

Lived Experiences of Muslim Women Facing Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism at the University of Calgary

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Background

- The National Council of Canadian Muslims reports that the hate crimes against Muslims in Canada have increased by 1000% in 2024 (NCCM, 2024), posing significant challenges to social justice and equity (Minsky, 2017; Zine, 2021).
- Academic biases and institutional racism are well-documented, yet a more insidious form of systemic racism persists in academia (Alizai, 2023; Tuck, 2009). This form of racism, often concealed by liberal ideals of diversity and inclusion, influences educational policies, institutional cultures, and student experiences, upholding exclusionary practices under the guise of neutrality (Gauvin, 2023).
- Minimal empirical research exists on Islamophobia in Canada despite increasing global discussions (Smith, 2020; Macdonald, 2015; W-Laflamme, 2018).
- More than 60% of hate crimes against Muslims go unreported due to the fear of further victimization or lack of trust in the police (Harris, 2017; Ahmed, 2019; StatsCan, 2020).
- Negative views about Muslims are held by 48% of Canadians, with some attributing injustice and hate crimes to Muslims (Kanji, 2020; Jisravi & Arnold, 2018).

Objectives

- **Examine Lived Experiences:** Investigate the lived experiences of Muslim women students, staff, instructors, and faculty members at the University of Calgary to understand how Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism manifest and affect their academic and professional lives.
- **Identify Barriers and Support Needs:** Identify the systemic barriers, challenges, and forms of racism and discrimination faced by Muslim women at the university, along with their coping strategies and identification of support systems.
- **Develop Recommendations for combating Islamophobia:** Provide key recommendations to improve institutional policies, programs, and practices to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion while addressing anti-Muslim racism at the University of Calgary.
- **Expand Research on Anti-Muslim Racism:** Contribute to, and advance research on anti-Muslim racism within Canadian higher education, with a specific focus on the gendered experiences of Muslim women in academic institutions.
- **Inform Future National Research and Policy:** Provide insights to inform and guide national research and policy efforts focused on combating anti-Muslim racism and fostering inclusive learning and working environments in Canadian universities.

Research Method

Five Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

- Three with students
- One with academic staff
- One with administrative staff

Twenty In-Depth Interviews:

FGD's will be complemented by in-depth interviews by engaging participants who seek more profound and reflective conversations.

The study aims to capture the nuanced emotional and social dimensions of participants' experiences, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism affect Muslim women's sense of belonging, identity, and mental well-being.



Research Question/s

To capture the complexities of personal, gendered, racial, and social influences of racism, the primary research study question will be:

- How do Muslim women at the University of Calgary experience and respond to Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism in their academic and social environments?

Sub-questions of the study will be:

- What are the Muslim women's experiences with Instructors, staff members, and peers at the University of Calgary?
- How do these experiences impact their academic performance?
- How does it impact their sense of identity, belonging, and mental well-being?
- How do they navigate these challenges, and what needs to be done to address them?

Theoretical Framework

- This research will be guided by the core frameworks of Anti-Opressive Practice (AOP) principles and Critical Race Theory (CRT), complementing the transformative epistemological stance that views knowledge as socially constructed and shaped by power dynamics (Harms & Connolly, 2019; Payne, 2016; Brown & Strega, 2015; Creswell and Creswell, 2023).
- AOP views oppression as socially constructed and supported by institutions, creating social and economic barriers for marginalized groups. It aims to address these issues by promoting a culturally aware society that resists oppression (Harms & Connolly, 2019; Payne, 2016).
- CRT explores how racism is embedded in social structures, where markers like hijab or Muslim names signify identity and validate the experiences of marginalized groups regarding race and racism in Western societies (Garner & Selod, 2015; Housee, 2012).

- Participants will be recruited through the Muslim Student Association, Muslim social clubs, and Islamic centers. The recruitment process will prioritize inclusivity, ensuring representation from diverse racial backgrounds, as experiences may vary significantly among different groups (Fraser, 2004; Alizai, 2017; Brown & Strega, 2015).
- Open-ended questions will guide the interviews and focus groups, allowing for flexibility in responses while ensuring that crucial topics related to Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism are addressed.
- Safe spaces will be created, following trauma-informed practices, allowing participants to skip questions, provide mental health support, and obtain informed consent.
- Critical Narrative analysis will identify emergent themes and patterns within the data while noting inconsistencies and unexpected findings (Fraser, 2004; Alizai, 2017; Zine, 2006).

Impacts

This study on anti-Muslim racism among Muslim women at the University of Calgary is expected to generate multiple positive outcomes:

- **Enhanced Understanding of Marginalization:** This study will explore the experiences of Muslim women in higher education, revealing how anti-Muslim racism and gender intersect, affecting their academic and professional success.
- **Policy and Practice Improvement:** The study's findings will help refine university policies and practices to promote equity and inclusion and safeguard against discrimination, fostering a safer, more supportive environment.
- **Advancement of Equity and Inclusion Initiatives:** The research aims to reduce systemic barriers for marginalized communities by providing data to enhance diversity and anti-racism initiatives at the University of Calgary.
- **Contribution to National and Institutional Knowledge:** This study will enhance research on anti-Muslim racism in Canadian universities, filling a knowledge gap and serving as a foundation for comparative studies in other institutions and communities.
- **Informing Broader National Policies:** The study's findings will guide future research and policy on anti-Muslim racism and promote inclusivity in Canadian education system.

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