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DR. JATINDER CHEEMA

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INTERVIEW

Q: All right. So, today is November 21, 2022, and we are starting a conversation with—I always called you Cheema, but what should I call you?

CHEEMA: Cheema is fine.

Q: Okay. With Cheema. And we're going to start at the beginning. So, if you will tell us a little bit about where you were born, your family, siblings, your early education. Something to give us a sense of where you started.

CHEEMA: Well, I was born on July 27, 1942, and it was kind of a difficult time. The second World War was happening. My mom was with my grandfather because traditionally the mother went home to her parents to have the children. I was born at home, like most babies, in those days. I have a sister, Satinder Cheema and a brother, Jagdeep Singh Cheema, unfortunately he is no longer with us.

Q: Where were you born?

CHEEMA: I was born in Lahore, India, which is now in Pakistan.

Q: Right:

CHEEMA: From what my mom remembers, I was born at 8:00 a.m. She says that's why I'm always so active. "You never stopped moving," she says to me. My grandfather was working for the British Civil Service and was posted in Lahore. He was the income tax officer. My own father had just finished his graduate work in agriculture and was posted

in a small town which didn't have much medical facilities, so my mom went to my grandfather because it was a bigger city to have me. And it was the tradition also.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: I was the first born. My mom was sixteen years old. She's ninety-nine now, so I feel like I have a friend rather than a mom.

That's sort of the context. Several of her relatives were involved in World War II. And simultaneously the whole movement of India Pakistan divide was underway. It was kind of a difficult time when I was born, but they were all very happy to have me come into the world. My mom stayed with her parents for about three months and then she went home where my father was posted. I forget the name; it was a small town. And he was by then in the Department of Agriculture in the India Civil Service. My early childhood had a lot of movements because every time he would get transferred, we would move from place to place. I have this memory of constantly moving during my childhood. And sometimes I think that in some ways influenced my career decision. In some ways it became natural to want to move after every couple of years.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: But there were a couple of traumatic experiences when I was growing up because when the partition divide happened. My mom, my sister and I were visiting my paternal grandparents for the summer, which my mom used to do when we were young, not in school, to go to the village. And my grandparents, my paternal grandparents then were living in a small village called Wadhai Cheema near the border of what is now Pakistan. During the summer of 1947 visit, my father wanted us to come home because things were getting bad, and the rioting had started. So, my father said, "Come home," and I remember that scene, being on the train, coming back on the India side, and the scenes that I saw of people rioting, killing, people trying to get on the train are marked in my memory forever.

Q: You were about five then?

CHEEMA: Yes, I was five years old. I have a sister who is three years younger. She was two when we made this journey to Faridkot where my father was posted and which was on the India side of the border, when the partition lines were drawn. My father was the agriculture officer in charge of a large government agricultural research farm. Because Faridkot was near the border, I remember lines of refugees carrying bundles on their heads or carrying children going back and forth. Muslims leaving and Sikhs and Hindus coming into India side of the border. I have memories of food always being cooked and tea always being made because people were moving from the border, and they would stop for water or stop for food, and I felt that our house was like an open house that was welcoming to all. We stayed there for a couple of years and as my father moved, we moved. And my first formal school did not start until I was six or seven because the times were so dramatic, and the school systems were disrupted during the partition with all the

rioting and the independence movement. I remember some home schooling and maybe going to a school for a year or so in a small town called Nabha where my father was posted. I learned how to write Urdu, Hindi on a wooden slate before going to school.

Q: So where did you go to school?

CHEEMA: My maternal grandfather at that time was posted in New Delhi and my parents decided to send me there for schooling. I think it was 1949 and I was seven years old. He was still working for the income tax office. I was enrolled in what then was one of the best schools in North India, St. Mary's Presentation Convent.

Q: And it was a boarding school?

CHEEMA: No, I stayed with my maternal grandfather, his two sons, one of them married. I lived with them until I was thirteen or fourteen. My uncle had a child, and my sister joined me after two years, so I had family, but missed my parents. A year before matriculation, my father was posted in Chandigarh, which was built as a new capital for Punjab then and had a good high school and college. In India then you finished high school with a matriculation which is tenth grade, did one year of pre-university and then three years of undergrad. I believe that has changed now to more international standards. My parents wanted us to go back and live with them. I was not very happy at leaving my friends. I was involved in sports and it was hard to leave my team behind.

Q: Wow. So, you basically had a very active extended family and you got to know your grandparents pretty well.

CHEEMA: Yes, I did. my maternal grandmother had died soon after partition. She had cancer. I didn't know her much, but my grandfather I did because he was de facto my parent from seven until I was fourteen. I had a conflicting relationship with him. I quite did not know how to be – I wanted him to be my grandfather and he felt he had the responsibility to be my parent – we did have some fights.

Q: Right. Well, that must have been hard for your parents to see you go, although maybe it was expected that you would send your children away to get the best education.

CHEEMA: Yes. I think it was very important for my mom for us to have an education because she had to give up her schooling when her mom died. There were five siblings and my grandfather asked her to be the caretaker. She always, and even now, has felt that she would have wanted to be a doctor if she could have finished her education. She was very, very determined that we, I, and my sister, would get the best education.

And her message to us always had been, I remember growing up, women can do anything men can do. This was, what, seventy years ago or something. She was progressive about women's rights even then. I remember that message, like you must be independent, and get a good education. Girls can do whatever they want to. That message stuck with me and my sister.

Q: Right. Also, a little bit of pressure on you, but also such wonderful support too because it was at a time (which isn't entirely past) when there were a lot of people who could disagree. You must have had to deal with lots of prejudices and, you know, assumptions that you didn't belong.

CHEEMA: Right. I mean, the biggest one was (you must) get married by the time you're nineteen, twenty. In India it was expected.

So, I'm grateful to my mom for not having put that pressure on me and just focused on getting a good education, do what you want. It has been a blessing.

Q: Yeah. Did you say she is still alive?

CHEEMA: Yes, I just went to India, spent some time with her because she doesn't travel anymore. I always admired her so much, so I started a project when I came to Madison. I contacted a woman who does oral histories of survivors of the Holocaust - she lives in my neighborhood. Although she had no experience with people from India, I asked her to do an oral history for my mom, when my mother was visiting, so we did six, seven interviews. I worked on editing and interviewing my mother to fill in the gaps for another year and produced the book in 2016. I was very pleased. I think she is too.

Q: Oh, my gosh, that's wonderful. I mean, you remember some of the trauma of the partition, but for your mom it must have been just so real.

CHEEMA: Right. She was twenty-two and I later asked her, because we did a lot of trips during that time when people were being killed around us, and she would take us to see her mom, who was sick, and I said, "Why did you not want to leave us behind?"
She said, "No, I thought if something was going to happen to me, might as well happen to you too," you know. She didn't want to be separated from us because we were five, my sister was two, so she took the package with her whenever she traveled during those times. I think she was pretty brave at that age, and she still is.

Q: Yes, absolutely. She sounds remarkable. I'd love to read the oral history that you did of her sometime. What was your language at home? English?

CHEEMA: Well, when I started school, it was English because I went to a convent school and at that time the only language we could use was English. The nuns wouldn't let us speak anything else. But later, the government required that schools teach Hindi and I had to learn that. Before we started formal school, my mother had a tutor so that we learned to write Urdu and Punjabi which we spoke at home. Punjabi is the local language of North India, Punjab. And somehow, since my sister and I went together to the convent school, we started speaking English all the time. With my mom I speak in Punjabi as I do with other relatives when I visit India.

People ask me sometimes, you know, What's your first language? And I'm always surprised because I've never thought of anything else. I dream in English, I speak English, I write in English because that's what I started with.

Q: Right. But you still understand Punjabi?

CHEEMA: Yes, yes, yes. I don't read it. And Hindi I read a little bit because by the time India became independent Hindi became the official language, so we all had to learn it. So, I can read it a bit. I can speak, but I can't read a serious book for example.
I passed my language requirement test at FSI (Foreign Service Institute) in Hindi. I was surprised how much I did remember. I was happy.

Q: So, there was never any chance that you might have gotten stuck on the Pakistani side?

CHEEMA: Well, if I had, I would have been killed. There were not that many of my people, Sikhs, who chose to stay behind because the situation was quite awful. In the India side of Punjab many Muslims left, but some chose to stay. The Sikh leadership had decided to be part of India, so most all the Sikh population left Pakistan once the decision to partition was made. The only Sikhs who stayed were the religious group to manage one of the famous Sikh Gurdwaras (Sikh temple) Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur. Once the leadership of the Sikh community had decided to move, everybody moved. The movement was terrible. About 15 million were displaced and two to three millions of people were killed in the riots, women, children, old people – both sides.

Q: You went to a parochial primary school?

CHEEMA: I went to no school until I was six years old. Then I went to a small school. I have no memory of it. My mom tells me because I said, you know, "You think I was seven when I first went to school? That seems old." She said, "No, you were six when you first went for a year in the small school, but they didn't have high school." It was really, really a small local school and then they transferred us. So, I suppose I did get some ABC and 1,2,3 or something in that year.

Q: Did you like school? Were you a good student?

CHEEMA: Yes, I loved school. I loved reading. I started reading early, and I would read everything in sight, without any—parental controls. My grandfather was older. Me and my sister were on our own. I learned to manage on my own very early, which I think was a good thing as it prepared me to deal with all kinds of situations and changes in my life in the future, I think.

I always have read. There were all these magazines that I shouldn't have read under my bed, books that I have no idea why I was reading and what they meant, so I've always been reading.

Q: Were there others at your school who were also away from their parents or there because of extended family because they couldn't get schooling where their family lived?

CHEEMA: Most of my close friends that I used to hang out with were from Delhi, and they'd always been there, so their families didn't move. But if there were others I don't remember. All I remember was some mean boys that used to tease me because I had long hair and they used to pull my hair. (Both laugh). And I was a bit fat. But I fought back.

Q: That's universal, you know.

CHEEMA: I know. I still remember I used to avoid sitting in front of those groups of boys.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: Sometimes I wonder if I was lonely or if the separation bothered me, but at that stage and my age I was so involved in my school activities that these big events only take on meaning when you get older. That's how I feel. I was busy at school, I played sports, I was in all kinds of group activities and drama and any show that had to be put on, I somehow was in it. I was in the choir. I was in the Independence Day parade at India gage. I was a busy kid.

Q: Right. So, you didn't know anything different. This was what school was as far as you—

CHEEMA: Yes, and this was my parents' decision. I didn't like being away from them. Going back from the holidays was hard. I remember that they would get us ready, our suitcase and all and put us on the train. I asked my mom – if they did not worry that we would be kidnapped or something. She said in those days, you didn't have to worry about anything happening to you. They would ask another family who was going to Delhi to keep an eye on us and make sure that we got off at Delhi where my uncle would pick us up. And we just thought it was all part of what we had to do. I mean, at least I did. I remember holding my sister tightly to myself.

Q: Do you remember any of your teachers from that early time?

CHEEMA: I remember the nuns. I don't remember any teacher before I went to Delhi. But I remember some of the nuns. I remember standing in the school yard one afternoon and a big hawk dove down and took my lunch. I was crying, and one of the nuns brought me their food. So – they would give me food after that. Not sure why – maybe she thought I was making up the story of the hawk and had no lunch to bring from home. But I also remember that they were strict. I was naughty and a bit rebellious if the teacher was being unfair to me or to someone else. I ended up getting quite a bit of punishment.

Q: A physical punishment?

CHEEMA: Yes. I used to rebel against some rules I thought were unfair, and I would get the class to rebel. Maybe because I didn't have any parameters to go by at home, I was pretty much left to do my own thing, I just made my own rules, and if I didn't like anything I would speak up. And then, I remember getting a ruler on my hand, standing up with my arms for many long hours. But I would never cry as I thought I was right.

On the other hand, that school started me being active, which I've been all my life.

Q: So, when your parents said, "We've got a good school here, come back," was that difficult for you to leave New Delhi?

CHEEMA: Yeah. I didn't like the idea of leaving my friends and all the sport activities I was part of. I was surprised because suddenly one day my grandfather came in and said, "You're going to go back to your parents," and first, I thought I'd done something wrong. Here I was with my best friend for the last ten years or so, and I was doing well in school. I loved the school. And then, the town my parents were in, Chandigarh, had just been built. It was a new city, and I found the school provincial. I came from a big city. I had a hard time making friends because they thought I was a little bit, you know, city girl showing off, and I thought they were ignorant, small-town people, so that's when I started reading more and more. And I used to spend hours and my mom would say, "Go out and play," but I didn't want to play with anybody. They didn't want to play with me. So, it was a lonely two years in high school. By the time I went to college for my Bachelors, I had made friends and had a group of my own and felt more at home. But I continued reading and started keeping a journal.

Q: Right, right.

CHEEMA: But you know, it was nice also, staying with my parents. I hadn't been with them for so long.

Q: And did your sister come back at the same time?

CHEEMA: Yes, we both moved. She was three years younger. But we both moved back together.

Q: So, you had two years with them and then you went away to university?

CHEEMA: No, there was a good college there, so after matriculation, I finished my undergrad in Chandigarh. I started with pre-med. Did not manage to dissect an animal. Changed to psychology, philosophy, and sociology as my major. After finishing my bachelor's degree in 1963, I took a break from school and went to Delhi to work. I lived with my grandfather and uncle again and first went to a typing school and then found a job with the Ford Foundation as a receptionist. Then, my father was nominated as the Secretary of Agriculture and was transferred to Delhi. I moved back in with my parents in a government assigned house in Moti Nagar. After working for a year and a half or two, I

joined the School of Social Work at the Delhi University for my masters in social work. I wanted to be independent, have a career and live on my own.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: I didn't know where I wanted to go. I knew I wanted to get a PhD because I was about twelve or thirteen when my dad went to Cornell to do his PhD, and I thought, that's what I want to do. I clearly remember being at the airport saying good-bye to him and thinking, I want to do that when I get older. So, I always wanted to get a PhD. But in India, there were very few options. And a master's was as far as I could go.

Q: So, when your dad went off for his PhD, you and your family were left in India? You didn't go with him, right?

CHEEMA: No. He was on a Ford Foundation scholarship, and it didn't include us. Me and my sister were already going to school in Delhi and living with my grandfather —and my parents had a third child. My brother was two years old. So, my mother moved in with us in New Delhi and stayed with her father, my grandfather, and the whole family while my father was away for a year and a half. Then my parents moved to Chandigarh after his return and later my sister and I moved to finish high school, as I mentioned above.

Q: Right. Do you remember conversations with him while he was in the U.S., or was there not much communication?

CHEEMA: It was very hard. Letters were the only way to communicate, and letters took a long time to get back and forth. I'm talking about the late fifties when he was at Cornell. All I remember is my mom getting some letters and telling us, "Can you believe he's cooking for himself? And keeping house." Little things like that.

Even in 1975, when I came to Michigan, I remember making a telephone call to my parents. I had to call the operator, make a reservation in advance, time, and day. Then wait for the operator to connect you on the given day and time. The connection would be so bad that it was frustrating. Most of the time you said, "Hello? Hello? Can you hear me?" And then, the three minutes would be up, and the operator would say, "Time up." And my mom would say, "Wait, but we haven't said anything yet." Extremely frustrating.

Q: But it was a good experience for him?

CHEEMA: Oh yes, yes. I mean, for his career and then, on his way back, my mom joined him for three months around Europe. It was part of his PhD program, like a field trip. Ford Foundation provided the allowance for my mother to join him on the Europe trip. They went to many countries where he visited farms and agriculture projects and colleges. My mom loved the trip. She said that people thought he was a prince with his turban and all.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: And one of my aunts came and stayed with—to take care of my brother, who was then, I think, two or three years old.

Q: Oh, my goodness.

CHEEMA: I know.

Q: It takes a village.

CHEEMA: It sure does, it sure did for us.

Q: So, do you have any memory of why you chose psychology and philosophy for your undergraduate work?

CHEEMA: I wanted to work. I wanted to have a career. And my choices then were being a doctor, a teacher, or a professor. Maybe there were some women in the Civil Service. As I said before, I did enroll in pre-med and was hopeless in dissecting any animals. I absolutely could not do it. Absolutely could not do it. I just could not, you know. So, then my counselors said, "Oh, that's done, now what." I always wanted to help and be part of the development process because maybe my father was the role model, and my grandfather was in the Civil Service, and they were involved in services and development issues. My paternal grandfather was head of the village and was always working with farmers and helping them, so I always wanted to do something meaningful. That's a good question. Maybe I was touched by humanity and what was happening around me when I was five, six years old that I wanted to reach out and help people. And that could be the reason. But I was always attracted to the services. So, if I could not be a doctor, I thought I could be a psychiatrist or a social worker, health worker or a professor. I did not know about international development at that time.

Q: Right. Well, you certainly saw in your father and in your grandparents a service orientation.

CHEEMA: Right.

Q: And that obviously was part of the impulse because it's not that you were competitive, but they had set high standards for you.

CHEEMA: True, I just didn't want to do less. My maternal grandfather was in the civil service, my paternal grandfather was a village head and I remember him helping and solving problems and my father was in the civil service. If my mom had been able to finish her education, I am sure she would have been a doctor. I wanted to build on their legacy and do more.

Q: Right: How were the teachers or the professors at your undergraduate program?

CHEEMA: It was an all-girls' college and most of the professors were women. I remember Mrs. Ram, who passed away recently. I do remember one teacher, our French teacher. I had to learn a second language. I chose French. It was not a pleasant experience. He was not a good teacher of how to teach a second language to adults, we all agreed to that. The psychology professor was very good. The subject matter didn't interest me that much because at that time the whole Freudian approach was popular. I thought it was very condescending to women. And I couldn't accept it. I couldn't kind of see myself following that school of thought. So, I did my Master's in social work.

