Young Women's Experiences of Anti-Muslim Racism in Schools

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Janet Nowatzki is a community researcher for the CEDA Pathways to Education program.

Acknowledgements

Land Acknowledgement

The CCPA Manitoba publishes research on the original lands of the Anishinaabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples and the homeland of the Métis Nation on Treaty 1 Territory. Beyond recognizing the importance of place, we acknowledge our responsibility to contribute to solutions to the problems caused by past and present colonial policies in Canada. We are committed to contributing research that builds on the strengths of Indigenous communities, respects the spirit and intent of Treaties, and that is done in partnership with First Nation, Métis and Inuit people and organizations.

Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Executive Summary

MUSLIM YOUNG WOMEN who wear the hijab are stigmatized because of their religious and ethnic or racial backgrounds. Community-based reports in Winnipeg have documented how Muslim young women have been humiliated and threatened by their peers and teachers in schools through physical attacks, bullying, and harassment. These experiences often happen with limited if any accountability from schools.

Researchers Fadi Ennab, Sharifat Makinde, and Janet Nowatzki partnered with the Manitoba Islamic Association, a community organization in Winnipeg, and wrote *Young Women's Experiences of Anti-Muslim Racism in Schools*. The purpose of the research project was to examine the experiences of Muslim young women related to safety and racism in Winnipeg public schools. The report is based on interviews with ten Muslim students, most of whom identified as Black and/or Arab, and two key informants. By shedding light on their stories, the study hopes to contribute to a fuller understanding of the lived experiences of Muslim young women and inform strategies and interventions to support their well-being within schools.

Muslim students, who wore the hijab and who identified as Black or Palestinian, shared experiences of heightened Islamophobia and racism at school, attributing it to the visibility of their religious, racial, and gender identities. Several Muslim students interviewed discussed how they felt scared, especially after intense verbal attacks or when they experienced having their hijabs pulled off. The intersection of multiple identities made

the experience of discrimination especially pronounced for Black Muslim and Palestinian Muslim students.

Experiences of anti-Muslim racism were not always explicit with school staff. Sometimes discrimination appeared as subtle differences in treatment of students relative to their non-Muslim and white peers. Participants witnessed teacher bias favoring white students over others. Students also expressed that the school curriculum lacked accommodation and inclusivity. Issues related to Islam and Muslims were either censored or presented in an intolerant manner. These experiences of exclusion within the school environment made students feel unsafe and unwelcome.

Recommendations

To promote anti-racism in schools, participants emphasized the importance of having racialized and Muslim identifying school staff at all levels to ensure that students from different cultures and identities are adequately represented and included in the school community. Participants highlighted the need for schools to take proactive measures to expose students to diverse cultures and to foster a more inclusive and well-rounded educational experience.

In addition to diverse staff, participants highlighted the importance of anti-Muslim racism training. Several Muslim young women indicated that they want teachers who help promote their curiosity and freedom to explore. Students also want educators to help advocate for them and appropriately intervene when peers are bullying or harassing them.

Participants also emphasized the need for curricula that are more accommodating and attentive to the requirements of Muslim students. They expressed concerns about negative portrayals of Islam in the Canadian curriculum, including in classroom discussion and in books.

Lastly, building anti-racist and safer school spaces for Muslim students will require building relations with the Muslim community in Manitoba to better ensure that the needs of Muslim students are being met.

Initiatives to tackle anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia must be multifaceted. Some participants emphasized the need for system change. Thus, representative staff, anti-racist training, inclusive curricula, and relationships with the Muslim and racialized communities are not stand-alone solutions, but pieces that work together against structural racism.

Introduction

RACISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA are a common experience for many Muslim young women in schools. Muslim students must contend with racist stereotypes (e.g., as terrorists or cultural threats) as they interact with peers, school staff, and the curriculum. Community-based reports in Winnipeg have documented how Muslim young women have been humiliated and threatened by peers and teachers in schools through physical attacks, bullying, and harassment (Ennab, 2022; Sotiriadou & Elbakri, 2022). These experiences often happen with limited if any accountability from schools. Similar cases of Muslim young women being targeted in schools have been documented across Canada, including in Saskatchewan (Ruby, 2006), Quebec (Mazigh, 2023; Razack, 2008), and Ontario (Ahmed, 2016).

While anti-Muslim racism is not new or unique to Canada, there has been an increase in anti-Muslim hate and racial assaults in recent years, often associated with racist nationalism and xenophobia towards migrants (Walia, 2021). Several Black feminist scholars have discussed how Black Muslim Somalis in Canada have faced intensified racism post-9/11 because they are at the "intersection of anti-blackness and Islamophobia," which excludes them from citizenship and humanity (Maynard, 2017, p. 160; Abdillahi, 2022). In Winnipeg, the Manitoba Islamic Association has recently emphasized the need for more research to understand Islamophobia and how it intersects with "other factors, especially anti-black racism and discrimination against women" (Sotiriadou & Elbakri, 2022, p. 18). More recently, the news on Palestine and Israel has resulted in an "explosion of incidents" of

anti-Palestinian racism (CJPME, 2023, p. 4). Thus, it is important to explore Muslim young women's experiences as they intersect with anti-Blackness and other forms of racism.

