Jaber, who whispered in my ear the call to prayer just moments after I was born. Like all Muslim babies, the first sounds I heard upon entering the world were words of love. I was welcomed into life, into my neighborhood, into my family with great enthusiasm. Even though my parents should have been disappointed to have a baby girl instead of a boy, they were overjoyed at my arrival. In Arab culture, everyone wants a son first and foremost, because boys can carry on the family name. It is customary to hope aloud that your first child will be a boy. People in my culture do not shrug and say, "Oh, we don't care about the gender—as long as the baby's healthy!" No. They pray openly and unabashedly for a son. But my parents had a girl, and my name was to be Linda. Inspired by a pop song that was very popular all over the Middle East at the time about a man who loved a girl named Linda.

My dad was also a man who loved a girl named Linda. As his oldest child, I was his pride and joy. His love was so vocal that for several years into my childhood, people in the neighborhood used to call him Abu Linda (*the father of Linda*). This nickname made his eyes twinkle, his spirit shine. He loved nothing more than his children. In a span of ten years, my mother gave birth to five daughters and two sons. The five daughters came first—one after the other, five of us in a row. Every time my mother would have another daughter, people would say, “Poor lady, inshallah [God willing] next time it will be a boy.” Not my dad. He would be so elated every time my mother had a daughter that when he would come home from the hospital acting so giddy, our neighbors and family would rise up from their seats thinking surely Dad’s glee meant that this time it was a boy. Then my dad would tell them my mother had given birth to another girl, and it always left them puzzled.

The moment my mother delivered her fifth child into the world—the last of her five girls—she closed her eyes.

“Is it a boy? Is it a boy?” my mother asked the doctor, wincing with hope and expectation.

“You have another beautiful princess!” Dr. Jaber announced joyfully.

“It’s a girl?!” she could not believe the odds that she had brought a *fifth* girl into the world, and she made no secret of her longing for a boy.

“I don’t even have a girl’s name prepared!” she said in complete desperation. “I thought for sure it would be a boy this time! What am I supposed to name her?!”

“*Hela*. You should name her Hela,” he said, using the Arabic word for *welcome*. “We must let her know she is welcome in this wonderful family, and this marvelous world.”

“Yes, you are right. She is Hela,” my mother cried.

Hela was welcomed into this world just like the rest of us were—with nothing but sheer exuberance from my father. While my mother recovered from labor, resting in bed with her baby, he would make his excitement known to anyone who would listen in the hospital, in the mosque, in the streets. My father did not have an easy life, but you would not have known this from his constant, visible joy. The way he saw it, he was so blessed to have so many healthy children—girls and boys—in a country so full of opportunity. He and my mother had left their village in

Al Bireh, Palestine, where they lived under military occupation. My father came here with just a fifth-grade education and a few hundred dollars. But he and my mother wanted to start their family in a safe place, with better opportunities. They arrived in Brooklyn to find that several other people from their village back in Palestine had come here too. My father hit the ground running very quickly, opening a corner store in Crown Heights where he often worked sixteen-hour days. His love for his family was unquestionable and extreme. He would have worked even more without complaint if it meant he could provide better for his family.

We were not an unusual family in our neighborhood. There were dozens of other Arab families, along with the Dominican, Mexican, Ecuadoran, and Honduran families. They all worked hard, raised their children, supported their neighbors, and gave back to the community. During the daytime, the kids would all gather to play tag, Wiffle ball, and dodgeball in the street. We'd sit for hours on end on the front stoops. When it got really dark, all the moms and grandmothers would come outside and call us home for dinner or bed. We had block parties all throughout the summer filled with music from our different cultures. We used to teach one another dances like salsa and debka.

The Palestinian-Americans were very close-knit. The community was always there for one another when someone was in need or when someone had something to celebrate. We would have concerts with Palestinian folklore, dancing to raise money for Palestinian orphans and refugees; festivals in the park that showcased our heritage and brought our community together for celebration and networking.

My father's love for celebrating Palestinian culture with his children and community was—like everything else he did—inexhaustible. And his support of all his children—boys and girls alike—was also very clear. It is true that in Muslim families, women are often the backbone, the foundation, and not so much at the forefront. But my father never kept his daughters at home. He always integrated us into social activities and encouraged us to participate in anything that could help us learn or have fun. He routinely brought us to classes in the community where we could learn more about Palestinian folklore and history and practice speaking our Arabic. My dad rooted for us to learn Palestinian folk dance, and cheered me on when I played the lead role in the plays or walked in the Arab fashion shows.

