2014

Muslim women in American and hijab : a study of empowerment, feminist identity, and body image

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines how, if at all, the Islamic practice of hijab (veiling) empowers those women who practice and if it has any influence upon feminist identity and body image. This study is based upon the perspective of 12 adult Muslim American women living in North Carolina who practice a form of physical hijab on a daily basis. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique and interviewed in person by the researcher. Questions included, but were not limited to: do you feel empowered by the hijab why or why not? Do you identify as a feminist, why or why not? Do you feel the hijab contributes to a positive or negative body image, why or why not? Each interview was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher and analyzed using an open coding system.

The major findings of the study were: the hijab was empowering for these women by providing control over their physical selves; the hijab was a conscious choice; participants believed their image as a Muslim woman challenged mainstream Western images of empowered women; the hijab was seen as separate from their physical body but generally contributed to a positive body image; and hijab was a choice not influenced by male control. The findings from this study can contribute to social work education and practice, through considering forms of female empowerment not considered and to help dispel negative stereotypes of Muslim women and the practice of hijab.

MUSLIM WOMEN IN AMERICA AND HIJAB: A STUDY OF EMPOWERMENT,

FEMINIST IDENTITY, AND BODY IMAGE

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The focus of this qualitative study is to examine the affect, if any, that the Islamic practice of wearing the hijab (veil) has upon notions of female empowerment, feminist identity, and body image. Specifically, I am investigating how, if at all, does the hijab empower American Muslim women who practice hijab? Due to the current sociopolitical climate which is often hostile towards the Islamic faith and in particular, Muslim women, this study is necessary to allow for Muslim hijabi women to describe in their own words what this practice means to them. After 9/11 there has been an increased suspicion both of the Islamic faith in general and how Muslim women are treated within it ("Islamophobia and Its Impact in the United States," CAIR 2009-2010). More often than not, many Americans assume that the hijab is a clear symbol of the subjugation of women within Islam and Muslim women who wear the veil are more prone to acts of discrimination than those who do not veil. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, hate crimes against Muslims rose 674% from the year 2000 to 2006 ("Discrimination Against Muslim Women," 2008). This study will only consider adult Muslim women living within America, regardless of their immigrant status.

As a Muslim American who wears the hijab, I have had numerous first hand experiences of non-Muslims treating me in a condescending or patronizing way at times, overtly informing me of my assumed oppression. Within the social work field itself, I have repeatedly been the

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target by both fellow professionals and students who incorrectly assumed that the hijab was forced upon me, that I was ignorant of Western freedoms, and moreover that Islam was to be feared and clearly contradicted the values present in Western democracy. Despite the fact that I readily identify as a feminist and feel very much empowered by my decision to wear the hijab, I found a huge gap in both social work literature and education in regards to understanding the community to which I belong.

The concept of the veil (hijab) serving as a symbol of both piety and empowerment is rarely, if ever, considered on a social level. This area of research can be particularly helpful for social work education and professional practice, as it has implications for both macro and micro work. The Muslim faith and sociocultural identity is rarely taught in social work education (or in other fields), even though the American Muslim population is a large minority constituting six to seven million people ("American Muslims," CAIR, n.d.). In order to best serve the needs of both clients as well as advocating for those who are underpriveleged in America, it is essential that social workers understand how Muslim identity is shaped and understood by the women who practice.

Limitations to this study include differences between how Muslim women self-identify in regards to immigration status: it is possible those who are second-generation Muslim Americans may have a different view than those who are first generation immigrants. By not setting restrictions on how Muslim women practice hijab (e.g., only interviewing women who cover hair versus covering of the face), I may not have delved as deeply into the different concepts of hijab and what implications that has upon identity, which is certainly an area for continued research to expand upon. Lastly, because this study has only included Muslims living in America I cannot

possibly account for other cultural views of non-American Muslims and the concept of empowerment could be very different in other geographic regions.

For the purpose of this study, it is important to define several terms that are used throughout. The Arabic term *hijab* will be used in lieu of "veil" to refer to the Islamic practice of covering, as it is the correct word to describe such practice and simply translates as "a covering." The term *hijab* is very much open to interpretation, which results in great diversity of coverings from simple headscarves to burqas, which completely cover the face and body. To be clear, the term *Muslim* refers to one who follows and practices the religion of Islam, which is based in the teachings of the holy book the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The letters PBUH stand for "Peace Be Upon Him" which is an obligatory statement whenever referencing the prophet of Islam. It is important to note that Arabic terms are used, as this is the language used in the Quran and throughout the Islamic religion as a whole and are broader in definition than their English equivalents.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Throughout modern history and into the present day, one of the most fiercely contested images of the feminine form is that of the veiled Islamic woman. Such women have been the focus of social anxieties, the mapping of moral values, and the justification for waging wars in Eastern nations predominantly populated by Muslim people. In American society, no other image of woman seems to so easily and fully encompass all that Western democracy and its brand of feminism rejects. Moreover, this image has become the clear indication that Islamic values and traditions are inherently patriarchal, bar women from public space, and subjugate the female form. Western feminist movements have rarely, if ever, considered this model of femininity to be capable of upholding the notion of female empowerment and liberation. Yet in a culture in which mass marketed images of women rely upon the exposure -- and arguably, exploitation -- of the female body, has Western society neglected to consider the potential for a radically different form of empowerment presented by the veiled, Muslim woman? It is in this potential for a new perspective on reclaiming the private space of women as a source of agency and positive body image that I based this study.

I have composed the following literature review section accordingly, to: define hijab and its foundation in Islamic practice; discuss the historical relationship between the West and hijab analyze contemporary political and feminist practices in relation to hijab; consider the link

between market capitalism and feminist images; and present the potential for the hijab as a protective factor against impossible beauty ideals and potential for new feminist interpretations of the hijab. This literature review is certainly ambitious in the breadth of what it seeks to cover, but I believe it is imperative that one understands the history of the hijab in the context of Western feminist images in order to deconstruct and analyze the hijab in the current American sociopolitical climate. This section is certainly unable to cover all the existing theoretical and empirical research that exists on this topic, but attempts to be as comprehensive as possible for placing the hijab in context within the proposed area of study of my research.

Understanding Hijab in Islamic Context

Despite the plethora of manifestations the hijab has taken throughout different countries, cultures, and time periods, what remains consistent is the use of the Quran as evidence that the hijab was made obligatory to those who practice it. Two verses in the Quran in particular are often cited by Muslim communities, regardless of denomination, as clear evidence that such practice of physical veiling was commonplace during the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In chapter twenty-four, of the Quran, an-Nur/The Light states:

> Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. That is purer for them. Lo!
> Allah is aware of what they do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be
> modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their
> veils over their bosoms (24:30-31); ("Quran," n.d.).

An additional reference is made in chapter thirty-three of the Quran, al-Azhab/The Clans:

> O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their
> cloaks close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, so that they may be
> recognized and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful (33:59); ("Quran," n.d.).

Although the above-stated reference to modesty in the Quran describes behaviors mandated for both men and women, the focus has nonetheless continued to be placed upon women. These verses are quite simplistic in nature and arguably have not clearly defined exactly what needs to be covered, resulting in a widely diverse Muslim community that offers a wide range of hijab practices. The most basic understanding of the physical hijab as practiced by women is a simplistic head covering, usually paired with long sleeved, loose fitting clothing. Local cultures have always exerted influence over the style of hijab present in one's culture, which has allowed for local traditions to adopt the hijab in unique ways. The manner in which a Lebanese woman wears hijab may greatly different from an Egyptian woman, who may also differ from an Iranian woman, and so on and so forth. Examples of such differences range from the chador (a long, black coat worn over the head with face exposed), niqab (a face veil that does not cover the eyes), burqa (a garment completely covering the body including the eyes and face), and the most common hijab (a simple scarf covering hair and neck). For the purpose of this study, there were no limitations on how much a woman participant covered with the exception that the hijab, or headscarf that covers the hair, must be worn at a minimum. The term "hijab" refers to both the physical headscarf itself as well as the practice of covering or veiling.