Q: Right. And did you stay in New Delhi for your Master's?

CHEEMA: Yes. By the time I joined the school of social work, I was in Delhi. I thought that was a good alternative, working as a social worker with people. And I could use my psychology background also. So, I did—the Delhi School of Social Work had a program in conjunction with the Chicago School of Social Work. I specialized in Psychiatric social work. My minor in psychology helped. I graduated in 1968 with a MSW.

Q: Which you did.

CHEEMA: Yes.

Q: Right, right. So, always in the back of your mind was at some point I'm going to go for schooling in the U.S.

CHEEMA: Right, ever since I was young, I wanted to go to the US to get my PhD just like my father did.

Q: So, did you work as a social worker?

CHEEMA: Part of the degree program was to do an internship for six months with an institute providing social services. I was matched with the department of youth with the Ministry as a social worker in a youth hostel, where most of the youth were serving sentences for minor thefts, use of drugs and some major crimes, like stabbing and killing someone. I worked for six months. Then, I was assigned to a large slum area in Delhi to work with my family on maternal health and family planning issues. While working in the slums, I met a professor who was doing his research work there from the University of Berkeley. The more I worked with mothers and children and this professor, I started thinking about public health. And with his help I applied to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore and got accepted for my DRPH (Doctor of Public Health) program. And then, I made a bad decision to get married. (Laughs).

Q: Ah, right. Just talk a little bit more, if you will, about the social problems that you were dealing with. Were there a lot of street children, orphans?

CHEEMA: I worked with young kids ranging from nine to fifteen years of age. I was nervous and a little afraid when I started working with them. They were not the nicest of kids, rather mean and tough. The hostel was located up on a hill away from the neighborhood and walking up the driveway, I used to think – can I do this? They were hard to work with. Many of them were homeless and got into trouble and came to the shelter through the juvenile court system. Over time, I think I did make a difference in some way in their lives. When I left a few cried and told me how I had helped them accept themselves better. I also did an internship with the Ministry of Health and worked in one of the largest slums in Delhi. My job was to work with mothers on maternal child health issues and family planning. Culturally, family planning was a sensitive subject, so it took some time and developing a relationship with mothers to talk to them about family planning in the context of better health for mothers.

Yes, In the first program there were street children who had committed crimes, and mostly were orphan kids. I worked with one kid who had killed somebody. At heart, they were just kids, and good kids, but their life and circumstances had left them with little options. On the street, they had to be tough to survive. Some of them got caught up in drug selling to make money and that led to dealing with drug dealers, who did not have much sympathy for them as kids. I did have an office, but in the summer, I remember, we held individual and group sessions under a tree as it was cooler. I was not an expert in the field as I had just finished my course work. I was just starting my internship and was learning by myself. But I believe I did help a few at least to accept themselves as being worthy. I used to think, how can a kid do this, but the more I learned about their background and their history, I could see how they got to where they did. One of them told me, “If I had one person in my life to guide me or even to tell me that I was going down a bad road, it might have made a difference, but there was no one since I was five and on the street. I have been bad ever since to survive.” What made my work hard also was knowing that the public hostel had very little budget to help train and give some support to help the kids to develop skills that might change their lives once they had done their term. There were a couple of kids, who I thought were beyond my help, their mental health issues needed help from services that the hostel did not have access to. I knew, sadly, that they would go back on the streets and suffer more and get into more and more problems, till they ended up in prison for good.

Q: Yeah. I imagine—how about working in the slums?

CHEEMA: Working with the women and children in the slum area made me understand how sensitive the issue of family planning was in those days. Talking to women about why spacing is important, or what choices they had if they did not want to continue having children, about birth control, were culturally a taboo subject. This was in 1968. They thought that I had some hidden agenda for promoting fewer children. That we were foreign agents, or that the government had some reason to target them in the slums, as they were poor. For the first couple of months, women would turn away when I approached or go into their small houses and shut the door. Or they would shout at me and say – “who will take care of us, if we do not have children?” It took months of me being there every day walking the small alleys between closely built shacks before I was

able to break through the silence and talk to them. I remember how a few younger women approached me first and slowly some trust was built. I learned that the best approach was to avoid talking about family planning, but to focus on the children's health. Working in that area was a good lesson for me to understand how to work in harder environments and how to navigate discussion on sensitive topics.

Q: Just one more question on your social work years. Were there also girls who were delinquents? I mean, you talked about the mothers and—

CHEEMA: No, I was assigned to a boy's hostel. I'm sure there were separate places for girls. For some reason I was assigned to boys—I think because I lived closer to this place so, my school assigned me there —or maybe, they thought I could handle it. I don't know. But there was a place for young women. Most of these places were shelter type places. They stayed there, they lived there, and in the daytime, they went to classes or were part of the education program if they chose to finish school. Many in my center had had some schooling and there was a teacher to help them finish school.

Q: Right. And there was no school associated with it?

CHEEMA: No. Because I used to go during the daytime and all the kids would be there. A teacher was assigned to the center.

Q: Now, you said you met a Berkeley researcher while you were doing your social work?

CHEEMA: Yes, I did. He was working on a research project with the School of Public Health, in Berkeley in conjunction with the Department of Public Health in India. His project was to study behavior change and the role of communications to bring about the desired change. I do not remember exactly. I do remember though that for the first time I learned that there was a degree program in public health and that it was a professional field.

After my social work internship was over, the professor recruited me to collect data for his research, which was useful to further expand my own knowledge base to prepare me for my future PhD goals.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: A big lesson for me was that one should not assume that you know best just because you have some technical background, that the approach and gaining trust is very important. Patience helps and having an open mind no matter how different the people were economically and otherwise to me. I learned that I could learn from them. For example, in the beginning, I would walk up to the women and start talking about why they should space their births and what they can do to not have more children and they would shut the door on me. I learned that the direct approach offended many. I slowly changed my approach, I spent more time listening to them about what issues were

important to them, problems they were facing. Or I would just sit with them and not say much, just listen to them chat away amongst themselves. Slowly their questions came.

Q: Yeah. That was a good thing to learn.

CHEEMA: I know. And many times, even now I think I'm still learning every day.

Q: So, the professor encouraged you to apply—?

CHEEMA: Yes, he did. He knew that I wanted to have a career and that I aspired to get my PhD. He told me which public health schools had a good reputation and standing. I applied to Berkeley, and I applied to Johns Hopkins, which offered me a scholarship, which I needed as my father was a Civil Service officer and, on his salary, he could not afford to send me to the US.

Q: So, what was the name of the professor?

CHEEMA: Dr. Snehendu Kar. From Berkely, he moved to Ann Arbor and was teaching there when I applied to the school of public health there in 1975. He and his wife became good friends while I was at Ann Arbor. I was in touch with him until recently. Years later, he moved and is the Professor Emeritus of Public Health and of Asian American Studies at the University of Los Angeles.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: Yes, he was very helpful in getting me started. People talk about hard work and all, but at critical times luck and a little help from someone makes a big difference. Dr. Kar, along with a couple of other people in my life, was that person who helped me at a key turning point in my life.

Q: Right. I think, probably knowing you as I do, you think about how you can help other people, how you can play that role.

CHEEMA: Right. Absolutely. I have kept that in my mind and followed it all my life.

Q: Which is, I guess, what you have been trying to do in your social work too.

CHEEMA: Yes. And even with USAID I encouraged and supported women to get into management jobs. At every post, if there was one person, I taught who had the potential to do well as a manager and leader, I would try to motivate and mentor, especially women. In my time with USAID, at least in the early days, there was a very small percentage of women in management jobs. I also observed during my career that women were not as outspoken about their aspirations and where they want to be in let's say five years, as some of the male colleagues were.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: USAID has made a lot of progress, but when I joined in 1990, there were not that many women in leadership roles. We had few women role models then. So, I made that as one of my missions, to encourage and support women.

Q: So, you alluded to a mistake. We won't spend a lot of time on it.

CHEEMA: Yeah, (Laughs) we won't. The alluded mistake was getting married when I did instead of going to get my Doctorate in Public Health at John Hopkins. It was such a great opportunity, scholarship, and all. Not sure what I was thinking.

Q: Did you choose to be married? It wasn't an arranged marriage.

CHEEMA: No. My parents never put any pressure on me. My aunties and relatives might have, but I didn't get any pressure from my parents. And I just made my own choice. And it was just bad timing. I don't know, it just happens. I had my scholarship all set, ready to go. I had a year before the program started, and then I chose to get married in 1970. Maybe I thought I could do both, have a career, and get married. And maybe there was some societal pressure. I was twenty-eight by then. And I met someone who was very eager, and said, "We can get married. We can go to the States. You can do this; you can do that. You can get anything you want." So, I just thought, oh, maybe I can do both, you know. So, who knows?

Q: Yeah. Were your parents encouraging you?

CHEEMA: No, it was totally my decision. Totally my decision. I don't know what was going on in my head, but…

Q: Hmm. So, it didn't last.

CHEEMA: No. It didn't. Lasted only about three years. It was not a good experience for me. You know, we all make mistakes. It is important to correct them.

Q: Right, right.

CHEEMA: So, I got out of the marriage. I won't go into details of that here; it is not important. What is important is that I packed my bags and went to the U.S. I was a citizen by then through my marriage. I went to live with a friend and then applied to Ann Arbor and was accepted. That's how I then ended up back in the U.S., back on track to get my PhD, but three or four years later at a different school.

Q: So, you got married and then you went to the States with your husband?

CHEEMA: No, when we married, he was posted in Delhi and then to Pakistan, so I went with him to Pakistan. Then the war between India and Pakistan happened, so we were evacuated to Tehran and then to the Philippines where he got a temporary assignment.

Then he got a permanent job, I believe with the Ford Foundation, in Sri Lanka. It was then that I knew I had made a mistake, a wrong decision. But it takes time to get out of a bad decision.

Q: Of course. Of course. So, you still at that point had never been to the States?

CHEEMA: Just for short visits, not to live. So, I just packed up my bags. I had my best friend, Karen, whom I knew from my days when I worked with the Ford Foundation between my undergrad and social work degree. I took two years off. Karen became my best friend over the years. In India, we traveled around India together. She was in New York, and I didn't go home when my marriage was over. My mother to this day sometimes says, "Why didn't you come home?" And I said, "I was embarrassed." You know. "I didn't want to explain to the family. Some family members had questioned my decision as I had lined up and was all set to go to Johns Hopkins. I had fought against getting married all this while as I wanted a career and then I went ahead and got married. So, some family members did not understand. Some questioned why I was marrying a foreigner and someone much older. I didn't want my mom to have to explain to anyone the mistake I made. So, I said to myself, "I'll go to the U.S., get my life back and then we will see." So, I just didn't—and she says, you know, "You should have come home. This is when you need family." I was also afraid that if I go home, my mom will just say, "Stay, be with us." You know. "You need us." And I didn't want to get trapped in that.

Q: Right. So, you basically applied for graduate school again?

CHEEMA: Yes, I stayed with my friend for three to four months because she had a one-room apartment with her husband. I couldn't stay there longer. While with her, I applied to the schools of public health. The Boston School of Public Health accepted me, and I moved to Boston and stayed there for six months. The program started, but they didn't give me any financial support, so I couldn't afford to go there. I had also applied to the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. When Ann Arbor offered me a scholarship and tuition, I moved there in 1975.

Q: Right, right. So, you said you were already an American citizen at that point?

CHEEMA: Yes, as soon as I got married, I had started my paperwork. He and I had talked about me going back to school and having a career. So having a US citizenship would be easier for both of us while married and after he retired. Of course, at that point I did not know that my marriage wouldn't work.

Q: And so, between New York and Boston there was almost a year before you got to Michigan.

CHEEMA: Yes about that, I do not remember exactly.

Q: Did you have short-term jobs or what were you doing?

CHEEMA: No, it was hard to get a job not knowing where I would be. While waiting to hear from Ann Arbor, I volunteered at a hospital, in the ward for terminally ill elderly. I helped feed them, talk to them. Many of them had no families who would visit them. I felt sad. I also volunteered with the social services department and was assigned to a shelter for the mentally challenged kids – I would take them on trips, do group activities with them.

It was my first experience living in the U.S. I had a studio apartment on Cambridge Street. I had a small amount of support from my husband as officially we were not divorced yet. I did not want to ask for money from my parents. I was embarrassed to ask for help as my father was not making that much money as a government employee. My neighborhood was made up of mostly Italian immigrants. I made friends with the family from whom I was renting. They knew of my situation and often would invite me over for Italian dinners. I kept myself busy with volunteering.

I did pick up odd jobs, like at a grocery store, and my landlord would ask me to help with bookkeeping and paid me. I do not remember how much, but it was not a lot. This extra bit was my pocket money. It was a good learning experience about how to make it on my own in the US.

Q: Right. And you knew you were going to a cold climate, I assume!

CHEEMA: I knew I was going to a cold climate. Boston prepared me a little bit, but I was not prepared for Ann Arbor.

Q: Right. So, was Professor Kar there?

CHEEMA: Yes. He was there. I did take a communication class from him, but my major was in public health administration. But knowing him and his wife helped me settle in.

Q: So, but he wasn't your mentor at that point.

CHEEMA: No. Because I did more on the administration side of public health and he was teaching behavior change and communication. There was another professor that was my advisor. His name is Fred Munson.

Q: Right. You didn't know anybody else there.

CHEEMA: I didn't know anyone. I moved into a two-bedroom apartment managed by the ecumenical center. My roommates included a woman from Japan and a woman from Puerto Rico. They took the larger room as they had arrived earlier. Another woman from Baltimore and me had a small room. We could not get two beds in there. She was of African heritage from Philadelphia. I was in Michigan for five years and as a student made many friends, some of whom I am in touch with even now.

I didn't know any black people, so my roommate was my first exposure to a whole different culture. I learned so much about race, color, and prejudices in America through my black roommate. We became close friends. I was familiar with the caste system in India, but this was all new to me.

And the winters. The first time it snowed, I stayed home. I thought the university must be closed. And my friend and my classmates called and said, "Where were you?" I said, "It was snowing." They said, "The university never closes." "Just so you know." I think I was always cold for all the winters I was there.

Q: Right, wow. So, when you came to Michigan, did you already have an idea of what you wanted to study and specialize in?

CHEEMA: Yes. I had applied for public health because that's what I had got admission into Johns Hopkins. Also, that was the program I had been accepted at the Boston School of Public Health. So, I didn't even think of any other. I thought that was my best bet. I had done some field work with Dr. Kar in India related to the health area when I worked in the Delhi slums, so I only applied to schools of public health. I wanted to go into the PhD program, but the first scholarship I got was for a master's in public health. Since I already had one masters (social work) – I got admitted to a shorter one-year program to get my master's in public health.

Q: Right. But I was just wondering, you said that you were more on the administrative side how did you pursue those interests?

CHEEMA: I always felt I had good people skills for managing and negotiating. I wanted to build on that skill set – thus during my master's course work, I focused on the management/administration side. Luckily for me, my scholarship was extended for me to continue a PhD program. I put together an interdisciplinary program that included management, policy and international development as my focus. Of course, I had to take the required courses such as statistics and research methodologies for the PhD program. I got the course program approved from my committee. I branched out to other schools and departments in the University system. Such as the school of management and public policy and sociology. Instead of getting a doctorate in public health, my PhD is in social sciences – an interdisciplinary program. I did research back in India examining public services response – policy and services – to the needs of the people.

Q: Right. And what did you find?

CHEEMA: Well, what I found, very simply put, was that where the need was the most, there was also avoidance by the government to meet those needs - because they didn't have the resources and the means, they didn't know how to meet the need, so the extension workers and service providers avoided working in those villages. In addition, the villages and the people which had no resources and were most in need would require extra effort by the government and the service providers. In sum, the bureaucracy failed those most in need.

Q: Right. So, it became a vicious circle.

CHEEMA: Yes, it was evident that the people knew what their needs were more than the government who was supposed to aid. But my findings were a bit more complex than that. Anyway, I had a blast doing my field work. I had my jeep, I used to take my cousin with me whose father was one of the landlords in my study area and my cousin knew his way around to get to the villages. I was the driver and the researcher. My cousin took some notes, but was mostly to help me with introductions etc. I learned a lot from the farmers and their families.

Q: Did you have to work while you were in Ann Arbor?

CHEEMA: I did part time work as a teaching assistant for one of the professors. My scholarship was for a limited period, I believe five years, and I had to finish all my coursework, my field work, and my thesis defense by then. So, I took a heavy load of about 18 credits each semester and did not have much free time to work. My divorce had come through and I had agreed to alimony until I finished school. So, with some work, my alimony and scholarship, I could concentrate on completing my program before my scholarship ended.

By then I had started to think of what after. I love teaching, but being older, I could not see myself start at the bottom of the tenure system in a university. My father had worked with the World Bank for a couple of years, which I didn't mention earlier. I knew about the UN. I didn't know much about USAID, but while I was in Michigan a friend of mine, like Kar, had got a project from USAID. And then, Barbara Kennedy who was in my master's class joined USAID. So, I knew there were other options I could pursue besides teaching after I finished my PhD.

Q: Okay. So, you never wanted to teach, and your world view was so much bigger than Ann Arbor that I can't imagine you're settling there.

CHEEMA: Settling in Ann Arbor was never an option I considered.

Q: So, I see from your CV that your first post-doctorate assignment was with the World Bank?

