Individual Interview 19 – Mary

(Full time: 38:48)

Int: Hello welcome.

Mary: \*Laughs.

Int: How are you?

Mary: Good, and you?

Int: Good, good. Just quickly, you have read and understood the informed consent form?

Mary: Yes.

Int: Great. Um, ya, just a board overview of what we are going to talk about today. We’re going to look at belonging but more the emotional side – not where you belong but what does it make you feel when you belong, I can be people or the place.

Mary: Okay.

Int: So, then we’re going to look at safety, specially your experiences of safety in South Africa. And then we’re going to bring it together and have a look at how that affects you as a South African woman.

Mary: Okay.

Int: Ya, so if you’ve got any questions, you can ask them... No, all good?

Mary: Ya.

Int: Great. Okay, so we’re just going to do a background; so how old are you, are you working, are you studying, did you study and now you’re working, did you move around a lot as a kid or were you just in Pretoria?

Mary: Okay, so I’m twenty-one turning twenty-two in ().

Int: Happy birthday.

Mary: Thank you. \*Laughs. Um, I just finished studying, Environmental Design, four years. And I’m taking a gap year.

Int: Excited?

Mary: Mmm, ya I am.

Int: And you’re from Pretoria?

Mary: No, I grew up overseas, um but I was born in Nelspruit, but at that time we lived in Swaziland and then from there we moved to quite a few different places.

Int: So, you’re from Nelspruit – no, you were born in Nelspruit?

Mary: I was born in Nelspruit, and then we moved.

Int: How old were you when you moved from Nelspruit?

Mary: Well, no. I was there for a week. \*Laughs.

Int: \*Laughs. Oh, okay.

Mary: I was just born and then we went to Swaziland. But my parents were living in Swaziland, they just came to Nelspruit for the medical.

Int: Oh ya, it’s much better.

Mary: Ya.

Int: They just came to have a child and then went back.

Mary: Ya. And then I stayed there till I was nine, and then we moved to Canada for a year, moved to Nelspruit for two years – till I was about eleven, and then we lived on St. Alina island for six years and then we came back.

Int: Where is St. Alina Island?

Mary: I lived in the middle of the South Atlantic.

Int: Oh, rather. Isn’t it cold?

Mary: No. Not at all. Well, it’s like fifteen to twenty-five degrees.

Int: Oh okay. It’s not hot but-

Mary: Ya, it’s not hot but it isn’t freezing either, just kind of mellow

Int: And where was your favourite place that you grew up in?

Mary: The island.

Int: The island.

Mary: Yep.

Int: And you were there for how long?

Mary: Six years. My entire high school.

Int: Your whole high school – did they have a high school on the island.

Mary: Ya, one. \*Laughs.

Int: \*Laughs.

Mary: There three primary schools and one high school.

Int: Big population, small population?

Mary: Five thousand people.

Int: That’s tiny.

Mary: Ya, my high school was 202 people.

Int: Do you know Girls High is like three thousand girls.

Mary: Ya, there’s like a grade or more.

Int: Ya, that’s mad.

Mary: My grade eleven class slash grade twelve class was like fifteen people.

Int: What do you parents do?

Mary: My dad’s an engineer, and my mom is a ‘Town-planner’.

Int: A Time planner?

Mary: A Town-planner.

Int: Oh. \*Laughs.

Mary: Or an ‘Urban-planner’.

Int: So, the island was your favourite place to grow up.

Mary: Yes.

Int: What place felt the most like home?

Mary: Um, probably there, especially because when you reach high school you kind of start to have your own life, and then up until that point your life is with your parents. So, you really like give up friends and adapt and stuff, but as soon as you’re in a high school place you start making your own little friends and your own little part. So, I think that would be where I felt the most ‘at home’.

Int: And you come to Pretoria for Uni?

Mary: Yeah.

Int: And did you come on your own or did your parents come with you?

Mary: They moved with me. I was supposed to go to Canada, but things didn’t work out there and I ended up studying here, and now I’m done.

Int: You’re happy, no regrets that you didn’t go to Canada?