Historical Links: The West, Liberalism, Hijab

The use of feminism as a means to justify the West's superior model of democracy and freedom, particularly in regards to Eastern nations with high concentrations of Muslim followers, has been a feature of Western international relations beginning as early as the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century. During this period colonial efforts largely by the British and French throughout North Africa and what became known as the Middle East, used the rhetoric of Western people saving Eastern women as justification for imperialism and oppressive

occupation of eastern nations (Ahmed, 1992). Despite the fact that Western women in the West during this period were fighting their own battles for voting rights, education, and the right to work outside the home, abroad, Western women were using their image as the exemplar of the only way to be. Although this study has focused upon contemporary uses of the hijab within an American context, I found it increasingly important to understand how we have arrived at the point we are at today.

In both Egypt and Algeria during the turn of the century, Western women created feminist movements grounded in liberal, democratic language calling upon each other to literally go to the East and liberate their veiled counterparts. In "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" (2002), Leila Abu Lughod describes the justification for imperialism and military occupation of Muslim countries through the exploitation of Western feminist imagery. One such historical example occurred in Algeria in which the French military rounded up native Algerian women from villages, and publicly paraded them in front of crowds in city squares, where French women literally removed the Algerian's veils in a symbolic homage to Western democracy (as cited in Lazreg, 1994).

In her book *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), Leila Ahmed describes the British occupation of Egypt and the dramatic change to Egyptian social structure under Western imperialism. Similar to the French efforts in Algeria, the British in Egypt under the supervision of Lord Cromer, denounced Islam as a morally bankrupt system and imposed Western political and Christian religious beliefs as the arbiters of justice. Not only were politics heavily imbued with the language of the West as savior, the entire social and economic structure of society was rebuilt strategically excluding Islamic religious beliefs, laws, and customs. Even though Western colonists like Lord Cromer denounced women's movements in his home country, he too

garnered support by Western feminist movements in his efforts to occupy and control Egypt. What emerged during this period of imperialism was a marketable image of what the liberated woman should look like: unveiled, publicly accessible, and most of all lacking association with the Islamic religion. Long before major feminist movements began in America, beginning with the first wave of women's suffrage, global political agendas were laying a foundation for the image of woman in the context of a democratic state.

This marketable image of the liberated woman became synonymous with the freedom and democracy propagated by the West, brought to the East through imperialism and colonialism. Current American political discourse maintains the Western democratic model to be the epitome of freedom, human rights, and equality to which all other countries and political models must be compared. Edward Said's 1978 groundbreaking work *Orientalism,* powerfully described this dichotomy of the progressive West versus the archaic East. Said proposed that "orientalism" became the foundation for contemporary Western politics, which not only views the East as stagnant in Biblical times, but also became equally obsessed with the harem and women's veils as symbols of Eastern culture's femininity, weakness, and uncontrolled eroticism. Aspects of this belief can be found in the rhetoric of "American Exceptionalism" which has become the basis for the military, economic, and political invasion and occupation of foreign lands and the defining feature of the current War on Terror (Patman, 2006). Specifically, "American Exceptionalism" is defined as an "informal ideology that endows Americans with a pervasive faith in the uniqueness, immutability and superiority of the country's founding liberal principles and also with the conviction that the USA has a special destiny among nations" (Patman, 2006, p.964). In this philosophy, the West again is established as being the epitome of

morality, which must bring justice and values to Eastern cultures, which require external forces to be brought into the progressive era.

Contemporary Political and Feminist Relationships with Hijab

Since the 9/11 attacks of 2001, the War on Terror launched during the Bush administration initially focused upon Afghanistan for harboring the terrorists that claimed responsibility for the 9/11 attacks under the leadership of Al-Qaeda's Osama bin Laden. Despite the fact that no Afghan national was one of the nineteen hijackers, through political language used by Western leaders including then President George W. Bush, the Afghan became associated with both the Taliban and Al Qaeda network. In his state of the union address on January 29, 2002, former President George W. Bush named Muslim majority countries Iraq and Iran as part of the "axis of evil" that must be confronted ("The State of the Union," NPR, 2002). Although North Korea was also part of this "axis of evil," little if any attention was given to that country, and even less attention has been paid to the Korean people as the image of terror. Yet, the image of the Arab, the Middle Eastern, and above all, the Muslim has become the defining image of violence, oppression, and terror that so fully embodies everything that American democracy and freedom stands against. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, hate crimes against Muslims rose 674% from the year 2000 to 2006 ("Discrimination Against Muslim Women," 2008).

The media were quick to pick up on the image of the Muslim as terrorist and although Muslim men were no more favored, it was the image of the veiled Muslim woman that became the symbolic image of oppression and violence (Haddad, 2007). Much like the British and French colonists of the previous century, so too modern politicians incorporated the veil, or hijab, into political language. The Afghan tradition of wearing the burqa, a form of veiling that

completely covers women including their face and eyes, was even cited as evidence that Americans must support the war effort in both Afghanistan and later Iraq to help bring "freedom" to a society so clearly unequal and harsh in its treatment of women. George W. Bush himself referred to such Muslim women as "women of cover" and then First Lady Laura Bush stated in her radio speech on November 17, 2001:

> Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror -- not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us. ("Radio Address by Mrs. Bush," 2001).

She would continue on to state that the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan was the reason that such women could now embrace freedom and were essentially being brought into the world of the "civilized people," the West. This speech further connected the Western woman, in all her uncovered freedom, as the moral and civilized counterpart to the "women of cover" held in domestic servitude in Eastern, Islamic lands.

Although the Obama administration has withdrawn troops from Iraq and there are current efforts to remove U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, the focus upon the Muslim woman as desperate, downtrodden, and in need of saving by the West has not significantly declined. The focus on Islam, Muslims, and veiled Muslim women as being synonymous with terrorism, religious fanaticism, and aggression against the West has declined even less. The Council of American and Islamic Relations (CAIR) recently published a study which found the irrational fear of Islam, or "Islamaphobia," to be on the rise and that hate crimes and acts of violence were more often directed at Muslim women who wore the hijab than Muslim men. ("Islamophobia

and Its Impact in the United States," 2009-2010). A qualitative study conducted by Nadal et al.

(2012) examined the ways in which Muslim Americans experienced microaggressions based

upon their religious identity. Overall, six themes were found in discriminatory practices against

the Muslim participants: the endorsement of the stereotype that Muslims are terrorists,

embracing a pathology of the Muslim religion as inherently violent, the assumption that all

Muslims are homogenous, exoticization of Muslim individuals, Islamophobic or mocking

language, and accusing Muslims of being "an alien in their own land" (Nadal et al., 2012, p.22).

These researchers also called upon the need for continued empirical research into the mental

health concerns facing Muslim Americans as a result of these microaggressions.

The image of the hijab as the symbol of the oppression and violence against women by

the hands of the uncivilized Muslim man became the rallying point not only for American

politicians, but for contemporary Western feminists as well. Sunaina Maira's piece "The 'Good'

and 'Bad' Muslim Citizens: Feminists, Terrorists, and U.S. Orientalisms" (2009) directly

addresses in what ways the body of the Muslim identity (especially those who practice hijab) has

become the entity upon which Western liberal neo-Orientalists superimpose their values. Maira

works from a position that liberal feminism today operates in a very ethnocentric and often racist

framework that misinterprets, if not completely misunderstands, the Islamic identity for women

and their role within society and religion. It is in contrast to this perspective of liberal feminism

that I based the bulk of my work in this study. The Muslims considered to be "good" are those

that abandon Islamic values, discourage practices of hijab, and promote American liberal

feminism as the definitive source of individual freedom.

