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THE MUSLIMAH PROJECT:
A COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY INTO DISCRIMINATION AND
MUSLIM WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH IN A CANADIAN CONTEXT

by

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BA (Hons), University of Winnipeg, 2014

THESIS

Submitted to the Department of Psychology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Master of Arts in Psychology

Wilfrid Laurier University

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Abstract

In Canada, Muslim women face a unique form of discrimination based on their religious, racial, and gender identities (Helly, 2012; Mohanty, 2003; Zine, 2008). These complex forms of discrimination make it difficult to access adequate supports for positive mental health and wellbeing (Burgess, Ding, Hargreaves, van Ryn & Phelan, 2008). Grounded in feminist intersectional theory and practice (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016), the present manuscript emerges from a community-based project centered around Muslim women's experiences of discrimination and resulting adverse mental health impacts. Through a series of five focus groups (N=55) the research team engaged with Muslim women from diverse backgrounds in order to centre the voices of Muslim women and gain a more complete understanding of health inequities in Canada. Thematic analyses of focus group data reveal that Muslim women participants regularly experience Islamophobic discrimination along intersectional identity lines. Further, women face multiple barriers when attempting to access culturally relevant and responsive supports. Results illuminate the potential of reciprocal, community-based research to investigate and respond to mental health disparities experienced by Muslim women in Canada.

Keywords: Discrimination, Muslim Women, Mental Health, Intersectionality

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge that I am a recipient of The Ontario Women's Health Scholars Award. The Ontario Women's Health Scholars Award is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. The views expressed in the publication are the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.

This research was supported in part by Women's Xchange.

Personally, I would like to thank Dr. Ciann L. Wilson, who has provided immeasurable support throughout my writing process. I thank Dr. Wilson for her mentorship over the past two years, and her guidance in the present research. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Wilson for her steadfast confidence in me and for supporting me as the coordinator of The Muslimah Project.

I would like to acknowledge my community partner, The Coalition of Muslim Women of Kitchener Waterloo, for their meaningful collaboration on the present work. Fauzia Mazhar, Ghazala Fauzia, and Uzma Bhutto - Thank you for your passion, dedication, and support throughout the research process. I would not be here without you.

Thank you to all of the women who participated in The Muslimah Project!

I would also like to acknowledge my thesis committee members, who read and provided feedback throughout the writing process. Dr. Ketan Shankardass and Dr. Maryam Khan – I am grateful for your time and input.

Finally, thank you to my friends and family for your input, advice, and for keeping me smiling.

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Introduction/Preamble

As a master's student, I have had the privilege of coordinating the community-based study entitled "The Muslimah project: Exploring intersections of belonging, mental health, and wellbeing for Muslim women in Waterloo Region." This large qualitative study provided the data that has informed the present master's thesis. As a whole, The Muslimah Project was conceptualized and implemented by a diverse partnership of women researchers and community leaders in Waterloo Region who wanted to document the complex experiences of Muslim women within the region. The Muslimah Project focused broadly on Muslim women's experiences of discrimination, and the various impacts on their mental health, sense of belonging, and overall wellbeing. As a member of this research team, and as a student researcher who stands to benefit academically from my role as coordinator of this project, acknowledgement and analysis of my own social location and positionality as a researcher and author is essential. I personally identify as a white, European settler in Canada. I am non-religious but was raised within the religious framework of Western Christianity. I recognize that I am an uninvited visitor on stolen land. As such, I will begin by contextualizing my role in this project, and my own approach to the present work.

This contextualization is particularly important, as research within communities of colour has long been a source of abuse and exploitation driven by institutional racism at the hands of Western state systems, systems that originate in the West, particularly in Europe, the United States, and Canada (Wilson, Flicker, & Restoule, 2015). Given the international history of violent research that directly harms the bodies of racialized or otherwise marginalized peoples, as well as the continuation of coercive and unethical research in both Canadian and international contexts, many communities hold a justified mistrust of Western European researchers and

research institutions. In Muslim communities specifically, academic literature has served to extend colonial systems in which the stories and experiences of Muslim people are co-opted by non-Muslims, who do not share a Muslim identity and do not experience associated realities yet stand to benefit in both academic and monetary ways (Zine, 2012).

Many Muslim people in North America are racialized, that is, they have been categorized according to others' perceptions of their racial and/or ethnic identities. As a researcher engaging with many racialized and often marginalized Muslim women, my role within this community-based research project necessitates ongoing reflection and analysis of power distribution within research partnerships and projects. As such, I have continued to engage in ongoing analysis of my own assumptions and privilege throughout the research process. This analysis involves careful consideration and consultation with community partners, The Coalition of Muslim Women of Kitchener Waterloo (CMWKW), at each step of the research process. For example, drafting of the research proposal, literature cited, theoretical frameworks, research methods, and instruments were planned and developed through ongoing conversation and consultation with community partners. Regular in-person meetings, as well as routine phone consultations with all members of the research team enabled each member of the team to contribute meaningfully to each stage of the research process. Throughout all stages of this work, I have sought to frame research questions and analysis with careful consideration of how specific lines of inquiry and investigation have the potential to further exacerbate discriminatory assumptions and/or conclusions surrounding Muslim community members.

Research questions, methodologies and frameworks that informed the present work explicitly challenge dominant Western narratives of the roles of *expert researcher*, *community partner*, and *research participant*. It is my strong belief that each participant in The Muslimah

Project is an expert on their own experiences. As an outsider-researcher who stands to benefit academically from engaging in research with Muslim women, I make every attempt to amplify the voices of Muslim theorists, scholars, and community members within my own writing and reporting of data.

My primary priority within this work is to respond to local needs identified by research partners from The Coalition of Muslim Women of Kitchener Waterloo. In my thesis, I work toward meaningful ally-ship by centering the voices of Muslim women within this work, and actively applying intersectionality in practice (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Given this orientation, the present thesis is presented in two parts, as requested by community partners: 1) A manuscript centered around the ways in which discrimination shows up within Waterloo Region and manifests in the lives of Muslim women, impacting their mental health, sense of belonging, and overall wellbeing and 2) A community report detailing The Muslimah Project process that provides an overview of the broad study as well as key findings that emerged from the data. Readers will find the manuscript as Part I of the present document, followed by the community report, Part II.

Along with the importance of providing relevant requested deliverables to community partners, knowledge translation and mobilization activities play a central role in putting critical inquiry into practice within Waterloo Region. Recent health research from Birmingham City University and Nottingham Trent University investigated health outcomes of anti-Muslim discrimination and found that the number one health recommendation involves anti-Muslim hate being challenged within Muslim communities (Awan & Zempi, 2015). As such, the research team has ensured that findings are shared within the Muslim community in Waterloo Region using several mediums.

The long report that serves as Part II of the present work will be used by community advocates and service providers who cater to Muslim women and families, such as The Coalition of Muslim Women of KW, the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre, the YMCA, the Downtown Kitchener Community Health Centre and Muslim Social Services. This report is tailored for implementation in community programming. It also serves as a document that service providers may reference when advocating for their clients in the areas of mental health and wellbeing. From the long report, research team members will work together to identify key messages for the creation of a short report (2 pages) for broader dissemination to the public. The short report will be a key tool shared at a community launch that will be held with local community leaders to highlight project findings.

The community launch is intended for both Muslim and non-Muslim community members and leaders. The aim of this forum is to create a space for community members who identify as Muslim and non-Muslim allies to gather and discuss themes identified throughout the research, and how these findings may help to shape a more inclusive and equitable Waterloo Region. The realities of discrimination experienced by Muslim women in Waterloo Region will be the central discussion point, and this forum should provide space to amplify the voices of Muslim women around the topics of discrimination, mental health, belonging, and overall wellbeing. The short report and other project outputs such as infographics will be utilized to spark dialogue among attendees at the forum about the realities and community needs of Muslim women within Waterloo Region.

In contributing to current academic discourse, findings will be presented at community and academic conferences, including, but not limited to: Wellbeing Waterloo Region Community Forum, Annisaa Organization of Canada Women's Health Conference, The South

Asian Mental Health Conference, The Society for Community Research and Action Biennial Conference, and the Health Promotion Ontario Conference. Project findings will also be used in the production of articles for peer-reviewed publication in relevant academic journals such as Women and Health, The American Journal of Community Psychology, and the Journal of Muslim Mental Health.

A Collaborative Inquiry into Discrimination and
Muslim Women's Mental Health in a Canadian Context – Part I

Beginning with the earliest Crusades of the eleventh century through the twentieth century Holocaust and beyond, religious discrimination has long fuelled systemic and interpersonal violence and hatred. Today, aggression and harassment occurring as a result of religious discrimination continue to negatively impact individuals, families, and communities (Allen & Nielsen, 2002). For example, in early 2019, newcomer families to Canada were met with hateful, anti-Muslim and anti-immigration demonstrations occurring within close proximity to welcome centres for newcomers to Canada (Huncar, 2019). While many different religious communities experience these impacts, prior research suggests that Islamophobia, defined as a dread or dislike of Islam resulting in the fear or hatred of Muslims, is a pervasive form of discrimination within Europe and North America (Runnymede Trust, 1997). Theorists suggest that as a result of Islamophobia, dominant Western European narratives have often negatively characterized Muslim people. Specifically, Muslim women are characterized as a homogenous group of oppressed victims (Helly, 2012; Mohanty, 2003; Zine, 2008). This pervasive narrative serves to erase the diverse voices of Muslim women, even within the very conversations that surround them.

Grounded in an understanding of *intersectionality as praxis* (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016) and microaggression theory (Nadal, 2018; Sue et al., 2007), the present thesis will explore the mental health impacts of Muslim women's experiences of discrimination within a Canadian context. To begin, the literature review will contextualize prior research on Islamophobia within the greater historical contexts of Europe and North America, exploring the relationship between this fraught history and women's experiences of Islamophobia today. Given the previously

established relationship between discrimination and negative mental health impacts (Awan & Zempi, 2015; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2015), as well as a significant rise in hate crimes against religious communities within Canada (Leber, 2017), greater understanding of the varied impacts of discrimination is desperately needed.

This manuscript explores results from The Muslimah Project, a community-based exploratory study that brought together diverse groups of Muslim women (N=55) to identify challenges and strengths while sharing their experiences of discrimination and the resulting impacts. Results provide compelling evidence that discrimination within Waterloo Region, Canada has varied and multiple negative impacts on Muslim Women's feelings of belonging, mental health, and overall wellbeing.

Literature Review

Historical Context

Canada's Muslim population is incredibly diverse, comprised of people from varying ethno-racial backgrounds, including cultures from "South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Continental Africa, and the Caribbean" (Zine, 2012, p. 6). In order to contextually situate discrimination faced by Muslim individuals, families, and communities in Canada, we must examine the greater international historical context. Current discriminatory ideas, ideals, practices, and policies are the products of "deeply entrenched historical, political, imperial, and religious" (Zine, 2008, p. 110) anti-Muslim orientations. Centuries-old debates focused around *East vs. West* sentiments date back to ancient Europe, and Islam's spread into Spain, France, and the Balkans (Allen, 2011). The perception of Islam as a threat to the expansion of Christianity and the European Roman Christian tradition planted seeds of fear of Islam that continue to flourish, permeating international borders (Allen, 2011). This fearful perception persisted

throughout the colonization of the Americas, where European Christianity was used as a means to unite colonizers, and to label outsiders as *the other* (Husain & Howard, 2017). Present day anti-Muslim rhetoric, policies, and practices collectively reflect an explicit association of whiteness, Christianity, unity, and freedom that is deeply historically rooted.

Long-standing historical anti-Muslim sentiment and discrimination rapidly flourished in Europe and North America following the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City on September 11, 2001 (9/11). Many theorists and researchers suggest that this event marked a shift in the cultural climate of North America, exacerbating pre-existing prejudices and increasing anti-Muslim harassment and rhetoric (Allen & Nielsen, 2002; Sheridan, 2006). An escalation of hostilities toward Muslim peoples was palpable, and explicitly Islamophobic content was easily accessible via the internet, including widespread content sent by email, and harassment via text message (Sheridan, 2006).

On the ground, the Trade Centre attacks also marked an increase in hate crimes toward those deemed to be Muslim within Europe and North America. In the U.S., many instances were documented in which those who appeared Muslim were violently targeted and attacked (Disha, Cavendish & King, 2011). One such example is the murder of Sikh man, Balbir Singh Sodhi, who was shot in Arizona on September 15, 2001 when he was assumed to be Muslim (Anwar & Jenkins, 2018). Another example of hateful violence enacted against those perceived to be Muslim following the Trade Centre attacks lies in the actions of a white supremacist spree shooter who opened fire in Texas, ending the lives of a Muslim man, Waqar Hasan, and a Hindu man, Vasudev Patel, on the same day as Sodhi's murder (Williams, 2011). During the post-September 11 period, Muslim women were particularly vulnerable to hate-motivated violence, as many women were identified by attackers by their religious attire, including the headscarf or

hijab (Kwan, 2008). During this period, Muslim women experienced a decrease in feelings of safety, and in fact, young Muslim women became targets for white supremacist sexual violence (Kwan, 2008).

Prior work also indicates that everyday discrimination and non-physical harassment toward Muslim people increased following September 2001. Sheridan (2006) highlights that in the wake of the Trade Centre attacks, Muslim people in Europe increasingly received “abusive telephone calls, messages left on cars, and anonymous mail sent to private homes” (p.319). Along with personal victimization, mosques and Islamic cultural centers became targets of hateful messaging (Sheridan, 2006).

While the 9/11 attacks certainly marked a cultural shift, there was also an explicit political anti-Muslim orientation. In the United States, the “war on terror” was perceived by many as a “war on Islam,” wherein a conflation of terrorism with Islam itself was common and accepted (Husain & Howard, 2017, p. 148). Far-right political activists and neo-Nazi collectives increased activity and shifts in political discourse and policy were observable in the predominant cultural narrative (Sheridan, 2006). In the years following 2001, Muslims have increasingly been positioned as socially and politically un-or-under-developed, anti-democratic, and living “outside the western narratives of progress and modernity” (Zine, 2006a, p. 2). This characterization allowed for the spread of racist and Islamophobic messaging within media, operating under the guise of international development and liberation. In reality, the militarized political discourse of the “war on terror” includes and often centers on politics of race and gender, as “military violence is rooted in the complex inequalities of race, gender, class and ethnicity” (Zine, 2006a, p.3). During this period, the West was waging war not on terrorism, but on the bodies, minds, and lives of Muslim people.

Today, “war on terror” rhetoric continues to echo through the Western political sphere in Europe and North America. Recent commentary from U.S. political leaders clearly indicates that anti-Muslim political sentiment is alive and well in the West. In the months leading up to the 2016 presidential election in the United States, presidential candidate Donald Trump was quoted saying, “Islam hates us,” and suggesting support for a national database with which to track Muslims in the United States (Underwood, 2018). Now, as president, Trump is openly discriminatory on multiple platforms, voicing opinions thought by many to reflect Islamophobia and xenophobia. Within just one month of his inauguration, Trump signed an executive order, dubbed a *Muslim ban*, to bar people from several Muslim-majority nations from entering the United States (Underwood, 2018).

While Trump serves as an extreme example of anti-Muslim sentiment, supposedly socially progressive political actors are no less guilty of generating and propagating harmful discriminatory policy. In the United States, former Democratic president Barack Obama established *Countering Violent Extremism*, a publicly sponsored program that allows for broader surveillance of Muslim communities within the United States than was allowed during the Republican Bush administration (Underwood, 2018). Further, many European nations have enacted policy that disproportionately impacts Muslim women who choose to wear religious attire. As of the present paper, eight European nations have banned women from wearing headscarves within government settings, including France and Austria (Abdelgadir & Fouka, 2019).

On a national scale, implementation of discriminatory policy and practices occurs within Canada’s own borders. Similar to the case of Barack Obama, socially progressive politicians in Canada espouse secular values of citizenship and security that disproportionately impact Muslim

people (Zine, 2012). While the Canadian government publicly celebrates a nation built on multicultural values, an insidious strand of Islamophobia underlies proposed policy, including Bill C-24, “which gives the government the right to strip dual citizens of their Canadian citizenship” (Al-Solaylee, 2017). Many argue that such policies are established in response to a fear of Muslim people, and the assumption that Islam is foreign and incompatible with Canadian values. This fear manifests in a public “obsession with Muslim women's head scarves and face covers” (Al-Solaylee, 2017). Like many nations around the globe, secular politicians in Canada have power to regulate women’s bodies within the public sphere. This power is embodied in the proposition of Bill 94 in 2010 (Olwan, 2010), and now the passing of Bill 62 in Quebec, which prohibits the use of face coverings for those using public services (Steuter-Martin, 2017). Muslim people wearing face coverings will no longer be permitted to sign a book out of a library, interact with staff members in a medical setting, or pick up their children from public daycare services (Steuter-Martin, 2017). Bill 62 and similar laws enable the state to restrict access to essential services and regulate “who may and may not have access to universal medical care and education -- services guaranteed to Canadian citizens through the Canadian Health Act and both the Quebec and Canadian Charter of Rights” (Olwan, 2010).

