Invisible Violence Against Hypervisible Women: Understanding Islamophobic Violence in the Greater Toronto Area Through Qualitative Interviews and Arts-Based Inquiry

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Leadership, Higher & Adult Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Islamophobic violence against Muslim women is an understudied issue in Canada, even as it is increasing. Using an anti-colonial Muslim feminist theoretical framework and praxis, I conducted 21 interviews of Muslim women survivors of Islamophobic violence in the GTA, and analyzed these interviews to characterize the discourses that sanction Islamophobic violence; the different forms of Islamophobic violence and its impacts, including its relation to trauma; challenges for bystander intervention; and Muslim women’s strength and agency. Notably, several participants employed faith-based methods of understanding and responding to Islamophobic violence. Poetry by six Muslim women survivors of Islamophobic violence supplemented these findings by enriching them with emotional depth; this poetry will be included in a community toolkit on Islamophobic violence that will emerge from this study. Future research should continue to centre diverse Muslim women’s voices and focus on anti-colonial methods of challenging Islamophobia that focus on building relationships with Indigenous peoples.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the late Solveiga Meitzis, professor at OISE. I completed my Master’s coursework part-time while I was working, so it has been 5 years in the making. The first Master’s course I took 5 years ago was called “Creativity and Wellness”, and it taught by Solveiga. The course began in September 2012, which was just over about a year after I had faced a significant trauma. Although I was feeling and functioning much better by the time I started at OISE, I was still living with post-traumatic stress. Solveiga’s course was an absolute gift. Not only was it a warm and positive way to re-enter academia, but it exposed me to the transformative power of art in healing. She also appreciated and encouraged my gifts in writing – both creative and academic. In a way, this Master’s thesis is an extension of Solveiga’s course. Indeed, I have incorporated an arts-based component to my research, through the poetry of Muslim women survivors of Islamophobic violence. And I brought my heart and spirit – not just my mind – into the research process, which Solveiga would have encouraged.

It is my hope that Solveiga would be proud of this thesis that I have produced.

I would also like to acknowledge my thesis supervisor Professor Jamie Magnusson. She took a chance on supervising me last year, when I decided to switch from the M.Ed. program to the M.A. in order to carry out a research project. She has given me tremendous encouragement throughout this process while demonstrating trust in my vision and my passion.
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When I was growing up, these are the words I was taught to say at the beginning of starting anything new: to whisper them under my breath before eating, before writing a math test, before attempting to ride my bike up a hill. To my child’s mind, these words felt like a magical incantation: I believed that just by whispering them, my food would be endowed with nourishing blessing; I would ace my math test; I would ride my bike up the hill without having to take any breaks.

Those days of certain, child-like faith were eroded by life’s harsh realities, until they were entirely lost. By the time I was an adult, I no longer believed in the power of the *du’as* (prayerful supplications) of my mother and grandmother. I began to view my ancestors’ beliefs through a Western, colonial, gaze: they were primitive, superstitious, quaint.

And so, there was no longer any reason for me to say *Bismillah hir Rahman ir Raheem* before attempting any new or difficult tasks.

Yet as I sit down to write this Master’s thesis – one that journeys along the lives of women who have been targeted for physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional violence because they are Muslim, women whose spirits are flagging in a time of virulent Islamophobia, and who have entrusted me with their personal stories and points of view – I am daunted by the task of doing justice to their voices, their pain, and their hopes.
Should I assess my interviews with Foucauldian analysis and try to come up with a brilliant new sociological insight, to be published in a reputable journal? Should I pull out the most shocking and distressing aspects of participants’ stories, to compel the public to recognize the severity of Islamophobia in Toronto? Surely these women’s stories, in this particular moment in history, deserve something more than academic prowess or sensationalized repackaging.

More than anything, I want this thesis to have a positive impact of the participants, and on other Muslim women and girls in the GTA, and beyond. But I am a loss for how to make that happen.

And so, I find myself sitting here, at the proverbial bottom of the hill, at the beginning of the math test, at the outset of my Master’s thesis, and my lips seem to want to utter that phrase I was taught so many years ago.

_Bismillah hir Rahman ir Raheem._

This thesis is about coming home.
PART 1: INTRODUCTION
Chapter 1: Locating Myself

1.1 Self-Location as an Indigenous Research Method

Self-location is an Indigenous research method that counters hegemonic notions of the neutral (read: white, male) researcher, whose personal identity and life experiences do not factor into the work he produces. Self-location, by contrast, foregrounds the embodied reality of the researcher, and discloses their unique positionality. According to Absolon and Willett (in Strega and Brown, 2015),

Identifying, at the outset, the location from which the voice of the researcher emanates is an Aboriginal way of ensuring that those who study, write, and participate in knowledge creation are accountable for their own positionality (Owens, 2002; Said, 1994; Tierney, 2002). (p. 97)

In order to be accountable for my positionality in this research project, I will share with the reader my social identities and lived experiences that brought me to this research, and shape my views on the subject of Islamophobic violence.

1.2 My Positionality

Firstly, I locate myself as a settler on Turtle Island, who has just within the past few years gained knowledge and understanding around the extent of my complicity in settler-colonialism, and recognized my responsibilities to uphold treaties between settlers and Indigenous peoples, and participate in enacting the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation commission. And as will be discussed in this thesis, I have come to understand that the Islamophobia I encounter is inextricably linked to the ongoing process of colonization and genocide of Indigenous peoples perpetrated by the Canadian state.
Secondly, my name is Sidrah. *Sidrah* is an Arabic word that my parents chose for me out of the Islamic holy scripture, the *Quran*. In the *Quran*, ‘*Sidrah*’ is the name of a tree that is said to be at the highest level of heaven: this tree is located at the barrier between all of creation and the divine. My parents’ choice for my name encapsulates the extent to which Islam and Islamic theology was imbued into their vision for me and the manner in which I was raised.

My parents immigrated to Canada from Pakistan in the 1970s, and I was born and raised in Toronto in a low/middle-income household. I was taught how to pray five times a day, fast during Ramadan, recite Quran in Arabic, and generally abided by the norms of a Pakistani version of *Sunni* Islam.¹ I was deeply religious until about age 16, when for a variety of reasons – the most prominent of which were exposure to family violence and realizing that I was bisexual – I had a falling out with my childhood belief system. This loss of faith was emotionally devastating, and left me disoriented, unable to make sense of life any longer. After about a decade of struggling in and out of depression, and experimenting with various belief systems, including atheism and Christianity, I settled into a newfound relationship with the Divine. This new relationship, which is still part of my life today, loosely identifies as Muslim, but borrows from multiple faiths’ practices and does not involve a prescriptive theology nor mandate specific acts of prayer or devotion.

These lived experiences give me a unique relationship with the Muslim faith: I can understand the mindset of a traditionally devout Muslim, because I’ve been one; although I may not be personally committed to the worldviews these Muslims hold, I can nonetheless intimately

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¹ *Sunni* Muslims encapsulate approximately 85% of the global Muslim population, with the remainder being *Shia*, *Ahmadi*, *Sufi*, and other sects. The ways in which people practice Islam vary greatly across geographic regions.
appreciate those paradigms. The diversity of my individual religious and spiritual journey has given me a profound respect for people’s diverse approaches to faith, and a hard-won conviction that each individual should be free to decide what beliefs are good for her.

I also have lived experience as a visible Muslim – a topic that factors heavily into this thesis. I started wearing hijab in Grade 6, and kept it on until my second year of undergraduate university. I started wearing hijab again two years ago. Throughout my years as a visible Muslim, I faced many different forms of Islamophobia, including gendered Islamophobia (defined below, in Section 2.2.2). I am well-versed in the distinct and sometimes bizarre forms of violence targeted against Muslim girls and women: I remember being told by a boy in Grade 7 that I would ‘prettier if I didn’t have that thing on my head’; I remember my close friend, who also wore hijab, being in tears after it was torn off by a bully; I remember the stares and leers from older men in the bus, who told me my hijab was pretty; I remember being asked countless times if I was ‘hot in that’, or forced to wear it by my father. And I remember over-performing and excelling at academic and athletics in order to try to compensate for bigotry.

The years of my life where I did not wear hijab also familiarized me with Islamophobic violence, albeit from a different angle: I remember the sudden absence of stares and exclusion, and experiencing a strange new and uncomfortable phenomenon of being treated like an average person. I also remember the new form of aggressive exoticization that occurred when non-Muslim men found out that I used to wear hijab. They tasked themselves with taking on the continuation of what they perceived to be my sexual liberation, sometimes without my consent.

These experiences enabled me to heartily believe the women in this study when they shared what they had been through, and empathize with the levels of frustration and pain they expressed. It
also motivated me to accurately name and characterize this violence and its nuances (Section 6.3), which is rarely spoken about and, at present, poorly defined.

