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Community – University Institute for Social Research

Immigrant Muslim Women and the Hijab

by Tabassum Ruby

Building Healthy Sustainable Communities

Community-University Institute for Social Research

CUISR is a partnership between a set of community-based organizations (including Saskatoon District Health, the City of Saskatoon, Quint Development Corporation, the Saskatoon Regional Intersectoral Committee on Human Services) and a large number of faculty and graduate students from the University of Saskatchewan. CUISR's mission is "to serve as a focal point for community-based research and to integrate the various social research needs and experiential knowledge of the community-based organizations with the technical expertise available at the University. It promotes, undertakes, and critically evaluates applied social research for community-based organizations, and serves as a data clearinghouse for applied and community-based social research. The overall goal of CUISR is to build the capacity of researchers, community-based organizations and citizenry to enhance community quality of life."

This mission is reflected in the following objectives: (1) to build capacity within CBOs to conduct their own applied social research and write grant proposals; (2) to serve as a conduit for the transfer of experientially-based knowledge from the community to the University classroom, and transfer technical expertise from the University to the community and CBOs; (3) to provide CBOs with assistance in the areas of survey sample design, estimation and data analysis, or, where necessary, to undertake survey research that is timely, accurate and reliable; (4) to serve as a central clearinghouse, or data warehouse, for community-based and applied social research findings; and (5) to allow members of the University and CBOs to access a broad range of data over a long time period.

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Research is the driving force that cements the partnership between universities, CBOs, and government in acquiring, transferring, and applying knowledge in the form of policy and programs. Researchers within each of the modules examine these dimensions from their particular perspective, and the results are integrated at the level of the Institute, thus providing a rich, multi-faceted analysis of the common social and economic issues. The integrated results are then communicated to the Community and the University in a number of ways to ensure that research makes a difference in the development of services, implementation of policy, and lives of the people of Saskatoon and Saskatchewan.

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Immigrant Muslim Women and the *Hijab*: Sites of Struggle in Crafting and Negotiating Identities in Canada

by

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Abstract

The *hijab* is often recognized as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression in Canada. In contrast, focus groups in this research showed that those women who wore the *hijab* professed it to be a positive experience because it confirmed their Muslim identities, provided them an opportunity to take control of their lives, and offered them the status of a respectable person. Moreover, the *hijab* was not limited to attire in this study. Most participants saw conducting life modestly as a part of the *hijab*. The concept of modesty led many of the informants (whether they wore a headscarf or not) to carry on their Muslim cultures' values. Muslim traditions, however, are not woven into larger Canadian society and participants often confronted difficulties in crafting female Muslim identities.

Introduction

To position oneself as a Muslim in a Western society raises critical concerns for many immigrant Muslim women as they negotiate their place in the dominant Western culture and their own communities.[1] Most often, they need to contend with the negative "Muslim woman" stereotype of a passive, backward, non-professional *hijab* wearer.[2] Within Western media, the *hijab* has become a symbol of Muslim women's gendered oppression.[3] The illustration is usually represented without reference to the West's historical and cultural understandings of the *hijab*.[4] In some situations, the *hijab* may indeed be imposed on Muslim women, but in other contexts Muslim women choose to wear it.

Objectives

The primary goal of this research was to examine, with specific reference to the *hijab*, the ways that immigrant Muslim women living in Saskatoon constructed their Muslim identities both within the Muslim community and dominant Western society. The concept of the *hijab* varies from culture to culture and person to person. Many immigrant Muslim women identify the *hijab* as a positive affirmation of their identities and as a tool to confer power and status in their own communities, as well as in mainstream Western society. Moreover, while many Muslims and non-Muslims often perceive it as attire, aspects of the *hijab* also encompass ethical dimensions. Thus, one research goal was to explore the *hijab*'s meanings, including its moral features and quality of life impacts as viewed by both those women who wear it and by those who do not.

The Hijab in the Muslim Context

There are two Qur'anic verses traditionally cited to describe women's dress code:

> And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty …. And that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments (24: 31).

> O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): this is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And God is oft forgiving, most merciful (33: 59).[5]

In the first verse, the Qur'an uses the word *Khomoorehenna* (from *Khimar*), which means veiled, covered, or canceled. Moreover, *Khimar* is an article used by Arabian women for head-covering before and after the advent of Islam. In the second verse, the Qur'an uses the word *Jalabib* (from *Jilbab*), which means an outer garment, a long gown covering the whole body, or a cloak covering the neck and bosom. *Khimar* and *Jilbab*, then, are the basic words that often lead scholars to conclude that the Qur'an requires that Muslim women should wear specific types of clothing, now known as the *hijab*.

Scholars, however, have had varying views about the extent to which Muslim women are required to cover their bodies, from concealing the whole body except one eye to merely modest behavior. Ibn Kathir (1300-1372) (1981), for example, argued that *Khimar* and *Jilbab* signify the former. al-Tabari (839-923) (1984), on the contrary, saw the first verse as inferring that women's faces and hands can be exposed. Khalid (2001) argued that Islam requires lowering of the gaze and guarding modesty for both men and women. Thus, a covered female body alone will not lead to a modest society (the essence of the'*hijab*) and for that reason both men and women should behave modestly.