Anti-Muslim racism and gendered Islamophobia negatively impact young women's well-being and mental health across spaces and places (Ahmed, 2016; Thijs et al., 2018). Many Muslim and racialized students feel alienated and excluded from the school system. These feelings stem in part from a lack of Muslim representation in the teaching staff and curriculum and a general lack of knowledge about Islam and Muslims amongst staff and students (Hindy, 2016). In some cases, the school curriculum has perpetuated negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims (Hindy, 2016).

The purpose of this research study is to examine the experiences of anti-Muslim racism among Muslim young women who attend public schools in Winnipeg. By shedding light on their stories, the study shows how racism shapes the experiences of Muslim young women. In addition, exploring anti-Muslim racism will help inform strategies and interventions to advocate and support Muslim students.

Research Approach

THIS STUDY UTILIZES a qualitative methodology informed by a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach. The CBPR approach emphasizes collaboration between researchers and communities to ensure that the research aligns with community needs and priorities (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). Various scholars and community activists rely on this approach to represent community voices and advocate for social and policy changes (MacKinnon, 2018). In this study, we use a CBPR approach to explore Muslim young women's experiences with anti-Muslim racism in public schools. The term "anti-Muslim racism" is used to discuss Muslim experiences of discrimination as part of ongoing histories of racism and white supremacy. Anti-Muslim racism is also connected to other forms of racism, such as anti-Arab, anti-Black, anti-immigrant, and anti-Indigenous racisms. Anti-Muslim racism must be understood as "a product of settler societies and states engaged in imperial warfare across the globe" (Rana et al., 2022, p. 58).

Research Procedures

ETHICS APPROVAL FOR this study was received from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Winnipeg. The study was done in partnership with the Manitoba Islamic Association (MIA). The MIA has existed since 1969 and serves as Manitoba's oldest and largest membership-based Islamic organization (Manitoba Islamic Association, n.d.). A research proposal was developed to examine the experiences of Muslim young women related to safety and racism in Winnipeg schools. This study was driven by three research questions:

1. What are Muslim young women's experiences of anti-Muslim racism in schools?

2. How do Muslim young women cope with racism in schools?

3. What helps to address anti-Muslim racism in schools?

The method of data collection was qualitative one-on-one interviews with youth, and other key informants. The researchers used purposive sampling to recruit ten self-identifying Muslim young women between the ages of 16 and 20 who were either enrolled in high school or had recently graduated from a Winnipeg public school. In addition, two key informants, who identify as Muslim, from community organizations who work directly with Muslim families were interviewed. Feedback from key informants is included in the recommendations section.

Participants were recruited by staff members at our community partner, MIA, and at Community Education Development Association's (CEDA) Pathways to Education program. Prior to the interviews, verbal consent was obtained from participants, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and the voluntary nature of their participation. The interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform and lasted 40 minutes to an hour. As an incentive for participating in one-on-one in-depth interviews, participants were given a $25 gift card. Interviews conducted with the participants were transcribed and thematically analyzed. The analysis process involved carefully reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, coding the data, and categorizing the codes into meaningful themes. The identified themes were then examined in relation to one another to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Participant Demographics

THE STUDY INCLUDED ten self-identifying Muslim young women—four were still in high school, while six had recently graduated from high school. Five participants identified as Arab and/or Palestinian, four as Black, and one as South Asian. Eight participants were Canadian citizens, while two were permanent residents. All the Muslim 'students' referred to in the report are young women.

Findings and Discussions

Theme 1: Anti-Muslim Racism

One significant theme from the interviews is that Muslim students feel unsafe in schools because they experience harassment and assaults. Participants reported experiencing various forms of discrimination based on their race and/or religion, and these negative encounters came from students, teachers, and staff.

Participants started by talking about the prevalence of racism in schools and that, in particular, racism and Islamophobia became more apparent in junior high and high school. One participant explained how racism occurs within peer groups: "Racism is very rampant…like [white] teenage boys, they will be in the same group with a black person and just be spewing… the most racist things I ever heard." Another participant added that non-Muslim students would say:

> 'Oh, Allahu Akbar, boom, boom, boom!' [referring to a racist stereotype of Muslims as a terrorist or suicide bomber] … stuff like that. That is not funny. And how [non-Black] students say the N-word and people are like, 'Oh, they have the pass because they had a Black person say that they can say it.'

Another young women discussed her transition from an inner-city high school to a suburban high school with a less diverse student population:

> "I don't like the students either… they used to bully. One time a group of girls came up to me. I could tell they were talking [expletive] about me." She

described how she walked away to avoid a confrontation and the possibility of getting into trouble with teachers. She continued, "The students used to bully us for not knowing how to speak English."