In conducting research within the specific Islamic context, I found it increasingly

important to understand how "feminism" itself is constructed in America, how these movements

influence and are part of contemporary "second-wave feminism" (Rosen, 2012), and what implications may White privilege have upon determining what constitutes a liberated or empowered woman and what does not. Perin Gurel pointed out in her piece "Transnational Feminism, Islam, and the Other Woman: How to Teach" (2009) that feminists have been complicit in the "casting the 'Third World Woman' as a victim to be saved by the White man" and endorsing the same rhetoric in "the service of neoliberalism when mobilizing Americans for war" (p.67). Numerous pieces highlighted the notion that the White dominant class has largely been the determinate for what the empowered woman looks like, which greatly contradicts the appearance of non-White and/or Muslim identities (Coogan-Gehr, 2011). Moreover, there has been an increasing focus upon international issues of violence against women, which could be understood as a distraction from frustrations experienced by women within America itself (Stansell, 2010). In other words, the feminist movement in America has sought to right the injustices of women outside America to reinforce the Western ideal that American liberalism and economic capitalism is the superior framework by which society, gender, and equality is constructed. However, these globalized efforts do not exist in a vacuum and have had a direct impact upon the lives and identities of American Muslim women.

Capitalism, Media, Beauty Ideals, and Post-Colonial Feminism

The exposed female body, active in the public sphere, not only became the image of liberal feminism but also the marketable image of women by free market capitalism. During the previous eras of colonialism and on into recent political efforts for the War on Terror, the image of the covered woman had to be exchanged for the image of the freely exposed woman as a sign of progress, democracy, and freedom. Politicians were not the only figures to exploit this image of woman: mass media representations of liberated and empowered women also appealed to

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capitalist ventures and marketing schemes. On an average day, one is bombarded with images of

women empowered by the freedom to choose products that endorse this image-- from shaving

commercials selling razors that allow women to choose how to maintain body hair, shampoo

commercials endorsed by celebrities selling the brand as the strong woman's preferred choice, to

clothing companies selling the perfect working woman's outfit. Although feminist efforts have

long been used as a method to deconstruct patriarchal control over women, including their

physical selves, many argue that such movements have found a strange bedfellow with

capitalism that is reinforcing unfair expectations for women's bodies.

Johanna Kantola and Judith Squires's work "From State Feminism to Market Feminism?"

(2012), examined the evolution from "state feminism" in which issues of women's rights or

gender equality was advocated through policy changes within state-run agencies to "market

feminism" in which the same goals are now being achieved through the private sector in

accordance with market trends. More specifically, this shift in advocacy:

> Results in gender equality machineries in nation states becoming ever more embedded in
>
> neoliberal market reform…these developments not only change the relationship between
>
> the agencies and the women's movement, but also give primacy to those feminist claims
>
> that are complicit with a market agenda" (Kantola & Squires, 2012, p.383).

However, this does not necessarily equate to being inherently problematic as the authors point

out that there has never been a clear divide between the state and the market. The authors noted

that while working with market agendas, feminist agencies were able to access more funding

sources when establishing them as a non-governmental organization (NGO). However, a

growing concern from some radical feminists is that the same agencies will now have to market

their goals and their image in the form of what is appealing to current economic trends, which may result in the compromising of values and supporting the status quo.

One of the most seminal pieces of literature regarding this new shift in feminism is Hester Eisenstein's "A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization" (2005), which outlines how the feminist efforts of the second wave in the 1960s set the stage for corporations to adjust their marketing to sell products to women who embraced such ideals. Eisenstein proposes that the feminists of the 1960s essentially sought to bring women into the workforce and establish their individualism separate from housewives dependent solely upon their husbands. This emphasis on individualism and the right to engage in a market economy became the brand of U.S. feminism. Eisenstein continues to argue that the success of U.S. feminism has been used to promote capitalism in the third world. During the launching of the War on Terror by the Bush administration, the goals of war efforts in the Middle East became the new colonial effort to bring modernity and democracy. The new conventional wisdom embraces the equation that "modern" equals women's rights, the Judeo-Christian heritage, and democracy, while "traditional" equals patriarchal suppression of women's rights, the Islamic heritage, and terrorism" (Eisenstein, 2005, p.509). Yet this neo-liberal modernity campaign not only enforced U.S. feminism on women abroad-it has repercussions for women at home.

While the merger of feminism and market capitalism has allowed for more freedom and creativity in garnering funding for women's advocacy groups, the marketed standards for the liberated woman have led to media images of women with impossible standards for the way women's bodies should look. The same commercial selling the shampoos and business suits for the empowered women are presenting impossibly thin models, edited beyond any natural state, physically exposed, thereby creating a new prison for women. Numerous research studies in the

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treatment of eating disorders have found that exposure to media images which glorify the thin ideal have contributed to body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and poor mental health (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004). Joan Jacob Brumber's non-fiction novel *The Body Project* (1998), presents the disturbing new trend of teenage adolescents coming of age in the 1990s -- instead of focusing on "good works" the new motto is "good looks." Women's groups of prior generations, which focused upon cultivating a strong inner self and being a productive citizen, have now given way to focusing upon cultivating the perfect body. The U.S. society alone now boasts a dieting industry profiting $40 billion per year and is seeing unprecedented numbers of individuals suffering from eating disorders ("Going to Extremes," n.d.).

There is an increasing recognition of body image in conceptual and empirical research in the social sciences, which have produced a number of longitudinal studies of adolescent and adult females in relation to body ideals. The "body perfect" ideals media images have mass-produced have shown the ultra-thin model to be the standard by which new generations of girls are holding themselves to in order to achieve what is being sold to them as reaching their full potential (Dittmar, 2009). Not only is the standard for beauty producing images of ultra thin models with flawless physiques, women's bodies are become more and more exposed. The effects of exposure to these images not only negatively impacts women, they are negatively impacting men as well. A 2009 study in Belgium surveyed 215 participants and found that both men and women reported a decrease in body esteem in relation to exposure of scantily dressed models (Dens, Janssens, & Pelsmacker, 2009). As the female form became liberated, market capitalism exploited and exposed her to a new form of imprisonment for women.

Although the hijab has repeatedly been dismissed by feminist efforts as degrading towards women, subjugating them to the power of patriarchy, there is new and emerging

research about how the hijab may actually work to protect women against negative body image ideals. Alexander J. Mussap's quantitative study "Strength of Faith and Body Image in Muslim and Non-Muslim Women" (2009) surveyed Australian women to see if there was in fact any correlation between the wearing of hijab and a higher rate of body satisfaction. The study found that those who follow the Islamic faith and wear hijab were not necessarily any less likely to compare their bodies to the body ideals produced in the media. However, the hijab did offer protection by "buffering against appearance based public scrutiny (through adoption of traditional clothing) and by insulating her from exposure to Western ideals (by discouraging consumption of body-centric media)" (Mussap, 2009, p.125).

Similar to Mussap's study in Australia, a similar quantitative study was conducted in the U.S. to examine how both younger and older Muslim and non-Muslim women internalized Western standards of beauty. Dunkel, Davidson, and Qurashi's research "Body Satisfaction and Pressure to be Thin in Younger and Older Muslim and Non-Muslim Women: The Role of Western and Non-Western Dress Preferences" (2010) built upon previous studies which found that Muslim women, even living in the West, who adopted Islamic traditional clothing and identified with this religious community, often reported greater rates of body satisfaction than their non-Muslim counterparts living in the same area. The results showed that both older and younger women, who regularly wore traditional Islamic clothing with a headscarf, reported reduced internalization of impossible Western beauty ideals than both women who did not adopt this dress and women who adopted traditional dress but no head covering. What is striking about this study is that the veil itself served as a protective factor. Similar to Mussap, the researchers concluded that "it may be the religious or cultural ideals behind non-Western clothing and in particular, the veil, that provide protective factors against a strong drive for thinness and

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obtaining Western standards of beauty in some women" (Dunkel, Davidson, & Qurashi, 2009, p.63). The researchers also called upon the need for future empirical research to consider what they did not-why women wore the hijab, degree of religiosity, and adherence to religious practices. It is my goal in the present research to examine some of these aspects through qualitative analysis of interviews with women who wear hijab.

Lana D. Tolaymat and Bonnie Moradi's work "U.S. Muslim Women and Body Image: Links Among Objectification Theory Constructs and the Hijab" (2011) conducted a quantitative study that was built upon the knowledge from such previous studies that found overall, Muslim women who wore hijab reported less internalization of beauty ideals and less risk for eating disorders. Their study was based in objectification theory in which "Sexual objectification experiences can promote internalization of dominant cultural standards of beauty and result in self-objectification or the adoption of an observer's perspective on one's own body" (Tolaymat & Moradi, 2011, p.383). Results from the study found that while U.S. Muslim women are still vulnerable to scrutinizing their own bodies in relation to an impossible standard of beauty, those that wore the hijab may be associated with less experiences of other people objectifying them. In other words, those wearing the hijab in public were able to claim a sense of private space that prevented sexually objectifying experiences brought on by the proverbial male gaze.

