

WE DON'T EXIST HERE: THE TENSIONS, CHALLENGES AND ERASURE OF  
MUSLIM WOMEN IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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MUSLIM WOMEN IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

By NAGHAM AZZAM, B.Sc. (Hons.) , HBSW

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**AUTHOR:** Nagham Azzam, Hons. B.Sc. (McMaster), Hons. BSW (Lakehead)

**SUPERVISOR:** Dr Saara Greene

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### **Abstract**

In a field such as social work, where anti-oppressive practice is preached, it is expected that educators and the academy alike work to challenge xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse. However, this may not be the case. Using a Critical Social Science frameworks, this study explores the experience of Muslim women in social work education through a qualitative methodology. A focus group was conducted with current social work students and recent graduates to explore their experience in social work education. What emerged from the data are the signs of an academy that does not embody the values and ethics it purports to teach. Through a thematic analysis of the data, three main themes emerged: the tensions and challenges between and within social work education and Islamic knowledge and Muslim identity; the marginalization and erasure of Muslim women's voices in social work education; and the ways that Muslim women students navigate these issues. The findings bring light to the challenges Muslim women face as a result of an academy that continuously tells them that they do not belong. Implications for theorists, educators, administrators and students are explored and recommendations are given regarding the importance of the inclusion of Muslim voices in the discourse, creating safe and inclusive spaces for Muslim students, and working collectively to address the tensions and challenges that Muslim women face in social work education.

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*In the Name of Allah, the Especially Gracious, the Especially Merciful*

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Growing up a Muslim woman in a post-9/11 world, particularly in North America, was not easy. Every Muslim kid I know can distinctly remember when our teachers rolled in the TV on that noisy cart and we watched the aftermath of the world trade center attacks, and we are still watching. The invasion of Iraq, the execution of Saddam Hussein, the fall of the Levant region, the rise of Daesh and so forth. My generation has grown up in a world where Muslim means terrorist and Islam is perceived as a “threat”. We are taught that we are representatives of the Muslim faith and we are in some way responsible for those who showed violence against us and on our behalf. We were raised in a world where our mothers whose wombs we owed our lives to, were not seen as the pillars they are but rather used to further the agendas that knocked us down. Although we share the same political climate, we have all internalized it in different ways.

For me, my experience as a Muslim woman and my attentiveness to the world around me, and how it reacted to me, has led me to the world of social work. Social work was introduced to me during my university career as a profession for those who seek justice, and it was something I immediately gravitated towards. Social work taught me about power and its imbalances and gave context to many of my lived experiences. I began implementing social work knowledge and skills as a means of understanding my social reality. However, when I shared these ideas in the classroom, they were not as well received as I thought they would be. Whether it was micro aggressions or blatantly



oppressive comments that dismissed my experiences, I experienced firsthand the erasure of Islam and marginalization of Muslim students in my social work classrooms.

I quickly learned that the best way to navigate the classroom was to find other racialized people and navigate the classroom alongside them. This allowed us the opportunity of having someone to roll our eyes with when a peer felt the need to explain something in an insensitive way, or to validate our feelings when we received feedback from our white professors saying that we did not provide a balanced critique on something relating to our experience of racism. Having other racialized students to share this experience with also meant we could vent about all the different ways social work education has failed us. The social work academy was supposed to be a place where we could critique oppressive systems, however, in my experience, it did more to maintain them. As a Muslim woman who wears a hijab, I found that the way I looked, dressed, and viewed the world did not fit into the hegemonic discourse that occurred in the social work classroom. Although social work championed the voice of diversity, it only welcomed voices that validated its liberal, secular, and Eurocentric viewpoint. This highlighted what I view as a discrepancy between my experiences and what I believed social work stood for; ideas of diversity, inclusivity, and social justice. After several years of reflecting on the multiple ways that my experience of racism and Islamophobia has been excluded from classroom discussion – regarding different facets of social work, including but not limited to: clinical work, research, and policy - I decided to examine this phenomenon more closely. This has resulted in my desire to seek out other social work students (or recent graduates) who identify as Muslim women and ask them about their experiences

navigating social work education. I believe that this is an important topic for social work research because it can provide insight regarding the experience of Muslim women in social work education and identify room for improvement.

### **Islamophobia and Orientalism**

To understand the experience of Muslim women in the classroom, one must understand the political climate that they come from. Muslim women come into the classroom carrying with them the experiences that they have gathered outside the classroom and are greeted by peers and professors whom, like many other Canadians, are exposed to pervasive and perverted images of Islam. I recently watched a stand-up comedy act where a Muslim comedian, Ramy Youssef said:

Even if sometimes I watch (TV) for too long, I feel like woah, am I going to do something? Like when I turn 30, am I going to get a Hogwarts letter from ISIS and a big man with a beard and an owl is going to say, “you’re a terrorist, Ramy” and that’s it, I have to go join ISIS. (The Late Show with Stephan Colbert, 2017).

Youssef’s comedic take on the media representation of Muslims points to the idea that the perverted representations of Islam and Muslims are so pervasive that even Muslims themselves may begin to internalize it.

Heightened awareness and interest in the affairs of Muslim peoples has increased dramatically since the events of 9/11 (Read, 2007). Increased violence in the Middle East, the rise of ISIS, homegrown terrorism and associated fear-mongering has kept this heightened awareness alive. The emerging climate of anti-Muslim sentiments in the West was labelled Islamophobia (Mastnak, 2010; Rana, 2007). Former Secretary General Kofi

Annan began a UN conference on Islamophobia by saying, “When the world is compelled to coin a new term to take account of increasingly widespread bigotry, that is a sad and troubling development. Such is the case with Islamophobia.” (2004).

However, Islamophobia is just a new word for an old concept. The term “Islamophobia” emerged in modern discourse after the 1997 publication of the report “Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All” by the Runnymede Trust, however the exact origin of the word is unknown (Bleich, 2011; Richardson, 2009). Islamophobia has now become a widely-used term that refers to a fear or hatred of Islam and Muslims (Rana, 2007). Although the term Islamophobia is here to stay, the disadvantages of the term are significant and must be acknowledged (Richardson, 2009). One of the primary arguments regarding the limitations of the term is that *phobia* implies a mental illness that only impacts a small minority of the population, or an unjustifiable or irrational fear - of which Islamophobia is neither (Richardson, 2009). Islamophobia is not a “*phobia*”, but rather, a result of deeply rooted negative sentiments, images and stereotypes that are best explained through Orientalism. Orientalism as theorized by Edward Said is a Eurocentric prejudice against Arab-Muslim people and their culture that serves to further colonial and imperial powers of the West (1979). Said theorizes that this is done by portraying the West as progressive and superior and the East as ‘suppressive’ and ‘inferior’ (Said, 1979). This conception of the East facilitates cultural imperialism and is internalized by Muslims and Non-Muslims alike.

Islamophobia worldwide has taken place in many forms including attacks on Muslim people’s property, persons, and places of worship, in both public and private

spheres including the internet. The range of Islamophobia on social media sites ranges from individuals making hateful and insulting comments to people making actual death threats against Muslim communities (Awan, 2014). Several websites use the cloak of freedom of expression to perpetuate anti-Muslim rhetoric, which inevitably attracts other users with similar deeply embedded anti-Muslim narrative (Awan, 2014). As a Muslim, reading any articles pertaining to Islam online can be a very stressful and emotional experience, somewhere on that page whether in the article itself or the comments section often lies inflammatory Islamophobic remarks. In fact, trying to search for information for this study was a very emotionally taxing experience. For every website with useful information I was faced with many others that incited hate against Muslims and Islam.

While Canadians pride themselves on their multicultural identity, they are not exempt from this phenomenon, as attacks on Muslim places of worship and on visibly Muslim women are being reported across the country (Mawani, 2015). The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey of 1,515 Canadians on views of various religions between February 12-22, 2017 and found that almost half (46%) of those surveyed had negative views of Islam. The National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) has an online map that tracks Islamophobic incidents that have been reported to police in Canada. These incidents have been scattered all over the nation and include physical, verbal, hate propaganda, vandalism and threats (National Council of Canadian Muslims, 2017).

### **The “Oppression” of Muslim Woman**

At the forefront of this battle between the West and Islam are Muslim women. Muslim women who decide to veil are under even more scrutiny in the West than their male counterparts. Muslim women who choose to cover, often shoulder the burden of anti-Muslim hostility and have faced additional problems in terms of their politics and their lived experiences (Afshar, 2008). Visibly shrouded with the hijab, Muslim women are singled out as the living example of backwardness and fearful subordination. While Muslim men can conceal their Muslim identity, Muslim women who decide to veil become an easy target for Islamophobic attacks. The political discourse and debates about the legality of what Muslim women wear has made the commentary on the private lives of Muslim women socially acceptable.

Islamophobia narratives are not just part of the war on terror. Khiabany & Williamson (2008) argue that it is the increased visibility of veiled bodies in the West today that has provoked a racist response that originates from long-standing orientalist oppositions; it has been repackaged and justified through discourse around the ‘war on terror’ and parallel racist discourses positioning Islam as a “threat to our way of life”.

The narrative of Muslim women as oppressed is one that predates the post-9/11 era; in their study of (mis)representations of Muslim women, Bullock and Jafri (2000) discuss how Muslim women's identities are excluded from the construction of "women" in the Canadian nation. Bullock and Jafri argue that Muslim women are members of a religion (Islam) that is in opposition to "Canadian" values and promotes indiscriminate

violence and gender oppression; they are presented as outsiders that are foreign and distant "others,". Even pre- 9/11, a young Muslim girl was expelled from a public school in Montreal for wearing hijab (Bullock & Jafri, 2000). This historical context is important and demonstrates a deep-seated Islamophobia that predates 9/11 and other events. Veiled Muslim women's undeniable Muslim identity coupled with the pervasive messaging and stereotyping of their "passivity" makes them the ideal subject against whom to enact anti-Muslim hostility (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012).

### *The Misrepresentation of Muslim Women*

The Western mass media tend to construct the image of Muslim women using one of two narratives (Navarro, 2010). The dominant discourse being the aforementioned notions of passivity; and the second being the less common but more positive image of a "liberated Muslim woman", linked closely to Western attire and/or economic success (Navarro, 2010). These dichotomous narratives are perpetuated by mass media and tend to erode the social, cultural and economic diversity of Muslim women and champions an inaccurate monolithic narrative which silences a very diverse population of Muslim women (Navarro, 2010).

The portrayal of Muslim women in the public discourse has become a venue for both Islamophobia and sexism; specifically, how the Muslim woman, or construction of her social figure is used to fuel Islamophobia (Navarro, 2010). By constructing the Muslim woman as weak and submissive, the Muslim man by association is situated as aggressive and authoritarian. This construction of Muslim women positions them as

“pawns” in a political struggle, whose identities are manipulated to further an agenda (El Saadawi, 2005). By presenting this erroneous dichotomy as one dictated by Islam, one manages to engage in a cyclical argument that is fueled by both Islamophobia and sexism. This argument masks Islamophobia with a “colonial feminism” that sets the stage for the salvation of Muslim women. The societal fixation on the oppression of Muslim women has become the primary source for prejudice and discrimination against them.

Muslim women in the West, when discussing their identity feel that the labelling of Islam as backward and patriarchal is inaccurate and furthers discrimination against them (Eid, 2015). Muslim women’s veiling is a product of religious commitment and not oppression by Muslim men or the religion of Islam (Eid, 2015). Interestingly, many Muslim women look at the sexualization and objectification of women in Western culture as inherently oppressive due to its use of female sexuality to fulfill men’s sexual desires (Eid, 2015). Both veiled and non-veiled Muslim women referenced the concept of modesty and the hijab as a tool of resistance against their sexual exploitation (Eid, 2015). Muslim women viewed gender equality as not just essential but also integral to the message of Islam (Eid, 2015).

