Cross-Sections of Positionality and Educational Research
The Experiences of Muslim Women in Academia

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This qualitative study examines the experiences of five Muslim women scholars in academia, focusing on the intersection of race, religion, and gender in predominantly secular institutions. Through Critical Race Methodology (CRM), and Muslim Critical Race Theory (MusCrit), we analyze how Muslim women navigate exclusionary academic spaces, particularly in the context of intensified Islamophobia. Drawing on narrative inquiry and thematic analysis, we uncover patterns of silencing, inclusivity, hypervisibility, impostor syndrome, and the complexities of allyship. Our findings reveal the multifaceted strategies Muslim women employ to reconcile their personal and professional

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lives within institutional structures that often fail to recognize religious diversity. This study enhances discussions on representation and systemic change in higher education, highlighting the necessity for truly inclusive environments that recognize and address the unique experiences of Muslim women scholars.

Keywords: Muslim women, academia, intersectionality, Islamophobia, MusCrit

INTRODUCTION

The authors had gathered in an affinity space, exploring the emerging voices on the Muslim experience within different domains at the virtual symposium. This planted the seeds for a meaningful convergence in April 2024 at the American Education Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, where we presented research on Muslims in educational contexts. Two faculty members, Ali and DeCuir, led the session as research mentors, introducing their application of MusCrit—a micro-theoretical lens facilitating analysis of Muslim Americans in educational spaces. Three doctoral candidates—Kizil, Lane, and Khawaja—presented their research addressing Muslim students' experiences in schools. As Muslim American women scholars who wear hijabs as identifiable markers of our faith commitments, we discovered aligned research interests and shared experiences navigating academic institutions. The session revealed profound commonalities in our experiences. The doctoral candidates expressed experiencing unprecedented warmth and support for their research, which they rarely find in their typical experiences in their doctoral programs. The faculty members resonated with these sentiments,

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reflecting on their own experiences of isolation and marginalization in graduate school. They noted that transitioning to faculty positions had not significantly altered these dynamics. This collective recognition of shared challenges, particularly regarding anti-Muslim racism in academic spaces, catalyzed our commitment to examining our experiences as Muslim women scholars and exploring institutional changes needed to create more equitable academic environments.

The complex intersections of race, religion, and gender fundamentally shape our experiences as Muslim women in academia. As hijab-wearing scholars, we are involved in predominantly secular institutions as noticeable religious minorities. Contemporary higher education institutions function as secular spaces that systematically limit discourse on religious, spiritual, and faith exploration (Burchett & Glanzer, 2020), continuing centuries of secularization across Western academia (Flatt, 2020). This secularization extends beyond the mere absence of religious mandates; it actively functions to silence and erase faith-based worldviews and practices. In particular, this secularization challenges the legitimacy of religious expressions such as the hijab and invalidates the need for religious accommodations within rigid institutional structures.

Despite significant institutional investments in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, many academic structures fail to recognize religious diversity as a critical dimension of equity and inclusion. The exclusion of religious identity from many institutional DEI efforts creates an implicit hierarchy of marginalization, often leading to the oversight of religious diversity—especially the experiences of Muslim scholars—in policies and practices. While many universities have statements supporting religious inclusion, implementing accommodations, such as designated prayer spaces, halal food options, and the recognition of religious holidays, remains inconsistent. This neglect is particularly evident in institutions where secularism is deeply ingrained in academic culture, resulting in implicit biases in hiring, research recognition, and professional advancement. Consequently, Muslim scholars frequently face unspoken norms that delegitimize faith-based perspectives in research while also encountering structural barriers similar to those faced by other marginalized racial and gender groups in academia.

While racial, ethnic, gender, and sexuality identities are increasingly acknowledged as integral to social realities, religious identity is often relegated to the realm of personal choice, recognized only when publicly expressed. This marginalization is particularly evident in the composition

of DEI offices, where religious diversity rarely features in hiring considerations. The absence of Muslim women's voices in these spaces perpetuates the inadequacy of institutional policies and practices in creating truly inclusive learning environments for practicing Muslim scholars in graduate programs.

We chose to conduct a collaborative narrative inquiry to center our collective voices in both the documentation of our shared experiences in graduate school as well as our knowledge of critical race methodologies to inform recommendations for antiracist solutions to the ongoing inequities and injustices we face as Muslim women researchers. We hope to contribute to ongoing academic discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as policies and practices that reproduce systemic inequities in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The field of higher education has extensively documented the experiences of marginalized doctoral students and faculty members. Dupree and Boykin's (2021) analysis reveal deeply rooted exclusionary practices within institutions, which persist despite structural attempts to foster belonging and inclusion through diversity initiatives. While scholarship on marginalized communities in higher education is extensive, research specifically examining Muslim women's experiences in the academy remains limited. Mir's (2014) groundbreaking work centered on the lived experiences of Muslim undergraduate women in Washington DC, universities. Ali's (2016) examination of post-PATRIOT Act surveillance of Muslim students in New York City, along with studies on Muslim college students' sense of belonging (Cole, 2021) and intersectional reflections of both Muslim international and American students (Baboolal, 2020), similarly focused on undergraduate populations. Though valuable, these studies do not capture the distinct complexities of graduate student experiences, particularly the intricate dynamics of faculty relationships, funding support, and teaching responsibilities.