The reclaiming of the Islamic practice of the hijab as a Muslim women's movement of solidarity and affirming the Islamic religion and identity as liberating and not oppressive, is an emerging trend amongst American Muslims. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad's "The Post 9/11 'Hijab' as Icon" (2007), studied second generation American Muslim communities within the United States and analyzed their practice of hijab and reasons for doing so. Haddad found increasingly that American women born and raised in the United States, were engaging in hijab practices as

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"an iconic symbol of the refusal to be defined by the Western media and war propaganda since 9/11" (2007, p.254). Moreover, such women were identifying the hijab as a symbol of post-colonial female empowerment. While colonial efforts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were "saving" Muslim women from the uncontrolled sexuality of Muslim men abroad, the second wave feminists of the 1960s and into today are encouraging Muslim women to cast off the veil to reclaim their sexuality. Yet, as Haddad concluded in her research, many Muslim women in America have found American feminists to be both complicit in imposing their values upon "other" women and find the Western images of the hyper-sexualized and exposed woman to be contradictory to Islamic beliefs and exploitive of women. For such women, the hijab not only affirms their identity as Muslims, but also rejects the media representations of the hyper-sexual and overly exposed woman as empowered.

American Muslim women are not the only group to be reconsidering prevailing feminist attitudes towards "other" women and the new bind women are finding themselves in regards to the globalized image of women produced by the media. So-called "Third Wave Feminists" are advocating for what R. Claire Snyder Hall (2010) called "choice feminism," which "views freedom not as simply the 'capacity to make individual choices' but rather as the ability to determine your own life path" (p.256). In this context, Muslim women who practice hijab are given the freedom to both choose to wear the hijab in contrast to the assumption that they are subjugated by it, and in so-doing may also choose to reject media representations of Western beauty ideals. Others echo Snyder Hall's position by including "multi-racial feminist theory" which considers the adoption of feminist identity by women of different racial and ethnic groups to be a different path and intent, with different goals, than the dominant, White class of previous feminist movements (Harnois, 2005). It is in this new "wave" of feminist thought and freedom

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of choice in defining what constitutes an empowered woman, or feminist, that I will conduct my research with Muslim women who wear hijab.

It was not my intent or goal in my research study to advocate the idea that the wearing of the hijab is a panacea for women's battles with both feminist images and images of impossible beauty ideals. Rather, I sought to work from a position of choice and examining a voice that has rarely been heard in prevailing feminist literature. Moreover, it is imperative in conducting research with Muslim women that participants are given the space to determine for themselves if they embrace a feminist identity and how, if at all, the hijab empowers them to reject (or accept) mass produced images of "liberated" women. It is my goal to add to the previous empirical research that has found the hijab to serve as a protective factor in women's body esteem and a post-colonial feminist identity, through asking how women came to such decisions, how their religiosity is reflected in this decision, and what impact choice has had upon their understanding of female empowerment and religious identity.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The field of social work, and in particular social work education and research, has continued to grow in its understanding of religious groups and in particular, religious minorities within American society, yet there still exists a gap in literature in regards to Muslim Americans. Although the disturbing trend of Islamophobia towards the Muslim community in the wake of 9/11 has brought a needed attention to this particular religious minority, little research exists which examines Muslim women in particular from a perspective of empowerment. Much of the empirical research that exists on Muslim Americans examines them from a place of discrimination and in particular, Muslim women from a place of persecution and subjugation to Muslim men. This research is an exploratory/descriptive study, which seeks to examine how, if at all, the Islamic practice of hijab influence feminist identity, feelings of empowerment, and body image of those who practice. From these overarching questions, this study asks do hijabi women identify as feminist? Do hijabi women identify as empowered, and is this a different response from feminist identity? Does the hijab contribute to a positive or negative body image and if so, how or how not? Does the image of the hijab challenge mainstream images of the feminism in America? Although there has been a great deal of theoretical feminist critique of the practice of hijab, few empirical research studies exist which examine how the hijab may serve as a source of empowerment for Muslim women and as such, contributes to their understanding of

their own body image in relation to mainstream, Western images of the "empowered" or "feminist" woman.

Sample

For the purpose of this study, I interviewed twelve Muslim women who are at least eighteen years of age and are currently living in the United States. All interviews were conducted in the same geographic area in the southeastern United States. I did not control for immigrant status, as much of the American Muslim community is composed of first generation immigrants. Each participant's current legal status, such as being a citizen, permanent resident, or undocumented, was irrelevant to the purpose of this study. Although the length of time each participant lived in the United States was not controlled for, most participants were either born in the United States or had lived here for a period greater than five years. Participants were recruited from the Triangle area (Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill) of North Carolina and were proficient in English, as all in-person interviews were conducted in English. All participants were female, self-identified as Muslim, and practiced some tradition of physical hijab or veil. Due to the wide range of hijab practices (e.g. covering hair, covering face, etc.) participants were not required to veil in a specific manner, only that they practiced hijab regularly.

Participants were recruited by the researcher from contacting Muslim Student Associations (MSA) and local mosques through an initial recruitment email (Appendix A) which briefly stated the purpose of the study. Interested participants then emailed the researcher directly for further details, at which point I provided them with the study details (Appendix B) as well as arranged a time and place to conduct an in-person interview. Volunteer participants were offered a place to meet at either a public university library central to their location in the Triangle Area, or an alternate place of their choosing. The only requirement was that the location offered

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a space in which the participants' confidentiality was respected and they felt comfortable being audio recorded. Once a time and place had been established, participants were provided with the interview questions (Appendix C) to review at their will.

At the interview itself, participants were given sufficient time to speak with the researcher about any further questions or concerns they had in regards to the study or interview questions. They were again provided with a copy of interview questions to review, as well as an informed consent form (Appendix D) to review and sign by both the researcher and participant. Both the participant and researcher kept a personal copy of the informed consent. Participants were also provided with a list of emergency mental health services (Appendix E) should they become emotionally triggered during the interview or following. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher and ranged in time from twelve to twenty five minutes in length. Participants were offered a copy of their transcribed interview within three weeks of the interview date.

Data Collection

Data collection commenced upon receipt of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review committee's official letter of approval for the study (Appendix F). I used a snowball technique for gathering participants after initial contact was made through emailing MSA organizations at local universities and colleges, as well as local mosques. After each volunteer participant completed their interviews, I asked them to please provide the study information and the researcher's contact information to any other Muslim women who might qualify for and be interested in participating in the study. Although I had no professional connections with any participant, due to the cultural and religious practices of Muslim women, especially of those who practice hijab, I found it enormously beneficial to have a personal tie to

the population of interest. This also served me well in recruitment, as participants expressed a greater degree of comfort and confidence engaging with a researcher who was also a member of the population being studied.

Due to the limited existing qualitative empirical research on this particular population, I engaged with each participant using a set of standardized closed and open-ended questions to structure each interview. The closed ended questions were used to specifically gather demographic information such as age, race, ethnicity, and country of origin. Although all of the formal questions were the same for each participant, the interview was very much a dialogue between researcher and volunteer. Examples of interview questions included but were not limited to: Do you feel the hijab empowers you as a woman and, if so, how; or how not? Do you feel that your identity as a Muslim woman who wears hijab contradicts or challenges mainstream Western images of the "empowered" or "feminist" woman?