The Hijab *as an Identity Icon and its Meanings to Immigrant Muslim Women*

Although the concept of the *hijab* in the Muslim context is rooted in a notion of modesty, it has also become a sign of female Muslim identity and resistance to Western values, particularly in North America. Ibrahim (1999) stated that it was a growing feeling on the part of Muslim women that they no longer wished to identify with the West, and that reaffirmation of their identities as Muslims required the kind of visible sign that the adoption of traditional clothing implied. For these women, the issue was not that they

had to dress traditionally, but that they chose to embrace the *hijab* as a marker of their Muslim identities. The *hijab*, thus, serves at multiple levels, such as making immigrant Muslim women's identities distinct, offering a tool to oppose Western standards, and asserting agency by taking control of their appearance.

The notion that the *hijab* liberates women from the male gaze and helps them to be in charge of their own bodies is a prominent claim by those Muslim women who wear it. They argue that the *hijab* is not a mark of oppression. Rather, it is a sign of liberation that protects them from a sexist society. Yusufali (1998), for example, stated that when she covered herself she made it virtually impossible for people to judge her according to the way that she looked. She could not be categorized on the basis of her attractiveness or lack thereof. In contrast, she thought that others were constantly evaluating each other on the basis of clothing, jewelry, hair, and makeup.

The *hijab* also gives *Muhajibh* both a sense of belonging to a wider Muslim world and family members and friends' appreciation.[6] Read and Bartkowski (2000) found that several women began wearing the *hijab* because they had friends who did so or because they felt more closely connected to significant others through this practice. Embracing the community's practice gives the women a sense of belonging, prestige, power, and status. It also increases their confidence and self-esteem, which in turn helps them form positive identities as immigrant Muslim women.

Papanek (1994) argued that individual identities include a sense of belonging to some group, but may also have many ethnic, religious, national, and racial differences. Similarly, even though religion is a common link among immigrant Muslim women, they have diverse views about the *hijab*. While many use the *hijab* to construct their Muslim identities in the West, other immigrant Muslim women do not think that the *hijab* is a necessary marker for identifying themselves as Muslim. Immigrant Muslim women's refusal to wear the *hijab* could be because of a family/cultural background that does not regard the *hijab* as a necessary part of women's clothing. It might also be a response to Western stereotypes of the *hijab*. One of Haddad and Smith's (1994) research participants, for example, commented that she did not think that Islam explicitly required head-covering for women, and that she could still be a good *Muslimah* (a Muslim woman) without wearing the *hijab*. Furthermore, she stated that "I want to blend in as far as my clothes go. I want to look normal"(Haddad and Smith, 1994:36). Her remark highlighted her awareness of Western stereotypes of the *hijab*, and that she negotiated her clothing in order to be part of a dominant culture that would not see her as "normal" if she covered her head.

Media Representation of Muslim Women in the West

Identity formation is not only restricted to the ways in which we relate and present ourselves to others. It also depends on how others perceive us. One avenue for understanding the ways in which a society views different people or cultures is to

study its media because the media often play a powerful role in suggesting and shaping national and personal identities. Several studies (Kutty, 1997; Bullock and Jafri, 2000; Jafri, 1998) have shown that mainstream North American media have consistently portrayed an image of "the Muslim woman" as an oppressed and passive *hijab* wearer. A majority of articles about the *hijab* in the print media suggests that this practice is a sign of Muslim women's subjugation, and therefore should be condemned. The print media's negative stereotypes of the *hijab* are demonstrated in the following headlines: "Wearing a uniform of oppression" (Toronto *Globe and Mail*, 1993); "Women's legacy of pain" (Toronto *Star*, 1995); "The new law: Wear the veil and stay alive" (Toronto *Globe and Mail*, 1993); "Lifting the veil of ignorance" (Toronto *Star*, 1996) (Bullock and Jafri, 2000). These headlines illustrate how the popular media not only see the *hijab* as a mark of Muslim women's subjugation, but how the media perpetuate this image. The media's negative stereotypes raise the critical question of whether the *hijab* contributes to or inhibits the crafting of positive identities of immigrant Muslim women in a Western society (Bremen, 2000).

Methodological Tools

The Focus Group

Using focus groups, fourteen women from twelve different countries were interviewed. Participants were divided on the basis of their use of the *hijab*. One interview session was conducted with those who did not wear a headscarf and one with those who did. These sessions involved five participants and were 90 minutes long. A third group consisted of mixed informants, some who wore the *hijab* and some who did not. This mixed group had four participants and the session lasted for one hour and fifty minutes. All three focus groups were carried out at the researcher's apartment as it was convenient for everyone. In order to facilitate the group discussion and stay on-topic, an open-ended questionnaire was developed (**Appendix A**). The focus groups were conducted in English so that all involved used a common language. Choosing English, however, limited the research to only those participants who spoke and understood the language. Conducting interviews in a second language, on the other hand, might have affected the data, as the women might have expressed themselves through different metaphors used in their mother tongue. The interviews were audio-taped with participants' permission (**Appendix B**), and were conducted over a two month period from 30 January 2002 to 20 February 2002. The Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioral Sciences Research in the University of Saskatchewan approved the research on 11 January 2002.

Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic questionnaire (**Appendices E and F**) was designed to understand and contexualize participants' responses on the basis of their sociocultural background. The

questionnaire consisted of inquiries concerning age, income level, immigration status, and cultural affiliation. Participants were asked to fill out the demographic questionnaire before conducting the interview. While many informants identified a cultural connection with their place of birth, others found it difficult to associate with a specific culture and left it blank. In other cases, some participants stated "Islam" as their cultural identity. Different responses demonstrate that a sense of belonging is not necessarily linked with country of origin, and that Islam's role is an important factor in some participants' lives.