The discrimination reflected in these laws and policies will have a broad negative impact, as within the past ten years, Zine (2012) identified Islam as the “fastest growing religion in Canada” (p.6). While Canada continues to brand itself a leader in multiculturalism and equality, the climate remains thick with anti-Muslim sentiment. In addition, there are some increasingly vocal anti-immigration and anti-refugee segments of the Canadian population. Considering recent violent attacks on Muslim places of worship in Canada, including the recent mosque shootings in Quebec (Van Praet, Picard, Seguin & Gordon, 2017), investigation of Islamophobic

discrimination is essential for the physical safety, health, and wellbeing of Muslim people in Canada. Further, given the increase in hateful demonstrations outside of mosques across the country (Abedi, 2017), an understanding of how discrimination operates and impacts Muslim people is essential for the safety and wellbeing of Canada's increasingly diverse population.

Theoretical Frameworks

The present manuscript will use a theoretical and practical application of Intersectionality Theory, in combination with Microaggression Theory to frame the paper. These complementary approaches will be used in the analysis of prior literature, methodology, results, and discussion of the present research.

Intersectionality. Generally, intersectionality is applied in the academic sphere as an analytical framework that helps scholars to understand and explain relationships between complex forms of discrimination. It allows for in-depth investigation and understanding of forces working in tandem with one another to create and maintain social injustices and the status quo (Cox & hooks, 2015). Indeed, intersectionality is a powerful analytical tool that allows us to make sense of the world around us, including unequal power distribution related to multilayered social divisions of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and age, among other considerations (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Through an intersectional lens, we are able to zoom in on the “interconnected nature of cis-normative-imperialist-white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy” (Cox & hooks, 2015). Intersectionality informs us about the ways in which social divisions and layers of oppression operate together, as they are built upon each other and work together to create and maintain unequal and unjust divisions of power.

Intersectional frameworks help us to identify and understand interpersonal power relations, including how people relate to one another, and who is advantaged or disadvantaged

within social interactions and systems (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Along with interpersonal power, a comprehensive intersectional framework also sheds light on disciplinary power – how do systems and policies of discipline operate within society? How does power operate within dominant Western culture? Perhaps most importantly, who holds power, and who wields power over others?

bell hooks (2014) identifies intersectionality as a movement growing out of the unique and pervasive oppression of Black women, evidenced by the conditioning of American people to devalue and cast Black women's bodies aside. Within the Americas, Black women's bodies and labour are both exploited and undervalued, beginning with the earliest instances of Black women's exploitation in the American slave trade and continuing today. America's legacy as a leader in agriculture and manufacturing was built upon the backs of Black women, who were distinguished from white women and relegated to domestic work or hard, physical labour, suffering at the abusive hands of their employers (Gross, 2015). In recent decades, Black women's labour has been exploited "at the bottom of the service sector" (Brewer, 1999, p. 35), and anti-Blackness underlies the modern overrepresentation of Black women in the private prison industry (Gross, 2015). Gendered anti-Blackness continues to threaten Black women's lives, and as such, it is crucial that the present research acknowledge that understandings of intersectional theory are a result of Black feminist political movements, driven by a social structure that ranks white men first, white women second, Black men third, and finally, Black women last (hooks, 2014).

Perhaps the most salient illustration of intersections of oppression experienced by Black women can be seen "when politically conscious white feminists minimize sexist oppression of Black women" (hooks, 2014, p. 77). Black women's liberation has historically come second to

that of white women. Black feminist movements and understandings of intersectionality had little to do with prior iterations of feminism that were initiated and lauded by white women. These initial Western feminist movements focusing white women's interests at the forefront, strove for equality between white male/white female economic status, pushing the interests of Black women to the margins (hooks, 2014). Black women were placed squarely at the intersection of racial and gender discrimination and held there by a movement of predominantly white women, eager to give up their household status to Black women, who they saw as worthy of this "degrading work" (hooks, 2014, p. 128). This analysis and contextualization of intersectionality illuminates intersectional frameworks as an ongoing struggle that is neither finished nor established.

The continued oppression and devaluation of Black women's work and Black women's bodies necessitates an understanding of intersectionality that extends beyond an analytical framework and is applied in practice. Given deeply entrenched roots in practical liberation movements for Black women, intersectionality is inherently political. Intersectionality is a call to action. Social marginality based on race, class, ability, sexuality, gender, and religion "form a system of interlocking oppressions that are mutually reinforcing" (Zine, 2006a, p.18). Responding to discrimination and dismantling oppressive systems involves actively challenging those systems that uphold social injustices. Within the context of Western academic institutions, in order to confront oppressive systems and respond to the barriers faced by racialized and complexly marginalized women, it is essential to use methods that challenge the white superiority that underlies the subordination of Blackness, and Black women in particular. By centering the experiences of marginalized women of colour within research and analyses, we gain novel insights and perspectives that allow us to deepen our understanding of the concepts

and paradigms that inform this worldview (Hill Collins, 1990). The application of intersectionality in both theory and practice allows for research that centers the experiences of Black women and women of colour, who define their own experiences and realities. The present thesis applied an intersectionality framework to theory and practice, centering the voices of Muslim women in conversations surrounding them.

Microaggression theory. Microaggression Theory provides a novel framework to understand the ways that subtle discrimination operates throughout the world today (Nadal, 2018; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). Most simply explained, microaggressions are “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273) based on someone’s identity as a member of a marginalized community. A basic understanding of microaggressions posits that discriminatory messages are often delivered in the form of subtle looks, gestures, or vocal tones (Nadal, 2018; Sue et al., 2007). The microaggression framework is further broken down into three distinct components: 1) Microassaults, insults that are typically overt and can be seen as discriminatory, 2) Microinsults, interactions based on existing stereotypes about specific groups, and 3) Microinvalidations, communication that dismisses, refutes, or undermines the lived experiences of people belonging to marginalized groups (Nadal, 2018). For example, a Canadian hijabie Muslim woman who is confronted by someone saying her hijab is not Canadian may be experiencing a microassault. A hijabie Muslim woman who is wrongly assumed to work in the service industry when she arrives to her place of employment as a professor may be experiencing a microinsult, while a hijabie Muslim woman who visits a career counsellor and has her experiences of discrimination dismissed may be experiencing a microinvalidation. These components work together to make up the microaggression framework that informs the present work.

This framework is based on the understanding of discrimination as a source of emotional trauma. A central tenant of this understanding is the importance of validating experiences of discrimination and understanding microaggressions as reflections of greater systemic problems of discrimination in North American society (Nadal, 2018). Exposure to microaggressions results in specific psychological dynamics that further marginalize those who experience them. One such dynamic is illustrated in conversations surrounding intent and impact. While perpetrators of microaggressions may not intend harm, and may view their own behaviour as innocent, well intentioned, or innocuous, those who are targeted often experience microaggressions as hurtful or biased (Nadal, 2018). Due to dominant group socialization processes, many people hold implicit bias toward marginalized groups. This bias acts as a barrier to understanding the experiences of people who face discrimination (Nadal, 2018; Sue et al., 2007). In the dominant cultural landscapes of the United States and Canada, there is a “pervasive understanding of microaggressions as minimally harmful” (Nadal, 2018, p.43). This understanding contributes to the difficulty many people who experience microaggressions face in attempting to respond adequately and appropriately to those who discriminate.

Often, people who face microaggressions find them difficult to address. In particular, many find it difficult to respond appropriately to instances of micro- insult or invalidation, because challenging a seemingly innocuous comment is often perceived by the aggressor as over-reactionary (Nadal, 2018). Further, given the sometimes-fleeting nature of discriminatory comments, the setting may not be appropriate for lengthy discussion surrounding impact and intention. This particular aspect of the impact of microaggressions interacts with the invisibility of unintentional bias, as people are who socialized to see microaggressions as normal may become defensive or deny their culpability in the reality experienced by another (Nadal, 2018).

Denial of the existence and impact of microaggressions is common in North American society, both in interpersonal exchanges as well as within greater systems and structures.

As the field of research and action surrounding microaggression theory continues to grow, it is important to be aware of the particular way that systems and institutions attempt to discount the legitimacy of the framework. Many who challenge the existence of microaggressions cite a lack of empirical or experimental evidence for their existence (Lilienfeld, 2017). These challenges clearly echo the divisions of race, gender, class, ethnicity, citizenship, sexuality and ability that are evident within academic institutions (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Considering the long history of powerful academic organizations systematically disadvantaging racialized and otherwise marginalized populations, denying the legitimacy of the microaggression framework may demonstrate yet another way that marginalized populations are silenced and invisibilized in academic contexts. Given the pervasiveness of racial and religious discrimination in Canada and the United States, it is crucial that we listen to people who report experiencing microaggressions, identify them as discrimination, and recognize the negative impacts of these encounters (Nadal, 2018; Sue et al., 2007).

Another, more complex critique of the microaggression framework surrounds the suggestion that microaggression theory may minimize blatant forms of violence by highlighting only subtle and covert forms of discrimination. Garcia and Johnston-Guerrero (2016) suggest that while many racially biased incidents on university campuses do fit within a microaggression framework, many incidents are “blatantly racist” (p. 48). These occurrences of overt discrimination cannot be described as subtle forms of racism, such as micro- insults and invalidations, which are both highlighted in microaggression theory. In fact, much of the existing literature on microaggression theory references microaggressions as “modern racism” (Wong, et

al., 2014, p. 183). The assertion that racism today occurs implicitly and only in subtle ways is problematic for several reasons. It ignores the interpersonal, systemic, and systematic violence that disproportionately impacts people of colour. A microaggression framework does little to address the modern racism reflected in the disproportionate incarceration of Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic people in Canada and the United States (Gaiter, Potter, & O'Leary, 2006) and may ignore or minimize incidences of police violence, which occur at alarming rates. For example, empirical investigations into gendered police violence have rendered disturbing findings, suggesting that women who identify with racial and ethnic minority groups experience significantly higher rates of police victimization, particularly if they have experienced intimate partner or sexual violence in the past (Fedina, Backes, Jun, Shah, Nam, Link, & DeVylder, 2018).

For the aforementioned reasons, it is crucial that the present application of a microaggression framework explicitly acknowledge existing violent racism and reject a view of present-day racism that discounts or ignores blatant racist practices at the level of individuals, groups, or systems. Less hostile aspects of the microaggression framework, micro- insults and invalidations, are often accepted as the sole type of racism seen in the modern world. However, the present work acknowledges that explicit and overt violence based on racial, religious, gender or any other form of discrimination does exist at individual, group, and institutional levels. Utilization of the microaggression framework is intended to center and validate participant experiences while aiding in the exploration and interpretation of the prevalence and consequences of insidious discrimination toward marginalized people. However, it was applied in the present work with the understanding that alongside covert discrimination, overt violence toward marginalized communities remains both prevalent and macro.

Finally, the present work uses a microaggression framework in conversation with intersectional theory and practice. Lewis & Neville (2015) bring intersectionality and microaggression theory together in their Gendered Racial Microaggressions scale for Black Women. In constructing this scale, the authors intended to develop an intersectional measure of microaggressions that acknowledges the particular and unique experiences of Black women (Lewis & Neville, 2015). This scale serves as one example of the ways that intersectionality theory and microaggression theory can work together, enabling us to probe at the nuanced and complicated nature of microaggressions. Additional research by Nadal et al. (2015) highlights the importance of exploring microaggressions through an intersectional lens, acknowledging that “traditional conceptualizations of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, etc.) do not act independently but rather are interdependent” (p.149) and that the intersections of various identities impact how microaggressions are received and perceived. This important interaction of theory within the literature has contributed to the integration of microaggression and intersectionality theories within the present work.

Implications for the research project. Using a research framework that is intersectionality-informed, while acknowledging the existence and impact of microaggressions as valid experiences has been an important aspect of the present study. Prior research and theory indicate that multiple forms of intersecting oppression impact Muslim women, connecting to religion, race, ethnicity and gender (Lépinard, 2010; Zine, 2006b; Zine, 2008). Therefore, in order to understand the experiences of Muslim women adequately, the present work incorporates the understanding that multiple forms of discrimination impact lived experiences of women who are pushed to the margins of North American society. Further, in framing this work,

understanding lived experience of microaggressions as a legitimate and valuable way to learn about the world is essential.

Intersectionality. Hill Collins & Bilge (2016) point out that in the North American domain of power, the system is set up such that we see the cultural landscape as inherently conducive to fair play. Without an intersectionality informed perspective, any success or failure is attributed to personal responsibility, and systemic factors that contribute to success and failure, such as institutional discrimination, are often ignored. Due to ignorance, whether deliberate or unintentional, failure to acknowledge how present-day systems disadvantage those categorized as racial or religious minorities results in a cultural landscape within which religious and racial discrimination grow and flourish.

Prior literature identifies that the line between different forms of discrimination, including racial and religious discrimination, is often blurred (Sheridan, 2006; Zine, 2008). Muslim people who are discriminated against on the basis of race often experience compounded discrimination due to their religious identity (Sheridan, 2006). Islamophobia often provokes a racialized view of religion, allowing for the conflation of racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination (Underwood, 2018). Therefore, an intersectional analysis of these experiences is essential in order to address how this conflation shapes the experiences of Muslim people. This conflation is evident when considering the Islamophobic attacks experienced by South Asian people post-9/11 in the United States, irrespective of religious affiliation or identity (Underwood, 2018). Islamophobia is uniquely characterized by the intersection of distinct forms of discrimination that work together, negatively impacting the lives of Muslim people.

Meaningful understanding and consideration of the ways in which racial, religious, and gender oppressions work together, impacting the mental health and wellbeing of people with

intersecting identities is a crucial aspect of the present work. In working with Muslim women in Canada, acknowledgement of within-group differences is an important element of this work. Considering how ethno-racial identity differentially impacts Muslim women is an important aspect of this study that speaks back to the application of Intersectionality Theory. From an intersectional perspective, acknowledging and responding to difference of experience within groups is important to ease tension within groups (Crenshaw, 1991). This acknowledgement and delineation of difference in The Muslimah Project was intended to act as a “source of social empowerment and reconstruction” (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1242). The application of Intersectionality Theory in this study creates potential for empowerment of a diverse group of Muslim women, who share space and hear the similar and varied experiences of other Muslim women within Waterloo Region.

Not only is the analytical aspect of an intersectional framework crucial to this study, an understanding of intersectionality-as-praxis is essential for the present research. While analytical interpretations of intersectionality-informed approaches are valuable in scholarship, we cannot dismiss the power relations that have made the adoption of this analytical framework legitimate (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). When considering power and oppression, we must openly accept Intersectionality Theory as a form of political discourse and action. Intersectionality Theory was born out of political action “far broader than passively receiving knowledge or contemplating or even criticizing the world” (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 33-34) around us.

At its core, intersectionality is about creating something that turns the oppressive status quo on its head. It is action-oriented, and as such, fits well within the framework of community-based research. Community-based research is inherently action-oriented, collaborative, and

explicitly acknowledges and attempts to shift traditional power dynamics in research (Ochocka, Moorlag & Janzen, 2010).

Microaggression theory. While originally conceptualized as a theoretical framework to explain subtle day-to-day instances of discrimination experienced by racial minority communities, Husain & Howard (2017) argue that Microaggression Theory can be extended to religious discrimination “by virtue of the historic racialization of religion” (p. 144). Theorists and researchers attest that historical persecution on the basis of religious affiliation in pre-modern America provides evidence that many of the same forms of discrimination experienced by racialized communities are felt similarly within various religious communities.

While still gaining traction, the relationship between the microaggression framework and mental health is growing in the literature. Prior research has examined microaggressions in various domains, including mental health (Forrest-Bank, 2016). These research findings suggest a link between microaggressions and negative mental health outcomes, including anxiety, binge drinking, stress, lower self-regard, and both short- and long-term depression (Blume, Lovato, Thyken, & Denny, 2012; Wong et al., 2014). Furthermore, prior research has examined microaggressions in the context of mental health support programming and found that microaggressions in therapy are linked to more strained therapeutic alliances, with less empathy between counsellors and clients (Burkhard & Knox, 2004). An important part of shifting power dynamics within the present thesis lies in the understanding of experiences of microaggressions and other instances of discrimination as legitimate sources of knowledge.

In combination, both Intersectionality Theory and Microaggression Theory informed the approach to collecting, holding, and interpreting knowledge in the present project.

Islamophobia

Expressions of Islamophobia. Islamophobic behaviour and expressions are common across the Western landscape and have been documented extensively in Europe and North America. Anti-Muslim discrimination takes many forms, including offensive jokes, comments, verbal abuse, as well as threatening and violent behaviour (Tell MAMA, 2017). Often, anti-Muslim hate is expressed subtly, in non-criminal and ambiguous ways (Nadal, Griffin, Hamit, Leon, Tobio & Rivera, 2012; Tell MAMA, 2017). Prior research identifies instances of anti-Muslim microaggressions as common occurrences. These interpersonal interactions are often uncomfortable, and Muslim people experiencing this form of discrimination feel stigmatized (Tell MAMA, 2017). For Muslim people who experience more subtle or ambiguous forms of discrimination, it is often difficult to respond adequately.