The coopting of Muslim women’s voices and misrepresentation of their experiences is central to Islamophobic discourse and must be challenged in the fight against Islamophobia. Although my research focuses on the educational experience of Muslim women in the field of social work, identity formation and the body in which Muslim social work students occupy is central to the way they experience the world and by extension their social work education. Central to discussions in social work classrooms

is social location and discussions around privilege. Therefore, understanding the social context and discourse surrounding Muslim women is essential. Muslim women come into the social work classroom with the lived experience, politics and views that the global community has forced upon them; therefore, it is difficult to understand one without the other.

### **Muslim Women, Islam and Social Work Education**

From reading and reviewing the literature, it appears that othering of Muslim women may occur in three ways: first, othering based on racial or cultural aspects of identity; second, othering on the basis of religion and third; othering based on gender. The literature specific to Muslim women in social work is limited. However, we can draw on research regarding the experiences of other racial and ethnic minorities in social work, other religious groups in social work and Muslim women in university settings more generally, to understand what knowledge already exists pertaining to the topic.

Although we like to think so, social work education is not exempt from the euro-Christian ethnocentric bias that other university programs often exhibit. The literature on social work education and ethnic minorities is limited, however, what literature does exist points to an incongruence between social work's declared value of diversity and the experience of minorities in the classroom. Social work education often imagines a social work student who is white and who must be taught how to think about diversity from a Eurocentric standpoint (Badwall, 2013). There is a dilemma that emerges in social work



when the racialized Others become the helpers and attempts to perform a normative identity that is constructed through white dominance (Badwall, 2013).

Peggy McIntosh's (1988) "Invisible Knapsack of White Privilege" is a contentious reading that is a staple in many social work classrooms as it brings attention to the way that even in discussions to breakdown white privilege, whiteness reclaims the center (Badwall, 2013). Badwall (2013) comments on the erasure of people of colour from the profession and the burden that they carry as a result of not being able to discuss their experiences within the profession. One of Badwall's participants explains how Peggy gets to unpack her backpack and "and everybody came together to carry it around", but nobody asks her (the participant) about her backpack and it becomes more and more invisible until somebody notices that she is "carrying a honking camper" on her back! This humorous representation of the problematic nature of social work education points to the serious burden that social workers of colour must carry as their education normalizes whiteness and erases their voices from the discourse.

Students enter social work programs with an idealized understanding of their professional identity and are quickly disillusioned by the lack of diversity in the faculty, staff and their colleagues (Daniel, 2007). Students of colour also struggle with finding their place in the curriculum as a result of not identifying with the material and lack of mentorship within a primarily white faculty. The findings in the literature regarding minority experiences in social work classrooms draw attention to the imperfect nature of social work education. In a classroom where values of inclusion and anti-oppression are

supposed to be taught, it is important to point out discrepancies between theory and practice.

### *Muslim Women and University Education*

Institutions of higher learning in Western society share many common themes. Although my focus is on social work education specifically, it is important to consider the experience of Muslim women in educational institutions as a whole in order to develop an understanding of their experiences within the academy.

Research has shown that Muslim women who engage in higher education have had varying experiences. Ahmad (2001) argues that that some British Muslim women attending university in the UK viewed their experience as positive and felt that their experiences had helped them to rationalize their thoughts regarding their culture and religion in a positive sense. However, the participants also shared that Islamophobic or racist comments were experienced and were a cause for concern. When confronted with Islamic content in their course work, the participants were disappointed with the colonial bias of readings and noted the “white male bias” and hegemonic authority that some lecturers exerted in relation to the curriculum. Course material contributed to some of the participant’s perceptions of being “othered,” excluded, or feeling that they had wasted their time. However, many participants noted how they used their developed academic skills and incorporated their personal experience to learn how to critically analyze and challenge hegemonic discourse.

Similar to Ahmed (2001), Aslam (2011) comments on the authority of educators and their role in othering and marginalizing Muslim students through the material taught in classrooms. Ways that Muslim students experience marginalization and racism in the classroom include professors discussing their support of hijab bans in class, perpetuating the idea of the hijab being a tool of oppression, and singling out Muslim women students for plagiarism and other academic criticisms (Aslam, 2011). While not all students experienced overt racism, some identified barriers accessing services by virtue of their Muslim identity and felt that the university culture did not allow room for their Islamic identity (Aslam, 2011)

### *Islam, Religion and Social Work Education*

The topic of Islamophobia within schools of social work is underdeveloped as is indicated through the lack of scholarship on Muslims and Islamophobia within social work education. Trying to find literature relevant to the topic of Muslim women in social work education was not an easy feat. Much of the literature on Muslim women and social work, positions Muslims as clients and not professionals. Literature on social work education and people of colour followed this trend by speaking primarily about multicultural competency and anti-oppressive practice. What is present in the literature points to an academy that does not practice what it preaches. Although social work has a social justice agenda that seeks to disrupt hegemonic discourse, narratives of students of colour points to a system that further marginalizes students that do not belong to the dominant group.

Violence occurs in social work classrooms and workplaces with surprising frequency; and religious groups are subjected to emotional violence, ridicule, harassment and stigma by virtue of their religious beliefs (Ressler, 1998). While no study has been completed to evaluate the full extent of the problem, one small study by Ressler in 1997 found that 67% of those who identified as religious and spiritual had experienced prejudice or discrimination within the profession. Secularism, which is central to social work is a way of thinking that denies or ignores the spiritual dimension of life and discredits the value and contribution of religion (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000).

Spirituality often replaces religion in social work discourse which is justified using the language of inclusion to other. Spirituality is constructed as non-sectarian and neutral, a concept that is 'pure' and free of the baggage associated with religion, politics, history, culture, and ideological interpretation (Wong & Vinsky, 2008). When faith groups are mentioned in social work text, they are often portrayed in a biased, spiritually insensitive manner (Hodge, Baughman & Cummings, 2006). This hierarchy sets up the colonial othering of racialized ethnic groups, such as Muslims, who are often represented as 'more religious than spiritual' (Wong & Vinsky, 2008). Spirituality as constructed in academia and social work is done so as to remove what is objectionable in religion. However, given the rootedness of the term 'spirituality' in Euro-Christianity, we must recognize that sometimes, spirituality is no less indicative nor objectionable than religion (Wong & Vinsky, 2009). In fact, to many people of different historical-cultural contexts, the separation of spirituality and religion may not make any sense ontologically and epistemologically (Wong & Vinsky, 2009). These concepts of spirituality engage in the

erasure of Islamic concepts and the othering of Muslim folks outside of the traditional narrative of Islamophobia.

Literature on religious representation and social work education exists, however, Muslim students and the religion of Islam sometimes are only briefly mentioned. Muslims are essentially invisible in social work texts (Hodge, Baughman & Cummings, 2006). When the Muslim experience is included, it characterizes Islam as a religion that is irrational, anti-Semitic, and denies Muslims' historical and present-day experiences of oppression (Hodge, Baughman & Cummings, 2006). To address these painful social constructions of Muslims and of Islam, it is important to recognize the need for people of faith write their own narratives, as material written by dominant and often secular perspectives tend to reinforce existing stereotypes and prejudices (Ginsberg, 1999; Hodge, Baughman & Cummings, 2006). Due to the lack of attention on religion and on the ways Muslim people are portrayed in social work education, there is a dire need for scholarship in this area. My research aims to address this gap by understanding the experience of social work students straddling the lines of Islam and social work.

### **The Research Question**

Given the political climate surrounding Islam, Muslim women's positioning in the public sphere, and their unique multi-dimensional identity, it is imperative that the experience of Muslim women be considered when evaluating social work academia. Understanding of the experience of Muslim women can shed light on how the academy

takes up ideas of religious thought, racial/ethnic minorities, gendered identities and the unique identity that is formed when all three are combined.

I am hoping that I can understand and share the experiences of other Muslim women by talking to them about their experiences of social work education. My goal is to explore areas of contention pointed out in the literature, including concepts of marginalization and oppression in the academy, lack of diversity of thought, and relationships with staff, faculty and other students. I want to know if and how social work education engages Muslim women, and how has it let Muslim women down? I am hoping that through this research I will be able to contribute to the literature in a way that did not exist previously, to allow Muslim women to question the very institution that taught us how to question the power it held.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical and methodological approach in which my research is grounded is Critical Social Science (CSS) with an influence from Orientalism, Anti-Racist Feminism and my personal ontology directed by my Muslim faith.

I will use Critical Social Sciences (CSS) to engage in discussions regarding the power relations and inequalities that is reflected in Islamophobic discourses and to provide a more holistic understanding of the Muslim experience. My CSS approach to research is inspired by the work of Black, Chicana, and anti-racist feminist scholars who have developed ways to center the voices of racialized women in an attempt to address the shortcomings of traditional patriarchal and liberal feminist scholarship (Bernal, 1998; Roth, 2004). I have drawn upon a range of knowledges presented by women of colour, which I will discuss and elaborate on throughout.

An important concept that I will bring into my research draws on the Chicana Feminist notion of “cultural intuition”. Coined by Dolores Delgado Bernal, cultural intuition is the foundation of a Chicana feminist researcher's epistemology (Bernal, 1998). It comes from four major sources: personal experience, existing research, professional experience, and the analytical research process itself. I will revisit the concept of Cultural Intuition when delving deeper into my data analysis process.

### *Critical Social Sciences (CSS)*

*The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then [let him change it] with his*

*tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart — and that is the weakest of faith.” - Sahih Muslim*

The Prophet PBUH instructs Muslims to be beacons of change when they observe any form of oppression or “evil”. Justice is a core theme in the teachings of the Quran and Hadith (teachings of the Prophet PBUH), and the role of Muslims as those who stand against the “oppressors” is often highlighted. This hadith of the Prophet SAW, found in Sahih Muslim, resonates with me because it creates a hierarchy of how to address an “evil”: by recognizing it (in your heart), raising awareness about it (with your tongue), and removing it (with your hand). The hadith highlights that the goal is always to change it with “your hand”, recognizing that anything less than that is falling short of your target.

CSS is a research paradigm that fits in with the teachings of this hadith as it aims to change the social world rather than simply study it (Neuman, 2007). CSS researchers do this by conducting studies that critique and transform social relations through uncovering sources of inequality, power relations and social control (Neuman, 2007). By uncovering sources of inequality, I can come to a better understanding of them and change my view of them in my “heart”. By sharing this research and shedding light on the restrictive and alienating conditions of our societal “status quo”, I can change society’s views with my “tongue”. Finally, by designing my research, with the goal of most CSS researchers, to be catalyst for change, I can try changing conditions with “my hand” (Neuman, 2007).

*Trying to Find My Place & Anti-Racist Feminism*

*The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “The parable of myself and the people is that of a man who lit a fire. When it illuminated its surroundings, the moths and other*



*creatures which are attracted to light began to fall into it. He began to pull them out of the fire, but they overwhelmed him and continued to fall into it. I am the one pulling you away from the fire, but you keep going headlong into it.” - Sahih Bukhari*

The Prophet PBUH often warns us of those who go astray, casting religious doctrine aside for more appealing alternatives only to find themselves in dismay. This hadith, found in the collections of Sahih Bukhari, is a reminder that the message of Islam and the Prophet PBUH is paramount to me and the way I frame my research. Although I can learn from the works of secular scholars, they are like the fire that the Prophet PBUH warns of. Many people have taken these works and lost their own identity to the politics and agendas of others. This hadith serves as a reminder to me that while secular scholarship can illuminate my path, if I go “headlong into it” and don’t remain at arm’s length, I may lose my values, ethics and existential identity.