I identify as a survivor of multiple forms of trauma. I lived through chronic and severe childhood physical abuse and witnessing of violence in childhood. I also faced an Islamophobically-motivated sexual assault (a term which will be clarified in Section 6.3.4) 6 years ago, which brought forward relentless post-traumatic stress experiences such as sleeplessness, hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, avoidance and flashbacks, which could be triggered by anything that reminded me of the violence. This incident and its aftermath led me to seek therapy and undertake personal research in order to heal. Through this healing process, I’ve equipped myself with a significant amount of knowledge surrounding issues of trauma. Although I was not planning to bring this aspect of my life into this thesis, it became apparent to me that Islamophobic violence, even in the form of verbal assaults, generated classic trauma responses for many participants in this study. This correlation motivated me to make the argument that Islamophobic violence is a form of trauma in Section 8.1 of this thesis.

Finally, the last thing the reader should know about me is that I am highly empathetic: I have always been able to feel and resonate with others’ experiences quite deeply. While this has often been a liability for me, what with the unfeeling norms of our neoliberal society, it became a strength in the context of this research process, as I was able to listen to research participants with an open heart, and allow myself to become affected by them. In this way, this research project deeply transformed me, and for this I am grateful.
Chapter 2: Rationale and Literature Review

2.1 Prior Research on Islamophobic Violence Against Muslim Women

This thesis represents the first qualitative research study on the impact of Islamophobic violence on Muslim women in Canada. There have been no prior studies on the experiences of Muslim women survivors of Islamophobic violence in Canada; no studies that have looked at the relationship between Islamophobia and gender-based violence, nor any qualitative studies on Muslim women survivors of hate crime in Canada, apart from an introductory discussion of the phenomenon by Perry (2014), and a tally of reported hate crimes complied by Statistics Canada (Harris, 2017). It is my hope that this project will provide a launching pad from which scholarly work on the impact of Islamophobic violence on Muslim women in Canada – and the ways in which Muslim women resist that violence – can develop into a vibrant discussion that is able to articulate the realities of Muslim women and meet their needs.

Previous scholarly examination of the lives of Muslim women in Canada has largely focused on the hijab and niqab (Chapman, 2016; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2008; Ruby, 2006; Medina, 2014; Shirazi & Mishra, 2010; Zine, 2006). Where the topic of violence against Muslim women has been a research focus, this research has centered around violence perpetrated by Muslim men (Shalabi et.al, 2005; Ali & Toner, 1999; Aujla & Gill, 2004; Jiwani, 2014). While research on Muslim male-perpetrated violence against Muslim women is vital, it is only part of the full picture of gender-based violence that Muslim women in Canada are subject to. This imbalance in representation of violence contributes to hegemonic discourses that single out Muslim communities as uniquely ‘barbaric’, whilst eliding a critique of Western patriarchal structures and violence perpetrated by Western men (Razack, 2004; Browers, 2014). This thesis begins the work of more accurately representing the relational reality of gender-based violence in Canadian
Muslim women’s lives by exploring violence by perpetrators who are not family or community members, who are not Muslim, and who are motivated by Islamophobia.

2.2 Central Concepts

This thesis relies on three central concepts, which will require thorough definition: Islamophobia, gendered Islamophobia, and the colonization of the Indigenous peoples of Canada.

2.2.1 Islamophobia

We are living in times of the boiling frog parable. The boiling frog parable describes a frog sitting in a pot of tepid water, who does not realize he is going to be boiled alive. The water starts out lukewarm, but slowly and incrementally gets hotter, until it reaches a boil. Because the changes are so gradual, with each new level of heat normalized for our frog, he does not react. He sits in the pot as the temperature slowly rises, and dies.

Now, if our frog was dropped directly into a pot of boiling hot water, he would have noticed the dangerous temperature, and jumped out. He would have survived.

At the time of this writing, the temperature of Islamophobic hate in North America, and globally, has been rising incrementally. While some of us have noticed, and are feeling our skin being scalded, many others have been allowing normalization of violence against Muslim bodies to spread without recourse. It is the aim of this study to alert and encourage more people to react to the reality of Islamophobia and its accompanying violence. In order to accomplish this task, hegemonic discourses which dehumanize Muslims, sanction violence against them, and then render this very violence invisible, will have to be named (see Section 6.1).

A central method of avoiding recognition of the ‘rising temperature’ of Islamophobia is to deny that Islamophobia even exists. One cannot jump out of a pot, after all, if it’s ‘all in your head’.
This study aims to verify and assert the reality and existence of Islamophobia through the voices and stories of women who have been targeted for Islamophobic violence.

There has also been contention as to whether Islamophobia is a valid form of racism, with discrimination, hate speech, and violence towards being Muslims being erroneously justified under the guise of so-called ‘religious criticism’. Indeed, Meer and Modood (2009) point out that “while Muslims are increasingly the subject of hostility and discrimination, as well as governmental racial profiling and surveillance, and targeting by intelligence agencies, their status as victims of racism is frequently challenged or denied” (p. 338). Given this denial of the processes of racialization operating through Islamophobic discourses, it is important to clearly define Islamophobia as a form of racism at the outset of this thesis, as this will be a key concept used throughout this manuscript.

Although Islamophobia is as old as colonization itself – wherein Orientalist narratives positioned Muslims as the exotic ‘Other’ and rationalized domination of Muslim peoples and lands (Said, 1978) – the term ‘Islamophobia’ is relatively new, as it was first put into use by the Runnymede Trust in 1997 (Dobkowski, 2015). Ironically, the word ‘Islamophobia’ has played a role in disguising and misrepresenting the racist processes it seeks to name. Firstly, having the word ‘Islam’ in the term focuses our attention onto an abstract religion, rather than onto the embodied realities of Muslim people who are affected by prejudice and hate. Secondly, the suffix ‘phobia’ implies an irrational fear, which surreptitiously excuses perpetrators of Islamophobic violence as acting out of fear, rather than hatred and a desire for power and domination. Some scholars have proffered the term ‘anti-Muslim racism’ in order to better capture the lived reality of racism directed at Muslim-identified bodies, but at this point, ‘Islamophobia’ has such a widespread
currency and is used to describe such a wide range of anti-Muslim racist discourses, that I believe it is more useful to expand upon its definition rather than attempt to circulate a new term.

Definitions of Islamophobia that characterize it as a new form of racism have emerged from critical race theory. New understandings of racism recognize that racism exists beyond the scope of skin colour; according to Grosfoguel (2016):

Racism is a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human that have been politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced for centuries by the institutions of the “capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial worldsystem” (Grosfoguel, 2011). The people classified above the line of the human are recognized socially in their humanity as human beings and, thus, enjoy access to rights (human rights, civil rights, women rights and/or labor rights), material resources, and social recognition to their subjectivities, identities, epistemologies and spiritualities. The people below the line of the human are considered subhuman or non-human; that is, their humanity is questioned and, as such, negated (Fanon 1967). In the latter case, the extension of rights, material resources and the recognition of their subjectivities, identities, spiritualities and epistemologies are denied. (p.10)

As such, race theorists have identified new forms of racism that do not rely solely on phenotypic characteristics but instead utilize cultural, linguistic or religious identifiers to mark certain bodies as Other through a process of racialization (Keith, 1993; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2015), as “[r]acism can be marked by color, ethnicity, language, culture and/or religion” (Grosfoguel, 2016, p. 10). The process of racialization as it applies to the Muslim identity has already been
discussed in studies of the lived experiences of diasporic Muslims (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2005; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2015).

The process of racialization of Muslims through Islamophobic discourses rests on a foundation of first homogenizing Muslims as a monolithic group, and denying their reality as a diverse cross section of humanity encompassing a range of sects, nationalities, races, ethnicities, sexualities, abilities, coming from diverse sociopolitical contexts, for whom multiple forms of oppression discursively interact to produce their subjective conditions. Indeed, Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2015) acknowledge the “tendency within the academy, government and media to over-generalize about the Muslim diaspora living in Europe and North America” (p. 98)

The War on Terror has been a primary instrument of homogenizing Muslims into a unified group, as seen through an imperial-colonial gaze. Selod (2015) argues that the “‘War on Terror’ targets terrorism rather than individual nations, resulting in a myriad of ethnicities and nationalities being classified into a monolithic category of Muslim (Rana, 2011)” (p. 80); and because the “‘War on Terror’ targets terrorism rather than individual nations, [this] result[s] in a myriad of ethnicities and nationalities being classified into a monolithic category of Muslim (Rana, 2011)” (p. 80). This monolithic category ignores the “unique political, economic and cultural situation of each nation” (Selod, 2015, p. 80).