Mary: No, it’s cold.

Int: Yeah, it is cold there.

Mary: It’s freezing, but it’s nice. It was a lot of fun.

Int: You lived in Canada for a year?

Mary: Mm.

Int: How big was your town?

Mary: I think there were like five hundred people in that town.

Int: Up north or?

Mary: In Alberta. So, it’s like four hours from ().

Int: I think there was a famous serial killer from Alberta.

Mary: I do know that, indeed, but I wasn’t there. All I know was that there was like a little squad of Native Americans in that town, and they used to bully all the kids. But they just come out of nowhere, like they’d come freak you out and then disappear. I don’t know where they went to school – nothing.

Int: It sounds like a myth.

Mary: It was torture, that what it was.

Int: So, yeah. You moved around a lot. Your sense of ‘home’, what is that?

Mary: Um… probably somewhere you feel like you could actually grow. I feel like when you’re in a space where you have to adapt, being able to do that it’s kind of like a – becomes a home to you.

Int: And you moving around a lot – do you have any siblings?

Mary: No, it’s just me and my parents.

Int: So, you moved around with your family a lot. For you is ‘home’, a ‘people’ or a ‘place’?

Mary: It’s people.

Int: People always?

Mary: Ya, because I moved around a lot I could never get comfortable in a spot, because there was a possibility that we would up and leave. It never bothered me, but it did like help me understand the difference between being comfortable in a place and being comfortable around a certain group of people.

Int: So, also with belonging there is this attachment to ‘home’. Did you feel like you belonged in all of these places or were there specific ones that you didn’t?

Mary: I think being rooted is really related to finding your way around a place – so I never really felt like I wasn’t meant to be somewhere.

Int: Also, in terms of safety. Did you feel safe in all of these places or in some of these places did you not?

Mary: Um… I think as I got older or I started to obviously understand more about like the safety problems around me, and I have to, you know, be careful. But generally, all the places were safe, but coming to South Africa was definitely a bit of a shock. I mean coming from a very small island to a place like Pretoria, it’s really different.

Int: Ya, I’d say.

Mary: Ya, there’s a lot of people – you know, we didn’t have like robots on the island, there wasn’t traffic. There wasn’t things like murder, you know, like people didn’t steal. And then you come back and there so much stuff that you have to lock, you know what I mean.

Int: Ya, ya.

Mary: So, you have to be sure not to ignore that.

Int: Did you come here on holidays or were you always just there on the island?

Mary: So, the situation was that we got to stay on the island for ten months, and then my parents had to leave the island for like two months. And then we’d go to Nelspruit.

Int: So, for two months you’d be here in South Africa?

Mary: No, probably like – at the time there was a like a ship that would take us there, for like two weeks at most. So, that obviously takes out of the eight-week period. And then it was normally around two weeks in Nelspruit and then travel somewhere.

Int: Lovely. Also, on the island does everyone know everyone – like is it a tiny-tiny community or is it a bit split?

Mary: It’s weird because you’d think that, you know, but you would still walk into people that you don’t see. I was like a high school kid, I was not in Town in the day. People working there and stuff, I don’t see them.

Int: And the sense of community. Did you have a sense of community at all in these places or not?

Mary: No, I think there are times where the locals are, you know, and then you come and as an expat and then kind of – you have to find your place. There are certain people who aren’t very open to it, but others were very welcoming.

Int: I’m impressed that you still have your accent. I thought you would have lost your accent somewhere along the line.

Mary: Oh, that came when I came here to study, before that I had a British accent.

Int: Oh, and your parents stayed with their South African accents?

Mary: Ya, they have a South African accent, but they are pretty Afrikaans – they work in English but they too very long to speak English fluently.

Int: So, your parents still speak Afrikaans?

Mary: Ya, my mom still speaks it every now and then […]

Int: Getting yelled at in Afrikaans is a very different type of experience.

Mary: I mean I will still reply in English, I can’t talk back in Afrikaans.

Int: Do you speak multiple languages or just English and Afrikaans?