CHEEMA: I must check my CV – my first assignment when I finished my post-doctorate was with a USAID contractor. I finished in 1981 and moved to Washington DC. I got a job with Battelle soon after. While with Battelle, I traveled on a needs assessment trip to Sudan. It was during one of the worst droughts in Sudan and traveling around the countryside, I saw animal carcasses and people on the move to find food. We finished our assessment. At the end, I remember at the end being invited by an expat to have a beer in a hotel at the place where the White and the Blue Nile meet. I never in my wildest dreams thought I would ever be in Khartoum, having a warm beer and watching the two Niles merge.

Then, there were rumors of budget cuts and Battelle was downsizing and I was let go. For two to three years, I could not get a full-time job. That was the hardest period of my life. I kept thinking that I have two master's and a PhD, why can't I find work? I was on unemployment benefits for the first eight months. I rented a place in Arlington. Then, I did short-term assignments with UNICEF and the World Bank. With the World Bank, I did five health evaluations. I was hired by a unit called the External Evaluation Department that reported to the board of directors. In many ways independent of the World Bank system. I traveled to Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Nepal, to evaluate the health programs. I enjoyed the work and the traveling, but unfortunately, by the time our reports were final, in many places follow-on projects were already approved and operating. So, because of the time lag, the application of lessons learned from our evaluations could not be applied to follow on projects. I was hoping that maybe future programs down the road might incorporate the lessons learned.

Q: Right. And were you on teams when you did these evaluations and then what?

CHEEMA: I had a staff member with me. I was the health specialist. When I completed the World Bank work, I got an assignment with UNICEF in New York for two months to three months, I believe. Then, Mike Jordan, who was a friend of mine, encouraged me to apply to several contractors who normally bid on USAID contracts. He would say "Just put your name in. They may not win it, but it is the health area, policy area. You've done this work." He was another one of those people who came to my help at a critical juncture in my life. I could not afford to live in DC with short term assignments.

So, one of these jobs came through. University Research Corporation (URC) won an Operations Research Regional Health project covering Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangkok, and Sri Lanka with the head office in Bangladesh. I had put my name on their roster. When they were awarded the contract, I moved to Bangladesh. This was in 1985. There were supposed to be three technical American staff, one of them the Chief of Party. I was the health technical officer. For the first year, URC had problems hiring the other American staff and I was assigned the role of the Chief of Party. I was totally unprepared for it. It fell upon me to administratively coordinate the establishment of the regional office, and get technical projects started in the client countries. I thought the concept was innovative, the ability to learn as we go and make corrections was a great idea. We were supposed to get pilot projects started in each country within the first year. I was constantly on the road traveling in the region. Most counterparts liked the idea, but bureaucracies being bureaucracies, getting pilot projects started was not easy according to the targets established in the proposal. Looking back, technically it was a great project, but not enough time or thought had been given to the startup time. Over time, we had a couple of successful projects, but the USAID project manager was not happy with the progress, so URC let me go.

Q: Oh, my gosh. So, you were traveling all the time!

CHEEMA: I was the only American staff in that office. They didn't get me a second person until I was already there a year and a half or something. In the project that was approved URC were supposed to field three senior people—I don't think URC was prepared. I was a scapegoat. It happens.

Q: But probably one of the lessons for you is to look at the prep time and ask if the work is being put in to make something successful.

CHEEMA: Yes, an important lesson that I learned was that startup time should be factored in as an important factor in the implementation phase. USAID should factor in startup and orientation to new settings, especially if it is a new idea that does not have an ongoing project on the ground. Another lesson was that technically qualified staff are not sitting around waiting for the contract to come through. Sometimes it takes USAID a year or two to get all the process completed and people who the contractors list as key staff find other jobs. This is what happened to URC. Finding new staff takes time.

Q: So, what then?

CHEEMA: I had horrible thoughts of being jobless again from my previous experience. About the same time when I was told that I was not needed at URC, there was a job opening at the Bangladesh USAID Mission for a personal service contractor (PSC). I thought that being a PSC would be a good step towards a career with USAID and I did not want to move back to the U.S. I applied and got the job. I had the credentials and the USAID Mission understood that the problems URC was having did not have to do with me technically. Susan Olds, I believe, was the HPN Office Director.

After a year, Mike Jordan sent me a message that USAID was hiring health officers for difficult to fill positions. Although, there was a hiring freeze in the agency and Reduction in Force (RIF) efforts at USAID were underway. However, there was a shortage of health officers, especially in Africa, where the HIV/AID epidemic was in full force. USAID had special approval to recruit health officers for hard to fill posts in Africa with large health budgets. I applied, and I got in and the rest is history.

Q: Just back you up a little bit. So, you knew Mike Jordan from just being—

CHEEMA: I met Mike Jordan and his wife way back in India in the sixties when my dad was posted in Delhi, and I was going to the school of social work. I am not sure if he was working with USAID or another organization then. We have been friends ever since. I was friends with his wife who was a designer and I used to do tie and dye with her. I even modeled one of her dresses in a local fashion show.

Q: Right. So, was that the first time you had been in Bangladesh?

CHEEMA: No. when I was in Pakistan with my ex-husband, he had a short-term work assignment in Bangladesh in 1971. I decided to go along for touring purposes. I had never been to Bangladesh before. There was some news of an independence movement in

Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, but no one took it seriously. There was very little information on the West Pakistan side on the radio or in the news, where I was living with my ex-husband, as mentioned above. Two weeks into the trip when we were in Chittagong there was a call by the independence activists for a massive strike. We were stuck in a hotel, which was the only safe place to a point.

Q: Oh, my gosh.

CHEEMA: Because I looked like a Punjabi and there were people being killed all around who were from West Pakistan and looked like me, the Ford Foundation said, "Don't leave. We're trying to make arrangement on a boat to take you out of there because it's too dangerous for you to come back to Dhaka." So, I remember staying for ten days in that hotel, and then, there was a halt for a day to negotiate and a call for no violence was made. All the foreigners living in the hotel made a convoy of cars. We put Bangladeshi flags in front of the cars to show that we were in support, we felt we had no choice. Every city and village we passed there were groups of gangs and people on the streets demonstrating although peacefully for that one day. We were told to go straight to the Dhaka Airport and wait for evacuation. All I had with me was a small suitcase as we were not planning to stay in Chittagong for long. We stayed two days at the airport before we were on a flight to our house in Karachi. And by then Pakistan and India were in open war and Karachi was being bombed. Then, we were evacuated again to Tehran on a recently introduced new Boeing 747 that the US Embassy had arranged. It was packed to maximum capacity.

Q: Oh, my gosh. You've been through two major partitions.

CHEEMA: I know. Two partitions and three evacuations. I remember that I was so worried about people around me when I was in Chittagong and kept saying why so much fuss about me. I'll be fine. And then my ex-husband said, "Look at your face. They're killing people that look like you."

Q: Let's move forward, working on family planning as a PSC. And was that the first time that you'd really worked with the population crowd?

CHEEMA: Yes, the office of population in the Bangladesh mission was made up of great people. I am still friends with some and in contact with others. We were like one big family. We worked hard as there was so much to be done in family planning in the eighties then. We had some of the best Bangladeshi organizations and people to work with. Many of the heads of these organizations were in school with me in Ann Arbor under a special program after independence of Bangladesh to create a professional group of people as many qualified people had been killed during the independence movement. I worked with some wonderful groups of people. I remember Gary Newton, Susan Olds, Gary Cook, Sigrid Anderson, Donna Vogel, Marylynn Schmidt, great professionals, and great people to be with. I learned about USAID from all of them. We came together in the right place and right time to work on the population issues in Bangladesh. We worked hard and had fun doing it. We used to have rickshaw races and mango Rama parties, with

all mango dishes. I have so many great memories from that first job with USAID. The office of health and population was a busy office given the health status of mothers and children and high fertility rates in Bangladesh. The health budgets I believe were the largest. There was lots of traveling for monitoring purposes. Traveling around Bangladesh was not the easiest with poor roads and transport means. We were often in the field for project monitoring. In those days compared to now, there was more time for project monitoring and being in the field than doing briefing documents sitting behind your computers, as I hear is the case now.

Q: But that was a great group to introduce you to USAID.

CHEEMA: Yes. a fun group. I would work with all of them any time again. It is not often you find yourself in one office with like minded and hardworking people who also like to have fun. We had each other's back at work and had many get together events to make a family away from family.

Q: Obviously it was a fraught time, but did you feel that you were making progress

CHEEMA: Yes, I think it was a successful family planning program. The success mainly was due to the excellent implementing partners who knew the country and people. Survey after survey had shown that women wanted fewer children. I believe in 1998, the fertility rate was 6 or 7 children. Two unique approaches which made a difference in outreach was recruiting women by our implementing partners as field workers and outreach workers to go door to door and talk to women. Hiring predominantly women had an additional benefit that women became income earners in the family and brought home money, thus gaining them some respect in an otherwise strongly male dominated society. Another approach that I thought was effective was to involve the village religion leaders and convince them that spacing between births makes for better health of the mother and the child.

Q: Right, right. So, you were based in Bangladesh, and you were there until 1990?

CHEEMA: I took this assignment with URC in 1985. I applied for the PSC position in 1988. I applied for the USAID direct hire position in 1990 and was accepted. Did my language requirement in Washington, DC and then was assigned to Burkina Faso in 1991. I had no idea where that was. Ouagadougou. Where is Ouagadougou? I thought to myself.

Q: Right. Do you think it helped having been a PSC to then be able to join?

CHEEMA: Yes, tremendously. As a PSC you learn so much about how USAID operates and that helps. By the time I went to Ouagadougou as a direct hire, I was better prepared with the organizations, who is who and how the systems work. Of course, there are so many other parts of the job as a direct hire that you do not undertake as a PSC. My PSC job was purely technical in nature and not supervisory. In Burkina Faso, I was assigned to be the director of the office of health and population.

Q: So, your first assignment was as an office director? And you said it was a small office,

CHEEMA: Yes, it was a small office.

Q: Did you have any staff?

CHEEMA: Yes. We had one PSC for HIV/AIDS. We had one PSC for maternal/child health. And then, we had four local hired staff. So, it was an office of seven people. Our budget if I remember was about $15- $16 million. Because of HIV/AIDS, the health office had the largest budget. We had a small project in agriculture. I ended up closing the USAID office. So, that was another great learning experience. I think that gave me the foundation to then bid on senior management positions because I had done so much work closing and learned so much about management issues.

Q: Yeah, it's not fun—

CHEEMA: No, I think that was the worst policy decision that I had to implement. But I had a wonderful and very supportive Ambassador in Ambassador McConnell.

Q: Yeah. So, we can come back to this next time, but I'd love to have you talk about the way that AID approached HIV/AIDS because 1990 was really early days, I think there was certainly research going on, but there was a lot that we didn't know, and I'm not sure what kind of program you inherited or whether you had to start from scratch, but I would love to hear you talk about.

CHEEMA: Yes, often in the earlier days, people were dying and referring to it as "died of pneumonia" – even the official records did not log it as HIV/AIDs. But that changed overtime as the pandemic could not be ignored. In the early nineties, prevention mainly by use of condoms was the main message. PSI was our implementing partner.

Q: Population Services International?

CHEEMA: Right. That was our main contractor. We had the resources, the money. Enough supply of condoms. What I think we didn't know enough was how to deal with the cultural aspect of having several wives and girlfriends. As an example, the Burkinabe staff in my office who was the lead staff for HIV/AIDS program died of HIV. He was the expert yet, he had a number of wives and we learned that he had unprotected relationships with other women. And when I was in the hospital with him, I sort of looked at him and he knew what I was thinking, and he just said, "But Cheema, this is our culture." You know. And I just thought, and here is the person who was heading up that program, was advising the government on behalf of USAID, knew all the dangers, and still went and got married again, knowing he had HIV/AIDS. So, that part was the first big learning for me: that it is hard to introduce interventions to change a behavior that is rooted in culture and so ingrained in society and part of people's lives.

The other challenge PSI faced was to educate men and women, especially sex workers, to use the condoms properly. Changing behavior and practices was the biggest challenge. We had plenty of communication materials.

Q: Right. Or even the knowledge. I mean, behavior is often the last thing to change. Do you remember, did you have any support from Washington or were you basically on your own in terms of the resources you needed for your program?

CHEEMA: Yes, there was support for HIV/AIDS programs from the Health Bureau in Washington, but it was also when policy decisions were being made to close the Mission. We were told that the programs will continue from the regional office, but there was a lot of disconnect and time gap before that happened. The ministry of health was our best partner. They were extremely committed and wanting to do their part. It was very hard to close the programs. Just when we thought we were making a breakthrough and were seeing success in condom use and acceptance, we had to close the program. And then, it took time from the regional office to start projects. It's not easy.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: That, I think, was more of a problem than lack of support. I think that policy decision (to close missions) was made at high levels in USAID. Whether it was a right or wrong decision is not for me to say, but we should have started the regional projects in Burkina before we closed.

Q: Do you remember fighting it? Because we fought it in Washington.

CHEEMA: Yes – the Ambassador sent cables and requests, but I believe the decision was made. Frankly it was my first tour, and I did not have a clue about how to make a case or make the right arguments. We had no Mission director at that point. Once it appeared that closing the USAID office was a reality, the director decided to retire. I suppose he did not want to go through the painful process of letting staff go and managing the closing. Ambassador McConnell did not want a short-term person to come and insisted that I be the person to manage the close out since I had been in the Mission for three years or more by then and knew the counterparts. He felt I had the best interest of the local staff. So, Washington assigned me as the Acting Rep. Washington did send an experienced retired executive officer to help me, which was a life saver. I could then focus on finding jobs for our staff and transition programs to the regional office So, here I was, my first tour as a health officer, and I'm acting AID/Rep. And I am meeting with the prime minister, the health ministers, trying to close this mission that had been there for I don't know how many years. That was the fastest learning experience for me as a Foreign Service Officer and prepared me for my future career decisions. I was in Burkina from 1991-1995.

Q: I'm just going to stop the recording.

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Q: All right. Let's go back and talk a bit about your parents: was it an arranged marriage?

CHEEMA: Well, my father says that the Cheema, my paternal side of the family and the Gills, my maternal side of the family were very close families. Their ancestral villages were not far from each other. My father tells the story that he remembers seeing my mom when he was twelve and she was seven and thought she was so beautiful that he was going to marry her when he grows up. My mother thought that he was one of the cousins. She remembered playing with him as kids. Everyone in India who is a close family friend is a cousin, an aunt, and an uncle. My mom paid no attention to him. But the families arranged the marriage.

Q: Right. And she married at sixteen?

CHEEMA: My mom got married at fourteen but did not go to live with my father's family until she was sixteen. My father was still in school when they married and in college when my mother moved to stay with him, but since he was in college, she lived with my paternal grandparents in the village of Wadhai Cheema. She stayed there until he finished his college and had his first government job in 1945.

Q: Right. So, you lived both with your paternal grandparents and your maternal grandparents at different points growing up.

CHEEMA: Yes. I have memories of being with my paternal grandparents during the summers and then, of course, when I went to school I was with my maternal grandfather and my mom's side of the family.

Q: Right. Now, I think I asked you before, but it was just expected that you might do that. Do you have any memories of not wanting to leave your parents or was that just the way it was?

CHEEMA: I think there were so many uncertainties during that period after partition and schools were being reorganized. Everyone was being resettled and people's lives were being reorganized, I don't even think we kids even factored in all that. I am glad that my parents did not spend too much time talking about it and trying to explain what was happening around me. I felt safe being with my mom, even when nothing was safe around me. We were lucky that my father had a job in the city of Faridkot that was in India. I feel lucky that we were all alive, all our extended family had made it through from Pakistan. So, when my parents made the decision to send us to school, I thought they knew best. I never questioned. Looking back, I question a lot of rules that seem wrong. But I did not question the decision to send us to school away from our parents. It was just the times. My parents said that there was no school where my dad was posted, so that was it.

Q: Right. Do you remember your parents talking about partition? Did they leave friends behind?

CHEEMA: My paternal grandparents were left behind and had to flee later. They left everything behind, friends, their belongings, their money, jewelry, collectibles, everything. Just walked out at night fearing for their lives with the clothes they had on. I don't remember my parents talking about it. I felt everyone was just dealing with the situation as it was happening. We were aware of what was going on, although at my age I did not remember being in a house in Faridkot in the summer of 1947. It was where dad was posted, and it was close to the new border dividing the two countries. I remember our house becoming a house for all, refugees moving back and forth and stopping there for food. I remember wondering who all these people were as they were not our family. Although, many of my real uncles and aunts had moved in to live with us till they found permanent relocation places allocated by the government. There were always cousins to play with. Thinking about it now, I am glad that our parents protected us from telling us too much about what was going on. We knew in the back of our minds that something historic was happening, but emotionally somehow, we felt free to be kids, play and get into trouble as kids do, especially in the Faridkot house where with a lot of relatives around, there were many kinds to play with.

Q: Yes, I'm sure it does trigger memories. So, your family was Sikh, correct?

CHEEMA: Yes.

Q: Was there discrimination against the Sikh?

CHEEMA: Sikhs were a major ethnic group in that part of Punjab that got divided, long with the Muslims. Knowing now what I did not then was that the Sikh community decided to be part of India and thus had to leave their homes and villages. But the way it happened could have been avoided and better managed. In Punjab the Hindus and the Sikhs had to leave. Yes, Sikhs were targeted as there were many villages with Sikhs as majority. But during the riots, people did not care who was who, they just killed when they saw people leaving the villages. I know there were killings on both sides. My grandfather would tell us later that it was all started by the young gangs and rumors that one community was killing the other in some village and the word would spread and, in another village, there would be counter attacks. One would hope that the world would learn lessons from such events, but they keep happening. What is happening in Ukraine is one example, and so many ethnic conflicts like in the Tigre region and in the DRC and many more during my lifetime. So unfortunate.

Q: Uh-huh, fascinating. Are there Sikhs back there?