After this act of homogenizing Muslims into a monolithic group, the racialization process of Muslims proceeds to inscribe religious identity as the absolute explanatory factor for all Muslims’ lives and actions. Selod (2015) notes that as Muslims in different regions of the world are homogenized into a singular category, the “religion of the region is overly exaggerated and held responsible for the country’s instability” (p. 80).
As discussed above, some have argued that religious affiliation is a choice, and therefore Muslims cannot be racialized. This understanding falls short of grasping how the racialization of Muslims through Islamophobia proceeds to “imagine an essential difference that is hard-wired through innate qualities.” (Rana, 2010, p. 2). In this leap of logic, the religious signifiers of Muslims – such as having a Muslim last name, speaking Arabic, or a wearing a hijab – become racialized and become seen as intrinsic qualities of the bodies which possess those signifiers.

While eliding the direct focus on biologic difference that is featured in older methods of racialization, “the terms of a solely naturalised biological difference to a cultural notion of difference…is nonetheless crafted through a racial logic.” (Rana, 2010, p. 2).

Thus racialization is a “key analytical concept [that] allows us to make sense of the fact that regardless of physical appearance, country of origin and economic situation, Muslims are homogenized and degraded by Islamophobic discourse and practices in their everyday lives.” (Garner and Selod, 2015, p. 17). In fact, Selod (2015) has argued that “‘Muslim’ is becoming a de facto racial classification, one that is experienced in practice although not formally recognized” (p. 80).

While Islamophobia is in itself a new form of racism, most Muslims are Black, brown, or Arab, and also face racism on the basis of those identities. This is particularly true for Black Muslims, who live at the intersection of Islamophobia and systemic anti-Black racism. Indeed, Black Muslims were the first Muslims on the North American continent, as they were kidnapped from their homelands, brought here against their will, and enslaved both in the U.S. and Canada. The psychological violence of slavery involved severing Black people from their traditional belief systems – whether it be Islam, or other African spiritualties – and enforcing a version of Christianity on them that justified their subordination and erased their connection to their
ancestry. Black Muslims in the U.S. have been part of a long development of uniquely Black American approach to Islam, one whose spiritual practice is inextricably tied to liberation and racial justice, as this has been the primary concern of Black Muslims in America for centuries (Auston, 2017).

In more recent decades, the arrival of ‘newer’ immigrant communities of Muslims – many of whom are South Asian or Arab – shifted the landscape of Muslims in North America. These non-Black Muslims created new Islamic organizations and committees, often with little to no meaningful representation of Black Muslims, and regularly failed to meet the needs of Black Muslims. Moreover, many of these newer Muslim immigrants came from countries that have a long and active history of anti-Black racism, and they brought these anti-Black biases into Muslim religious spaces in the U.S. and Canada, thereby further isolating and excluding Black Muslims from their supposed ‘brothers and sisters in Islam’. As I will discuss in Section 5.1, the erasure of Black Muslims is also bolstered by the fact that popular imagery of Muslims almost always features Arab or light-skinned South Asians.

In the Canadian context, major organizations representing Muslims have been criticized for failing to include Black Muslims in their organizational makeup and mandates, failing to address anti-Black racism in their midst, and failing to show meaningful solidarity to social justice issues affecting Black people, such as police brutality and the school-to-prison pipeline. While living at the intersection of anti-Black racism and Islamophobia renders Black Muslims in Canada highly vulnerable to Islamophobic violence, the persistent anti-Black racism within ‘mainstream’ Muslim communities leaves Black Muslims with fewer spaces to be seen, heard and supported in the face of this violence.
In addition to understanding Islamophobia as a new form of racism, and recognizing how it compounds with other forms of racism, some have sought to understand Islamophobia by comparing it to Antisemitism. Antisemitism is a unique global phenomenon based upon a conspiratorial view that Jews operate through a ‘hidden hand’ to cause the ills of the entire world (Dobkowski, 2015; Klug, 2014). This irrational idea has led individuals, hate groups, and whole societies to blame Jews for their problems and support movements to exclude, harm or, in the case of the Third Reich, commit genocide against Jews. Islamophobia, in contrast, does not contain the ‘hidden hand’ notion, nor are Muslims blamed as a total explanation for all the problem of the world. Even though examining the topological likenesses between Antisemitism and Islamophobia is edifying, it is vital to avoid idly equating Antisemitism and Islamophobia by making erroneous arguments such as Muslims are ‘the new Jews’. Such a statement erases the fact that Antisemitism is affecting Jews presently, and trivializes the historically singular event of the Holocaust.

Rather than equating Islamophobia with Antisemitism, it is more useful to notice how these two forms of discrimination interact within white supremacist and neo-Nazi logic. In the current radicalization process for white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups, Islamophobia is deployed to trump up fear of immigrants by painting a picture of a (Black and brown-bodied) Muslim invasion that seeks to change the demographics of Western society. Antisemitism interacts with this Islamophobic reasoning, through the conspiracy theory that ‘Jews are responsible’ for orchestrating these immigration policies and patterns, and are somehow ‘behind’ the impending demographic shift (more detail regarding this conspiracy theory will be provided in Section 6.1.3). Indeed, in the now infamous white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August
2017, the torch-bearing white supremacists were chanting “Jews will not replace us” (Green, 2017, p. 1).

A final note about defining Islamophobia is that there are in fact many Islamophobias – geographically situated manifestations of Islamophobia that differ depending on the country/region in which it is being practiced. Islamophobic discourses in France, for example, are uniquely shaped by the colonial legacy of French occupation of Muslim-majority countries. Islamophobia in the U.S., on the other hand, is primarily shaped through post-9/11 discourses around the War on Terror. Canadian Islamophobia has its own nuances and tactics, and relies heavily on the myth of a racially and religiously ‘pure’ Canadian nation-state. Throughout this thesis, the specificity of Canadian Islamophobia will be highlighted wherever possible, as it is this form of Islamophobia that participants have encountered in their experiences of Islamophobic violence in the GTA.

2.2.2 Gendered Islamophobia

The racialization of Muslims through discourses of Islamophobia is gendered in both process and outcome (Selod, 2015); as such, Islamophobia has a unique and distinct impact on Muslim women, or Muslimahs. This process has been characterized as ‘gendered Islamophobia’ (Zine 2006).

Although the extremity of fixation on Muslim women in North America is relatively new, the origins of gendered Islamophobia run deep in Western traditional thought, as “[p]aternalistic

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2 *Muslimah* is an Arabic word that means “Muslim woman”. Many Muslim women refer to themselves as “Muslimahs”, rather than as “Muslim women”. For this reason, and also for efficiency in expression, I will use the term “Muslimah” interchangeably with “Muslim woman” throughout this thesis.
interest in the bodies of Other women is as much a part of western liberal tradition as John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham.” (Fernandez, 2009, p. 271). Like Islamophobia, gendered Islamophobia has its roots in colonization and in the colonial imagination. As Zine (2006) has argued, the colonial image of the Muslim woman “ranged from oppressed and subjugated women, to the highly sexualized and erotic imagery of the sensual, yet inaccessible, haremgirl (Alloula, 1986; Bullock, 2000, 2002; Hoodfar, 1993; Kahf, 1999; Mabro, 1991; MacMaster & Lewis, 1998; Said, 1979; Yegenoglu, 1998; Zine, 2002)” (p. 242).

Through gendered Islamophobia, Muslim women “are feared and reviled on the same basis as all Muslims. Yet in addition, they are often constructed as racialized, exotic Others who do not fit the Western ideal of womanhood.” (Perry, 2014, p. 79). More specifically, Muslim women are racialized vis-à-vis “the Western trope of the Muslim woman as the ultimate victim of a timeless patriarchy defined by the barbarism of the Islamic religion, which is in need of civilizing” (Moallem, 2005, p. 20). Therefore the racialization process of Muslim women is a highly gendered process hinging on the insistence of her victimhood, denial of agency, and need of rescue, presumably by Western powers. Discourses of concern for helpless Muslim women in turn feed further Islamophobia, as “anti-Muslim prejudice is increasingly subsumed and hidden behind a concern for women” (Fernandez, 2009, p. 269).

In case one might underestimate the impact of these tropes, it is worth noting that the rhetorical and discursive power of gendered Islamophobia has been used to justify imperial wars. Orientalist representations of oppressed and backwards Muslim women are used to “justify and rationalize imperial domination over colonized Muslims through the emancipatory effect that European hegemony was expected to garner for Muslim women.” (Zine, 2006, p. 240). Surely enough, the depiction of Muslim women in Afghanistan was central to justifying the U.S.
bombing and military invasion of Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Martino and Rezai-Rashti, 2008), which resulted in the deaths of over 3000 Afghan civilians, presumably half of whom were women. Thus does gendered Islamophobia, with an eerily Orwellian logic, justify killing large numbers of Muslim women in the name of saving them. This violence is seen as right and natural or inevitable, as “violence against the bodies of subaltern women is both granted and taken for granted in the making of worlds” (Ahmed, 2003, p. 385).