Mary: Just English and Afrikaans.

Int: And on the island, was it just English?

Mary: It’s an English-dialect because it was a British territory. So, they spoke a really messed up grammar – like they mixed their grammar. It was quite-

Int: But it was English?

Mary: Ya.

Int: With the boat, it must have been the same boat every single time.

Mary: Yes. It’s one ship that takes a 150 people. Transported our groceries everything once a month. So, it took five days to get to the island from Cape Town, and five days to go back, and then it would dock for like a week and then load the cargo and all that.

Int: And that boat did that ever feel like a sense of ‘our boat’, or?

Mary: It was definitely like when on our like three months break and we see like our ship in the harbour, you’re like, “Well, okay I’m going back now.”

Int: And you’re excited.

Mary: Ya.

Int: So, with Swazi-land. You grew up there when you were really young, and I was interviewing another participant who had family there and they said it’s pretty safe.

Mary: It is pretty safe, but we lived a bit outside of the town so it was a bit of a, you know, wasn’t too safe – but in general it was.

Int: So, South Africans build their houses in a very, very specific way.

Mary: Ya.

Int: We fortify out houses with burglar bars, alarm systems are quite normal.

Mary: Ya.

Int: Your house here in Pretoria, same type of thing?

Mary: Ya. There’s bars on the windows and on the door. Ans then there’s – I don’t think we have an alarm system, but it’s pretty secure.

Int: Is it in a complex or a standalone house?

Mary: It’s an Airbnb.

Int: Oh okay.

Mary: Ya, so it’s – I’m staying there till I leave the country for the year.

Int: Oh and are you going to come back?

Mary: Ah, still debating. I’ll see how the year goes and then decide, ya.

Int: Is South Africa place that you would like to settle down, start a family, buy a house?

Mary: Not really. I think growing up overseas it’s never been a thing for me like come to South Africa and live my life here, so I definitely want to do that overseas.

Int: When you were overseas, did you refer to yourself as a South African or were you just a diplomate all the time?

Mary: Unfortunately, yes I was South African. \*Laughs.

Int: \*Laughs.

Mary: Ya, I did kind of own the fact that I was from South Africa but ultimately – I was, strangely enough, never attached to like being called an Afrikaans person even though I grew up with Afrikaans music, Sokkieing, all of that stuff. And for me, because of the places I lived in, I just spoke the language there. So, I never identified myself as an Afrikaans South African, I was just South African. It was more so that I was born here. I think that’s what makes you a South African.

Int: The other houses that you lived in, were they as fortified as your house in South Africa?

Mary: Um… no. The one on the island, we left doors unlocked, never closed gates.

Int: And Canada?

Mary: We had very – they were a lot like typical American homes. They had like a fence around and you lock your door.

Int: And Swazi-land if you can remember that house, very much the same as South Africa or different?

Mary: Ya, there were like bars and stuff on the windows and things, but it wasn’t that hectic. We had a massive yard with a big wall, you know, that kind of area. And then our gate was constantly open. We had people who lived on the property.

Int: So, speaking about safety, we have safety precautions. So, there are certain things that South Africans do –

Mary: Ya.

Int: What kind of safety precautions that you take on a daily basis?

Mary: Not walking with my phone in my back pocket. Constantly… um, as soon as I leave a place I lock my door or my car instantly, like if I’m in a parking lot and I get out of my car, I lock my door instantly. Um… and then ag, just typical ‘don’t drink drinks from people’ – drinks that have been open, you know.

Int: Is spiking something you’re worried about?

Mary: Yes. I think it’s a very easy way to be, ah… make girls vulnerable.

Int: Ya.

Mary: So – and I say girls specifically because, you know, […] if we’re alone and then […] so ya, it is a concern. I’ve never fully been spiked, but there has been a situation when I’ve been with a friend where it has occurred. So, I think for me it is a little bit, you know, I don’t know like ya.

Int: Do you feel safe in South Africa?

Mary: Not really.

Int: Not really. Did you feel safe – like you said on the island that it was very safe.

