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Highly Skilled Muslim Immigrant Women in Canadian Higher Education: Lived Experiences

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Abstract. Highly skilled Muslim immigrant women enter higher education spaces to counter the obstacles in their economic integration in Canada. This research shares their lived experiences in Canadian higher education spaces in the context of contemporary anti-Muslim hate and the integration discourse. Through a decolonial framework, this study reveals that higher education can be a space of pervasive epistemic violence and gendered Islamophobia for these Muslim women. Their lived experiences reveal a negation of their voice and agency within the hierarchy of knowledge, which structures the colonial epistemological basis of Western higher education. The overall aim is to engage with Muslim women's lived experiences from a decolonial intersectional perspective on race, gender, and religion. The discussion offers decolonial possibilities and imperatives for teaching and learning for peace. This study proposes the use of decolonial methodology for future studies to center the lived experiences of Muslim immigrant women.

Keywords: Higher Education, Muslim Women, Canada, Islamophobia, Integration, Labour Market.

Introduction

Highly skilled Muslim immigrant women face many barriers to a successful economic integration in Canadian labour market (Khattab et al., 2019). This leads them to explore multiple pathways to re-enter the labour market including employment in precarious jobs, changing their careers, and enrolling in institutions of higher education to upskill and further add to their human capital (Adamuti-Trache, 2016; Block et al., 2019; CLC, 2019; Kazemipur, 2014; Zainub, 2023). As these Muslim immigrant women access and engage with educational institutions and spaces, they experience further discrimination and Islamophobia due to growing anti-Muslim sentiment on Canadian campuses (Alizai, 2021; Centre for Free Expression, 2026; Ibrahim, 2023). This is particularly acute for Muslim women who wear the hijab (Baksh, 2024; Jahangeer, 2022).

This article contextualizes the lived experiences of highly skilled Muslim women in higher education spaces within the contemporary global waves of anti-Muslim sentiment and the integration discourse within Western societies. This context is necessary to understand how socio-political integration (such as engagement with higher education) of Muslim immigrants is deeply connected to economic integration outcomes (Zainub, 2023). I argue for a decolonial intersectional perspective of race, gender, and religion in teaching and learning for peace to counter EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusion) challenges in Canadian higher education.

Although there is substantial research on the experiences of Muslims in education from various perspectives, mostly located in the United States (Ahmadi & Cole, 2020), there are insufficient studies on the lived experiences of Muslim immigrant women in Canadian higher education. Incidents of anti-Muslim hate crimes on university campuses have been growing within contemporary socio-political climate and consistently reported over the years (Yaqzan, 2018; McMaster University Equity and Inclusion Office, 2017; Zine, 2024). Thus, it is imperative to learn through scholarly research about the lived experiences of highly skilled Muslim immigrant women in Canadian higher education from an intersectional decolonial perspective of race, gender, and religion.

Thus, this article aims to investigate the following research questions:

> How do race, gender, and religion impact the lived experiences of highly skilled Muslim immigrant women in Canadian higher education within the context of current EDI challenges?
> How can higher education teaching for peace disrupt epistemic violence and gendered Islamophobia, countering its effects with a decolonial praxis that integrates race, gender, and religion?

I attempt to explore these questions within a decolonial framework (Grosfoguel, 2012) by sharing the detailed lived experiences of two highly skilled Muslim women in higher education. The data for these stories are

extracted from my qualitative study of the social and economic integration of 21 highly skilled Muslim immigrants in Canada (Zainub, 2023). This work situates these stories within a decolonial space in higher education and presents possibilities to demonstrate the impact of race, gender, and religion within the context of contemporary social and political discourses on integration. This study views higher education as a space of socio-economic immigrant integration. I am privileged to respectfully share these stories with the overall aim to bring forward a deeper understanding of conflict and violence through advocating for peace in teaching and learning in higher education.

To situate the context for this research, first I present a profile of highly skilled Muslim women and the barriers they face in Canadian economy and draw on the growing body of literature on their experiences in Canadian higher education. Next, I will outline the method for this study and then, I will discuss the findings from the two stories within the context of the existing research literature. The lived experiences of these Muslim immigrant women will show that incidents and issues which occur in higher education further relate to other socio-economic spaces. Thus, for Muslim immigrants social and economic integration is interconnected (Zainub, 2023). Finally, this work endeavours to offer a critical understanding of conflict in higher education, proposing an epistemic corrective rooted in decolonial frameworks (Grosfoguel, 2007). Decolonial perspectives on teaching and learning for peace do not aim to contain nor pacify rather they acknowledge dispossession and displacement, epistemic violence, racism, and Islamophobia. With this acknowledgement comes the task of rebuilding an educational space where dialogue and engagement with community can replace conflict management. Moreover, it provides space for engagement with the lived experiences of learners understanding that they are embedded in a wider set of encounters which reflects how social, cultural, and economic spaces are interconnected.