Further analysis of religious microaggressions experienced by Muslim people have led researchers and theorists to identify “a differential construct of religious microaggressions” (Husain & Howard, 2017, p.141). Recently, researchers have identified six themes specific to anti-Muslim microaggressions emerging from qualitative data. According to this framework, Islamophobic discrimination is often tied to: 1) Endorsement of religious stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists; 2) Pathology of the Muslim religion; 3) Assumptions of religious homogeneity, or the assumption that all Muslim people hold the same religious beliefs and subscribe to the same religious practices; 4) Exoticization, wherein someone asks an individual an excessive number of questions regarding their religious or cultural background; 5) Islamophobic or mocking language; 6) Considering Muslim people alien, that is, when someone who is Muslim is assumed to be a foreigner, or is consistently asked about where they come from (Husain & Howard, 2017; Nadal et al., 2012). Microaggressions reflecting these themes emerged consistently throughout

prior investigation and have been identified by Muslim participants as the main ways in which they experience subtle discrimination.

Instances of discrimination fitting within these themes may take many forms. Examples include poor treatment of Muslim people within educational institutions and businesses. This treatment is reflected in widespread assumptions and policies that deem education or credentials earned outside of North America as inferior to those nested in Western education systems. Further, pathologizing assumptions underlie the experiences of many Muslim women, who report being asked about what they are allowed to do within the context of Islam, or why they may choose to wear a head covering (Nadal et al., 2012). The subtle invalidation of different religious worldviews is a common form of microaggression, and these forms of discrimination are often thought to be harmless in the mainstream. Recent data from the UK informs our knowledge that the most common forms of anti-Muslim hatred include verbal abuse and threatening behaviour (Tell MAMA, 2017). While anti-Muslim discrimination occurring at the interpersonal level is more likely to be consistent with experiences of microaggressions (Nadal et al., 2012), it is important to note that anti-Muslim hatred is observable at both interpersonal and institutional levels (Tell MAMA, 2017).

At both the interpersonal and institutional level, Islamophobic discrimination seems to correlate with significant world events. For example, Muslim people in Europe “experienced increased hostility post–September 11th” (Sheridan, 2006; Tell MAMA, 2017). Violent expressions of anti-Muslim hatred seem to be closely linked to acts identified as terrorism. Following the World Trade Centre attacks in 2001, many Islamic cultural centers were targeted with attacks professed to be retaliatory (Sheridan, 2006). Mosques were targeted with “vandalism, graffiti, arson, and bomb attacks” (Sheridan, 2006, p. 319). In 2002 alone, an array

of hate crimes was reported against Muslim people across the United States, including destruction of property, physical and verbal assaults, and discrimination in employment practices (Nadal et al., 2012). The reverberation of these events was felt throughout Muslim communities. One study found that 82.6% of Muslim participants “reported an increase in religious discrimination post-September 11, 2001” (Sheridan, 2006, p. 324).

While discrimination on the basis of world events has had a great impact on Muslim people, other significant expressions of anti-Muslim hate remain prevalent. In 2007 in the United States, Muslim Americans reported a significant number of cases of civil-rights violations against Muslims in the US, “including 141 reported cases of passenger profiling and 613 reported cases of hate mail” (Nadal et al., 2012, p. 16-17). The continued pattern of discrimination and hatred at the hands of individuals, communities, institutions, and the state have various negative impacts on Muslim communities. Research from around the world has attempted to understand the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim people and communities.

Impact of anti-Muslim discrimination. Assumptions of criminality, being treated as a foreigner in one’s own home, and assumptions about cultural and religious practices impact multiple aspects of how Muslim people experience and move through the world. Constantly explaining one’s own position and background in order to be understood as competent or viewed as an equal in society adds another layer of labour to the experience of being Muslim in Europe or North America. These experiences actively disadvantage Muslim people in society, and privilege those who are assumed to be non-Muslim. The societal consequences of anti-Muslim discrimination include exclusion from educational spaces and the work force, among other public spheres (Zine, 2012). Interpersonal and structural barriers that limit opportunities for

Muslim people are often not obvious or immediately visible (Zine, 2012). Such barriers are reflections of subtle and invisible forms of exclusion and discrimination.

On an individual and community level, social exclusion and marginalization on the basis of anti-Muslim discrimination result in personal experiences of loneliness and isolation. Prior research indicates that experiences of anti-Muslim hate result in a diminished sense of belonging and feelings of alienation (Awan & Zempi, 2015; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2015). These impacts are particularly harmful for wellbeing. Isaac Prilleltensky (2012) defines wellbeing as a positive experience in which objective and subjective needs are balanced and satisfied. According to this wellbeing framework, justice is an integral component of wellbeing. Within the present work, wellbeing is considered a broad concept, encompassing a variety of factors, including experiences of social justice, access to resources and opportunity, as well as employment and meaningful community involvement. Research indicates that Muslim people experience disempowerment and social injustices as a result of discrimination (Zine, 2012), indicating that discrimination contributes to a lack of wellbeing.

In addition to diminished wellbeing, social isolation as a consequence of discrimination is related to significant mental health issues, including anxiety and depression, while a sense of belonging is associated with positive mental health outcomes (MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Conner, Spas, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2010). Extensive international research has explicitly identified that anti-Muslim discrimination impacts mental health and wellbeing. Significant negative mental health consequences of anti-Muslim discrimination include decreases in self-esteem, as well as feelings of fear, anxiety, and worthlessness (Awan & Zempi, 2015; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2015). Both quantitative and

qualitative research has yielded findings that identify numerous negative mental health impacts of anti-Muslim hate and discrimination.

Prior qualitative research involving microaggressive discrimination toward people belonging to marginalized groups suggests that people are able to recall detailed accounts of experiences of discrimination (Nadal, 2018). These recollections include emotions experienced in the short term as well as the lasting impact of these experiences. In particular, subtle instances of discrimination leave targets feeling confused and wondering whether something they experienced as insulting or dismissive was in fact intentional. Prior research has identified that dealing with microaggressions can be exhausting for those who experience them (Nadal, 2018). Further, encountering and responding to high levels of microaggressions is associated with high levels of stress and poor mental health outcomes (Nadal, et al., 2012). While the mental health impacts of experiencing anti-Muslim hate are well documented, little is documented in the literature regarding “the internalization of Islamophobic messages” (Husain & Howard, 2017, p.142). Rich, qualitative research data that centers the voices of people experiencing Islamophobia is required to understand how those who experience such discrimination internalize anti-Muslim messaging.

Gendered Islamophobia

Literature has established that Muslim women in particular experience a unique form of oppression that occurs at the intersection of racial, religious, and gender discrimination (Lépinard, 2010; Zine, 2006b). A recent comprehensive study based in the UK suggests that anti-Muslim hatred is deeply gendered and raced, such that 56% of victims of anti-Muslim attacks are female, and 69% of perpetrators are white males (Tell MAMA, 2017). Findings from this report are echoed by perceptions of women in Canada, where results from a study conducted in the

Greater Toronto Area further indicate that Muslim women perceive greater discrimination than Muslim men (Litchmore & Safdar, 2015). Several themes related to forms and impacts of gendered Islamophobia emerged in the literature, indicating that gendered Islamophobia is related to identifying religious markers, such as clothing, multiple intersecting identities, surveillance and visibility, and common tropes of Muslim women as victims in need of saving by white Westerners.

Intersections of identity. In dominant Western society, diverse religious, racial, and gender identities of Muslim women are framed within narrow boundaries. These framings limit the capacity of Muslim women to independently locate their own identities and operate outside of the lines that have been drawn (Zine, 2008). Muslim women who are not perceived to fit the quintessential profile created in the West experience greater and more robust life possibilities. For example, those who are not veiled, or who have Western or European sounding names will experience their religious identity differently than those women who wear hijab (Zine, 2008). Privilege is also experienced differently by Muslim women who are white and bypass the conflation of race and religion that results in surveillance of specific Muslim women.

Muslim women also experience distinct realities on the basis of power imbalances between North/South “geo-political and economic disparities” (Zine, 2006a, p.11). The realities of Muslim Canadians, Muslim refugees in Canada, and those who have recently immigrated to Canada are vastly different, and reflect different experiences of socioeconomic mobility, employment, and privilege. In Western-based academic spaces, Muslim women benefit from a particular “social, political and economic location on the global landscape” (Zine, 2006a, p.11). Factors such as ethnicity, patterns of migration, age, and generational norms, among other

considerations, have significant impacts on Muslim women's experiences of gendered Islamophobia.

Further, racial differences in gendered Islamophobia are significant factors that dictate the experiences of Muslim women in the West. Anti-Black Islamophobia is a unique form of discrimination based on racial and religious identity. As Black women's bodies have historically been a cite for abuse and exploitation on small and large scales (hooks, 2014), it follows that Black Muslim women will experience further discrimination at the intersections of anti-Black racism, religious discrimination, and gender discrimination.

Surveillance and visibility. Muslim women's bodies, identities, and behaviours are scrutinized within the North American context. Muslim women experience pervasive forms of surveillance and judgment. Prior research indicates that these experiences are especially common for women "who are more visibly marked by religious attire" (Taylor & Zine, 2014, p. 7). Many studies demonstrate that Muslim women perceive greater discrimination than Muslim men, particularly if they are wearing a hijab (headscarf) or a niqab, a veil that covers the face (Awan & Zempi, 2015; Litchmore & Safdar, 2015; Tell MAMA, 2017). Research indicates that Muslim women who wear a veil become visible targets for anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination (Awan & Zempi, 2015). In Europe and North America, surveillance on the basis of visibility seems a salient and consistent theme underlying Muslim women's experiences.

For women who wear the hijab, Islamophobic discrimination can produce many obstacles to wellbeing, including difficulties finding and maintaining meaningful employment. Prior literature suggests that Muslim female leaders face employment issues due to many overlapping factors (Tariq & Syed, 2017). In particular, previous research highlights significant relationships between unemployment, underemployment and gendered Islamophobic discrimination for

women who wear the hijab. Findings from a field experiment conducted in the United States by Ghumman and Ryan (2013) indicate that women who wear the hijab experience formal discrimination when prospective employers perform call backs for interviews and choose how to administer applications. Furthermore, Muslim women who wear the hijab experience more interpersonal discrimination during hiring processes in comparison to applicants who are not visibly Muslim (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013). Women participating in this study also reported holding lower expectations to receive job offers (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013). Qualitative research from the UK further explores the relationship between gendered Islamophobia and employment for Muslim women. Tariq and Syed (2017) point to the significance of establishing social networks for Muslim women to showcase leadership, as well as ensuring that policy makers and employers understand the importance of intersectionality in the workplace.

Research on religious microaggressions further identified that gender-specific expectations exist for Muslim women and Muslim men. In the United States, Muslim participants described microaggressions that were specifically linked to gender stereotypes, emerging at the intersection of gender and religion (Nadal et al., 2015). Again, the research conducted by Nadal et al. (2015) demonstrated that women wearing face or head coverings were assumed to be lacking agency. Assumptions around choice and obligation label Muslim women as powerless. Muslim participants expressed that Muslim women's decisions to wear the hijab are inconsistent with the Western objectification of women, and therefore seen as threatening to Western gender ideals (Nadal et al., 2015). Wearing the hijab was identified as a central component of anti-Muslim harassment due to increased religious visibility. According to one participant within this study, Muslim women who wear the veil experience microaggressions and overt discrimination "based on their religion, their gender, or both" (Nadal et al., 2015, p. 157).

In the context of Islamophobic discrimination, surveillance and visibility of religious clothing undeniably impacts Muslim women's experiences.

Tropes and white saviour-ism. The trope characterizing Muslim women as *helpless victims in need of saving* is pervasive in the West and underlies many policies and practices in Europe and North America. Zine (2006a) articulates that constructions of veiled Muslim women in Western media paint them as “objects of desire, sensual, elusive harem girls” (p.3-4) yet disempowered as “backward victims of their heathen and misogynistic cultures” (p.4). Many communities in the West adopt the narrative that Muslim women are oppressed, and that Islam is inherently misogynistic (Olwan, 2010). Often, such beliefs spearhead a patriarchal impulse and attempt to rescue Muslim women (Al-Solaylee, 2017). Prior research identifies that assumptions and myths about child marriages and domestic violence are common consequences of gendered Islamophobia, expressed in discriminatory behaviour, such as characterizing the hijab as oppressive (Nadal et al., 2015). Based on assumptions that women do not hold agency over their own decisions, such behaviour communicates that Muslim women should assimilate to the dominant culture in order to truly be *free*.

The impulse to rescue women from their own families, cultures, and religions is reminiscent of old colonial images of a “white Jesus with his hands out, the world in front of him, and the Black and brown people at his feet” (Cox & hooks, 2015). While not explicitly ill intentioned, the images evoked by this narrative create and sustain adverse social conditions for Muslim women living in Canada. Within a country that espouses values of multiculturalism, Muslim women face many barriers, including social exclusion, isolation and underemployment. For many Muslim women, the very idea of multiculturalism has been placed at odds with gender

equality, such that Muslim women experience marginalization from the very feminist movements that claim to ‘empower and liberate’ women (Lépinard, 2010).

Day-to-day forms of harassment and discrimination are often by-products of the stereotypes generated through a “ubiquity of negative images and the dearth of equally salient counter-narratives to correct them” (Taylor & Zine, 2014, p. 7). The process of constructing such counter-narratives involves giving Muslim women control over the discourse surrounding their lives. According to Tariq and Syed (2017), community inclusion and leadership are essential in re-writing these narratives. Shifting away from paternalistic ideas and ideals toward an understanding of Muslim women as leaders in their communities, as active, empowered and complete human beings is necessary in order to begin addressing discrimination and its impacts.

Research Context

As Canada’s Muslim population continues to grow due to increased international migration and religious conversion (Zine, 2012), the need for conversations surrounding and involving the experiences of Muslim communities in Canada is increasing. In particular, Canada should be listening and responding to experiences of discrimination and how they impact the wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities. This is particularly important now, as recent data from Statistics Canada indicates that hate crimes against the Muslim population in Canada increased by 61% between 2014 and 2015 (Leber, 2017).

In particular, Waterloo Region is an important site for research; as the region was listed among 3 Canadian census areas with the highest increase in hate crimes between 2014 and 2015, alongside only Edmonton and Montreal (Leber, 2017). Furthermore, the highest increases in Canadian hate crimes were found to be on the basis of religious and racial discrimination (Leber, 2017). Examples of such hate crimes in Waterloo Region include hate-motivated violent assaults

and threats, and most commonly, graffiti containing ethnic, religious, and racial slurs, including swastikas (Rutledge, 2018). While many hate crimes occur at places of worship and businesses, local law enforcement officials have identified schools as the places most commonly targeted for hate crimes within Waterloo Region (Rutledge, 2018). These disturbing statistics and incidents indicate that discrimination on the basis of Muslim identity is on the rise in Waterloo Region.

Since November 2015, over 1 500 Syrian refugees have resettled in Waterloo Region (Government of Canada, 2017). Given the dramatic increase in local hate-crimes, and the influx of newcomer families to the area, Waterloo Region is a particularly important site for research and intervention. Further, it is important to understand the unique experiences of Black Muslim women within Waterloo region, who may experience further discrimination due to intersections of anti-Black racism and religious discrimination (Taylor & Zine, 2014). Given a recent influx of Muslim community members, as well as a dramatic increase in hate crime motivated by racial and religious factors, it is essential that research specific to discrimination within Waterloo Region be immediately prioritized.

Current social and political discourse within Waterloo Region also provides evidence for the importance of this research. In particular, academic spaces within the region have become a recent source of debate. In 2017 and 2018, university campuses within Waterloo Region were visited by prominent public figures espousing hateful anti-Muslim and anti-immigration rhetoric. These speakers were welcomed by local institutions, who understood their messaging as a harmless expression of *free speech* (Paradkar, 2018). Local activists and community leaders responded by staging peaceful demonstrations, alternate events, and reminding Muslim students, international students, and other marginalized community members that they have allies within the institution. In the wake of these debates and demonstrations, research that seeks to highlight

the importance of human rights of Muslim people in Canada and empower communities that are silenced and marginalized by hateful rhetoric is an important step in transforming discrimination.