Students expanded on their experiences of anti-Muslim racism by linking it to wearing the hijab. Those who wore the hijab shared their experiences of heightened Islamophobia and racism at school, attributing it to the visibility of their Muslim identity. Most participants said that they feel that Muslim students experience worse treatment than Muslim boys. They felt the hijab was a visual marker of their religious affiliation, prompting others to make assumptions and biases about them. Several participants discussed a noticeable shift in how their peers treated them after they started wearing the hijab. One student described her experience with transitioning to wearing the hijab: "Once you wear the hijab... at school, you get a lot of dirty looks... Everyone looks the same except you, and you're getting dirty looks from other people, from parents as well."

Furthermore, feelings of judgement and exclusion were heightened for Muslim students during participation in school sports. As one student explained regarding a sports uniform, "Everyone looks the same [wearing shorts] except you [wearing pants and a hijab], and you're getting dirty looks from other peers and parents."

Muslim students reported frequent incidents of verbal attacks by peers related to their appearance. As one student described:

> Going into junior high and high school, that's where I started experiencing racism, such as someone once telling me I don't look good because I have a towel on my head [referring to my hijab]. I've had someone make fun of my colour or... say that I dress like a ninja.

Consistent with these experiences, research shows that Muslim students who put on the hijab notice changes in how they are viewed and treated in society; where without the hijab, they are seen as more smart and friendly, but with the hijab, they are considered oppressed and less intelligent (Najib & Hopkins, 2019).

Another student shared a similar experience: "One time we were just playing basketball... then this kid just comes, and I don't know why he got mad... He's like, 'you, terrorist'."

Yet another student endured verbal attacks on their way to and from school: "Racist encounters would be outside of school. So, for example, I would bike to school all the time, and I remember... getting cussed at or sworn at or... called names and stuff like that."

Furthermore, several participants had experienced physical attacks in which their hijabs had been pulled at or ripped off by peers. As one student described, "My own friend pulled my hijab off in middle school... That's why I'm like... I'll just take it off and whenever I can in the future, [I'll wear it]." Such Islamophobic incidents made students feel fearful, unsafe, and excluded from the school environment.

In addition to experiencing anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia from peers, participants also discussed incidents of educators being overtly racist. As one student said, "I had a heavy accent... my math teacher at any given moment would make fun of it.... It was horrible." Another participant summarized the racist behaviour of teachers and school staff towards students: "I've seen it, and I've experienced it. I had a friend who had a teacher who slammed the door in her face and called her dumb and stupid." One student described her experience with switching schools and encountering greater racism with teachers at the new school:

> And so, you know, I was surrounded by Muslim [classmates] for nine years from kindergarten to grade nine...and then I went to high school, and it was kind of a shock for me, because now it's the opposite. Like there's barely any Muslims and the majority are white people.... But the teacher that I had specifically for math was probably the most racist teacher that I've had. And math, I personally struggled with it, so I used to go to him all the time to ask for help, even when he treated me like trash. And there [were] incidents where, like, he would raise his voice or yell at me, like, 'Oh, what are you doing here now?' Just very disrespectful and disappointing to see that.

In some cases, participants had a sense that the teachers and staff were aware they were being racist and that it was wrong but did it anyway. This was shown by one student's story: "It was my ELA teacher and he was like 'I know I shouldn't be saying this.... you know, All Lives Matter.'" The All Lives Matter slogan was created in opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement (Dibinga, 2023). This teacher continued to promote the "All Lives Matter" sentiment despite their awareness of the feelings of the Black student.

Experiences of anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia from teachers were not always explicit. Sometimes discrimination appeared as subtle differences in treatment of students relative to their non-Muslim and white peers. Participants witnessed teacher bias favoring white students over others. These experiences of exclusion within the school environment made students feel unsafe and unwelcome. For example, a participant discussing her experience with a teacher in her class said:

[The teacher] catered a lot of attention to the Canadian [white] kids... [but she did] not focus on me or pay much attention to my needs. A lot of teachers actually prefer the whiter kids over the other [darker] races... and they are more lenient in their grading [with white kids]. But for us [Muslim kids] it would just be like 'figure it out yourself'.

Another student shared:

I remember one time we were trying to participate in an activity like tug of war or something...We went and signed up [to participate, but] the teacher removed all the people of colour and she left all the white people to participate in it.... I feel like [Muslim and coloured students] were very excluded.

Similarly, most students felt they were racialized in schools and often lumped in with other marginalized groups such as newcomer refugees. There were assumptions made about their language and capabilities despite having lived in Canada for an extended period or being born in Canada. For example, a participant recounted:

At the end of the [school year] I was in grade 11 or 12, there were quite a few refugees [at school]. So even though I'd had my teacher for four years, she still assumed that I had no English and that I needed... [more accommodation such as] simpler tests.

Participants' feelings of exclusion were worsened when the school curriculum carried negative stereotypes connected with their faith. Participants frequently expressed that the school curriculum lacked accommodation and inclusivity. Issues related to Islam and Muslims were either censored or presented in an intolerant manner. As one student described, "Every time we were learning about 9/11, [other students] always say, 'It's all Muslims.' That's what I mostly hate." When Muslim women were spoken about in class, participants reported that comments from both teachers and students reflected stereotypes of Muslim women's oppression, as a participant explained:

Sometimes we would be learning or talking about Islam in general. They would be so ignorant to some things, such as, 'Don't the ladies feel oppressed wearing this' or, 'Isn't it some kind of oppression?' I remember we were talking about Islam and a teacher... he basically said, 'Aren't they [Muslim women] being forced to just wear the hijab and are basically being controlled?'