CHEEMA: There's no Sikhs back there except a few who stayed behind to take care of the temple and live in the temple.

Q: Right. So, Cheema, when the Sikhs moved, was there a place in India that already had a Sikh community or not?

CHEEMA: There were Sikhs living on the India side. Sikhs are predominantly a farming people and majority lived in villages. New Sikh refugees were placed in camps until the government allocated them land. Most of the land and houses allocated were those left behind by the Muslims who left Punjab to move to the Pakistan side of Punjab. Our family was lucky as my father was posted in Faridkot which was on the India side and many of our relatives from my paternal side of the family moved in with us until they were allocated land and houses. But the allocation of new homes did not happen immediately. The government was not prepared—nobody knew how many people would come over and what their needs were. I heard somebody did go back to our village years later and said that ten Muslim families lived in one house in Wadhai Cheema where my grandparents lived.

Q: So, I recall later in your life you experienced another partition when Bangladesh was formed, and did it trigger earlier memories? I know you were caught on the wrong side, and it was the Ford Foundation that had to get you out of there.

CHEEMA: Yes, my ex-husband was working for the Ford Foundation then and posted in Karachi. He was on a short-term assignment to then East Pakistan, but the separation movement had started by then. We happened to be in Chittagong when there was a major hartal (strike) and everything in Pakistan came to a stop still.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: And negotiations were happening, but that was not safe for people to be on the roads. So, ten foreign families who happened to be in Chittagong could not leave. Before we had time to get back to Dhaka, the hotel was under lockdown. I think we were there for like ten days before there was a ceasefire. Then we learned that negotiations failed, and full-blown rioting started. We were told to stay in our rooms and lock the doors. One day the hotel would be occupied by the independent movement groups and day later by the Pakistan army. At night, there would be quiet, and someone would bring us water and food. At one point there was discussion between a ship that was anchored at the Chittagong port and between our head office in Dhaka to evacuate us. At some time during that period there was a one day cease fire agreement. We made a convoy of our cars and in the middle of the night drove from Chittagong to Dhaka. I am not sure where the other families went but we were told to go straight to the airport. We stayed at the airport for two days before we could get space on one of the evacuation flights organized by Pakistan to get mostly the non-Muslim, Pakistanis out of what by then was clear would be an independent country of Bangladesh. Because it had been one country, there were many people from West Pakistan settled in East Pakistan for business.

Q: Right, right.

CHEEMA: I don't remember exactly what memories it triggered, but I do remember being anxious. I somehow felt as an American, I was safe. I worried about all the people from Pakistan who were trying to leave. I never thought that somebody would kill me. I don't remember that fear. Maybe I adapted to the fear of death early on in my life during the partition years.

Q: And you probably witnessed some violence yourself.

CHEEMA: I did not witness any violence this time around. I heard of killings and riots going on, but we were first shut up in the hotel and then at the airport and then out. I just remember scenes of panic at the airport and burnt army vehicles and tanks when driving to the airport as we entered Dhaka.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: When we got back to Karachi, there was very little news on the West Pakistan side as to what was happening in the East. All the media was blocked. Then when India started bombing Karachi, as India had entered the war on the side of Bangladesh movement for independence, I was evacuated again to Tehran.

We lived for a couple of days or weeks, I do not remember before being evacuated. We used to black out our windows during lights off. We had a white car, and we were told to put a black cover on it. We were told to keep a small suitcase ready, but we didn't know when the call would come to go to the airport.

Q: Right, yeah. Fascinating.

So, last time we talked about your work in Bangladesh, and then we moved to Burkina Faso. And I'd like to pick up there if there aren't other things that you want to pick up from the earlier time. Because I know you came when the HIV/AIDS pandemic was already raging. And you inherited an HIV program. Could you talk a little bit about what it was you inherited and then what changes you felt you needed to make?

CHEEMA: It was my very first job as a USAID health officer, and in 1991, people were still not openly talking about HIV/AIDs. There was underreporting of cases. If someone died, people said, he or she was sick. But slowly within the next two years, the facts could not be hidden. By the time I left, I believe the rate was nearly six to seven percent of the adult population. Among the sex workers, truck drivers, the rate was much higher. I felt like I was on a moving train, not knowing where it would stop. By 1994, it was evident that there were far more cases than being reported. It is also clear that all donors need to coordinate. Our major efforts were in mass media campaigns to reinforce behavior change, communication interventions targeting high risk populations, and promotion of condom use and ensure supply. But in the beginning, there was so much resistance as the Government had not officially recognized the problem as a pandemic. I inherited a good staff. I had an excellent PSC specialist in HIV/AIDS. I learned a lot from her. Once the government had recognized and accepted what they were dealing with, we

had great support from the Ministry of Health. Although I was so new to the job, I do think looking back that no one knew how serious the situation was and how fast it could spread, we should have started a donor coordinated effort much sooner than we did.

Q: And was it labeled HIV or was it called pneumonia?

CHEEMA: In the early days when I got there it was called pneumonia or that someone was just sick. Then there was a period that people would know, but would not openly say it, but then it got to a point that there was no hiding.

Q: Yeah. So, at that point, was it largely male deaths or were you also seeing deaths in the female community?

CHEEMA: I remember mostly male deaths, but I do remember at that time we couldn't track all the wives and all the girlfriends. We did not have the resources. But as it became clear that sex workers were being identified as having HIV/AIDS, we knew that it would already be spreading amongst the women as men would come home and have sex with their wives. But there was not good data at that time.

Q: Right. So, the program was basically condoms—

CHEEMA: Yes, USAID's program then was training of health workers, information and communication and mass media to change behavior and promotion and supply of condoms.

Q: Right. Do you feel you made some progress on condom use?

CHEEMA: I think so, by the time I left the epidemic did not decline but it wasn't the peak yet. But PSI was reporting an increase of condom use amongst the sex workers and truck drivers. But by then data started coming about women and children and that was a whole new set of interventions – by that time we had started to coordinate with other donors. Unfortunately, we closed the Mission in 1995 and the regional program was on the ground, but I think we did lose some momentum.

Q: So, is there anything you want to say about the maternal/child health program, the other part of your portfolio?

CHEEMA: It was a smaller program. The usual components of nutrition, child spacing and preventive care. Even though we did not have a large financial assistance, I had an excellent staff in the office who worked with the Ministry of Health on policy and provided technical assistance.

Q: Exactly. And at that point we weren't making it clear that HIV programs also were helping mothers and children.

CHEEMA: Yes, yes, yes. We were making that link clear in our outreach messages. As we were learning more about HIV/AIDs and its spread we were changing our messaging.

Q: Did anyone from Congress come out to see the program?

CHEEMA: No, I don't remember. But I do remember that we had a reporter from the Washington Post come out and do an article on the program. I was mentioned as was the story of HIV/AIDs and I think there was some reference to the USAID assistance program that got attention in Washington.

Q: Even from USAID Washington.

CHEEMA: I think not because by the time the decision was made, USAID/W's focus was how to do the close out. It is amazing how policy decisions are made. Years later, we have gone back and opened some of these missions that we closed in the seventies. We got a lot of help and pushed back against closure from the Global Health Bureau or whatever it was called then because of the HIV/AIDs situation. But from the policy side I think it was clear that we were going to close. It was a mistake.

Q: And did you go through two ambassadors during your time there? Or three?

CHEEMA: Well, let's see. Who was there, Ambassador McConnell was there when we closed. Ambassador Ed Brynn was there when I arrived at post. I have been so lucky to have worked with great Ambassadors during my career. Elizabeth Jones in Almaty, Michael Lemmon in Armenia, Donald McConnell again in Eritrea, Scott DeLisi when I left Eritrea, Pamela Bridgewater in Ghana when I was the Regional Mission Director, Bill Woods in Kabul, Masha Yovanovitch in Armenia when I returned there in 2009. And others that I can't recall now. Washington is important, but on the ground it is your ambassadors, your own USAID Director and staff that make or break you in your success at your job. As I rose in management and became the USAID Director, I realized how much what and how I did influenced others professionally and personally. It is an awesome responsibility and also humbling.

Q: Right. And did Ambassador McConnell try to argue against closing?

CHEEMA: Yes. He sent cables making the case, but I think the decision was made. It was frustrating times to keep working not knowing what the future holds, especially for our Burkinabe staff who lived in fear of losing jobs. I was surprised that the majority of them stayed until the end as they were really committed to the programs. Wilbur Thomas who was the USAID/Rep when I arrived at post also made the case but to no avail. He moved on after completing his assignment to become the Mission Director in Guinea Conakry. Tom Lucas was assigned as the AID/Rep. Once the decision was made to close, he curtailed. We did get a consultant to help close out, who was a retired EXO, who helped me a lot.

Q: Well, it was your first assignment.

CHEEMA: I know.

Q: So, lessons from closing out?

CHEEMA: Once the decision was made, I believe we did a good job of closing. We found jobs for most of our staff, and worked with the regional office to link ongoing programs. However, the two years of uncertainty before that was difficult and we could not start any planning in advance, not knowing, which made the close out a bit chaotic given the short time we had from once the decision was made to close to then actually shutting the USAID door. An important lesson is that once the close out decision is made, there should be enough budget and time to help train staff in new skills and do an orderly phase out. Allow for that time. For example, discussion about close out had started way early before the final decision, so some planning to phasedown should have started by management, even if the close out was not sure, it was clear that there will be reduction in staff and budget.

Q: So, several aspects to close out: one is closing, phasing out or moving the portfolio; another is dealing with close out and our responsibilities to our staff.

CHEEMA: Between me and the ambassador, I think we found jobs for all our staff. I remember at one point, I visited the warehouse with the EXO consultant and there was all this furniture and old computers that USAID had bought over the years, but never had a sale. So here was all this stuff that could fill a football field, to be taken care of properly and legally to ensure accountability within six months or so. I think we could have done some of this sooner, but here I was first tour officer and acting A/Rep and having to figure it out, luckily, the short-term EXO, who had helped close Missions before was there to help. To do it right, we should have started to phase out much sooner knowing that the writing was on the wall. My experience tells me that people in management positions have a hard time making hard decisions and avoid doing so until it must be done and then everyone is doing catch up.

Q: Toward the end of close out, did you know what you were going to do next?

CHEEMA: Let's see. I had already bid on Central Asia during the previous bidding cycle. I was extremely interested in that region after the fall of the Soviet Union and all the reforms that USAID was supporting. The Washington Health office had been wanting me to move and continue as the health officer. I am not sure they thought it was good for my career to stay in Ouagadougou to close the Mission. I thought otherwise. I thought it would give me management experience. So, I bid on the General Development Officer position in Central Asia, which had the primary responsibility of managing the restructuring of the soviet style health systems. I looked forward to being part of a major reform system. The Office was called the Social Transition Office and had oversight responsibilities then for the democracy and other programs in the social sector, like pensions systems reform. I thought it would help me broaden my expertise being in that office.

Q: Right. Okay, let's talk about Central Asia because those were early days.

CHEEMA: Those were very exciting days.

Q: So, talk a little bit about arriving and what you found and what your assignment was.

CHEEMA: I arrived in Almaty in September of 1995, I believe. The STO managed democracy, health/social and I believe environment programs. My primary responsibilities were to oversee the health portfolio, which I believe then had a budget of $75 million for the five countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. I supervised three staff and was the deputy director of the Office of Social Transition. I was also the liaison person to coordinate with CDC, who were there providing support for communicable diseases, especially tuberculosis then. Although the countries varied in their economic and political situations, they shared the same type of policies and programs for delivering health services. So, we had one regional program with the same components of reform for each of the countries.

The program was already ongoing when I arrived at post. I did discover how difficult it was to reform a fragmented health services system that was managed by different levels of the bureaucracy, some at the central level, others at the oblast level and some at the rayon level. In addition, although services were free, everyone had to make out of pocket expenses on the side. Then, the financing system was all managed at different levels. The focus of the whole system was on specialized services and there was no health insurance system. So, the whole system had to be reorganized to make health services more accessible and available.

My impression on arrival were mixed. I was excited to be in a region I knew so little about. All I knew was that there was this Soviet Union and I had very little knowledge of what about the countries. I was told that I should bring minimum household effects as all staff were living in apartments. I knew I would have to learn Russian as it was required language to work there. I was told to bring enough items like favorite foods and toiletries as there was not much available in the stores. Toilet paper and detergent was high on the list. So, that was my first indication that it was going to be different. And then when I boarded the plane at Frankfurt, I was surprised at the vodka drinking. At that time My landing was interesting with so many people at the airport in military clothes. Marilyn Schmidt met me, and it was dark, and there was a little shed-like place with a conveyer –I can remember our luggage coming out of it very slowly. I was also surprised to see all the police around on the tarmac. I was struck by the silence all around. So unlike India and Africa, where there are constant voices. First when we landed, there was this silence, the engines closed, nothing happened. Then we get in the car and it's dark, and people in black clothes were crossing hardly seen by the fast-driving cars. I just thought, I hope in my three years I don't hit anyone here. Then we ended up in front of my dark apartment building with a big steel door. With a cigarette lighter the driver found the keyhole, no lights, carried my luggage upstairs.

I was very excited because this was a region that we were going to change.

Q: Right. So, you were more excited than afraid or apprehensive?

CHEEMA: Apprehensive a little bit because I didn't speak the language and when my supervisor Marilynn, said "don't open the door," I thought what could happen. I was not afraid. Just curious. I woke up the next morning, and I looked out of the window and saw a kiosk, so I took my little dictionary, crossed the street and I said, "I need to get some coffee or something". And I saw some bread being delivered. So, I walked out and got my little piece of bread and my instant coffee and came back. But it was interesting and about 11:00 somebody started banging my door, and I kept saying, "I don't speak," in English, "I don't speak Russian," and he insisted and afterwards made some sound and left, and I looked at my dictionary, they were telling me that I was wasting electricity by the light that was left on in my hallway. That was my neighbor. It took a year before my neighbors said hello to me because they were so suspicious—they were more suspicious of me than I was of them. We knew our apartments were bugged. I knew a couple of times I came in and there were footmarks on the carpet to let us know that somebody had been in there. They left a light on or water running. I found it all interesting and at times nervous but never afraid.

Q: Right. So, was Bill Courtney still the ambassador then?

CHEEMA: I believe it was Elizabeth Jones. Extremely competent, caring of her staff and fun to be with during non-business social settings. The Regional Mission Director Patti Buckles taught me a lot about strategic planning and development in that environment. Most of my experience to date was in Asia and in Africa, very different environments.

Q: Yeah. So, she was already there.

CHEEMA: I think so. There was a time during my tour when most of the office and other U.S. Agency heads were all women. It was a strange but also a rare experience to be in a country team where the majority of the staff around the table are women. It was the only Mission I remember having this awesome experience of being surrounded by women managers. From the State side, the Ambassador, the DCM, political officer, and head of public affairs were women. From USAID the Mission Director, Patti Buckles, the Deputy Mission Director, Dianne Tsitsos – Director of my office and me, we were all women. It felt great.

So, when I first entered the country team meeting (most missions have these country team meetings. In some it is once a month and in some more often. The team consists of heads of offices and agencies who meet with the Ambassador for briefing purposes). I thought to myself – it took the Soviet Union to break up for us to have seven women on the leadership table to get the job done. It was kind of exciting.

Q: Did you ever meet Mrs. Nazarbayev? She was quite a force.

CHEEMA: Only on events when we had high level visitors like then the first lady Hillary Clinton when she visited a health center, and I was the control officer. Mrs. Nazarbayev was very involved in the art and cultural aspects of Kazakhstan's revival. I am sure my colleague from the public affairs office at the Embassy had more opportunities.

Q: Right. So, did you have to build the health program from scratch or what did you inherit when you arrived?

CHEEMA: At that time, we had one major health reform program for the whole region and our implementing partner ABT Associates had offices in each of the countries. This I believe has changed. The new programs are more aligned with the needs of each of the countries as they have shaped their restructuring and development trajectory. The program was on going when I arrived, but in its early stages. It was a big program where we were doing the whole restructuring of health care across the region. There were many aspects to the reforms, reorganizing the governance and financing aspects, restructuring delivering systems to focus on primary health care, training doctors and nurses to the concepts of family doctors and away from specialized delivery and then introducing insurance systems so health care was affordable, accessible, and available.

I worked with our implementing partners to ensure that the program objectives were being achieved and I also worked with the Ministries of Health to gain their support and commitment to the programs.

Q: Right. Did you find that the doctors were well-trained, or was there a training component?

CHEEMA: I think the doctors were well-trained in the specialties. But the concept of family doctor or primary care doctor was new, so yes there was a training component, primarily in preventive care and doctors had to be retrained to operate in the capacity of family doctors. Most doctors in the old system were specialists. So reorientation was needed.

Q: Right. Well, Kyrgyzstan certainly seemed very keen to reform as quickly as possible.

CHEEMA: Right and it was our star project where the pilot was doing well as a model to apply in other countries. But we discovered that we had to do modifications in each country depending on budgets and countries interest and commitment.

Q: So, did you do a lot of traveling among the five countries?

CHEEMA: There were lots and lots of regional travel and it was not so easy to get to many countries like Turkmenistan and Tajikistan where flights were limited and road travel was not possible due to the distance. So yes, I and my other colleagues traveled a lot. Kyrgyzstan was the easiest as I could leave early in the morning, do my work and meet the people I needed to and get home by dinner time, except in the winter when due to road conditions we were not supposed to travel after dark. In the early stages of the

program, there were more frequent trips as we had to negotiate all aspects of the program with the Ministry of Health and many times the Ministry of Finance to obtain their commitment and partnership. Traveling to Uzbekistan was also easy due to more flights between Tashkent and Almaty. But the frequency of travel does take a toll on your body, but we were all so into the reform process that we did not complain.

