

The Muslimah Project Community Report:
A Community Inquiry into Discrimination and
Muslim Women's Mental Health in a Canadian Context

Key Messages

Several key findings emerged from the present project. One overarching theme was **discrimination**. **Subtle discrimination** was the most common form of discrimination reported in the focus groups. While many women did share experiences of **direct and overt discrimination**, most women spoke about subtle forms of discrimination. Examples of this include: **being ignored, people staring, or people making assumptions about things like language skills, employment or education**.

Another key finding was **feelings of community ownership and responsibility**. During focus groups, much of the conversation focused around Muslim women feeling as though they are **accountable and responsible for representing their entire community and Islam** within the broader community. Many women reported that they felt a need to always portray Islam in a positive way, and that this responsibility weighed heavily on their day-to-day interactions. There were three main ways that women reported feeling responsible to represent their religion: **Teaching others, Proving oneself, and Apologizing**.

The present project revealed that for Muslim women, **discrimination falls along multiple intersections of identity**. Many women reported in the focus groups that discrimination impacts people differently depending on **intersections of identity**. The main examples of parts of identity that intersect to elicit discrimination include: **Gender, Race, Black Identity and Visible Markers of Faith**, such as the hijab.

Key findings around impacts of discrimination revealed that **discrimination negatively impacts Muslim women’s mental health, wellbeing, and belonging**. Focus Groups revealed that experiences of discrimination in Waterloo Region negatively impact Muslim women’s wellbeing in a variety of ways. The impacts of discrimination that were mentioned most often include: **underemployment and lack of opportunity** and **negative mental health impacts**, including feelings of **isolation** and a **lack of belonging**.

Specific and unique needs of Muslim women in the community were identified as a key finding in the present project. This was a valuable aspect of The Muslimah Project focus groups, and several important **community needs** within Waterloo Region that would benefit Muslim women were identified. The most common needs that were identified by Muslim women to address issues surrounding discrimination, wellbeing, mental health, and belonging include: **opportunities for dialogue about mental health** within Muslim community, **culturally relevant mental health supports**, and **education for the broader community** about issues impacting Muslim community members.

Background and Context

The Coalition of Muslim Women of Kitchener Waterloo (CMWKW) was formed in 2010, when a group of over 50 Muslim women concerned about the impact of Bill 94 in Quebec came together to add their voices to critical conversations surrounding the bill. This initial meeting at Kitchener City Hall turned into a lasting coalition of strong Muslim women, determined to diminish common misconceptions about Muslim women within the Kitchener Waterloo community. Today, the CMWKW is an incorporated non-profit that contributes in numerous ways to the community in Waterloo Region. From facilitating leadership training for Muslim women within the community to hosting and facilitating public events build bridges

between Muslim community members and the broader community, the CMWKW continues to help Waterloo Region become a more diverse, just, and harmonious community.

One essential aspect of the CMWKW's work within the community lies within research partnerships with a variety of community organizations and actors. Recently, the CMWKW began important partnerships with local universities in Waterloo Region. The present report comes out of a partnership between Wilfrid Laurier University, the Centre for Community Research, Learning, and Action, and the CMWKW. As the CMWKW leaders and representatives strive to create a more inclusive and equitable community within Waterloo Region, local and national data on discrimination and hate crime rates indicate that there is a great deal of work to be done and that discrimination on the basis of Muslim identity is rising in Waterloo Region.

Recent data from Statistics Canada indicates that hate crimes against the Muslim population in Canada increased by 61% between 2014 and 2015 (Leber, 2017). While this national data is shocking, it is even more shocking that Waterloo Region was listed among 3 Canadian census areas with the highest increase in hate crimes between 2014 and 2015. Even more recently, Statistics Canada reported that hate crimes within Waterloo Region nearly tripled between 2016 and 2017 (2018). The highest increases in Ontario hate crimes were found to be on the basis of religious and racial discrimination (Leber, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2018). In Waterloo Region, reported hate crimes include violent assaults and threats, as well as graffiti containing discriminatory language and slurs (Rutledge, 2018). Hate crimes like graffiti have been found in many different locations throughout Waterloo Region, however, local law enforcement explains that schools are the most common locations for this type of crime (Rutledge, 2018).