Zine argues that gendered Islamophobia “operates socially, politically, and discursively to deny material advantages to Muslim women” (Zine, 2006, p. 240). I concur with this definition in its mirroring of classic critical race definitions of racism; however, I would add that gendered Islamophobia also operates to increase Muslim women’s vulnerability to violence. Indeed, there is a relationship between racialization and increased subjection to violence. As noted by Schiffer and Wagner (2011), “[t]he act of physical racial violence carried out by an individual is the end product of a whole process of racialisation which begins with the stereotypes that society as a whole generates and perpetuates through laws, the media, the education system, and so on, in popular discourse” (p. 82). Perry (2014), in a paper written to begin dialogue on hate crime against Muslim women, notes that “[r]egardless of the cultural background of women, it is highly likely that they become even more vulnerable to bias motivated violence when they can be ‘othered’” (p. 79).

As of late, the classic colonial image of the oppressed Muslim woman who lacks agency and needs to be rescued by Western intervention has been extended and overlayed by promulgations from the War on Terror, which has produced new discourses of Muslim women as terrorists-in-waiting. Fernandez (2009) speaks to the Islamophobic notion that “there is ‘something aggressive about the veil’” (p. 274), and that Muslim women who cover are “coerced
purveyors of terror” (p. 275). This latter formulation is particularly disheartening since equating a visibly Muslim woman with terrorism renders her a ‘fair target’ for violence in the fight against terrorism. She not a woman; she is an enemy combatant and as such violence against her is righteous. Violence against her does not count as violence against women proper.

Another new permutation of gendered Islamophobia is the reduction of Muslim women to abstract symbols of cultural values. Selod (2015) points to an argument by Cainkar (2009) that women in hijab are targeted for verbal and physical assaults because their hijab is associated with so-called “anti-Western values” (p. 86). In this manner, “the bodies of Muslim women who wear the hijab become a site of contestation between American and Islamic values.” (Selod, 2015, p. 87). By casting Muslim women either as terrorists or as symbols of contested values, these newer iterations of gendered Islamophobia are more directly linked to increased impunity for violence against Muslim women’s bodies.

Thus is Islamophobia gendered not only in process, but in outcome, as the majority of hate crimes and harassment against Muslims target Muslim women. According to a summary report on Islamophobia by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, “one overarching feature that emerged in all the fifteen European Union countries was the tendency for Muslim women to be attacked because the hijab signified an Islamic identity” (Meer and Modood, 2009, p. 342). Selod (2015) found that in the U.S., “citizens did not question Muslim men in the same fashion as they questioned Muslim women wearing the hijab. [Men]…were rarely yelled at by strangers on the street unless accompanied by women who wore the hijab” (p. 84). An American study found “a significant relationship between gender and hate crimes… with more women reporting hate crimes (86.3%, n = 44) than men (54.9%, n = 28)” (Abu-Ras and Suarez, 2009, p. 54). A British-based study points out how the majority of victims of
Islamophobic violence were women, particularly visibly Muslim women (Hopkins, 2016). A recent (2015) tally of hate crimes in Canada released by Statistics Canada, which noted 224 police-reported crimes against Muslims in 2015, which is 60 more than in the previous year (Leber, 2017). The report on the data also noted that “Muslim populations had the highest percentage of hate crime victims who were female” (Leber, 2017, p. 19) and that violent crimes targeting Muslims had increased by 141% between 2014 and 2015, which is the largest increase compared to any other group (Leber, 2017, p. 18).

Notably, the Hopkins (2016) study takes the gender analysis further to focus on the gender and racial identities of the perpetrators. Hopkins found that almost 80% of perpetrators of offline Islamophobic violence were men under the age of 40. Hopkins contends that when perpetrators are “White men who enact specific practices associated with masculinity and White supremacy… This is not only racist violence as it is inflected with gender and bolstered by sexism, patriarchy and White supremacy (Hopkins, 2016, p. 187). Hopkin’s analysis highlights how gendered Islamophobia operates not only to single out Muslim women as fair targets of violence, but permits white men to physically assault Muslim women as part of a ‘war on Terror’.

It is important to note that none of these studies disaggregated the data to identify what percentage of Muslims targeted for violence are Black. In Canada, anti-Black hate crimes are recorded separately from Islamophobic hate crimes: 224 incidents of anti-Black crimes were accounted for in 2015 (Leber, 2017, p. 17). At the community level, Black visibly Muslim women have been sharing about how they are regularly targeted for Islamophobic violence; future data collection on Islamophobic violence should include race data, so that potential connections between anti-Black racism and Islamophobia can be characterized and responded to.
Finally, even though gendered Islamophobia is a sexist (and racist) process, some of its proponents are women. A study by Scharff (2011) revealed how German non-Muslim women deployed gendered Islamophobia for their own identity formation. In this identity formation, the trope of the helpless Muslim woman who is oppressed by a patriarchal Muslim man was engaged so that the non-Muslim women would come to know themselves as liberated subjects. Scharff (2011) found that her research participants’ “construction of empowered selves is constituted by the othering of Muslim women” (p. 119). Stemming from the works of Said (1985) and Frankenberg (1993), Scharff concluded that “through knowing and naming its other, the western self gets constructed as that which is not its other: if the Muslim woman is oppressed and a victim of patriarchal power, the western woman is liberated and free from gender constraints” (Scharff, 2011, p. 130). This is an important feature for my research on Islamophobic violence against Muslim women, because although one would hope that Muslim women survivors of gender-based violence would be able to find solace in other women – including non-Muslim women – and build solidarity with them, if these non-Muslim women are invested in gendered Islamophobia as a way to claim their own liberated identity, they may even become perpetrators of Islamophobic violence themselves.

2.2.3 Colonization of Indigenous Peoples

The colonial frameworks that were used to colonize and perpetrate genocide against Indigenous peoples include anti-Indigenous racism, epistemic violence, Indian Agents, the reservation system, breach of treaty agreements, land theft, and residential schools. Framing Indigenous spiritualties as inherently anti-Christian, and therefore anti-Canadian, rationalized the banning of Indigenous ceremonies by the Canadian state and motivated the (failed) colonial attempt to eradicate Indigenous spiritualties, languages, and ways of living (Truth and Reconciliation...
Canada, 2015). This process of cultural genocide has been ongoing throughout the history of the Canadian state; anti-Indigenous racism is woven into the foundational structure of the country. However, without equating the two, it is informative to note how there are eerie similarities between logics of anti-Indigenous racism and cultural genocide and the present-day manifestations of Islamophobia in Canada.

The Canadian project was perpetuated through – and continues to be perpetuated through – Othering Indigenous peoples, perpetrating genocide against them, and stealing their land. Land theft practices relied on the Doctrine of Discovery, which is an ideology that provides a justification for Christians to ‘discover’ and claim rights to land that are not yet inhabited by Christians (Burrows, 2015). Land theft was also rationalized through the doctrine of *Terra Nullius*, which asserts that so-called ‘uninhabited’ land can be laid claim to by colonizers: Indigenous people were framed as ‘not human’, and therefore the land was considered vacant and available to become the property of Christian settlers (Burrows, 2015). In this way, *Terra Nullius* was directly linked to dehumanizing Indigenous peoples by virtue of their non-Christian identity. As such, it laid the groundwork for further abuses of Indigenous peoples, including forced conversion to Christianity through the state and church-sponsored residential school system.

These founding doctrines of Canada –the Doctrine of Discovery and *Terra Nullius* – both connect to contemporary manifestations of Islamophobia. Islamophobia and colonization of Indigenous peoples are both logical outcomes of the same ideal of the racially and religiously ‘pure’ Canadian nation-state: a myth that is continually reinvented through racist doctrines, genocidal policies, and historic erasure. Muslims cannot be told to “go back to where you came from” (which, as reported in this thesis, was a common form of verbal assault encountered by
participants) without the foundational myth that Canada was ‘empty’ before the arrival of colonists, and is somehow the eternal and divinely-appointed property of white Christians. Indeed, in responding to the Islamophobic verbal attack to “go back home”, Muslims have the option of responding with an assertion that they do belong here in Canada – that this is home. In this way, Islamophobic violence creates a psychic pressure for Muslims to affirm and re-assert their Canadian-ness, and thereby potentially be co-opted into the discourses that erase the reality of Indigenous peoples and Canada’s violent foundation. As I will argue in Sections 7.22 and 11.2, anti-colonial methods of responding to xenophobic verbal abuse present an opportunity for Muslims to show solidarity with Indigenous people while surviving and resisting Islamophobia.