Muslim Immigrant Women in Canada

Highly skilled Muslim women are a racialized, young, robust population belonging to diverse countries of origin. Research shows that due to the highly selective educational criteria of the Canadian points-based immigration system, they disproportionately hold the highest degrees and credentials compared to their Canadian-born counterparts (Hamdani, 2014). They bring an impressive set of professional knowledge and skills to the growing Canadian knowledge economy. However, despite these high levels of academic and professional indicators, highly skilled Muslim immigrant women fare significantly lower in their socio-economic integration than their Canadian-born counterparts. They are in the low-income category, and more likely to be working in precarious and informal jobs compared to Muslim men and non-Muslim women experiencing occupational downgrading (Zainub, 2023). They are also more likely to be unemployed compared to non-Muslim women (Shah, 2022, p. 26). Furthermore, they are

highly likely to live in households with low income cut off compared to non-Muslim women (p. 29).

Barriers to Economic Integration in Canada

Research shows that Muslim immigrants suffer higher disadvantages and barriers in their socio-economic integration in Canada compared to their native-born counterparts (CLC, 2019; Kazemipur, 2014). Barriers in the labour market due to Muslim religious identity lead to low economic outcomes, referred to as the "Muslim penalty" (Khattab et al, 2019, 2020). Research explains this as "Muslim exceptionalism" when Muslims are uniquely singled out for being inherently incapable of integrating into Western societies (Kazemipur, 2014; Picot & Lu, 2017).

These barriers shape Muslim women's lives more profoundly and in more inequitable ways compared to Muslim men, changing the direction of their growth patterns. In a review of 105 research articles, Nazari (2024) finds that Muslim religious affiliation significantly lowers Muslim women's economic outcomes, especially for Hijab-wearing women. Her review of scholarly literature shows that Muslim women are consistently undervalued due to their foreign qualifications, skills, and linguistic accents, where their religious identity plays a central role (Zainub, 2023). Their visible identity prevents them from being included in the workplace network and organizational culture resulting in gatekeeping and being promoted to leadership roles.

Research identifies nonrecognition of their credentials and skills, lack of positive responses to jobs, discrimination in hiring and workplace, and Islamophobia in the labour markets as the main barriers for high skilled Muslim women (CLC, 2019, Hamdani 2014, Shah, 2022). These barriers lead to both social and economic exclusion due to a hypervisible socio-religious identity. Research and media continue to share harrowing stories of violence and discrimination faced by both Hijab wearing and non-Hijab wearing Muslim immigrant women. Shah (2022) in her analysis of NHS (2011 National Household Survey) and focus group data, found that immigrant women experienced marginality and discrimination in daily public interactions and social institutions (p. 39).

Thus, an intersectional analysis of race, gender, and religion is essential to understanding the labour market penalty faced by Muslim women. These social and economic issues have a downward effect on Muslim women's labour market participation further diminishing any positive returns, thereby resulting in unemployment, occupational displacement and occupational downgrading. In effect, these barriers lead to lower socio-economic gains in integration and settlement outcomes. Furthermore, they discourage a positive engagement with their professions thereby choosing to participate in "ethnic economies" (Chuatico et al., 2022; Khattab et al., 2019). This means Muslim women may choose to work for employers who may belong to the same ethnic or religious groups or in environments where their "otherness" is acceptable.

Research suggests that investing in higher education can potentially lead to better economic outcomes for recent high skilled immigrants. It also shows that they are likely to succeed in occupational matching (i.e. gaining employment in the pre-migration profession) if they acquire this post-secondary education in the same field of study (Adamuti-Trache, 2016). Thus, investing in further education and skills is considered a path to economic integration. Therefore, research indicates that for these high skilled Muslim women, engagement with Canadian higher education is a likely outcome of income inequality, discrimination, and Islamophobia experienced in the Canadian labour market (Shah, 2022, p. 24).

Decolonial thought shows how socio-economic integration can be unjust for marginalized immigrants as they enter the Canadian economy which doesn't accept their prior skills and education and forces them to join the informal economy. This precarity becomes their state of being for many years creating a cyclical form of inequity and injustice. Decoloniality begins with the acknowledgement of the presence of colonial structural inequities which are embedded in foundational institutions such as immigration and higher education. Thus, to counter these inequities an intersectional focus on race, gender, and religion (Zainub, 2026) as applied to this study is necessary where we can bring to light how Muslim women face significant barriers to their integration into Canadian society due to their identity.