These disturbing statistics tell us that steps should be taken within Waterloo Region to understand and address anti-Muslim discrimination and hate. Given the CMWKW's commitment to building a safe and inclusive Waterloo Region where there is understanding between Muslim community members and the broader community, addressing anti-Muslim discrimination within Waterloo Region is an important step forward for the CMWKW. Through the present research partnership, leaders from the CMWKW and researchers from Wilfrid Laurier University came together to investigate the experiences of Muslim women within Waterloo Region, and the impacts of discrimination on their mental health, wellbeing, and sense of community belonging. The Muslimah Project was borne out of this partnership.

The Muslimah Project is an example of a community-based research project, wherein the partnership between Laurier and the CMWKW is based on communication, collaboration, trust, and respect, ensuring that data collected in the study is relevant and meets community needs. Information from this research project will help to assist community leaders and local social service organizations to create initiatives and interventions based around the community needs, strengths, and challenges identified in the study. Findings from this project should help service providers to respond more comprehensively to the needs of clients identifying as Muslim women. Additionally, this report should provide information for use by coalition members and organizers interested in coming together around impacts of discrimination and avenues of resistance. As a whole, The Muslimah Project aimed to create positive and transformative social change within Waterloo Region.

Method

Throughout November and December of 2018, The Muslimah Project research team conducted a series of five focus groups with a diverse group of Muslim women. In total, we

spoke with 55 Muslim women who lived in either Kitchener (31%), Cambridge (34.5%), or Waterloo (32.8%). We were able to hear from women from many different countries, including India, Pakistan, Iran, Lebanon, Somalia, Eritrea, Jordan, Syria, Turkey and ranged in age from 16 to 57 years old. Focus groups brought together groups of approximately 10 Muslim women. Three focus groups were held in Kitchener, one group was held in Waterloo and one group was held in Cambridge. Groups focused on youth experiences and experiences of Black Muslim women were among these five focus groups and centered specifically on the unique experiences of these sub-groups.

During these focus groups, we asked women questions about their experiences of discrimination in Waterloo Region. We also asked about the impacts of discrimination on their own lives, including their feelings of belonging, their own mental health, and their overall wellbeing. Next, we asked participants what they do in response to discrimination, and what the response of the broader community is. Finally, we explored spaces and places that Muslim women feel comfortable and safe within Waterloo Region, investigating what should be done within the Region to improve Muslim women's experiences.

Findings

Discrimination. Muslim women who participated in focus groups provided several examples of discrimination occurring within Waterloo Region. Some of the discrimination experienced by women was subtle, experienced during day to day interactions. Other women reported hate crimes occurring in Waterloo Region. One woman provided the following example:

"[...]there is a skate park next to our school and I never saw a skate park before. I went with my sister and we saw those what do you call, graffiti. Okay. They were so beautiful, and then when I started to read what was written: Muslims kills, Muslims hates gays. And, there were many people around that park so at that time, I felt unsafe to be there." – Participant, FG 1

Given this rhetoric it is clear that anti-Muslim discrimination is occurring within our community. The next steps in our research process surrounded investigating the different ways that Muslim women experience discrimination in Waterloo Region.

Assumptions and Stereotypes. Many instances of discrimination reported within Waterloo Region involve people making assumptions based on stereotypes of Muslim women. For example, assuming that someone will be violent, assuming that someone is new to Canada based on their clothing choices, or assuming that Muslim women are oppressed.

“And, they're going to think of me as a foreigner. Like, ‘did you just move here?’ I'm like no, I've been living here, I [was] born here. They're like, I get that so much, and it's like why? Is it because I wear a niqab?” – Participant, FG 4

Having to educate others. Many women in the focus groups reported that they are often asked personal or inappropriate questions related to Islam. For example, women reported being approached by strangers and asked why they wear the hijab, or other details surrounding their expressions of faith.

“[...] in summers you get a lot, that can I ask you a question? Do you get hot in wearing a hijab?” – Participant, FG 3

Feelings of community ownership & responsibility. Consistently across focus groups, Muslim women reported experiencing the feeling of needing to represent their entire community, as well as represent Islam within their day to day lives. This finding was most pronounced for South Asian Muslim women, moderately pronounced for Arab women, and was less common among Black Muslim women. Feelings of community representation, ownership and responsibility also differed across generational lines, such that younger Muslim women reported a greater feeling of responsibility to prove themselves and positively represent Islam.

“It's true. I keep reminding my girls that you are presenting Islam, please think twice before you do anything.”