Sampling and Recruiting Participants

There is a small population of immigrant Muslim women in Saskatoon, and most know each other. I have had personal contact with many of the Muslim women, and by using the snowball technique I was able to identify my participants. The snowball, or chain, method occurs when "sampling identifies cases of interest from people who know other people with relevant cases" (Bradshaw and Stratford, 2000: 44). In recruiting the sample, the mosque played a particularly important role. Friday prayers and weekly gatherings in the mosque facilitated meeting diverse groups of women and provided opportunities to speak with them about my research project.[7]

In order to protect participant anonymity, details such as place of birth, age, and occupation cannot be fully described here, but some general characteristics should prove useful. Informants' countries of origin included Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brunei, Burma, Egypt, Guyana, India, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Pakistan, and Turkey. Ages ranged from under twenty to sixty years. Participants' occupations included physician, accountant, writer, and insurance officer, and student. Participants' immigration history ranged from those who arrived in Canada a few years ago to those who immigrated more than two decades ago. Some informants had lived in other cities, such as Toronto and Edmonton, while others had resided in Saskatoon since they emigrated. Six participants did not wear the *hijab* and eight were *Muhajibh*.

Focus Group Advantages and Disadvantages

The focus group was a particularly useful method to conduct. This technique brought together many cultural groups among immigrant Muslim women and enabled exploration of the range of participants' cultural differences and similarities. Berg (1998) states that the focus group is one effective method that allows for observation of group dynamics. Rich data were collected by observing conversations that were not necessarily directed at the researcher, but between participants who often talked among themselves. Thus, the group energy and interaction nurtured considerable stimulation, providing an opportunity to explore diverse meanings of the *hijab*, as well as the ways in which Muslim women construct identities in a Western society.

The focus groups, however, also brought some difficulties. It was stated in the consent form (**Appendix B**) that only one copy of the transcript would be released to the entire group and that participants would be reading what others had said. One informant, nevertheless, expressed concern regarding confidentiality and worried that other participants' family members would have access to the transcript. Assurances that the group had signed the consent form (**Appendix C**) to not disclose the information did not convince the participant that confidentiality would be honored. She insisted that participant information be separated, and that group members have access only to individual data for transcript revision. The participant was reminded that she could withdraw from the study if she preferred, but that it was not possible to pull out each informant's separate discussion. Rather than quitting the study, the participant reviewed the transcript before it was delivered to the rest of the group members and omitted opinions that she did not wish to share.

These concerns raise some critical points. While a consent form theoretically assured participants that their information would be confidential, in practice the informant was unconvinced. She was particularly distressed because most group members knew each other quite well and she did not want to disclose herself to community members. Although the previous familiarity was a positive aspect for most of the study with participants talking comfortably among friends, it also appeared that some informants were reluctant to unveil their views to their social networks. Moreover, some women felt a group pressure and were disinclined to voice their opinions.

Being an "Insider" Researcher

As a member of Saskatoon's Muslim community, the researcher had several advantages in conducting research on the *hijab*, such as easy access to participants and their trust. One of the interviewed women stated that if a non-Muslim had asked her to participate in the study, she would have refused, as she would not have been comfortable talking about sensitive issues like the *hijab* with a "stranger." Furthermore, Zavella (1996) has written that insiders "are more likely to be cognizant and accepting of complexity and internal variation" (139). Similarly, the researcher's Muslim background enabled greater understanding of informants' narratives.

The "indigenous" advantages, however, were not without limits. The researcher often had different perspectives from participants on issues that were discussed in this study. Distancing from a personal point of view, and not offering an opinion, was a challenge. Furthermore, "a culture is not homogenous; a society is differentiated, and a professional identity that involves problematizing lived reality inevitably creates a distance" between a researcher and her/his culture (Narayan, 1993: 671). Accordingly, it is argued here that there are different Muslim cultures, that there is no monolithic "Islamic" culture that represents the diversity of Muslim societies. The researcher's four years of socialization in Saskatoon provided some understanding of the *hijab* in different

cultures, but because it was a complex phenomenon, being situated as an "insider" researcher was problematic. Therefore, despite the credibility of "indigenousness," the limitations of the "insider" position were recognized.

Study Findings

Crafting Female Muslim Identities

Writing about the clichéd images of Islam, Said (1981) stated that the West and Europe have portrayed, characterized, analyzed, and given instant courses on it, and consequently have made it "known." The Western "known" version of Islam quite often, if not always, presents it as an extremist, brutal, and backward religion. One of the main institutions for the transmission of these negative stereotypes is the education system. For example, participants remarked that their teachers often talked about the restrictions that women face in Muslim countries, particularly in Afghanistan. The students, however, argued that the instructors "look[ed] at the severe cases." The situation of Afghan women does not represent an average Muslim woman's life and it is, therefore, not fair to generalize about Muslim women's conditions.

Another example that many women mentioned regarding their teachers' myopic views was the practice of female circumcision. Participants stated that some teachers gave the impression that female circumcision was an Islamic tradition that all Muslim countries practice. The women argued that "it is not an Islamic custom and it was even done before Islam" and "many countries do not do it." As educators, professors play an important role in shaping students' views. When they provide inaccurate and/or partial information, non-Muslim students learn stereotypical ideas about Islam and Muslims, while Muslim students experience racism in the classrooms.