Q: So, did you have PSCs?

CHEEMA: We had several PSCs in the Mission. We had to. I believe in those early days, the assistance budget was very large, maybe in the range of $150-$200 million. I can check. But we only had 5 technical direct hire technical foreign service officers. We need additional expertise to monitor, manage and provide technical assistance to our counterparts.

Q: Right. So, did you drive yourself?

CHEEMA: No, no. Embassy. We were not allowed to drive ourselves for official purposes. I believe we had not consolidated administrative services at that time and USAID maintained the motor pool and other administrative support services for USAID.

Q: Yeah, I can't remember that either. So, Russian was the lingua franca. How did you do?

CHEEMA: Well, I had a great teacher for three months. I did eight, nine hours a day. Didn't see anybody. Did trips to the stores and markets and rode local buses, total immersion. By the evening I would be so tired that I had little energy then to mix with my American colleagues. I did pass the minimum proficiency requirement after the three months started full time work. But, I did continue to take an hour-long lesson a couple of days a week. It is a hard language and three months is not enough. I really liked the language and was glad to have had that as later in Armenia, I had a head start. So, my Russian was enough to get along, but in official meetings, I always had an interpreter.

Q: Would you say in general people were receptive to what AID was trying to do?

CHEEMA: Which people? The population or the government.

Q: Well, the population that you met—

CHEEMA: For example, my Russian teacher. After lessons sometimes she would speak to me in English because during lessons she would not speak in English. I sort of asked her one time, and I think that was confirmed by other people. At the start, the people were enthusiastic, but as time passed, it became clear that the reforms were not helping all equally. Like my teacher said, everybody got the opportunity to buy their apartments, but "Yes, everybody's happy that we don't have to worry about someone saying something about us and us being put in jails for not even having said anything or done anything, that

we are living in fear anymore." But then she said, "But we are living in uncertainty because we don't know what to expect, what not to expect. Everybody's on their own and we've lost some of that safety net." During my stay, I noticed an increasing number of homelessness and people begging on the streets. I found the government counterparts, outwardly, extremely interested in the reform process, but the willingness and commitment to change at the speed the US wanted varied from country to country.

Q: Right. Do you think the people dealing with the consequences blamed the U.S.?

CHEEMA: I didn't hear anyone say that to me. I think I heard more people blaming their governments than the U.S. They saw me as helping with the health care system, or the pension system, so they saw me as someone helping. Because the average person didn't understand the larger picture. The person on the street simply thought we were there to help.

Q: Yeah, so basically even while it was breaking around you, it was not clear what was happening. So, reporting back to Washington didn't necessarily reflect on the growing oligarch problem.

CHEEMA: I'll refrain from making a statement regarding what we reported back to Washington. Our assistance programs were high on the political agenda to succeed with privatization and make it happen as fast as we could. So, if some of us were concerned with the oligarchs taking advantage – but our mandate was to reform from the old to the new system and we hoped that over time, things will balance out and good governance will lead the way. We were all very idealistic. I think we were a bit naïve to think that so much could be changed in a fair and equitable manner for the best interests of the people and the government. We do not quite understand or comprehend how embedded the old system was in the mindset of the ruling class.

Q: Yeah, no, I understand that. In your CV you talk about reforms of the social sector and how you had to interact with government officials as well as with the embassy. Was it more than the health sector?

CHEEMA: I must refresh my memory, I know as part of establishing a private health insurance system, there were broader discussions on pension system reform and setting up accounts and working with the Central Bank. Of course, under our privatization program, we were engaged with the government to reform the banking sector.

Q: Right. Well, traditionally when we look at health programs, we tend to look at infant mortality, child mortality etc. What was it that needed to change in the health sector? Did you inherit a situation where child mortality or morbidity was a major issue? Other than the fact that it was very hospital dominant, what were the health issues that you confronted?

CHEEMA: The major health issues were not what I was used to dealing with in Africa, such as high child and maternal mortality. Communicable diseases like tuberculosis were

a major problem. Mortality due to alcoholism was another issue. Maternal health was important because of the high abortion rates, so yes we had a project in spacing and prevention. I remember having billboards and buses promoting condom use. Family planning was a tough subject to address as birth rates in the countries were dropping and families were being encouraged to have children. So, we had to focus on the health of the mother. We supported a successful soap opera, as soap operas were popular, to get the message out on maternal care. I was in Central Asia from 1995-1999.

Q: Right, okay. Well, thank you. I think that's helpful, and we'll move forward. Next time, same time? Does that work for you?

CHEEMA: That works for me.

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Q: Today is December 8, and this is the third conversation with Cheema. And I think when we stopped, we were just wrapping up the experience in the Central Asian mission and some of the experiences with the newly dissolved Soviet Union. But maybe before we move forward, if there are some lessons learned from that or from your earlier experience in Burkina Faso. I don't want to get too far ahead without drawing those lessons. So, Cheema, why don't you talk about that for a bit.

CHEEMA: While thinking about Bangladesh, I was thinking about the regional operations research project in Asia. The concept of operations research was new and innovative and needed, but the lesson was that innovation takes time when changing bureaucratic systems. The idea to learn and reform as you go is good on paper, harder to implement. To change means approvals from different levels of the government and the ministries, modify delivery mechanisms and financial aspects. Not easy within a two-year period or the time usually allocated to get results in our contracts. I learned from my World Bank evaluation experience, by the time we did the evaluations, got the results, lessons learned, the new projects were already on the ground. So, this idea of learning as and making changes along the way was a great concept, but to implement lessons as you learn them is a bit harder in a system where contracts must be amended, and agreements are needed from host countries to make those changes. It takes time.

Q: Right. Well, I think bureaucratic behavior change is every bit as difficult as personal or family behavior change, and that's what you were confronting.

CHEEMA: In Burkina, I learned that changing people's behavior that is so embedded in a culture takes time even during a pandemic environment. Another lesson from Burkina and working in Central Asia was how US political interest influences our assistance programs. And, how interests of our own congress as to the topic of the day, might influence USAID budgets. I learned this later while working in Armenia, how the Armenia diaspora in the States could influence the level of our assistance programs in Armenia through their strong advocacy with the congress. I also learned early on that as an official and representative of the US Government, what I said in meetings with the

host country and or to donors had a much different meaning than just giving an opinion. I had to structure my conversation more meaningfully than just free flow conversation. I remember talking to a non-profit organization at a social event about an idea and a month later, they submitted a proposal requesting funding for the idea I had discussed. They had assumed that I would approve it as it was my idea. I learned from that experience.

Q: Right. And that's an important one. But weren't you under a lot of pressure to move money?

CHEEMA: Well in countries where we have agreements with the government, we have more time to design and implement as we can obligate in other words park money in these agreements – but in countries like then in the whole Newly Independent States (the former Soviet Union) we did not in early days have agreements, so the programs had to be designed and the funds obligated within the approved time frame, first it was a year and later two. Many times, our contracting process takes over a year. So, there was always urgency to obligate and since our procurement process is long, we did five-to-six-year contracts that we could keep funding each year. This did not allow for flexibility or easily changing as fast as the environment and the needs were changing in these countries. Or risk taking which was needed in such a volatile situation.

Q: Do you think USAID has gotten better at risk taking?

CHEEMA: I've thought through this question. In some areas, possibly, but in some areas, I feel, no. Some of the hindrance to risk taking is from within and some from outside forces. From within, we seem to be stuck in our model of technical assistance and training. It is an easy approach, but we must assess, especially in countries where we have been providing TA and training for many years, if the need has changed. We do have grant programs, but if you review those, most of them are organized around technical assistance and training. I just feel that many countries have their own experts now and they might not need TA or training as much as they did before. There are new models, like what we are trying in India with partnership with the government, or like the Trade Fairs in Central Asia – but they are risky. But making changes in how we contract and for what requires time and effort and new thinking.

USAID also did take risks in trying new approaches such as working directly with the governments where programs could be implemented by the host ministries, but the criteria to qualify the local systems to meet fiscally accountable systems was a long process and some countries did not want their systems to be investigated. Given that we as an agency are accountable to taxpayers, we are always under scrutiny – so being safe is important.

Externally, USAID is also not able to take risks, in my opinion, because we are always on the defensive, fighting for our survival as an agency and competing for funding as more and more US agencies have entered the development. On top of that we are in constant reorganization in response to our political environment. I am not saying that we should not improve our effectiveness and or be more efficient when using taxpayers' money, but

constant reorganization, monitoring and redefining strategies, in response to outside pressures is disruptive and not conducive to doing things differently. I feel we have been in constant reorganization for many years now. Every time I read an article or talk to a colleague, I hear that there is another reorganization underway.

In this environment, how can USAID take risks – with so much scrutiny.

Q: Reorgs and strategic planning.

CHEEMA: Yes, And strategic planning. In two countries we spent over a year doing a new strategy and in one country we were told there was no budget in the end to support it even when all technical officers were involved in the strategy, and we were told it was a sound and good document. In the second case, the assistance program was closed after we had completed our strategy. I personally think that as an agency we spend far too much staff time and resources in these efforts. I am not saying that there should not be some strategic planning, but to do it just because we must review annually where we are in our results and efforts, I think is not necessary, giving staff time and resources it takes to plan, prepare, and discuss. It should be on a need basis and targeted to areas where we need modification and change and revision. We do not need to review the whole portfolio every bi-annually or annually.

Q: Right. Going back to being cautious. Do you think it made you more cautious in what you said in social settings?

CHEEMA: Yes, as a US official, I felt that what I said informally or at social gatherings was sometimes taken to mean as I was giving an agency position. Same is true when dealing with other partners and donors. I learned how building relationships and networks outside of the office is important to leverage resources for the host country and to maximize USG efforts. But I usually would refrain from discussing work related issues at social gatherings or discussing things in a manner that sounded like a decision or preference. I learned early on in my career that I had quite a bit of leverage being part of the US system and many donors would look upon us to take the lead on difficult policy and or programmatic problems with the host governments. So, I was a bit careful to free-lance in social settings and kept to broader issues.

Q: You know, common wisdom is when you're starting out it's better to be in a big mission where you've got mentors and you're not sort of out there on your own, but for you, it worked well being in a small mission where you had to learn these skills.

CHEEMA: Absolutely, I got a broad experience in my very first and a small mission. I do wish that I had a mentor though. Now that I am part of the mentoring program, I see how valuable it is to newcomers and to first time senior managers.

Q: Right. Clearly, it did work for you. I'm wondering if there are that many backwater missions that we could employ for training purposes.

CHEEMA: Yes. Also, small bilateral missions are better for learning than regional missions for first tour officers from my experience. I would not recommend placing new staff in large, politically high priority missions as new staff can struggle. Plus, instead of mastering their technical areas, many get sidetracked to report writing and briefing documents and do not have the time to develop relationships or learn about the workings of USAID as well as they could in a smaller mission.

Q: Right. And at the end too. So, you had been in Central Asia for four years. Is that right?

CHEEMA: Yes from 1995 until 1999 for about three and a half years.

Q: And you were recruited to go to Armenia, right?

CHEEMA: Yes, as a USAID deputy mission director. I was in Armenia from 199-2001.

Q: So, that's your first senior manager mission post.

CHEEMA: Yes.

Q: Talk a little bit about that, what you found when you got there.

CHEEMA: Well, first, it was a challenge. I knew it was going to be challenging. I was the first deputy mission director assigned to Armenia. Previously, I believed there was just the Director and or the Representative. Possibly because our budget and programs expanded that there was a need for a deputy. I was responsible for establishing the internal systems as Armenia then was a full Mission with all our own support staff except for the contracting officer and the legal advisor. Georgia provided those services. But we had a contracting office with Armenian staff. What we did not have was internal control and management policies, like Mission Orders – who does what and how. This was new to me. But I had assistance from Washington, and we recruited consultants to help us set up our systems. I had a great Mission Director and supervisor and mentor in Dianne Tsitsos. She delegated full authority and responsibility to me for implementing what needed to be done, but guided me, so I could be ready to take on Mission Director responsibilities when she was not at post. So, most of my normal work was in managing the internal mission procedures and functions. Another great learning experience.

In addition, we had a separate program, congressionally approved, in the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Because of the political sensitivities related to NK's status as a disputed territory, a US policy decision was made that only one senior US foreign service officer could visit the enclave for project monitoring. Dianne decided that I would be that senior person. So, I was the main contact point for our programs in Nagorno-Karabakh. And I was the only USAID official who could go there. We had a demining program with Halo and a small program to support women's business. I forget who implemented that program, but it was an organization located in NK. The rebuilding of destroyed houses and schools was also part of our program. I would visit NK once every three months with

an Armenia staff member. I accompanied two congressional delegations to NK during my time in Armenia. By the end of my tour, I think I covered all the territory of NK - there were times when I would be meeting with a farming family and mine would go off close by. I could meet with the recipients, the implementing partners, but I could not meet with any officials. By being the main contact person for NK – I would often be involved in senior level meetings at the Embassy and with Washington staff, regarding how to bring about peace and a resolution to the NK status. Another huge learning experience for me.

Q: Did you travel with security?

CHEEMA: No, I did not. Just me, one Armenian staff and the driver. In the field arrangements were made by the implementing partner. When I accompanied CODELs, I believe we had some security, but I forget now.

Q: Right. Did you have to set up all your own meetings when you went to NK?

CHEEMA: Yes, my Armenian staff coordinated with our implementing partners. As we could not meet any officials, most of the meetings were with the implementing partners and being in the field to see progress. We had developed a checklist to make sure I covered all our project sites. I believe the only time we might have had an exchange with the local officials was when a CODEL was going to visit. We then flew by helicopter to the sites they wanted to visit. Such a high-level visit did require participation and at least agreement from the NK officials.

Q: This is what CODELs are about?

CHEEMA: Most of the CODELS were interested in meeting with the displaced population and seeing for themselves some of the damages caused by the different conflicts and occurring skirmishes, which continued off and on between Azerbaijan and Armenia army.

Q: When you were going to NK were you optimistic that there would be a peaceful resolution, that Armenia and Azerbaijan could work something out, or not?

CHEEMA: One is always hopeful. People are people, when I would talk to would say, we want to stay in our homes, we want peace. “We have no problems with each other, you know. We want to live here, you know, this was our home, we always were here.” But I didn’t feel from talking with the people that they were hopeful. At times, in meetings with high level delegations, I would feel, gosh, we are so close to peace but then, not so. Ambassador Yovanovitch’s book – Lessons from the Edge – covers this subject well.

Q: Do you have a sense of how large the overall Armenia program was and how large the NK piece of it was?

CHEEMA: I think NK was about $10 million – $12 million and the USAID/Armenia budget then was one of the largest per capita, maybe around $99 million. I believe this

has changed since then and the budget now is not that large, and I think we do not have a program in NK. I have not kept up with that.

Q: So, unlike in Central Asia, there were some NGOs, local NGOs.

CHEEMA: Yes, Armenia for sure had more established non-government organizations by the time I got there.

Q: And that's because the diaspora had been supporting them over the years.

CHEEMA: Yes, and by then USAID had been on the ground since 1992.

Q: You said there was a health component?

CHEEMA: Unlike Central Asia, our health budget focused on training and technical assistance – but not so much on restructuring when I got there. In Armenia, we worked closely with the Armenian Diaspora also and had a partnership with them in women's health care, especially in breast cancer diagnoses and treatment.

Q: Because the health infrastructure was already in better shape?

CHEEMA: Yes. I think Armenia was never influenced the same way as Central Asia systems were by the Soviet Union. They had assistance from the diaspora and had established their own infrastructure which required reform in introducing new concepts and retraining – but not at the scale of what we did in Central Asia.

Q: Right, interesting.

CHEEMA: My challenge was to get the mission up and running, getting all the internal mechanisms set and established. Working with the diaspora was a challenge. We had to negotiate with great sensitivity with the diaspora organizations. I learned that once when I said no to a program and got a call from a congressional staffer to question. So, we had to negotiate all the time, give in a bit but make sure that the program did fit within our goals and objectives.

Q: Well, as you're talking, I'm thinking there's two kinds of pressure that you can get. One is pressure from powerful groups like the diaspora or Congress to work on a particular topic, maternal health or whatever. And the second type of pressure is when they want you to work with a particular organization. And I'm sure you got both.

CHEEMA: Right. And sometimes we were creative enough to come up with a project design that met the diaspora priorities without compromising our own accountability and systems. But it took a lot of my time, my mission director's time, and the time of our technical staff, who often did not see why we were giving in to political pressure. But it made me realize that there are some good ideas out there and we should be open, flexible, and maybe take some risks, as development professionals.

Q: Would you say that in this assignment you had more external pressure than any of the others?

CHEEMA: Different kind. In Central Asia the pressures were from our own internal political agenda – to privatize and privatize fast. This pressure from the Diaspora was more programmatic and what each diaspora organization wanted funding for. The level of pressure depends upon their connections with congress. So, I think it was a different kind of pressure. It was sort of a good learning experience for me. I must have demonstrated some good negotiation skills as over time, I became the point person to work with the Armenian diaspora groups when they would visit the USAID office. My Mission Director must have had trust in my judgment. I felt that I always found a middle ground and did not get intimidated by the pressure. When I went back in 2012, I did not feel the same level of diaspora engagement or pressure as my first assignment.

Q: Right. Who was the mission director and was she there for the whole time you were there?

CHEEMA: Dianne Tsitsos was the Mission Director, and she was there for my whole first tour. During my tour, I had the opportunity to take on the acting mission director role when she was away. So that was another management experience for me. I had worked with Dianne in Kazakhstan, and she actively recruited me for the deputy position as she said that she felt I was the best candidate for the job that needed to be done. She was the best guide and supervisor I had. I learned from her, especially how to think strategically. She could be tough, but always fair.