Muslim Immigrant Women in Higher Education

There is substantial research to show that Muslims face discrimination, racism, and Islamophobia in formal educational settings. In a review of 44 qualitative and quantitative studies from United States, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Ireland, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, Abu Khalaf et al. (2023) found that Muslim students experienced diverse forms of discrimination from peers, teachers, and the institutions. However, students relied on religion, community, and families for strength (p. 218). Although the studies in the review originate from seven different countries, the commonality of discriminatory experiences and Islamophobia resonates through them all.

There is a growing body of literature on sexism, discrimination, racism, and Islamophobia specifically targeting Muslim women in Western higher education institutions (Mahmud & Islam, 2024). This research literature encompasses the experiences of Muslims in diverse Western societies including United States, United Kingdom, and Canada (Ibrahim, 2023; Rifahie, 2020; Saeed, 2018). It exposes the marginalized status of Muslim women who may be students, academics, educational administrators, etc. In these educational spaces, they experience myriad obstacles such as securitization, surveillance, on-campus harassment, a climate of fear and mistrust, and hate crimes due to their religious identities that otherize them from the dominant mainstream thereby exposing them to institutionalized Islamophobia (Anwar, 2020; Rifahie, 2020). Although the literature speaks to the experiences of Muslim women in academia, there is

insufficient attention paid to the lived experiences of high skilled Muslim immigrant women in Canadian higher education.

Sadeghi's (2007) study on Muslim students in higher education showed that race and stereotypical cultural representation of Iranian men and women in higher education spaces is linked to their religious identities resulting in hidden racism and racial discrimination. Media has played a central role in perpetuating hateful stereotypes and ideologies about Muslims. Thus, giving impetus to racially motived hate crimes. Islamophobic violence continues even after many years of Canada experiencing the attack on the Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec when six Muslim worshippers were killed and five were critically injured in 2017.

To understand how these events affect Muslim students on campuses it is important to investigate their experiences within these contexts to reveal how they confront and resist Islamophobia in higher education. Alizai (2021) explored the experiences of six female Muslims and two male students in Canadian higher education. This qualitative study distinguishes gendered Islamophobia from general Islamophobia. It found resistance to Islamophobia in higher education in the form of stronger religious identity, collective identity formation, and solidarity with other Muslims. These experiences also led them to advocacy through activism, interfaith dialogue, and civic participation. Instances of Islamophobia and hate crimes against Muslim women who wore the Hijab revealed that "gendered Islamophobia has the intended effect of terrorizing and instilling fear among Muslim women: fear of violence, harassment, profiling, and a generalized fear of appearing in public. Interestingly, this concern was also echoed by a non-veiling participant" (p. 368).

These findings reveal the fundamental power and discursive effect of Islamophobic violence upon Muslim women's bodies, for both Hijabi and non-Hijabi women, effectively otherizing them. Students mention experiencing microaggressions in-class and in other academic spaces, which produce marginalization. However, they remain unaddressed by the academic staff, administration, and campus police. This further reproduces the injustices as it creates feelings of isolation, vulnerability, and exclusion for the Muslim women.

In 2021, the Afzaal family suffered a terrorist attack when four family members were killed, leaving behind an orphaned young boy (Government of Canada, 2024). Ibrahim (2023) considers the motivations and ideologies harbored by the terrorist who studied in London, Ontario, where she conducted her study on Islamophobia. She questions the power to challenge these ideologies through the medium of higher education. Hence, in her work, Ibrahim (2023) explores the ongoing Islamophobia against Muslim women in higher education in terms of student achievement and how it is being countered at the institutional level. She shares her teaching experiences at a university located in London, Ontario, and reviews the limited literature on Islamophobia in higher education including that of Martis's (2020) who wrote a book on her student experiences at the

same institution. She argues that the colonial foundations of educational institutions lead to hate crimes against Muslims in higher education and calls on the higher education institutions to serve Muslim students.

Baksh (2024), in her recent work on the lived experiences of a Hijabi Muslim woman at a university in Ontario, centers the intersectionality of race, gender, and religious identity. This work demonstrates how her experiences of racism and Islamophobia in higher education were not addressed. She argued that this in turn reinforced the patterns of Islamophobic violence endured by Muslim women in academia. She highlights the impact of microaggressions in learning spaces such as classrooms, and "the use of power through identity, positionality" (p. 51). Her lived experiences generated feelings of anxiety, multiplied into fear of being rejected for writing her autoethnographic study and of being questioned. These feelings of self-doubt and of being perceived as an immigrant Muslim outsider due to her visible identity jeopardized her mental health and reduced the significance of her valuable insights for her.