While Islam is often presented as a harsh religion toward women in the West, Muslim identities are frequently linked with "terrorism." Hall (1991) argued that "history changes your conception of yourself" (6), and the history of being an immigrant Muslim woman in the West changed markedly after the 2001 attack on the Pentagon and World Trade Center towers in the United States. Persistence association of the term "terrorist" with Muslims deeply affected the participants. They believed that Muslim identities were wrongly connected to "terrorism," and if they had a chance to make some changes in Canada, they would clear up some of the misconceptions equating Muslims with terrorists. Some women also argued that if the killing of civilians on 11 September 2001 could lead to labeling Afghanistan's Taliban as "terrorists," then the United States has killed innocent Afghans and defeated the purpose of attacking the country. The women felt that Muslim identities were at risk because of the United State's response to 11 September. On the basis of a shared bond—Islam—they felt connected with fellow believers and that this promoted a sense of collective victimization among the participants.

Participants' stories also reveal that 11 September and its aftermath have had a direct impact on a personal level. Some women mentioned traveling experiences and argued that Muslim passengers often faced longer inquires about their identification and luggage at airports, and that airport security's vigilant approach shows biases against Muslims. For example, one woman stated that she went to Florida after 11 September to attend a conference with her two Euro-Canadian friends, and at the Toronto airport she was the only one whose luggage was checked. She stated that:

> They just told them, "Oh yeah, go ahead," you know, whatever. For me they actually checked for everything"… I mean, I can understand, but do it to everybody, not just to me, you know. It is not nice to be distinguished, to be picked out like that for things like this.

This participant wears a headscarf, a distinct symbol of her Muslim identities,[8] and believed that she went through this drawn out process because she was identified as a member of a group deemed "undesirable," whereas her friends had an easy time because they belonged to the dominant society. The woman recognized the issue of security, but she also indicated that only specific people were being targeted. As a result, she faced racism. This participant's experience shows that she was viewed as "other" despite her Canadian citizenship. Constructing Muslim identities was not easy for her because her religion was used to she discriminate against her.

Many participants also voiced concerns regarding media biases, which often perpetuate clichéd images of Muslims. One example that some women stated regarding media biases was about fake video footage. Several days after the attacks the Pentagon and World Trade Center towers in the United States, a video was aired in which Palestinian people were shown celebrating the events. The women, however, argued that it was a faked video, as they had seen it before 11 September. Henry (1997) has written that the mass media not only shapes personal and national identity, it is the lens through which reality is perceived. Likewise, these women strongly believed that the large majority of North Americans who watched or heard about the video received a false message about Muslims. Therefore, the media perpetuated negative stereotypical images about Muslims.

Racial discrimination, however, was not limited to school, traveling, and media experiences. Many participants said that despite having been in Canada for several years they were often viewed as outsiders. Participants stated that they were often asked about their country of origin, a constant reminder that they did not belong in Canada. The women argued that "you have to look a certain way … in order to be accepted as Canadian" and that their status was associated with racial background rather than with legal status, suggesting that only European immigrants embodied the Canadian image.

Advantages of Living in Canada and the Dilemmas of Two Different Worlds

Even though participants' distinct identities were often at risk and they regularly encountered racism, they also had positive experiences in Canada, and their quality of life had improved, both as individuals and females. They viewed their residency in Canada as an opportunity to enrich their lives by combining traditional values and the Western society's resources. By doing so, they felt that they were "the most fortunate people on this earth." Many women also commented that they lived a more autonomous life as females because they thought that Muslim women often had less control over their lives in a Muslim state.

The concept of quality of life includes a self-conscious integration of religion into participants' lives. Living in a Western society has provided them opportunity to understand their religion in greater depth. Conducting their lives according to Islamic teachings was part of crafting Muslim identities, but it was also a reaction to questions that participants often faced about their faith from non-Muslims. One woman, for example, remarked that, as a Muslim woman, she maintained certain values different from those of the larger Canadian culture. In order to present herself as a reasonable person, she felt that she should study Islam, so that she should be able to better explain it to others. Some participants also felt that people in Muslim nations had taken their religion for granted and these women stated that their relatives "back home" were "less aware of Islam." Although religious insecurity in a non-Muslim culture appeared as a threat to one's faith and required a defensive position, it was also regarded as an opportunity to seek further knowledge about Islam.

Having exposure to both negative and positive experiences, participants frequently assessed their lives by what they lacked and what they attained in Canada. Illustrating such advantages and disadvantages, participants frequently referred to their country of origin, a place perceived as "home." Memories of "home" and commitment to religious values, which were closely connected to the notion of the *hijab*, led many participants to live according to their country of origin. As a result, their home environments were different from the "outside world," and they felt that they were simultaneously living in two different worlds.

Negotiating these two worlds generated tensions for the women as they tried to maintain their distinct identities in a non-Muslim country. For example, many mentioned the issues of mixed parties, premarital relationships, and easy access to pornography. In a Muslim society, it is normally not acceptable for boys and girls to participate in mixed parties and/or engage in sexual activities outside of marriage. In Canada, while some restrictions apply, these are common social activities. Mothers commented that they placed restrictions on their daughters' socialization, forbidding them to participate in mixed gatherings.[9] Mothers also pointed out that raising children in a non-Muslim

environment was difficult, and they felt insecure because they did not have control over these external factors. In particular, the portrayal of explicit sexual images in Canada was a cause of anxiety for many participants and they recognized it as a huge cultural difference. Thus, while immigrant Muslim women tried to keep their customs, it appeared that all participants struggled to maintain Muslim culture's values while also fitting into the mainstream community.