Several studies have delved into the experiences of Muslim students in higher education in the United States and other Western countries. For instance, Anderson (2020) conducted a study that examined how Muslim international students navigate their religious, ethnic/racial, and gender identities both before arriving in the United States and as students in the midwestern region. Utilizing Kim's (2012) International Student Identity

model as a guiding framework, the research uncovered three significant findings through semi-structured interviews with 10 students enrolled in 4-year institutions in the midwestern United States. These findings highlighted the religious challenges faced by Muslim individuals, the adaptability of Islam as a religion, struggles with racial stereotypes and ethnic constructs, as well as gender-related difficulties encompassing interactions between males and females and perceptions surrounding veiling practices (Anderson, 2020).

Another study investigated the obstacles encountered by Middle Eastern Muslim men in U.S. higher education. Salinas et al. (2022) conducted this research, employing a phenomenological approach and semi-structured interviews to gain insight into how these students navigate the university environment amidst a politically divisive backdrop. The key findings underscore the necessity for these students to confront negative perceptions, often experiencing social and academic isolation. Despite these adversities, their dedication to education remains unwavering, fueled by familial encouragement and cultural norms. The study emphasizes the profound impact of Islamophobia and xenophobia on the experiences of these students, alongside the inadequacy of university support and cultural inclusivity. Furthermore, the authors delve into the historical context of Islamophobia in the U.S., exacerbated by significant events such as 9/11 and the discourse surrounding the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Salinas et al., 2022). Fewer studies examine the unique experiences of Muslim women in educational spaces (Karaman and Christian, 2020; Al-Sharif, 2021; Yousafzai, 2019). In an autoethnographic piece, Al-Sharif (2021) recounts her journey working in higher education as a white, Muslim, American, hijabi woman, shedding light on how the intersectionality of her identity has influenced various aspects of her professional life. She delves into the impact of her multifaceted identity on her work environment, relationships within the workplace, opportunities for career advancement, and even her employment prospects. Through introspective narratives, she shares moments where her identity was both validated and questioned, offering insights into the complexities of identity development and the challenges of navigating the campus environment and its inhabitants. The author reflects on the internal struggles she faces due to the diverse facets of her identity, grappling with feelings of impostership and inner dissonance (Al-Sharif, 2021).

A complex interplay of identity, religion, and societal perceptions shapes the experiences of Muslim women in academia. Ali (2022) highlights the

dual impact of the hijab on identity formation, emphasizing how it offers comfort within the community while inviting public investigation and discrimination. Similarly, Yousafzai (2019) discusses the hijab's role in providing personal and social significance to Muslim women, countering prevailing stereotypes. Despite the positive religious affirmation that Muslim women describe in choosing to wear the hijab, in the United States, these women continue to face violent expressions of hate and discrimination targeting their religious identity (Abu-Ras and Suarez, 2009). This theme is further examined by Selod and Embrick (2013), who analyze the racialization of Muslims and its profound effects on their identity and community belonging. Garner and Selod (2015) add that Islamophobia acts as a form of racial discrimination, rendering the experiences of U.S. Muslims in higher education unjust and inequitable.

Islamophobia is also used as a tool to further isolate Muslims and place them on the margins of academic relevance and discourse. Karaman and Christian (2020) focus on the de-Americanization and alienation experienced by hijabi Muslim women in American educational institutions. They argue that these women are often seen as outsiders, which affects their academic and social experiences. Immigrant Muslim women face similar challenges that marginalize and silence their positions in higher education. Yakaboski et al. (2018) describe Saudi Arabian women studying in the United States and the discrimination they faced, often due to persistent gendered stereotypes and a lack of substantive knowledge of Islam and Muslims. Ahmad Pazil (2022) wrote about earning her Ph.D. in the United Kingdom as a Muslim Malay woman, emphasizing the distinctions between Western and Eastern cultural norms as well as persistent discrimination that targeted her immigrant and Muslim identities. The work of Stewart (2024) brings a fresh dimension to this work by centering Muslim women in graduate school and moving beyond the representation of anti-Muslim discrimination experienced in broader society. This research interrogated the institution of higher education as the site of dehumanizing experiences by this unique community. This study shows how Muslim women challenge socio-cultural narratives of anti-Blackness, anti-Muslim racism, xenophobia, and sexism deeply rooted in graduate schools that often intersect to marginalize Muslim women. In describing the findings of the study, Stewart (2024, p. 337) writes, "… we discuss how being of immigrant-origin and first-generation can often feel isolating in ways that bring about a sense of disposability and erasure." As a result,

the women in Stewart's (2024) study develop humanizing approaches to navigate higher education, offering a research agenda for future studies that examine Muslim women in educational institutions.

As we explored the few studies that center on our identities and experiences as Muslim women in higher education, we recognized common patterns across the literature. Experiences of marginalization, isolation, and silencing were common realities of inequitable accounts of failed attempts at inclusion across many institutions. It was also clear to us that larger social discourses of Islamophobia had significant impacts on our collective experiences in graduate school. Although much of the literature documented the long-term impacts of a post-9/11 society, the sharp increase in campus-targeted forms of Islamophobia from the post-10/7 context has sharpened attacks on Muslim women and their place as researchers in higher education.