After the foundational Doctrine of Discovery and Terra Nullius, Canada solidified and entrenched a national identity by identifying (racialized) ‘Others’ against which Canada can be defined by what it is not. Dhamoon and Abu-Laban (2009) argue that there is “a dialectical relationship between re-nationalization and Othering” (p. 179) in Canada, and that “[r]acialized discourses can therefore be a guise to secure “our” national identity” (p. 167). They chronicle historic incidents in which this re-nationalization process took place through the identification of a ‘dangerous internal threat’. Among the examples they chronicle, they describe how a renationalization process took place during the Oka crisis, where Indigenous peoples were again ‘Othered’ and deemed dangerous to the Canadian way of being:

Indigenous nations were accordingly represented not only as dangerous to national economic development and state sovereignty over territory but also as a danger to Canadian law and order, cultured society, and the physical well-being of Canada’s “civilized” people. On this basis, “they” (read: dangerous, tribal, and pre-modern Others) carried uncontrollable explosive hate, unlike “us” (read: western, progressive, rational
peoples) who could reason and operate within the law. Any sympathy for or questioning of the real nature of the threat posed by Indigenous militants could easily be squashed by racialized stereotypes in which “the Indian” was represented as intrinsically threatening.

This racialized construction of the Indigenous barbarian not only gained legitimacy so as to demarcate Others from “us,” but it served to secure the primacy assigned to a western territorial, material, and legal conception of nationhood. This was an act of re-nationalization in which the federal government entered the negotiations on the premise that the nation’s security was at threat. (Dhamoon and Abu-Laban, 2009, p. 177)

Dhamoon and Abu-Laban conclude their paper by cautioning that similar deployments of ‘dangerous internal threat’ processes may be occurring in Canada today through the racialization of Muslims (pp. 179-180). Indeed, a few years after the publication of Dhamoon and Abu-Laban’s paper, former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper revived the narrative of the ‘dangerous internal threat’ by using gendered Islamophobic rhetoric to hone in on the citizenship ceremony of Zunera Ishaq, whom he tried to ban from taking a citizenship ceremony unless she removed her niqab. In taking on a legal battle with her, Harper sought to re-nationalize Canada as a space defined by its not-Muslim-ness. Here again, Islamophobia mirrors processes of anti-Indigenous racism (although the two forms of discrimination are distinct): the policing of Zunera Ishaq’s ‘non-Christian’ clothing by the Canadian state is ideologically founded on the same colonial principles that sought to force Indigenous peoples out of their traditional clothing through the residential school system.
Since the ideological foundation of colonization of Indigenous peoples is also the basis for Islamophobic violence in Canada, and ‘Othering’ of Indigenous peoples and Muslims and ‘dangerous internal threats’ have been central to renationalization processes by the Canadian state, it follows that struggles against Islamophobia and for justice for Indigenous peoples must be interrelated. To quote Lilla Watson, an Indigenous Gangula woman, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” It is through this lens that it becomes clear that freedom from Islamophobic oppression in Canada is ‘bound up’ with justice for Indigenous peoples. Therefore, an anti-colonial approach to responding to Islamophobia must focus on Muslims settlers’ recognition of their responsibilities on this land in relation to Indigenous peoples, and developing a critical consciousness of Islamophobia that effectively connects it to its colonial roots. In this anti-colonial paradigm, Muslims can resist the psychic pressure created by Islamophobia to uncritically assert Canadian-ness, and instead look towards the ways in which the Islamophobia they are facing is intertwined with ongoing processes of colonization of Indigenous peoples, and build trust, relationship, and solidarity with Indigenous communities.

2.3 Important Terminology

2.3.1 Hijab

*Hijab* is the most common and identifiable form of Muslim women’s clothing: it looks like a headscarf, and typically covers all of a woman’s hair (see Fig 1). Hijab can be worn with any other form of clothing, such as jeans, skirts, blouses, a dress, a track suit, an abaya, and so on.

![Fig.1: Artist depiction of a Muslim woman wearing a light blue hijab (Artist: @xenopurple_art)](image)
2.3.2 Niqab

*Niqab* is a less common form of Muslim women’s clothing: it is a portion of material that covers the face. In Fig. 2, the niqab can be identified as the material that is dark pink, whereas the hijab is light pink. Anyone who wears niqab also wears hijab.

2.3.3 Abaya

The abaya is a similar to a cloak: it is loose garment that can be worn over other clothes. Many abayas are black, but they can come in other colours. The abaya covers the entire body except for the hands, feet, face, and hair. Abayas are typically worn with hijab, and in some cases, niqab.

In Fig. 3, the abaya is the long black dress-like robe. The hijab in this case is pink, distinguishing it from the black abaya worn by the woman in the drawing.
3.1 Intersectionality

A foundational theory guiding this thesis is intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1994), as it is uniquely positioned to attend the nuances of Muslim women’s experiences, which are shaped by both their gender identity and the way that they are racialized through Islamophobic discourses. According to Ramírez (2015):

The subordination of Muslim women can only be understood within a framework that considers the interrelationships between sexism (both inside Muslim communities and with respect to non-Muslim) and anti-Muslim racism.… Muslim women experience racism in different terms than Muslim men, just as they experience sexism differently than non-Muslim women. (p. 679)

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1994), was first developed in order to name the unique positionality of Black women, and their lived experiences in facing a specific combination of anti-Black racism and sexism. This theory is well-suited to also tackle the distinct positioning of women who are racialized as Muslim through Islamophobic discourses, since according to this approach, the unity of two minority traits constitutes in fact a distinct single-minority entity giving rise to unique forms of position and disadvantage that can neither be accounted for by race or gender or adding the one to the other…it focuses on processes leading to experience of not only multiple but also particular distinct forms of inequalities. (Anthias, 2014, p. 157)

I am interested in the “single-minority” entity of the ‘Muslim woman’, and examining how Islamophobic violence operates in this space. Such an approach will allow me to sidestep the
pitfall of antiracist efforts that “are unable to move beyond reductive concepts of culture and community and examine the intertwining and complex relationships between sexism and racism” (Rezai-Rashti, 1999, pp. 47-48).

In addition to defining the single-minority entity of Muslim women, intersectionality acts as a “sensitising concept for addressing the complexity of social relations” (Anthias, 2014, p. 157). Having tools to address this complexity is vital, as my research participants came from a variety of additional intersecting identities in the categories of race, age, immigration status, and socioeconomic status. Intersectional theory allows for the examination of how various intersections of oppression shape diverse Muslim women’s vulnerability to and experience of Islamophobic violence.

The unique positioning of Muslim women due to the discursive processes of gendered Islamophobia will mean that Islamophobic violence enacted against Muslim women will be unique, and not easily mapped onto other understandings of gender-based violence. Crenshaw (1994) has delineated how “experiences of women of colour are frequently the product of racism and sexism…. [T]hese experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism” (pp. 1243-1244). Following this vein, Perry (2014) asserts that it is “because of the intersecting spaces that Muslim women occupy that they become vulnerable to violence, and in unique ways” (p. 79). Hopkins (2016) also defines a space of violence that “is motivated by racism that is partly shaped by patriarchy and sexism with the victims being targeted as a result of these racist interpretations of the intersections between gender, ethnicity and religion” (p. 188). Hence intersectionality theory will be required to depict what violence against Muslim women looks like in the nexus of sexism and Islamophobia, and how racist
discourses impede Muslim women’s ability to access safety while they nonetheless employ agency to resist violence and heal.

3.2 Anti-colonial Muslim Feminism

According to Medina (2010), “[t]he Muslim woman’s body is like a battleground upon which patriarchy (both religious and secular) and feminism are at ideological war” (p. 876). Hegemonic discourses of liberation of Muslim women are wrapped up in notions of colonial rescue; this rescuing is contingent upon excising Islam from the Muslim woman’s life and shifting her towards Western (read: white, colonial) ways of living, thinking, and being. Muslim women are often positioned as having to choose between either embracing this colonial narrative or accepting misogynistic interpretations of Islam imposed on them by Muslim patriarchies. Fortunately, this dichotomy is false; Muslim feminism, led by Muslim women scholars and activists, creates a space for achieving liberation from patriarchy without surrendering to colonial processes (Zine, 2004). This nuanced framework seeks to “address the internal dynamics of gender relations for men and women on both sides of this problematic Orientalist divide.” (Martino and Rezai-Rashti, 2008, p. 419).