The feminist approach that I have been taught throughout my post-secondary education was very much rooted in the political strife and experiences of white European women. In my search for a framework with an ontology more in line with my own. I turned to Islamic Feminism but found that it was in direct opposition with my identity as a Muslim woman and my approach to Islamic teachings. I did however find many parallels and learning points within Black, Chicana and Anti-Racist Feminism that I felt was more in line with my own ontology and could be applied to the understanding of the experiences of Muslim women in Western society.

*Islamic Feminism*

In recent years we have seen the rise of Islamic Feminism, a term referring to a movement that advocates for “a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm” (Badran, 2002). The Islamic Feminist movement at first glance seems very promising in its attempts to address the limits of feminism more broadly, in response to the needs and experiences of Muslim women. However, this branch of feminism seems to unnaturally evolve from the works of mainstream (white) feminist organizing rather than that of anti-racist theorists.

Although Islamic Feminism claims to champion the voice of Muslim women, it is a term that is used by individuals to carry forward controversial messages rather than an organized movement or frameworks. The predominant discourse around Islamic Feminism engages in erasure of Islamic scholarship and champions Western feminist narratives under the guise of “Islam”. A key example of this is the discourse around veiling. The veil of Muslim women, the Hijab, is a point of great contention for “Islamic Feminism” (Amin, 1991; Wadud, 1999; Raza, 2006). Qasim Amin, known as the Arab world’s “first feminist” heavily criticized veiling. Likewise, champions of Islamic Feminism such as Riffat Hassan, Amina Wadud and Raheel Raza continue the critique in the modern era. Similar to Qasim Amin, the aforementioned “Islamic Feminists” use orientalist arguments to support the advancement of women’s rights and to reform veiling. Just as it was inflammatory to Egyptians demanding their rights for self-determination during his time, it continues to produce a knee-jerk reaction today (Mazid, 2002). It can be argued that these feminist movements are a result of imperialism rather than a natural response to the needs of Muslim women.

As a practicing Muslim woman, it is difficult to read the works of “Islamic Feminists” such as Raheel Raza who has argued for a public ban in Canada against the hijab and the burqa, opposed congregational Friday prayers in public schools, have led mixed gender prayers, advocated for female-led prayers and call this advocacy on behalf of Muslim women (2006). Advocates such as these make the task of being a visibly Muslim woman dressed in a traditional veil and armed with the theology of Islam even more difficult. When women allegedly championing the flag of Islam pervert the texts in the name of gender equality to invalidate the actions of the majority of Muslim women it creates a very toxic environment for some to navigate. When orientalist discourse has become the norm and “Trump” ideology permeates our borders, voices of women critical of Islamic practices are amplified due to how palatable they are to western consumption.

The Qur'an is a book that sheds light on humanity, and misinterpretations have led many astray. Likewise, feminism has alienated so many women from their own liberation. The term “feminism” and the stigma associated with it has scared many away from a cause that should really be universal in modern discourse. The merging of two very misunderstood ideologies, Islam and Feminism, has led to the very misunderstood and highly divisive movement, Islamic Feminism. Furthermore, by allowing Islam to be ambiguous and defined by its followers, it loses its meaning. It becomes the work of humans, it loses its divinity and gains fallibility. As a Muslim and a Woman, with two identities that are intertwined I struggle with this concept. I struggle to let Islam be widely recognized as an ambiguous term to be defined by whom so chooses. Whether it is progressive movements that champion orientalist discourse in the guise of Islam or

patriarchal cultures that seek to oppress Muslim women, it is important to redistribute the power through education and reclaim our narrative.

Feminism and Islamic Feminism in theory shows some promise for Muslim women in the West trying to understand their identity as women navigating western society and conserving their Muslim identity. However, in practice, it alienates many of the people it claims to advocate for. It is essential that we develop and include the narratives of Muslim women in our understanding of feminism and of the Muslim women's experience in social work education in order to understand how they (we) continue to be silenced and excluded in the social work classroom.

#### *Black, Chicana & Anti-Racist Feminists*

Through my readings, I found many parallels between my personal ontology and that of Black, Chicana and Anti-Racist Feminists. They used their advocacy to fight against the erasure of their culture and their role within it. They understood the critical role of men in their fight and they did not let the fight of white women direct their agenda.

Although Chicana and Black feminists were organizing in the same time and place as white women, they were not fighting alongside them. During the second wave of feminism, the feminist organizing of white middle-class women in the United States was seen as a model for feminist activism, creating a discourse that situated a "real" feminist movements as one that makes claims solely on the basis of gender (Roth, 2004). However, unlike white feminists, women of colour rejected the idea of striving to achieve equal rights to men in their community. Rather, they acknowledged that when compared

to white women, people of colour, men *and* women, were unfairly disadvantaged (Roth, 2004). While mainstream feminist discourse situates organizing of women of colour as an evolution of feminism, women of colour in the 1960s and 70s paved their own roads to feminism that were not only emancipatory from white feminists but often in opposition.

Black women have experienced marginalization and oppression through colonization and slavery long before the recent influx of Muslim immigrants to North America. In fact, many of the first Muslims to come to North America were our Black brothers and sisters who were brought here through the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Therefore, it is important to learn from their well-established resistance. In the 1980s and 1990s Black women developed a collective voice regarding black womanhood used to "talk back" to the representation of black women in dominant discourses (Collins, 1990; Hooks, 1989). Unlike white women whose work was in direct opposition to white men, Black women created an avenue to foster relationships between Black women and men and focused on the wholeness of all Black people (Collins, 1996). This approach, championed by Black women, is very in line with a collectivist viewpoint that can be utilized in the study of Muslim women.

I believe that the study of Muslim women can learn from the works of Black Feminists or Womanists, Chicana Feminists, and other Feminist Anti-Racist Theories. Anti-racist feminist theories focus on the ways in which individuals are socially located within interactive race, gender and class hierarchies (Mirchandani, 2003). It recognizes that women of colour do not experience themselves in disjointed segments of gender, race, ethnicity, and class; rather, all these elements are produced and reproduced within

the same everyday experiencing of their lives (Acker, 1999). For Muslim women in a society greatly impacted by Islamophobia, dimensions of religious beliefs must also be included in the feminist triad of race, class and gender.

### *Researcher's Voice*

It is important that as part of trying to explain my theoretical framework, that I position myself as a researcher. In critical social science research, it is imperative to acknowledge the researcher's active presence in the research process and the construction of findings (Neysmith, 1995). I am a Muslim woman who lives in the hyphen. Both a researcher and a student, a client and a clinician, a Muslim within a Eurocentric social work program. I tend to confuse myself with my dual identities, straddle myself between two personas that I will attempt to reconcile within my research.

As a Muslim social work student, educated through traditional social work programs, I feel like it is very rare to find works by Muslims that seek to celebrate Islamic knowledge rather than orientalist works that objectifies and others the population. Due to the erasure and devaluing of Muslim voices in discourse, through the process of orientalism, I find it important to situate myself as a Muslim woman. Although my work is heavily informed by my secular social work education, I will not carry a secular torch throughout my research. I will position myself and my identity as central to the research question in order to challenge the historical and ideological representation of Muslim Women and relocate them in the research.

## **Research Methods**

### *Qualitative Method*

In order to learn about the experience of Muslim women in social work education, it was important for me to hear from them directly. For this reason, I decided to use a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative methods are concerned with how the social world is constructed (Mason, 2002). It starts with people and tries to grasp the "texture and weave" of their everyday life, their experiences, and the meaning that they generate from it. I operationalized my qualitative research method through the use of a focus group for data collection.

### *Recruitment*

Participants were recruited through the circulation of a recruitment letter using social media pages and email distribution lists through the school of social work and associated campus clubs as well as Muslim organizations within and outside the university (Appendix A). After a potential participant responded to the advertisement, a recruitment email was sent to them with an attached Letter of Information/Consent (Appendix B) so that the potential participants had all the information about the study to ensure they were able to make an informed decision about their participation.

After the participants gave their consent, a time and location for the focus group was set up in collaboration with the participants. The focus group was conducted at McMaster University in a pre-booked tutorial room.

*Data Collection - Focus Group*

To gain a better understanding of the experience of Muslim women in social work education, I turned to focus groups for my data collection. Focus groups capitalize on communication between research participants in order to generate data (Kitzinger, 1995). For participants who may have never discussed the topic before, the group process provided an avenue to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to one interview (Kitzinger, 1995). I felt that focus groups would also foster a sense of belonging between participants and allow them to feel safe sharing information (Peters, 1993; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Using a focus group to collect my data allowed for a venue for data collection that allowed the participant to inform the research rather than just contribute to it. Rather than just using Muslim women as a tool for data collection, through a focus group, they can work together to shift the discussion and shape the data. The focus group also enabled the participants to engage in a conversation or discussion, a sharing of experiences and stories while ensuring that I captured the data I require for my research study.

At the end of the focus group I asked the participants to fill out a focus group background information sheet (See Appendix D) to collect demographic data and information around educational, cultural, and religious background. The focus group was digitally recorded and later transcribed.

*Participants*



Four social work students or recent graduates between the ages of 20 and 26 identifying as Muslim women participated in this study. Collectively, participants have completed social work coursework at McMaster University, York University and Ryerson University. All participants identified that they sometimes or always adhere to obligatory and recommended acts of worship. Three of the participants practice wearing hijab while one participant identified that she used to practice wearing hijab and stopped doing so in her final year of her social work studies. All the women stated that they seek out religious knowledge to some degree with common sources of knowledge being local scholars and online resources. All other identifying information has been kept confidential due to the possibility of a loss of anonymity.

#### *Data Analysis*

I engaged in the process of thematic analysis as outlined by Ryan and Bernard (2003). This process included reading over the transcript a couple of times to familiarize myself with the data. I then began identifying themes in the data by highlighting and annotating my transcript. Themes were identified primarily through repetition but also through theory related material, use of Islamic terminology and metaphors (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Once broad themes were identified, I began using the “cutting and sorting” technique to group excerpts from the transcript into the identified themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Through this process, I was able to better refine my identified themes.

Data reading in critical theory is usually interpretive and critical and the aim of data analysis is to organize the data in order to facilitate interpretation (Mason, 2002).

After identifying key themes in the data, abductive reasoning was used to make meaning out of the data. Different from an inductive approach, an abductive approach considers not only the data, but the larger structural, personal, and interpersonal processes that interact with the data. Abductive reasoning is best explained by Coffey and Atkinson (1996) as moving back and forth between the data, our experience, and broader concepts.

### *Cultural Intuition & Reflexivity*

My cultural intuition as a researcher was essential to my data analysis process. "Cultural intuition" is a term coined by Dolores Bernal, that refers to the phenomenon whereby researchers researching a community or group which they belong to have a unique viewpoint that can inform their research. Our cultural intuition informs the ways we approach, collect, interpret, and analyze data. Critical race theorists go even further and say that cultural intuition not only informs our data collection and analysis, but rather, informs the entire process of research including what questions we ask, how we critique the literature, the methodologies we employ, and how we present the data (Malagon, Huber & Velez, 2009). The sources of cultural intuition according to Bernal (1998) are personal experience, knowledge of literature, professional experience and data analysis.

