



**Solidarity Stories from Asian American and Pacific Islander
Community Leaders, Asian American Leaders Table**

Zahra Billoo, Council for American-Islamic Relations (CAIR),
San Francisco Bay Area

Introduction

“How am I using my freedom to free other people?”

Welcome to a Solidarity Story featuring Zahra Billoo, the executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, San Francisco Bay area chapter ([CAIR-SFBA](#)).

Zahra shares solidarity practices that stem from a variety of campaigns, including CAIR-SFBA's work to end the surveillance of Muslim, South Asian and Arab community members by local law enforcement and federal authorities. Over the years, CAIR-SFBA has brought in partners from other movement spaces to inform, guide, and co-build their campaign, including groups like the Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAAJ) - [Asian Law Caucus](#), ACLU, Anti-Police Terror Project, Secure Justice, National Center for Lesbian Rights, and National Lawyers Guild.

Zahra shared a few guiding questions she uses to navigate challenging decisions:

What is our likelihood of being able to make a meaningful contribution to this issue?

What is our long-term plan for engagement on an issue, or with a particular group?

What is our capacity to engage members of our community, rather than just a couple of key leaders or staff?

Takeaways

Here are Zahra's key takeaways for building sustainable solidarity practices:

1. Find your personal connection for choosing solidarity.

Our interest in engaging with people and organizations through the lens of solidarity is inherently and deeply personal. As a person of faith and the leader of a faith-based community organization, Zahra's commitment to solidarity goes hand-in-hand with her faith. "For me, choosing my faith facilitates a desire to be in solidarity with other communities," she says.

Zahra also points to strategic reasons why solidarity is important: "I do sincerely believe that what we let happen to other communities happens to all of us eventually," she explains. "And from a proactive side, whatever freedom and rights we build for other communities, we all benefit from."

2. Broaden what we see as 'our issues.'

Identifying connections and commonalities between issues and communities is a vital part of solidarity practice. In the wake of 9/11, many organizations began to collaborate with Muslim, South Asian, and Arab communities facing unprecedented levels of hate violence, profiling, and discrimination. Zahra emphasizes the importance of building cross-community solidarity and centering those most impacted by Islamophobic policies and actions. "Muslims are a small part of the population, but what law enforcement can do to us, we know that they can do to others," she explains. "By being in solidarity with the Muslim community and pushing back against these incursions, we are all freer."

Even within the Muslim community, Zahra noted that it is important to find ties that bind communities together: "Just because it's not the issue for an upper middle-class Pakistani American, doesn't mean it's not an issue for a Black Muslim, or for an undocumented Muslim or whatever the diversities of our communities might be in that struggle," she says. This emphasis on finding commonalities has also led CAIR to build coalitions with other immigrant, Black, and Latinx communities targeted by law enforcement.

Takeaways

Here are Zahra's key takeaways for building sustainable solidarity practices:

3. Invest in relationships.

Zahra also points to the importance of investing in relationships as part of solidarity. "Solidarity needs to be more than performative. It needs to be deeper than singular events or campaigns for it to be effective and transformative," Zahra shared. "It needs to be relationship-based. It needs to be something that we approach from a place of compassion."

True relationships take time, Zahra explains, and honest communication is essential. "Having courageous conversations is something that doesn't happen overnight, but is an important part of relationships," she notes. "I could know you for 10 years, but if we're not communicating honestly, we're not truly in relationship."

4. Manage capacity for meaningful solidarity.

As Zahra notes, it can be difficult to take a step back and manage one's capacity in movement work. "It's been challenging at times to say we have to fight our own fires - and we have to figure out how to create the capacity to participate in someone else's firefight as well," she explains. "It's not any less necessary, it's just difficult when we're stretched thin, even though we know it's necessary and believe it to be true."

Your Turn

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What's the origin of your personal commitment to solidarity?

How does solidarity align with your larger mission and long-term goals?

What strengths can you (or your organization) offer ongoing movements for equity, justice, and liberation?

How can you build meaningful, long-term relationships with others?

How can you engage your community around issues that might not directly affect them? What are potential ways that issue can be connected to another issue, experience, value, etc. that would resonate with your community?

What are some examples of "wins" that utilize solidarity as a strategy?