Critical Muslim feminism has been posited as “an alternate space for the articulation of Muslim female identity that resists both patriarchal fundamentalism and secular Islamophobia” (Zine, 2006, p. 250). Rather than seeing Muslim identity as a peripheral issue, it aims to provide “a space that is attentive to the role spirituality and religious commitment play in Muslim women’s conceptions of selfhood and feminist engagement.” (Zine, 2004, p. 181). As such, critical Muslim feminism is well-positioned to articulate an understanding of Islamophobic violence that is situated within the lived, embodied experiences of Muslim women. In addition, it provides a framework through which patriarchal structures within conservative Muslim discourses can be
critiqued, without this critique in turn being co-opted towards Islamophobic discourse. Indeed, in thinking through a critical Muslim feminist framework, Zine speaks to the dilemma that when “exposing issues of sexism within their communities, Muslim feminists are immediately subject to the racism and Islamophobia that negatively essentialize these experiences as the defining referents of the Muslim community.” (Zine, 2004). She contends that critical Muslim feminism can overcome this dilemma by “simultaneously dismantl[ing] these interlocking systems that mutually sustain and reinforce the nexus of oppressions affecting Muslim women's lives.” (Zine, 2004, p. 178).

Although the role of faith and belief in Muslim women’s lives is often important, I will not use ascribing to the tenets of the Muslim faith, or formally practicing Islam, as my primary means of defining Muslim identity. This approach departs from Zine’s articulation of a critical Muslim feminist theoretical framework, where she states that

Despite the secularity of many individuals who cast themselves as Muslim, I see Islamic identity as largely connected to spiritual practice of the faith in its multiple forms rather than as simply a "cultural" identity. My attempt, therefore, is to map out possibilities for an alternative faith-centered epistemology that speaks to the way Muslim women who actively align with their faith see the world and their place within it. (Zine, 2004, pp. 180-181)

Unlike Zine, I will avoid using a faith-centered definition of Muslim, because defining Muslims on the basis of their personal identification with faith belies the extent to which Islamophobic discourses operate to impose identities onto groups of people without their consent and regardless of their beliefs, and thereby render them vulnerable to Islamophobic violence. No racist assailant asks someone they perceive to be Muslim if they really and truly believe in Allah
before perpetrating a hate crime. This external, Islamophobia-driven definition of what defines a ‘Muslim’ is evidenced in how Sikhs have been targeted for Islamophobic violence: Sikhs have an entirely different set of beliefs than Muslims do, and yet are externally labelled as Muslim and attacked. Women who have had their heads covered in the cold have been attacked under the presumption of being Muslim. When it comes to how Islamophobia works, having a Muslim last name, being born into a Muslim family, living in a certain city or country, speaking a certain language, or fitting a certain physical profile or clothing profile are enough to mark someone as a Muslim and therefore as a target for Islamophobic violence.

Moreover, while critical Muslim feminism is a robust theory for tackling the topic Islamophobic violence targeted against Muslim women, it requires further expansion in order to account for the connections between Islamophobic violence and the logics that underpinned the colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Failing to draw these connections will result in responses to Islamophobic violence that can be co-opted into discourses of Canadian ‘nation-building’ that erase and marginalize ongoing Indigenous struggles. Indeed, during the recent Canada 150 celebrations, which were a national exercise in celebrating what for Indigenous people is the trauma of genocide, Muslims were presented with it an ‘opportunity’ to ‘be a part of’ Canada by joining these celebrations and in some cases even becoming the ‘face of’ Canada150. These ‘opportunities’ were presented as methods of combatting the Islamophobic notion that Muslims do not belong in Canadian society.

Anti-colonial Muslim feminist analysis will enable Muslim women in Canada affected by Islamophobic violence to respond in ways that do not bolster colonial frameworks. As such, for this thesis, I will employ anti-colonial Muslim feminist theory to create a space for articulating
the complex positionality of Muslim women, in a way that does not erase Muslim women’s responsibilities as settlers on stolen land, while providing a platform for their voices.

This theoretical framework will also borrow from postcolonial feminism, which “seeks to draw attention to various strategies highlighted by non-Western or third-world women to resist domination.” (Golnaraghi & Dye, 2016, p. 140). Using post-colonial feminist analytical methods (Lazar, 2007), I examined ways in which Muslim women engaged in anticolonial resistance: how they used agency and moved through the violent episode and its aftermath and shaped their own paths of resistance and healing. This agency challenges the gendered Islamophobic notion of the helpless Muslim woman in need of colonial rescue. Sharing these strategies of resistance is essential to deconstructing hegemonic notions of Muslim women as powerless victims.
Chapter 4: Methodology and Methods

4.1 Qualitative Interviews

I recruited participants through a combination of physical postering and social media outreach (see recruitment materials in Appendix B). Organically, news of the study also began spreading by word of mouth in the Regent Park Muslim community. This range of outreach processes recruited diverse Muslim women in the GTA, all of whom I would not have been able to connect with through my existing social networks.

I conducted 20 in-person interviews for this study; one additional person provided the answers to the interview questions in written form (see Appendix D for research questions). The research interviews were grounded in principles of feminist interviewing. As suggested by Oakley (1998), I gave interviewees a sense of control over the interview process, as returning control is vital practice for interviewing survivors of violence, and a central tenet of trauma recovery (Herman, 1992). I met interviewees at times and in spaces of their choosing, and affirmed their right to skip any interview question, and end the interview at any time. I utilized feminist interviewing practices that centred on minimizing power dynamics and hierarchies that can be embedded in interviewing relationships (Limerick et al., 1996): one way I diminished hierarchy was by disclosing in a general way that I too am a survivor of Islamophobic violence, rather than allowing the vulnerability of disclosure to be unidirectional. I also made it clear at the outset of the interview that I was not there to judge or blame participants on the basis of their adherence and lack of adherence to Islamic practices; if, for example, they were drinking at the time of the Islamophobic violence (drinking is considered to be haram and often shamed and stigmatized in the Muslim community), there would be no shaming and judgement from me, and would still not mean that the violence was their fault (see pre-interview script in Appendix D).
I also attended to the reality of trauma in my interview methodology. Interview questions were provided in advance to participants so that they could consent to and prepare for them. I stayed true to these interview questions for all of the interviews, and only asked follow-up or clarifying questions if the participant led the interview into a divergent topic. In addition to it being made clear that participants could skip questions and stop the interview at any time, I also paid attention to non-verbal cues, and paused the interview if the participant appeared to be upset. At the end of each interview, I provided interviewees with the name and contact information of Muslim a feminist Social Worker with an understanding of intersectionality and Islamophobia, should they need to speak to her after the research interview.

Throughout the interview process, I engaged Muslim feminist praxis to hold space for language and frameworks that reflected faith-based reasoning. Muslim feminist praxis creates room for “the salience of faith and spirituality in framing the worldviews, beliefs, and practices of faith-centred people and accepts this as a valid way of negotiating an understanding of notions of community, selfhood, identity, and feminist engagement and praxis” (Zine, 2004, p. 182), and I welcomed and mirrored the use of faith-centered language throughout the interview process. In many cases, the interviewees greeted me with the traditional Muslim greeting of As salaamu alaikum, to which I always replied with the traditional response. When participants referred to Quranic verses or Islamic concepts throughout the interview, I nodded in understanding, encouraging them to continue their train of thought. I believe that my identity as a visible Muslim enabled many participants to relax and share these views with me, and build a sense of immediate ‘sisterhood’ that garnered trust. Indeed, Sameena Eidoo (2016) speaks of the value of being a researcher situated as a member of the community being researched: “I believe that being a slightly older Muslim researcher engaged in activist work, with a vested interest in disrupting
hegemonic master narratives about Muslims, powerfully structured my access to participants” (p. 4).

After the interviews were complete, I transcribed them and engaged in thematic analysis using an anti-colonial Muslim feminist lens (see Section 4.4).

4.2 Arts-Based Inquiry

In addition to conducting qualitative interviews, I used an arts-based inquiry method centred on the analysis of poetry by Muslim women on the topic of Islamophobic violence and their resistance to it. I recruited participants for the poetry part of the research project through a social media strategy (see recruitment materials in Appendix C), and received 6 unique poems. In this thesis publication, the identities of the poets will remain anonymous; titles of poems will be shared, with the authors referred to as “participants”.

Given that Muslim women are often spoken about and constructed through an Orientalist gaze, it is important to engage methods of research and knowledge production that centre the voices of Muslim women. Arts-based research is uniquely poised to “to frame the issues that are important in their lives” (Hodges, et al., 2014, p. 1092), and poetic inquiry in particular can be seen as a “response to the crisis of representation experiences in postmodern critical perspectives on traditional approaches to ethnography and other social science research paradigms…. [It is] sometimes a socio-political and critical act of resistance to dominant forms and an effective way to talk back to power.” (Hodges, et al., 2014, p. 1093). Roberts et al. (2014) also noted that poetry as a form of inquiry “was able to provide new, unexpected answers (Magritte, 1933) and often metaphorical, “below the surface” associations that might otherwise be easily overlooked or untapped” (p. 179). Indeed, by analyzing what Muslim women expressed through poetry, I
was able to build emotional depth into the themes identified through the research interviews, and define the emotional, spiritual, and psychological impact of Islamophobic violence more vividly.