The Hijab *and its Meanings*

Participants felt that maintaining "back home" values was important because wholly accepting the Western lifestyle would cause their Muslim identities disappearance. The *hijab* appeared to be a powerful signifier in maintaining Muslim culture's traditions, and a sign of their identities. Because the *hijab* was not limited to headscarves in this research, participants felt that modest behavior was also significant. By conducting one's life unpretentiously and wearing modest clothing (which would exclude, for example, a miniskirt) those participants who did not wear the headscarf maintained the *hijab*. Thus, the *hijab* emerged not only in a variety of ways, but as a significant concept that distinguished immigrant Muslim women from mainstream society.

Women "find value, purpose, and identity in religious practice" (Moghadam, 1994: 21), and in this study the practice of the *hijab* emerged as a significant religious symbol. Many headscarf wearers felt that it indicated commitment to the religion and self-discipline because it covered a woman's hair—a sign of female beauty and sexuality. Some informants linked it with Muslim—morality and believed that the headscarf sets a boundary between men and women that helps them to avoid forbidden premarital relationships.

A number of participants also wore the *hijab* because it offered them respect, dignity, and protection. They reported that the *hijab* had become a security measure because men are respectful towards *Muhajibh* and do not treat them like sexual objects. Some women also used the *hijab* to create a space where they could feel free from the male gaze. One woman, for example, commented that she liked keeping her curtains closed when she had the lights on to keep those outside from seeing her. She remarked that, "I do not want people, like this guy, who is he, you know? That's the thing." Secor (2002) has written that veiling as a form of dress is a spatial practice embedded in relations of power and resistance. Accordingly, extending the idea of the *hijab* from headscarf to creating "safe" space, the participant used her curtains to assert power and resistance, to free herself from the undesired gaze.

Nasser (1999) has written that adoption of a *hijab* "conveys a public message/ statement, both about the wearer and about the relationship between the wearer and potential viewers" (409). Similarly, many participants recognized the *hijab* as a mark of their Muslim identities, a symbol that connected them with the wider Muslim world, and a device that protected them from a sexist society, as well as conferring to them status and dignity. For example, one participant stated that:

> The *hijab* limits me from doing certain things. When I have the *hijab* on, me, as a Muslim woman, I consider myself basically representative of the whole Muslim community. So, I do not go to bars with my *hijab* on. I do not go to strip clubs with my *hijab* on, because I know by wearing the *hijab* I am not representing only myself, it's the whole Muslim community, basically.

This participant believed that the *hijab* symbolized both individual and collective Muslim identities. It was also a reminder for the wearer to conduct her life in accordance with the Muslim belief system by not going to bars or strip clubs, places where sexuality is on display, contradicting the Qur'an's demand for modesty.

Participants who maintained the practice of wearing headscarves in Canada indicated that they were stricter in the use of the *hijab* in Canada than "back home." Shaffir (1978) has stated that people usually become more loyal to their traditions and customs if their identities are threatened by the larger society. Similarly, some women stated that "I find that our *hijab* here is better than people are wearing ["back home"] and I think the reason that it kind of, we need more, I do not know, for some how we need more to do this here than there." This informant thought that the *hijab* helped to keep her distinct identities in a non-Muslim country, and that the *hijab* appeared as a sign of resistance to the larger society's assimilative influence. Equally important, in comparing the practice of wearing the *hijab* in Canada to "back home," wearers of headscarves were crafting their Muslim identities not only in relation to the dominant values of their residing country, but to the values of their country of origin.

Contrary to those women who perceived the *hijab* as religious obligation, protection, and a sign of Muslim identity, non-wearers of headscarves viewed the *hijab* differently. They argued that their relationship with their God was a personal matter unconnected to the visible marker of a headscarf. Participants stated that many Muslims looked negatively upon women who do not wear it, and that non-wearers often felt community pressure to conform. The *hijab* thus disempowered non-wearers because the Muslim community did not perceive them as a "good" *Muslimah*.

Participants who did not wear the headscarves perceived the *hijab* as a cultural dress code rather than as a religious symbol. The women indicated that wearing a *hijab* is a new cultural phenomenon locally and globally that does not have a religious connotation. One woman remarked, "I think it's more like a culture that is the way they are raised ['back home']. And it is not, really. I do not think it is taken as a religion when they started." According to this participant, women are traditionally taught to cover their bodies with the *hijab.* They do not, however, wear it out of religious requirement.

Non-wearers of the headscarves, in addition to perceiving the *hijab* as a cultural marker, also reported the irregularity of many of the *Muhajibh'*s clothing. These

participants mentioned that many of the women who wear the *hijab* often dress in tight and transparent garments at home and/or in women's gatherings, whereas these non-wearers felt that they could not "imagine" putting on a tight and translucent outfit. Thus, the women thought that because of their "immodest" clothing, *Muhajibh* usually need to cover their bodies with a *hijab* when they go out. Moreover, non-wearers adopted a consistent wardrobe whether at home or outside.

Although non-wearers of the headscarves provided different reasons for wearing a *hijab* from those who wear it, both groups felt that the *hijab* is a way of demonstrating the difference between Muslim and Western values. One participant, for example, commented that morality was declining in Canadian society, and wearing the *hijab* showed that its wearer did not subscribe to immoral values. The women were particularly concerned about this because they did not have control over these undesired values. One woman reported that:

> The sense of morals has gone way over the other end. You know, permissiveness has gone to its utter extreme. Like, even if you go to the library now, which was a safe place for kids to go to, they have access to the most horrific pornographic literature. It is really scary. There is complete lack of morals and I think it's a swing in the opposite direction, because people are afraid, and so they are sort of running to, you know, cover themselves literally speaking and metaphorically.