The interplay of identity, religion, and societal perceptions profoundly shapes Muslim women's academic experiences. Despite the positive religious affirmation that Muslim women describe in choosing to wear the hijab, they continue to face discriminatory practices targeting their religious identity (Abu-Ras and Suarez, 2009). These patterns of marginalization and resistance inform our methodological approach, which centers the voices and experiences of Muslim women scholars while examining the institutional structures that shape their academic journeys.

METHODOLOGY

Our methodological approach emerges from both lived experience and theoretical grounding in critical race studies. The convergence of our paths at AERA 2024 catalyzed a collaborative narrative inquiry that centers our collective experiences while maintaining individual authenticity.

Data Collection

Our data collection process emerged organically from our Spring 2024 discussions of shared experiences as Muslim women researchers in academia. Initial conversations revealed a collective desire to document our narratives for an audience that would recognize both our faith commitments and the complexities of navigating research challenges in secular institutions. Our formal data collection commenced with the collaborative decision to compose detailed personal narratives guided by established principles:

- Protection of individual privacy
- Non-judgmental engagement with experiences
- Commitment to authentic reflexivity
- Strengthening of sisterhood through the process

Theoretical Framework

Our study employs Critical Race Methodology (CRM) and Muslim Critical Race Theory (MusCrit) to examine Muslim women's experiences in academia. As conceptualized by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), CRM provides an analytical framework centering on marginalized voices through counter-storytelling. MusCrit extends this foundation by specifically addressing Muslim experiences, particularly the intersections of Islamophobia and racialization (Ali, 2022).

Research Questions

This study explores the multifaceted experiences of Muslim women in academia, focusing on how they navigate their identities and respond to challenges within predominantly secular educational spaces. The following research questions guide this inquiry:

1. **How do Muslim women in academia navigate their religious, cultural, and professional identities in predominantly secular and exclusionary environments?**
    - In what ways do the intersecting factors of race, religion, and gender impact their academic and social experiences?
    - How does hypervisibility affect the professional and personal lives of Muslim women in higher education?
    - What strategies do Muslim women employ to reconcile their religious and cultural identities with the secular norms of academic institutions?
2. **What challenges and forms of support do Muslim women encounter in academia, and how do these shape their motivations and approaches to their work?**
    - How do Muslim women experience and respond to silencing, both within academic settings and broader societal contexts?
    - What role does allyship, both within and outside of the Muslim community, play in shaping their academic journeys?
    - How do internal challenges, such as impostor syndrome and the pressure to represent all Muslims, influence their professional identities and aspirations?
    - What types of professional and personal support networks do Muslim women build and sustain in secular institutions, and how do these networks impact their experiences and success in academia?

By addressing these questions, this study highlights the complexities of navigating academia as a Muslim woman and emphasize the need for more inclusive and supportive educational environments.

CODING PROCESS:

The data was analyzed through a thematic coding process, which involved several steps:

1. **Initial Coding**: Each narrative was first read thoroughly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. Initial codes were assigned to various segments of the narratives to capture key ideas and themes related to the participants' experiences, such as silencing and speaking out, navigating secular spaces, allyship and its complications, internal considerations (e.g., impostor syndrome), reasons and motivations for their work, hypervisibility and intersectional identities, and working independently in academia.

2. **Collaborative Coding**: To ensure reliability and validity in our coding process, each participant's narrative was coded independently by two different researchers. This collaborative approach allowed for multiple perspectives in interpreting the data and helped to identify consistent themes across different narratives.

3. **Identification of Themes**: After the initial coding, we identified overarching themes that were prevalent across the different narratives. These themes were not predefined but emerged organically from the data, allowing for a more authentic representation of the participants' experiences.

4. **Refining Themes**: The identified themes were further refined and grouped into broader categories. This step involved discussion among the research team to ensure that each theme accurately reflected the data and captured the complexities of the participants' experiences.

5. **Cross-Checking and Validation**: To validate our findings, we cross-checked the themes with the original narratives. This step ensured that the themes remained grounded in the data and that the voices of the participants were accurately represented.

6. **Use of Direct Quotes**: Throughout the analysis, direct quotes were extracted from the narratives to provide a rich, detailed account of the participants' experiences. These quotes were carefully selected to illustrate key themes and to ensure that the participants' voices were foregrounded in our analysis.

7. **Developing a Narrative Synthesis**: The final step involved developing a narrative synthesis that weaved together the themes and direct quotes to provide a cohesive account of the experiences of Muslim women in academia. This synthesis aimed to highlight the complexity of their experiences and the intersecting factors of race, religion, and gender that shape their academic journeys.

Through this rigorous data analysis process, we have aimed to illuminate the multifaceted challenges faced by Muslim women in academia and to advocate for more inclusive and supportive educational environments. Our findings contribute to the broader discourse on diversity and representation in higher education, emphasizing the need for an intersectional approach to understanding and addressing the experiences of marginalized groups.

