



Using Intersectionality Theory and Microaggression Theory in Research: The Muslimah Project

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In collaboration with The Coalition of Muslim Women of KW (Kitchener-Waterloo), researchers at Wilfrid Laurier University and The Centre for Community Research Learning and Action (CCRLA) explored Muslim women's experiences of discrimination in Ontario between



Figure 1 Photo by Asad Photo Maldives from Pexels. CCO

2018-2019. This research project, titled The Muslimah Project, was motivated by a dramatic increase in hate crimes within Waterloo Region, Ontario between 2016 and 2017. Hate crimes driven by discrimination on the basis of both race and religion remain a key human rights issue impacting religious minority groups and Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour communities. The Muslimah Project explored the impact of discrimination on Muslim women's mental health, belonging, and well-being. Using a collaborative approach, the research team centered Muslim women's voices within the project, creating space for women to come together to share experiences and identify community strengths.

Highlights

Both subtle and overt discrimination negatively impact Muslim women's mental health.

Community leaders must address the negative consequences of discrimination.

Future research should expand on the application of Microaggression Theory and Intersectionality Theory to understand the complex experiences of Muslim women.

The Muslimah Project shows that discrimination experienced by Muslim women often occurs at the intersection of their racial, religious, and gender identities. Given the recent global outcry against racial discrimination and discrimination against Black communities in particular, it is important that diversity and equity initiatives are at the center of our work as Community Psychology scholars and practitioners. Research helps us to understand the ways that discrimination negatively impacts communities and is essential in order to pursue justice. Comprehensive understanding of the mental health impacts of discrimination informs both policy and practice, promoting the development of meaningful and effective mental health support initiatives.

Methods

Using a collaborative, community-based approach to data collection, we conducted five focus groups with a diverse group of Muslim women living in Canada in order to understand their personal experiences of discrimination, mental health, and well-being. In total, we spoke with 55 Muslim women, between the ages of 16-57 years old, from many different countries, including Canada, India, Pakistan, Iran, Lebanon, Somalia, Eritrea, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey. The main themes that emerged during these conversations were analyzed to identify key project findings.

Results

- Muslim women regularly experience both subtle and overt forms of discrimination, including microaggressions, social exclusion, and verbal attacks. This negatively impacts their mental health, causing feelings of isolation and a lack of belonging.
- Discrimination experienced by Muslim women is intersectional. It is compounded based on their unique racial identities and expressions of faith, in addition to their gender.
- Culturally relevant mental health interventions that include the recruitment of mental health practitioners from Muslim and other marginalized communities are essential to appropriately respond to the negative impacts of discrimination experienced by Muslim women.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

By centering shared goals and working in genuine collaboration, we were able to utilize Community Psychology research principles in order to successfully frame the issues, results, and implications of the project. From the outset, the research approach prioritized the needs of community partners. We created project goals together. All steps of the research process, including securing funds, participant recruitment, data collection and the presentation of findings were implemented by community leaders from the Coalition of Muslim Women of KW in collaboration with academic researchers.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: The Muslimah Project demonstrates the effectiveness of community-academic collaboration within justice-focused research. This project provides insight into the application of Intersectionality Theory and Microaggression Theory, both of which are gaining traction within social justice scholarship and literature, as well as within mental health care. This research demonstrates the effectiveness of these theoretical frameworks in scholarly exploration of complex experiences of discrimination.

Practice: This research shows the unique experiences of Muslim women as they access community supports, including mental health services. Mental health system administrators should act on these findings. For example, it is important to hire Muslim women in mental health service provision roles. Administrators and practitioners need to meaningfully engage in training and professional development focused on anti-oppressive practice and cultural competency in order to identify and put an end to subtle discrimination within their organizations.

Social Action: Given the ongoing global demonstrations calling for an end to police brutality and the re-direction of policing funds to other community services, including mental health supports for those in need, these findings highlight that better and more equitable mental health supports are urgently required in the face of systemic issues like discrimination on the basis and race, religion, and gender.

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