Along with directly responding to community needs, the present project sought to respond to gaps in the academic literature. Much of the North American research that has been conducted surrounding Muslim women's experiences of discrimination is quantitative in nature, while robust qualitative analyses of Islamophobia mainly originate in the UK (Tell MAMA, 2017). Perhaps most importantly, very little research focuses on the unique experiences of Muslim women as they encounter the particular form of discrimination known as gendered Islamophobia (Lépinard, 2010; Zine, 2006b). The negative impacts of discrimination on mental health and wellbeing have been documented (Leber, 2017). The present thesis seeks to respond to the need for community-based, qualitative research that explores the unique experiences of Muslim women in Canada. Rich qualitative data may inform future initiatives and interventions based around community strengths and challenges and help service providers respond more comprehensively and appropriately to the needs of Muslim women. Along with informing service provision, the present study will provide valuable information for use by local community organizers and coalitions. With evidence-based knowledge surrounding the direct manifestations and impacts of discrimination within Waterloo Region, community leaders are better positioned to educate their networks and members of the broader community about methods of creating positive social change.

Research Objectives

Micro and macro forms of anti-Muslim discrimination communicate deeply harmful messages about Islam and are indicative of social undertones that disadvantage those people at whom they are directed. Prior literature suggests that intersections of oppression on the basis of

gender, race and class impact Muslim women in several ways. Discrimination directly impacts employment prospects, social mobility, lived experiences, mental health and wellbeing. These impacts are important to understand and address at national, provincial and community levels. Gaining an understanding of anti-Muslim gendered discrimination allows for the creation and maintenance of services that respond to the unique needs of Muslim women within Waterloo Region.

Working from a place of empowerment that 1) honours Muslim women's successes and agency, and 2) recognizes Muslim women as leaders in their own communities, the present project sought to center Muslim women's voices in the conversations that surround them. In this study, a team of researchers, community leaders who identify as Muslim women, and advocates came together to explore the impacts of discrimination experienced by Muslim women in Waterloo Region. The present project sought to create intentional space for Muslim women to come together to discuss challenges and identify community strengths in the face of discrimination. This project explores the effects of discrimination on women's feelings of belonging, mental health, and wellbeing.

Centering Muslim women's voices within their own communities is essential for challenging anti-Muslim hate and showcasing Muslim women's leadership potential, power and agency (Awan & Zempi, 2015). The present project employed qualitative research methods that brought together Muslim women from diverse backgrounds to explore community strengths and experiences of living at the intersection of different forms of discrimination. This exploration should inform future community projects and workshops aimed at reducing discrimination and increasing belonging within Waterloo Region, while addressing and improving mental health outcomes for Muslim women.

Methodology

Research Questions

Drafted by the research team, the following specific research questions were explored within the present work: 1) How do Muslim women experience intersectional oppression such as Islamophobia, racism and sexism within Waterloo Region? 2) How do Muslim women's lived experiences of discrimination impact their sense of belonging, mental health, and wellbeing? 3) What personal and collective strengths do Muslim women identify in the face of anti-Muslim discrimination? 4) What can Waterloo Region implement to improve sense of belonging, mental health, and wellbeing for Muslim women in the broader community?

Research Paradigm

Grounded in the belief that different research paradigms are not necessarily incompatible but rather complementary to one another (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010), the present thesis is aligned with the following two paradigms: (a) social constructivist (b) critical transformative. These research paradigms inform how reality is viewed, constructed, sought, and interpreted within the context of the present work (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Social constructivist paradigm. This study fits within a social constructivist paradigm that views knowledge as co-created and evolving. The chosen methodology for the present project is reflective of a desire to create welcoming community space that is shaped by researchers and participants who share with and learn from one another. From the very first iteration of the present study's initial proposal, project methodology was collectively agreed upon by all members of the research team. A social constructivist research paradigm acknowledges that the collective decision making process, the very presence of researchers, the academic setting, and the research context impact all parts of the present work. In terms of my

own positionality, understanding the power dynamics inherent in research, and the significance of my presence as a white, non-Muslim, researcher-outsider was essential in both The Muslimah Project research process, as well as the interpretation of data. Further, the unique power brought to the present project by all research partners, including women of colour and Muslim community leaders should be acknowledged. In the process of “combining the individual perspectives, resources, and skills of the partners, the group creates something new and valuable together—something that is greater than the sum of its parts” (Minkler, 2005, p.ii4). This understanding of shared knowledge that is constructed by the collective is compatible with the present community-based project.

Critical transformative paradigm. In addition to understanding the research process as an evolving process that must account for positionality and worldview of the researchers as well as the broader social context, the present project sought to be a force for social justice and social change. Community deliverables remain the driving force for the project and were of primary importance throughout the research process. Planned knowledge translation and mobilization activities include hosting a community forum based on study results in order to mobilize knowledge and encourage relationship- and coalition-building within the community. Results from this study have the potential to transform intercommunity dialogue and educate members of the broader community about local instances of discrimination and inequity. Furthermore, working within a critical transformative paradigm speaks back to *Intersectionality in praxis*, as an intentional, consistent, and ongoing attempt to conduct research that benefits community, in the wake of historical and present-day research that brings harm to marginalized communities.

Research Process

The present study is a collaborative venture between the Coalition of Muslim Women of Kitchener Waterloo (CMWKW), the Access and Equity Research Interest Group at the Centre for Community Research Learning and Action (CCRLA), and Wilfrid Laurier University. This research partnership was formed when community members from the Coalition of Muslim Women of KW connected with CCRLA to request some research documenting Muslim women's experiences of discrimination in Waterloo region. In response to this identified community need, our research partnership and the first draft of The Muslimah Project proposal was born.

The CMWKW was formed in 2010 as a way to strengthen the voices of Muslim women in the community, to develop understanding, and to foster intercommunity relationships within the broader community of Kitchener Waterloo (Coalition of Muslim Women of KW, 2018). The Coalition brings community together by hosting local workshops and events, while drawing upon Intersectionality to shape their organization and the political agendas they pursue (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Much of the work done by the Coalition focuses on dispelling myths about the Muslim community, building bridges between people from different ethno-racial and religious backgrounds, and providing networking and leadership support to Muslim women in the community. The Coalition also strives to support Muslim women in capacity building, while connecting them with essential resources within Waterloo Region (Coalition of Muslim Women of KW, 2018).

The Access and Equity Research Interest Group, of which I am a member, uses community-based research approaches to improve services, resources and supports for marginalized communities in the areas of health and social services. Dr. Ciann L. Wilson, the lab's research lead, specializes in community-based research within racialized communities. Her research applies critical race and class theory to issues in public health and sexual health,

including HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. Dr. Wilson is an ideal lead investigator for The Muslimah Project because her emphasis on meaningful reflexivity and community partnership in research informed my own approach to the research process. Dr. Wilson possesses a wealth of knowledge in community collaboration in research and provides comprehensive support in guiding the research of her students. Within her impressive body of work, Dr. Wilson highlights the importance of relationship in research partnerships, and of creating, facilitating, and sharing research in community. These principles are reflected in the formation and maintenance of the relationships between all members of the present research partnership in The Muslimah Project.

Research Design

The present thesis uses an exploratory, Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) design. This type of research is characterized by systematic inquiry undertaken by research partners based in community. CBPR focuses on advocacy, an understanding and prioritization of community needs, as well as individual and collective empowerment. Research that is based in community is often characterized by a pursuit of justice through social change or transformation (Ochocka et al., 2010). Community-based research involves equal partnerships, where all members work collectively on action-oriented projects (Minkler, 2005). The pursuit of transformative research design involves the explicit and ongoing acknowledgement of power differentials within research (Padgett, 2012). Roles of research team members are assessed on an ongoing basis, and clear, honest team communication is an essential aspect of accountability in CBPR. Most importantly, community-based research provides an example of *Intersectionality in practice*, wherein power is shared, traditional methods of researcher-community relationships are challenged, and community needs and goals remain at the forefront of the work.

Participants

Demographic information. Participants in the present study were women who self-identify as Muslim and reside in Waterloo Region. Additional demographic information was collected according to priority areas for community partner, the CMWKW. All participants spoke English. Participants lived in either Kitchener (31%), Cambridge (34.5%), or Waterloo (32.8%), and represented many different countries, including Canada, India, Pakistan, Iran, Lebanon, Somalia, Eritrea, Jordan, Syria, Turkey. Of the participants who completed the demographic survey, a large majority identified as heterosexual (75.5%) with just 5.6% of women identifying as bisexual or homosexual. At the suggestion of community partner, the CMWKW, the present project did not inquire about participant gender identity and expression. In terms of employment status, 20.8% of participants reported full time employment, while 43.4% reported part-time, casual, or self-employment. Just 15.1% reported unemployment, with other participants reporting full-time student status, or other. Educational backgrounds of participants ranged from receipt of a high school diploma to a graduate degree, with 73.6% of participants having obtained a college, undergraduate, or graduate degree. In terms of self-described ethnicity, 32.1% of participants identified as ‘brown,’ 20.8% identified as ‘Black,’ 18.9% identified as ‘Arab,’ while just 5.7% of participants identified as ‘white.’ Participants ranged in age from 16 to 57 years old.

Participant recruitment. The present study employed a comprehensive recruitment and engagement strategy, including displaying posters (Appendix A) at local libraries, community centres and Wilfrid Laurier University, and recruiting participants through email list-serves of local social services organizations that cater to racialized community members. Posters were displayed at The Family Centre, Muslim Social Services, The Kitchener Downtown Community Health Centre, The Working Centre, Lutherwood Employment Services, among other local

organizations. Posters were circulated using social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter. Due to the community-situated nature of this project, our engagement strategy also involved utilizing existing relationships between leadership in the CMWKW and various community members and organizations.

Sampling. In order to develop a fulsome understanding of the different and nuanced experiences of Muslim women in Waterloo Region, the research team took a maximum variation approach to sampling (Padgett, 2012). The Muslim community in Waterloo Region is comprised of people from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, including people from Asian, South Asian, African, European, and Middle-Eastern descent (Waterloo Masjid, 2018). Using the networks provided by each research team member, participants represented a diverse variety of ethno-racial groups.

Education and employment for Muslim women in Waterloo Region was a key area of interest identified by the CMWKW. Together, members of the research team were able to recruit participants from different educational backgrounds, including those who attended Islamic school in Canada, those who attended public school in Canada, and those who obtained post-secondary education, whether in Canada or internationally. Furthermore, women from a diverse range of ages were recruited in order to encourage intergenerational conversation and diversity among participants. While diversity within the sampling process was a key priority identified by the CMWKW, gender and sexual identity and expression did not emerge as key areas of diversity when sampling in the present project.

Methods of sampling involved connecting with large organizations and institutions, for example, the Muslim Students' Association at Wilfrid Laurier University. Although the recruitment strategy was enhanced and informed by networks and community connections

facilitated by the Coalition of Muslim Women of KW, the sample was not limited to Muslim women who are affiliated with the Coalition.

Sample size. The Coalition of Muslim Women of Kitchener Waterloo has approximately 40 members and over 100 volunteers. In Waterloo Region more broadly, the Waterloo Masjid, The Islamic Centre in Waterloo Region, reports a community with roughly 11 000 members (Waterloo Masjid, 2018). Given the size and reach of the Coalition, and the overall Muslim population of Waterloo Region, the research team estimated that the sample size of 55 Muslim women makes up just under 1% of Muslim women in Waterloo Region. In alignment with standard qualitative research practices, a sample size of N=55 is ideal for qualitative community-based work. As such, the research team hopes that the present study provides a rich and diverse sample for qualitative data analysis.

Data Collection

Focus groups. A series of five focus groups, with up to 12 participants in each, were conducted to gather data from Muslim women in Waterloo Region. Generally, focus groups involve bringing together a group of research participants and asking targeted open-ended questions of the group (Padgett, 2012). Similar to a semi-structured interview, focus groups allow for the natural expansion of ideas, and are facilitated by one or more leaders who are tasked with guiding the conversation.

Using an Intersectionality framework, the present work understands the research process as a tool for empowering community (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). The use of focus groups to encourage group conversation within the present project was a deliberate methodological decision made collectively by the research team. Leaders from the CMWKW indicate that many Muslim women in Waterloo Region do not often encounter opportunities to share their unique

stories. Further, Muslim women may benefit from an environment that allows them to understand their experiences as valid in the context of other Muslim women's similar experiences. Focus group discussions afford participants the unique and empowering opportunity to share their testimonies of lived experience and build upon the stories of others.

Procedure

Research team. Our research team is made up of academic researchers, community leaders, practitioners and activists. Research procedures began with regular monthly meetings between all members of the research team. The entire research team worked together throughout the present project to create plans and strategies for details specific to focus groups with Muslim community members. Meetings between research group members were an evolving process, as is characteristic of community-based research. Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) stress that *Intersectionality in practice* is “not simply a heuristic for intellectual inquiry but is also an important analytical strategy for doing social justice work” (p. 39). The research team for the present project worked together to incorporate this understanding of research as justice work into all collective research procedures by reviewing community goals of the project regularly and checking in throughout the research process.

Focus groups. Data for the present thesis was collected during a series of five focus groups. Each focus group had a different central theme, in order to elicit data from a diverse group of Muslim women. Two of the five focus groups took place in Kitchener, while one was held in Cambridge, in order to serve that specific population. Two focus groups were targeted for specific demographic groups of Muslim women. One focus group was held specifically for young women, ages 16-24 (*FG 2*), while another group was held for Black Muslim women (*FG 5*) to share their unique experiences. These targeted focus groups were created with the intention

of creating a more comfortable atmosphere for participants, while ensuring that the research team was creating space for often neglected voices to be heard within the present project. Focus groups took place at accessible locations around Waterloo Region, including libraries, community centres, and The Family Centre in Kitchener. The Family Centre is home to the CMWKW office and is accessible to a large proportion of Muslim families in Waterloo Region. This is also an ideal location for the study, as many Muslim families access services at the Centre, and are familiar with the space.

Prior to beginning focus groups, all participants were provided with a \$30 honorarium for their time and commitment, as well as \$5 to cover public transportation costs.

As focus groups began, group members each completed a survey with some demographic questions (Appendix B). The project lead and one to two members of the research team reviewed the informed consent form (Appendix C) and research process with participants and discussed potential risks and privacy concerns with participants. All participants completed and were provided with a copy of the consent form. Focus groups were conducted according to the focus group framework (Appendix D) and were audio-recorded to capture rich data and the details of participant responses. Specific consent was obtained for this recording.

Only members of the project team with the requisite ethics clearance had access to raw data from the study. Data is stored securely within password-protected software on a password-protected computer within a locked laboratory.

Establishing the Quality of the Data

In order to ensure that the data collected throughout the present project was rich and high quality, the research team implemented several strategies that are outlined below.

Prolonged and substantial engagement. Prolonged community engagement is a key component of community-based research. Continuing and growing the partnership between the Access and Equity Research Interest Group and the Coalition of Muslim Women of Kitchener Waterloo was essential for the growth and development of the present study. Substantial community-based relationships in research lead to more honest and genuine engagement (Padgett, 2012, p. 208). Further, strong community engagement allows for deeper inquiry, and for more detailed data investigation.

The strong collaborative relationship within The Muslimah Project team enabled varied and thorough participant recruitment, as multiple community networks were leveraged. Further, this relationship may have helped to strengthen the quality of data collected within The Muslimah Project. Due to the strong relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim research team members, focus group participants may have experienced greater trust toward non-Muslim research team members, leading to greater candidness throughout the focus group process. Finally, ongoing and substantial engagement allowed the team to keep track of what is important and applicable throughout analysis. The relationships built within the present project allowed us to feel more comfortable within the work, and to penetrate to the roots of social issues and understand participant experiences more completely.

Member checking. Following data analysis, participants were invited to return for a member checking session in order to ensure that data and analyses reflect the needs and experiences of Muslim women participants and community members. The member checking session was voluntary and was made up of a small group of women from across all focus groups. Attendees were asked to review the main themes emerging from focus group data and were provided an opportunity to offer feedback on each finding and its accompanying quotation. This

member checking session helped to ensure that key themes and findings resonated with focus group participants. It also ensured that quotations used within the present work spoke directly to the key findings that participants wished to highlight.

Peer debriefing and support. Throughout the present study, research team members met monthly in person to debrief. Following each focus group, the research team met via conference call. The research team also offered support to each other by attending community events together and sharing news about The Muslimah Project collectively within the community. Debriefing took place prior to and following significant project milestones, such as the first focus group. Peer debriefing and support are key methods to keep research honest and keep researchers accountable to results (Padgett, 2012).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis. All focus group conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All potentially identifying information from the focus groups was removed for confidentiality purposes. Transcripts were checked for accuracy by the research team prior to data analysis. Transcripts were coded using NVivo qualitative analysis software Version 12. NVivo 12 is a form of qualitative analysis software used to analyze text and identify recurrent themes and subthemes. In the present thesis, NVivo 12 was used to code and thematically analyze data drawn from all five project focus groups. Emergent themes were clustered and organized to identify patterns of meaning that speak back to Muslim women's experiences of discrimination and the relationships between their experiences and the central outcomes of mental health, wellbeing, and belonging.

Thematic analyses in the present project utilized a combination of deductive and inductive analysis techniques. The theoretical frameworks of Intersectionality and

Microaggressions helped inform a basic initial codebook, while other themes emerged directly from the data. This approach allows for meaningful application of theory to the present work, while also reflecting the words of participants themselves, continuing to center the voices of Muslim women within the project.