This review presents the context for this research and shows that as adult learners whose resumes already boast high levels of academic and professional achievements, highly skilled Muslim women make the difficult decision to re-enter academic spaces to counter the obstacles they face in the labour market. However, as adults with familial responsibilities, they face unique pressures both at home and socially, which are exacerbated by discrimination and Islamophobia encountered in higher education.

Methodology

This article draws on data from my previously conducted qualitative study of highly skilled Muslim immigrants in Canada (Zainub, 2023). It is comprised of in-depth interviews with fifteen men and six women, aged 35-69, residing in GTHA, Regina and Labrador, which lasted approximately 90 minutes each (Zainub, 2023). The recruitment was voluntary and conducted through advertising in university list-servs and posters at various mosques and community centres. The interview protocol explained the purpose of the study through a written and verbal explanation. I also presented informed consent forms, explained their rights, assured data privacy and confidentiality of their responses. The participants understood their rights and signed their consent forms. There was one follow up interview conducted to understand some of the circumstances shared in participant's responses. During the recruitment process, many women showed interest in participation, however, they didn't keep their appointment. The questionnaire was developed with insights gained from a combination of existing literature and experiential knowledge of the community. In particular, I gained significant depth of knowledge through the proxies and indicators for measuring social and economic integration in migration studies. It consisted of demographic profile questions and open-ended questions (Zainub, 2023).

The stories of two female participants are drawn from this study and their lived experiences in higher education are shared in depth and the findings are discussed later. Of the six women interviewed, the two women chosen for this paper share responses representative of the others. This article shares unpublished quotes from the interview data providing new insights into their lived experiences. For data analysis of my study, I used the axial coding technique to identify patterns in the text which then show links within the rich data. This requires identifying codes, categories, and subcategories and creating codes based on the open-ended questions and their demographic profile such as motivations for migration, skills and education at the time of migration etc. These were coded into themes such a pre-migration context, economic integration etc. Interviews were conducted in English but some in Urdu where I had to translate, however, the codes were the same for both.

These stories' carry agency and strength revealing personal narratives navigating faith, race, culture, and gender in academia. They are embedded in a wider process of socio-economic integration. Their agency disrupts racial and Islamophobic stereotypes about Muslim women. The stories I share have strengthened my academic perspective, agency, and renewed my commitment and responsibility to my participants. Thus, I analyzed the stories within the wider spectrum of their social and economic integration processes. I recognize that these Muslim women share their most personal experiences where the loss of dignity and respect in spaces of learning generates unique trauma and fear.

Introducing the Participants

This study draws on two stories of high skilled Muslim immigrant women in Canada. Both of them agreed to be interviewed voluntarily and provided in-depth knowledge of their lived experiences. I have given them pseudonyms and changed significant information to protect their identities. Both women are visibly racialized Muslim women and wear the Hijab (head scarf) and sometimes Abaya (full body garment). Their Canadian immigration was accepted in the "high skilled economic category". They experienced significant barriers to successful integration in higher education, labour market and social settings. However, their stories also demonstrate resistance and strength in the face of these disadvantages and challenges. I will first introduce these participants and then discuss their experiences while offering thematic analysis.

Rahila. Rahila, aged 35, arrived in Canada from Saudi Arabia with her husband and children looking for a better future for her family. She originally lived in India, however she moved to Saudi Arabia for work many years prior to migrating to Canada. She was employed as a university professor in Saudi Arabia. At the time of the interview, she was pursuing a Ph.D. at a university in Ontario, Canada. Her lived experiences at the

university exacerbate the challenges she faced in her social and economic settlement.

Saima. Saima, aged 36, is a Syrian origin woman who lived in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for work. After working in the UAE, she migrated to Canada with her husband and children. Their motivation to migrate was to acquire the basic rights of a Canadian citizen. She worked as a college instructor and a Certified English/ELT (English Language Training) teacher before arrival in Canada. At the time of the interview, she was pursuing her ELT license for teaching in Canada, and working as an Arabic language teacher in Ontario, Canada. Her lived experiences at the ELT academic institution and those outside of the academy affected her integration and health.

Discussion

This discussion weaves findings with a thematic analysis of Rahila and Saima's stories. I have attempted to create a sense of connection to the other parts of their lived experience. I focus on the two main themes of a) epistemic violence, and b) gendered Islamophobia as I present their lived experiences. Although these themes are intertwined, presenting them separately one after the other creates narrative flow and provides structural balance to their stories.

