

# Interpreting Islam in the Workplace: The Internal and External Expectations Borne by Second-Generation Muslim Women

Awish Aslam ■ PhD Candidate

Department of Sociology, Collaborative Program in Migration and Ethnic Relations ■ Western University

## INTRODUCTION

- Second-generation Canadian Muslim immigrants (the children of Muslim immigrants living in Canada) have high levels of postsecondary attainment, but report poor economic outcomes.<sup>1,2</sup>
- This population faces:
  - alarming rates of un(der)employment and low-income
  - the lowest return on their education compared to other major religious groups
  - shockingly high rates of poverty (30—55%).<sup>1,2,3</sup>
- Both Muslim men and women face a host of social and economic challenges, but economic indicators point to gender disparities, placing Muslim women at a comparative disadvantage to their male counterparts.<sup>3</sup>
- Muslim women are less likely to be employed in paid work when compared to women of other religions.<sup>4</sup>
- These women also experience a high degree of workplace discrimination. This has in part been attributed to the fact that headscarves are frequently seen as the icon of Islamic culture, which increases women's visibility as Muslims.<sup>5,6</sup>

## RESEARCH QUESTION

- The work experiences of the second generation provide important insight into the long-term process of immigrant integration.<sup>7,8</sup>
- However, little is known about second-generation Muslim immigrants living in Canada, and questions that are central to understanding the reasons behind these women's work outcomes remain largely unanswered.
- Therefore, I am seeking to answer the following question:  
**How do second-generation Canadian Muslim women understand the challenges they face at work?**

## METHODS

### RECRUITMENT

- Posters were displayed in everyday locations (e.g., coffee shops, grocery stores, libraries) and targeted locations (e.g., employment centres, Islamic organizations, cultural centres) across Ontario.
- The study was also promoted online using social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn), announced at community events, and through passive snowball sampling.

### DATA COLLECTION

- Participants took part in an in-depth interview.
- Interview questions covered five broad areas:
  1. upbringing in Canada and Muslim identity
  2. pathways from school to work
  3. work experiences, orientations to work, and career goals
  4. challenges to performing work/in the workplace
  5. strategies and sources of support.
- Interviewees also completed a brief demographic survey to contextualize their interview responses.

### ANALYSIS

- Inductive thematic analysis of field notes and interview transcripts to identify key patterns in participants' experiences.

## SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANTS

- 35 second-generation Muslim women
- between 22 and 59 years of age
- completed at least one form of post-secondary education in Canada
- located in urban centres across Ontario
- diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds
- different sects of Islam
- varying levels of commitment to religious practices
- range of occupational fields and work settings:
  - e.g., professional occupations, clerical and retail work, and homemakers

## RESULTS

- Participants were mindful about the ways in which they attempted to reconcile their Islamic values with Canadian workplace norms.
- Some of the more common beliefs or practices participants attempted to negotiate included:
  - daily prayers
  - fasting during Ramadan
  - dressing modestly/hijab
  - physical contact (e.g., shaking hands) with males
  - social situations involving alcohol.
- Accommodation depended on the workplace culture.
- Interpretations of Islam and the intentions behind their work allowed participants to reconcile potential religious conflicts.

*"Praying in the staff room was always sort of weird—especially if someone else is on break and having a meal."*  
—Mai (Librarian)

- Employers, co-workers, and clients tended to have little knowledge of Islam, but at times they imposed a monolithic image of Muslim women onto participants:
  - conservative
  - no personality—their life revolves around their religion
  - no sense of humour
  - easily offended
  - uneducated
  - foreign
  - oppressed
- These assumptions had very real implications for participants' careers, including perceptions around their competence and capability to perform certain kinds of work as well as the likelihood that they would be put forward for promotions and leadership opportunities.

*"There is that conflict that some things don't align with what I believe religiously, and there's that paranoia that I might do something wrong religiously, but at the same time I'm helping people right? My religion isn't gonna stop me from providing service."*  
—Sarah (Residential Caseworker)

Reconciling  
Faith & Work

Muslim  
Women  
as a Monolith

*"The comment the guy had to make was something stupid like, 'Oh, I don't know how that [her hijab] is going to come into play with meetings.' People have these assumptions and if they're the only ones that are making decisions, then obviously [Muslim women] are not going to have a chance."*  
—Amina (Program Manager)

*"Because I can't bond in the ways that they do [over drinks]. I feel like I'm missing out, so I need to compensate in other ways."*  
—Layla (Community Worker)

Proving  
Your Worth  
as a Worker

Discrimination  
&  
Islamophobia

*"They were like, 'Oh, but we thought we accommodated you and we still didn't. How difficult are you?'"*  
—Maliha (Business Manager)

- Conflicts between their religious beliefs/practices and various workplace norms were sometimes interpreted as a burden by employers and co-workers, leading participants to:
  - limit their requests for accommodation and find their own creative ways to meet religious obligations, so as not to appear too burdensome.
  - feel the need to make up for these tensions by proving their worth as a worker in other capacities.
- "Proving your worth" could mean:
  - going above and beyond in other aspects of work.
  - tolerating undignified comments and treatment.
  - not speaking up despite experiencing overt discrimination.

*"Regularly, people think we are the same person. She's not a hijabi and I don't think we look alike...I think sometimes you're sort of like, what are you actually seeing?"*  
—Ifrah (Physician)

- Participants described experiencing both overt and covert forms of discrimination at work.
  - Because anti-discrimination legislation prohibits overtly discriminatory practices at work, discrimination was more likely to occur covertly.
- The ambiguous nature of covert discrimination made it difficult for participants to determine whether they were in fact experiencing discrimination and on what basis.
  - Certain experiences were clearly linked to their Muslim identity—particularly those related to requests for accommodation.

*"When I have to work and it's Ramadan, it can be pretty challenging because there aren't any accommodations in place already. [...]"*  
*I didn't even tell my boss that I was fasting, I didn't really want him to know. I didn't want to make it seem like I wasn't able to do my job."*  
—Kara (Sports Coach)

*"So she said that there are no empty rooms that she could offer me, even though I knew of rooms where there weren't any employees working in it. [...]"*  
*And instead, she was telling me that I could go to my car and pray."*  
—Zaynab (Regulatory Affairs Specialist)

## CONCLUSIONS

- These findings help to uncover some of the unique challenges that Muslim women encounter on the job and how these experiences shape their orientations to work.
  - Challenges were present across occupational fields and industries.
  - The barriers these women faced took different forms, and they often varied based on the visibility of their faith and the context of their work environment.
- Internal tensions were rooted in conflicts between (formal and informal) occupational requirements and religious beliefs.
  - These were resolved through participants' commitment to their faith, their interpretations of Islam, and the intention behind their actions.
- Negative situations at work were often attributed to a general lack of understanding about Islam and stereotypes about Muslim women.
  - Assumptions about Muslim women shaped the opportunities available to participants, which in turn influenced their long-term career plans.
- The difficulties these women faced were reinforced by a lack of institutional support to help them navigate these challenges, which also exacerbated experiences of discrimination.
  - There is an urgent need to address these inequalities at a structural level, because they have widespread consequences for the overall well-being of the Muslim population.

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