Data Analysis

Each interview was subsequently transcribed by myself as researcher, and no outside professional transcription services were used. Responses to the interview questions were then examined using an open coding system to analyze for any emerging themes, which relate to the concept of female empowerment, feminist identity, and body image in relation to mainstream feminist imagery. I expected that most participants would identify with the concept of empowerment but might vary in their acceptance of feminist identity, as Western feminist movements have historically neglected to include Muslim women or hijab. Limitations to the study include not controlling for immigration status, as those participants who were born and raised outside of the United States often had more difficulty understanding the term "feminist" as opposed to those participants born and raised in American society. An additional limitation was

the lack of control for age, as younger generation (college aged) participants more readily relate, whether positively or negatively, to mainstream images of feminism, empowerment, and body image. For all participants, the concept of body image seemed to be a separate issue from feminism and empowerment and could have been used as a separate study altogether.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how, if at all, the Islamic practice of hijab empowers those Muslim women who practice this tradition. Moreover, for the participants interviewed, does the practice of hijab influence or shape feelings of feminist identity, body image, and what it means to be an empowered woman living in the West? This chapter contains findings that are based upon twelve interviews of Muslim women living in America who all practice hijab. Interviews were conducted in-person, audio recorded, fully transcribed by the researcher, and coded using grounded theory for analysis. The interviews were structured by first gathering demographic information (age, race or ethnicity, immigrant status) and subsequently gathered information regarding participants' thoughts and feelings about the hijab and how, if at all, it empowers them, whether or not they identify as feminists, if and how hijab impacts their body image, as well as their thoughts and feelings regarding mainstream, Western images of empowered or feminist women. The main themes of the interviews were whether one identified as empowered, whether one identified as feminist, reflections upon body image, and reflections upon the Islamic image of hijabi women being at odds with or challenging mainstream, Western images of empowered or feminist women. The findings in this chapter will be structured in the same manner that the interviews were conducted.

Demographic Data

This study conducted interviews with 12 participants, all of whom identified as female, were at least 18 years of age, identified as Muslim, and wore the hijab. Although immigrant status varied, all participants were currently living in the United States and spoke English. All interviews were conducted in person, in English, and in the same geographic area in the Southeastern United States. The age range varied greatly, with the youngest participant being 19 years of age and the oldest being 60 years of age. Several participants were current undergraduate, graduate, or Ph.D. candidates; all participants had advanced degrees or specialized training in their specific field, and one owned her own business.

Although all participants were American citizens and identified as such at time of interview, four participants had immigrated to the United States and all others were native-born. Of those who immigrated, all identified with a Middle Eastern or Asian country of origin and spoke either a dialect of Arabic or Farsi as a first language. Of the native-born participants, three converted to the religion of Islam and also identified as Caucasian. One participant was born into a Muslim family and identified as African American, one identified as a second generation Middle Eastern-American, and three identified as second generation Pakistani-Americans.

Age and Manner of Hijab Choice/Religious and Social Factors

This section details the age at which participants began wearing the hijab, the manner in which they wore the hijab, if the manner in which they wore the hijab changed or was impacted by country of origin, if the hijab was an individual choice, and if participants cited religious, social, or political motivations for wearing the hijab.

Age of Hijab

The age in which participants first began wearing the hijab as a regular practice varied greatly, with the youngest age being nine and the oldest age being 53. The age of initiating the hijab was very diverse in both the native born and immigrant groups. Of the four immigrant participants, two began wearing the hijab in their country of origin at the age of nine. The remaining two did not wear the hijab until after they immigrated to the United States, one at age 28 and the other at age 40. Of the native-born participants, the age ranged from nine years old to 53 years old.

Manner of Hijab

All participants wore the hijab in a generally similar way, though several participants reported that the style in which they wore the hijab fluctuated since their age of first wearing it. Overall, all 12 participants covered their hair, neck, and ears with a headscarf and wore longer sleeves and pants. None of the participants covered their face or hands, but several reported they covered their feet all or most of the time. At time of interview, 11 participants wore Western style clothing although several reported they wore traditional Islamic garments such as the abaya (long, loose fitting dress typically black in color and worn as an outer garment) or salwar chamis (long tunic top with wide leg pants and a long scarf) periodically, especially when visiting their country of origin or their parent's country of origin. Only one native-born participant wore a more traditional salwar chamis at time of interview. Of the four participants who immigrated, two never wore the hijab in their country of origin unless during times of prayer or when visiting a mosque (which is obligatory for all Muslims). The other two immigrant participants stated their manner of covering did not significantly change when they immigrated, with the exception of one who wore a traditional abaya on top of the clothes she currently wears.

The maximum fluctuation in style of hijab existed amongst the eight native-born participants, although there were no other significant changes in the hijab. For example, several stated they experimented with different styles of wrapping the veil or fabric materials, but none reported significant changes such as once covering the face and then later not covering the face. Several reported they wore ¾ length sleeves periodically, some stated they initially wore tighter fitting clothing before wearing looser fitting garments later in life, and several participants reported initially wearing or periodically wearing a loose fitting head covering in which the hair and neck was partially exposed.

Choice and Religious, Social, or Political Motivations

All 12 participants were very adamant that it be known that their decision to wear the hijab, regardless of age at initiating the practice, was of their own free will. A number of participants were the only females in their families who wore the hijab or had several female family members who did not wear the hijab; this occurred in both native-born and immigrant groups. When asked if the decision to wear the hijab was influenced only by religion or if any other social or political factor contributed to their decision to wear it, none reported any political motivations at any point in time. All 12 participants referenced the same verses in the Quran as clear evidence that the hijab was a commandment from Allah (God), which obliged women to cover their head and bodies. Specifically, participants referred to the surah (chapter) An-Noor (The Light) of the Quran:

> And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their
> adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not
> to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands' fathers, or
> their sons or their husbands' sons, or their brothers or their brothers' sons or sisters' sons,

or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigour, or children who know naught of women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn unto Allah together, O believers, in order that ye may succeed. (http://quran.al-islam.org/; 24:31).

Although all 12 participants stated their current motivation for wearing the hijab was based only in religion, a number of participants stated there was positive social reinforcement for wearing the hijab at an earlier age before they were able to intellectually understand the religious scriptures they understood to obligate women to cover. One immigrant participant stated in reference to initiating the practice of hijab, "We've learned from when we were young, hijab was obligatory on a woman and that is what she needs to do and this is what she needs to wear. We had role models. We had our mothers and aunts, our teachers, everyone in society was a role model for us in the way they wore their hijab." This sentiment was not specific to immigrants, and several native born participants who were born and raised in Muslim families referenced the influence of female role models in their families and communities, which shaped their decision to wear it. One individual stated, "Well, I was raised in a Muslim household and I saw my mom wearing it and other Muslims around me wearing it. So it was very natural for me to grow towards it. But in terms of the reasoning for why I was wearing it, at that age it was very a preliminary kind of understanding of why I was wearing it. As I grew older, it grew into a more solidified reasoning for what it meant and what it represented."

Female Empowerment/Feminist Identity/Body Image/ Western Images of Empowerment and Feminism/Male Oppression

The following section details the responses of participants to the questions related to whether one feels empowered as a woman, whether one identifies as a feminist, if the hijab

affects a sense of negative or positive body image, if they believed the image of the hijabi Muslim woman contradicts or challenges Western images of empowered and feminist women, and how they felt about assumptions that Muslim women who wear hijab are oppressed or controlled by men.

Female Empowerment

When asked directly if participants felt that the hijab contributed to a sense of feeling empowered as a woman, all participants did identify as an empowered Muslim woman. Although all of the participants directly identified the hijab as a source, or a contributor, of their sense of empowerment as a woman, several participants did reference negative stereotypes and assumptions in the post-9/11 American society as at times making them feel uncomfortable or "less-than." One native-born participant described being chased in a car by a man who shouted at her for being a terrorist following the Boston Marathon bombing and another immigrant participant stated she removed the hijab immediately following 9/11 because the negative attention felt unsafe. Two participants also stated that they faced difficulty in either obtaining work or moving up within their workplace, which they contributed to their outward image. "I feel that in a lot of business places, like in my field especially being an administrator or assistant, even in my country, sometimes they feel they [need] to pick a pretty girl because she [re]presents the whole office or something like that. So even here I felt it more because I told you, I interviewed for a lot of jobs and I did not get hired. I don't know if it's because I'm wearing hijab or because I got my B.A. degree from outside here. I don't know what's going on but I do really feel that, yeah, if you're a manager that's going to hire someone to [re]present your whole office, you're going to be like 'Oh, yeah, I want someone pretty, you know, someone showing off whatever.'"