FINDINGS

Silencing and Speaking Out

As Muslim women in academia, we each described experiences of silencing, a dynamic that manifests itself in both overt and subtle ways. One key form of silencing is the marginalization of our voices within academic spaces, where our contributions are both overlooked and undervalued. Ali elaborated on how this silencing is tied to historical and systemic injustices, stating that the "injustice and colonialism" are inherent in the exclusion of Muslim students and scholars, where the lack of acknowledgment of their voices reflects broader societal erasure. In attempting to "blend into spaces" that are unwelcoming to their identities, Muslims often find themselves muted by the pressures to conform.

DeCuir echoed this theme, noting the tension between encouragement and exclusion that functioned to silence her full engagement in the academic community. She reflected, "I reclaimed my research agenda as addressing the needs of Muslims in schools and began to speak out on issues of faith marginalization, anti-Muslim racism, and religious inclusion at academic conferences." While this may limit opportunities for her, DeCuir found that it gave her "a strong motivation to speak out about the needs of Muslims in schools and stop silencing my identities and research interests." Similarly, Ali reflected on how being a "Brown, Muslim, woman scholar" systematically positioned her on the margins of academic discourse. This exclusion underscores the persistent silencing that Muslim women face, particularly when their research challenges dominant narratives.

We each described instances when wearing our hijabs led to silencing behaviors from others in our classrooms, committee meetings, or research spaces. As a visible marker of adherence to Islam, others often respond to our hijabs by ignoring us and our comments, relegating us as Muslim women to the margins of academic discourse. Kizil also highlighted that the "hijab acts as a silent proclamation," indicating its symbolism of religious identity in spaces where speaking out is not always welcomed.

Maintaining our hijabs was experienced as a form of silent resistance, serving as a marker of determination to display our faith in predominantly secular environments even when others attempt to use it as a justification for our silencing. She offered a nuanced view, embracing strategic silence as a powerful tool. "Remaining silent is sometimes more powerful than speaking out," she explained, emphasizing how silence can be used intentionally to disrupt expectations. Her choice to let her presence and hijab speak for themselves challenges the idea that vocal participation is the only form of resistance. The act of wearing the hijab in academia, despite pressures to conform, can be understood as a form of embodied literacy—a lived expression of identity, faith, and defiance against erasure. Muhammad (2024) expands the notion of literacy beyond reading and writing, emphasizing that "literacy, as the Qur'an has revealed, gives the world and me a more complete essence of what literacy is and can be. It can be identity development (of self and community), reading (words and worlds), bountiful language, knowledge-building, anti-oppression, and joy." Just as literacy is a tool for knowledge-building and resistance, the hijab becomes a site of discursive and embodied knowledge—communicating self-determination, justice, and refusal to be erased from academic spaces.

For many Muslim women, silence is a deliberate act of self-preservation in spaces where their voices are not just ignored but actively silenced. Lane also shared her experiences of academic silencing despite the university's outward support of social justice. The limits of academic freedom, particularly for visible Muslims, felt palpable in her narrative as she noted, "Keep quiet, blend in… and all is well," which highlighted the pressure on visibly Muslim women in academia to conform silently to avoid repercussions.

Faith, Identity, and Inclusivity in Academia

Muslim women navigating secular academic spaces face profound challenges, as these environments often fail to accommodate or even recognize their religious identities. Lane described the stark contrast in visibility between Muslim men and women in academia: "The men—I know that there are Muslim male lecturers and tenured faculty, but they don't stand out much. Maybe that's the point. Their presence is not questioned in the same way as ours. A Muslim man in a suit does not draw the same scrutiny as a Muslim woman in a hijab." This observation underscores how gender shapes institutional inclusion. While hijabi women often face hypervisibility, their male counterparts may navigate academia with relative invisibility unless they actively disclose their religious identity. This discrepancy reflects unspoken expectations around neutrality in academic

spaces, where being visibly Muslim can present professional and social barriers. Kizil notes the unique tension that we, as Muslim women, often feel in academic spaces that don't fully acknowledge our religious identities. She describes the resilience it takes to hold onto her faith in environments that sometimes make her feel she doesn't fully belong. "I freely perform my prayers and wear my hijab mostly without confrontation, but I can sense the tension in the air," she says, yet recognizes her relative freedom compared to places where the hijab is banned (Rootham, 2015).

DeCuir reinforced this theme noting,

> These secular spaces on campus don't make room for faith-motivated actions. It's already enough that I show up in these spaces… expressing confident modesty in all of my collegial interactions. It is exhausting feeling and experiencing differences in everything I do, in everything I feel. So, I compromise. I do not disclose how Islam provides a complete framework for all that I continue to research.

This constant need to compartmentalize—to choose between expressing our beliefs fully or conforming to secular norms—can leave us feeling unwelcome or out of place as if we must continually measure how much of ourselves to reveal. This balance comes with a personal toll for each of us as we navigate environments that may ask us to leave parts of ourselves at the door to fit in. Khawaja described this experience as follows: "Being a visibly Muslim woman in different U.S. universities, I did not feel included. There were many instances where I felt that all other minorities were mentioned or included, but specifically, Muslim students were not mentioned in any way." This experience highlights how academic institutions, while officially promoting diversity, may, in practice, exclude Muslim scholars and students. Yet, like DeCuir, we persist, finding solace in quiet acts of faith and inner strength that ground us amidst these unspoken challenges.