Q: Tough and fair.

CHEEMA: Yes, we are still good friends.

Q: Okay, so I have one more question on Armenia. I'm sure we could go on for hours on that, but I do want to find out how Eritrea came up. But first, are there any projects that you're particularly proud of from the Armenia time, anything that you thought was particularly successful?

CHEEMA: I think the demining programs in NK as clearing the agriculture land made it possible for so many families to go back to farming. In Armenia, the support to the parliament was a critical program, our media and civil society programs especially supporting women participation was a success. In the health area, the breast screening program in partnership with the diaspora saved the lives of many women with early detection and from having to have surgeries with no other option. Later when I was there in 2012, I was very proud that we supported a small domestic violence program, a culturally sensitive subject. Our health program was sound in that all nurses were trained in the latest technologies and practices of health care. I was proud of our programs and staff.

Q: As you should be. So, how did Eritrea come about?

CHEEMA: I had bid on a second tour in Armenia. When Dianne Tsitsos finished her tour, I put my application in to be considered as the Mission Director. But Washington had another candidate in mind. Meanwhile another opportunity came up. Ambassador McConnell who was my Ambassador in Burkina Faso was going to be the ambassador in Eritrea. Ambassador McConnell asked me if I would be interested. I felt I was ready, and I did put my name in with the Africa Bureau. Eritrea had a reputation for being a difficult government and a country to work in. The program was small and mostly humanitarian assistance focused. For me I thought it would be good as the first time MD, small program, and small staff. I felt I could manage that. Ambassador McConnell must have thought so also, as he was adamant that he wanted me to head up the USAID program. I believe he had seen how I had closed Burkina – and maybe had trust in my way of managing. I hate to think ambassadors have that kind of power. But he just felt that it was such a sensitive time for bilateral relations that needed someone he could trust. So, when the new list of openings came up – I put my name in for Eritrea and a couple of other missions. Eritrea came though, I am sure that Ambassador McConnell played some role. But I had a great boss in the Africa Bureau who I believe was the AA. When I met him for the first time, he said – don't get PNGd (persona non-grata). I thought he was being funny but learned later that it had happened to other directors before. Some of my colleagues felt that Eritrea was too small a program for me to get promoted to senior foreign service. I think because Eritrea had such a reputation of being a difficult post, I got the best support from my bureau in Washington during my tour. Talking about it now, I feel, I did have a lot of challenging posts.

Q: Yes, you did. I know. So, maybe they knew you could take it! But those were early days for the mission there, wasn't it?

CHEEMA: I think U.S. established a relationship with Eritrea in 1993 after the long war for independence ended and the U.S. was the first country to recognize Eritrea as an independent country. USAID, I believe, established an office in 1994. So not so early. There had been a mission or an office since 1994. By the time I got there in 2001, the assistance budget was around $10 million and additional $2-3 million for emergency food aid through OFDA.

It was a small assistance program, which had preventive maternal and child health intervention and HIV/AIDs. The OFDA emergency program was implemented through various non-government organizations. The challenge and what made working in Eritrea hard was our inability to build a trusting relationship with the government counterparts. The Ministry of Health was an exception, very committed to our partnership and programs.

Q: Well, you've had plenty of challenges.

CHEEMA: Yeah. And my big challenge was to have the government sign an agreement to allow tax exemption and other facilities and support to our non-government agencies

who implemented the humanitarian assistance program. I remember one time I sat in the office of my main counterpart, who was like the Prime Minister, but I forget his title, to discuss the agreement. His office would not schedule a meeting, but I knew he was in his office. So, I took a book to read and showed up in his office and told the secretary that I really needed to meet with him. I was told he was in a meeting, and I said – fine, I will wait. People would come and leave, and I waited all day until he had no choice but to see me.

It was tough working in those circumstances. I remember but I did get the agreement negotiated and signed. I believe that was one of my big achievements as we had been trying to get this done for years. Before going to post, I had thought about how difficult it could be to develop a working relationship with a counterpart. Most of the heads of ministries were educated in the West and had returned to Eritrea after independence to rebuild the country. They shared, I thought, similar values as us. What I did not realize was the level of control of the president and how no matter how useful and needed our programs were, no matter what many of my Western trained counterparts thought personally, officially they had to maintain the position taken by the Eritrean president. The bilateral relations between the two countries were at its lowest. And, in that environment, I was trying my best to implement our development assistance programs. It took a lot of patience, persistence, and painful discussions. I must add that I could not have done it without the support of our ambassador's. It was hard for USAID Washington to help as issues and resistance our programs were facing had more to do with the overall bilateral relations rather than within the development context and policy.

Q: Right. And there was a certain amount of hostility to the U.S.?

CHEEMA: Oh, absolutely, yeah. I mean, nothing personal against me. I had the greatest going away party from my counterparts, but they had to work within the larger bilateral environment, and they couldn't treat me any differently, you know, officially.

At the start of my tour, things were a bit easier. Towards the end there were more restrictions on travel within the country. We had to get permission to travel outside of Asmara. So, things even in those four years started getting much more restrictive. When Ambassador McConnell finished his tour, I was the Charge (acting ambassador). When Scott DeLisi, the next ambassador arrived at post, the government would not accept his credentials and he could not participate in official meetings with the government. So, I continued as Chargé for a couple more months. I did get to meet the Eritrean president when I had to accompany VIP visitors from the US and our armed forces. As Chargé, it was another great learning experience to understand other aspects of Embassy wide operations. I was so excited to see my name at the end of the reporting cables that went out from the Mission.

Q: So, another challenging post, you said you got promoted?

CHEEMA: Yes. I would say so, but all the patience, sensitivity to the situation and persistence paid off. My USAID/W bureau supervisors knew that it was hard managing

and working with our Eritrean counterparts. I was promoted to Senior Foreign Service during my time in Eritrea. But I think that was my hardest post in many ways. I loved living there, I loved the people, I loved the geography and everything, but workwise, I think it was a tough position because those were difficult times for our bilateral relations. Another challenge was working with our Eritrean staff. We knew that they were under pressure to report on what discussions took place inside our Embassy, and USAID. So, we Americans had to be careful not to put our Eritrean staff in any compromised situation. I was in Eritrea from 2001-2005.

Q: Right. Did you ever feel physically threatened?

CHEEMA: No, no, never. I was and am a walker. I walk wherever I am posted. I remember taking my walks early morning before dawn and sometimes late in the evenings. Never felt any physical threat or unsafe.

It was tough when I heard a couple of months later after my departure that the foreign ministry called the ambassador and said that they wanted USAID to close, and for the mission director to leave. I don't know what happened, No one told me what took place between the government and the follow-on director. But I felt sad – for the Eritrean people and for all the work me and my staff had put in to keep our assistance program ongoing to help the Eritrean people.

Q: What year was that do you remember?

CHEEMA: I believe it was December of 2005.

Q: How much time did you have to do the closing?

CHEEMA: I was already assigned to Ghana in mid-2005 to take on the regional position there. So not sure how the close out took place.

Q: There must have been HIV programs, but you weren't working on HIV there?

CHEEMA: Oh, gosh, I'm sure we were. We had a communication program in preventive HIV/AID but not treatment.

Q: Interesting, interesting. Because I mean, human nature is human nature. Was there the temptation to siphon off funds?

CHEEMA: No, not in Eritrea, if you are referring to Eritrea. The government had too many strict controls. In addition, in Eritrea and in other countries, it is hard to siphon off funds as most of our funding is managed by our US implementing partners and we have audit requirements, annually or biannually of our projects. Even with grants to local organizations we have auditing requirements. But as you said human beings are human beings and at individual level, I have come across cases when someone mismanaged or stole funds from within USAID. In most of these cases in my experience, the person, or

the project, was dealt with according to local and or American law and our mission policies.

Q: Did you apply for the position in West Africa?

CHEEMA: I bid on it, yes. The Africa/Bureau management thought that would be a good fit. When I was assigned, the office was called WARP – West Africa Regional Programs, based in Accra/Ghana covering the region for technical programs in some of the countries where there was no USAID mission or had limited presence. I understood that for some time there were ongoing discussions in USAID Africa Bureau about reorganizing. Countries with no on the ground USAID missions or offices, were being covered from multiple places for different technical and administrative services. Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, bilateral USAID/Missions all had some responsibility for assistance programs to some twenty countries. Coordination was a big problem. I understood.

Soon after my arrival to WARP in Accra, the Bureau had made the decision to reorganize and make WARP a full West Africa Regional USAID Mission where all technical, administrative, financial, and contracting would be consolidated. So, staff had to be reassigned, moved and new offices re-established. The main responsibility for restructuring and establishing WARP to USAID/WA was left to me and the Mission Director of the Ghana bilateral USAID Mission, Sharon Cromer, an excellent and experienced manager. I think I learned a lot from her, and we also became friends. The restructuring work and traveling to all the countries took a lot of my time. In my second year, I had a deputy director and that helped a lot. During my two years, WARP grew from an office of ten to twenty staff and a budget of $30 million to a regional mission of over 120 staff and a budget of over $100 million.

I spent a lot of my time reorganizing the regional program to become a fully servicing mission for the region. It was frustrating as it was challenging. In one year, our staff grew but our operating budget allowance to support them was not there right away. We had to scramble to find furniture etc for the additional staff. The OE was approved on paper, but it took a whole budget cycle or more to transfer the funds to us from other missions, who had structures established to use the funds and had to downsize. I think it was difficult for the regional mission who was receiving the funds and for the missions who had to downsize.

Q: No, the system wasn't there. So, you must have had to find work around it.

CHEEMA: Yeah, we did. We had to house those people. I mean, there's always a lot of furniture around. We bought stuff locally, but refrigerators and air conditioners and generators are another matter. All that takes time to order and be delivered through our procurement system. In addition, my mission was receiving additional funding for special anti-terrorism in Niger and Mauritania – where we had no presence or staff - so we had to program and start those bilateral programs. So, while administratively reorganizing, we were also starting programs in non-USAID present countries. I had a group of wonderful staff, and everyone got into the reorganization and restarting programs. At times it felt

like we were juggling too many things. But I never heard complaints, frustration sometimes, but not complaints. Regional jobs are tough, people are on the road a lot and I am not sure the outside world or even Washington truly understood how difficult travel is in some countries.

Q: Were you supported by Washington?

CHEEMA: Yes, because it was the Bureau's decision and I believe the right one. Programs were too fragmented, and some consolidation and streamlining of staff and resources was needed. I've heard there's been two or more reorganizations. That's my one issue with USAID, we are always reorganizing. It takes so much staff time and resources. So, I was on the road a lot. We had twenty-one countries where we had regional programs and in most of these countries, we had no presence with our own staff. Towards the end of my tour, there was approval to place an officer in some key places like Niger and Burkina Faso. Both missions were closed in the nineties, so here we were back in them. However, our Bureau had to juggle funds around and work with all the Missions in the region, who might not have wanted to give up some of the programs – organizations are not easy.

Q: Exhausting too.

CHEEMA: Exhausting yes, but when you have great staff and see results of your efforts, some of the exhaustion is minimized. The staff really must travel a lot if they want to stay on top of their work and programs. But you know, they had families also. So, it's very hard. 60 percent of the time, our staff was on the road. Some of our programs like the trade and transport program, where we had to establish trade hubs required more attention as they had attracted political attention.

Q: Can you describe that, the trade hubs?

CHEEMA: Simply stated, the trade and transport program focused on developing and working with local entrepreneurs and linking their products to U.S. first and then other markets. Trade Hubs were regional platforms to manage and implement the components of the program that covered the whole region. The transport part of the program focused on easing restrictions and linking countries to move goods more efficiently. We had a trade hub in Ghana. When Condoleezza Rice visited Dakar, she announced that we would have a trade hub in Dakar in three months. My Africa Bureau AA turned to me and said, "I think you can do it," right? But our contracting officer and the implementing partners came through and we amended the contract and opened a trade hub in Dakar within three months. Some would say it was a miracle given our contracting regulations and policies.

Q: Okay. So, it's very different from an economic attaché's role, which was largely to develop U.S. trade.

CHEEMA: Yeah, totally different. This was an assistance program where we were developing these small businesses to market their goods anywhere in the world, mostly

the U.S. And with that developing their skills to improve the quality of goods and their marketing. It was an economic development program.

CHEEMA: Please can you pause; there is someone at the door.

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Q: Right. Just stepping back for a bird's eye view of regional missions; they play at least two roles. One is technical assistance to missions that aren't able to have their own technical staff. Another would be shared backroom services, whether it's contracting or security or whatever. And then the third, which you mentioned, is basically supporting non-presence situations where we still have programs or still have interests. Is that right? That's your experience?

CHEEMA: We had non-presence countries, limited presence countries where maybe there was a PSC or an FSN where congress had approved funding bilaterally for example for humanitarian assistance and later anit-terrorism. Then, we had the bilateral missions. I do not have the list with me, but I believe of all the twenty-one countries that the regional mission covered, there was a bilateral USAID mission in seven during my time. The bilateral mission provided all their own technical and back up (contracting, Controller, and legal) for their bilateral programs. In some bilateral countries, we had a regional component, like the trade project and health programs which were cross border issues, like transport and HIV/AIDs. In those cases, we coordinated very closely with the technical offices in the bilateral missions. Sometimes, they were more complicated as the sometimes-bilateral missions would wonder why they had to buy into a regional program when they can do one of their own. But cross border issues often were an easy case to make. The non-presence and limited presence countries, where all responsibility lay with the regional mission staff, managing relationships and programs was less complicated. But coordination was a challenge as we also had the African Union, EUCOM and other entities and agencies present in West Africa in addition to the multilateral agencies, like the world bank and WFP and other UN agencies.

Q: Right. And you said people in general were on the road 60 percent of the time. Was that your experience too?

CHEEMA: Yeah, I was always in the air. As the new regional mission, I needed to develop relationships with all the ambassadors and donor agencies. Ambassadors wanted visibility of senior USAID staff in their countries and between my deputy and me, we ensured that we covered all the countries every couple of months. My secretary kept a schedule to make sure that we did. On top of that there would be special requests at times politically mandated, like when in high level discussion between the USG and Equatorial Guinea agreed to sign a jointly funded agreement to facilitate trade and assistance. So, me and our legal advisor were there for five days trying to get the agreement components negotiated. I was a busy person. Sometimes my biggest fear was when sending emails to Ambassadors that I would mix the names up. And it's just amazing how accepting and understanding people are when working in difficult environments. There were hiccups at

times, sometimes I did get complaints from Ambassadors, but everyone understood and realized that we were working in a challenging environment, managing, and coordinating many aspects.

Q: Right, right. Because you're in it together.

CHEEMA: Absolutely.

Q: It sounds at least up to this point you've had very good and cordial relationships with your counterparts in the embassy and particularly with the ambassador.

CHEEMA: Yes, I have been lucky. Or maybe, my style of leadership and interpersonal skills might have helped in developing cordial relationships.

Q: Right. Was that also a learning curve for you?

CHEEMA: Yes and No, because in Eritrea, I was chargé for a couple of months, so that prepared me for the job. But yes it was the first time, I had so many countries, counterparts, ambassadors, and donors to coordinate with – I understood West Africa development challenges far more when I left than when I had arrived.

Q: Right, right, interesting. So, for a while you spent your life at airports!

CHEEMA: I left Central Asia saying, "I'll never take a regional mission again," and then I got a more difficult one, in a different way, more countries to go, more travel. But you know, and I said, "It sort of inspires me to see our work and meet with our counterparts directly. I did not mind."

Q: Right. It probably ate into whatever social life you might have had because you were never there. But were you able to make friends with people in the local community?

CHEEMA: No and yes. Most of my friends were really my colleagues in the mission because I really didn't have time, you know. I had time enough to fulfill my representational duties, but most of that responsibility fell to the Bilateral Mission. I entertained our staff and had social get-togethers. I did make some friends with other donors' representatives but have lost contact now. I did miss that part. To make friends you have to be there a little bit. So, that part I did miss. It's sort of a little lonely. I mean, being a regional job brings a certain amount of isolation and loneliness.

Q: Did you ever come up with a different way of handling regional issues? I mean, did you ever have suggestions for AID about how else we might manage regional programs?

CHEEMA: No, at least for me, we were learning as the Regional Mission. I learned soon that ambassadors wanted regular interaction, so I did. We had just reorganized, so I was not about to make any suggestions that would need another reorganization. I think regional programs, by nature, are complicated and one must navigate many relationships.

Sometimes you can't make everyone happy. Individual leadership style and personality can play a role. I think having a staff member in the countries where we had on the ground programs, such as Niger and Burkina Faso are important, and we did do that. At times, it is hard to recommend what model works as so many of our programs and staffing can depend on what congress approves and or what is politically mandated and sometimes funding can be for a limited time. It is not easy to place people in the Embassy when there is no USAID office and then pull them out in a year or two.

Q: Right. So, you mentioned something that I really want to hear you talk about, but we can do it in a wrap-up session. You've had some amazing experiences with local hires, and especially FSNs and maybe also Third Country Nationals. And I'd love to have your thoughts on whether AID is using them properly, how the relationship has evolved between direct hire and local staff, and honestly are there any FSNs that really stand out? I'd love to know.

CHEEMA: Yes, absolutely. Our FSN staff is the backbone of our work in each country. We, the direct hire staff, move on every couple of years, it is the FSN staff who is left behind to manage and sustain the relationships. So, it is in our best interest to develop and build that capacity to its fullest. Over the years, I have seen our FSN staff become team leaders and even office directors. But there is an inherent difference in that, there are some functions FSNs yet could not perform. For example, they could not supervise a USDH or obligate USG funds. I do not think that has changed. But I have seen a lot of progress in taking advantage of the large resource base that we have in our FSN. But there is a challenge – we must ensure that we do not put them in a compromising position where they can feel pressure from the host country to favor a project and a program, like in the case of Eritrea. Also, our FSNs do not have the same level of security clearances thus are limited in the information they have access to especially on the USG policy side, which sometimes – we need to consider in development.