Generally, when constructing themes directly from data, participant experiences may be rendered into grounded theory that is in turn shaped by the research process. In this view, the “analysis is contextually situated in time, place, culture, and situation” (Charmaz, 2006, p.131). Unlike objectivist grounded theory, which is rooted in a positivist paradigm and views developing theory as an establishment and iteration of truth, constructivist grounded theory involves the understanding that both data and analysis are “created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p.130). This approach to thematic analysis involves a contextual view of data, not only theorizing content from research participants, but also acknowledging that the developing themes are interpretations themselves (Charmaz, 2006). This awareness was crucial in my own process of reflexivity as I conducted analyses for the present project. Emerging themes can be understood as products not only of the raw data, but also of one’s own interpretations. Thematic analysis will necessarily be shaped by those conducting analyses, who will inform themes that develop in distinct ways.

Ethical Considerations

This community-based research project was approved by the Research Ethics Board of Wilfrid Laurier University (REB # 5768). Data collection began only after participants had been provided a thorough explanation of the project and had provided written consent. The project lead and research team reviewed the consent form and research process with participants and discussed any potential risks and privacy concerns.

The process of sharing experiences in a focus group setting did have the potential to prompt unpleasant or painful memories for participants. Taking this into account, one of the core research team members (a leading member and acting chair of the CMWKW) was available in her role as a registered social worker to provide culturally relevant and sensitive counselling support as necessary, throughout the focus groups. Additionally, participants were provided with contact and referral information for alternative counselling options.

Honorarium payments to focus group participants may also present ethical challenges. In order to address these potential issues, all participants were made aware that if they had the desire to withdraw consent at any time, or leave the space for any reason, they were able to keep their honorarium to honor the time they had spent up to the point of withdrawal. Overall, risks presented to participants within the present work were minimal. Further, the benefit of bringing community members together and responding to discrimination within the community outweighs any potential risks to participants.

Results

Muslim Women's Experiences of Discrimination and Islamophobia in Waterloo Region

In each of the focus groups conducted, Muslim women reported routinely experiencing discrimination within Waterloo Region. Within this major finding, both overt and covert examples of discrimination were shared, and the unique ways that discrimination operates in the lives of Muslim women was an overarching theme that emerged from the data.

Subtle discrimination. Within the major finding that Muslim women throughout Waterloo Region routinely face discrimination, thematic analyses revealed that subtle or covert discrimination is the most common form of discrimination within Waterloo Region. This larger

theme of insidious discrimination shows up in many ways. Several women directly referenced this subtle discrimination throughout the focus group process:

“So, that's what essentially what discrimination kind of looks like but it's in the city. It's mainly like microaggressions, very subtle racism because they know that if they you know do something physically, there are consequences for it.” – Participant, FG 5

“Yes, so, I was just going to go generally on what was said here because it's kind of a lot of the times, people say discrimination as like something very big. But, most of the time, it's very subtle, and you wouldn't think that people can notice it, but we can always feel it.” – Participant, FG 3

Assumptions and stereotypes. Data indicated that subtle discrimination operates based on assumptions and stereotypes that underpin Muslim women's experiences in Waterloo Region. Data revealed that the broader community makes many assumptions and generalizations about Muslim community members based on stereotypes. Assumptions center around many aspects of Muslim women's lives, including background and experiences, education level, income and employment status, family dynamics, and language.

“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.’ [...] I get that so much, and it's like ‘why? Is it because I wear a niqab?’” – Participant, FG 4

“The bad thing is that, those who are like stereotypes some people have in their mind. For example, like at Costco, [a] lady who was helping me with a, like a membership, she was assuming that I do not have any salary or income. And, my husband is the one who is like the first. And, it makes me feel bad because this assumption is like based on what?” – Participant, FG 1

Teaching others. Another illustration of subtle discrimination within Waterloo Region is the tendency of members of the broader community to relegate Muslim women to the role of teacher. Although often framed as an expression of curiosity, many Muslim women recognize the nature of repetitive questions about their faith as inappropriate, and reflective of entitlement within the broader community.

“like my neighbour asks me like ‘did you wear hijab all the time, while you're sleeping?’ I said ‘no, I do not.’ ‘Do you have hair on your head?’ ‘You want to see? Come inside I will show you.’ So, they have a lot of surprises about us, and we should, and it is not very like on us to answer all the questions because sometimes we don't want to answer. We have our frustrations too.” – Participant, FG 3

A key aspect of this sub-theme lies in the often-inappropriate nature of the questions being asked, or the inappropriateness of context. Many women reported being asked personal questions about the presentation, clothing, or faith by strangers, or during interactions with various service providers within the community:

“So, I decided to keep my hijab on during the massage, like I kept like the under-cap thing on. And, she was like ‘you know you can take that off, because I'm a lady’ and I'm like ‘okay’. She's like ‘why do you even wear that anyways? Is it because the men aren't,’ I don't know, she's like talking about things about like tempting men and stuff. I'm like ‘what?’ I was [thinking] like okay, I came here for a massage, I came here to relax. And, she just kept going on and on.” – Participant, FG 2

Overt discrimination. While subtle discrimination was identified as the most prevalent form of discrimination experienced by Muslim women within Waterloo Region, experiences of overt, hostile discrimination were commonly reported and emerged as a sub-theme of discrimination. Threats of physical violence were rare and did not emerge consistently within this sub-theme in the data, however, verbal abuse and other threatening messages have played a key role in Muslim women's experiences of discrimination within the community.

“I remember this one time. Very recent time, where like I was driving, and like somebody like literally started swearing at me. Like telling me, take off my scarf, and like blatant cussing me out type thing, and it was very like what the heck but like it was kind of like okay. You know like it's more of like a, it's, you start internalizing it more.” – Participant, FG 5

“I grabbed the chips and the lady behind me said like ‘all these hungry Muslims’. And, I was like, I was speechless. And, it hurts.” – Participant, FG 1

As illustrated in the first quote above, expressions of discrimination affecting Muslim women in Waterloo Region may be direct and clearly abusive, such as yelling and swearing directly at them. However, overt discrimination may also be delivered indirectly, making its way into every day conversation, as demonstrated in the second quote above. Both quotes represent discrimination specifically targeting Muslim identity. Often, these expressions of overt discrimination reflect complex forms of discrimination that target multiple aspects of Muslim women's identity.

Intersections of Identity

Another key theme that emerged from thematic analysis is that discrimination falls along multiple intersections of identity. Focus group data indicated that discrimination is layered, and impacts people differently depending on various factors. Within the data, 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. During focus group conversations, women discussed how these layers interact to impact women differently depending on their own intersecting identities:

"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

Gender. Discrimination that focused on gender identity for Muslim women was generally related to stereotypes and preconceived notions of Muslim women held by members of the broader community. Assumptions about family dynamics and gender roles were underlying

much of the gender-based discrimination reported by Muslim women. Women also reported experiencing gender discrimination within employment settings.

“For those who choose the scarf, like to wear headscarf. Yeah, when they see it happened to one of my friends. Like she is teaching at university, and when one of those, it was like an election, and somebody came to the door and wants to say like: ‘Okay, vote for him’. [Instead,] she said ‘Okay, when your husband comes home to talk to him’. And, she said: ‘Well, why? I have my own vote. So, why should I wait for my husband?’ Because immediately she sees the scarf and she’s like okay, this lady is not like good enough to talk about elections.” – Participant, FG 1

“I’m just saying like the layers continue. And then, I got into my first co-op as a female in tech, that’s another thing. So, I didn’t realize how that would affect me but like I’ve encountered you know like entitled men that would like basically assume that because I’m a female programmer, I don’t know my shit. Like I can’t program and then, like he implied that I was like a diversity hire, and then things like that.” – Participant, FG 2

Notably, discrimination on the basis of gender was closely related to women’s decision to wear the hijab, niqab, or other pieces of clothing that indicated their practice of Muslim faith.

Visible markers of faith. Women’s clothing choices and whether or not those choices reflected a visible affiliation with Muslim faith was a major sub-theme within intersections of oppression experienced by Muslim women. Directly related to gender, the hijab itself was reported to elicit discrimination, whether overt or subtle. Other clothing choices, such as whether women choose to wear pants, skirts, a long dress etc. were also reported to impact their experiences of discrimination.

“Even if it was a hijab, like let’s say I’m wearing a pant, some hijabies wear a skirt. They experience more discrimination. Those people I think experience the worst. It depends on what I’m wearing then, people treat me differently.” – Participant, FG 1

“I definitely say like how you dress, your scarf. [...] Also, like I have a lot of friends who don’t wear a hijab but they do have an accent. And, they really struggle with that portion. So, I think it’s not only how you look, it’s also how sound. And, that affects how people treat you.” – Participant, FG 1

The data revealed layers of discrimination experienced by Muslim women, such that gender discrimination interacts with discrimination based on clothing choices. Further, focus group data indicated that gender and clothing choices interact with racial discrimination.

Racism. Racism toward Muslim women of colour emerged as a prominent form of oppression that intersects with other themes, including gender and clothing choices. Experiences of racism were also closely related to the assumptions made about people of colour and the stereotypes from which assumptions originate.

“But it's so quick that's somebody's visually Brown or diverse, anything, they'll use that word. Terrorist. Not even knowing their background, their name.” – Participant, FG 2

“I feel like skin colour always plays a big part too. Muslim, you have a hijab, you have colour in your skin, you have a beard, colour of skin, right. There's the Muslim part, and then there is skin colour, right. Put those together, it's like people don't know how to act anymore like, right. That plays a big part in discrimination towards the Muslim community for sure.” – Participant, FG 2

Anti-Black racism. Focus group data illustrated that racism experienced by Muslim women certainly dictates their experiences of discrimination and oppression in Waterloo Region. Data further revealed that Black Muslim women experience a unique form of discrimination that centers around their Black identity. Invisibilization within both the Muslim community as well as the broader community emerged for Black Muslim women when reflecting on aspects of their identities that elicit discrimination within the community.

“Well, basically, like you can, like any representation that Muslim people get, it's usually not a Black Muslim person, right. Like the default is always like an Arab or a Brown person, right. So, we have that intersection to deal with because like on top of being a Black woman, you're also a Muslim woman, right. So, it's like a lot of things. Like our experience is just very unique, right.” – Participant, FG 5

“Like it was exacerbated because I was visibly Muslim and so, that like being Black and being Muslim. It got to a point where a lot of people didn't even think that I spoke English, and, so, when I did speak English, they kind of would get surprised, and I'm like a student at the University of Waterloo but they, like it got to a point where I started now having to prove myself, and justify the positions that I'm in, and the spaces that I would take up” – Participant, FG 5

Feelings of Community Representation, Ownership, and Responsibility

A unique and consistent theme emerging within the data lies in Muslim women's feelings of community ownership and responsibility for representing their entire community, Muslim people more generally, and even Islam in its entirety.

"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[s] a lot of pressure on people."

- Conversation between participants, FG 1

Several sub-themes emerged in the data that work together to create a prominent feeling of community representation, ownership, and responsibility on the part of Muslim women. These sub-themes include teaching others, proving oneself, and apologizing.

Teaching Others. Within the theme of community ownership and responsibility, the theme of teaching others clearly emerged. A similar sub-theme related to teaching others also emerged under the umbrella of subtle discrimination, however, the specific ways that it operates within the lives of Muslim women differ in terms of the impact. Our analyses revealed that the pressure to teach others in the broader community about Islam is experienced in a dual way by Muslim women. It is experienced as implicit discrimination, as outlined above, which causes Muslim women to feel targeted when discriminatory questions are asked of them. However, the sub-theme of teaching others also appeared within the data as an experience of internal pressure. Even without the receipt of inappropriate questions, teaching others appeared to be closely related to Muslim women feeling the need to act as community representatives, both of their own Muslim community within Waterloo Region, and of 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

“Yes, definitely with my environment friends, like again, like for some of them, they come from up north Canada, right. So, they're just like ‘you're the first Muslim I've met’. And, I'm like ‘I'm sort of happy I'm the first one you met’, you know what I mean. Like I want to give you a really good image and they're like you know I'm pretty cool, so you know they're just like you know. I feel like I'm teaching them new things all the time and they're very open, and they are really nice people, right. So, I've had a good experience with that but, definitely like you know teaching people.”- Participant, FG 2

Some participants recognized this responsibility as a burden lying outside of their own area of expertise. Although the opinion was not shared by everyone, some participants articulated that they do not wish to hold the responsibility of teaching the broader community about Islam, their own religious practices, or their physical expressions of religion.

“And, the one thing she always said is: remember, you're not an Islamic scholar, you don't have to answer these questions. And for her to give us that training, all of sudden it was like okay, I can actually say ‘you know what, if you want to learn, open the book yourself and read it. I'm not an Islamic scholar, this is how I live my life’. And, so, that was actually empowering, and that message just needs to get out a bit more I think I just realized we don't have to answer for everybody or answer every question that comes to us or defend Islam.” – Participant, FG 1

Proving oneself. A second sub-theme falling under the umbrella theme of community ownership and responsibility is the feeling of having to prove oneself. As Muslim women, participants spoke about the desire to prove to the broader community that they deserve to be treated equally. They spoke about the desire to represent Islam in a positive way, and prove their non-violence, their kindness, and their ability within educational and occupational settings. The need to prove oneself also includes the extra effort that Muslim women feel they should exhibit throughout their everyday lives in order to present Islam well, and to match the respect, status, or success obtained by their non-Muslim counterparts.

“For the second part, since 9/11, Muslims across the world have to defend themselves. And, define ‘it's okay, you know, I'm not a terrorist.’ Not every Muslim is a terrorist, we are put on the defensive all the time. That is a reality that I think Muslims, regardless of where they come from

deal with it. How they respond to it depends on their culture, their background, their education, comfort zone, that and multiple other factors.” – Participant, FG 1

“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 70s, you need to have 90s.” – Participant, FG 2

Apologizing. Within the data, the sub-theme of Muslim women feeling the need to apologize on the behalf of other Muslim community members or apologize for portrayals of Islam in a broader context was apparent. Women clearly identified the need to be apologetic and provided several examples of scenarios in which they take blame upon themselves for the words or actions of others. This theme was reflected on an individual level, but women also reported feeling the need to apologize for the practices of large government bodies within an international context.

“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

“But anyways, the Danforth shooting happened, and everyone knew like I was from that area, [...] And, like the guy who shot up those people, he was Muslim, he was mentally ill, but he was Muslim, right. And, I remember like it happening, everyone's whispering and like they're all my friends but it's like what are they supposed to say? [...] They're like whispering and I'm sitting there like typing and I felt like I wanted to like go in a hole, man. I just didn't want to be there because I felt so ashamed and I was like, I felt like I was responsible to like speak up, be like hear me guys, I'm sorry, this guy was like mentally ill. I didn't know what to say, like I was ashamed. Like, for the first time, I was actually ashamed.” – Participant, FG 2

While community representation, ownership, and responsibility emerged as an important theme across focus groups, differences in how Muslim women experience this theme were noted across racial and generational lines. The research team noted that this feeling was most prominent among South Asian identified women, slightly less so among Arab identified women, and most uncommon among Black Muslim women. Further, youth participants strongly voiced

the pressure they feel to fulfill the role of representing Islam within their own social networks and the larger community.

Impacts on Muslim Women in Waterloo Region

A key finding that emerged from the data is that discrimination occurring along various intersections of identity negatively impacts Muslim women's overall wellbeing, experiences of belonging, and mental health within Waterloo Region. Focus group data revealed that experiences of discrimination in Waterloo Region negatively impact Muslim women in a variety of ways. The impacts of discrimination that occurred most often within the data include underemployment and a lack of opportunity, a lack of belonging, and negative mental health impacts, most prominently, isolation.

Wellbeing. Negative impacts on overall wellbeing were reported by Muslim women throughout focus group data. Women explained being impacted by discrimination and social injustices in multiple ways, shifting and changing their approach to everyday interactions, as well as impacting how they feel moving through the community.

“Yes, and those feelings kind of just, they stay with you throughout you know, you just learn to be more cautious, and more closed off. And, it's so frustrating because you know, if you're not a normally closed off person, to have to move into that state, and always be in the defensive, it's very tiring. So, in that sense, it can [have a] huge impact on a person.” – Participant, FG 4

Aside from reflections on general wellbeing, the main facets of wellbeing that were reported by participants as being negatively impacted by discrimination were opportunities for employment and other meaningful community involvement, feelings of belonging, and feelings of safety within the community.

Employment and opportunity. An important aspect of wellbeing is the opportunity one has to meaningfully contribute to their community through employment and community involvement. Focus group data revealed that Muslim women experience high rates of

underemployment and unemployment within Waterloo Region, despite competitive levels of experience and education.