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Regardless of whatever outright or assumed discrimination participants faced, all of them ultimately identified as feeling very much empowered and that Islam as a religion was the source of their rights and power as a woman. At some point in the interview, every single participant stated that the hijab gave them a sense of respect, dignity, and control over who has access to their physical bodies. All participants felt that this, in turn, offered them security, self-confidence, and empowerment.

Feminist Identity

The issue of feminist identity was one of the more contested issues for each participant when asked if they identify as such. Of the 12 participants, eight stated that they did identify with a feminist identity without any seeming difficulty. One native born participant stated, "I think just by virtue of being a Muslim I am by default a feminist." As the researcher, I was careful not to define what feminism meant but rather allowed participants to associate with this identity as they understood it for themselves. Another two participants also ultimately identified with a feminist identity, but were careful to denote what aspects of it they chose to associate with. One participant stated, "I feel the whole term feminism has morphed into something other than what it was meant to be. I feel like women should have certain equality, so in that sense, yes, [I identify as] a feminist. Equality in the workplace, equal to just be on the planet as human beings." Of the ten total participants who did identify as a feminist or did identify with some aspect of feminist identity, unanimously across the board, all of them stated they firmly believe in equality of the genders. Whether or not one identified with a particular feminist movement would have been a separate question for future study.

Only two of the 12 participants did not identify with a feminist identity and both were native born, one a convert and the other born into a Muslim family. However, these participants

each gave a more descriptive answer as to why they struggled with the concept of feminist identity for themselves. One stated that Islam offered a more comprehensive sense of power and rights to the woman than any feminist movement could. Specifically, "I think feminism is kind of limited. First of all, it's a construction of a human being. Feminism is an ideology that comes from …it's not from Allah. It's not from Islam. Although, a lot of the principles included in feminism are included in Islam. So we see Islam as something that is ultimately the most empowering and liberating ideology, if you want to say ideology: you know -- system of beliefs of women in ways that are not encompassed by feminism." Even amongst the participants who affirmed a feminist identity, many of the participants stated the same or similar sentiments about the limitations of a human-constructed system of beliefs and attributed Islam as being more powerful and liberating in affirming the status of women.

The second participant who also denied a personal feminist identity referenced a belief that the genders are ultimately equal, but that they are prescribed different roles in society. Several other participants also referenced that they struggled with the feminist movement as a whole as it seemed to punish women who willingly chose traditional roles as wife and mother. The same participant who denied a personal feminist identity and stated that she believed in separate roles shared a common sentiment that feminism seemed to lack a coherent message and can be discriminatory and even racist. When asked what aspects of feminism the participant did not agree with, she stated "the controversy with the whole Femen movement" and continued to elaborate, "I guess a lot of feminism, sometimes I've seen, is more against hijab than anything. They feel that it's oppressive and I don't believe in any of that. I mean I feel that if you're a feminist you should be for whatever women want." Regardless of affirming or denying a

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feminist identity, all 12 participants ultimately agreed upon equality of genders, rights to education and work, and free will to choose a lifestyle that suited them.

Body Image

When asked if participants related the hijab to a positive or negative body image, none reported a negative body image. All 12 participants also affirmed that the hijab offers them a sense of positive reinforcement about their physical selves, but also referenced a sense of neutrality in that the hijab neither directly gives them a positive or a negative body image. "I feel that the hijab is actually separate from my physical body. I don't really see it in conjunction with each other." Many participants expressed that although they had a positive view about their physical body, they knew of many women or girls who wore hijab and struggled with body acceptance. "I do believe it protects me but seeing, like, some of my friends or other Muslim women who do wear hijab, some of them actually go through these things. So it's just kind of shocking to hear that and listening to those stories, it just confuses me. But personally I think I'm fine, I don't really feel insecure about myself." Others stated that although they viewed themselves in a positive way, they did not understand why hijab would impact their physical self. "I feel, as a Muslim woman, we can be beautiful in our clothing. It's not about making ourselves ugly. The purpose is not to make ourselves attractive to other men, but we can certainly feel attractive to ourselves."

Several participants stated that the source of positive body image was based in the hijab's concealment of their bodies from the public view. "I'm going to say that it contributes to a positive body image. I mean if you let it. I think that when you wear hijab, first off, that's the thing that people see when they look at you. People will have to get to know you before they move forward with anything. So I think it helps you improve, kind of, your body image because

people aren't really judging you for kind of the way you look." Another participant stated the hijab was even better than offering a positive body image because it removed the pressure to focus on the physical self. "I think I've completely cut out that aspect of being in the public sphere and allowing those opinions and judgments about what I look like to enter my mind. You know what I mean? Like, she doesn't have this or she doesn't have that. She doesn't have enough of this. So they're not even a factor in that. It's just me. It's just my family."

Western Images of Empowered or Feminist Women as a Contradiction or Challenge to Hijab

Regardless of the response to the previous questions, the most detailed responses occurred when the participants were asked if they felt that their identity as a Muslim woman who wears hijab challenges or contradicts mainstream, Western images of empowered or feminist women. All 12 participants stated that they do feel the hijab may challenge Western images of empowered or feminist woman, but that it is not necessarily in contradiction to Western values of female empowerment and feminism. Similar to the responses found about whether one identifies as a feminist, several participants endorsed equality of the genders and female empowerment but felt rejected by feminist movements as a whole. "Contradicts? No. Challenges? Yeah, I think so. Especially since, I feel Western feminists are still working on what they actually believe in. So that's still a work in progress. So, according to their beliefs and having Muslim women say that they have the same rights and aren't oppressed definitely challenges them, because they're like 'Oh, stop.'" Another participant stated that although she saw herself as being similar to Western feminists or empowered women, she felt elevated by what the hijab offered her. "I feel like them, I feel the same way they are or even better than them because you're doing all of that with

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courage." In this case, the hijab could be viewed as a challenge but one that afforded a higher sense of dignity and respect.

A majority of the participants also stated that they felt Western images of empowered woman tend to exploit women's bodies by commercializing them and they challenged Western beauty standards, as well. "I think it definitely challenges mainstream Western images. I think that women, they see beauty, they see beauty as wearing less because that's what they're shown in magazines and t.v. and in society." Another stated, "I think that as a Muslim woman saying that 'No, we're choosing to cover and that's what's empowering us.' That's definitely a challenging idea. You know some people might even look at us and kind of don't get it, like 'Why would you hide all that beauty? Why don't you embrace it and stuff?' And in that regards, it also challenges the definition of beauty." This sentiment was shared equally amongst both immigrant and native-born groups. When asked if images of empowered or Western women were different in the country of origin of the immigrant participants, all stated that Western society had become increasingly popular and globalization brought the same commercialized images to Eastern countries.

In addition to reports that the image of the Muslim woman who wears hijab challenging beauty standards which participants linked with mainstream images of Western empowerment or feminism, a few participants reported that such Western images are at odds with what feminism was supposed to stand for. "Back to that whole … Western idea of the empowered woman and the free women [who] can walk down the streets in their tiny bikinis or on the billboard. To me, those images are totally disempowering for women to be with their bodies totally on display as an object, because that's all it is. It has nothing to do with freedom. It has to do with people who are objectifying women and are making that the standard of how women should be viewed.

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We're back to being objectified and sexualized. That whole thing that feminism was set to, you know, be against. We're back to it. Only it's worse. Because even in the 50s and 60s women didn't walk around in their underwear." Another participant shared that she believed ignorance towards Muslim women is responsible for why people may view those who wear hijab as at odds with Western values. "If people were to actually contemplate Muslim empowerment, female empowerment, they would see that there's actually, it's actually not very different because it's about empowering the woman. It's the means by which we empower the woman which is different."