Epistemic Violence

Rahila and Saima pursued post-secondary education after migration to counter skill underutilization and to match pre-migration occupational status. As mentioned earlier, research shows highly skilled immigrants facing income disparity and occupational mismatch choose to invest in post-secondary education to improve their economic outcomes (Adamuti-Trache, 2016). Although trained as teachers in their respective occupational fields they understood upon arrival in Canada that their occupational status will not be matched unless they invest in further education specifically at a Canadian institution. This realization, that their previous education is not valued at the same level as that of a Canadian academic institution affected them deeply. Research locates these disparities and credential devaluation within a fundamental hierarchy of global knowledge systems (Grosfoguel, 2007). Rahila understood that to teach at a university again she will have to enroll in a Ph.D. program. During this process she encountered many hurdles in gaining information and admission. She was turned down multiple times since she was misinformed on the criteria for admission.

Saima shared a similar ordeal where she was not presented with the right information to pursue her interest in becoming an ELT teacher. She was passionate about her career and wished to engage with it further. While making the decision to migrate, she readily expressed her excitement to her husband that being a part of the Canadian English-speaking culture will allow her to practice the English language. As she shared:

> *I studied English literature, but I have never spoken English more than 3-4 hours in day when I was teaching English in Syria. I had hoped that I can continue my study, and I was so excited to come here (Canada).*

After enrolling in their respective academic programs, Rahila and Saima shared encounters with daily microaggressions and epistemic violence at their academic institutions. Epistemic violence, a concept introduced by Gayatri Spivak (1994), emerges from a colonial past and takes shape in the ongoing coloniality which is embedded in social and economic structures. It refers to the ways in which Western colonial epistemological superiority and frameworks are resuscitated and reproduced through a delegitimization of non-Western knowledge systems and ways of knowing. Decolonial scholarship shows that marginalized groups are not only devalued for their knowledge systems but also their belief systems (An, 2020), which must be replaced in order to "save" them (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). This colonial epistemic hierarchy results in epistemic violence whereby any effort on the part of marginalized groups to break free from this hierarchy is penalized through silencing, pathologization, devaluation, and Othering. Utilization of this concept offers great potential to analyze sources of conflict in higher education in times of unrest and war as is the case for recent times when anti-Muslim hate motivates people to commit hate crimes against those who identify as Muslims and those who are perceived as Muslims (Zine, 2022).

It was difficult to listen to Rahila's interactions in her classroom with other students and learn about the content and delivery of the curriculum. She shared with great excitement that her doctoral journey had begun but soon turned her attention to how classroom discussions singled her out as a visible Muslim woman. The reading material included topics which misrepresented or demonized Muslims in general and created divisive dialogues. She said,

> *The [research] papers we read in class had an element of ISIS [banned terrorist organization] and of terrorism or women not being allowed to drive. Then, I have to explain to them. They asked, "do you shake hands?" and I answered, No. Then, I had to explain to them if my faith allows pre-marital sex and extra-marital sex. Especially when I needed those classes, I had to explain to them what my faith says about this and that. The whole time in the class, I would only discuss about myself and my faith!*

This burden to "explain" one's ideas and beliefs as valid is exhausting, pointing to the aggression underlying the questions by her classmates and teachers. It is the burden to represent the world's Muslim population for their beliefs and actions, offering the correct interpretation

of Islamic teachings, and distancing oneself from what Mamdani (2005) calls the Bad Muslim. In his conceptualization of how Muslims are placed into the Good and Bad Muslim categories, he argues that Bad Muslims are those who commit terrorist crimes and barbaric practices oppressing women and Good Muslims are the moderate and freedom loving secular ones (Gova, 2015, p. 33).

Yet these explanations occurred in spaces of higher education institutions, where the potential to engage with conflict through peace can and must exist. The teacher's resistance to intervene when these encounters turned emotionally violent reproduces the inequities Muslim women face in academia. Zine (2022) states,

> *Publicly representing Islam and serving as an "image corrective" by exhibiting positive behaviours and actions inculcates a sense of duty and a burden of responsibility. This responsibility is invoked whenever Muslims are called upon to publicly condemn violence and terrorism carried out by their co-religionists (or be accused of moral and political culpability) but is also internalized and enacted through behaving and acting (consciously and unconsciously) in ways that reflect positively on Islam. (p. 41)*

The denial of her intersectional identity (gender, race, and religion) as inferior and needing justification conveys a fundamental provocation to "explain" not only her own views on faith but an effort to recover her dignity as a human being.

During the interview, she repeated several times that her knowledge was discredited in multiple ways, in reference to the classroom discussions, and when she faced discrimination in other settings. She shared another experience to help me understand the sedimentation of these lived experiences whereby a loss of dignity in one social space is intertwined with another space, affectively wounding her innermost Self. Before the birth of her child, she explained to the physician the complications which occurred during her first pregnancy, however, her physician did not take her concerns seriously, leading to the dislocation of her child's arm at the time of delivery. This experience was traumatizing because her knowledge of her body and Self was made doubtful, a form of silencing originating in epistemic violence whereby her statements were disregarded as invaluable and incompetent (Kjaran & Halldórsdóttir, 2022).