Most would concur with this informant that access to pornographic material has become easier, especially for young people. As a writer, this woman held libraries in some esteem, as denoted by use of the word "even," as if one could expect to find pornography at "other" places but never at the library, "a safe place for kids." Pornographic material's availability at public libraries—an important cultural and information repository—represented the defilement of something that this participant previously regarded as "pure." As mentioned earlier, access to pornographic material was regarded as contrary to the concept of the *hijab* and one of the biggest anxieties about raising children in Canada. The women felt vulnerable as they realized that they could not eliminate explicit sexual images from the culture in which they lived. Even though this participant did not wear the *hijab*, she saw a link between the *hijab* and pornographic literature. The former stands as a reaction to the latter, *Muhajibh* use the *hijab* to oppose immoral values. Furthermore, as stated in the preceding section, some participants perceived the *hijab* as a protector of their culture for they think that women are responsible for a chaste society. Likewise, this participant believes that covering women's bodies, as representatives of Muslim society, shields Muslims from immorality.

Non-wearers of the headscarves recognized that *Muhajibh* wear the *hijab* to protect Muslim values. Nevertheless, they also commented that the *hijab* was not appropriate

dress in Canada. These participants stated that the basic purpose of the *hijab* was to not draw attention to oneself. In Canada, however, where it is not customary dress, people often look at women who wear the *hijab*. Thus, they argued, it does not fulfill its goal in a non-Muslim society. While some women in this study retained their distinct Muslim identities by wearing the *hijab*, some did not wear it in order to be more anonymous in mainstream society. Both wearers and non-wearers were crafting their identities and negotiating a place as Muslim women immigrants in a Western society. This study's results indicate that the reasons for wearing or not wearing the *hijab* are varied and complex, and cannot be reduced simply to religious or cultural determinants.

Western Perception of the Hijab

As non-wearers of headscarves indicated, the *hijab* is not recognized as one of the dress codes, and, as noted earlier, there is a general intolerance about the *hijab* in the media. Many participants stated that they had personally encountered negative stereotypes of the *hijab* in Canada. Those participants who attended Saskatoon schools reported that they experienced racism in the classroom. One informant commented that when she began to wear the *hijab* in high school, her teacher started to ignore her as if she were not part of the class, something which deeply disturbed her. Another woman reported that someone called her a "terrorist." She thought that it was because she wore the *hijab*. These racist incidents demonstrate that Muslim women are often seen as "other" in Canadian society, and despite the claim that Canada is a multicultural country, many Muslims face difficulties living in Canada.

Stereotypes of the *hijab* are intimately related to issues of voice in the West, which has been expressed through the colonial relationship between the "Occident" (Europe) and the "Orient" (Asia) (Said, 1978). Said has argued that the link between Occident and Orient is a"power relationship, of domination, and in varying degrees, of complex hegemony, where the Occident spoke for and defined the Orient. As a result, there are many myths about Muslim women created by the Europeans. One myth is that Muslim women are passive victims of their societies and their religion, the *hijab* often cited as a sign of their submissiveness. Some women have encountered this negative stereotype, and one participant said that people often told her that she could safely remove her scarf as her family would not know that she was not wearing it in Canada. The participant argued, "It's not for my parents" because her family did not force her to wear the *hijab*.

Participants not only mentioned the *hijab*'s negative stereotype, but they also recognized that many Western-style clothes could be construed as oppressive. One woman, for example, remarked that, to many people, the "ten inch heel and a miniskirt is not seen as oppressive. To me it is more oppressive than putting a scarf on your head." Even though this participant did not wear the *hijab*, she believed that wearing short dresses and exposing bodies is not perceived as an act of oppression in Canada, yet covering the body was interpreted as a sign of subjugation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the collected data, the following recommendations might help raise the quality of life of immigrant Muslim women.

- Awareness about Islam as a religion and its teaching from a Muslim point of view needs to be developed in the larger community. Furthermore, Muslims practice their religion along with many cultural traditions. Therefore, what Muslims do is not necessarily a result of Islam, and these distinctions between religious teachings and cultural practices need to be understood. Greater understanding Islam and Muslim traditions can be achieved through multiple communication networks, such as public forums, personal contacts, and designing projects like this research.
- As most participants indicated that Muslim stereotypes, particularly in the media, play an important role in shaping people's views, better coverage about Islam and Muslims is needed in the media, including promoting Muslim perspectives.
- The education system should not deliver biased or distorted information regarding Islam and/or Muslims, and instructors should be sensitive to the religion and Muslim cultural practices. This requires that educators be careful in selecting texts and understanding cultural and religious practices.
- Immigrant Muslim women possessed diverse interpretations of the *hijab*. The *hijab* as a form of dress empowers many Muslim women. Therefore, it should not be seen as a form of oppression. Equally important, the *hijab* is also an ideology that often determines Muslim women's lifestyle, such as conducting life modestly, which may exclude practices like dating and participation in mixed gatherings. Therefore, Muslim women's social interaction should not be seen as confinement in their homes, but as a chosen conduct.
- Because the concept of the *hijab* includes ethical dimensions, modesty should be understood as part of religious obligation, as well as a sign of Muslim traditions and costumes.

As both Said (1978; 1981) and many participants mentioned, eliminating negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims is an intricate issue deeply rooted in government and media polices. However, one of the key elements to terminating the clichéd images of immigrant Muslim women is to work from a small scale and raise awareness in the larger society. Therefore, interaction between the larger and Muslim community through multiple channels would be useful to eradicate negative stereotypes of immigrant Muslim women, which, in turn, would raise their quality of life.