“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

“I feel like the hijab and name. So, applying to a job, there's so many times where I applied with my resume, and you know what I mean. You're at an interview or you get an interview, then someone says like [name]. But when you get an interview and you walk in and you see the shock on their face instantly. [...] Like I don't know what you guys were expecting but there is diversity within the world.” – Participant, FG 2

Belonging. Focus group data revealed that discrimination against Muslim women within Waterloo Region results in Muslim women feeling unwelcome in many spaces. This negatively impacts feelings of belonging. During focus groups, women shared instances of being criticized by members of the larger community, who were overtly discriminatory and specifically challenged their right to be in Canada, creating a feeling of exclusion, or lack of belonging.

“I experienced that, one day I was entering Tim Horton's with my 2 kids, and there was one man, and then all of a sudden, [...] He asked me but his face was very angry, like frustrated, ‘are you Canadian? Are you [a] Canadian citizen? When are you going to be [a] Canadian citizen?’ I'm a permanent resident now. So, you know like suddenly I couldn't understand why he's, ‘why are you asking this?’ I told him, and ‘not yet, but I will be Canadian citizen. But I'm proud of being here, I like Canada’ you know, this kind of thing.” – Participant, FG 4

Safety. In addition to impacting feelings of belonging, participants reported that experiences of discrimination resulted in them feeling unsafe within many spaces in Waterloo Region.

“So, I used to go to the University of Waterloo. So, over there, I genuinely did feel like a lot of engineering students there, and a lot of the students like pre-med and stuff like that, and accounting are people of colour, mostly Asians, all types of Asians. So, generally when I was in those buildings and stuff like that, you know you feel very safe and stuff like that. But then, I myself was in the Fine Arts program, and I was. I think it's one of the few programs on campus where White people are actually the majority on campus. So, you can very much actually feel out of place in that program like even though the rest of Waterloo, I felt safer in the Engineering Buildings, and the Health Sciences Buildings, and stuff like that because there's more people of colour over there, more ethnicities and stuff. Versus in my own program building, it was very much I am the odd one out. I kind of stuck out there like a sore thumb, and sometimes, depending

on who was there, sometimes I wouldn't like, stay there to finish my assignments. We would have been like okay, there's going to be just White people here now or there's just going to be people who I know to be more aggressive here. I don't feel entirely safe” – Participant, FG 3

Mental health. Throughout focus group data, Muslim women identified several ways in which mental health is negatively impacted by discrimination 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

The most common negative mental health impacts of discrimination identified by Muslim women include feelings of isolation, difficulties with self-identity, and decreased self-esteem.

Isolation. One of the most frequently occurring mental health consequences of discrimination that emerged throughout focus group data is feelings of isolation from the broader community.

“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

“So, you don't have anyone to support you, to witness for you. Everyone, even if there is no one, non-Muslim, the non-Muslim protect the non-Muslim, and then you, you stay like you are alone.” – Participant, FG 3

Identity. Throughout focus group data, Muslim women reported struggling to understand or find their identity, due to discrimination they have experienced within the broader community. In particular, women who identify as Canadians and were born in Canada or have been Canadian citizens for an extended period of time reported feeling lost in terms of their own identity as Muslim women in Canada.

“it's almost like having to fight it on two fronts and having to constantly, you know, debate what you are.” – Participant, FG 1

“And, like I am Muslim, but like I'm not a White person but I grew up with them, they're my friends. So, it's just like what am I? [...] I think those are the issues which affect mental health, affect our self-esteem, our confidence. And, those are issues we can't talk to our parents about.” – Participant, FG 2

Self-esteem. Low self-esteem as a result of intersectional discrimination emerged clearly in the focus group data. Many women explained that they struggled with finding their place, and as a result struggled with their identity, which ultimately led to low self-esteem. Others explained that navigating the situation of dealing with discrimination itself can negatively impact your confidence and self-esteem.

“[...] I kind of shut my African identity away. I kind of went through a self-loathing phase, for a very long time.” – Participant, FG 5

“But when this happens to you, you walk out of that place, feeling like a little creepy crawly inside, just wanting to hide under the carpet and wondering ‘why was I not able to stand there and say ‘get lost’?’ or whatever, you know. So, on the one hand, it does make it you feel like that.” – Participant, FG 1

Community Needs

A valuable aspect of The Muslimah Project focus groups was the identification of several important community needs within Waterloo Region that would benefit Muslim women.

Thematic analyses revealed that the most common community needs 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.

Opportunities for intra-community dialogue about mental health. A main theme emerging from the data identified dialogue about mental health within Muslim communities as a crucial community need. Generational differences were also identified throughout the data, such

that Muslim women discussed older generations' hesitancy to engage in dialogue about mental health.

“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

“Where I come from mental health was not talked about. It was never even heard of. It was a bad thing to talk about it. It was a bad thing to address it. So, my generation is the generation, where we are learning how to deal with them, with the new generation, with the new culture and everything.” – Participant, FG 3

Culturally relevant mental health supports. In addition to open dialogue about mental health within Muslim communities, a major community need that emerged from the data is the need for culturally relevant and responsive mental health supports. Many women within focus groups identified a lack of representation of Muslim people in support roles as a serious issue within Waterloo Region.

“[...] 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

“Yes, like going to a therapist is one thing, but having a therapist with the same cultural background or like religious background, it's a very important thing. And, like, my mom is a therapist and she's a Muslim woman, she wears a hijab. And, I'm like I'm so fortunate that she's there because I can, like if my friends go through something, I recommend her. Like I recommend her as a therapist. But like I've had Muslim friends that have gone through like very trauma experiences, and they go to a therapist, and it's a white woman that cannot, she just can't understand the background, like the added societal pressures that like have like led here to that situation.” – Participant, FG 2

Education for broader community. Another key community need that emerged from focus group data is the need for education for the broader community in Waterloo Region.

Throughout focus groups, Muslim women explained the need for the broader community to understand issues impacting Muslim community members, as well as increased understanding

about Islam in general. Many participants suggested that this may help to decrease anti-Muslim discrimination within Waterloo Region.

“[...] 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

“Education in schools will help a lot. Like 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. I wanted to go as soon as possible because while I was reading those stuff, people were around me, people were seeing me. And, those people are the same people that are in my school. So, education would be helpful too.” – Participant, FG 1

Discussion

Muslim Women’s Experiences of Discrimination and Islamophobia in Waterloo Region

In each focus group, Muslim women participants indicated that they have experienced overt and covert discrimination within Waterloo Region. Many women shared stories and experiences of being targeted with verbal attacks and inappropriate comments specifically focused on their appearance as Muslim women. These experiences of discrimination as described by women within the focus groups relate to many themes discussed by scholars who study microaggression theory (Nadal, 2018; Sue et al., 2007). An analysis of women’s experiences of subtle discrimination, overt discrimination, as well as perceptions and framing of discrimination work together to help us understand the unique experiences of Muslim women within Waterloo Region.

Subtle discrimination. Overt discrimination toward Muslim women in Waterloo Region was regularly reported throughout data collection. However, one of the key findings from The Muslimah Project surrounds the prevalence and regularity with which Muslim women encounter subtle forms of discrimination that may or may not be intentional, but nonetheless call into

question their own confidence and belonging within the broader community. Two key patterns arose through the analysis of subtle discrimination, including the prevalence of comments and questions from the broader community that are rooted in assumptions and stereotypes about Muslim women, as well as the frequency with which Muslim women are asked to answer inappropriate questions about their own faith and practices.

The subtle discrimination reported by Muslim women echoes theorizing around microaggressions. The microaggression framework posits that a great deal of discrimination experienced by marginalized communities is received in the form of subtle, covert, or innocuous comments within the broader community (Sue et al., 2007). Results indicate that this subtle discrimination is a common occurrence in the lives of Muslim women that impacts their wellbeing.

Using microaggression theory, Husain and Howard (2017) have created a framework that captures the means by which religious microaggressions impact Muslim community members. The central themes within this framework reflect the experiences of Muslim women documented within the present work. According to Husain and Howard (2017), Islamophobic discrimination is often tied to six main tropes. Our results aligned with this framework in several ways. First, Husain and Howard (2017) discuss microaggressions being tied to endorsing religious stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists. Within focus groups, several women reported being asked whether their family had ties to terrorism, beginning at a very young age. Next, the authors suggest that pathology of the Muslim religion contributes to broader communities' readiness to discriminate against Muslim people. This concept clearly emerged within the focus groups, as broader community members would often ask whether Islam subjugated Muslim women. A third mechanism through which subtle discrimination operates lies in the assumption of religious

homogeneity, that is, the assumption that all Muslim people hold the same religious beliefs and subscribe to the same religious practices. This emerged within our data in several instances. For example, Muslim women reported being questioned about their fasting practices during Ramadan by members of the broader community.

The next major alignment between our results and this framework lies in the idea of exoticization. Husain and Howard (2017) explain that exoticization is observed when a community outsider asks an individual an excessive number of questions regarding their religious or cultural background. The regularity with which Muslim women were approached to answer questions about their own religious practices or Islam more generally is staggering. Many women reported this as being commonplace within their own lives.

Women participants within the present study reported experiencing Islamophobic or mocking language, another key aspect of Husain and Howard's (2017) framework for religious microaggressions. The final aspect of this framework involves Muslim people being treated as an *alien in one's own land*, that is, where someone who is Muslim is assumed to be a foreigner within their own country. Many women reported confronting this assumption and being repeatedly asked where they come from. The damaging nature of this occurrence was recently highlighted on Laurier's own campus, when a group of young Muslim women were accosted by a white woman, who accused them of not representing Canada and not being Canadian enough due to their choice to wear hijab (Patton, 2019). The majority of young Muslim women involved in this specific incident identified as Black, and just one woman within the group was deemed to look acceptable by the attacker – the only non-Black woman within the group.

Many of the scenarios and experiences of discrimination shared within the present study reflect aspects of microaggression theory. In many cases, participants felt as though the

discrimination from the broader community was unintentional. In fact, at the beginning of focus groups, many women indicated that they had never experienced discrimination. However, these participants went on to reveal their own stories of subtle and overt discrimination upon hearing the stories of others. This may indicate that creating space for women to share with one another empowers them to name their own experiences as discriminatory. This occurrence also aligns with the principle of microaggression theory that states that subtle discrimination can be hard to name due to its implicit nature and that many targets of subtle discrimination do not immediately identify it as such (Nadal et al., 2012). Muslim women participants articulated the undue amount of pressure and stress that even unintentional forms of discrimination place on their shoulders. This pressure and stress are related to but differ from the extreme distress caused by instances of overt discrimination within the community.

Overt discrimination. Although subtle discrimination was the most referenced form of discrimination emerging from focus groups, participants described several instances of overt discrimination occurring within Waterloo Region. Threats of violence and/or instances of verbal abuse were reported in each focus group. While these instances reflect some major components of microaggression theory surrounding micro-assaults (Nadal, 2018), that is, more direct instances of discrimination, the impacts of such scenarios are anything but micro. Women stated that instances of overt discrimination made them feel hurt, out of place, and threatened.

While microaggression theory may be utilized to frame some of the most pervasive forms of subtle discrimination, it fails to recognize the continued experiences of overt discrimination faced by Muslim women. This failure is highlighted in the criticisms surrounding microaggression theory offered by several theorists. For example, Garcia and Johnston-Guerrero (2016) challenge the umbrella application of microaggression theory, suggesting that the

language of ‘micro’ minimizes the very large impacts of this type of discrimination, dismissing even acute instances of discrimination as small. Results from the present study indicate that overt discrimination within the community creates unsafe space for Muslim community members, impacting their wellbeing, mental health, and belonging.

In Waterloo Region in particular, the acknowledgement of overt discrimination and its impact in the lives of Muslim women is essential. Many women reported experiencing overt discrimination not only in adulthood but beginning at a very young age. Occurrences of discrimination in early childhood, sometimes as early as kindergarten, indicate that overt discrimination is alive and well within Waterloo Region. These results highlight the disconcerting reality that even young children are exposed to discriminatory ideas and stereotypes about Muslim community members. The troubling suggestion here lies in the possibility that young children receive discriminatory messaging from the adults in their lives, who are better positioned to express their own discriminatory attitudes in subtle, covert ways. The subtlety of much discrimination may serve to lessen the perceived importance of the issue, as overt instances of discrimination are easier to label as such.

Intersections of Identity

Discrimination revolves around intersections of identity. Results from the present study indicate that there are layers to the experiences of discrimination faced by Muslim women within their communities. As identified by many prominent women of colour scholars, women experience discrimination differently based on their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic position, language, religion, ability, and many other factors (Cox & hooks, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990; & Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Findings from the present work align with the work of scholars and theorists who have paved the way for application of intersectional

frameworks within and beyond academia. In Waterloo Region, Muslim women experience discrimination that occurs along several lines of social identity, most prominently, gender, race, visible markers of faith, and Black identity. Reflected in the present findings is the idea that adding layers of difference, including accent, brown or Black skin, or the wearing of the hijab, creates further barriers for Muslim women to excel and thrive within the community.

The layered discrimination described by participants exemplifies how intersections of identity elicit multiple forms of discrimination that operate differently within the lives of women, depending on their placement within social categories. As suggested by scholars and activists, the present results indicate that the further one moves away from the ideal of a white man, the more marginalized one becomes (Cox & hooks, 2016). Results indicate that complex, layered discrimination occurs with regularity within the Canadian context.

Gender. Muslim women within the present study identify their experiences of discrimination as unique from their male counterparts. Gender discrimination plays a major role within North American society, as evidenced by many feminist scholars and activists that highlight the ways in which women's bodies continue to be regulated and governed by state systems (Andaya & Mishtal, 2016; Chesney-Lind & Hadi, 2017). However, as Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) have identified, the experiences of Black women and other women of colour are complex and extend beyond marginalization based exclusively on gender. Within the present study, very few experiences of discrimination shared by Muslim women reflect discrimination on the basis of gender alone. In fact, much of the discrimination that relates specifically to gender is connected to gendered markers of religion. For example, Muslim women were often targeted with anti-Muslim discrimination when wearing the hijab. This finding reflects the

central tenant of intersectionality theory, the interaction of gender discrimination with other complex forms of discrimination (Hill Collins, 1990).

Further, results indicate that discrimination on the basis of gender was closely linked to assumptions about the Muslim faith. In particular, the assumption that Muslim women are oppressed within Islam, are unable to hold employment or income, or are unable to make decisions without the approval of male family members. Within the present study, women reported being ignored in favour of their husbands when dealing with matters involving economic or political decision-making. Zine (2006a) explains that Muslim women in the West live under the weight of orientalist tropes that paint them as “debased, voiceless, and universally oppressed victims” (p.9), unable to navigate the world without help from a saviour. The present findings indicate that these orientalist stereotypes underlie the gender discrimination experienced by Muslim women in Waterloo Region.

Visible markers of faith. Findings indicate that visible markers of faith worn by Muslim women, such as the hijab and niqab, elicit both subtle and overt discrimination within Waterloo Region. For example, many women referenced being asked personal questions about their hijab, including why they wear it or whether they take it off in private. Prior research has identified the hijab and other visible markers of religion as a large factor in the targeting of Muslim women for discrimination within Europe and North America (Awan & Zempi, 2015). This finding indicates that Waterloo Region is a site of discrimination impacting Muslim women differentially depending on their decisions surrounding visible religious markers.

Examples of overt discrimination reported by women in the present study included verbal abuse, such as people referring to the hijab as a rag or a flag, and physical abuse, such as people forcibly removing the hijab from Muslim women’s bodies. Other scholars have studied instances

of discrimination that mirror those shared in the present study, centering around Muslim women's decision to wear or not wear clothing that indicates their religious faith (Perry, 2014). In Waterloo Region, the decision to wear a religious head covering is ostensibly a protected human right. Therefore, a woman's decision to express religious faith via items of clothing should not be linked to a desire to avoid overt discrimination. Results from the present study indicate that within the community, there is much to be done in order to ensure discrimination surrounding visible markers of faith does not continue within Waterloo Region.

Racism. Findings reveal that racism experienced by Muslim women within Waterloo Region is an ongoing issue that interacts with gender and visible markers of identity, among other factors. Many women within focus groups reported that Muslim women who wear the hijab and have skin that is not white experience the greatest amount of discrimination. In other words, results suggest that racialized Muslim women experience a unique form of discrimination on the basis of gender, visible religious identity, and race. This finding is in line with Intersectionality Theory, which suggests that people of colour experience increased barriers to wellbeing based on racism within present systems (Hill Collins, 1990; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Several women within the present study identified that skin colour could mean the difference between having a negative experience or a positive experience within this community, naming race as one crucial factor contributing to experiences within Waterloo Region.

Participants also identified that the concept of colourism or shadeism impacts their lives as Muslim women, suggesting that the darker the shade of one's skin tone, the more discrimination they experience. Many authors have written about colourism within Canada, the United States, and other colonized societies, explaining it as "a globalized preference for whiteness and/or lightness" (Dixon & Telles, 2017, p.405). This gradation of racial

discrimination is an important finding surrounding anti-Muslim discrimination, and discrimination within Muslim communities. Scholars explain that colourism is rooted in colonialism, and in particular in the marginalization of Black skin and Black bodies (Dixon & Telles, 2017). Given the mechanism by which colourism operates, this finding indicates that within the community of Waterloo Region, anti-Black racism needs to be recognized and addressed.