Rahila's experience within the context of contemporary anti-Muslim sentiment reveals the simultaneity of oppression she endured as the only visible Muslim woman in her university classes. Saima's story reveals a similar trajectory when she enrolled in ELT courses and began her engagement with the teacher and classmates. During this time, Saima shared the following verbal exchange:

> *My ELT teacher mentioned that if you take off your hijab, you look White. This way, you will get a job. I guarantee, you will get the best job in one week. I said, this is my identity! I wouldn't do that; I wouldn't trade my principles to get what I want. I can keep my principles at the same time and can get a job. We are in debt most of the time, but we are okay.*

As in Rahila's case Saima felt obligated at first to "explain" why she chose to wear the hijab and its meaning for her at a personal and religious levels. This inner turmoil to offer a correct version, dispel myths, and to shatter stereotypes created unnecessary tension. Although Saima told her teacher what she believed in, her teacher's comments led to months of depression and anxiety. She dropped out of the classes and wondered how she will find a job and if there are indeed inequities associated to her religious identity in the Canadian labour market. These thoughts presented her with a sense of uncertainty for her family's livelihood as her husband was employed in a precarious position and not earning enough at the time. Her worries reflect current research findings which show that high skilled Muslim women face a racialized and gendered Canadian labour market facing significant barriers to occupational growth due to their religious identity (Nazari, 2026).

This multilayered verbal exchange with Saima's teacher locates her in an epistemic hierarchy where she must disengage from her traditional knowledge of faith and its link to her lived experience of day to day meaning-making activities. This severs the link to her identity, inner Self, and dignity as meaning-making is done by those in privileged positions of power. This epistemic violence legitimizes non-recognition and denigration of her skills and credentials while silencing and further devaluing her knowledge of Self, and her faith-based ways of knowing. As the teacher asks her to remove the visible signifiers of her difference, she must come face to face with the "colour-coded" labour market (Block et al., 2019) where hijab wearing women face higher discrimination in the labour market (Ahmed & Gorey, 2021). She must also come to terms with the stereotypical socially and politically inferior identity of a Muslim immigrant woman, excluded from national imaginary and belonging (Zine, 2022, p. 58). Removing the hijab, so she can pass as a White person represents a move towards de-racialization, i.e. essentially discarding her racialized Islamic identity. Thus, scholars have argued that, in the Western mindset, the hijab symbolizes a patriarchal, oppressive Islamic cultural practice which finds purpose in the Western liberatory project to rescue Muslim women, a conceptualization rooted in the "savior" mentality (Alizai 2021; Baksh, 2024; Zine, 2022).

As Saima drops out and "almost" accepts the perceived meanings associated with her religious choices, she suffered prolonged mental health issues. After gaining her strength, Saima renewed her commitment to her studies and also found a job. Upon sharing this with her teacher, her

optimism was struck down again when her teacher claimed that it was because her employer is an Islamic institution. This "othering" of not just bodies but also educational institutions on Canadian soil by virtue of their affiliation with Islam reveals that epistemic violence erects social and cultural membership boundaries within a nation-state. It is also a reminder of the Quebec's Bill 21 which prohibits Muslim women from wearing hijabs and other religious symbols in public institutions. Muslim women have not only suffered displacement but also loss of employment and academic penalties as a result of Bill 21 (Jahangeer, 2022: Zainub, 2024). Saima's experience connects to the research which shows that racialized women are pushed towards "ethnic economies" due to negative labour market experiences (Chuatico et al., 2022; Khattab et al., 2019). These findings on epistemic violence act as a precursor to the ones on the second theme of gendered Islamophobia.

Gendered Islamophobia

Zine (2006) introduced the term gendered Islamophobia which are "specific forms of ethno-religious and racialized discrimination leveled at Muslim women" (p. 240). She locates them in historical/ideological discursive colonial processes where Muslim women are presented as oppressed in order to legitimize the colonial conquest of Muslims and their lands. She writes that, "the epistemic violence behind these constructs bears material consequences for Muslim girls and women" (p. 240). Gendered islamophobia is fundamentally predicated upon gender demarcations when assigning traits to Muslim men and women with differential outcomes for instance, in policy it brings attention to Quebec's Bill 21 which bans hijab, bearing an economic penalty primarily for Muslim women in the labour market.