Conclusion

Examining the literature on the *hijab* and listening to participant stories, it becomes clear that the *hijab* stands at the intersection of resisting/protecting Muslim values and opposing the dominance of Western values. In doing so, the *hijab*'s physical and moral dimensions mediate the process of assimilation into the mainstream society, while also protecting female Muslim identities from undesired Western practices. The concept of the *hijab* does not easily mesh with Western lifestyles, and, as a result, participants often struggled to maintain their distinct identities. In negotiating the two worlds, participants were often placed on the margins of a greater Canadian society. In part, this marginalization was self-imposed as a means of protecting their Muslim identities. More often, however, it was imposed by those non-Muslim Canadians, to whom the *hijab* and Muslim women were symbolized as the "Other." Thus, although the idea of the *hijab* grants some security to Muslim values, it has not been woven into the larger Canadian society

.

Notes

[1]The term "immigrant" is defined here as any Muslim woman born outside, but currently residing in Canada, and having any kind of official documents, such as a Canadian passport or student visa. The intention to define the term broadly is partly due to a desire not to exclude anyone on the basis of a certain immigration status. As well, any Muslim woman currently living in the West is not only directly exposed to Western standards, but also faces negative stereotypes as she shares a common identity. Therefore, potentially, all Muslim women, regardless of their immigrant status, could share these concerns.

[2]The *hijab* is currently a popular term that refers to a certain standard or modest dress for women, such as head-covering and/or long coat. The connotation of the word *hijab*, however, is much broader and includes living unpretentiously.

[3]Media is defined here as any form of written text (e.g. books, magazines, journal articles, reports or articles in newspapers) and audio or visual productions (e.g. radio, television shows, and documentary films).

[4]Use of the term "the West" is not intended to homogenize, for Western people are indeed heterogeneous. However, the purpose here is to indicate the West's assumed superiority. Western discourses often profoundly mold most people's lives and have managed to impress an ideology of white supremacy over the last few centuries (Jhappan, 1996). This report discusses some Western views that often underscore their superiority in reference to the *hijab*.

[5]The translations of the Qur'anic verses are taken from Ali Yusuf (1946).

[6]A woman who wears the *hijab*, such as a headscarf, is called *Muhajibh*.

[7]Please note that men's and women's gatherings are held separately in the mosque.

[8]The plural "identities" is used throughout because a person's identity is multi-faceted. A Muslim woman living in Saskatoon, for example, is viewed not only as a woman, but also as a woman of color, an immigrant, and a member of both an ethnic and a religious group. Thus, the pluralized "identities" is appropriate

[9]Participants who had faced socialization limitations as daughters also stated that it was hard to carry on Muslim values because of peer pressure.

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Appendix A. Guideline for Interview Session.

1. Why did you move to Canada?
2. What was it like to be a newcomer in Canada?
3. What is like living in Saskatoon now?
4. Would you please explain whether Saskatoon feels like as a home or not?
5. What are the differences and similarities between living in Saskatoon and back home?
6. Would you please throw some light upon whether you feel different being here or not, in Saskatoon?
7. If you have lived in other parts of the West, would you please tell us how different and/or similar it is living in Saskatoon as being a Muslim woman?
8. Do you wear the *hijab*? Yes____ No____?
9. What is the *hijab*?
10. What does it mean to you?
11. How is the *hijab* perceived back home?
12. Why do you wear the *hijab* or do not wear it?
13. Did you wear the *hijab* prior migrating to Canada?
14. What are two good experiences you could recall living in Saskatoon?
15. What are two bad experiences you could recall living in Saskatoon?
16. What are the three things that you would like to change in Saskatoon if you had a chance?
17. Any other thoughts that may have occurred to you or any other information you would like to add?

Appendix B. Consent Form.

Dear ____

I am studying for my Master's degree at the University of Saskatchewan in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies. My research interest is on'"Immigrant Muslim Women and the *Hijab*: Sites of Struggle in Crafting and Negotiating Identities in Canada." I am interested in your experience of immigration to Canada and its impact on you as a Muslim woman. For this, I am planning to conduct group interviews, with each group having 5-6 group members. The interview session will be one hour to one and half hours long. I will ask questions regarding your migration experiences, such as what is like to be living in Saskatoon and similarities and/or differences between living in Saskatoon and back home. I will particularly ask some questions about the *hijab* and its meaning to you. There are no known risks for participating in this research; rather, it will be your chance to tell your stories. All the information that I will gather from you will remain strictly confidential and it is your right as a participant to refuse to answer any questions.

Please also note that the Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioral Sciences Research in the University of Saskatchewan has approved my research on January 11, 2002. If you want to contact the office for any reasons, you can reach at 966-4053.

I seek and appreciate your willingness to participate in the research. If you have any concerns, you can contact me, Tabassum F. Ruby, at any time at 955-6469. You may also contact to my supervisor Dr. Lesley Biggs at 966-6931 or the Department of Women's and Gender Studies' office at 966-4327.

Before we start the focus group, I would like to reassure you of your rights as a participant in this research.

- Your participation in the research is completely voluntary.
- You are free to withdraw from the research at any time without providing any explanation.
- There will not be any penalty or loss under any circumstances for choosing to withdraw and all data that has been collected from you will be immediately destroyed.
- No one except my supervisor and I will have access to the interview and all the information will be kept completely confidential.
- The interview will be audio taped with your permission and the session will be one hour to one and half hours long.