Inspired by the works of Bernal (1998), I will outline the sources of my cultural intuition and how they may affect my interpretation and analysis of the data. My experiences as a Muslim woman, social worker, student, and my relation to my communities help me to understand and analyze my data. My attachment to my Muslim faith and how it has shaped my life, is a big part of my personal experience and a driving

factor in my experience as a woman, my pursuit of social work and my connection to my community. Cultural intuition extends beyond my own personal experience and includes collective experience and community memory. So, the experience of assimilation, resistance, colonization and migration passed onto me by my community and our history also affects my understanding, insight and analysis of certain conditions and why things happen (Bernal, 1998)

By reading and understanding the history of anti-racist feminists, orientalism, and people of colour, amongst others, I was able to shape the way I approach and analyze my data. This enhanced my cultural intuition and informed the questions I asked in the focus group as well as what I looked for in the data.

My experience as a student and as a social worker gave me an insider view of how things work in education and in social services. Being able to interact with social work in educational as well as practical settings and having firsthand experience interacting with theory and practice both inside and outside the classroom, informs the way I approach the data.

It is important to realize that the data itself is a source of cultural intuition. The more I interacted with the data, the more I formed an understanding of about the experience of Muslim women. While interacting with the data, making comparisons, asking questions, sorting, coding, and engaging in concept formation, I enhanced my cultural intuition and further informed the data analysis process.

### *Insider/Outsider Tensions*

I am a researcher, but also a subject, someone who has had to navigate the social work classroom, carrying with me my orthodox Islamic views as part of my belief system but also very visibly displayed on my head in the form of a hijab. My role as an insider is so entrenched in me that it required awareness and reflection to identify my role as a researcher which pushes me into the position of an outsider. For me, it is important to blur the lines between researcher and participant, both for myself and the participants. This means that throughout I will engage in self-reflexivity when interacting with the data; but it also means that participants make an important contribution in shaping the outcomes as well as discourse around the topic. This is not my research as an individual but our research as a collective.

### *Ethics*

This study received ethics approval from the McMaster Research Ethics Board. Dual roles and confidentiality were two major ethical considerations for this study. Due to the relatively small number of Muslim women, some of the participants had previous relationships with the researcher whether it was through the social work community or Muslim community. This dual role as a participant and as a classmate, friend or peer presented as an ethical consideration. This previous relationship could have beneficial to the research topic as participants may have felt more comfortable speaking about topics of religion, race and/or gender with a familiar individual rather than a complete stranger. However, participants may feel that the interviewee may discuss answers with community members or may be worried about the way the interviewee may react to participant

answers. In addition, participants may have felt coerced or pressured to participate. For this reason, steps were put in place to ensure this risk was mitigated. Discussing confidentiality (see Appendix B) with participants as well as creating a non-judgmental and safe space for participants was essential. The ability to withdraw from the study prior to participating, leave the room during the focus group and the option to skip questions or not answer questions they were not comfortable answering was stressed during recruitment, prior to the focus group and at the beginning of the focus group.

Participants participated in this study confidentially, and steps were taken to protect their identities. Data was kept on a password protected laptop and only I had access to it. However, because of the nature of focus groups, other participants were aware of each other's participation and contributions. As a result, participants were asked that they keep the content of the focus groups and identity of participants confidential. However, the actions of participants could not be guaranteed by the researchers and participants were forewarned of this.

While transcribing the digital recordings I removed identifiers from the data such as personal bits of information that participants stated were unique to them, as well as parts that participants asked to be removed due to its ability to identify them in the data. Regardless of safeguards put in place, it is important to note that people are identified by the stories they tell. While transcribing, I noticed that participants referred to things they discussed outside of the focus group, therefore, I decided to attribute the information to the group rather than individuals as to make the participant's identities less easily

identifiable. By doing so, even if an individual's statements could be identified, at the very least all their opinions would not be attributed to them.

## **Chapter 3: Findings**

### **Introduction**

The Muslim women who participated in the focus group came from different walks of life and found themselves in social work due to their passion for helping others. However, during their social work education they were confronted with tensions between social work education and their Islamic values and Muslim identity which impacted their experience and perceptions of social work education. Before embarking on this study, I decided to take a gendered lens to studying the experience of Muslim women in social work education. However, what I quickly learned from the women who participated in this study is that the most relevant aspect of their identity is not their gender but rather their Muslim identity and Islamic values. Throughout the focus group the women told a story of their journey to social work, the tensions and challenges they experienced because of their Muslim identity, the erasure and oppression they experienced, and how they coped with and navigated the social work classroom. These themes intersected and overlapped throughout the focus group and wove the story of the experiences of Muslim women in social work education.

### **The Road to Social Work**

Prior to discussing their experiences of social work education, the focus group started with the women sharing their journey to becoming a social worker. Meeting the women in the group and understanding their motivations to enter the field of social work, it was interesting to find that while the tensions discussed had to do with their Muslim

identity, most of them did not source their Muslim identity as the primary reason for pursuing social work. The motivating factor for all the women in the group was their desire to help others. Some of the women disclosed that it was knowing a social worker who was a role model in their lives that peaked their interest in the field. One woman explained:

*“I got into social work because there was a social worker in my life and she had a huge impact on me and I always wanted to be her, and I guess now I am her”*

Equally important was knowing someone that they cared about who had gone through a difficult time in their lives and wanting to support others through similar struggles. One of the women went on to say:

*“I got into social work because I really wanted to work with immigrants and refugees. A lot of my family or people I know are immigrants or refugees and I grew up seeing their struggle, and I guess that’s the main reason why”*

Another woman explained:

*“One of the reasons I got into social work is because my cousin was in a domestic violence situation and I wanted to help other women who felt preyed on and here I am today.”*

One of the participants provided an alternative explanation and stated that growing up in a post 9/11 era, social work was less of a choice and more of a “discovery” that she identified as a source of empowerment that helped her make sense of the world around her.

Participants also came to social work because they believed that some of the values that were prevalent in social work, such as helping others or commitment to community, were in line with their Muslim values. As one participant explained:



*“I don't think I chose social work specifically because I am Muslim, but I believe some of the values coincide, such as helping others, your community, and those in need. I recognized that these values aligned and that was nice.”*

The perceived alignment of social work values with Islamic values was seen as an added benefit for Muslim women pursuing social work education and not a central part to their decision-making process. It was a superficial understanding of social work values and an inclination to help others that led them to social work.

### **Tensions Between Social Work and Muslim Religious Values**

As previously demonstrated, the Muslim women who participated in this study came to social work for various reasons that were mainly connected to their desire to provide social care. However, although some participants saw a natural alignment between social work and Muslim values, it was found that once they entered social work education, the relationship between social work and Muslim values was more of an assumption than a reality. All the women who participated in the study identified tensions between social work values and the personal values they held that were connected to their Islamic faith. One woman went on to explain:

*“I thought social work values were aligned with Muslim values as opposed to, for example, working in a bank and promoting capitalism or working sale which doesn't necessarily contribute to helping your community. But as I move along, I am finding a lot more clashes”*

The women in the group felt that there were tensions and challenges between their Islamic faith and social work, whether it was differing views on gender and gender roles,

sexual diversity, or merely the contrast in the different ways of knowing. This tension was exacerbated by the idea that faith in the context of organized religion was heavily criticized in social work classrooms.

### *Tensions Regarding Religion and Expression of Faith*

The women's stories about how their religion was taken up in the classroom was experienced as being "up for grabs". One of the participants stated:

*"You know that thing "flower power" activity or whatever it's called. If you followed the AOP perspective, there would be no problem. The truth of the matter is, the way it's being practiced, there's a bias towards some categories and less towards other. When people say, 'we don't discriminate against race, age, sexual orientation, etc.', religion is often not even included in that"*

This participant felt that in the discussion of oppression, religion is left out and, as a Muslim, this was experienced as an erasure of the oppression she experienced as a result of her Muslim identity. Throughout the focus group the women identified tensions between the secular leaning of social work education and their religiosity as Muslims. They felt that although social work preaches anti-oppression, it was acceptable to marginalize people of religion.

One participant went to explain how when interacting with "well-meaning white liberals" she felt like her religiosity was "whitewashed" into spirituality. She went on to explain how even though she never said the word spirituality in her discussions with peers, whenever her experiences were discussed the word "spirituality" was used to replace religion. This use of spirituality to replace religion is an attempt to use a term that is "pure" and "neutral", that is free from the baggage of religion (Wong & Vinsky, 2008).

These “well-meaning white liberals” that the participant speaks of may have been projecting these notions of purity and neutrality on the participant’s religiosity and transforming it into spirituality. This separation can be traced back to the differentiation between spirituality and religion and a preference for “spiritual-but-not-religious” discourse in social work and serves as a tension for Muslim women.

Participants identified feelings impacted by certain critiques of religion in social work classrooms. One participant explains:

*“Even my white male colleague agrees that there are no safe spaces for people of faith in social work. When we talk about deconstructing oppression, like colonization was driven by religion. And Christianity was co-opted by greed and power and capitalism, and religion is given a really bad name in social work – especially Christianity but Islam is in there too!”*

This participant explains how although narratives that paint religion in a bad light particularly target the Christian faith, it’s easy for Muslims who share many of the same view points and Abrahamic belief sets to feel targeted by these discussions. This participant highlights how when discourse in the classroom is critical of religion and endorses secular thinking, it does not matter what the root of this discourse is, people of religion will be marginalized by this narrative.

Assumptions regarding religion permeated classroom discussions and one participant expressed how she felt that “people of religion are seen as followers and not critical thinkers”. Another participant explains how she feels that this belief may be reinforced due to a lack of understanding of religion. In Islam, religion is not just a set of beliefs it is a way of life, therefore, it can be hard to explain concepts because they belong to an entirely different “set of knowledge”. She explains:

*“...it can be difficult to explain Islam to someone not in our community, it's tricky, because the knowledge is different. Trying to explain Islam's views on, for example, the soul or spirituality that are not backed by science or logic or theories accepted by western knowledge, it's difficult. For example, there are some things that affect your soul, it just seems mystical. It's not that I don't always know, it's that we have a different set of knowledge and ways of living, being, and knowing.”*

Hence, there is a lack of visibility and of spaces where of Islamic ways of knowing can emerge in order to prevent the misunderstandings and stereotypes of the Islamic religion. As reflected in the focus group discussion, the erasure and vilifying of religion is experienced as oppressive by practicing Muslims whose connection to Islam is the most defining aspect of their identity

#### *Tensions Regarding Values Around Sexual Diversity*

Islamic rulings regarding gender and sexuality acted as a frequent example for the tensions experienced by participants between Islam and social work. Throughout the focus group, the women often pointed to the issue of sexuality, gender and the rigid boundaries drawn for Muslims in relation to these topics as directly contradicting teachings in the social work classroom. In fact, initially, when asked “were your motivations to enter social work influenced by your Islamic values?”, one of the first responses was:

*“I think they did. But I don't have a lot of experience in social work but I find that sometimes one's values as a Muslim and the values expected of the organization you are working for may conflict, for example, supporting LGBTQ+ folks may be supported by your organization but as a Muslim it is a hard line to draw. As a social worker, you're supposed to help everyone, but as a Muslim I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be doing. I guess some values align, but not everything always aligns.”*

The participant did not directly answer the question asked but points to a clear tension in social work practice for Muslim social work students: the tensions between Islamic understandings and social work teachings in regard to the expression of sexual diversity. Importantly, this participant also explains how she is not equipped with the knowledge of how to behave when faced with this tension which is confusing to her.