Male Oppression

The final formal question I asked participants was to share their reaction towards the assumption that Muslim women who wear the hijab are oppressed and controlled by men. Again, all 12 participants stated in response to this question that this notion was completely false and was a result of ignorance and misinformation. As one participant adamantly stated, "That is not true, not true at all. I don't believe in that at all. I think every woman has a choice, they have a choice, just like there are choices for everything else." Several participants referenced media images post 9/11 as being a major contributor to the proliferation of such assumptions in Western society. "I completely disagree with that and I think that the idea of oppression is something that is propagated a lot by the media here. A lot of that is based on the things the people see occurring in countries around the world that force their women, force their women to cover up taking away their freedom to choose. I think that is so engrained in Western media that sometimes people believe that women here who are covering up do not have the choice to cover up."

In expanding upon the use of images of non-Western women or women from societies in which men were outwardly oppressing women, many stated that they wanted it be known that this is a result of culture and patriarchal traditions and not a part of Islam. "I think culture would, from the Muslims I see, it's definitely culture that serves as the oppression of women. I don't think it's ever really religion or covering or anything like that." Similar to the responses of body image and hijab, many voiced they felt that oppression of women and the hijab were two separate issues. "I think that a man who wants to control a woman -- it doesn't matter if she wears hijab or not, that's just his nature. I don't feel that has so much to with religion as that has to do with the power of the men in those countries."

CHAPTER V

Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine how, if at all, the practice of hijab impacts feelings of empowerment, feminist identity, and body image for the Muslim women who practice. A qualitative study method was used to conduct in-person interviews with participants, which allowed them to respond to questions in an open-ended manner to gather their unique perspective upon hijab, female empowerment, feminism, and body image. The findings from this study provide an important perspective of a population that is rapidly growing in the United States, yet sorely misunderstood and under researched. The major themes from this study are as follows: 1) association with female empowerment and what that means, 2) whether one identified as a feminist and why or why not, 3) whether the hijab impacted one's body image, and 4) how participants related to images of mainstream, Western images of female empowerment and feminism. I will first examine the major findings of the study and how they relate to theories presented in the literature review, consider the strengths and limitations of the current study, and conclude with implications for social work education and practice.

Major Findings

The most significant findings from this study are in regards to feelings of female empowerment and feminist identity in relationship to the hijab. All 12 participants identified

with feeling empowered as a woman and many directly related this to their practice of hijab, which contradicts stereotyped images of hijabi Muslim women as being disenfranchised and controlled by men. In regards to feminist identity, a majority of participants also identified as feminists but were careful to denote what aspects of contemporary feminist movements they did not agree with, which tended to include sentiments that feminist movements have been narrow-minded in their definition of what feminism means and can even appear racist and discriminatory. Moreover, participants suggested that the image of the hijabi Muslim woman may present as a challenge to the mass-marketed images of Western feminists, but in actual belief and practice Muslim women are no less in congruence with the values of choice, freedom, and gender equality. The findings in this study serve as counter-evidence to the stereotypes and stigmas upheld by many Western feminists, political movements, and media images that stigmatize such women as subservient and oppressed.

Moreover, contemporary feminists should also reconsider what contributions hijabi Muslim women can make towards feminist movements in both the West and the East. Nearly every participant expressed as sense of feeling more in control of their physical selves through the hijab, as it allowed them to control exactly who had access to their bodies. Despite both historical and contemporary stereotypes that assumed the covering of one's body to be a sign of oppression, the women in this study strongly argued that they feel all the more liberated from the male gaze through their practice of hijab. This is not to say that the hijab is a panacea for patriarchal constraints upon women, but rather that it is at least as equally a legitimate source of freedom and liberation as exposing one's body can be for others.

Strengths and Limitations

The strengths of this study can be found in the diversity amongst the 12 participants, which included a wide range of age, racial or ethnic identity, immigrant status, and conversion to Islam. Despite the small number of participants, I was able to hear the experiences of women who were both born in America and abroad, from both converts and women born into Muslim families, and those who wore the hijab early and later in life, regardless of immigrant status. The qualitative nature of this study also allowed for participants to more freely express themselves in response to the questions in the interview and identities discussed in the study. As the researcher, I was careful to remove my own bias from the study as much as possible and in so doing asked the participants to describe and define hijab, feminism, and empowerment for themselves. Although the inherent bias in my own identity will be discussed below, the fact that I self-identify as a member of the study population absolutely proved to be an advantage in obtaining participants and in participants feeling more comfortable responding to my questions. In a sense, there was less concern from participants that I might misinterpret their statements or make assumptions based upon their outer image.

Despite the successes of the study, limitations clearly exist in the small sample size, lack of control for immigration status or whether or not one converted, and in the inherent bias of myself as researcher who also identifies with the study population. It is my hope that future research can be conducted to include a much larger sample size to make the findings more generalizable. I must also recognize that patriarchy and male domination absolutely does exist amongst Muslim populations and that some women do not exercise choice in hijab. Future studies conducted outside the United States may yield different results and it is possible as well to find women within the United States who face strong social or familial expectations to wear

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hijab. Additionally, I found that participants who were born and raised abroad understood the term "feminism" much differently than those raised in America, as the feminist movement as a whole is very much embedded in Western society. Furthermore, converts may also experience hijab and feminism in relation to the hijab much differently than those born and raised Muslim -- arguably converts may exercise more freedom of choice and may also be more devout due to their decision to embrace the religion despite their personal or familial background. Last, I must recognize that my identity as a hijabi Muslim woman who embraces feminist values certainly contributes to implicit bias in the study. Although I made concerted efforts to remove myself as much as possible, I no doubt impacted participants' responses to interview questions and it is possible they would have responded differently if interviewed by a non-Muslim or by a Muslim who does not practice hijab.

Implications for Social Work Education and Practice

The most important aspect of the study is the direct implication it has for social work education and both clinical and macro social work practice. As previously mentioned, the Muslim population in America is a significant minority and rapidly growing as more converts join the faith and immigrants from Muslim majority countries continue to increase. Considering the stigma and discrimination against Muslims since 9/11, this study is all the more relevant for social workers who need to become more acutely aware of what overt and micro aggressions exist against Muslims and how these oppressions contribute to the urgency for change in social policy, as well as the importance for social workers to be aware of mental health concerns of Muslim Americans. Several participants in the study referenced experiences of implicit and explicit acts of aggression, from removing the headscarf in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 for fear of negative reaction to being chased in a car following the Boston Marathon bombings.

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These negative reactions are also found in policy, which include but are not limited to immigration policies, unwarranted body searches in airports, to recent violations of privacy by the NYPD who performed arguably unconstitutional surveillance and wiretaps on NYC mosques and college students associated with Muslim Student Associations (MSA) on their campuses. For the clinical social worker, the negative impact such experiences can have upon one's mental health is also of increasing concern. It is imperative that any helping professional working with Muslims, especially hijabi Muslim women, must be mindful of their own biases when providing direct practice to such individuals. It is essential that the clinician refrain from making assumptions about hijabi women based upon the stereotypes presented in this study and that one educate themselves prior to providing therapeutic interventions.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this study may serve as an impetus for future research with this population which can provide more in depth and larger scale studies, but -- more importantly -- that it may also serve as a way to begin a conversation about implicit biases against all Muslims living in America and abroad. In America, we are so bombarded with images of Islam in congruence with terrorism, war, aggression, and violence against women that it is easy to assume the Muslim community to be homogenous and dangerous. In so doing, we discredit the inherent value of every individual and we also lose out on hearing and learning from the voices of women who are exemplars of choice, freedom, and female empowerment. As the Muslim population within the United States continues to increase, it is the duty of all Americans and the responsibility of social workers to ensure that they too are afforded the rights and protections guaranteed to every American regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or religious identity.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Email

Sample Email for Recruitment:

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Anderson Beckmann and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study on Muslim women who wear the hijab as part of my Master's thesis and looking for participants. Specifically, I am studying how the hijab, if at all, empowers Muslim women and how this may affect their body image.

If you are interested in participating in this study, you must be female, at least 18 years of age, Muslim-identified, and wear the hijab. Please contact Anderson Beckmann at ABeckmann@Smith.edu to enroll in the study and/or for more details. The deadline for participation is March 15, 2014. Please note that the researcher is both female and Muslim.