Another student described how she felt singled out for being a Muslim girl and that her teacher made assumptions about her knowledge and feelings:

> I remember my teacher asking me, 'Have you experienced this [referring to something stereotypical about Muslim culture]?... And a lot of the time if you put someone in the center of light then everyone's focus is on that person. That was me. I felt like I was naked, and everyone was just looking at me because he pointed and asked me that question. All eyes were on me, and I didn't know what to say.

Not surprisingly, there was a consensus among the participants that school staff had limited knowledge about Muslims. Teachers often demonstrate a lack of cultural understanding and knowledge regarding Islam, leading to misunderstandings and potential mistreatment of Muslim students (Amjad, 2018). In her research on Black women on social assistance in Toronto, Abdillahi argues that official narratives on Somali women often view them as oppressed, instead of "valued as central to the functioning of their Somali cultures and traditions" and as "meaningful breadwinners within the familial and kinship network" (Abdillahi, 2022, p. 155).

Participants also felt hesitant to express their religious beliefs or values freely, especially when they contradicted mainstream views. There was a fear that speaking up could negatively affect their academic performance or grades. For example, one student described how she did a presentation for school on Islamophobia, including anti-Palestinian racism, anti-Asian hate, and the Black Lives Matter movement. While speaking about cultural appropriation through her experience in her home country, the teacher objected, as the girl described, "So I was a spectacle, [the teacher] started criticizing [my presentation]. 'No, no, no, I don't think this is right! ... This is not cultural appropriation. This is what white people created.'" This teacher challenged the student's knowledge of her own cultural background and made her feel singled-out amongst her peers. Another girl expanded on the risk of speaking up about the experience of Islamophobia:

> We had a lot of kids who wouldn't complain because the teacher would affect their grades or purposely not fail them but almost fail them. And so, there was that problem as well, of the teachers not understanding or allowing themselves to grow as educators.

Similarly, research shows that teachers often demonstrate a lack of cultural understanding and knowledge regarding Islam, leading to misunderstandings and potential mistreatment of Muslim students (Amjad, 2018).

Another consistent theme across the participants' experiences of anti-Muslim racism was the lack of intervention from school staff. Only on one

occasion was a peer made to apologize for an incident of name-calling. All other incidents described by participants occurred with no intervention from school staff, and as evidenced in the examples above, teachers often contributed to the racist environment, either through overt comments, exclusionary practices and curriculum, and failure to provide safe environments for Muslim students.

Research shows that the experiences of the participants in this study are not unique; Muslim students frequently encounter Islamophobia from their teachers, school administrators, and classmates (Aroian, 2012). In fact, troubling evidence indicates that Muslim students experience higher levels of discrimination *within* school premises compared to outside settings (Aroian, 2012; Totonchi et al., 2022). Racism, bullying, religious discrimination, verbal abuse, and physical attacks are commonly observed among high school Muslim adolescents, originating from peers, teachers, and the general public (Dupper et al., 2015; Meetoo, 2021).

For Muslim students in this study, their experiences of racism were tied to their gender and visibility through wearing the hijab. Research shows that women are often the primary target of anti-Muslim racism, particularly those who are visibly different (e.g., racialized and/or wear the hijab) (Alizai, 2021). According to a survey conducted by the Manitoba Islamic Association (MIA) with the Muslim community in Manitoba, 73 percent of reported Islamophobic attacks in public spaces were directed at women (Sotiriadou & Elbakri, 2022). Echoing these findings, Mercier-Dalphond and Helly (2021) document that Muslim women who wear the hijab are particularly vulnerable to Islamophobic attacks, which include verbal and sexual harassment, physical assault, threats of violence, and objects being thrown at them. They also experience being followed and chased, with forceful attempts made to remove their hijabs (Mercier-Dalphond & Helly, 2021). Similarly, reports by the MIA found that an alarming 29 percent of their participants felt unsafe when wearing clothing that identifies them as Muslims in Manitoba (Sotiriadou & Elbakri, 2022). Thus, Muslim young women are "hyper-visible and distrusted on the one hand, not truly seen on the other" (Abdillahi, 2022, p. 155).