My uncle, my mother's brother, was our Palestinian folklore instructor, and I was the youngest member of the dance troupe. Because my uncle lived with us at the time, I got a lot more practice and became one of the best performers. I loved it so much that I even became an instructor when I was older and taught Arab-American girls debka, performing all over New York City. Many of the Muslim parents didn't want their daughters dancing in public, but my parents were happy to see me doing what I loved. And my father was always the guy in the front row, blocking everyone else's view with his giant 1990s video camera on his shoulder, taping every moment and angle of the performance. He used to stay up all night making copies of the videotape to distribute among the other parents in our community who didn't have cameras of their own.

People sometimes ask me now how a Muslim woman like me can be a feminist, because they are under the impression that those two things are incompatible. But I was brought up to believe I was loved, important, and integral to our community.

My Muslim immigrant father set the standard for me that girls and women are just as important to the village as anyone else. People imagine that Muslim communities turn their backs on women or subjugate them to lesser roles, but this was not my experience. As a child, I never felt less than my brothers or male cousins. I was Linda, the daughter of Abu Linda. My name meant something to the most important man in my life. It never even occurred to me that women couldn't speak in public or that women were any less important in our community—or any part of the world, for that matter. I was always surrounded by my sisters, female cousins, and other mothers in my neighborhood, and we weren't a passive bunch. We all looked out for one another.

In my family, I was the little mama. By the age of ten, I was already the oldest of seven children. My parents were never ashamed that my English was better than theirs. They leveraged this for the good of our entire family. With my father working sixteen-hour days, my mom needed my support. She had an eleventh-grade education and is a very smart woman, but still needed help filling out forms in English, assisting my siblings with homework, and speaking to bill collectors, doctors, and teachers. I did all of these things for my parents. I was always helping my six younger siblings. This gave me a sense of responsibility and empowerment

at a very early age. There were definitely times I wasn't sure I wanted this role, but it built up my confidence, which I would need later in life.

And no matter how critical my English-language skills were for our family, my parents never allowed me to forget Arabic. I used English at home only when absolutely necessary. My parents wanted us to be fluent in their mother tongue, and so they made a house rule to speak only Arabic to them. I remember running home from school to tell my dad a story about something exciting that had happened that day. I would let the words rush quickly from my mouth, forgetting the rule, only to be stopped by my father:

“Linda, tell me the whole story again. But this time in Arabic,” he would say with a smile.

I resented this at the time, but now as an adult I am grateful to be bilingual and to pass on the mother tongue of my ancestors and parents to my children. Our language is one thing that connects the past with our future—our grandparents with our children. I always knew I would have children. I wanted to become a mother. I was surrounded by them, in awe of them. And every mother in our community was a mother to all. The woman who lived next door was just as concerned about my well-being as my own parents were. My friends' mom could correct me if I was misbehaving. Other aunts—which is what you called almost any of your mother's female friends—were welcomed and even expected to comment on me, my grades, my attitude, my accomplishments, and my shortcomings. In my community, we didn't see ourselves as just singular individuals or singular families. We were connected to something bigger. There was and still is a collective that we all feel like we are a part of. It was not just logistics—it was a way of thinking.

This was the village mentality that I thought all Americans shared. But as I grew older, I found that I was fortunate to have been born into my neighborhood, and maybe I had even taken it for granted. Not everyone has this village experience. It is a thing of the past in many cities. People have said goodbye to the village life in exchange for the global life. More and more people have embraced being alone in their homes—a stranger to their neighbors—but digitally connected to people across the world.

I am grateful and proud of the way I grew up. As a child, I never questioned that I was loved, safe, and connected to a village within a larger city in a country I

loved. The first time I realized life wasn't as good for everyone else was when I was in high school. Some of the kids at my school came from different neighborhoods in Brooklyn. Their streets had been shattered by crime, drugs, police corruption, and gang violence. They would show up at school with stories of their friends being shot or jumped. Every morning when we arrived at school, we were greeted by security officers who waved their wands across our bodies and asked us to run our book bags through the scanners. These were the only metal detectors I'd ever encountered besides at the airport. But some of the other kids of color would comment about being stopped and frisked within their communities by NYPD all the time.

When I finished high school, I wanted to dedicate my life to helping kids who didn't have the same kind of support and love I had experienced growing up. I had seen the movie *Dangerous Minds* in high school and wanted to be just like Michelle Pfeiffer—the bighearted badass teacher showing kids how to love poetry, one another, and themselves. It made sense to me to work outside my own village—where I had it so good—to help kids in other neighborhoods. I enrolled in community college in Brooklyn to get my English degree. I was going to become the adult who told all the disenfranchised kids of Brooklyn that they mattered.