Indeed, poetry has the capacity for “fully capturing and evoking emotive experiences” (Sjollema et al., 2012, p. 206); it can create an emotional response linked to empathy, which is important to cultivate in light of the dearth of empathy for Muslim people that has been caused by Islamophobic discourses of dehumanization. Performed poetry can also be understood as “a form of intervention or social action that reaches out to touch the hearts and minds of the audience in a direct and transformative way” (Hodges et al., 2014, p. 1094).

The medium of poetry has deep roots in many Muslim cultures, and there is vibrant and diverse community of Muslim women poets in the GTA. Poetry as methodology may thus be a powerful avenue towards building a critical Muslim feminist epistemology, in that it creates a culturally resonant space for new knowledges central to countering Islamophobic violence to be articulated. Just as storytelling has been used as a methodology that recovers epistemologies important to some Aboriginal researchers (Barton, 2004), poetry as methodology may be of importance to anti-colonial Muslim feminist researchers.

4.3 Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, participants were assigned pseudonyms that were in keeping with the ethnic origin of their actual name. Any identifying characteristics about the participants were removed. In analysing the interview transcripts, I stayed away from formal coding systems, as there has been “a longstanding critique of methodological positivism within the social sciences” ((Ringrose and Renold, 2014, p. 772) and coding is a positivist analytical approach that is ill-suited to the anti-colonial Muslim feminist lens I sought to bring to participants’ stories.
Indeed, in order to maintain the ‘life’ of the interview transcripts, I found that I needed “new methodological discussions about the need for thinking creatively and “inventively” with and about our data” (Ringrose and Renold, 2014, p. 772).

Before launching into this unstructured territory, I first set out on the practical task of ensuring that I was giving due diligence to participants’ stories, and properly collating the experiences they shared in order to make Islamophobic violence visible. With this aim, I systematically analysed the interview transcripts, in order to:

- Thoroughly identify all of the different forms of Islamophobic violence reported by participants (see Section 6.3)
- Examine the impact of bystander intervention (or the lack thereof) in each of the participants’ experiences (see Section 7.2)
- Look for moments of resistance and agency employed by participants, using an anti-colonial Muslim feminist lens (Chapter 9)
- Highlight participants’ unique insights regarding the nature of Islamophobic violence or how it can be prevented (Section 6.1 and Chapter 10)

In this process, while paying attention to over-arching themes and patterns that were represented among several participants, I was careful not to erase realities that were reported by one participant only. This is especially true in the case of Islamophobically-motivated rape and sexual assault. Although this particular form of Islamophobic violence was only reported by one participant, I dedicate significant space for discussion of this topic, and for the insights provided by the participant who survived this kind of violence, in this thesis.
This preliminary analysis served as scaffolding for a secondary look at the interview transcripts. In this second approach, I used what can be seen as an anti-colonial Muslim feminist praxis, in that I remained emotionally and spiritually connected to the participants, and engaged not just my mind, but my heart, in attempting to effectively ‘hear’ them and pull out additional themes.

This praxis relied on the feminist qualitative methodology of “affinities”:

affinities are the ways in which people connect with each other. They might exist in the invisible connections between people revealed in looks or particular expressions more than in words. They may be captured by an acknowledgement of physical resemblances or even the remarking of similar modes of speech, accents, smiles or general demeanour and deportment. (Smart, 2009, p. 298)

Indeed, as I reflected on the profound “invisible connections” I felt with participants throughout the interviews, many of whom reminded me of my late grandmother, and allowed myself to soak into the shared Muslim vocabulary, body language, and humour that peppered the interview dialogues, these “affinities” led me to several unexpected insights, which branched off of the initial scaffolding, described above. This secondary analysis took considerable time and reflection. Indeed, according to Ringrose and Renold (2014),

MacLure (2013) argues that we should not rush for solid meaning and definitive interpretation of data, suggesting the value of an “affective” approach that can help slow us down and sit with what in the data sparks “fascination or exhilaration . . . incipience, suspense or intensity” (pp. 169, 173). MacLure (2013, pp. 172-173) suggests that qualitative researchers spend more time considering data “hot spots”—those affective
relations to data that both “disconcert” and create a sense of “wonder”—where data “glows” for the researcher in various moments of fieldwork, analysis, and beyond. (p. 773)

Through this secondary analysis, I identified many portions of the interview transcripts which inspired fascination, disconcertion, and wonder. First, I noted that the demographic identities of the participants were in themselves an important ‘result’ of this research, and decided to dedicate an entire chapter of the thesis to this issue (Chapter 3). Second, it became clear that issues of trauma were emerging throughout the participants’ narratives, which led me to include a section on the impact of Islamophobic violence, with special attention paid to post-traumatic stress (Chapter 5). And finally, participants’ particular methods of using faith-based reasoning led me a sense of both nostalgia and wonder, as I was struck by their methods of using Islamic theology to make sense of Islamophobic violence. I created room for this discussion in Chapter 6.

After developing this framework, I looked to the poetry aspect of this project to emotionally augment and expand upon the themes I had identified through analysing the interview transcripts. Excerpts from the poems were used to further ‘explain’ insights provided by participants in the qualitative interviews, as poetry has the capacity to highlight emotional truths in a distinct manner, due to the nature of the art form.
PART 2: Surviving Islamophobic Violence in the GTA
Chapter 5: Who is Facing Islamophobic Violence in the GTA?

5.1 Challenging the image of the ‘model Muslimah minority’

As discussed in Section 2.2.1, Islamophobic discourses have warped the depiction of Muslims to that of a monolithic, barbaric ‘Other’, who is at best, unable to meaningfully contribute to Western society, and at worst, a terrorist-in-waiting. In order to deconstruct this depiction, many well-intentioned counternarratives put forward a ‘positive Muslim identity’ that relies on model minority discourses (see Kiang et. al, 2017 for a discussion on the ramifications of model minority stereotypes). In this counternarrative process, ‘positive’ images of Islam and Muslims in the West are asserted in order to debunk harmful stereotypes and the homogenizing effects of Islamophobia; these positive depictions show Muslims engaged in academic hyperachievement, economic success, and charity work. The ‘model Muslim minority’ is, for example, a doctor, leading fundraising efforts for humanitarian relief, and part of a stable heterosexual family unit. The ‘model Muslimah minority’ similarly engages with hyperachievement, but also must be decidedly ‘modern’; she may affiliate with Islamic faith practices, but only in a way that is palatable and unobtrusive to the ‘norms’ of Western liberal society. The ‘model Muslimah minority’ may wear hijab, but it will be a colourful hijab, and perhaps match her blouse. She most definitely does not wear niqab. She speaks English. She has Canadian (or American) citizenship – not precarious status. She is fun-loving, happy, apolitical, and watches hockey.

Anti-Black racism and model minority discourses are inextricably linked, with the ‘success’ (read: economic success) of newer immigrants to the United States and Canada often held up as justification for misplaced blame on Black communities for the generational economic disenfranchisement wrought on their communities through systemic anti-Black racism. Indeed, the ‘model Muslimah minority’ is a light-skinned Arab or light-skinned South Asian woman; her
lighter skin tone makes her more palatable to white supremacy, and serves to continually erase the reality of Black Muslimahs and masks the intersection of Islamophobia and anti-Black racism.

Despite its flaws and almost caricatured narrowness of view, the ‘model Muslimah minority’ is regularly held up as the *antidote* to racism and gendered Islamophobia. What’s more, imagery of this palatable ‘not-too-Muslim’ Muslimah have been put forward in far-reaching global anti-Islamophobia campaigns. In the wake of Donald Trump’s election as President of the United States, the Women’s March, a large movement encompassing a diverse set of intersecting progressive demands that coalesce around resisting the Trump agenda, released a series of *We the People* posters. One of the most iconic posters in the series, seen in Fig. 4b, depicts what to me encapsulates the ideal of the ‘model Muslimah minority’: a light-skinned, young, patriotic *not-too-Muslim* Muslim woman. By contrast, Fig. 4a depicts Munira Ahmed, the woman whose photo inspired the poster. Munira Ahmed is a South Asian Muslim woman who does not normally wear hijab. Although she already aligns strongly with model Muslimah minority expectations by being South Asian, English speaking, and young, her image was still altered significantly for the *We the People* poster. In the poster image, Munira’s skin colour is whitened, she is given bright red lipstick, and her features have been made more angular to align with European beauty standards.
These kinds of images of the model Muslimah minority have powerfully affected what the public understands to be ‘the face of’ Muslim women and who they empathize with as ‘worthy victims’ of Islamophobic violence. Indeed, in-depth news coverage of Islamophobic violence faced by Muslim women in the GTA often feature Muslim women who fit the model Muslimah minority profile. For example, a 2015 CBC news article reported that Sundus A. was targeted for Islamophobic verbal abuse on a TTC bus (Rieti, 2015), which, as we will see below, was a common experience for participants in this research study as well. However, unlike many of the participants in the study, Sundus is young, lighter-skinned, speaks fluent English, and does not wear niqab.