As discussed in the previous section, Saima and Rahila encountered many instances of epistemic violence where their intersectional identities were belittled. Rahila shared that her classmates were surprised to see a Muslim woman in a doctoral program and praised her husband for providing her with the freedom to study (Zainub, 2023). Thus, simultaneously creating the good Muslim/bad Muslim (Gova, 2015) binary alongside the construction of the male-female bifurcation in terms of oppressor/victim binary (Zine, 2022). When recalling this incident, Rahila struggled to find words to express her disappointment at these reactions. This encounter suppressed her enthusiasm for her work and studies. Such incidents negate a Muslim woman's agency and ambition as it denigrates the common Muslim man as controlling, violent, and oppressive.

These lived experiences an over sense of despair as these incidents reflect the interconnected nature of social, cultural, and economic spaces. Dealing with issues such as the one shared above was difficult enough when Rahila found that her daughter's school had reported her to child welfare services. She reflected upon this incident with a great deal of distress because as a new immigrant she wasn't aware of how to deal with the

situation. She cried remembering the anxiety and stress it caused her family. She shared that even her parenting was challenged simply due to the perceptions/ stereotypes held by her school administrators and teachers. Research shows that racialized visible minorities are disproportionately reported to the child welfare services (OHRC, 2017). Thus, these constructs of gendered Islamophobia are predicated upon epistemic violence.

Saima shared a similar instance:

> *When we didn't have a car, we used to take the bus a lot. If my kids misbehaved in the bus, people would give me a look, tell me to take care of my kids, and start giving me lessons, as if I am ignorant.*

These everyday experiences have a cumulative effect on a person's mental health especially when they are also struggling economically and in other areas of their social life. As racialized mothers, it can significantly deteriorate their health, both physically and mentally. Both Rahila and Saima shared the stress it placed on them. As mentioned above, Rahila was extremely worried about the child welfare representative's visit to her home. She understood that although she had done nothing to her child, however, as a racialized Muslim woman, her words may not hold the same value compared to a non-racialized person. This reality is especially troubling when a new immigrant is unaccustomed to the rights and laws of their host society. Within the context of her experiences with the delivery of her child at the hospital and discussions with her peers in classrooms, Rahila believed her words were devalued and not recognized as trustworthy. This is referred to as "testimonial injustice," a form of epistemic violence, where the marginalized Other is silenced and not given credibility as a knower (Kjaran & Halldórsdóttir, 2022). This epistemic violence remains unarticulated among these racialized Muslim women as their lived experiences are disregarded and deemed unworthy. Their knowledge of the world and Self is delegitimized and silenced and left out of the knowledge production. This further marginalizes them and reinforces power and privilege hierarchies.

Saima and Rahila both believed that they, as visibly racialized hijab wearing Muslim women, generated particular set of reactions in people around them, for instance, Rahila shared that people avoided sitting next to her in classroom. Saima shared a classroom interaction,

> *In a class we were introducing ourselves and answering, where are you from? And giving the impression we have about this country. When I said Syria, they looked at me with surprise and said, "Oh, that's desert, camels, and tents. I replied, "Oh my God, I have never met a camel in Syria!"*

The above-cited reactions emerge from a long historical/ cultural Orientalist depiction of the East as pre-modern, static, and unaccepting of change. These stereotypes are based in the construction of the Occident in opposition to the Orient. Hence, Zine (2022) argues that: "Orientalist ideologies shape Islamophobic imaginaries and provide the rationale for systemic practices through which Islamophobia becomes institutionally embedded and reproduced" (p. 15). Unfortunately, as discussed, these tropes not only harm at the individual level but also cause unbearable damage to the entire communities as they restrict Muslim women's participation in daily social and economic spheres. Statistical data highlights the rise in hate crimes against Muslim women (CBC, 2024).

The preceding discussion shows that epistemic violence and gendered Islamophobia are disruptive forces where race, gender, and religion play a pivotal intersectional role in shaping high skilled Muslim women's academic and career trajectories. Lived experiences cannot be understood as isolated events without paying attention to the racism, Islamophobia, and sexism which undergirds social discursive practices. With the rise of religiously motivated hate crimes, (Government of Canada, 2024) it has become even more important to focus on the decolonial intersectionality of race, gender, and religion to understand the context of Muslim women's lived experiences.

Decoloniality and Teaching for Peace

This study demonstrated that higher education can be a site of epistemic violence and gendered Islamophobia for Muslim women. This section discusses possibilities and imperatives for teaching for peace in higher education to counter the current challenges against EDI.

The contemporary growth of anti-Muslim hate in higher education places boundaries upon Muslim women's engagement and participation in academia and the associated labour market. In a review of recent research, Ibrahim (2023) identifies some of the approaches to dealing with Islamophobia in higher education which include EDI workshops, anti-racist/bias training and development of faculty and staff, and socio-emotional learning strategies for teaching in pluralistic societies. She notes that the growth in Islamophobia scholarship will likely offer more approaches to teaching and learning in the future. However, she argues that the dearth of approaches to education shows that "Islamophobia is operationalized as an issue addressed within the bandwidth of all education training and learning in diversity" and "the ways in which higher education fails to support the specific and complex needs of explicitly marginalized communities of Muslim students and their intersectionality (p. 150).