“Yes, and I think this is really, like put a lot of pressure on people.”

- Conversation between participants, FG 1

Teaching others. The responsibility of teaching others about Islam and Muslim people often falls on the shoulders of Muslim women. The subtheme of teaching others was closely related to the experience of answering inappropriate questions under the umbrella of subtle discrimination, however, women's articulation of emotional energy and labour result in teaching others forming its own subtheme within community representation. The feeling of needing to accurately and adequately represent one's community resulting in frustration and fatigue for many women, who explained that their role as the teacher within their own relationships resulted in feeling as though they were required to be Islamic scholars and represent their faith perfectly. Women participants reported feeling exhaustion from this emotional labour and the task of constantly being questioned regarding their own faith practices, or Islam more generally.

“Then, you try to put in that effort to explain to people: what Islam says or what Islam is? And, they generally have a lot of questions. A lot of people are not being discriminatory intentionally, there are concerns and questions and misconceptions that they have. And, we then are the people who would then help eradicate those or at least minimize those misconceptions.” – Participant, FG 1

Proving oneself. The desire to prove oneself within the broader community was an important aspect of community ownership and responsibility. Muslim women participants described feeling the need to achieve a great deal more than their non-Muslim counterparts in order to garner the same amount of respect or recognition within their own communities, as well as within the broader community of Waterloo Region. This feeling was reported on a practical scale, in the context of school achievement and employment, as well as on an emotional scale, in the context of identity formation and self-esteem. Many women explained that they felt the need

to be the perfect representation of a Muslim woman in their interpersonal relationships, as well as in their diverse roles in the community.

“I feel like you just need to compensate for it. Like it's almost like it's a defect, you just got to like present yourself. Like you can't have B's, if you're going to wear this, you need to be a straight A student if you want to land the same job as your counterpart who has 70's, you need to have 90's.” - Participant, FG 2

Apologizing. The descriptions given by Muslim women participants of the need to apologize for the actions of other Muslim community members were startling. One example of an instance in which Muslim women feel the need to apologize on behalf of others occurs when people make assumptions about Islam and draw incorrect conclusions based on these assumptions. Another example lies in the actions of criminals who identify as Muslim and commit crimes. In particular, when the perpetrators of violent offenses are Muslim, Muslim women feel the need to apologize for the offense and to explain that the actions of one person are not representative of Islam.

A key aspect of the discussion surrounding this phenomenon within focus groups was the difference with which the media treats white offenders, or Christian offenders. Rarely, participants pointed out, are a white Christian person's violent actions tied back to his Christian faith. However, it is a routine narrative for media outlets to report on the faith of Muslim offenders. Many women explained that when confronted with news of a violent or large-scale attack within Canada or internationally, their first response is to hope that the offender does not identify as Muslim. This responsibility felt by Muslim women to apologize on behalf of other Muslim people seems to differ significantly from feelings of community ownership expressed by people of other faiths.

“I think one of the things is that we as Muslims are apologetic. So, we are apologetic of being from where we are, and being a visible minority, and then, being a Muslim. So, we don't really tend to stand up for ourselves.” – Participant, FG 1

Discrimination is intersectional. Across focus groups, Muslim women identified that the number and variety of markers of diverse identities that women display elicit unique forms of discrimination. For example, women who wear visible markers of religion and have a darker complexion will experience a unique form of discrimination that differs from the experiences of someone who is white or white-passing.

“For the visible ones, hijabie dressed in non-Canadian outfits, visibly different complexion and an accent is a killer.”

“Different colour too.”

“Different colour too. It's a killer. That's the worst possible avenue. You can have different layers, so if somebody is wearing a hijab and they don't have an accent, they have a better chance of being accepted than somebody who has a hijab and an accent. So, it kind of tops it all up.” – Conversation between participants, FG 1

Participants explained that women who wear visible markers of religion, women who have an accent, and women who have Black or darker skin will all experience anti-Muslim and gendered discrimination differently. Black women further articulated the anti-Black racism that is pervasive within Waterloo Region.

Negative impacts of anti-Muslim discrimination.

Underemployment and lack of opportunity. Discrimination at several levels of employment were identified by Muslim women within focus groups. For example, discrimination during the process of call-backs was cited, with participants explaining that many women will Westernize their Muslim name in order to appear more palatable to prospective employers. During interviews, women reported experiencing discrimination in comparison to

applicants who are not visibly Muslim. In particular, women explained that many employers will be shocked or surprised to see a woman wearing a hijab enter an interview.