Participants discussed how social work values that support sexual diversity conflicted with their teachings and are presented in such a way as to inhibit Muslim students from contributing to class discussions. One participant stated:

*“I could never say “In my religion being in a gay relationship is a sin, but of course I’m not going to discriminate against you because that’s not my place” – I don’t think I could ever say that in any of the spaces that I occupy. Like if I was able to say that in my classroom, no one would say that oh okay being a Muslim is part of your identity – that would be so fine if I could say that. But the fact that I cannot even say that – I would never say that. I am even worried saying that and someone hearing me, I think is a problem”*

This participant points to barriers to feeling able to discuss or share issues relevant to the tensions that Muslim social worker students experience as it relates to their Muslim identity and Islam’s views on sexuality and gender. Consequently, this participant explains how the idea of expressing that her religious beliefs dictate that she or other Muslims cannot engage in same-sex relationships is unfathomable to her, even with the disclaimer that this has no implications on her view of classmates or other LGBTQ+ people. It is not that the participant has an insuppressible desire to express this belief, but rather it is that she cannot contribute to discussions in a way that is productive for her and her classmates for fear of backlash.

The women felt that although their views did not transgress against the rights of others or affect the way they viewed or interacted with people from the LGBTQ+ community, they did recognize that sometimes Muslim rulings can be experienced as oppressive to people who identify as LGBTQ+. Consequently, the participants felt the need to distance themselves from this narrative at the expense of keeping their voices out of the classroom discussion.

This tension between not wanting to silence others gave way to worries about being perceived as policing the actions or behaviours of other classmates. As one woman stated,

*“It’s not my role to impose my views on everyone – we don’t live in a theocratic society... I think some people in our community do dehumanize gay people and that’s a problem. But there’s a difference between a set of values and the way that some people enact those values and dehumanizing people. In the same way that I don’t sit there and I don’t say “don’t drink your alcohol”, I’m not going to sit there and be like “don’t be gay”.*

This participant highlights how it is not her role to police everyone’s actions based on Islamic rulings. She goes on to explain how people have coopted Islam to oppress people and highlights how this is problematic and appears to suggest an implicit link between this and the policing of people. Importantly, she identified that although she does not feel nor want to take on this policing identity she does want to be able to share the tensions she experiences as a Muslim woman and as a social worker.

Although the woman felt that their understanding of their beliefs regarding sexual diversity were not intrinsically oppressive, there was an understanding amongst the women as to why it may be problematic or triggering to discuss Islamic rulings on sexuality and gender for fear of misinterpretation. One woman explained how having

LGBTQ+ individuals in her classroom brought rise to a tension between her own values and wanting to discuss how she fit into the classroom, but also her desire to support spaces for other oppressed groups of people. She goes onto explain:

*“I think there is at least one LGBTQ person in all of my classes, so if I were to speak about my Islamic view in class, then I would feel like I’m directly attacking that person sitting across from me. And I don’t want to be taking away their safe space. I don’t want to make it seem like all of Islam is against what this person is doing.”*

This participant points to the ongoing tension of not wanting to oppress LGBTQ+ students while also wanting to express her experience and identity. Although there is a move towards some religious groups, including a minority of Muslims, reinterpreting texts to change rulings regarding gender and sexuality, all of the participants felt that this was a transgression against the religion and not a viable solution. The woman pointed to the importance of providing spaces where individuals of differing ideologies and perspectives can learn from one another and can coexist in ways that do not result in re-traumatizing or re-creating oppressive spaces.

Importantly, the women who had more experience in education and the field of social work had strong standings regarding being able to differentiate between the religious rulings they chose to adhere to by virtue of their Muslim faith and the way they interacted with members of the LGBTQ+ community. One woman, a current BSW student stated: “As a social worker you’re supposed to help everyone, but as a Muslim I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be doing.” This poses an important tension, because, this lack of dialogue not only further marginalizes LGBTQ+ individuals who are also

practicing Muslims, but it also closes the door to exploring the tensions between Islamic rulings and a critical approach to social work education and impedes learning.

### **The Erasure of Our Identity**

Central to the identity of Muslim women is the way that they internalize their gender roles and their understanding of modesty. This aspect of their identity was identified as a space of erasure or marginalization by the women who participated in the focus group. This was in part due to their view that the dominant feminist discourses echoed in the classroom did not include their experiences or voices. In particular, participants felt that the dominant feminist narrative in their classrooms rejected the gender roles and practices of modesty upheld by Islam. For example, one woman shared how her experience with learning about the celebratory discourse surrounding the slut walk left her feeling isolated:

*“I remember when the slut walk was going on, and the girls were so hyped up about it and I was thinking, you don’t have to dress like that to be “liberated”, when dressing in a hijab or modestly can be empowering to some women and not oppressive.”*

She later explained how although no one has overtly attacked the concept of modesty as it’s taken up by Islam, the pervasiveness of the agenda to push the “opposite” made her feel like her views were not welcome. Another woman explained that even when expressing concepts relevant to women such as sexuality and modesty from an academic lens, she did not feel like her thoughts and reflections would be well received. She explained how if she were to discuss the privatization of women’s sexuality as a form of empowerment, even when using secular concepts such as market demand, capitalism and



the male gaze, she felt that those views were too conservative to be taken up by her classmates:

*“I find that understanding sexuality as an empowerment movement tends to be very white centered because of lack of intersectional analysis is non-existent and it excludes other views of feminism such as privatization of female sexuality as empowerment. I feel if I were to say that sex work was a manifestation of larger problems that promote patriarchy I would be challenged, even though that is not necessarily because of my Islamic views or was unrelated to my being a Muslim, I would still be critiqued and I do know there are some people that might be like “oh she’s conservative” so I don’t say it.”*

Another participant, who was married stated that she felt that even the use of the word “partner”, which was perceived as anti-oppressive, served to marginalize her experience.

*“I love the fact that I’m married and have a husband, it’s part of my identity. Islam holds marriage very high – like it’s half your deen (laughter)... Even saying “husband”, that is his role in my life. When I say partner, it’s like you’re my partner in this project. That’s not like Husband – the man who I share my soul with. But sometimes I feel like I have to say partner because I don’t want to get called out on it”*

The other women in the group were not married or in relationships and felt that they could not relate to this point, however, given the status of marriage and a husband in Islam, other participants did critique the aversion to marriage within the social work classroom.

Interestingly, one participant shared that when she can explain her viewpoints using language unrelated to her Muslim identity, she feels more comfortable sharing her views, regardless of how they will be received. An example of this is in regard to her thoughts about being a stay at home mom or “being part of a more “traditional” family” which may not necessarily be supported in the social work classroom. Yet, by distancing

herself in that moment from her Muslim identity somehow created a safer space to raise contentious issues highlighting how sometimes the women attempt to avert Islamophobia in the classroom.

Reflecting on teachings in the classroom, one participant went so far as to say: “I don’t think I am part of society really – I don’t think my views are accepted.”. From navigating the classroom, all the women drew the conclusion at some point or another that their voices and the voices of Islamic teachings were not welcome. When discussing the role of women and modesty in social work classrooms and informal settings with social work classmates, it seems that the pervasive messaging of values in opposition to Muslim perspectives makes Muslim women feel judged and that their perspective was less valuable than that of non-Muslim students.

### **The Oppression Faced by Muslim Women in Social Work Education**

The devaluing of the experience of Muslim women and their identities was identified as central to the experience of oppression faced by Muslim women in the social work classroom. The participants felt that in theory, social work education valued and accepted diversity, however, in practice the contradiction to these values is what caused them to feel marginalized and oppressed. One woman went on to explain:

*“We talk a lot about privilege and oppression, but I don’t think everyone understand that being a visible Muslim you face oppression, even in a social work classroom.”*

This participant points to the isolation felt by Muslim women who participate in a classroom where they are taught about privilege and oppression while their own experiences of oppression and the privilege of their classmates is overlooked.

Muslim women are taught in the classroom that we must make room for everyone, but they felt that people were only willing to make room for Muslim women if they conform to beliefs other than their own. One woman explains:

*“There’s all these categories of race, gender, class, etc. and all these identifiers, and we’re supposed to accept all of them – well it’s become skewed because you’re only allowed to accept some of them and Muslims aren’t part of that. The only time being Muslim is acceptable is when you’re a modern Muslim ... and you very blatantly contradict the laws of Islam.”*

The women felt like their version of Islam was not acceptable. That they had to be a “modern” Muslim, who maintains a Muslim identity while swapping Islamic values for more liberal ones to be palatable to their social work colleagues.

When speaking about Muslim organizing that she felt would be deemed “acceptable” by social work’s standard, one participant describes them and says:

*“The values they uphold is ‘I am a “Canadian Muslim” and I uphold Canadian values, I am your easy package of non-controversial-ness”*

This description of what she feels is acceptable for a Muslim woman by “social work standards” is that one upholds “Canadian” values before their Islamic values, filtering out their Islam through a Western lens, thereby making them non-controversial and “acceptable”. She continues and explains how if she ever wanted to proceed in social work academia she will have present herself similarly, she says:

*“I think if I ever wanted to be a professor or move higher in my career, I will always have to package myself in that way – like I can never be an authentic person.”*

Participants unanimously felt that there was no space for them to express their opinions if they were in contradiction to social work teachings. They felt that although they might not always be overtly challenged, it was due to their status as a visible minority and not the perceived validity of their voice. They did not feel that their opinions were welcome even if they were rooted in academic and critical perspectives. One participant explained how she feels that although classmates have expressed indirectly their opposition to her opinions, they might not challenge her directly. She went on to say:

*“And they might not say it because I’m like the only person in my program with melanin in their skin... So people feel nervous to challenge the one piece of diversity - so I have that going for me.”*

This participant points to how although social work upholds a standard of diversity, she felt that it was the symbolic diversity of individuals and not the meaningful diversity of their speech that was valued. Therefore, although she felt people would not criticize her in fear of criticizing her symbolic diversity, she felt that this lack of criticism was superficial and did not permeate into other aspects of her classroom experience.

An example of this superficial acceptance of diversity is one participant's experience of unveiling during her time as a social work student. One of the women explained how her experience of wearing hijab and unveiling changed her experience of the classroom. She explained:

*“In my three years of undergrad, I used to wear a hijab which stopped me from speaking out, but, in my 3rd year I took it off, and then I was much more confident. It sounds bad but that was my personal experience”*

Following the focus group, she reached out to clarify that it was not her experience of being in the social work classroom that caused her to stop veiling but rather her own

personal circumstances. She did identify however, that following her unveiling, she had social work classmates approach her and ask her if she had left Islam and she felt that they seemed excited by this possibility, this reinforced her feelings that her Muslim identity was not welcome. This disclosure caused awe between the participants. The hijab is a quintessential marker of Muslim women and this participant's experience of unveiling and how it changed her experience of the classroom is symbolic of many of the oppressions that are felt by Muslim women in social work education. Although all the participants could identify how they felt as visible Muslim women in the classroom, this participant's experience seemed to serve as an eye opener because it provided insight into what it would be like to be *less* visibly Muslim.

It seems that in theory there was an acceptance of Muslims and people of faith in social work, however, in practice, there was no space for us. When I explained the purpose of the focus group is to bring forth the tensions and the voices of the women and their experience in social work education, one participant responded saying:

*“That’s amazing. I don’t know, I’d never feel okay doing something like that. I would feel so defeated. And I feel like there’s no space to even make space”*

This participant's belief that merely discussing the challenges faced by Muslim women is something innovative and awe-inspiring points to the lack of space that Muslim women face in social work education. Her statement also points to the amount of work that must be done to facilitate the creation of space in social work education where Muslim women can feel like their voices are heard and valued.

*The Cultural Imperialism of Social Work Education*

One of the most startling statements made by a participant regarding her experience in social work education was the following:

*“Being in social work is like being exposed to cultural imperialism, every day you take a bite, and when you finish your program you ate the cake and you didn’t even know it.”*

This woman points to how the erasure of Muslim voice and lack of space to address the tensions between Islamic values and social work values felt like an attempt at ridding her of her Islamic value which she likened to cultural imperialism. This participant felt that this was a slow erosion rather than an aggressive effort which she likened to eating a piece of cake without realizing how much you have eaten. Throughout, the focus group, other participants felt that the labeling of this participant’s experience as cultural imperialism resonated with them and began using the same language.