Elsewhere I argue that globally we are witnessing a surge in Islamophobia which causes significant strain on the socio-economic culture of Canadian society (Zainub, 2026). Teaching for peace must address the colonial, historical, and systemically oppressive regimes foundational to the development of educational institutions. Hence, to specifically address the

source of Islamophobic conflict resulting in epistemic violence and gendered Islamophobia in spaces of teaching and learning, I address the above issues from a "decolonial epistemic lens." It identifies the possibility for sustainable peace through an engagement with a "broader canon of thought than simply the Western canon" and "to take seriously the epistemic perspective/cosmologies/insights of critical thinkers from the Global South thinking from and with subalternized racial/ethnic/sexual spaces and bodies" (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 212). I suggest further engagement with the decolonial framework for pedagogical purposes.

Saima and Rahila participated in my research with a keen interest, sharing in-depth knowledge of their experiences. They not only self-advocated through this research but also advocated on behalf of other marginalized persons supporting further engagement with research and dialogue. When they "explained" their faith and practices, as I elaborated upon earlier, their intentions were to promote peaceful dialogue with their peers and teachers, for instance, Rahila stated that:

> *At the time [in class] they kept quiet, but now I get emails from some of my colleagues that they had a wonderful experience because they were able to have this dialogue. And now they are respectful, and I feel very important. I felt that they were listening.*

Rahila' statement highlights three key concepts for dismantling epistemic violence and gendered Islamophobia in higher education: respect, recognition, and listening. These concepts situate the issues endured by Muslim women within the ethics of giving respect and recognition to their bodies, minds, faith, and identity alongside listening to their knowledge of Self and traditional epistemologies. Paying attention to these concepts is important for a decolonial pedagogy of peace. This includes paying attention to their migration history, stories of origin, family stories, which can help them situate themselves while making meaningful connections with other parts of their settlement experiences. Teaching and learning for peace entails providing a space where we listen deeply without questioning, judgement, discrimination, and violent speech. This entails a respect for boundaries and encouraging empathy and compassion for marginalized lived experiences. It recognizes that we must understand peace through remembering the coloniality of lived experiences acknowledging pain and loss. Parallel to this we must continue to resist against further forms of coloniality which create structural inequalities and hierarchies (Delgado & Romero, 2000). This recognition of loss and suffering can open a possibility of relationships with other communities and instead of understanding peace as the absence of violence we provide the necessary space and continuity for an ongoing process of 'historical repair' (Ali, 2025).

This research shows that decolonial framework can help analyse possibilities for dismantling the coloniality of epistemic violence and gendered Islamophobia, which appear deeply embedded in educational

systems, and that continue to affect lived experiences of Muslim women in higher education. It is important to nurture the peace in spaces of teaching and learning to respect, recognize, and listen to marginalized voices strengthening their agency and representation in higher education.

Conclusion

The stories of highly skilled Muslim women reveal the exclusionary impact of race, gender, and religion on their lived experiences in higher education. As visible hijab wearing Muslim women, they have been subjected to discrimination, marginalization, and Islamophobia in higher education and other spaces of integration. These educational spaces relegate them to the margins, resulting in epistemic violence and gendered Islamophobia. In addition to the non-recognition of their credentials and skills, Muslim women shared stories of devaluation of their voices in higher education and other areas of their lives. They argued for respect, recognition, and listening, and demonstrated narratives of strength drawing on their faith and religious identity to counter systemic forms of anti-Muslim hate. They voluntarily participated in this study and shared their knowledge of their faith and practices with peers and teachers as a way to promote dialogue. However, these spaces were aggressive and did not align with ethics of respectful listening.

This study argues for understanding Muslim women's lived experiences from a decolonial intersectional perspective of race, gender, and religion. This research attempted to understand Muslim women's lived experiences and examine decolonial ways to disrupt epistemic violence and gendered Islamophobia in higher education. It locates the potential in aligning Muslim women's voices within decolonial research and teaching for peace.

A decolonial approach can create opportunities for a pedagogy of peace in higher education, but also for the purpose of this study an open recognition of the lived experiences and histories of Muslim women. This study highlights significant opportunities for educational practitioners and students to participate in challenging epistemic violence and gendered Islamophobia in higher education. Higher educational spaces must do more to promote inclusion and respect for marginalized bodies and knowledge.

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None to declare.

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