Ali reflected on her journey through spaces that often failed to understand or welcome her Muslim identity—from her early years till now. She explained, "From attending a private Christian school in Pakistan to navigating the academic landscape in the United States, I have grappled with the pervasive supremacy of Western, white culture and the indoctrination of English as a marker of elitism" (Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; Leonardo, 2002; Yosso, 2005). For Ali, these environments continuously pushed her to adapt in ways that felt isolating, underscoring the broader challenges we face as Muslim women in spaces that subtly, or not so subtly, pressure us to conform. Ali's reflections resonated with each of us. Her story captures how each of us navigates an academy that often overlooks or undermines non-Western frameworks and identities, positioning Western, white culture as the invisible standard.

Khawaja highlighted the challenges we face as Muslim women in secular academic spaces that seem indifferent to our needs. "It was heartbreaking to see that Muslims as a minority and their cultural and religious events were not given importance," she said, recalling how a major conference was scheduled on Eid, one of the most significant holidays for Muslims. This disregard left her feeling unseen, as though her identity and beliefs were peripheral to the priorities of academic institutions. For Khawaja, she described the weight of constant adjustments, of navigating cultural norms that clash with her faith, and the unspoken expectation to downplay her beliefs to fit in. These environments, Khawaja noted, place the burden on her to change, reinforcing a message that her identity is incompatible with academic life.

Lane's story adds another layer to the challenges Muslim women face in academia. "My role as a dissertating doctoral student at the university where I teach has been uneventful until now," she shared. "Students have more freedom than faculty to voice their dissenting views. However, since I work and attend the same university, expressing my views as a student could be a problem." Balancing dual roles, Lane navigates the tension between staying true to her beliefs and fitting into a space that often limits self-expression. She, like the rest of us, grapples with environments that pressure us to conform, often at the expense of our religious identities. The need to adapt or compartmentalize, whether to fit in or to simply feel safe, underscores a systemic lack of inclusion that reinforces a sense of being outsiders.

The Complications of Allyship

Allyship, while a potential source of support for marginalized groups, presents unique complications for Muslim women in academia. For many, allyship is often fraught with misunderstandings, conditional support, and broader political tensions that exacerbate the difficulties of forming genuine alliances. DeCuir mentioned that "being in community with students was the first form of allyship that I experienced on campus as all of my identities were seen and supported through those relationships." Kizil mentioned that in recent times it was heartening to see an increase of allyship and inclusion in diverse groups while also providing a sense of empowerment. Lane opined that while non-Muslim allies may appear supportive, they fail to empathize fully with the struggles of Muslim communities. Recent geopolitical challenges have served "as a rude reminder or disruption to our complacency and comfort for our place in our communities near and far,"

where allyship might be superficial not really lead to authentic inclusion into an academic community.

There were instances and experiences shared among us that our institutions may support diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, but they often did not ensure our academic freedom and safety. Ali shared that fostering collective action and bridging divides has been a delicate and complex undertaking, requiring a nuanced understanding of power dynamics, identity, and the need for introspection and accountability. "I have encountered instances of bigotry and resistance, even from within my own community, when attempting to address systemic oppression and racism," she said. Navigating these internal tensions has involved a careful balance of calling out harmful behaviors while also providing opportunities for growth, learning, and authentic engagement. Khawaja describes the benefits that such a growth opportunity can bring forth. She shared the positive role of allyship in her journey, specifically a professor who supported her in advocating for Muslim students. This allyship enabled her to amplify Muslim voices and work toward more inclusive academic environments. She highlights that "this kind of allyship rooted in understanding and collaboration is essential," demonstrating the importance of genuine support for marginalized communities.

These narratives illustrate that allyship for Muslim women in academia is complex and often contingent on broader social, political, and cultural dynamics. While there are moments of solidarity, particularly within the Muslim community, the support from non-Muslim colleagues is frequently limited by misunderstandings and anti-Muslim discourse. This conditional allyship, combined with a lack of genuine understanding, leaves Muslim women navigating their academic journeys with a sense of isolation and a need to build their own spaces of support.

Internal and External Considerations

In academia, Muslim women often face a unique blend of internal and external pressures shaped by both their visible identities and the expectations placed upon them. Navigating impostor syndrome becomes a distinct challenge as it intertwines with the responsibility of representing an entire community. The internal struggle of self-doubt and the external demand to stand as a model for all Muslims create a complex landscape of personal and professional hurdles. Many of us, as Muslim women, experience these dynamics in deeply personal ways, as we aim not only to succeed individually but to foster visibility and inclusion for

our communities in academic spaces that historically overlook or misunderstand our presence.

Kizil highlighted the weight of representing an entire community in spaces where Muslim voices are often tokenized. "I've struggled with impostor syndrome, feeling like I must represent all Muslims, which can be overwhelming. But my belief in doing my best has kept me strong. When my achievements are overlooked while others' minor successes are celebrated, I realize it's not just an internal feeling but a societal bias." She shared, voicing a challenge that extends beyond personal pressure. Her experiences illustrate the dual challenge: excelling in her work while shouldering the expectations of being a visible Muslim woman, especially in contexts where her accomplishments are often overshadowed by the biases of others.