Mary: Ya, I felt safe on the island, I think because people know who you are. Obviously being a expats you stand out quite a bit, but […] everyone knows our problem. So, for something to happen to you in a small place like that, it’s very unlikely because… ah, we still live on an island.

Int: Ya, everyone knows everyone.

Mary: Ya, I feel like here you’re one of a million people.

Int: Ya, one of sixty million.

Mary: Ya, so I mean if something happens it doesn’t mean that people will help or take much concern either.

Int: And have you experienced crime in South Africa?

Mary: Not personally, just more general stuff that I’ve learned from the news. At least I haven’t bee in a situation.

Int: Have you ever had to interact with the South African Police Force?

Mary: No, never.

Int: What is your perception of the South African Police Force?

Mary: Corrupt. They are not reliable, like they’re one of the last people you call when something happens. There are so many other security companies that I would rather call than the police.

Int: And you’d rather put your money, mindset, or safety into these security companies?

Mary: Ya.

Int: I think a lot of South Africans are that way, like I don’t understand why we have a Police Force we have so many types of security companies – I’d rather pay for them to do it.

Mary: And they are more reliable than the police.

Int: Oh ya.

Mary: I don’t even bother with the police because I don’t think they will help.

Int: No. I a lot of people that I have spoken to who have had their phones stolen, the only reason why they let the cops know was for the insurance.

Mary: Ya, obviously it’s just an obligation it’s not like they actually rely on them.

Int: If the insurance companies did the affidavits – they wouldn’t do it.

Mary: No, ya. Exactly.

Int: How would you describe your life as a South African woman living in South Africa?

Mary: Um… I think it depends on my situation, like I mean I’m not a working woman yet so I think that would probably bring a lot more, opinions in terms of my being here. But as a young female, you know, you’re constantly on guard, and kind of look out for opportunities that are not necessarily here. I think that’s why a lot of us actually end up leaving the country.

Int: Ya, it does seem like there are a lot of opportunities elsewhere, but I think safety is one thing – a lack of opportunities. There’s also this sense that this country is heading towards a collapse. Is that something you feel?

Mary: Definitely. I mean obviously I grew up in a family that was determined to leave the country. So, ya I mean I have an aunt that lives in Canada and then obviously my parents live in Saudi, so I’ve been exposed to the approach of ‘leaving of the country’ and not the kind of ‘making it work’. So I guess, I’m not part of the South Africans that want to build the country back up, but you go where there’s opportunities, I guess.

Int: Exactly. Have you been to Saudi?

Mary: No, not yet.

Int: Oo, excited to go?

Mary: Yes, I think it will be interesting.

Int: Don’t you have to wear, I think it’s called a burka?

Mary: No. It used to be a rule but now-

Int: They have relaxed out a bit.

Mary: Ya, ya, on some things, but it definitely is a whole different dynamic there.

Int: I mean you have said that you have travelled a lot overseas – so, where have you gone?

Mary: In total, seventeen countries.

Int: Woah! At the young age of almost twenty-one.

Mary: Yeah, so I won’t list all of them, but I’ve been on every continent, just not Antarctica.

Int: I mean that should be on your list, that would be pretty cool.

Mary: Ya, I actually had geography teacher in high school that went.

Int: No way.

Mary: I ironically get seas problems; I don’t know why. But he said it was pretty cool, and I’d definitely would want to go.

Int: Ya. And you’d say your favourite place is that you’ve gone?

Mary: Maybe – Costa Rica was nice, ya and Singapore was also nice. Um, but they are all so different. I think the more you travel the more you realise that you can’t really compare any of the places.

Int: Best food?

Mary: Mm… Bali.

Int: Bali – I went to Thailand and the food was good, but I got food poisoning on the last night. And it was from a proper restaurant.

Mary: Oh that’s crazy.

Int: It was terrible, I flew back and we stopped off in Qatar and they pull me off the plane and they thought I was a drug mule.

Mary: Oh no! Because you were throwing up.

Int: Ya, so much. Had a strip search and everything. But Bali – you loved Bali?

Mary: Ya, ya.