Another woman shares her experience and explains:

*“I remember before going into social work, myself and my family were adamant about not letting some of the things I would learn change my views or values of Islam or be “brainwashed”. But it happened slowly but I find that I am not more accepting of things I would not have been in the past. It’s difficult to tell if this is because of Social Work or just because I am evolving and maturing as a person. So, it’s confusing”*

The threat that social work posed to Islamic values was also identified by other participants. The participant identified a confusion regarding whether the change she underwent was a positive one or not. Her comments raise the question, is it truly evolving and maturing as a person if only one perspective and one dimension of that perspective is allowed within their educational setting. This woman feels that she may have evolved and matured as a person, but from whose vantage point? She and the other woman expressed

that their progression in social work occurred in a context where there was no space to discuss or address the values and identity as Muslim women, how can one evolve and mature if this is the case.

Regarding the portrayal and value of Islamic knowledge and Muslim people, one participant states:

*“It’s always Muslims are the victims, and it’s our job as social workers to go help them. It always feels like they’re up here and we’re down there. It’s never Muslims in a regular everyday context, it’s like we can’t be normal everyday people.”*

This phenomenon explained by the participant of framing Muslims as those being in the helping role can be traced to Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism. Said explains that orientalist discourse positions the West on ruling side and the East in the ruled side, it creates a “master-slave” relationship that empowers the colonizer and disempowers the colonized (Said, 1979). Said theorizes that this is done by portraying the West as progressive and superior and the East as ‘suppressive’ and ‘inferior’ (Said, 1979).

When it came to readings and exposure to literature relevant to Muslim women, the participants identified that this was not something they were exposed to during their studies and had very shallow understanding of. Participants found that there are theorists they agree with on some aspects but no one that really embodies their theoretical viewpoint as a Muslim woman. One participant identified that when “Whenever I see a Muslim sounding author, I will google them to see who is this person, do they uphold Islamic values and are [they] a good social worker.”. Through this quest, the participant disclosed that she has yet to find someone who she theoretically aligns with and appears

to be a practicing Muslim and a social worker. This erasure of the Muslim voice from discourse furthers an agenda of cultural imperialism.

One woman explains the problematic nature of liberalism as it relates to social work education. She says:

*“Liberalism is critiqued in human rights and equity as a very problematic way of thinking. But social work is like we’re collective, we’re accepting, we’re different but social work just promotes liberal values.”*

The pervasiveness of the problematic concept of liberalism can be used to understand the perceived cultural imperialism that occurs in social work classrooms. Parekh explains that liberalism is used as a platform for justifying and enacting western power (Parekh, 2001). He explains how imperialism is intrinsic to liberalism and how liberal values are used to assert superiority over non-Western cultures, faiths, political values, and ideals (Parekh, 2001).

One participant explains her experience in social work education and explains that it was not due to her feeling that people were “Islamophobic” per say but rather the pervasiveness of the messaging that aims to erase her voices. She explains:

*“The real gist of why I feel unsafe isn’t because of that textbook definition of Islamophobia, or maybe that’s still Islamophobia, but I feel like it’s that “cultural imperialism” and the lack of understanding and acceptance of my values – the ones that are different than the ones being taught here.”*

This participant points to the idea that often, when discussing the affairs of Muslim people, it is in the context Islamophobia. However, it is not the intense fear or hatred associated with Islamophobia that makes her feel unsafe but rather the passive yet



pervasive attempts at the erasure of her identity which she labels as cultural imperialism that she fears most.

*The Choice between Authenticity and Survival*

Due to the multiple factors that attempt to erase, marginalize, and oppress the Muslim women and her voice in social work education, Muslim women must often make a conscious choice between authenticity and survival within their interactions in social work education. Throughout the focus group, the women discussed the strategies they used to navigate the social work classroom.

Silence was mentioned multiple times as a primary strategy. The women identified not engaging in discussion due feeling that if they shared their viewpoints they would be judged or misunderstood.

One participant explained how she had to be strategic in her interactions to ensure that she succeeded in her program and was able to make connections for after graduation. She explained:

*“I came in (to my social work program) with the mindset that I wanted to make friends and I wanted to make connections with people. I very much wanted to play the game and was very strategic with what I wanted to say and not say.”*

This participant points to how she had to “play the game” and act strategically in her interactions rather than be authentic to herself. Her explanation points to the idea that if a Muslim woman is authentic to herself within her interactions she risks not being able to make the connections to succeed in her social work program and beyond.

Another participant explains an example of how she “plays the game” and is able to share the beliefs of her community while preserving her survival. She explains how when speaking about beliefs in her community, she would “externalize (herself) from the situation”, another woman explains:

*“When I talk about myself, I talk about myself outside of myself. So I talk about “people of my community” – like people of my community believe x,y,z .. but I always presented it like I may or may not agree with them. I can make that statement but put myself outside of it.”*

This participant's explanation points to how Muslim women attempt to escape marginalization and resisting erasure of their community's voices. However, it reinforces the idea that although they can try to keep their community's voice heard, they must continuously balance and make a choice between authenticity and survival.

### **Moving forward**

At the end of the focus group after lengthy discussions about the tensions between social work and Islamic values, the women were asked if they felt they could be both a social worker and a Muslim, and all the women responded in the negative. One woman appeared hopeful and identified that although she has never felt this, she hopes that she can get there but in the meantime, she feels like the two are very disjointed identities. In response to the question, she said:

*“I haven't felt that. I hope we can get there but I don't think I've ever felt that. I feel that they are separate identities and I'm either talking about one or the other.”*

Although this participant points to the fragmentation of her identity as a Muslim woman and as a social worker, she points to a presence of hope or potential for change where those two identities can co-exist.

### *The Importance of Women in Academia*

In order to address the marginalization and erasure of Muslim women from social work's educational spaces, the women identified that this requires more representation of Muslim women in social work academia.

The women identified many barriers to this visibility of Muslim women in social work academia. One of the identified barriers is the lack of ability to be authentic to one's own voice. One participant stated:

*"I think if I ever wanted to be a professor or move higher in my career, I will always have to package myself in that way – like I can never be an authentic person."*

Another participant went on to explain how given the difficulty of championing the voice of Muslim women, the tradeoff is not worth it. She went on to explain.

*"For me it looks like women in academia. There are not enough visibly Muslim women in academia. I find that we instead of fighting for something that is hard to fight for I instead would give up and focus on other important parts of my life, such as focusing on home life instead of striving for a PhD."*

According to all the women in the focus group, they were not exposed to Muslim women in academia. Their only exposure to the Muslim voice discussing concepts relevant to social work was in "informal articles within Muslim circles" but nothing "mainstream". One woman explained how she does not see much in academia whether

through faculty or literature that represented Muslim women in the way she would like to see portrayed. This lack of visibility points to the erasure of Muslim women in social work academia but was also identified by the women as an area for visibility and change.

### *The Importance of Creating Safe Spaces*

Following the focus group, the women were discussing their experience of engaging in the focus group and they all identified how they had never engaged in a discussion about their feelings and experiences considering the intersection of the identity as Muslim women and social work students. They identified the experience as being therapeutic and were eager to engage in future focus groups. They shared that this was the first time they had such a discussion and it was “refreshing” to hear that other people shared their experience. This reflection on the focus group points to a lack of safe spaces where Muslim women can be authentic versions of themselves without having to engage in protective behaviours. It also points to the importance of creating safe spaces as a part of addressing the marginalization and oppression faced by Muslim women in social work education.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

### Summary of Key Findings

This study explored Muslim women's experience in the social work education and highlighted several important themes for anti-oppressive social work education. Emerging from the research were three main themes: tensions and challenges between and within social work education, the marginalization or erasure of the Muslim women's voice as a result of the demonizing of religion and the lack of knowledge about Islam, and Muslim women's experiences and identities; and the ways that Muslim women students navigate these issues. These themes intersected and overlapped to weave an understanding of the experience of Muslim women in social work education.

#### *Navigating the Tensions*

The findings illustrate a clear tension between social work's secular leanings and Islamic ways of knowing within social work education. One participant explained how her religion is often co-opted as spirituality within the social work classroom. This preference and replacement of religion with spirituality is acknowledged within the literature (i.e Wong & Vinsky, 2008; Gilligan & Furness, 2006). It can be argued that Euro-Christian ethnocentrism and individualism are at the root of this discourse (Wong & Vinsky, 2008). In addition, this discourse of spirituality has been proven to be quite problematic, as it is dismissive of the history and traditions of many racialized groups (Wong & Vinsky, 2008). In Islam, for example, the concept of spirituality, or Imaan, is the belief in the values, tenants, and religious doctrine of Islam – therefore, the idea of

spirituality as a Muslim concept is more accurately translated to “belief”. This makes it hard to discuss spirituality in a way that is dissociated from religious doctrine in the way that western scholarship does, yet Muslims in the classroom are often forced to frame their religious values as such.

The spiritual-religious divide is a subtle example of the ways that religion is erased from the classroom. Subsequently, in times that religion was present, it was clear that it was perceived to be of little value or importance. Due to the perceived attack on religion and religious values in social work classrooms, it appeared that this aspect of a Muslim women's identity was not welcome. It was difficult for Muslim women to navigate the classroom, feeling that their Islam, their “way of life”, was not accepted. In fact, the women were unable to identify a time where they were able to productively discuss religion in their social work classrooms. This raises the question of whether there is space to talk about one's Muslim identity within social work's educational settings, and the implications of this on Muslim identifying folks.

One of the examples of tensions between the Islamic teachings and those taught in social work is the topic of sexual diversity. In Islam, there are strict restrictions on touch and meeting in private spaces between males and females outside the scope of marriage, as well as males and effeminate males or females and masculine females. In separate rulings, dressing or behaving like the opposite gender is also considered sinful. This is starkly different than the views of gender and sexual diversity taught in social work classrooms. Note that the aforementioned rulings have direct implications for Muslims, however, have little to no bearing on non-Muslims living in Western society from an

Islamic point of view. When interacting with non-Muslims, Muslims are taught to never oppress or transgress on the rights of others, however, Islamic tenants state that Muslims should not engage in promoting things that are deemed sinful (i.e. engage in advocacy for Gay marriages). The inability to engage in discussion regarding the beliefs of their community or how to engage in anti-oppressive practice in light of their beliefs does not exist for Muslim folks in the classroom. There exists a need to create this type of space using an approach that does not oppress others but that illuminates where they come from. This may allow them to participate in the conversation in ways that enable them to discuss their own experiences as Muslim women grappling with their own experiences and belief sets – just like everyone else.

Although, not highlighted in the study, other areas of tension between Islamic values and social work education do exist. These include rulings for and against polygamy, the Islamic view of women's rights and responsibilities, the collectivist view of society in Islam and so on and so forth. Although Islam does share overarching values as social work that were identified by the women initially, the way these values are operationalized are drastically different and are shaped by different ways of knowing than those taught in social work education.

### *Making Room for Alternative Narratives*

Emerging from this study is the importance of the visibility of Muslim women's voices. The women felt that the alternative narratives of Muslim women are completely erased from the curriculum. The participants in the study identified that Muslim women

were hardly discussed in their classrooms and if they were it was only in the context of Islamophobia or existing within the position of the client or the one “being helped”. The women felt that there was a systemic silencing of Muslim voices from the hegemonic discourse and they often did not feel comfortable sharing their opinions in the classroom for fear of backlash.