Feelings of Community Ownership and Responsibility

The feelings of community ownership and responsibility that were identified by Muslim women within the focus groups proved to be a unique and important theme. Through teaching others, proving oneself, and apologizing, Muslim women participants routinely explained that they feel the need to represent their families, communities, and Islam more generally within the broader community. Although this theme appeared prominently throughout the present study, the body of literature that expands upon this topic is relatively small. One theory that aligns with these findings states that Muslims have become a suspect community in the Western world (Cherney & Murphy, 2016). According to the suspect community thesis, restrictive Western state policies and practices have labelled Muslim people as members of a suspect community who are subject to distrust and high surveillance, resulting in self-censorship, and distancing oneself from the broader community, among other emotional and behavioural consequences (Cherney & Murphy, 2016).

In addition to the work of scholars, many Muslim journalists and community members have spoken out regarding the need to represent Islam and prove themselves within their broader communities. In the article “As an American Muslim, I’m Tired of Having to Prove I Belong,” Khalid (2016) explains that her international work as an American journalist has suffered from

her constantly having to prove to others that she belongs and is not a threat. Similarly, focus group members in the present study spoke about feeling the need to publicly denounce and apologize for the actions of Muslim people around the world, and prove themselves as proud Canadians. This enormous responsibility and sense of ownership is further explained by a diverse group of Muslim community members in the video “I’m a Muslim and I’m Tired of Explaining Myself” (AJ+, 2015).

Within the present study, the prevalence of this theme differed along racial and generational lines. While almost all South Asian participants reported living under this pressure, less Arab identified women voiced this theme. Further, many Black Muslim women felt that this need to represent Islam and their community was not applicable to them. However, across all racial and ethnic groups, young Muslim women under age 25 explained the pressure they feel to teach others about Islam, prove themselves, and apologize for the actions of other Muslim people, on a local and global scale. Within the academic literature, exploration of this theme was limited. However, our findings reveal that the experiences of Black Muslim women differ greatly from the experiences of non-Black Muslim women, especially given the identified inter- and intra-community anti-Black racism. It is plausible that these different perceptions impact the ways in which Black Muslim women are expected to represent Islam. If Black Muslim women feel invisibilized within their religious communities, it is feasible that they do not feel the need to represent Islam as broadly as their South Asian or Arab counterparts.

Given the prevalence of this theme and the articulation of its negative impacts by Muslim community members, careful attention should be given to the ways in which Muslim community members in Waterloo Region are asked or expected to represent Islam within the broader community.

Impacts on Muslim Women in Waterloo Region

Nadal (2018) illustrated using qualitative research methods that people belonging to marginalized groups who experience discrimination are able to recall detailed accounts of experiences of discrimination (Nadal, 2018). These recollections include both short- and long-term emotional impacts of these experiences. In particular, subtle instances of discrimination may result in feelings of confusion surrounding the intent of something they experienced as insulting or dismissive. Prior research has identified that dealing with subtle discrimination results in feelings of exhaustion (Nadal, 2018). Encountering and responding to high levels of microaggressions is associated with higher stresses and poor mental health outcomes (Nadal, et al., 2012). Findings from the present study exemplify the impacts of discrimination identified by Nadal et al. (2012) and other scholars, helping us to understand the impact of both subtle and overt discrimination on Muslim women within Waterloo Region. The present findings surrounding mental health impacts also speak back to the work of Johnston and Lordon (2012), who found that in addition to negative physical health outcomes, anti-Muslim discrimination has a negative effect on indicators of wellbeing, perceived social support, and healthy behaviours.

Wellbeing. Within the present study, wellbeing refers to a positive experience in which objective and subjective needs are balanced and satisfied (Prilleltensky, 2012), and where one experiences a general feeling of emotional and physical health and welfare. Muslim women within the Muslimah Project

identified several ways in which their needs were not balanced or satisfied within the context of anti-Muslim discrimination experienced in Waterloo Region. Prior research has established that experiences of anti-Muslim discrimination result in negative physical and emotional consequences (Awan & Zempi, 2015; Johnston & Lordan, 2012; Zempi &

Chakraborti, 2015). While the present work does not center a Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) Framework, it is worth noting that a large body of work identifies several social determinants that negatively impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities in Canada. Mikkonen & Raphael (2010) have long identified unemployment and job insecurity, social exclusion, gender, and race as determinants of physical and mental health in Canada. Here, the impacts of discrimination on Muslim women will be discussed using a combination of Intersectionality, Microaggression, and SDOH frameworks. Women participants indicated many negative consequences of discrimination affecting their emotional and social wellbeing.

Employment and opportunity. Employment and the ability to contribute meaningfully to one's community is a crucial aspect of health and wellbeing (Huffman & Cohen, 2004) that is interconnected with feelings of self-esteem and confidence. For Muslim women who wear the hijab, discrimination produces many obstacles to wellbeing, including difficulties finding and maintaining meaningful employment. Prior research informs us that female Muslim leaders face un- and under-employment due to a variety of overlapping factors (Tariq & Syed, 2017), most prominently, discrimination. The present research confirmed these findings, as many women discussed their own difficulties with finding meaningful employment, despite being well-educated in the field in which they were looking for work. These trends within Waterloo Region are incredibly troubling and indicate that Muslim women may be at greater risk for serious mental health consequences. Mikkonen & Raphael (2010) explain that employment provides people with essential income, as well as a sense of identity. Further, a lack of employment has been associated with anxiety, depression, and increased rates of suicide, while unemployment

“frequently leads to material and social deprivation” and psychological stress (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010, p. 17).

In addition to facing difficulties when searching for work, according to findings from the present study, Muslim women encounter both overt and subtle discrimination in the workplace. Instances of discrimination described during focus groups included verbal harassment from clients, facing stereotypes and assumptions from co-workers, as well as being required to answer a variety of questions about Islam, regardless of the appropriateness of the context or situation. According to prior research, workplace discrimination experiences interact with many other factors, including social class and visible markers of Muslim faith such as the hijab (Ali, Yamada & Mahmood, 2015; Robinson, 2016). Our findings confirmed that this type of discrimination occurs in Waterloo Region. While just a few women participants reported never experiencing workplace discrimination, most women could identify at least one instance of overt or subtle discrimination they experienced in the workplace, leaving them feelings isolated, unsupported, or alone at work. The confirmation that employment discrimination and bias and workplace discrimination are issues within Waterloo Region represents one important area for change within the community.

Belonging. A lack of feelings of belonging was reported throughout focus groups by Muslim women experiencing discrimination. Women described feeling different within the broader community and feeling as though they do not fit in. Prior research identifies a sense of belonging as an important part of wellbeing and a healthy life that is associated with positive mental health outcomes (MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Newman, Newman, Griffen, O’Conner, Spas, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2010). Findings from the present study align with the literature, such that participants reported that a lack of community belonging was associated with feelings

of loneliness and isolation. Several women mentioned that instances of both subtle and covert discrimination served as a reminder that they were different. In addition to this common theme, many youth participants reported feeling as though they moved between two worlds, experiencing a lack of belonging in the Western world at school, and a lack of belonging in the Muslim world at home. Given the positive mental health outcomes that a sense of belonging brings, addressing these experiences of belonging within Waterloo Region is particularly important for youth mental health.

Our findings also reveal that feelings and experiences of belonging within Waterloo Region are closely related to Intersectionality Theory. Within focus groups, Black Muslim women reported experiencing the lowest sense of belonging in comparison to other focus group members. One reason for this lies in Black Muslim women's experiences of exclusion from Muslim spaces and experiences of exclusion from Black spaces. According to intersectionality authors and theorists, living at the intersection of multiple identity factors that elicit discrimination results in unique experiences of exclusion and oppression (Hill Collins, 1990; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Findings from the present project indicate that intersections of discrimination impact feelings and experiences of belonging within Waterloo Region.

Safety. While related to experiences of belonging, experiences of feeling unsafe within one's community may have great impacts on the everyday decisions of Muslim women (Kwan, 2008). Within our study, several participants reported feeling unsafe in certain local spaces, such as school campuses and fitness facilities. These feelings impact the way women choose to move through the world, including the services and resources they access. Scholars have identified discrimination as a cause of restrictive behaviours that many Muslim women exhibit as a consequence of fear. For example, Kwan (2008) studied women's daily experiences before and

after the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York City. The increase in hate crimes following these attacks struck fear throughout Muslim communities. In this 2008 study, Kwan demonstrates that discrimination changed Muslim women's daily trajectories in terms of activities, social outings, as well as sense of safety within the community and level of fear. The behaviour changes identified by Kwan (2008) mirror those explained by participants in the present study. Many women in focus groups spoke about avoiding certain spaces, isolating themselves, or feeling reluctant to leave their homes for fear of encountering discrimination within the broader community of Waterloo Region.

Mental health. Previous literature has uncovered links between subtle discrimination and negative mental health outcomes, including anxiety, binge drinking, stress, lower self-regard, and both short and long-term depression (Blume, Lovato, Thyken, & Denny, 2012; Wong et al., 2014). Similarly, a SDOH framework highlights that gender and racial discrimination impact the mental health of people in Canada (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). These findings were echoed within the present study, as Muslim women participants reported the negative emotional and mental health impacts of discrimination within the community.

Isolation. Within various contexts, participants within the present work identified feelings of isolation and loneliness as a major negative mental health impact of discrimination. Isolation was named both as a feeling resulting from discrimination, as well as a feeling resulting from a lack of support from the broader community in response to discrimination. Prior research demonstrates that social isolation as a consequence of discrimination is related to significant mental health issues (MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Conner, Spas, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2010). Mikkonen and Raphael (2010) explain that women of colour and newcomers to Canada are at a particularly high risk of isolation, in line with their higher risk for

social exclusion. Many women within the present study identified feelings of isolation as a primary negative mental health impact of anti-Muslim discrimination, echoing prior literature.

As such, this is an important area for intervention within Waterloo Region.

Identity. Within dominant Western society, Muslim women's identities are framed within narrow boundaries (Zine, 2006a). Muslim women are often seen to be a uniform group, but this lens erases the diversity within Muslim communities and between Muslim women (Helly, 2012; Mohanty, 2003; Zine, 2006a). Throughout the present study, Muslim women identified a struggle to find and hold their own identity when experiencing discrimination from the broader community. In particular, women who were born in Canada but who wore hijab or other visible religious markers struggled to identify themselves within their contexts, mainly due to discrimination experienced on the bases of assumptions and stereotypes made about Muslim women within the secular context of mainstream Canada. For many women, this theme was related to the decision of whether or not to wear the hijab.

Again, the importance of intersectional analyses emerges when examining the present findings around identity for Black Muslim women. Similar to findings surrounding belonging, Black Muslim women reported feeling caught between two identities, neither of which fully accepts them. This finding reflects the principles of Intersectionality Theory, as those who belong to various oppressed groups experience unique and particular mental health impacts of discrimination.

Community Needs

Opportunities for intra-community dialogue about mental health. A key need identified by Muslim women within focus groups is the need for opportunities for Muslim women and Muslim community members to discuss mental health openly and honestly within

their own communities. As prior research has established, many negative mental health impacts of discrimination impact Muslim community members (Awan & Zempi, 2015; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2015). These impacts include feelings of loneliness, anxiety, worthlessness and isolation. The present findings indicate that in Waterloo Region, open dialogue about mental health within Muslim communities is rare. This is particularly concerning given the severe and various mental health impacts that discrimination has, and the commonplace nature of discrimination within Waterloo Region.

Culturally relevant mental health supports. One of the most salient findings surrounding mental health within Waterloo Region is the need for culturally relevant and responsive mental health supports. According to Muslim women participants, support networks in Waterloo Region need to diversify in order to adequately and appropriately support the mental health of Muslim women within the community. Prior research identifies that within healthcare, service providers working with marginalized populations should use “a framework of cultural competence interventions” (Betancourt, Green, Carrillo, & Ananeh-Firempong, 2003, p.293) that includes recruitment of people of colour and those from other marginalized communities in order to adequately support clients. In line with these findings, participants within the present study identified explicit changes that are necessary within the community. Namely, they articulated the need for supports and services that include adequate representation of people of colour, and Muslim women of colour, in particular.

This crucial community need can be partially explained using microaggression theory. Many women within the present study shared examples of instances of discrimination during interactions with support professionals or health care providers. As microaggression theory suggests, many instances of discrimination were subtle, appeared to be unintentional, but still

negatively impacted women participants (Sue et al., 2007). Many women explained that when accessing mental health or counselling supports, professionals would misunderstand their struggles, or suggest solutions that reflected a lack of cultural understanding. This subtle or unintentional discrimination often resulted in women avoiding spaces of support and choosing to approach future issues without visiting a counsellor or therapist.

Education for broader community. A final essential need identified through the present study is the need for 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. Keeping with Intersectionality Theory which values the often-undervalued labour of women of colour (Hill Collins, 1990; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016), if regional resources and networks take some of the labour of answering inappropriate questions and educating the broader community it will ease the responsibility felt by Muslim women in Waterloo Region.

Finally, the community should be educated about the forms and impacts of discrimination experienced by Muslim community members, and Muslim women in particular. Microaggression theory suggests that understanding both subtle and overt discrimination and how they are perceived can improve the experiences of marginalized community members (Nadal, et al., 2015). Understanding the innocuous forms of discrimination that Muslim women encounter will play a crucial role in changing these dynamics within Waterloo Region.

Limitations

The framework of community-based research allows for rich, specific, qualitative data. In the present work, this data spoke meaningfully to the needs of Muslim women within the

community. Within The Muslimah Project, the alignment between community partners and academic research team members proved to be invaluable. However, there are both strengths and limitations of academic-community partnerships in research. Community-academic partnerships require regular conversation and consultation, often adding additional steps and significantly more time to the research process. Different timelines, frameworks, and worldviews of academic and community partners may present challenges. For this reason, future research should carefully consider the unique requirements and implications of community-academic partnership in research. Within the present study, the intentional partnership between the CMWKW and academic research team members ensured that community partnership was a strength rather than a limitation.

Although The Muslimah Project research team made every effort to address potential limitations of the present work, there remain several avenues for future research that build upon the current project. Despite the research team's intention to include a truly diverse sample of Muslim women within The Muslimah Project, our demographic analyses revealed that a large majority of women participants identified as heterosexual (75.5%) with just 5.6% of women identifying as bisexual or homosexual, and the remainder not completing the question. Further, our demographic survey did not ask about gender identity or expression. This homogeneity proves to be a limitation of the present work. Future research should center the experiences of Muslim women and non-binary people with diverse sexual and gender identities and expressions, and investigate how these identity factors interact with the factors explored within the present work. Application of Intersectionality Theory should aid in the analysis of this next important step in research surrounding the impacts of Muslim women's lived experiences of discrimination.

Additionally, the educational backgrounds of participants in the present study appeared to be quite homogeneous, with 73.6% of participants having obtained a college, undergraduate, or graduate degree. Future research should explore these important distinctions, particularly in the context of Muslim women's high under- and un-employment rates. Future research should also explore the differences between newcomer Muslim women and those who have lived in Canada for an extended period of time. Understanding potential differences between these groups may illuminate how anti-discrimination initiatives should be targeted for the greatest impact within community.

The present project sought to create a community space based exclusively on shared Muslim identity, however, future research should investigate how differences in religious beliefs and practices impact Muslim women's experiences of discrimination. The absence of this investigative lens is a potential limitation of the present work. As such, analyses centered on religion and faith, including sect differences within Muslim community should be conducted in future work. Application of this lens will serve as a unique and important continuation of this line of research.

A final limitation to the present research lies in the language accessibility of focus groups. Due to a number of factors beyond the control of the research team, the present project was not able to offer focus groups in a language other than English. As such, this project did not incorporate the voices of many women within Waterloo Region who do not speak English. Future research should investigate the possibility of conducting similar focus groups in a variety of languages, including Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, Turkish, Bengali, among other languages. Finally, future community-based work should explore the experiences of Muslim women in other Canadian cities, as well as in regions outside of Canada.

Conclusion

In the past ten years, literature calling for the application of Intersectionality Theory and an intersectional approach to women's health has emerged (Hankivsky, Reid, Cormier, Varcoe, Clark, Benoit, & Brotman, 2010). Still, the present study indicates that more work is needed to apply intersectionality in practice in the field of women's health, and women's mental health more specifically. Discrimination on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, ability, and many other factors remains an issue that impacts women's mental health within Canada and beyond. Results from the present study indicate that this discrimination is expressed in both subtle and overt ways, negatively impacting the wellbeing of Muslim women, including their mental health and feelings of belonging. Promising future directions for this research include the investigation of Muslim women's experiences of discrimination within different Canadian contexts, as well as other Western contexts outside of Canada's borders.