“It didn't happen to me, but employment, but I have friends who just decided to not wear a scarf, in order to go to the interview and to have a better chance of getting the job.” – Participant, FG 1

Mental health. Focus group participants reported feeling a lack of wellbeing, and they also reported experiencing negative mental health outcomes as a result of a lack of social justice efforts combating discrimination toward Muslim women within Waterloo Region.

“It has a huge impact on mental health, I feel because you know there are days when you're just feeling down in general, and then, to have that added weight of you know, whatever it is, but someone did towards you. It's just you know sometimes it gets to be too much. It's overwhelming in a day, you know. So, I think it's a big impact on mental health.” – Participant, FG 4

Isolation. One of the most prominent mental health impacts discussed throughout focus groups in The Muslimah Project was feelings of isolation and loneliness. Participants reported feeling isolated as a result of discrimination, and also feeling isolated as a result of a lack of response from the broader community in response to discrimination.

“So, you are like alone. You don't have support. You don't have people to understand you, and you don't have where to run to.” – Participant, FG 3

Belonging. When resources or spaces are inaccessible for Muslim women, they reported feeling a lack of belonging as the community refused to make an effort to understand or accommodate their unique needs. For example, recreation spaces such as swimming pools or gyms that refuse to hold hours exclusively for women.

Many women also explained that a lack of understanding around cultural practices, such as wearing religious clothing, led to feelings of exclusion. Another example was the explanation that misunderstanding or ignorance surrounding eating Halal within the broader community was

a barrier to meaningful engagement within community events, or within inter-faith dialogue.

Belonging was an important aspect of overall wellbeing identified by Muslim women and was closely related to mental health. Overall, women explained that being different within the community led to complicating feelings and a lack of belonging.

“Growing up you want to not be different. You don't want to be unique. You don't want to be the person that has a different skin colour or wears something different than everybody else. So, you don't want to go out in public. And, even when, I remember starting the hijab, I didn't want to go to school because I didn't want to, the kids to be like what is that? You have like a cloth on your head.” – Participant, FG 2

Community needs.

Opportunities for dialogue about mental health within Muslim communities. Within focus groups, women used conversations surrounding mental health to identify community needs and strengths. A major need identified within focus groups was the absence of opportunities for open dialogue about mental health within Muslim communities. Community strengths were referenced when women began brainstorming and planning methods of engaging Muslim community in conversation surrounding mental health. Many participants referenced a generational gap such that younger Muslim women felt more comfortable discussing issues surrounding mental health, while older generations still experienced stigma surrounding these issues. Opportunities for conversation within Muslim communities was clearly identified as one community need in addressing mental health concerns. In particular, this community conversation building was identified as significantly needed in the face of anti-Muslim discrimination.

“Also, kind of like telling them like the help, it does exist. It's nothing to be ashamed of but you just need to like spread the word. So, that our parents or like their parents, you know they can just like have an idea of like what we go through.” – Participant, FG 3

Culturally relevant mental health supports. Within focus groups, Muslim women revealed that the supports in place within Waterloo Region are not responding to the unique needs of Muslim women. Many women reported the importance of having Muslim women, women of colour, and Black women in the position of counsellor and mental health support in order to adequately and appropriately support the mental health of Muslim women within our community. Within the focus groups, women repeatedly articulated that the specific issues faced by marginalized women who experience discrimination within our community cannot be understood or addressed by those who lack that lived experience.

Explicit changes are needed within the community. Muslim women did highlight the importance of organizations who make an effort to administer mandatory cultural competency training. However, it was clearly identified by participants that this kind of training is just one first step toward the ultimate goal of having supports and services that include adequate representation of people of colour, and Muslim women of colour, in particular.

“...but the problem is when you go for these services and you go for these doctors, there's not that many people of colour there. So, they don't understand your struggles. They're White doctors. White doctors don't get that struggle, and don't get that, they don't get you coming here. They don't get cultural differences.” – Participant, FG 3

Education for the broader community. Another essential need identified through the present study is the need to large-scale education for the broader community of Waterloo Region. Within the region, the broader community should be more educated about Islam itself, about cultural and religious practices, and about the forms and impacts of discrimination experienced by Muslim community members.