The women in the focus group identified how their experiences and their voices are not reflected in the classroom. They are silenced and othered as a result. From the rich accounts of the experiences of the women in the focus group, it could be seen that the social work classroom did not facilitate the integration and acceptance of the viewpoints of Muslim women which made them feel othered, marginalized and unable to be true to authentic versions of themselves. These findings resonate with those in other research and literature highlighting the problematic nature of the construction of social work's professional and academic identity (i.e. Badwall, 2013; Daniel, 2007).

When a Muslim woman is taught in the classroom that all people are equal, and no one is worthy of being oppressed, the feeling of marginalization increases when the collective sends her a message saying, “everyone except for you”. Social work students are given the tools to discuss and identify their oppression, but Muslim social work students are silenced by the very academy that tells them that everyone deserves a voice.

### *Challenging Oppression*

The erasure of Muslim women from social work spaces is identified as a locus of oppression by the women in this study. The lack of visibility normalizes the hegemonic



discourse and acts as a tool for cultural imperialism. The women in the focus group identified how their experiences and their voices are not reflected in the classroom, they are silenced and othered as a result. There appeared to be a contradiction between the values that were taught in the classroom of anti-oppression and racial justice and the erasure and marginalization that the women felt in the classroom. The women felt that there was a double standard that was not in the favour of Muslim women. They felt that they would only be accepted in social work if they assimilated to liberal Canadian values. It is a red flag to educators, students and administrators alike when a student feels that by unveiling and making herself less visibly Muslim, she felt more comfortable in the social work classroom. This disclosure contradicts the very values of social justice, anti-oppression and inclusion that social work claims to uphold.

This leads into the discussion regarding the cultural imperialism of social work practice. Social work has a history of aiding in colonization and cultural imperialism, however, in an attempt to address this, social work has taken on a secular lens. Ironically, the secular leanings of social work lack flexibility, and swings the pendulum in the other direction and serves to oppress people of faith, specifically, but not limited to Muslim women.

The Muslim women in this study felt that they had to choose between survival in the classroom and authenticity. They identified how they had to “play a game” where they were strategic with their words and actions to ensure they could be successful. This perspective that this participant holds where to gain status in the field of social work, she would have to compromise the authenticity of her voice is in line with Richard Day’s

critique of liberal multiculturalism as “Seductive Integration” (2000). He argues that through this process, the dominant group, who confers status to others, creates a society where minorities want to integrate because integration results in an increase in their political, economic, and social success.

### *Taking Steps Towards Inclusion*

The tensions that arise for Muslim women in social work education highlight the need for educators to make spaces within the classroom to address these tensions to avoid the impact that they have on Muslim students and their experience in the classroom. This is a difficult feat given the deep-seated nature of these tensions for social work education and Muslim women. Whether it is tensions around religion, sexual diversity, or women's roles and modesty, although Muslim women feel marginalized by the hegemonic discourse, there are some people within the classroom that may feel the same way about Islamic knowledge and Islamic ways of knowing. Therefore, it is the role of educators to transverse the tricky terrain of allowing for a safe space for all students. How to address these tensions in an anti-oppressive way is a key area of contention that can and should be addressed in future research.

The women identified the importance of having other Muslim women in academia and present in the literature as critical to making strides towards the inclusion of their voices. This extends into the classroom and the role of educators in ensuring that the experiences of Muslim students are not erased in course materials, content, and in the everyday discussions that occur in the classroom. Administrators and professors of

varying tenure should also work together to support Muslim women in pursuing academia and ensuring diversity within their hiring practices. It is also important to work with Muslim students to find innovative ways to address this erasure to ensure that their voices are included in the discourse and to be authentic to the anti-oppressive theories taught in the classroom.

Erasure happens in several ways including lack of visibility in material but also lack of space that facilitates alternative ways of knowing, including but not limited to Islamic knowledge. This can be addressed by facilitating safe spaces where the voices of Muslim women are welcome. Central to this process is the inclusion of material in the curriculum that educates and allows for alternative ways of knowing beyond liberal constructions of individualism.

### **Implications for Social Work Education**

#### *For Educators*

For educators, this work highlights the challenges Muslim women experience in social work education, a topic which they may have not been previously exposed to. This study has demonstrated the importance of educating and supporting educators in understanding and navigating the ethical tensions that characterize current educational practices. By bringing light to these issues, this study gives educators the ability to reassess and inform their practices.

To allow for productive educational spaces, educators must create spaces where individuals feel the ability to express their thoughts and opinions in a respectful manner

that allows for positive academic inquiry. This can be done by providing a diversity of voices in the material that sets the stage for the inclusion of Muslim students. Although peer-reviewed articles may not be available at this time, using informal sources such as opinion pieces and online blogs may create an entryway. Supporting Muslim women in their pursuit of graduate level education and allowing space for representation and diversity of thought within faculty and staff is essential to the self-empowerment of Muslim women.

#### *For Research*

From the beginning of my journey, I realized that there was and still is a lack of Muslim voices within the social work literature. It is this lack of voice causes a lack of representation and diversity of thought that reinforces the erasure of Muslim women from social work education. By seeing other Muslim women being their authentic selves whether it is through a paper or a Muslim professor in the faculty, Muslim women are given the permission to express their ideas and thoughts more openly.

I believe that using prior research and feedback from women in this study, it is important to begin developing a theoretical framework that can act as a platform to engage the Muslim voice in academia and beyond. I propose that this theory engages in a critical approach to the understanding of the experience and study of Muslims as it allows for an understanding of colonization, orientalism, liberalism and secularism and how Muslims experience these structures. By understanding how power and those in power have shaped the experience of Muslim folks and how they understand themselves, we can

start to create alternative narratives that are emancipatory and challenge the status quo. It is through a critical analysis of these systems that we can understand and dismantle systems that lead to hegemonic and misleading narratives around Muslim folks that affect how people view us as well as how we view ourselves.

I would challenge my initial conception of this being a gendered theory and focus this framework on the experiences and injustices faced by Muslim people as a whole. However, I do recognize that disregarding a gendered framework would have been naive of me, but, I believe that using a critical approach to topics important to Muslim folks will draw in aspects of gender when necessary. I recognize that ignoring a person's gender identity would be a misnomer, especially when working within a minority population and gendered profession such as social work. However, as Kreuger and Neuman (2006) state, gender cannot be isolated and separated from the social processes of academic inquiry. Therefore, to critically study the perspectives of Muslim folks and their experiences will automatically render their gendered experiences into perspective without an unnecessary focus that will reduce solidarity and community.

#### *For Muslim Women*

For some Muslim women, who have not seen their voices or ways of knowing represented in the literature, this study may provide validation for their struggles. It offers representation that can aid in the process of authenticity. The conceptualization of some of the experiences provided may also allow for the vocabulary and theory to explain their

experiences to others. In addition, this work may inspire future research or research interests amongst other Muslim women.

This study points to the power of collectivity and the importance of organizing amongst Muslim women. Even for the brevity of the focus group, it was very eye opening to engage with others who possess similar belief sets and educational backgrounds, and see them come together to share ideas and frustrations. The feedback from participants was very positive and they appreciated the space that they were not provided previously. Based on the experience of facilitating a focus group for the purpose of this study, I believe that it may be constructive for Muslim women to engage in organizing and sharing of ideas as it pertains to the field of social work and their representation within it. This organizing may provide an avenue for constructive solutions and a place to belong.

### **Limitations**

Due to the limited number of participants and the time restrictions of this study, only one focus group was held which limits the number and diversity of voices present. I believe it would have been quite valuable to engage in a follow up focus group, however due to time restraints this was not possible. The opportunity to do so would have provided a more formed understanding of key concepts and the ability to follow up on some key themes that and receive feedback from the group.

Due to the travel requirement and time commitment of participating in the focus group, only individuals who were interested in the topic may have attended as opposed to a method that required less of a commitment. However, even those who were interested

were not able to participate given the busy schedules of students and working professionals. In future explorations of the topic, one-on-one interviews may allow a larger volume of participants as they can occur over the phone or in person and allow for flexibility around the participant's schedule.

Given the limited amount of recent social work graduates, the reach of my networks and limitations of my ethics clearance, three out of the four participants were McMaster Students. Due to this bias, perspectives of more diverse schools or more clinical schools were not represented which provides a limitation of the generalization of the data.

Group-think is a pitfall of focus groups that may have also served as a limitation in this study (MacDougall & Baum, 1997). Group-think is a process where individuals adjust their own behaviour in response to their impressions of other group members and do not challenge the consensus (MacDougall & Baum, 1997). Although focus groups offer a space for theory generation, the lack of individual data to compare the group data presents the possibility of group-think as a potential limitation. In addition, due to my self-disclosure regarding my intentions for the study, some participants may have felt the need to support and validate my experiences which may have exacerbated the group-think mentality.

### **Future Research Questions**

In future research, I believe it would be imperative to collect further data to confirm the findings of this study and recreate it on a wider scale without the limitations

imposed on a master's thesis project. This would include follow up with participants to involve them in the process of refining theories and analysis of findings.

I believe that by replicating this study with a larger sample, we may be able to validate the results and develop a more nuanced and detailed understanding of the experiences of Muslim folks in social work education. This may help inform theory and research regarding Muslims in social work practice and education. By using Muslim folks as a case study, we can engage in examining social work education and better understand how we can restructure educational spaces to allow for an inclusive environment that is more consistent with social work values and ethics.

### **Concluding Remarks**

As a social work student navigating the social work classroom, I felt very out of place. I pursued an education in social work because of its perceived alignment with my values, however, being in social work was disheartening because it gave me all the tools to identify what was wrong with the way my identity was taken up, but did not give me the space to challenge it. Engaging in this study and meeting the wonderful women who participated in the focus group, I felt a newfound hope. It brought to light the fact that I am not alone and there are other Muslim women who are engaging in the same struggle. The onus is on us to act as a collective and to provide spaces for each other, so we are not lost within the discourse.

Social work education has a long-standing history with religious institutions, however, it is important to note that the “history” of social work discussed in introduction to social work classes is a very Eurocentric view of social work and does not include the



development of social work in non-western societies; rather, it is the only “history” that has been taught to us. The views discussed whether it is regarding religion or women and modesty are not absolute and there are others with views different than those taught to us within the academy. We hold some responsibility to assert our voices, however, responsibility also lies in the hands of the institution. Educators, theorists, social work journals and leaders alike bear the responsibility of resisting orientalism and the recreation of oppressive spaces within social work education.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Email Recruitment Script

E-mail Subject line: McMaster Study - Experience of Muslim Women in Social Work Education

AssalamuAllaikum \_\_\_\_\_,

I am emailing you to request your participation in a study I am conducting. I am carrying out a study to learn about the experience of Muslim women in social work education, as part of my Masters in Social Work program at McMaster University. The study consists of a focus group that will last approximately 2 hrs, following this you may be invited to participate in a follow up focus group to make sure I didn't misunderstand anything that was said and to discuss some follow up topics. I'm interested in learning how the identity of being a Muslim, a woman and a visible minority affected your experience as a social work student and how you take up the curriculum. I want to know how you feel social work teachings and practices are compatible or incompatible with your Islamic worldview and your other intersecting identities. I also want to explore how social work literature and curriculum represent Muslim women and your views on it.

The risks of this study are minimal and include potentially feeling uncomfortable with the questions being asked. Also, although confidentiality is stressed in the focus group, I cannot control what information is shared outside the room, this applies to both the content of the focus group and your identity/participation. You can however choose what you want and do not want to say. You can also stop being in this study any time by either not participating or leaving the room. However, once you have provided a response or participated in the group, I cannot remove your individual responses due to the nature of the process. I have attached a copy of a letter of information about the study that gives you full details.