The present research provides insight into the ways in which Intersectionality Theory can inform and contextualize the experiences of Muslim women within a Canadian context. The understanding that women are differentially impacted by discrimination based on different aspects of their identity helps us to understand the complex experiences of discrimination of Muslim women in Waterloo Region. Specifically, we are able to better understand the ways in which women who wear visible markers of religion, such as the hijab or niqab, experience unique forms of discrimination. The present research also informs readers of the substantial impact of skin colour on women's experiences of discrimination.

Subtle discrimination was identified as a major vehicle for discriminatory attitudes within Waterloo Region. The present work supplements our understanding of the complex ways in which discrimination operates within Canadian contexts. While women in Waterloo Region

certainly reported instances of overt discrimination in the form of verbal harassment, many Muslim women identified subtle or covert discrimination as the most common form of discrimination experienced within Waterloo Region. Microaggression Theory can help us to frame these findings, contextualizing the experiences of women participants within the broader landscape of research on discrimination.

The Muslimah Project incorporated some analysis of community strengths in the face of discrimination experienced by Muslim women. Generally, women identified that faith was a major protective factor in the face of discrimination. Many scholars investigating community strengths have identified collective resilience as an important source of strength for communities facing multiple forms of oppression (Lyons, Fletcher, & Bariola, 2016). In investigating the impacts of discrimination on Muslim diasporic peoples, a lens of decolonial collective resilience may help to explain how community membership and identity can help to shape experiences and impacts of discrimination, as well as strength in the face of adversity. Future investigation of Muslim women's experiences of discrimination should examine community strengths harnessed by Muslim women from this collective resilience-centered perspective.

A final important finding from the present work lies in women's experiences of community responsibility and representation. As articulated throughout the present paper, many Muslim women express feeling the need to perfectly represent their entire community, and often the entire religion of Islam. Being relegated to the role of teacher within their communities, feeling the need to prove themselves, as well as feeling the need to apologize are all examples of the ways in which Muslim women strive to adequately represent their entire communities in positive ways. Future research should further investigate these important themes, exploring more

deeply how the feelings of responsibility and representation operate for Muslim women from different generations and different backgrounds.

The present work found that discrimination within Waterloo Region negatively impacts Muslim women's sense of belonging, overall wellbeing, and mental health, especially within the domains of isolation and identity formation. Building on the present findings surrounding wellbeing, mental health, and belonging, future research should recognize justice and equity as important components of wellbeing (Prilleltensky, 2012). In order to promote community wellbeing, it is essential that community leaders address the negative consequences of discrimination. Future interventions, both locally and beyond, should consider the recommendations provided by participants within the present study and expand upon the application of Microaggression Theory and Intersectionality Theory to understand the complex experiences of Muslim women.

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

Key Messages

Several key findings emerged from The Muslimah Project. One overarching theme was **discrimination**. **Subtle discrimination** was the most common form of discrimination reported by Muslim women in Waterloo Region. 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 the project 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 Muslimah 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 that 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 must 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 to community 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 participants 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 the 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[s] 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 the emotional energy and labour expended during this process resulted in ‘teaching others’ being defined as a subtheme within community representation. The feeling of needing to accurately and adequately represent one’s community resulted 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 Bs, 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 70s, you need to have 90s.” - 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.

“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. 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 [any]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 complicated 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 referenced a greater amount of 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 positions of counsellors and mental health supports 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 for 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.

“[...] 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 became 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.

Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Flyer

Are you a Muslim woman age 16 or older?

Are you a resident of Waterloo Region?
(Waterloo, Kitchener, Cambridge, Wellesley
Woolwich, Wilmot & North Dumfries)

Are you interested in improving the
experiences of Muslim women in
Waterloo Region and improving
cross-cultural understanding?

Join our study!

The Muslimah Project

Exploring Intersections of Belonging, Mental Health,
and Wellbeing for Muslim Women in Waterloo Region

Laurier REB Approval # 5768

You will be asked to participate in one
focus group conversation with other
participants that will involve
discussing experiences of discrimination.
You may also have
the opportunity to participate in a
follow-up member checking session.

The total time commitment for participation
in focus groups is approximately 2 hours.

An honorarium of \$30 will be provided for your
time and transportation costs will be covered.

**To participate in this study,
please contact Uzma Bhutto at
cmw.kw.info@gmail.com or call
519-576-0540 ex. 3468**

Coalition of
Muslim Women
Kitchener-Waterloo

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Appendix B

Demographic Survey

Please complete the following questions:

How old are you? (Age): _____

What gender do you identify with?: _____

What is your sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual etc.)?

What is your ethnic or cultural identity? _____

Are you visibly...(check all that apply):

- ☐ Black
- ☐ Brown
- ☐ White
- ☐ Latin American
- ☐ Afro-Caribbean
- ☐ Indo-Caribbean
- ☐ North African
- ☐ East African
- ☐ South African
- ☐ West African
- ☐ South Asian
- ☐ Arab
- ☐ West Asian
- ☐ East Asian
- ☐ Multiracial

Would you say that you are visibly Muslim? ☐ Yes ☐ No

How long have you lived in Canada?: _____

How long have you lived in the Waterloo Region? (Check one)

- ☐ Just moved here (less than 1 year)
- ☐ 1-3 years
- ☐ 3-5 years

- ☐ 5-8 years
- ☐ 9+ years
- ☐ All my life

What is your highest level of education? (Check one)

- ☐ Elementary School
- ☐ High School
- ☐ Trade School
- ☐ College
- ☐ University (Bachelor's degree)
- ☐ University (Masters degree or higher)
- Other? _____

What is your employment status?

- ☐ On social assistance
- ☐ Casual employment
- ☐ Seasonal employment
- ☐ Employed part time
- ☐ Employed full time
- ☐ Self-employed
- ☐ Retired

How many different employers have you had in the past 5 years?

What do you believe are the top issues facing Muslim women in Canada?

Appendix C

Focus Group Consent Form

***The Muslimah Project:
Exploring Intersections of Belonging, Mental Health, and Wellbeing
for Muslim Women in Waterloo Region***

Research Team

Dr. Ciann Wilson, Researcher and Assistant Professor, Wilfrid Laurier University
Brianna Hunt, Master's Student, Wilfrid Laurier University
Fauzia Mazhar, Coalition of Muslim Women of Kitchener Waterloo
Ghazala Fauzia, Coalition of Muslim Women of Kitchener Waterloo

You are invited to participate in The Muslimah Project! To be eligible for this study, you must be a Muslim woman, 16+ years of age, residing in Waterloo Region. Please read through this consent form carefully, ask questions and raise any concerns before we begin.

Project information

This project is a community-based research study exploring the experiences of Muslim women in the Waterloo Region, including Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge, and the immediate surrounding area. This project aims to create spaces where Muslim women are able to identify shared challenges and strengths, while honouring the diversity of various perspectives.

What will you be asked to do in this project?

The total time commitment for all activities in this project is approximately 3 hours. First, you will be asked to complete a survey that will include demographic questions. This will take you approximately 10 minutes. You will then participate in a focus group with a few other people where you will engage in discussions surrounding several questions. The focus group will last approximately 2 hours in total.

Interested participants may also be selected to participate in a group follow-up/member-checking session to verify findings from the project, which will take approximately 1 hour. Participants who wish to take part in member-checking sessions will be selected on a first-come, first-serve basis.

This project also includes an interview component with some service providers. Focus group participants are not eligible to participate in interviews if they are participating in a focus group for The Muslimah Project.

Note: All sessions will be audio-recorded for accurate data collection purposes.

Possible concerns and risks

We have taken many necessary steps to ensure that this research process is a safe one. However, there are minimal risks related to your engagement in this study. These may include:

- A risk that you might experience discomfort, negative feelings, upset or confusion when discussing a topic and/or reflecting upon your personal lived experiences.

- A risk that despite our group agreement to respect each other's privacy, there is a chance someone in the focus group could share information about you outside the group.

Importantly, there are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions asked throughout this research process and you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer or offer any information you do not feel comfortable sharing. Feelings of discomfort are normal and should be temporary. If you find that you need support at any time during the research process, team member Ghazala Fauzia will be available to provide counselling support. If you would like to be connected to an alternate support, information about multicultural counselling through KW Counselling Services can be found at the bottom of this form. If you experience persistent negative feelings as a result of participating in this study however, please let a member of the research team know.

Benefits

By participating in this study, you will be partaking in an important study related to Muslim women's unique experiences in Waterloo Region. Your perspectives and lived experience will inform research and knowledge production processes and local service delivery.

Compensation

For your time participating in this study, you will be provided with a \$30 honorarium as well as \$5 for transportation to and from the project location. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you may keep any compensation you've received up to that point in the study. Childcare will be provided on-site during the focus groups.

Confidentiality

Our team will do all it can to encourage the respect for confidentiality and privacy in the focus groups. Any personal information you disclose to the project team, with the exception of that information you choose to disclose in the presence of other participants will NOT be shared with anyone beyond the research team. The quotes of things you say in the focus groups may be used in websites, project videos, community reports, or articles produced by the research team. Any quotes of things you say in the focus group will not include your name and will be presented anonymously or using a pseudonym.

Following the focus groups, the research team will arrange a member-checking session where participants can reflect and provide feedback on the results of the study. Participation in the member-checking session is completely voluntary and will consist of a small group of 10 of the original 46 participants. Participation in the member-checking sessions will be determined on a first-come first-serve basis. This will also include a \$20 honorarium.

Only members of the research team will have access to the audio recordings and data collected from participants. Security will be ensured through password protection on all electronic data, as well as secure storage of hardcopy materials in a locked cabinet, within a restricted-access office at the Department of Psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University. Personal information will be stored separate from the data, and data will be labelled with a randomly-generated ID code. Personal information collected for the purpose of this study will be stored for up to two years after the end date of the study (i.e., until September 1, 2021). De-identified data, including the

audio recordings from the interviews will be stored for up to five years after the end date of the study (i.e., until September 1, 2023), at which point Brianna Hunt and Dr. Ciann Wilson will destroy this information.

Your rights as a participant

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You do not have to take part in activities you do not want to and you do not have to answer any questions or offer any information you do not want to. You are free to leave the project at any time without penalty or loss of compensation up to that point in the study. If you choose to leave the project, your data and information will be destroyed. This will in no way affect your relationships with the organizations and institutions involved in the project. The research team may also withdraw you from this research project if circumstances arise which warrant doing so (i.e., violent behaviour or threats). All data and materials collected in relation to you will be destroyed immediately.

How will this information be used?

The research findings will inform some community reports that will be shared within the Region to help service providers tailor their services to Muslim women. All identifying information from the study will be removed. Community reports will be made available to you and your community by September 1, 2019. You may indicate below whether you would like a copy of the community report sent to you by email. This report(s) will also be distributed to local service providers to help improve local service provision. Data from this study will inform articles for publication in academic journals and/or conferences and community-based presentations. The findings may be made available through Open Access Resources. The findings will also be included in Brianna Hunt's Master's thesis.

Contact

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board (REB #5768), which is supported by the [Research Support Fund](#). If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Jayne Kalmar, Research Ethics Board Chair, Wilfrid Laurier University, 519-884-0710, ext. 3131 or REBChair@wlu.ca

If you have questions at any time about the study, procedures, or your compensation (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study) you may contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Ciann Wilson, 519-884-0710 ext. 4911, ciwilson@wlu.ca. If you require additional support related to any discomfort as a result of participation in this study, you may contact KW Counselling Services located at 480 Charles St. East Kitchener ON N2G 4K5, Phone: 519.884.0000, www.kwcounselling.com.

Consent Form

- √ I want to take part in this study and meet eligibility criteria
- √ I have read through the information, understand what the project is about and what I will be asked to do
- √ I have been informed about my right to choose not to participate in the study

- ✓ I am aware of the potential risks, discomforts, and benefits of participating in this study
- ✓ If I have any questions/concerns during and/or after the study, I know that I can contact the researchers
- ✓ I have been assured that information relating to me will be kept confidential and that no information will be released or printed that would disclose my personal identity, beyond that information I choose to disclose about myself
- ✓ I consent to audio recording of the focus group
- ✓ I have received a copy of the consent form

Participant's Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

As part of sharing this project within the greater community, the research team will be creating a project video that captures moments from the focus groups. With your consent, we will be taking some photos throughout the focus group today to be used in this video.

Note that if you do not consent to photography, no photos of your face will be taken or shared in the project video.

☐ I consent to having my photograph taken and used in The Muslimah Project video.

The researchers may present findings from this project at professional conferences or publish them in academic journals. Sometimes it is useful to present short excerpts from participants' responses to help explain or illustrate certain concepts. All identifying information (i.e., names, organizations) is removed from quotations before they are used.

After quotations from the focus groups are collected and written up, it is impossible to identify who is speaking. For this reason, quotations from focus groups will not be identifiable.

Please carefully read the following:

☐ I understand that the researchers may use my de-identified quotations from focus groups in websites, project videos, presentations and publications.

Please provide your email address and/or phone number below so that we can contact you for the member-checking session.

Email Address: _____ Phone #: _____

☐ **Please check this box if you would like a summary of the results sent to this email address**

INTERNAL USE ONLY

Researcher's Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix D

Focus Group Framework

Prior to focus groups:

Members of the research team will introduce themselves to participants and ask them to complete the demographic survey. As a group, written consent forms will be reviewed and completed. All participants will be given a copy of written consent to keep for their records.

Hi everyone, my name _____ and I'd like to welcome and thank you for participating in this focus group. We appreciate all the time you have offered to come and participate in this project.

Just a note that we will be recording what is said here so we don't have to take careful notes and can also partake in the conversation.

No identifying information like your name will be attached to any quotations used.

While we encourage people to take the topics discussed into your social networks outside of this room, we ask that in an effort to keep the confidentiality of the other participants, that we do not discuss the names or personal information of individuals in this group.

We will be asking some questions about your personal experiences within your communities, and the Waterloo Region today. Your responses will help the Coalition of Muslim Women of KW to better provide services to the Muslim community in Waterloo Region, including partnerships with outside organizations and non-Muslim community members.

Our discussion today will take approximately 90 minutes and people are welcome to take health breaks as needed. This conversation is informal so please speak freely when answering questions and feel free to respond to other participants' comments. If you don't understand a question, please let us know. We are here to ask questions, listen, and make sure everyone has a chance to share.

If you would like to be connected to any resources for support please just let us know at the end of the discussion. If you have to step out or leave for any reason please give us a 'thumbs-up' if you are ok, and a 'thumbs-down' if you would like some assistance.

1. So to begin, why don't we all introduce ourselves and where we're all from? Take a few moments to talk about how long you have lived in the Region, and what area you live in.
2. What are some things you like about your neighbourhood and Waterloo Region? **PROMPT:** Explain.
3. Can you tell me about what discrimination means to you?
4. When thinking about discrimination in Waterloo Region, do you think Islamophobia is an issue? **PROMPT:** Explain.
5. Have you experienced discrimination and/or Islamophobia? If so, can you explain?
PROMPT: Did this happen in Waterloo Region?
6. If there were other people around, how did they respond?
7. Have you ever felt that you experienced discrimination on the basis of your gender?
PROMPTS: Religion? Culture? Race? Ethnicity?

8. If you have had these experiences, what parts of your identity do you think incite the most discrimination? **PROMPTS:** Gender? Religion? Culture? Race? Ethnicity? Wearing of a Hijab/Niqab? Accent? Names? Do you notice any patterns in people's attitudes?
9. What impacts, if any, has discrimination had on you?
10. How do you respond when faced with discrimination? **PROMPT:** Why do you respond this way?
11. What are the strengths that you and your community harness as Muslim women to deal with discrimination?
12. In your opinion, what are the best ways to address and respond to discrimination?
PROMPT: What support do you think Muslim women need ?
13. What does good health mean to you?
14. What does good mental health mean to you?
15. What does wellbeing mean to you?
16. What, if any, do you think is the relationship between discrimination and wellbeing?
17. How important do you feel it is to have a sense of belonging within your neighbourhood, or your larger community?
18. Do you feel a sense of belonging in Kitchener Waterloo? **PROMPTS:** Why or why not? Explain?
19. What do you think might improve belonging for Muslim communities in the Waterloo Region? What do you think is a barrier to belonging in the Region?
20. When thinking about services and supports, what services do you and your community access and why?
21. When you think of the spaces and services you avoid, what are the reasons you avoid those spaces?
22. How might local services you are aware of be improved to better meet the needs of Muslim women and their communities?
23. Thank you so much for sharing, does anyone have any other comments they would like to add? Anything you want people to take away or know about Muslim women?

I am stopping the audio recorder now. Do you have any questions off the record?

Thank you so much for taking the time to share with me today. Your responses will help The Coalition of Muslim Women of Kitchener Waterloo to understand discrimination within Waterloo Region and facilitate community collaboration. We have a list of resources available to you if you would like them.

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