Theme 2: Muslim Young Women's Experiences of Being a Triple Threat

The intersection between Muslim young women's experiences with racism and sexism was highlighted in this study. Although all participants in this

study reported that their experiences with Islamophobia were influenced by their race, this was especially true for Black Muslim participants. All four Black participants in the current study provided extensive insights into the influence of racism on their experiences in school and society. They described instances where they experienced and observed differential treatment, such as teachers giving harsher punishments for Black students. The participants also highlighted how their experiences as Black individuals compounded their experiences of Islamophobia, even when they shared similar experiences with other Muslim women; this brings to light the complex interplay of multiple identities in shaping experiences of Islamophobia. As one participant described: "I feel what I am experiencing [as a Black girl] would be slightly different than an Egyptian Muslimah [Arabic word for Muslim woman] because the melatonin is not there... Being Black, being a girl in a full-time hijab... is just a triple threat." Thus, Black Muslim students who were wearing the hijab had a "triple consciousness" as they were navigating their identities related to race, religion, and gender (Akram, 2022, p. 11). As such, they navigate their 'Muslimness', which is often punished, and 'Canadianness', where proximity to whiteness is privileged and rewarded (Akram, 2022, p. 11).

Similarly, one Palestinian student also expressed how she found school as a space where she experiences Islamophobia and racism. As she explained:

> At school a lot of things were censored...You couldn't talk politically, like stuff that was going on in Palestine [e.g., Israeli colonization or occupation]. Even as a Muslim, you couldn't talk about that. There are only a few key ideas we could talk about, and these didn't always align with my Muslim views, but you couldn't speak out about it.

This student felt silenced not just as a Muslim, but also as a Palestinian student in school. These experiences are not isolated. According to the Arab Canadian Lawyers Association, public school boards in Canada have "a long history of silencing Palestinian students and educators" (Majid, 2022, p. 5). Thus, when considering Muslim students' experiences of oppression or exclusion, it is important to consider their experiences along multiple identities (e.g., race and religion) and social positions (e.g., poverty and refugee status).

Theme 3: Impact and Response

All participants in the study discussed how their experiences of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism impacted their school experiences and overall well-being. They expressed a sense of exclusion and difficulty fitting in, with instances of losing friends or being avoided by others. They felt they were looked at differently and assumptions were made about their intelligence. Many students also discussed how they felt scared, especially after intense verbal attacks or when they experienced having their hijabs pulled off. Not surprisingly, some Muslim students were experiencing significant stress. As one student discussed:

> Mentally, I would think, because sometimes I don't even get the racist things that they've said until after, and then it just, like, dawns on me and I'm like, 'What?' And then it leads to mini mental breakdowns. And then I cry really badly and I'm like, 'Why did this happen to me?'

Another student described the impact of the anti-Muslim racism they experienced:

> And for them to tell me that I was basically a gorilla that had a towel on my head, it really, really made me feel different. I felt for the first time [singled out] and not in a good way. I definitely cried for a couple of days. I really cried and it made me wonder if I'm that different for practicing my religion. It made me just want to hide and not come out and do the things that I love.

Anti-Muslim racism did not just impact student wellbeing and social relations, but it also impacted the academic outcomes of Muslim students. As one participant said:

> My math grade dropped quite significantly over that [racist] issue with the math teacher... I'd always tune out the teachers or try and avoid confrontation... It affects the way you look at yourself and how you view the world as well. When you're told you're insignificant and you're shown that you're not important, you kind of take it to heart to some extent.

Many racialized groups can internalize racism when their environment is toxic and unsupportive, which can impact their social and academic outcomes (Ennab, 2017). Muslim students can also be afraid to speak up or challenge racism for fear of negatively impacting their academic performance (Bakali, 2017).

To avoid further scrutiny or pain, some Muslim students try to conceal their Muslim identities at school by removing their veils. A few participants indicated that they had made this choice themselves, whereas others had friends who had stopped wearing the hijab at school or altogether. A few participants described their struggles with their choice:

> And after the incident [of having my hijab ripped off by peers]... the first part of the damage, I was like, 'should I even wear a hijab?'... I told my mom [about the incident] and my mom was scared.... You don't want to say anything [to your parent] because they're scared for you. And I remember going to school on my own, so it was scary. So, my mom told me, just keep it quiet and I stopped [wearing the hijab].

> There are a couple of girls that I know that went into school with a hijab and then like a year or two later, they would take it off just because of the pressure. And there's also girls that kind of want to fit in, so they just go with the crowd, they take it off, they dress differently and all of that. So, I think it's a big struggle for some girls, especially with the hijab.

The participants who felt compelled to remove their hijabs to avoid drawing attention to themselves at schools did not do so because religion or culture was not important to them, but rather to cope with their experiences of anti-Muslim racism. Existing literature shows that Muslim and Arab youth are "often forced or feel that they are forced to perform their Canadian-ness to substantiate their innocence, and in some cases, this requires minimalization, or even erasure of part of who they are" (Finn et al., 2018, p. 667). Experiences of anti-Muslim racism, coupled with significant Islamophobic events such as the mosque shooting in Quebec City in 2017, instill fear for the safety of Muslim women and lead them to be cautious about expressing their Muslim identity (Mercier-Dalphond & Helly, 2021). Whether it is through policies targeting students based on their Islamic faith, as observed in certain government measures in Quebec (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, n.d.), or through verbal and physical attacks, these acts undermine a sense of belonging, contribute to psychological distress, and negatively impact overall well-being (Sotiriadou & Elbakri, 2022; Syed, 2013). The experiences of Muslim students in this study corroborates with the removal of the hijab as a coping method, as several participants resorted to hiding their Muslim faith to feel safe and included in schools.