Appendix B

Study Details

To Potential Research Participant,

My name is Anderson Beckmann and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am currently conducting a study on Muslim women who wear the physical hijab as part of my Master's thesis. Specifically, I am conducting interviews with Muslim identified woman who regularly wear the physical hijab to ask: 1) how, if at all, does the hijab empower Muslim women, 2) if one identifies with the term "feminist" and if so, how the hijab may or may not affect this 3) does the hijab impact their own body image, and 4) does this Islamic approach to the female body challenge mainstream, Western standards of beauty and feminist or female empowerment?

If you are interested in participating in this study, you must be female, at least 18 years of age, Muslim-identified woman, and wears the physical hijab. If you choose to participate, I will interview you in person about your experience using a set of questions that will be given to all participants. Please note that I am a hijabi Muslim woman and respect the cultural and religious traditions of all participants. A private space to interview will be offered to each participant, but as the researcher I am more than willing to meet participants in a space of their choosing. The interview will be conducted in person, in privacy with the participant, will be audio-recorded, and will last approximately one and a half hours. In addition, I will ask you to provide basic demographic information but all identifying information will be kept confidential. No names will be disclosed in the published study and pseudonyms will be used in all published reports and public use of study material.

The potential risks of this study may be that an interview questions could trigger negative thoughts or emotions. All participants have the right to refuse to answer any questions for any reason and can choose to end the interview at any point. Additionally, all participants will be provided with contact information for mental health support services should they experience any discomfort during the course of the interview. In the case of an emergency, the interview will be terminated and the researcher will secure emergency services.

The benefits of participating in this study are that you have the opportunity to contribute to a neglected area of research, to contribute to a growing body of literature that works to end discrimination against Muslim women, and to give voice to a perspective that is often dismissed in popular media depictions of the hijab.

Your participation in this study is confidential, only I will know your name and demographics. All audio recorded tapes and interview notes will subsequently use a pseudonym in lieu of actual names-as mentioned, which will be used in the published study. All data collected from this study including consent forms, audio tapes, and interview notes will be kept in a private locked location during the thesis process and for the mandatory three years following this study, in accordance with federal regulations.

***

Participation is completely voluntary. If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me by March 15, 2014. Please feel free to contact me in regards to any additional questions/concerns/or need for clarification. I greatly appreciate your time in considering this study and I hope that you may be interested! Please feel free to share this study information with any one you may know who fits the criteria for this study and may be interested in participating, as well.

Sincerely,

Anderson Beckmann; MSW Candidate, Smith College School for Social Work

█████████████████████████

Appendix C

Interview Questions

Interview Questions:

(Participants will be asked to provide their name, date of birth, and country of origin before continuing to the following questions.)

1. At what age did you begin to wear the hijab?
2. When you first decided to wear the hijab, was this by your own choosing or did any individual or group require that you wear this?
3. Please describe how you wear the physical hijab. For example, I only cover my hair and neck, or I cover my face, or I cover only my hair, etc.
4. Has this always been the manner in which you wore the hijab or has this changed?
5. (For immigrants only) Was the decision to wear the hijab impacted by your country of origin? Did it change when you immigrated to the U.S.?
6. Was the decision to wear the hijab based only in religious belief? Did any other social or political factor contribute to your wearing the hijab?
7. Do you feel the hijab empowers you as a woman? If so, how?
8. Do you feel that the hijab contributes to a positive or negative body image? In other words, do you feel wearing the hijab impacts how you feel about your physical body? If so, how?
9. Do you feel influenced by media images of women in regards to your sense of empowerment or body image?
10. Do these images contribute to your decision to wear the hijab?
11. (For immigrants only) Are the American/Western images of women different from the depictions of women in your country of origin? Do you feel any differently about wearing the hijab in relation to these Western images?
12. How do you feel about assumptions that Muslim women who wear the hijab are oppressed or controlled by men?

(At this point, participants may choose to add any additional information that I did not ask. There are no specific questions that I need to ask past this.)

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Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Smith College School for Social Work ● Northampton, MA

……………………………………………………………………………..

Title of Study: Muslim Women in America and the Hijab; A Study of Empowerment and Body Image

Investigator(s):

Anderson Beckmann, MSW Candidate

███████████

……………………………………………………………………………..

Introduction
- You are being asked to be in a research study of which seeks to investigate how, if at all, does the practice of the physical hijab impact issues of empowerment and body image in Muslim women.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you identify as a Muslim woman, practice the physical hijab, are at least 18 years of age, and voluntarily agreed to participate in an interview for this study.
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study
- The purpose of the study is to examine how Muslim women who practice the physical hijab (in any tradition, such as head scarf, face veil, etc.) relate to issues of empowerment and body image. Specifically, this study seeks to examine how the hijab impacts notions of empowerment and body image in Muslim women who regularly practice the physical hijab.
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master's in social work degree.
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

Description of the Study Procedures
- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: participate in one in-person interview with the researcher (Anderson Beckmann) and allow for the interview to be audio recorded. This interview will require one hour of your time and will only be conducted once. A copy of the transcribed interview will be provided for you by the researcher.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

- There are no reasonable foreseeable (or expected) risks.
-

Benefits of Being in the Study

The benefits of participation are: you will be able to contribute to an area of study that is largely neglected by current research and social work discourse, to convey to social work students and professionals the need for understanding this population, contribute to growing body of literature that seeks to dispel negative myths about this population as well as to work towards social justice.

-

The benefits to social work/society are: to understand a marginalized group that is currently under attack by widely propagated myths about these women, which are often the source of discrimination and hate crimes directed towards them. To gain insight into a population that social worker's potential clients may identify with. Society at large may also benefit by hearing from the independent voices of hijabi woman that can serve to inspire future public discourse on this topic.

Confidentiality

- Your participation will be kept confidential. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym in the published study. Additionally, the interview will be conducted in an environment in which privacy will be maintained and protected. Participants will be given an option of where they would like to meet to ensure privacy as well as comfort during the interview process.

. *In addition, t*he records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. All audio recordings of interviews will be kept in a private, secured location by the researcher (Anderson Beckmann). The transcriptions may be used in the published study or for educational purposes. All published and public use of transcriptions will use pseudonyms for participants. The actual name of participants will be kept in a secondary private, secured location by the researcher, which is not the same location as the material using pseudonyms. All materials will be destroyed after the three year period, in compliance with federal regulations. Audio tapes will be physically destroyed and all transcriptions, consent documents, analyses will be shredded. Any electronic copies will be maintained in a password protected storage during this period will be permanently deleted. No individual outside the researcher will have access to any of these materials.

> IF YOU SELECT 'CONFIDENTIAL', ALSO INCLUDE THE *FOLLOWING STATEMENT:*

- All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

Payments/gift

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* up to February 28, 2014 without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point noted below. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by February 28, 2014. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis, dissertation or final report.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Anderson Beckmann at ████████████ or by telephone at 9 ████ ████ If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Consent
- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep. [*If indicated, include this: You will also be given a list of referrals and access information if you experience emotional issues related to your participation in this study]*

…………………………………………………………………………….

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____   Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____   Date: _____

…………………………………………………………………………….

[if using audio or video recording, use next section for signatures:]

1. I agree to be [audio or video] **taped for this interview:**

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____   Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____   Date: _____

2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____   Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____   Date: _____

Appendix E

Mental Health Service Information

Mental Health Services
Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill

Crisis Services

1. Alliance Behavioral Health Care
http://www.alliancebhc.org/consumers-families/crisis-and-access/crisis-facilities
24 Hour Information Hotline: 1-800-510-9132

2. Therapuetic Alternatives; Mobile Crisis Care
http://www.mytahome.com/content/view/41/1/
1-877-626-1772

3. Durham Center Access
http://www.lincolnchc.org/patient-services/durham-center-access.html
919-797-1943
309 Crutchfield St. Durham, NC, 27704

4. Wake Crisis and Assessment Services
http://www.wakegov.com/humanservices/behavioralhealth/outpatient/pages/default.aspx
919-250-1260
107 Sunnybrook Rd. Raleigh, NC 27610

Appendix F

HSR Approval Letter

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January 2, 2014

Anderson Beckmann

Dear Andy,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished).   This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Crystal Hayes, Research Advisor