Int: And the Balinese people? I’ve heard that they are notoriously friendly people.

Mary: Ya, they really are, and I think it was because they are […] so they are obviously super welcoming.

Int: Who was the most guarded or you wouldn’t visit again?

Mary: Indians.

Int: Indians really, that’s so disappointing.

Mary: Like it’s a very nice country, but it’s hot.

Int: Did you go to Delhi.

Mary: Ya, but old Delhi – can I point out, there’s a really big stigma around Delhi. So, there’s old Delhi and new Delhi. New Delhi is like high end, clean, you’ll see fancy cars and mansions. Old Delhi is the typical Delhi that you see online.

Int: The poverty must have been a lot.

Mary: Ya, it was all over the place.

Int: Bali is also a fairly poor country, but India. And Costa Rica, I think there’s also poverty there.

Mary: They do but also a very big community, so I think they really do try to upgrade a lot of the areas and stuff like that.

Int: And you always felt safe in these places or-

Mary: Ya.

Int: Were you a bit apprehensive?

Mary: I think there were moments, like I mean… I grew up with my parents constantly reminding me of this or that, or not to do this, look out for this. So, I think it was something I had in the back of my head the whole time no matter my context. I have never been in a situation where I have been alone somewhere in a country when I was young, um, where I’ve felt unsafe. I’ve been in situations here and there, but they’ve all worked out.

Int: I suppose you get that all over the place.

Mary: Ya, it’s just so common.

Int: And while you were overseas – well, you did say that you used to have a British accent, so people wouldn’t easily identify you as South African.

Mary: Oh no.

Int: So, what would you say were one of those things that would give a way that ‘She might be something else’?

Mary: Um… it’s hard to say what people really thought, but definitely not always South African. When I came back here my friends used to mock me about sounding British, but then on the island because everyone knew I was South African they would mock me because I’m South African. But ag, it depends on who you are around.

Int: And so you go overseas, you’ve travelled to all these places, and then to come back to South Africa – what was that first things that was ‘Yeah, I’m back in South Africa’?

Mary: Um… I’m trying to use the right words here…

Int: Just say.

Mary: Probably dark people, just putting it lightly.

Int: \*Laughs. I don’t blame you-

Mary: I mean they’re not everywhere, so I mean it’s pretty obvious when you get here, and you feel like you stick out.

Int: I had a participant who had been in South Korea for seven months, and she was just like, ‘They just do not get black people’.

Mary: They’re not everywhere!

Int: It shocks them.

Mary: I didn’t seem them in India, or-

Int: Ya, I’d expect India to have Indians – sorry about my dogs. Ya, but finding black people in Korea was just shocking, they were playing with her hair, one woman wanted to take a photo with her.

Mary: Yeah, I got that in India.

Int: Really, they wanted to take photos with you?

Mary: A few with their cameras like they saw a monkey in a zoo or something. I mean it’s flattering the first few times and then becomes irritating ya. […] but I can’t blame them for being surprised if they’ve never seen a white girl,

Int: You must have been quite popular, if they have only seen the ‘burnt ones’.\*Laughs.

Mary: Yah. Exactly. Yah, but I mean I’m used to it – you go to places where there are people who come from a very small world, and you can’t be mad at them for this.

Int: What are the things that you really missed from South Africa?

Mary: I have never felt kind of alone or separated considering that I wasn’t always around South Africans, but I can say it was nice when I came back to be able to – I know my dad always said that, you know, things that you say in Afrikaans don’t always sound the same when you translate them to English. I think for things like that, it would nice for my parents to be able to know.

Int: Like ‘connect with your people’?

Mary: Ya, I think they even form a root – you have a root place, you know.

Int: And you feel that to South Africa?

Mary: Ya.

Int: That this is your rooting even if you might now stay here for the rest of your life, but it is.

Mary: Ya, ya, it’s always going to be part of me when I come back, its not something I’m going to run away from.

Int: Ya, you’re going to support South Africans for like sporting events.

Mary: Ya, ya.

\*End of transcription due to corrupted audio file