Some research suggests that Muslim youth may disidentify themselves from their Muslim identity in response to religious discrimination (Moulin-

Stožeka & J. Schirrb, 2017), whereas other research suggests that religious discrimination can lead to a strengthening of religious identity among Muslim youth, who may find support and solidarity within their community, educate themselves about their religion, and challenge racism (Alizai, 2021). Within this study, some participants used their encounters with anti-Muslim racism to deepen their faith. As one girl described:

> It also impacted me in a way that as [the racism] builds, I would get to a point where I wasn't able to let other comments get to me... So anytime anyone was trying to be, you know, either racist or make fun of me for being Muslim, it didn't get to me as much because I knew what my religion was and I knew this is what I stood for and this is what I still stand for... I feel like every time that I do get [racist or Islamophobic] comments, it just builds me to become a better person. It doesn't have as much impact as the [original racist comments about towels and ninjas] did.

Another girl described her resilience but did not attach it to her faith. In response to the racism she endured from her math teacher she said, "I learned from it and I think things like that make you stronger in a way."

As another way to cope with anti-Muslim racism, participants indicated that friend groups were helpful. As one participant explained:

> The hijabis would stick together. The Blacks would stick together. We were all in one group. So I think that for me, the friends really mattered the most. And so we stuck together and got through it.

Also, participants frequently sought encouragement and support from friends and family members who shared their experiences. Participants discussed receiving support from their classmates who had gone through similar experiences at school. For example, one participant described how her friend's encouragement made her not care about the Anti-Muslim racism she experienced. As she stated:

> [My friends] were the ones that boosted in me this feeling of "I don't care". Because they were like 'Whatever they do [to hurt you] it's not permanent, it's just in the class, whatever discrimination they do, it's just at that moment. It's not going to be with you forever.'

On the contrary, some participants highlighted that not all their Muslim peers were supportive. For example, some students encountered judgments and expectations from other Muslims regarding their behaviours, including their

choice not to wear the hijab. As a result, instead of choosing to be friends with these peers and seek their support, a few students wanted to avoid other Muslim students. As one participant explained,

> I do not wear the hijab but [other friends] do... When they see me wearing [clothing] that is inappropriate for them, they will start talking about me and all that. I would rather hang out with people that don't judge a lot. This is what makes me feel safer.

The study's findings are consistent with prior research on racism in schools. Racism can have detrimental impacts on students academically, socially, and psychologically, affecting their sense of belonging, self-esteem, and academic progress (Ennab, 2022).

Recommendations

PARTICIPANTS AND KEY informants had a variety of recommendations to address anti-Muslim racism. These recommendations ranged from strategies to address anti-Muslim racism in schools, including advocating for students, promoting diversity and anti-racism in staff hiring and throughout the curriculum, to providing safe spaces in schools for Muslim students.

Tackling Anti-Muslim Racism

A key recommendation that emerged from the study was the promotion of anti-racism within schools. The treatment of Muslim young women by their teachers and peers made them feel ostracized and excluded. In particular, students had the following comments about their hope for better treatment by teachers:

> I just wish the teachers were a bit more understanding. I think this is something you should stress in the report: The teachers make the students or break the students. My teachers broke me, they didn't make me. So, we need more [teachers] to make [the students] not break them.

> [Teachers should] be able to treat us as normal… they always expect too little from us. They give you the easier test to just push you along and, you know, making comments like 'Oh wow, your grammar is actually very good.' And I know that there's a big difference between the [white] Canadian kids

and [racialized newcomers], even though we're citizens and even though we're legal. They still have us here because they expect us to be here, but [the teachers] should be treating us like we're here like everyone else... they have to understand and to learn and accept the fact that they're messing up and they're saying things wrong.

Participants emphasized the importance of having racialized school staff at all levels to ensure that students from different cultures and identities are adequately represented and included in the school community. They highlighted the need for schools to take proactive measures to expose students to diverse cultures from around the world to foster a more inclusive and well-rounded educational experience. One of the participants explained:

Diversity within a school is very important because it is more welcoming of differences, and you can relate to one another... I think schools need to hire staff, including teachers and [school administrators], who are from different backgrounds and colors, not just white people.... [This] helps to make students feel less intimidated.

Participants also highlighted the importance of organizing cultural events where students can share and learn about different cultures and religions, including Islam. Outreach events such as visiting a mosque were also mentioned alongside inviting guest speakers to educate students and staff about diversity and different cultural practices to enhance knowledge and understanding of Islam.