And then 9/11 happened. I was twenty years old. A new wife, young mother, and college student. I loved my country, and I loved my people. But suddenly the two seemed at odds. After that horrific attack on our city and our fellow Americans, my Muslim community began to be regarded as a group of suspects—just by virtue of our language, our ethnicity, and our faith. Muslims were now very unwelcome in many places. They became subject to racial profiling and police surveillance. I watched with my very own eyes in Sunset Park as law enforcement agencies raided coffee shops and businesses. I watched women cry and say, *Somebody picked up my husband and I haven't seen him in five days and he never called me.* I knew so many Muslims who had fled their home countries to escape the very situations they were now encountering in America.

So this was the catalyst in starting my life's work as an activist leader—my love for my people. I wasn't going to let this happen to Muslims, to America. I knew my love would fuel me through the fight. I started working with women in the community whose husbands had been detained, connecting them to legal services, translating for them. I began to volunteer with the Arab American Association of



New York, an organization my cousin had helped found with Dr. Jaber, the man who had delivered me and my siblings. He was also a very well-respected leader in the community and imam in the mosque. I followed my cousin's lead, seeing her as a role model and mentor, and as yet another person confirming that I was allowed and expected to use my voice to help. It was just like Dr. Jaber used to always say: "Women are going to lead us one day. We must give young women the space to practice leading."

A few months after 9/11, I attended a citywide meeting at a mosque where various Arab-American leaders were coordinating efforts to defend Muslim-Americans across the city. When I entered the large room, I bent down to take off my shoes. As I stood up, I looked up to see thirty men in the room, all staring at me. I paused, realizing I had almost never been in a room of men only. Demographically this had never even been a possibility. There were always so many people around, so many of them girls or women. I kept my head high and crossed the room to where I saw the one familiar face, Dr. Jaber, who had resumed conversing passionately with another man. I could see by their frequent gestures and facial expressions that Dr. Jaber must have been defending my presence to this man.

I approached quietly, not wanting to interrupt or show disrespect.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

Both men stopped talking to look to me.

Dr. Jaber broke the silence: "No, there's no problem here. You're a part of this meeting, Sister Linda, and we are going to sit down now and start."

This was not a moment when I thought of Dr. Jaber or even myself as radical. We had made these other Muslim men—all very good and principled men—take a pause and question themselves. But they accepted me and moved on. We had work to do.

And we believed what Dr. Jaber said, my cousin and I, my sisters and I. There are millions of Muslim women who are powerful and independent. Women who are going to lead us one day. We did not consider this idea to be radical, just as we did not consider my dad's love and pride for his daughters to be radical.

But what was—and still is—radical is the strength of our commitment to take care of one another. Our community had such strong ties that it was going to take

a lot to break us. We are, in fact, stronger than I knew. As my activist work continued into my twenties, I began to see that the community I belonged to transcended my gender, my religion, and my village. I was part of a much *larger* village. Muslims could not fight this fight alone. We were aligned with so many others who shared our struggles. There were many young black and brown people who faced injustices every day—long before 9/11 when I felt it most in my community. These fellow Americans had been dealing with being stopped, frisked, interrogated, arrested, and even killed just because of the color of their skin. There were undocumented people living every day afraid of being separated from their families. If I hadn't grown up believing that my neighbors are my family, I may not have cared, but it was in my nature to care about all of these groups of people.

I do not believe that it is every man for himself, every woman for her child. Because my parents did not believe this. My neighbors did not believe this. And my community will not stand for this.

This is the radical love that has powered me through my decades of work. I used to think it was hope that fueled me—my hope for social justice and civil rights. But I have realized what truly fuels me is love. I love my people so much. I will lay my life on the line for my people. I would do that for my own children or for other people's children. I am a mother, and mothers know this radical love.

As our country has become more and more divided, I have had to weather personal attacks on my sincerity, my feminism, my faith. And my patriotism. My life has been threatened, my children and family have been intimidated by mainstream journalists, internet trolls, counterprotestors, and random passersby on the street. My children have been taunted for being Muslim, accused of being terrorists, belittled for who their mother is. They have seen Muslims attacked in their city, they have heard stories of Muslims killed for their beliefs. Right here in America. They have seen their president ban Muslims from entering this country. Sometimes at my low points, because I am only human, I can feel very “done” with this mess. I can feel hopeless and *done*.

But I am *never* done with my love for my people. The love that was given to me the moment I was born isn't going away until the day that I'm no longer on this earth.

This is radical love. It was passed down to me by my mother, by my father, and by so many fellow citizens of Brooklyn and America. This is the kind of love that will wake you up from hope. Hope can feel empty because you can't move toward something that is imagined. You can't work for something you are dreaming of and waiting for. But you *can* work for something that you see and feel every day. *Love is something you can see and feel every day.* When I go to my neighborhood, I know it is there. I am so lucky to be a member of this community, this family, and this movement that was born of radical love.