Education for the broader community about Islam itself, de-centering Christianity within Waterloo Region and allowing space for diverse experiences within schools and workplaces

represents an important step toward community transformation. This step may remove a small amount of the burden from Muslim women's shoulders, who feel that they must positively represent their community by answering questions from broader community members.

"I think for that the coalition has been taking a lot of steps which have helped quite a bit. But, also a lot more than this can be done for basic awareness just even within the Kitchener-Waterloo community about not fearing Muslims or not discriminating against them." – Participant, FG 1

Recreation spaces. A final community need that emerged from focus group data surrounds recreation spaces for Muslim women. Many women identified that there is a lack of recreation space in which they feel safe and welcomed within the region. Some women provided examples of exercise spaces that would not accommodate one class per week for only women. Other women identified the need for women's only spaces for swimming. This is an essential aspect of community wellbeing and local initiatives and interventions should examine necessary accommodations to ensure recreation spaces in Waterloo Region are welcoming for all community members.

"The well-being, the fitness and gym and like sports facilities. Because like some Muslim women have like their restrictions. Like, I just know that Movati has the, like the pool for women, right. So, which is like the women only pool for swimming." – Participant, FG 1

Suggestions for Service Providers

The Muslimah Project leaves us with several important key findings surrounding Muslim women's experiences of discrimination and the impacts of these experiences within Waterloo Region. These key findings have the potential to inform and improve service provision within our community. Notably, anti-Muslim discrimination is a common occurrence for Muslim women in our community, and occurs on a variety of levels, including more subtle and nuanced discrimination as well as overt instances of threatening behaviour and verbal abuse. Service

providers should be aware of the multiple ways in which discrimination occurs within the community, attending to the needs of clients who experience discrimination of any kind.

A second key finding was Muslim women's feelings of community ownership and responsibility to represent one's entire community. Women within the study explained that the responsibility of always having to portray Islam in a positive way weighed heavily on them, and their roles of teaching others, proving themselves and apologizing for the actions of other Muslim community members become exhausting. Service providers should be aware of these factors, and make every attempt to self-initiate personal learning, being careful not to add to these prominent stressors.

The present project revealed that for Muslim women, experiences of discrimination differ depending on different aspects of one's identity. Women explained that their gender, racial, and ethnic identities, as well as their choice to wear visible markers of faith were closely tied to their unique experiences of discrimination. Service providers should recognize that clients living at the intersection of marginalized identities are impacted by various forms of discrimination and inquire around the best ways to support individual clients and their families.

The Muslimah Project revealed that within Waterloo Region, anti-Muslim discrimination negatively impacts Muslim women's mental health, overall wellbeing, and feelings of belonging. Most significantly, women's wellbeing is impacted by experiences of discrimination related to employment, and feelings of isolation resulting from anti-Muslim discrimination. Service providers should recognize the impacts of discrimination on wellbeing and acknowledge the impact of discrimination on Muslim women's mental health rather than conceptualizing mental health as separate from one's social location and identity.

Moving forward, our community should recognize community needs articulated by Muslim women through the present project, including opportunities for dialogue around mental health, adequate representation of Muslim women within social services, and comprehensive education surrounding Islam and anti-Muslim discrimination for the broader community of Waterloo Region.

Key findings from this report should inform future social service provision and local policy within Waterloo Region. The concerns surrounding increased rates of reported hate crimes in our region are reflected in the experiences of Muslim women. Our hope is that results and recommendations for community needs emerging from this project will serve as a first step toward a more just and inclusive Waterloo Region.

Next Steps

The needs articulated within The Muslimah Project represent tangible changes that can be enacted within our community to positively impact the lives of Muslim women. Our hope is that with this information, community leaders will be better equipped to move forward and advise their own networks of the essential changes required within Waterloo Region to positively impact the lives of Muslim women.

Following our community forum, we hope that community leaders will take the findings shared and bring them to their own spaces of employment and involvement. These spaces include schools, health care and social service organizations, spaces of regional governance, and many more. The present report can be utilized as a tool for training within organizations, as well as an administrative guide for systemic change.

Still to come are short reports for distribution in schools and various organizations, fact sheets, and infographics that reflect the key findings of The Muslimah Project. Together, we are

able to draw on our unique and collective strengths and harness powerful support for all community members, prioritizing the needs of those experiencing discrimination, silencing, and marginalization.

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