In addition to diverse staff and cultural events, several students and key informants emphasized the importance of anti-racism training. As a key informant explained, anti-racism training is important for "creating awareness about the needs of Muslim students [e.g., to attend Friday prayers and to fast during Ramadan]". Hindy (2016), in her recommendation from her study on Muslim student experiences in Ontario, emphasizes the importance for all educators to attend mandated anti-Islamophobia training. Several Muslim students indicated that they want teachers who do not 'break' students but help promote their curiosity and freedom to explore. As such, anti-racism training can also help educators think of more relational ways to address issues that arise in the classroom (Ennab, 2022). Students also want educators to help advocate for them and appropriately intervene when peers are bullying or harassing them. As one student explained, "Educators should not ignore students when they are taunting Muslims and contributing to a toxic environment. Instead, educators need to confront students." As research

shows, educators can perpetuate anti-Muslim racism through their (in)actions (Amjad, 2018; Aroian, 2012). Participants felt that representation is not enough; it is important to have staff who are both Muslim and anti-racist.

Participants also emphasized the need for curricula that are more accommodating and attentive to the requirements of Muslim students. They expressed concerns about negative portrayals of Islam in the Canadian curriculum, including in classroom discussion and in books. For this reason, the Manitoba Islamic Association specifically emphasizes the need to: "Develop toolkits and curriculum resources for teachers on Islam, Muslims, and Islamophobia and incorporate Muslim history in Canada, Muslim civilization, and cultures in school curricula" (Sotiriadou & Elbakri, 2022, p. 19). Hindy (2016) expands on this to recommend that anti-Islamophobia strategies be included in the curricula. Similarly, Amjad (2018) discusses how teachers can play a significant part in increasing the inclusivity of curricula by making sure that their teaching strategies are considerate of Muslim students. Teachers can have the flexibility to add supplementary materials to curricula to make them more diverse and inclusive and foster a sense of belonging for all the students. However, often non-Muslim teachers may have trouble identifying their own biases within their pedagogy (Amjad, 2018). This is why changes to curricula and training must be accompanied with increased recruitment and retention of Muslim staff.

Lastly, building anti-racist and safer school spaces for Muslim students will require building relations with the Muslim community in Manitoba to better ensure that the needs of Muslim students are being met. As a key informant underlined:

> We need to be at the forefront with the schools and do a lot more education and a lot more community building. Relationship building, I think is important. People need to understand that there is a media portrayal of Muslims that is not always in favor of Muslims, which can impact stereotypes and misconceptions of Muslims.

Initiatives to tackle anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia must be multifaceted. Some participants emphasized the need for system change. As one student said, "I think you should focus on the teacher, then the principal and the school, the whole system in general, on the curriculum [and everything]." Thus, representative staff, anti-racist training, inclusive curriculum, and relationships with the Muslim and racialized communities are not standalone solutions, but pieces that work together against structural racism.

Religious Accommodation

Participants in this study expressed a strong need for dedicated spaces within schools that can accommodate their religious practices, particularly concerning food, prayer, and accommodation during Ramadan. Prayer is a fundamental aspect of the Islamic faith, and Muslims are required to pray at specific times throughout the day (Syed, 2013). Participants expressed a desire for accessible, adequately sized dedicated prayer spaces that are free from distractions. Participants indicated that access to prayer rooms without reliance on teachers was also important. For example, one student noted that "My school used to have a prayer room, but then COVID hit and they just removed it… And since we don't have an actual prayer room now…. we just had to keep asking teachers: is your room available? Can we use it?" Given the absence of a designated physical space, this student felt rushed to find space every day to pray.

Furthermore, participants recommended that staff are made aware of prayer times. One participant spoke positively of the accommodations given by her school, noting that they not only offer a prayer space but also make provisions for Friday prayers.

> [Unlike in the past years,] now the school offers us an allocated time [to go pray]. Teachers know if a student wants to pray during class time, they can leave. There are like tons of boxes of prayer mats when it is [Salatul-]Jumu'ah [Friday prayer in Arabic].

Participants in the study also emphasized the need for halal food options in school cafeterias to accommodate their dietary requirements. Halal food refers to food prepared and processed following Islamic dietary guidelines. For example, the Toronto District School Board released halal food guidelines to improve accessibility of food options in their school cafeterias (Toronto District School Board, n.d.). In addition, participants highlighted the importance of understanding and accommodating the needs of Muslim students during Ramadan. Ramadan is a month of fasting observed by Muslims, where they abstain from food and drink from dawn until sunset (Islamic Circle of North America Sisters Canada, n.d.). Participants want schools to be considerate during Ramadan. For example, understanding that fasting can lead to fatigue and Muslim students may be unable to participate in sports during fasting hours. The call for suitable prayer spaces within schools and reasonable accommodations aligns with recommendations from existing literature and reports, such as the one by the MIA (Sotiriadou & Elbakri, 2022).

Research shows the challenges faced by Muslim adolescents within the educational system are further complicated by the mismatch between secular and religious standards observed at school and home and the marginalization of the Islamic religion (Moulin-Stožek & Schirr, 2017). For example, school curricula frequently privilege Christianity as the norm while relegating other religions to culture; such views are reinforced by scheduling school breaks that often coincide with Christian holidays (Liou & Cutler, 2021). Even in cases where schools are perceived to be secular, these do not serve the needs of Muslim students whose religion can be central to their daily lives (Oberoi & Trickett, 2018). Therefore, the recommendations of religious accommodations can serve to make educational spaces more inclusive for Muslim students.