I know of cases where our FSNs have taken senior level positions in their own countries and in other donor missions or even in other USG agencies and I think that is a success in our efforts to train and develop their skills.

Third Country Nationals is another issue. This group of highly technical staff often falls within the cracks. Some missions had policies to give the TCNs the same benefits as the USPSCs but not in all cases. This affected morale in the mission. Maybe there is a more consistent policy now. I have not kept up to date on that issue.

Q: I agree. And I'd love your help in figuring out how we can develop that story. Because I think maybe there's a little bit of a time warp and people still think of FSNs as somehow junior—

CHEEMA: Yes, there is an attitude problem that USAID needs to work on. Not that every FSN is a high performer. I can say the same for some US staff also. We all are humans and have our own strengths and weaknesses. What as an agency we do not do

well is screen out poor performers or provide special training, as they do affect the atmosphere in the mission, whether they are FSNs and or USDHs.

Q: Right. And the only limitation is that the ambassador wants to talk to an American.

CHEEMA: Yes, and in many cases FSNs can't have the same level of security, so I can understand that.

Q: It probably is. I always like to step back and say, "Does the system need to change?"

CHEEMA: The world is not equal as much as we would want it to be – I will leave it at that. But in terms of their qualifications and their ability, after having worked in a mission for all their lives, many are very qualified to lead offices.

Q: Right. And probably as committed to the program, as loyal as any American.

CHEEMA: Right. But we cannot ignore totally that FSNs could have an invested interests in the country they are from, just as an American I have in America. But I think we can for sure say that technically our FSNs can do the job as well and are committed to the welfare of the people of their country.

Q: I am aware that you've got a meeting in ten minutes, so I think probably we will wrap up and we have the next meeting on Monday?

CHEEMA: Bye.

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Q: You've got so many interesting assignments still ahead to discuss that I'm not sure we're going to do it all today. But I must start with Afghanistan because at that point it was a major program. It wasn't a startup. Is that correct?

CHEEMA: Correct, in 2008 when I was there, it was not a startup.

Q: So, can you talk a little bit about how you were recruited for Afghanistan and what you had to do there?

CHEEMA: Sure. I retired at sixty-five on my birthday, the mandatory age for foreign service retirement. But I was not ready, nor had I made any plans.

The Africa Bureau had talked with me about going to Liberia as the acting MD and I stayed in Washington to be ready when the paperwork was done. Then I heard that the assignment was stalled as someone had complained about me. I do not know what the complaint really was, nothing was on paper. But it was annoying, and I was a bit angry. I have so many meritorious and superior awards for my work in hardship posts, and I know I have a solid professional reputation, so it was confusing. I went to senior staff in the

Africa Bureau, and they said they wanted me, but it was coming from above. So, I requested a meeting with the agency counselor, and we sorted it out. By then the Africa Bureau had found someone else for Liberia but offered another post, but I had accepted to go to Afghanistan. For the first time, I felt exposed to how a rumor or backdoor statement to someone high up in the agency can question your whole life of a successful career. I thought that was wrong and someone should have confirmed whether what was being said about me was accurate or not. I was disappointed with our senior management. Not the Africa/B management as they knew me and my work.

The person in charge of staffing Afghanistan needed a senior person in the role of the acting deputy mission director. My former colleague and friend Dianne Tsitsos, I believe, was contacted first and she could not go and recommended that I might be available and interested. So that is how it happened. The deputy was assigned but couldn't get there for six months or so. I still had all my security clearance. I had just retired a couple of months before and was still living in Washington. So, when I was asked "Would you go?" I said, "Yes, I would."

Q: Were you a PSC?

CHEEMA: I was direct hire for six months on recall and when the deputy director arrived to post, I moved to a PSC position as the senior policy advisor for six months. Most of my positions after retirement were as a direct hire on a recall basis.

Q: What year was that?

CHEEMA: July 2008 I retired and three months later in September of 2008, I was in Kabul living in a hooch (trailer).

Q: Right, and not something that we did a lot of at those times.

CHEEMA: No, nothing to the extent of what we were working on in Afghanistan. The most political and problematic project was the one where USAID was implanting infrastructure projects to increase electric power generation capacity in the Kajaki Dam in Helmand. There is a lot of material out there about this project. I remember standing one time in front of my hooch, the trailer I lived in, getting the latest update from the implementing partner. The connection was bad, and I had the ambassador on the other line asking "Has the plane left? Have our generators reached?" I was on this bad connection, shouting to be heard at the contractor. And then when everything was ready there was no plane. The only plane large enough to carry the generators, the old Russian Ilyushin, was not available on that day. Every day, there was something or the other, the road would be blown up so we could not take the generators by truck, or something else – this project alone took up the majority of my energy and time.

I was able to do some site visits with security detail of course, which was new and challenging. At five feet tall, I had a hard time fitting into some of the protective gear as most of it is designed for taller people. I had a memorable site visit to Bamyan, the place

where the Taliban had blown up the Buddha statues. I went to talk to farmers who were recipients of our agriculture assistance. And you know, I remember even sitting in the circle in the open, that's how everybody held their meetings, and I'm sitting there, and I'm the woman and every other person was a rough looking, bearded man with large turbans, and I thought, how do I start this conversation? And there was a little kid with one of the men—so, I started talking to the kid. And slowly, in fifteen minutes, I was asking questions about what they are growing, what the needs are, what the issues are. Then men got more engaged. Here I was the only woman amongst all these men. In my mind I was wondering who they really were. I think me being a woman, threw them off a bit at first. Also, I did not cover my head. It was a strange environment, talking about seed and fertilizers and their needs with our security detail with guns all around us. Surreal.

It took some time to get used to project monitoring in that environment. In other countries, you get in the car and go – here all trips needed clearance and then arrangements for security had to be made. A helicopter arranged with protection. All very new to me. I was not used to meeting our clients and beneficiaries with someone around in military gear and rifles. I remember another meeting with a group of women in Kagush, Nuristan – sitting in the room with a group of women trying to engage them in a friendly conversation and having a security guard standing in the back of the room with a rifle. I finally asked the security detail person to sit next to me – it seemed less daunting to the women. But I knew all this was for my protection.

Q: Right. But you weren't allowed to tell your security to go away.

CHEEMA: No, I asked, like one time, and she said, no, I can't. I knew it was for my protection. Many of our army colleagues that accompanied me were very interested in our work. Looking back at all my site visits, especially to some of the schools for girls makes me so sad – I remember a visit to a technical school for learning computing skills, majority of the students were women. They looked so hopeful for the future and were engaging and laughing. I wonder what happened to them now. I wonder where they are, you know. In my mind, I have not yet come to terms with what has happened in Afghanistan.

Q: Yeah. You have no idea?

CHEEMA: No, no. You know, most likely waiting it out, being at home if they've not left. But that excitement and the hope, you know, I saw in their faces and now I my gosh, who knows if they are still alive. This is hard.

Every time I took a trip to the field, I always thought I might not get back.

Q: Right. So, you were emotionally prepared?

CHEEMA: Yes, yes. But every time, and for everybody, I'm sure, who's worked there, the question was, you know, Is this my last visit? And anything could happen. When I

used to take helicopters, I remember thinking to myself, I promised my mom I'll never do this again, you know.

Q: I'd love to hear you talk about being a senior woman in societies that are very male dominated because some women have said to me, you know, it's almost like I'm a third sex. They don't treat me like their own women, they know I'm not a man. There's some sort of dispensation for American female officials. Is that your experience?

CHEEMA: No, not at all. I mean, first, I wouldn't want them to treat me like they treated their own women, you know. Just as an example, I never covered my head in Afghanistan, no matter where I went. I was very adamant because I had women in my office who felt finally, they could maybe not cover, and I thought if I started covering my head, then what role model am I. Some of my colleagues would say, Aren't you afraid? I said, "You know, they know who I am. If they want to kill me, they'll kill me anyway." So, whether I cover my head or not, won't make a difference. And it was not lack of respect, but I just said, I'm representing the U.S. government, I don't cover my head. And I never felt, you know, even in the villages I went to that no one not talked to me or didn't interact with me in meetings and all, and I never felt they were looking at me like I'm being disrespectful. I always felt they looked at me as an American diplomat. In Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and many other male oriented countries, in my official meetings and in my role, I never felt being undermined or ignored because of being a woman. I would not let them. Only, one time I had an awkward situation and that was in Mauritania where I was on a site visit and I stuck out my hand and the person, a male, did not take it – they do not shake hands with women there. I think he thought I was Mauritanian.

Q: Right, right.

CHEEMA: And part of it, I think, is also the image I project maybe. I would sort of walk into meetings without thinking, I'm a woman, how should I do this. I always had my position and my role at the meeting in mind and I think I was respected for that. Go to a meeting, do your part, keep it official and shake hands and leave. I am not big on chit chatting in official meetings. I think they respected that. I am asked that question by the women I mentor. My advice is that do not let the thought of you being a woman get in your head. Always think you are here in your official capacity and as an American diplomat. Just stick to the job and the message and the task at hand. If you start second guessing, you can compromise yourself. Don't think of yourself as a person but think of the position you are in when dealing with counterparts. That is what has worked for me. Outside of our official role, we cannot change the world all at once.

Q: And what you're representing.

CHEEMA: Yes, the representational position

Q: Yeah. Well, that's very good advice.

What do you think were the successful projects that you saw in Afghanistan or were you not there long enough to form an opinion?

CHEEMA: Well, I was there for a year. I think our programs with women education was one that I would say was successful. Just seeing so many girls going to school and so many programs for women, with so much energy. I just think that was the biggest success. But now who knows.

Getting the American University started there, I thought, was a success—and some very innovative programs directed at women in the university were successful programs. What was upsetting was to see and know that corruption was all around. I went for a meeting at one of the contractors' offices, a rented house, in a neighborhood I did not know existed as we did not get out much, or were not allowed to for security reasons. I was amazed to see the mansions that were there, and more being built. I wondered where that money came from, you know, and how could there be so much—I mean. I have been to other houses. For example, I went to see the dean of the university and he lived in a modest old house in Kabul. So where is this money coming from so fast and furiously? Corruption was all around, and we knew it. But I knew it could not be money siphoned off from our projects, because we have stricter audit requirements.

Q: Were they owned by Afghans or were they owned by expats?

CHEEMA: No, Afghans. But that was the money that was coming in from different sources to get cooperation, I suppose, you know. I never asked. It's just what I'm reading in the papers now.

Q: Right. So, Afghanistan was probably the place where you had most interaction with the U.S. military.

CHEEMA: Yes.

Q: But also, you must have been working hand in glove with the embassy, and feeling lots of pressure from the embassy too?

CHEEMA: I think most of the pressure I felt was in the energy program, because that was so crucial to get electricity in that region. I think we've experienced that with USAID in other high-profile countries, with a lot of people in charge of, quote, "to coordinate." You know, there's a military to coordinate with, then the State Department and there are special envoys and coordinators. Working all these relations was a learning experience, but also so much coordination and oversight increases the amount of time that goes into reporting, meetings, and briefing documents.

Q: Not writing reports.

CHEEMA: There was so much demand either from Washington – the State coordinator's office or from the embassy, or from our own Washington people, this constant, constant

requests for information. And you wondered what anyone does with so much information? And then, reporting—I mean, that is part of what has changed in the way our staff does their technical development work. Unlike the old times when technical staff used to do more field trips. How much of the monitoring is left to the FSN staff and our implementing partners. I noticed the change when I went back to Armenia and then Central Asia also.

Q: Right, yeah. I've heard that from others as well. So, after six months as a direct hire, and then as a PSC, you were recruited to go, where?

CHEEMA: After a year, to Armenia. The mission director had to leave due to a medical emergency, and I heard that the Mission morale was low and there were other management issues that the Ambassador had to intervene in. So, USAID needed to fill the position fast and not wait for the bidding cycle. I was supposed to be there just for one year because they had someone already lined up, but that person took another position in Washington. So, I ended up in Armenia for three years from 2009-2012. I had no complaints.

Q: And again, as a direct hire.

CHEEMA: Yes, yes, as direct hire. It is hard to have a mission director as a PSC as PSC's then did not have authorities to obligate funds. Not sure they can now.

Q: Right. So, how had Armenia changed in the intervening years? Or how had the program changed?

CHEEMA: Our programs were more mature, building on years of experience and changing needs. Our counterparts were more experienced, you know. The diaspora I noted was less engaged in how USAID dispensed funds and had less advocacy efforts at congressional level. Our relationship with our counterparts changed to more of a partnership. We were now obligating funds through agreements with the government. Having the agreements meant that we could design and plan programs as partners. And, our budget was much smaller, to about $30 million, as compared to the $100 million or so in 2001.

Q: Right. And it sounds as if your counterparts were fully invested in the program.

CHEEMA: Right. It seemed so much smoother working. Our programs didn't have the same urgency or visibility and attention from congress and the diaspora as before. In 2001, we had a huge humanitarian assistance reconstruction program post the 1998 earthquake. That work was completed. We had less Russian influence in the energy sector as in the old days. For example, our energy program in the old days was full of tension and negotiations as Armenia was dependent on Russia for oil. We were trying to start an energy distribution program for competition. Suddenly, the government made a deal with the Russians. But when I went back, I did not feel the Russian effect to that extent. Plus, our budget was so much smaller than the old days and not so political. The influence of

the diaspora was less. They had matured their programs. They didn't need USAID assistance as much.

But that was a big difference between the two times.

Q: Right. And were there also many more donors?

CHEEMA: During the early days when I was in Central Asia and Armenia, USG was the largest donor. Over time other donors have entered the scene and I realized the need for coordination was more to leverage the best programs for the country and to avoid duplication

Q: Did the economy look more vibrant? Was it more development—?

CHEEMA: You know, these countries are sort of mixed. On the surface yes, more fancy stores, improved housing complexes, bigger houses, more cars, more restaurants and cafes, more people, the young speaking English. Then you go to the local bazaars and some of the conditions are the same, people still in need and you go to the rural areas, and you do not see the same change. Lots of new money in the cities, not so much in the villages. You see shops selling high-end goods. You see people driving expensive cars and you wonder where the money is coming from.

Q: There was a lot of graft?

CHEEMA: Every donor was aware of corruption and had programs to establish systems to mitigate it – but it was hard to tell where and how the money was coming in, at least for me. There were new shopping centers and housing complexes that were built up in Armenia. There was hardly anyone shopping in the fancy stores, and I always wondered where the money came from. But some of Yerevan stayed the same, smaller streets, smaller houses. Rural areas did not change much. However, in general, both in Armenia and in Kazakhstan when I talked to people, they said things were better for the average person now than before.

Q: Even with the disparities between rich and—

CHEEMA: Yes, yes, even with the disparity. Being a little better is being better.

Q: Right. Did you hear people express any resentment about that?

CHEEMA: I think the resentment was more political than economic towards their own government.

Q: How large was the AID mission when you went back to Armenia?

CHEEMA: I believe our budget was down to maybe $25-30 million and a staff of thirty to forty. I must check. We still had regional contracting and legal services from Georgia. We were downsizing.

Q: Right, right. So, was there any program that you thought you really should try to start that you just didn't have either the people or the money to do? Or were you pretty content?

CHEEMA: No, I felt with a population of three million, we had enough money for Armenia. If I could, I would have liked to change the way we program funds so more money/small grants could go directly to the rural areas, which were most in need. I wanted to find better ways of establishing systems within the government to minimize avenues for corruption, not only in Armenia but in all our countries. Even if our projects are somewhat protected from graft because of our audit requirements and most of the funding being managed by US firms, in most countries, corruption is endemic, and I wondered about the loan programs that are directly negotiated with the government entities.

Q: Right, right.

CHEEMA: Development assistance is tricky – sometimes I feel we go in circles. As soon as we feel we have made progress, a conflict takes place, people are displaced, or there is not enough political and economic will on the part of the host country to sustain the change and things start to slide back or new challenges arise. It hurts me to see literacy rates and some health indicators backsliding in the former Soviet Union.

Q: Which was the legacy of the Soviet Union, right?

CHEEMA: Yes, yes.

Q: Right, wow. So, you were there for three years although you only thought you were going to be there for one.

CHEEMA: Yes, and I loved it.

Q: Right, yeah, so did people, reminiscing about some of the good things in the old days, but in general people said it's better now. So, you didn't hear a lot of oh gee, I wish we still were part of the Soviet system?

CHEEMA: No, no, no, no. No, no way. I think what people missed is the safety net, which I think is understandable. But they never, ever missed the old lifestyle and systems. I mean, not in Armenia and Armenia culture and tradition and systems were not as much affected by the Soviet system as was in Central Asia.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: But even in Central Asia I never, ever heard anyone saying - Oh, that system was better, you know. In Turkmenistan I could not talk to any one as some of the oppressive systems prevail. And in Tajikistan it was a bit mixed, people would come up to me to talk. I used to walk in a park to go downtown from the hotel on weekends. There were always groups who would want to sit and talk to me. But nobody ever wanted to talk about politics. They were very interested in what I did. I would ask them what they were doing, what they wanted to be etc. But never politics

Q: Right, right. Interesting. Fascinating. So, I guess we can come back to it. But then tell me, the next assignment was Guinea-Conakry. How did that happen?