Lane echoed these struggles, particularly in navigating impostor syndrome, while feeling the need to prove her worth in spaces that scrutinized her identity. "Not feeling like I am good enough or am doing enough to represent the Muslim community is a strong feeling, difficult to shake off or ignore. […] In Islam, there is a saying that the greatest 'jihad' is the 'jihad al-nafs' meaning that the greatest struggle is the inner struggle," she shared, capturing how impostor syndrome intensifies at the intersection of racial, gender, and religious identities. The academic environment made Lane question her abilities even though she knew she was qualified; it became a daily challenge, especially in spaces where her contributions were often overlooked or marginalized.

Ali also reflected on her journey with impostor syndrome, recognizing it as both a personal challenge and a broader issue of representation. "As I worked to hear and make heard the voice of Muslim youth in America, I recognized the same need within myself, acknowledging the self-invalidation I was perpetuating even among my doctoral peers" (Ospina and Su, 2009). This experience underscored the crisis of representation and the long road ahead in ensuring the visibility of Muslim perspectives in academic and public discourse. Her experience highlights the "crisis of representation" and the long journey ahead in amplifying Muslim perspectives within academic and public discourse. For Ali, as for all of us, this internal struggle serves as a reminder of the complex balance we navigate between self-doubt and the desire to make our voices heard.

Khawaja also mentioned "it is unrealistic for one individual to embody the entire spectrum of experiences among Muslim students. Despite this, many Muslim women share everyday experiences of discrimination and

Islamophobia, which shape their academic and social environments in unique ways. These stereotypes add layers of complexity to their experiences, demanding a high degree of self-awareness and compassion. For women like me who find themselves as the sole Muslim woman in a classroom, navigating this landscape can be particularly challenging." Together, these stories underscore the profound internal and external challenges Muslim women face in academia. Navigating impostor syndrome, representing an entire community, and striving to be visible in spaces that may not fully recognize our worth, we find strength in each other's resilience.

Reasons / Motivations for This Work

The motivations driving our academic pursuits are deeply connected to our Muslim identities, personal experiences, and a commitment to challenging stereotypes and uplifting marginalized voices. For each of us, this work is more than a scholarly endeavor; it is a form of activism, a means to establish space for Muslim women in academia, a field from which we have historically been excluded. Our motivations stem from the intersecting roles we hold—as scholars, educators, mothers, and community members—and the desire to create lasting change.

DeCuir reflects on her experience, sharing

> "It didn't come as a surprise to me that I was the only Muslim in my cohort and the only visibly Muslim student in the program. But I also quickly realized that I was the only student studying private schools, and the only one raising five young daughters. This was not new to me. It seems like I have lived a life of being 'the only' in almost all of my academic settings from elementary school through college. Rather than making me feel isolated, I found myself feeling obligated to succeed, obligated to succeed well, and obligated to amplify the community of Muslim school leaders in my research."

For DeCuir, her unique position fuels her sense of duty to succeed, not only for herself but for the entire community she represents in her work.

Kizil also finds motivation rooted in her Muslim identity, explaining, "My motivation is rooted in my Muslim identity. I strive to be the best in my field as a Muslim, feeling both capable and obligated to do so. I aim to be a good educator and a good Muslim in all my endeavors. I want to work with the aim to help create a better life for Muslim students." Her commitment is both personal and professional, aiming to bridge her faith with her contributions in education to improve the lives of future generations.

For Lane, her academic pursuits are inseparable from her lived experiences as a Muslim mother and educator. "Like I mentioned before, my

research interests are really and truly my life," she shares, highlighting the deep connection between her identity and her work. Her motivation stems from the integration of her personal journey and professional identity, as she channels her experiences into research that authentically represents the Muslim community.

Khawaja's motivation is driven by her own experiences as an outsider throughout her educational journey. She emphasizes the need to create an inclusive environment for Muslim students, stating "My motivation for this work stems from a deep-seated desire to pave the way for future generations of Muslim women in academia." Her drive comes from a vision of inclusivity, ensuring that the paths she has walked will be smoother for those who follow.

Ali describes her motivation as rooted in a "profound sense of responsibility to use my voice and resources to amplify the narratives of marginalized communities, particularly Muslim youth." She believes strongly in the transformative potential of individual and collective agency, adding, "I firmly believe in the power of individual agency and collective action to fuel the reality of social justice and equity." For Ali, her work is a commitment to social change, a dedication to amplifying voices that have historically been silenced.

Together, our motivations reveal a shared determination to transform academia into a more inclusive space. By centering our identities and experiences, we seek not only to contribute knowledge but also to challenge dominant narratives, advocate for Muslim representation, and make way for future generations. Our work, driven by a sense of duty and resilience, is a testament to the impact that personal commitment can bring to academia and beyond.

Hypervisibility / Intersectional Identities

Muslim women in academia experience hypervisibility due to their multiple, intersecting identities—being Muslim women and often from racialized or immigrant backgrounds. This hypervisibility can be a double-edged sword, creating opportunities for representation while simultaneously subjecting them to heightened scrutiny and exclusion.