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you any have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is being conducted you can contact:

The McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142  
c/o Research Office for Administration, Development and Support  
E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

I would like to thank you in advance for your time and consideration. After a week, I will send you a one-time follow-up reminder.

Once I receive a response from you, I will call you to schedule a time for our interview.

Fee Aman Illah,  
**Nagham Azzam**, BSc, BSW, RSW  
Masters Candidate in Social Work  
Department of Social Work  
McMaster University, Hamilton Ontario  
**Tel: 905-902-0549**  
[azzamn@mcmaster.ca](mailto:azzamn@mcmaster.ca)

**Appendix B: Letter of Information**



DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

**LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT**

**A Study About the Experience of Muslim Women in Social Work Education**

**Principal Investigator:**  
Nagham Azzam

Social Work  
McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
**(905) 902 - 0549**  
E-mail: azzamn@mcmaster.ca

**Faculty Supervisor:**  
Saara Greene

Social Work  
McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
**(905) 525-9140 ext. 23782**  
E-mail: greenes@mcmaster.ca

**Purpose of the Study:**

You are invited to take part in this study on the experience of Muslim Women in Social Work Programs. Through this study I hope to learn what factors influence the experience of Muslim Women in the classroom and how the triad of race, religion and gender affect this experience. From this study, we hope to gain insight from the experience of minority students to better to better our pedagogy. I am also hoping that this study can inform a new theoretical frameworks that can provide a more appropriate frameworks when studying Muslim Women. This research is being completed as a requirement for my thesis for my master's degree in social work.

**Procedures involved in the Research:**

At the time of the interview we will review the consent form and I will answer any questions you may have regarding consent or the study more broadly. This should take approximately 2-5 minutes. The consent form will be signed. With

your permission, I will then ask you a series of questions which will take approximately 60 minutes.

These questions will be focused on your identity as a Muslim woman more generally as well as your experience on campus and within the social work program. You may also be asked to explain your answer in further detail or asked to clarify your answer. I will also be asking you some background information such as your academic background and what has brought you to study in the field of social work.

If you choose not to answer the question we will move on to the next question. You may also choose to stop the interview at any time. During the interview, I will either be taking hand written notes, electronic notes, voice recording the interview, or a combination of the aforementioned.

#### **Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:**

The risks involved in participating in this study are minimal. You may worry about how others will react to what you say or you may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You will not be identified by name and all efforts will be made to protect your privacy throughout the study. Although I will try my best to protect your identity, please be advised that due to the small population of Muslim Social Work Students there is a potential risk of loss of privacy. Also, although confidentiality is stressed at the beginning of the focus group and in the recruitment process, the researcher cannot control what is shared outside of the focus group by other participants. Please note given the potential risks and discomforts, you do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. Please review below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

#### **Potential Benefits:**

The research will not benefit you directly given the nature of this study. I hope to learn more about how Muslim Women experience social work education. I hope that what is learned as a result of this study will help us, students and teachers, to understand how to better accommodate minority groups in the way social work is taught, practiced, and researched. This could help students and teachers and possibly identify gaps in our knowledge.

#### **Compensation:**

Focus group participants who will be travelling from outside the Greater Hamilton Area or who identify barriers related to travel in attending the focus group will be

provided with compensation for travel. Travel compensation will be provided in the form of Uber Guest Passes to a maximum of \$100. You will receive the compensation code by email 1 week before the focus group and can redeem the pass towards travel to McMaster University on the day of the focus group. Alternatively, you will be given the option to provide distance in KM to focus group location and compensated at \$0.30/km via prepaid credit card which will be sent to you 3 days before the focus group (This can be used at your leisure to cover travel related costs). If you decide to withdraw from the study at any point, you will still be compensated for travel.

**Confidentiality:**

You are participating in this study confidentially. However, because of the nature of focus groups, other participants will also be aware of your participation and contributions. We ask that you and other participants keep the content of the focus groups and identity of participants confidential. However, we cannot guarantee that all participants will do so.

In order to safeguard your identity, I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. At the beginning of the focus group, you will be asked to provide a pseudonym that may be used to make the data more navigable in the final write-up. No one but me, my faculty supervisor, and other participants will know whether you were in the study unless you choose to tell them. You can also choose to use your pseudonym when interacting with other participants. However, we are often identifiable through the stories we tell. Since the number of Muslim Social Workers is relatively small, others may be able to identify you based on references you make. Please keep this in mind in deciding what to tell me.

The information/data you provide will be kept in a locked desk/cabinet where only I will have access to it. Information kept on a computer will be protected by a password. Once the study has been completed, the data will be destroyed.

**Participation and Withdrawal:**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is important to note that you may know the principal investigator through a pre-existing relationship which may make you feel obligated to participate in this study. However, your participation should be completely voluntary and not influenced by that relationship in any way. If you decide to be part of the study, you can stop (withdraw), from the focus group for whatever reason, even after signing the consent form or partway through the study. You cannot withdraw your answers from the data after they have shared in the focus group due to the nature of the

transcription process, however, you are able to stop answering or leave the room at any time. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided outside of the focus group (i.e. consent forms, name, contact information, etc.) will be destroyed. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

### **Information about the Study Results:**

I expect to have this study completed by approximately December 1st, 2017. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

The final thesis will also be available via McMaster University Digital Commons website: [digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/](http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/)

### Information about the Study Results:

I expect to have this study completed by approximately **December 1st, 2017**. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

The thesis will also be available via McMaster University Digital Commons website: [digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/](http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/)

### Questions about the Study:

If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

Nagham Azzam, BSc, HBSW, MSW Candidate  
Phone: (905) 902-0549  
Email: [azzamn@mcmaster.ca](mailto:azzamn@mcmaster.ca)

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142  
C/o Research Office for Administrative Development and

Support

E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

### CONSENT

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Nagham Azzam, of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until approximately June 1st, 2017.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant (Printed) \_\_\_\_\_

1. I agree that the interview can be audio recorded.

- Yes.
- No

2. I agree that handwritten or electronic notes can be taken during the interview.

- Yes.
- No

3. Would you like to receive a summary of the study's results?

- Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the study's results  
Please send them to me at this email address

\_\_\_\_\_

Or to this mailing address:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

- No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.



## Appendix C: Focus Group Interview Guide

### [THE COMPLETION OF THE INTRODUCTORY SECTION OF THE FOCUS GROUP SHOULD TAKE APPROXIMATELY 10-15 MINUTES]

#### I) INTRODUCTION AND INSTRUCTIONS:

Hello, my name is Nagham Azzam. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group meeting. Just to remind everyone, the topic of this focus group is the experience of Muslim Women in Social Work Education.

**What is a focus group?** A focus group is an interactive group discussion where we can gain several perspectives about a topic and members of the group can think about and comment on what others have said in the group.

Before we start, I would like to walk you through the consent form that is in front of you.

**FOR FACILITATOR: REVIEW INFORMED CONSENT FORM AND ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT IT. COLLECT SIGNED CONSENT FORMS AND ENSURE THAT PARTICIPANTS HAVE A COPY OF THE LETTER OF INFORMATION TO TAKE WITH THEM.**

**Confidentiality: [READ ALOUD]** - Before we begin our discussion, I want to spend a few moments talking about confidentiality and to go over some basic ground rules for our focus group discussion today:

- Everyone's views are welcomed and important.
- The information which we will collect today will be attributable (*connected or associated*) to you as a group.
- Because of the nature of small communities or groups, it is possible that people could link participants in this room to quotes in the report. This is why we need to talk about confidentiality.
- We *are* assuming that when we learn about one another's views, they remain confidential. In a small community (group) like this, people are identifiable to some degree by their views and opinions.
- Having said this, and having made these requests, you know that we cannot guarantee that the request will be honoured by everyone in the room.
- So we are asking you to make only those comments that you w comfortable making in a public setting; and to hold back making comments that you would not say publicly.

- If you want to stop being in the focus group you can leave or stay and simply stop talking, but it will not be possible for you to pull out your data from the flow of the conversation because of the interconnected nature of the group discussion where one person's comments can stimulate the sharing of comments made by others in the group.
- Anything heard in the room should stay in the room.
- All voices are to be heard, so I will step in if too many people are speaking at once or to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak.
- I may also step in if I feel the conversation is straying off topic.
- After the discussion, I will invite you to fill in an anonymous "post-workgroup information sheet" to us help generally describe the kind of people who were part of the group today.
- You can expect this discussion group to last about 2 hours long.

### **Use of Tape Recorder**

- As you will recall, this focus/discussion group will be recorded to increase accuracy and to reduce the chance of misinterpreting what anyone says.
- All tapes and transcripts will be kept under lock and key by the researcher.
- Your real names will not appear in the transcript and the pseudonyms that you chose will appear instead. Please try to use individuals pseudonyms during the focus group. If you use the individual's real name I will replace it with their pseudonym in the transcript and my thesis.
- Only I and my supervisor, Saara Greene will have access to transcripts of this focus group.
- I'll also ask that when using abbreviations or acronyms, you say the full name at least once to aid transcription.
- I will use a computer projected onto the wall or Flipchart to write down key points during the focus group and take notes.

### ***Introductions:***

- Facilitator introduce self and what led her to this study
- Ask everyone to introduce themselves, first name or pseudonym and why they got into social work

## **II. INTERVIEW**

### ***FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION BEGINS WITH THE FACILITATOR ASKING THE FIRST QUESTION***

### ***OPEN UP DISCUSSION FOR GENERAL RESPONSES OF PARTICIPANTS TO EACH QUESTION.***

**Interview questions:**

- Was your motivation to study social work influenced by your experiences or values as a Muslim Woman?
- What was your experience like in your social work program?
- How did your identity as a Muslim Women shape your experience in your social work program ?
- What aspects of your social work education clashed with or were supported by your identity as a Muslim Women?
- How do you feel you or Muslim Women as a group were represented in curriculum or research?
- If you could change the way Muslim Women were represented in curriculum or research, what would that look like?

**III. WRAP-UP:**

- Is there anything we forgot or is there something important that we should discuss further ?

***INTRODUCE THE FOLLOWING ANONYMOUS “POST-WORKGROUP INFORMATION SHEET” NOW.***

***REMIND PARTICIPANTS THAT “WHAT IS SAID IN THE ROOM SHOULD STAY IN THE ROOM”.  
THANK THE PARTICIPANTS.***

**Appendix D: Focus Group Background Information Sheet****The Experience of Muslim Women in Social Work Education  
FOCUS GROUP BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET**

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Please fill in this form. Your answers will provide us with some basic background information about you. This is an anonymous, however, if you feel uncomfortable answering any of these questions you may skip over them.

1. How would you describe your gender? (Check one):  
 Male  
 Female  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_  
 Prefer not to answer
2. I'm \_\_\_\_\_ years old
3. I'm (Check one):  
 single  
 legally married  
 a common-law spouse  
 widowed/partner deceased  
 separated  
 divorced  
 prefer not to answer
4. What University did you attend? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What year did you graduate (or expect to graduate)?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What degree(s) have you completed (or are working on completing)?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. What cultural group do you identify with (if any)?  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. What racial group do you identify with (if any)?  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. What Islamic sect do you identify with (if any)?  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. How would you describe your level of adherence to religious practices?

a. Adherence to obligatory acts of worship (i.e 5 Pillars of Islam)

- Always
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

b. Adherence to recommended acts of worship (i.e optional fasts, prayers, etc)

- Always
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

c. Adherence to religious rulings (i.e gender interactions, dress code, finances, etc)

- Always
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

11. Do you practice wearing hijab?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

12. Do you actively seek out religious knowledge.

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

13. If you answered Yes or Sometimes to the above questions, where do you seek out this knowledge from?

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Please turn over this brief information sheet and leave it on