CHEEMA: I returned from Armenia in 2012 and settled in Madison and fully engaged myself in my neighborhood. I had been away from the States since 1985. With Ebola raging in that part of Africa, the Bureau was short staffed and the USAID representative in Sierra Leone had departed early. So, I was contacted by the special office set up to provide oversight and manage the special Ebola funds to know if I would for three months until they could put the position on the bid list. Denise Rollings was heading that office, a hard job. I was available and I thought why not help for three months. While in SL, I was extremely impressed at the inter-agency and multi-donor effort to address the magnitude of resources needed to mitigate and control Ebola.

From there, I returned to Madison and then when back to Guinea for two months at the end of the fiscal year as we had to obligate the funds for that year – and the mission director had left post and apparently the Bureau did not have a senior person who could be acting and or had the trust of the Bureau. I do not know. That was just a six week or two months assignment. I just wanted to help the bureau. I had a special place in my heart for the Africa Bureau as I had started my career in the Africa Bureau.

Q: Was there a gap between Armenia and going to Guinea-Conakry?

CHEEMA: I think about two years. So, I had two years here to get settled in Madison a little bit.

Q: Oh, okay, so that's when you moved to Madison?

CHEEMA: We had bought a place in Madison in 2008 when I was retired, but then I went back out, you know, to Afghanistan then to Armenia, so my husband stayed in Madison as Afghanistan was a non-family post and he did not want to move. I believe he was done with moving. Guinea was a hard post. I was mostly busy with USAID funding and management issues and did not have much time to meet people or do social events, but it is the filthiest city I have ever lived in. Garbage everywhere. I remember that Wilbur Thomas in the early nineties was the director there and had remarked on it and even had initiated a USAID program in garbage management, I believe and years later I thought – not much has changed. I am a walker, but walking was hard stepping over garbage. But after a month I got used to it.

Q: Yeah, right, how do you adapt? But were other public services deficient and was this reflective of poor services generally?

CHEEMA: You know, I can't be an expert on Guinea because I did not have much time to go out to the field or review programs—I mean, I wasn't there long enough to get a sense of how our programs were doing, how the government was doing. It was a very short time to obligate FY funding before the end of the FY year. Most of my time was spent on internal issues related to mission staff and morale and obligating the funds and getting the agreements signed.

Q: And relations with the embassy, did you have much to do with the embassy at that time?

CHEEMA: Well, I was on the country team. The Ambassador was pleased that there was someone in charge over at USAID. I did make one trip to SL while I was there. I think embassies and the ambassadors get tired when there's internal issues in USAID.

But then I don't know why, sometimes I felt USAID waits too long to pull someone out if she or he is not working. I experienced that in one or two missions that the ambassador had to intervene before USAID would act. And I never understood why, knowing staff and moral issues were happening, why we don't use our authority to be proactive. I never sort of understood that.

Q: Does AFSA play some role?

CHEEMA: Maybe, I had that experience with one very difficult staff, and it is not easy to curtail someone unless they do it voluntarily. The best you can do is to hope that they will move on and just manage the situation the best you can. But I feel that is not the best way to make it another mission's problem. I am only referring to staff that is difficult and or who's not performing, or way of managing and or and behavior affects others. There are times that a certain environment is not the best for a certain staff and those cases are easier to figure out as it has nothing to do with performance or behavior.

Q: Right, I know, and I think that's probably still an issue.

CHEEMA: The other thing, going back to the women's issue. I do think that men get away with certain behaviors or performance issues more than women. I believe that the agency is less forgiving of women. And that needs attention. I know women whom I admired and were excellent at their job but had a reputation and were reprimanded. If a man had demonstrated the same issues, I am not sure if the response would have been the same. I know of examples, but this is not the place for that discussion. Enough to say that we must do better in dealing with such a situation in an equitable manner. I do believe that corridor/hallway reputation affects women more negatively than the same reputation for men.

Q: Yeah, the evaluation system doesn't really do what it's supposed to do.

CHEEMA: Correct, even with the new system, it does not quite touch upon behavior and management issues that affect the mission. This is more important when people are in senior management issues as their work style can affect the whole mission.

Q: Well, it's been that way for a long time.

CHEEMA: Yeah, what can be done. And I know women get affected more than men.

Q: Well, you talked about corridor reputations, and you know, everybody gets one. But it's very hard to fight it.

CHEEMA: Again, I know it is and I advise my mentees how best to deal with that, but I do want to say that women get hurt by corridor reputation more than men. I mean, everyone gets one, but somehow some things that are overlooked for men are not overlooked for women is what bothers me. I can talk about my own example in one or two cases, but I do not want to sound like I am whining.

Q: I agree. All right, so just finishing this sequence, finally you went back to Central Asia.

CHEEMA: Right. That was in 2016, I was asked by the bureau to go for two years, I committed to one because I felt that as a retired officer, I can help, but I did not want to take the career development opportunity from someone, so I said, "I'll agree for one year and if you don't find someone, I'll do a second year." The mission had been without a mission director or had had short-term mission directors for some time and that had affected mission operations and staff morale.

Anyway, the mission had very poor morale. Meanwhile, there were issues about how to reorganize the mission because some of the other countries, like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, budgets were increasing, and the regional budget was decreasing so some right sizing was needed. I was supposed to help with the morale and work on reorganization and downsizing the regional staff and realign staffing patterns in other countries. I traveled quite a bit to ensure that Ambassadors and our staff were in the loop. And the biggest challenge of all was to maintain staff morale in the changing and uncertain environment of the regional mission staff who would be affected most. As much as I believed in transparency and open communication, there were some aspects I could not share as it might have created stress, panic and flight of staff as we still needed all the staff to manage the programs we had on the ground. It was a balancing act all around.

Q: Again!

CHEEMA*:* Yes, again restructuring and managing a difficult situation and trying to be fair to the staff. But I think I got one of those hallway reputations of having communication problems during that year. But I was very upfront with the ambassadors as to what I was dealing with and what I thought needed to be done. It was our own

USAID staff that was affected the most and I shared as much information that I could or even knew because decisions in Washington were in flux, and I did not want to create panic.

Q: Right. And you had to do a lot of that over your career.

CHEEMA: Right, right. Yes. Meanwhile, working in some countries was difficult, especially in Turkmenistan due to the government there and our bilateral relationship being a bit rocky. Tajikistan was not as difficult, but getting anything approved took forever as I was told all decision making was centralized to the president's office. For example, I made frequent trips to Tajikistan to negotiate an education program that the ministry wanted and was needed.

Q: Yeah.

CHEEMA: So, at the ministry level there would be agreement. I would leave and ask "So, when can I come back to sign?" and nothing. I was told by our staff that some more tweaking was needed. They would find a word or two that needed a change. It was all a stalling exercise. But I think by the time I left I delegated the AID director there to sign the agreement, so we got it signed. It took a year or more to sign a program like in primary education that everybody wanted. We had excellent Tajik staff, but I did feel that she was being caught in the middle as the ministry would just talk to her and try to influence her to make the changes they wanted. She held firm though.

Q: Yeah. Were they waiting for you to pay someone under the table?

CHEEMA: No. Just waiting for the president's office to give the go ahead. I do not think they were waiting for payment. And, you know we do not do that.

Q: Well, I know we don't, but wonder whether they were waiting—

CHEEMA: No, no, the Minister was afraid to make a decision to sign a bilateral agreement without the go ahead from above. All decision making was centralized. That was disappointing to see after so many years, some back sliding had happened in the system – to the former way of doing things.

Q: So, the U.S.-Russia relations were always a theme, a subcurrent.

CHEEMA: Yes. Right. And I think it played out differently and was managed differently in each of the former Soviet countries. The Russian factor was much more subtle at times.

Q: Right, right. Was China a player in any of these countries, the Central Asian countries?

CHEEMA: Well, China's always been a player even in Africa, you know, because they used to come in with huge construction works.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: And bring their labor and everything. Build roads and stadiums and other infrastructure and called it free without loans, but I wondered if it indeed was free. I know the China element is high on the USAID agenda, especially in Asia and the islands.

Q: Right, right. So, that's sort of a discouraging end of AID career, but maybe it's just the trajectory.

CHEEMA: You mean seeing how countries back slide - yes, a bit discouraging, but that is not my whole career. There are many positives, and I would not ever choose another career.

Q: Well, they're living that reality. So, you know, as we've been talking these last few hours, you've done more than your share of reorganizations, you've done more than your share of both hiring and letting go staff, and honestly, compared with a lot of people I think you've done a lot more working with ambassadors and dealing with their concerns. So, I'd love to hear how you look back on this career and what you've learned or what you would tell people just coming into AID the lessons for you.

CHEEMA: Overall, I have had a fantastic career. I pinch myself sometimes as to how I happened to fall into a career that I am passionate about and have enjoyed working in each of the countries, no matter how hard or easy the work was. Plus, I met and made friends with awesome professionals, many of whom I am in touch with and have become friends forever.

My advice to others is based on my own lessons and what has worked for me and that is: patience, persistence, be open minded and as a manager be sensitive to your environment and staff, focus on work and less on who says what, let your work speak for you, treat all no matter which country, rich or poor, with dignity and respect, avoid the use of the term " them -us" stay on top of your area of expertise, don't take things for granted and above all help others to advance in their careers and professional growth as you manage yours. And learn to compromise and be open to others' ideas. Don't get stuck on managing only upwards as some do in wanting to enhance their career growth. Don't be afraid to say "I am sorry" – it helps. I often find myself saying - "You know, if you work hard and you are upfront and straightforward and don't get into the internal issues and gossip and whatever, it pays off." One other lesson is don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it. I am sure there are many more lessons that made my work a learning experience and a rewarding one. And, be aware that it takes a team to be successful. Be good to your team and say thank you.

Q: Well, it clearly has resulted in a very successful career—

CHEEMA: Yes, I am proud of my career, it was not long after I joined USAID when I was fifty-three, I believe and had to retire mandatorily at sixty-five. Although, I worked for five or six years more on a recall basis. But in those eighteen years, I rose to the Senior Foreign Service ranks, I received many performance awards, and made some lifelong friends and got to work and know so many cultures and people. What more can I ask for? I learned that dialogue and conversation can help with a lot of issues and problems.

Q: Right, right. So, I'm struck in all of our conversations we've talked almost not at all about AID Washington, and I don't know whether you ever served in Washington, but clearly you had to deal with Washington, Washington requests and visits. Can you talk a little bit about how you see the field-Washington relationship or how it worked for you?

CHEEMA: I never served in Washington, and I wish I had. I feel I missed learning about how that whole machine works. I advise others to do so, especially in our current environment when we have so many agencies to coordinate and negotiate with. It is good to know how they think and work. Plus, it is also good for one's own networking if you are known better in Washington. I was fortunate in most cases to have very supportive and excellent supervisors and back stop officers who helped us in the field navigate Washington.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: My direct relationship with Washington was through the desk officers first and then with AAs and DAAs as I took management positions. I always recognized that they were balancing multiple interests also. Us in the field, our front office and priorities, the State department and other coordinating agencies and constituents like the diaspora in Armenia. Having a desk officer, who can sort some of this out for you and can make you feel that they hold your mission's best interest, makes a big difference. I think everyone's work life in Washington has gotten complicated over the years.

Q: Right. And you were talking about different clients, but they have to deal with the State Department, they have to deal with Congress, they have to deal with the White House, they have to deal with outside constituents.

CHEEMA: Right, right. And everyone has their own priorities and agendas and how they view the needs from their political perspective.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: This is truer in high profile countries where we have bilateral and political interests beyond just development or disease prevention or humanitarian programs.

Q: Right, right. You suggested we could talk about things that AID could do better. We've already talked about AID not being able to weed out bad actors or alternatively to train

them to be more effective as managers. But are there other things that come to mind from your incredible career?

CHEEMA: Sometimes I think we are too reactive to the State Department, White House, or Congress preferences and criticism. Every time I read an article on USAID, there is another reorganization and a new policy framework. It's like doing country strategies, by the time they are developed, approved, and funded, the environment changes and then we start modifying them. Lot of staff and resources are spent on this. Towards the end of my career, I felt we were in constant justification for survival.

I am hoping that is not the case anymore. I am not by any means saying that we should not assess ourselves from time to time to make sure we are efficient and effective, but constant change can be demoralizing, I think.

Another thing that comes to my mind is how we can minimize the barrage of briefing documents required from the field. During my career, I saw this as a hindrance to our technical staff who are specialists in their field who should be designing and monitoring and managing projects but now spending so much of their time on reporting and preparing documents. Many of these requests are from the State, Embassy and Washington. USAID senior management should review this and figure out a way to streamline.

Another area that we might have touched upon is that USAID is risk averse – our projects are implanted in a fluid environment – requiring flexibility. When we have five or more-year contracts, that set targets in advance and every indicator is tracked and every penny linked to results, we get ourselves trapped in contracting requirements. We should be able to cut our losses sometimes and be able to move faster as needs change. Plus, our projects are part of a larger program in these countries supported by many donors and with many factors influencing our results. I think the whole system of tracking indicators and results can be a waste of staff time and resources. Monitoring is needed but let us be more targeted and efficient about it and not just make it another bureaucratic requirement.

Q: Right. Well, I don't know that we've done very well at reforming them, but your point that development is not risk free and AID traditionally approached it as if we can nail down every penny is well taken. Finding mechanisms to allow us to learn as we go, revise, even, say, accept a 10 percent failure rate is what you would expect in a development program.

There have been experiments along those lines and there are people who say "just give the money."

CHEEMA: Yes, at times I am one of those people. But that means small grant mechanisms oriented directly at family, cooperatives and or even villages. But if we add our normal reporting requirement with these small grants, the people and communities are not going to be able to manage the paperwork. So, some risk is needed to say – maybe we will fail in ten percent of the cases. We do have some programs now that provide local

grants, but through our large partners which have become small USAID bureaucracies themselves with their contracting mechanisms, financial offices, and monitoring staff. So where do you think the money goes? But to do this and that is why it won't happen, that as long our funding is bilateral in that we have to work with and through the government, I am sure many governments would not agree to us giving money directly to the recipients.

Q: Regarding monitoring well that's got to be a conversation with Congress too, though I'm not sure Congress really does expect that level of scrutiny.

CHEEMA: See, that's what I feel sometimes we've got ourselves caught between meeting everybody's expectations, Congress, State Department, other policy makers, and we keep doing stuff thinking this will make it better, you know. With a part merger, administrative services and budget, we have lost our development autonomy.

Q: I think more recently people at AID are feeling that they're wresting some control back from State, but I think you lived through the accretion of the State responsibilities over USAID programming.

CHEEMA: I hope so.

Q: Right. Well, I think the other thing too is that the nature of development work is changing. All the reasons you've mentioned, our counterparts are better educated, they're more invested in the programs, their needs are different, the donor environment is different. So, you know, I think AID in its training programs and in its management, systems need to adapt.

CHEEMA: Yes, adapt to that. Because I do ask - why are we still doing technical and training, you know. That part is gone. Now everybody's trained. They don't need training; they don't need technical assistance to that extent they did in all the areas. What we need is more new generation models. I thought the trade shows that we supported in Central Asia were a good example of different kinds of programs. What we are doing in India is different. We need to be more targeted and have a different approach to different settings and environments, and that takes flexibility and some risk taking.

Q: Well, what an amazing career.

CHEEMA: I know. Sometimes maybe I sound too positive about everything, but I think my own experience has been such a positive and rewarding experience that it is hard for me to not be positive. Not that USAID is perfect, no agency is, and it needs to evolve with time.

Q: Right.

CHEEMA: And one last point to end our discussion. I am disappointed in terms of the host countries not being more accountable and committed. And our inability to ask more

of them in terms of meeting their people's needs. Some of these countries are rich and many so corrupt that their leaders have unimaginable wealth and yet their people could be starving. As a humanitarian I say yes, we can't let people starve or be displaced without help. As a development expert, I would want to hold the countries accountable.

Q: Right. How do we hold countries more accountable?

CHEEMA: That is a hard question and because our development assistance is linked to our overall bilateral relations, it becomes a complicated question.

One response is to cut our development assistance in countries that do not show commitment and or do nothing about corrupt leaders. The other is to ensure that they match our budget, especially in countries where there is wealth and leaders are siphoning off the country's resources. Another is to have a joint multi-donor front – so they can't fall back on the UN and the World Bank if USAID leaves. It is often in these poorly governed and corrupt countries where the people are suffering the most.

I am sure there are books written about how to make countries more accountable and responsive and what donors should do. I am not an expert on this issue.

Q: Cheema, thank you.

CHEEMA: Thank you. I am sure much has changed in USAID since I left, and what I said above are my personal opinions and thoughts. Now what happens?

Q: So, now what happens is you will receive a transcript. This is your story, so add whatever you want, take out what you think you don't want. You'll probably within the next three months get the transcript and you've got three, four months to do whatever, and I'm happy to help you because my questions weren't always right on point and so I'll look at it as well. When you're comfortable with it it will then get posted and be available for scholars and everyone through the Library of Congress.

To the extent you can add names and dates, that would be good. I mean, obviously, if you don't want to talk about the difficult deputy mission director you don't have to, although many people do. The dates will help because people then think, oh yes, that was the beginning of the Obama Administration or something, you know, so it puts it in a larger context.

CHEEMA: Thank you. This was wonderful—and how did you think of me?

Q: Well, honestly, we're looking for people who've had amazing careers who can talk about them—and yours obviously counts! In your case both in Africa and in the newly independent states you had some pretty difficult and important assignments and getting your perspective on these situations, in addition to managing those assignments as a senior woman in AID was sort of an obvious thing to ask. And so, I'm glad that you were willing to do this.

CHEEMA: Yeah, thank you. Thank you for asking me.

End of interview

Addendum

To learn more about Dr. Cheema's story, her book, *The Black Attaché: Vignettes from a Life,* is available through Amazon at: https://geni.us/blackattache