DeCuir expressed this hypervisibility, recalling colleagues who immediately recognize her, "Yes, I know you. This isn't because of anything I've done, but simply because I am one of two Muslim women faculty in hijab. This makes me hypervisible everywhere I go on my campus. There are times when this hypervisibility creates opportunities for me to be centered in

unique ways, and times when that centering is burdensome." Her presence is unmistakable, giving her visibility but also imposing an unchosen spotlight.

Lane reflected on how her intersectional identity—being a biracial Muslim woman—brought a kind of hypervisibility that left her feeling both seen and unseen. "I am hypervisible at work, as one of the few hijabi employees at both institutions, especially among the faculty. As far as I know, there are no full-time tenured professors who are visibly Muslim and wear a hijab. I know that there are some tenured Muslim faculty, but it may not be as obvious to many that they are Muslim…" For Lane, her racial, religious, and gender identities set her apart. She was frequently noticed for her differences, but this recognition did not always translate into genuine inclusion. "As a biracial Muslim woman wearing a hijab, I am constantly aware of how my identity sets me apart," she shared, highlighting how her visibility could lead to both representation and isolation.

Khawaja described hypervisibility as both an opportunity and a burden. "Being a visibly Muslim woman, it was tough for me not to be intimidated by Western society and its norms and to stand firm in my identity, customs, and culture," she noted. Khawaja's hypervisibility exposed her to increased scrutiny and stereotyping, but she found strength in her belief and support from others, which helped her endure. This visibility allowed her to represent her community, yet it also left her vulnerable to criticism—a balancing act she managed daily.

Ali stressed the weight of this hypervisibility as a Muslim woman leader, saying, "As a Muslim woman leader, I am acutely aware of the challenges of hypervisibility and the burden of navigating my intersectional identities. My positionality as a principal, academician, and community voice shapes perceptions and expectations in complex ways, requiring a delicate balance between the vulnerability of becoming visible and the strength required to assert my voice and claim space." Ali's role placed her at the forefront, demanding that she carefully navigate visibility to maintain her influence and voice.

Kizil also spoke about her experience of hypervisibility. "As a Turkish Muslim woman, mother, and academic, I am well-known on campus. My visible identity and outspoken nature make me stand out. While this might be challenging, I embrace it. Observing people's reactions, especially during conflicts, reveals much about societal attitudes." Kizil's visible identities made her hypervisible, adding another layer of pressure as she sought to represent herself and her multiple roles in a positive light. Her "multiple visible identities" (Turkish, mother, Muslim, academic) often made her

a symbol of diversity, while also intensifying the pressure to perform in spaces that were not designed to accommodate her full self.

These narratives demonstrate that hypervisibility is a complex and multifaceted experience for Muslim women in academia. While their visible identities offer opportunities for representation and advocacy, they also subject these women to increased scrutiny and expectations. The intersection of race, gender, and religion intensifies this visibility, making it both a source of empowerment and a burden that requires constant negotiation.

Work on Our Own

As Muslim women in academia, we often experience isolation, working alone in environments that lack the support or understanding we need. This isolation reaches beyond the professional sphere and touches our personal lives, as we frequently feel disconnected from our peers. The intersection of our religious, gender, and racial identities makes it difficult to find spaces where we are fully seen or supported. Kizil spoke directly to these challenges, describing how "working alone in American academia" often left her feeling disconnected from larger academic communities. Her experience of working independently is made even harder by the lack of inclusivity in many academic spaces, forcing her to face both professional and personal isolation. Despite these obstacles, she shared that working alone has allowed her to carve out spaces for herself and others, though the journey remains difficult and lonely.

> Working alone in an American university as an international Muslim woman has been challenging. I accept ongoing support from my colleagues but doing projects and working together is a different level. Until I found the MusCrit group, collaboration was hard to come by. While academia thrives on collaboration, I often had to work independently, which has its benefits but also highlights the need for strong Muslim communities as well as inclusive environments in academia.

Lane shared a similar experience, reflecting on how "working independently can feel like isolation," especially when her research interests and personal identity did not align with those of her peers. "We are often isolated and alone when it comes to our area of research, and the Muslim community may not understand my research, and my colleagues, well yeah, beyond a few … limited interest at best," she explained. This lack of understanding and support from colleagues often left her working alone. Lane expressed that this sense of isolation wasn't just due to her research focus but also her identity as a Muslim woman, which made it challenging to connect with others in academia. She stressed the importance of community for

marginalized groups: "We must reach out and make connections with like-minded people. Every project is more than just a project to me… and our contacts are like lifelines." Khawaja also described the loneliness of working independently in academia, particularly as a Muslim woman whose research interests did not fit within mainstream academic discourse.

> My journey was different from that of my cohort mates because I had to search for contact support in the literature all by myself. Other students might have had a professor whose research aligned with theirs, providing them with a lot of support. However, being in a university where there was no Muslim professor in my department, I felt that I had to do all the work and find all the literature on my own. The authors in my field were relatively new and not well-established. That made me feel lonely in the field of academia. Nevertheless, I must say that it was due to the support of my professors that I was able to engage in work related to the experiences of Muslim students. Without the support of my professors, I would not have been able to conduct this type of research, so their assistance was invaluable to me.

