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Unlearning Islamophobia in anti-Violence Against Women Work

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Unlearning Islamophobia in anti-Violence Against Women Work

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Islamophobia and Gendered Islamophobia

Viewing Muslims as “the Other” is a long-standing part of Western civilization, beginning with Orientalism (Said, 1979). In recent decades, the term ‘Islamophobia’, first put into common use by the Runnymede Trust in 1997 (Dobkowski, 2015), has been used to describe a wide series of discriminatory practices, stereotypes and violence levelled against those who identify as Muslim or who appear to be Muslim. Emerging scholarly literature names Islamophobia as a form of racism (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Mac an Ghail & Haywood, 2005; 2015). Indeed, new forms of racism do not focus exclusively on physical characteristics, but also on how cultural, linguistic or religious identifiers are used to mark certain groups of people as “Other” (Keith, 1993; Mac an Ghail & Haywood, 2015).

Islamophobia, as a form of racism, operates in the following ways:

- **homogenizing** Muslims as a monolithic group, thereby erasing the complexity and diversity among Muslims (e.g. the assumption that all Muslims are homophobic or transphobic erases the reality of LGBTQAI Muslims);
- **inscribing** religious identity as the absolute explanatory factor for Muslims’ lives and actions (Selod, 2015); and,
- **degrading** Muslims as subhuman, barbaric, terrorists, dangerous, and/or irrational.

Islamophobia also operates along gendered lines (see Zine, 2006). Through gendered Islamophobia, Muslim women are constructed in the following ways:

- as *victims* of their religion and of ‘uncivilized’ Muslim men (Moallem, 2005);
- as *exotic* and *hyper-sexualized*, as in the image of the harem girl (Zine, 2006);
- as *weak* and *passive* women who need to be rescued, presumably by Western powers or colonial intervention (Jiwani, 2014); and,
- as being affiliated with terrorism by default (Fernandez, 2009).

Not only does gendered Islamophobia stereotype all Muslim women under this same banner, but it also distracts from the reality that gender-based violence occurs across all communities, religions and cultures. As Jiwani (2014) points out, “[t]he focus on the oppressed Muslim woman serves to reinforce the notion of Western women and girls as being more liberated, while also deflecting attention from women’s oppression here.”

Islamophobia and anti-Violence Against Women Work in Canada

Discussions around ending violence against women (VAW) in Muslim communities in Canada have often been steeped with Islamophobia. When gendered violence is perpetrated in white non-Muslim Canadian contexts, the violence is viewed as being rooted in patriarchy, rather than in Canadian culture or the country’s major religious institutions. In contrast, when gendered violence is perpetrated within Muslim communities in Canada, there is an “exclusive emphasis on culture as the sole source of patriarchal violence” (Razack, 2004), and the solution becomes about “rescuing Muslim women from their feudal cultures” (Razack, 2004).

Indeed, Canadian media coverage of the Shafia sisters’ murders and the subsequent trial was considerably greater than other racialized victims of femicide, and the framing of this coverage unnecessarily fueled the notion that gendered violence is rooted in Muslim cultures, and that Muslim women and girls are in need of colonial rescue (Jiwani, 2014). Moreover, Bill S-7, the Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act – whose inflammatory name is in the process of being amended, but whose content will remain the same – has been flagged by scholars and

advocates as singling out gender-based violence as a Muslim issue (Thobani, 2015), while doing very little to improve access to safety for Muslim women living with violence (Casandy, 2015). For example, the Bill criminalizes forced marriages, even as advocates and scholars warned that such criminalization would create barriers for those who would want to come forward and make it “unlikely that Muslim youth, fearing the consequences for their families, will seek help” (Razack, 2004).

Unfortunately, Islamophobia is also perpetuated by professionals in the anti-VAW and related sectors in Ontario. Masiya Ahmadzai (2016) studied the experiences of immigrant survivors of domestic violence in Southern Ontario; in this study, she interviewed a professional in the DV field who pointed out that service providers sometimes make comments to clients such as, “Just so you know--you are here now, take off your hijab, you are safe.” (Ahmadzai, 2016). Yasmine Yousseff, Program Manager at NISA homes, a specialized shelter that serves Muslim women living with violence or homelessness, also pointed to Islamophobia in the anti-VAW sector: “Unfortunately, we've also had residents who have had bad experiences when reaching out to other services and resources for help, things like being told ‘doesn't your religion allow the husband to hit his wife?’ or having hijabs pulled off, and their dietary needs not accommodated. One resident even told us of a terrible experience where she was praying at another facility when another resident peed on her praying mat. It's difficult enough going through a traumatic experience like domestic violence, but having those you reach out to for help judge you or be Islamophobic towards you – it many times could lead them to go back to abusive partners.”

Anti-Islamophobic Approaches to anti-VAW Work in Muslim Communities

Given the issues highlighted above, conversations about gendered violence in Muslim communities in an environment of pervasive Islamophobia can feel like a minefield, as “anti-Muslim prejudice is increasingly subsumed and hidden behind a concern for women” (Fernandez, 2009). Nonetheless, there are promising practices taking place that have one

feature in common: they are led by Muslim communities and stem from feminisms that are indigenous to Muslim traditions and cultures.

The following three projects represent best practices for Muslim-led anti-VAW projects:

HEART Women and Girls

[HEART Women and Girls](#) is an American-based non-profit organization that raises awareness about sexual health and sexual violence awareness in Muslim communities through education, advocacy, research and training. The organization is co-founded and run by Muslim women. Their website contains a host of resources, including sexual violence and sexual health information video series created by and for Muslim women. Sameera Qureshi, director of sexuality education and training with HEART Women and Girls, told me that their organization challenges Islamophobia through their work: “We push back against exoticification of how Islamophobes define VAW with regards to Muslims: FGM/C¹, honor killings, and forced marriages. We also talk a lot about gendered Islamophobia and sexual violence, and its intersections. And we push back against white folks who co-opt global issues such as FGM/C, and frame it as "saving little Muslim girls" by advocating and pushing for Islamophobic legislation.”

The Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration

The [Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration](#), previously known as the Muslim Family Safety Project, operates out of London, Ontario, and is based on the research of Dr. Mohammed Baobaid, who identified gaps and barriers to accessing support services by Muslims impacted by domestic violence, and then sought to fill some of those gaps by engaging both Muslim community leaders and service providers. This initiative resulted in an increase in the number of Muslim families requesting assistance. The Centre currently provides counselling, carries out collaboration with mainstream services, and promotes public awareness and training for service providers. The Centre also hosts the [Reclaim Honour](#) project, which is a youth-led movement of young Muslim women speaking out about violence.

¹ Female genital mutilation/cutting.

Nisa Homes

[Nisa Homes](#) is a specialized transitional home for immigrant, refugee and Muslim women in Canada who are facing domestic violence, homelessness, or seeking asylum, with Ontario locations in Mississauga, Windsor, and a B.C. location in Surrey. Nisa Homes fills a service provision void and provides an alternative to anti-VAW spaces that some Muslim women find exclusionary. Yasmine Youssef, Program Manager at Nisa homes, says that Nisa is often approached by residents who would not approach other shelters because of the lack of religious and cultural understanding, and concern about being treated differently in those spaces. Moving forward, specialized services like Nisa Homes should be supported, while challenging and unlearning Islamophobia in mainstream services.

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