Muslim Student Clubs

There was a strong demand amongst participants for Muslim student clubs as safe spaces for Muslim students within schools. Participants expressed the need for these clubs to support identity development and a sense of belonging and to foster and create awareness about Islam and Muslim experiences. Muslim student clubs were viewed as spaces for advocacy, where students can come together to address their needs and concerns and promote understanding and inclusivity within the school community. One student suggested:

> For hijabis, it would be nice to have a club for *Muslimahs* [Arabic word for Muslim women]. Yes, it would be nice to have a club for all of us just to I guess [for] *tafsir Halaqah* [to comment on and interpret the Quran in a study group], because not everyone can make it down to the mosque, especially in this, [cold] weather. It is brutal.

The call for Muslim student clubs aligns with findings from several studies, such as the work by Hindy (2016), which highlights the positive impact of these clubs in providing support and a sense of belonging for Muslim students. Muslim student clubs are places where students can come together, share their experiences, and navigate the challenges of discrimination within and outside of school environments. Furthermore, these clubs can create spaces for awareness and education for both Muslim and non-Muslim students (Hindy, 2016). Implementing the recommendation for Muslim student clubs

can help create a more welcoming and encouraging environment where Muslim students' voices and needs are prioritized.

It is important to note that the undertaking of any recommendations must avoid homogenizing Muslim students' experiences; as shown in this study, experiences can vary across identities (e.g., race, class, and immigration status). Coping methods also vary amongst Muslim students. While some participants in this study chose to stop wearing the hijab in response to anti-Muslim racism, others did not. Many students tried to resist racism by bonding with friends who had similar experiences to them, and some experienced a deepening of faith.

Conclusion

THIS STUDY ECHOES previous findings that Muslim young women face anti-Muslim racism at schools. As we have shown, Muslim school students often navigate racism from peers, school staff, and the curriculum. These experiences are often amplified when a student chooses to wear the hijab, which can increase her visibility and likelihood of her experiencing bullying and harassment. The intersection of multiple identities made the experience of discrimination especially pronounced for Black and Palestinian Muslim students. As the students shared in this study, anti-Muslim racism can impact their well-being, social relationships, and academic outcomes. As a result, Muslim students often cope by seeking support from their limited network of friends and families and within their community. In some cases, Muslim students responded to Islamophobic experiences in schools by choosing not to wear the hijab to school to avoid being the target of unwanted and unwarranted attention.

For these reasons, this report recommends that school boards implement an anti-Muslim racism strategy, which includes hiring more Muslim staff at all levels, offering anti-racist training focusing on Muslim experiences, enhancing curriculum, and providing reasonable accommodations to allow Muslim students to practice their religion and culture in school spaces. This requires collaboration and action, involving Muslim communities, all levels of government, and the public (Sotiriadou & Elbakri, 2022).

While these reform measures can improve some student experiences, these measures must be accompanied by a sustained effort to dismantle

school structures and policies that recreate anti-Muslim racism and its intersection with other forms of oppression (e.g., anti-Black/Palestinian racism). As of to date, only two school boards in Canada, the Toronto District School Board and the Peel District School Board, have an explicit strategy to dismantle Islamophobia; the latter also emphasizing the intersection of Islamophobia with other forms of oppression, such as anti-Black and anti-Palestinian racism, sexism, anti-LGBTQ hate, and systemic oppression (The Canadian Press 2023; CBC, 2023). Muslim students and communities in Manitoba can also benefit from similar strategies that are explicit in tackling anti-Muslim racism.

Failing to explicitly address racism will maintain the status quo (a blind approach to Muslim and racialized experiences). The recent example of Quebec shows that continued anti-Muslim racism can pave the way for more racist policies and renewed hate. For example, the secularism law often known as Bill 21, which was passed in 2019, has intensified anti-Muslim racism in schools. Many Muslim educators, especially women who wear the Hijab, have lost their jobs since this law has been implemented (Rukavina, 2022). Thus, it is important to prioritize the experiences of Muslim students in decision making and school practices.

The recent news of Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza highlights how anti-Palestinian racism is a systemic problem in Canada. Many Palestinian families and educators are currently grieving their losses while experiencing racism in schools. There have been many documented cases of pro-Palestinian speech and expressions that have been unfairly censored and disciplined. Some school boards have applied controversial definitions of anti-semitism, such as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition, which conflate criticism of Israel and Zionism with antisemitism to crack down on Palestinian freedom of speech and assembly. Not surprisingly, many Palestinian families do not feel safe in education spaces and are often scared to speak up. For this reason, it is important for school boards to explicitly commit to addressing Anti-Palestinian racism and adopt it into their policies and frameworks (CJPME, 2023).

Future research on Muslim students in Canada should explore how their experiences intersect with issues related to whiteness, Indigeneity, and Blackness. This can help increase understanding and promote ways to advocate for anti-racist changes and advance cross-racial solidarity that can help in dismantling settler colonialism. As Erakat (2020) indicates, solidarities, including Black-Palestinian-Indigenous solidarities, are an important part of anti-racist community building and resistance.

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