For Khawaja, her identity and research focus made it hard to find allies or collaborators, adding to her feeling of isolation. While she recognized the value of Muslim women scholars leading their own work, she also acknowledged the emotional toll of doing so in isolation. DeCuir echoed this sentiment, saying "Although I knew my research was different from my colleagues, it wasn't until recently that I began to see how isolating that can feel. Not only does it feel lonely, personally, but it feels isolating academically." Ali added, "There is also a deep sense of responsibility to reflect the diverse experiences of all Muslims, a burden that can at times feel overwhelming. Yet, it is this very sense of duty that fuels my commitment to this work, driving me to forge ahead in reclaiming the narratives that rightfully belong to us." Ali's MusCrit group highlights how essential it is to build communities and demonstrates that a lack of community only deepens the feeling of isolation.

Our experiences reveal that working independently in academia is not just about professional focus; it is deeply intertwined with the isolation we feel due to our intersectional identities. While many of us find ways to thrive despite these challenges, the emotional and professional toll of working alone is substantial. This isolation reflects the broader structures in academia that often fail to accommodate who we are, leaving us to carve out spaces for ourselves without the support that others may take for granted.

DISCUSSION

Our findings reveal complex intersections between institutional structures, personal identity, and professional navigation in academic spaces.

The experiences documented in this study demonstrate how Muslim women scholars continuously negotiate their presence in environments that simultaneously render them hypervisible and attempt to erase their religious identity (Leet-Otley, 2020; Jackson, 2010). The silencing described by participants manifests not merely as an absence of voice but as an active institutional process of marginalization. This silencing operates through both overt exclusion and subtle delegitimization of religious identity, particularly evident in the treatment of visible markers like the hijab (Ali, 2021). However, participants demonstrate agency in transforming these experiences into forms of resistance, whether through strategic silence or deliberate reclamation of research agendas and academic mentors. The navigation of secular spaces emerges as a fundamental challenge, extending beyond individual accommodation to reveal systemic barriers within academic institutions. Participants' experiences highlight how secularization functions not as neutral institutional practice but as an active force that marginalizes religious identity and expression. This marginalization becomes particularly acute in contexts where religious practice intersects with professional expectations.

Allyship emerges as a complex and often conditional phenomenon, significantly influenced by broader sociopolitical contexts that illuminate the fragile nature of institutional support and the ways in which global events reshape campus relationships. While moments of genuine solidarity exist, participants' experiences reveal how allyship often fails to address the deeper structural challenges facing Muslim women in academia. The internal challenges described by participants, particularly impostor syndrome and the burden of representation, further reveal how personal and professional identities become inextricably linked for Muslim women scholars. These pressures extend beyond typical academic stresses to encompass responsibility for community representation and navigation of multiple marginalized identities.

CONCLUSION

This study illuminates the complex and multifaceted experiences of Muslim women in academia, revealing how race, religion, and gender profoundly shape their professional and personal lives. In this point, an intersectional approach to identity proves useful in this context (Salem, 2013); nonetheless, intersectionality theory has often overlooked the aspect of religion (Asif, 2023; Nyhagen, 2021). Therefore, more studies are needed to focus on intersectionality in Muslims.

Through the theoretical lenses of Critical Race Methodology and Muslim Critical Race Theory, we have documented how these scholars navigate predominantly secular and often exclusionary academic spaces, confronting challenges of silencing, hypervisibility, impostor syndrome, and complicated allyship dynamics. Our findings emphasize the urgent need for institutional transformation beyond surface-level inclusion initiatives. The experiences documented here demonstrate that current approaches to diversity and equity often fail to acknowledge or address the unique challenges facing Muslim women scholars. True institutional change requires:

- Recognition of religious identity as a fundamental dimension of diversity
- Structural support for religious practice within academic spaces
- Understanding of how global events impact Muslim scholars' campus experiences
- Development of genuine rather than conditional allyship
- Acknowledgment of the compound nature of the representation burden
- Creation of supportive communities that understand intersectional challenges

By amplifying Muslim women's voices, this study contributes to broader discussions about equity and representation in higher education. The narratives presented here document current challenges and point toward possibilities for creating truly inclusive academic environments that value and support scholars across their multiple identities.

Our work suggests several directions for future research, including the examination of institutional policies that effectively support religious diversity, strategies for building sustainable support networks, approaches to mentoring that address intersectional challenges, and the impact of global events on the campus climate for Muslim scholars. While this study highlights the multifaceted challenges Muslim women face in academia, further research is needed to expand on the systemic dimensions of these experiences. Future studies should examine institutional policies that effectively support religious diversity, strategies for building sustainable support networks, and approaches to mentoring that address intersectional challenges. Additionally, given the evolving sociopolitical landscape, research exploring the impact of global events on the campus climate for Muslim scholars would be valuable. Understanding these factors can help shape more inclusive academic environments that genuinely support Muslim women scholars rather than merely accommodating them as an afterthought. Through this work, we hope to catalyze meaningful institutional change that moves beyond token inclusion to create academic spaces where Muslim women scholars can fully contribute their expertise while maintaining their authentic identities.

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