- The tapes will be transcribed. One transcript will be released for the entire group and the participants will be reading what the others have said.
- You have right to see and review the interview transcripts and make changes to your words if you so desire.
- The tapes and the transcripts of the interviews will be stored by my supervisor Dr. Lesley Biggs at the University of Saskatchewan for five years and then destroyed if you give permission.

Please also note that this research has been funded by CUISR (Community-University-Institute for Social Research), which is an institution that promotes building capacity within Community-Based-Organizations (CBOs). On the basis of the information generated by the interviews, I will write a thesis to complete the requirement of my program and a report, as well as recommendations for CUISR regarding the concern(s) you might have particularly with regards to living in Saskatoon or in Canada generally.

I have read this consent form and understand my rights as a participant. I agree to participate in this focus group.

_____ _____

Participant Date

_____ _____

Tabassum Ruby, Researcher Date

I have received a copy of the consent form for my own records.

_____ _____

Participant Date

_____ _____

Tabassum Ruby, Researcher Date

Appendix C. Consent Form for the Group Agreement.

Dear _____

This form is to affirm the group's agreement for maintaining confidentiality that all the group members will not communicate or in any manner disclose publicly information discussed during the course of this focus group interview. Hence, by signing the form I am in agreement that I will not talk about what the other participants have said outside the group and the information will remain confidential.

I have read this consent form and I agree that I will maintain the group confidentiality.

_____ _____

Participant Date

_____ _____

Tabassum Ruby, Researcher Date

I have received a copy of the consent form for my own records.

_____ _____

Participant Date

_____ _____

Tabassum Ruby, Researcher Date

Appendix D. Transcript Release Form.

Dear_____

Once again thank you very much for your participation in my research. As indicated before that you have a right to see the transcripts and if you wish to change or delete any information you are free to do so. I hereby am releasing the transcripts of the group interview.

I, _____, have reviewed the complete transcripts of my group interview for Tabassum F. Ruby's project, "Immigrant Muslim Women and the *Hijab*: Sites of Struggle in Crafting and Negotiating Identities in Canada." I acknowledge that the transcripts accurately reflect the discussion we had during our group interview. I release the transcripts to be used by Tabassum F. Ruby in the manner described in the consent form. I have also received the copy of the transcripts for my personal record.

_____	_____
Participant	Date
_____	_____
Tabassum Ruby, Researcher	Date

Appendix E. Consent Form for Demographic Questionnaire.

Dear ____

I am studying for my Master's degree at the University of Saskatchewan in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies. The area of my research is "Immigrant Muslim Women and the *Hijab*: Sites of Struggle in Crafting and Negotiating Identities in Canada." I am interested in your experience of immigration to Canada and its impact on you as a Muslim woman.

In order to understand some of my participants' responses in a comprehensive way, I have designed a demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire contains some individual information, such as age, income level, and legal status. I am asking about this particular information so I can contexualize some of the answers that the participants may give because of their diverse social status. This questionnaire is strictly confidential and any information used from it will only be attributed to a pseudonym. Thus, no one except my supervisor Dr. Biggs and I will have access to this information. Moreover, it is your right as a participant to refuse to answer certain questions or ask for clarification before responding to specific questions. If you have any concerns, please contact me, Tabassum F. Ruby, at any time at 955-6469.

I appreciate your willingness and thank you for participating in my research.

I have read this consent form and understand the purpose of the questionnaire and my rights as a participant. I agree to participate in this research.

_____	_____
Participant	Date
_____	_____
Tabassum Ruby, Researcher	Date

Appendix F. Demographic Questionnaire.

Instructions

Please answer the following questions as accurately as possible. If you are uncertain of how to answer any of the questions please feel free to ask before responding.

1. Date: _____
2. Name: _____
3. Age: (check the one most applies to you)
   a) Under 20 _____
   b) Between 20 to 30 _____
   c) Between 31 to 40 _____
   d) Between 41 to 50 _____
   e) Between 51 to 60 _____
   f) Above 60 _____
4. Are you:
   a) Single _____
   b) Married _____
   c) Divorced _____
   d) Separated _____
   e) Widowed _____
5. Please state your education qualifications. If currently you are student, state the degree/diploma/certificate/program that you are working for.

   _____
6. From where did you obtain your education? _____
7. Do you work outside of the home? Yes____ No____ (if no, skip to question 10).
8. If yes, what is your occupation or nature of your work?

   _____

9. Are you: (check the one that most applies to you)
    a) Full-time _____
    b) Part-time _____
    c) Self employed _____
    d) Other (please specify) _____
10. Place of birth: Country _____
11. To which cultural group do you belong?_____
12. When did you come to Canada? _____
13. What is your legal immigrant status:
    a) Landed immigrant _____
    b) Refuges _____
    c) Student Visa _____
    d) Other (please specify _____
14. When did you move to Saskatoon? _____
15. What is your gross income for your household (before taxes)?
    a) Less than $10, 000 _____
    b) $10,001 to $20,000 _____
    c) $20,001 to $30,000 _____
    d) $30,001 to $40,000 _____
    e) $40,001 to $50,000 _____
    f) $50,001 to $75,000 _____
    g) $75,001 to $100,000 _____
    h) $100,001 to 125,000 _____
    i) $125,001 to 150,000 _____
    j) $150,001 to $175,000 _____
    k) $175,001 to $200,000 _____
    l) More than $200,001 _____

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