Another CBC news article on Islamophobia faced by a Muslim woman – this time, at a Toronto airport, through racial profiling of her Muslim name – also featured someone who fits the model Muslimah minority profile. In discussing the incident and sharing the hurt and harm caused to Alia Ali by this incident of profiling, the article takes pains to mention – even in the headline – that Ali is a doctor. It is worth noting that Ali’s economic status differs profoundly from almost every participant in this study, 17/21 of whom identified as low income. Ali also fits the model Muslimah minority profile of being a young, South Asian, light-skinned woman, who in this case does not wear hijab.

Fig 5. Photo of Sundus A. from a 2016 CBC article on an Islamophobic verbal assault she faced on a TTC bus.

Fig 6. Photo of Alia Ali from a 2017 CBC article on an Islamophobic profiling at an airport.
By pointing out these stories, I by no means intend to diminish the validity and importance of Sundus and Ali having their stories told. The problem lies within media systems’ selective reporting of the stories of ‘worthier victims’ of Islamophobia: those who more closely align with model Muslimah minority archetypes, and are thereby given more value. This selective process, in addition to being unfair, obscures the reality of who is in fact being most regularly and aggressively targeted for Islamophobic discrimination and violence.

It is important to also consider that it could be that CBC articles on Islamophobia feature women who closely fit the modern Muslimah minority archetype because these Muslim women have greater social capital and are more comfortable with contacting and agreeing to share their stories with journalists. Indeed, when a Muslim mother was assaulted outside of a school in Thorncliffe Park while picking up her kids – an incident that occurred shortly before Sundus A.’s story – the mother’s name remained anonymous and she did not agree to be interviewed by any media outlet (“Muslim woman traumatized,” 2015). While tackling the issue of Canadian media’s treatment of survivors of Islamophobic violence and examining for biases in reporting is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is clear that media often features stories of Muslim women who mirror the monolithic ‘acceptable’ Muslim woman image depicted in the We the People poster. ‘The face of’ gendered Islamophobic violence victimhood and survivorship is that of a young, light-skinned, English speaking, economically stable or upwardly mobile Muslimah who either wears a palatable style of hijab or does not cover her hair. This stultified image has arguably constrained the scope of anti-Islamophobia education campaigns and interventions, which perhaps miss swaths of sub-populations of Muslim women who are in fact most vulnerable to Islamophobic violence. Therefore, it is of great importance that I detail the demographic profile
of the participants in my research study, as it can help shatter the notion of the model Muslimah minority as-sole-and-worthy-victim-of Islamophobic violence.\textsuperscript{3}

5.2 Demographic Features of Participants in the Study

Table 1 provides a snapshot of some of the relevant demographic features of participants in this study. These categories, along with other considerations, will be explored in greater depth the following sections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Racialization</th>
<th>Ethnic Background/Country of Origin</th>
<th>Muslim-Identified Clothing Worn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amira</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Hijab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asma</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Hijab at time of incident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanifa</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Niqab, hijab and abaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryam</td>
<td>In her 40s</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>Hijab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lailah</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Arab Country</td>
<td>Hijab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zainab</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Hijab and abaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warsan</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>Hijab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shireen</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Hijab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faiza</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Hijab at time of incident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naiyyirah</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Hijab, niqab, abaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aisha</td>
<td>Early 40s</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>Hijab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jihan</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Hijab, niqab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Najma</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>Hijab, niqab at the time of the incident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aissatou</td>
<td>Late 30s</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Guinea</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shahnoza</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>Hijab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>Caribbean/Europe</td>
<td>Hijab during some incidents, none during other incidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safiya</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Hijab and abaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahar</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Hijab, niqab, and abaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilqis</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>Hijab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tahirah</td>
<td>Late 30s/early 40s</td>
<td>Black/Brown</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Hijab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>Arab country</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{3} When discussing demographic data regarding research participants, I will focus on the 21 interview participants only, not the arts-based research participants. This is because I did not collect demographic data from the Muslim women who submitted poetry to the study.
5.2.1 Age

Prior to conducting this study, my own perspectives were shaped by model Muslimah minority discourses; I anticipated that the majority of women who would reach out to the study would be young Muslimah university students, perhaps with an activist bent, who were likely to be first generation Canadians and English speaking. My bias in anticipating this kind of representation might also have been fueled by the fact that most prominent anti-Islamophobia activists I know fit this profile. I also assumed that these kinds of Muslim women would be the most eager to have their voices heard in this kind of a study, whereas others might find it burdensome or daunting to be involved. As described above, my outreach strategy relied heavily on social media – Facebook and Twitter. That also led me to assume that younger Muslimahs, who would be more active online, would be a mainstay of this study. I could not have been more wrong.

Due to the highly connected social network of Muslimahs in Regent Park, one research participant saw my research study recruitment post online and spread the news of the study through word-of-mouth in her community, thereby connecting with me with several older Muslimah participants who were eager to be heard. This fortunate turn of events connected me with a cross-section of participants in the study that extended far beyond my social networks and my pre-conceived notions regarding who my research participants would be.

The average age of research participants in this study is 39 years old. The youngest participant is 18; the eldest is 58. Only 3/21 participants are university students. Two of the three participants who reported the most frequent verbal assault in public are over 50. The reality that Islamophobic violence affects older Muslimahs mirrors statistics recently gathered about anti-Muslim hate crimes in Canada: according to Leber (2017), “between 2010 and 2015, half of the victims (50%) of violent hate crimes targeting Muslims were 35 years of age or older” (p. 19).
The fact that older Muslims are targeted has significant implications for our understanding of the nature of Islamophobic violence, and what supports and interventions will be appropriate for it.

For example, although this practice is not necessarily attributable to her age, Hanifa – one of the two participants over 50 who reported frequent verbal assault in public – told me that she chooses to not carry a cell phone:

Other thing is I don't have any cell phone, I don't like to use, I don't... almost I'm 20 years, I don't like... I trust with Allah, Alhamdullillah, always Allah with me, then I never carry, any, any, no, no, no, no. – Hanifa

Hanifa’s decision to not carry a cell phone is discussed in more detail in Section 9.2.2; however, it is important to note that technology is typically adopted more quickly by younger generations. Nonetheless, new interventions geared towards combatting public harassment and crime in Toronto, such as the #ThisIsWhere TTC campaign and SafeTTC app (discussed more in Section 10.6), rely on cell phone technology. Indeed, whether it be calling the police, using a reporting app, or learning more through a hashtag or online video, strategies for combatting Islamophobia have leaned heavily on mobile and internet technology. But do these solutions match the technology uptake and habits of the populations affected by Islamophobic violence? In Hanifa’s case, the answer is no.

On the other end of the age spectrum, it is important to note that severe gendered Islamophobic violence can be targeted towards children and youth. One research participant recounted how she was targeted for Islamophobic bullying starting at age 3 in Ontario public schools, and endured an Islamophobically-motivated rape on school property at age 12 (this incident is discussed in Section 6.3.4). The fact that Islamophobically-motivated sexual violence can be perpetrated
against Muslim children should inform the need for policy, training, survivor support, and education interventions regarding gendered Islamophobia and Islamophobic violence in elementary, middle, and high schools (see Section 10.5).

5.2.2 *Motherhood*

Neoliberal discourses seek to hyper-individualize human beings, and promote understandings of social problems that frame them as individual challenges that impact individualized people and must therefore be solved alone, according to the individual’s resources and personal efforts. Discussions of Islamophobic violence against Muslimahs are no exception to this framework: reporting apps are created for individual Muslimahs to document what happened to them; hate crimes against individual Muslimahs are shared on media and social media; bystanders are encouraged to intervene if they witness an individual Muslimah being targeted; stories of individual Muslimahs ‘breaking stereotypes’ (often by aligning with model minority tropes) are circulated to ‘combat’ Islamophobia.

One clear finding of this study is that the impact of gendered Islamophobic violence is rarely an individual impact: it has direct and indirect effects on the partners, parents, and children of the woman who was targeted for violence. This fact was particularly striking for the younger children of Muslimahs targeted for Islamophobic violence, some of whom were direct witnesses to the incident.

Of the participants in this study, 14/21 were mothers – most with multiple children and a few even with grandchildren. As stated above, in some cases, young children were direct witnesses to the targeted violence against their mothers; in other cases, they heard about it when their mother arrived home. Some adult children, as we will see below in Section 7.3.1, took on the task of
emotionally supporting their mothers in the aftermath of violence by helping her make sense of it and consider her options moving forwards.

Islamophobic violence also had an impact on the parents of children and young women who were targeted for it. One participant in the study had a mental breakdown after an Islamophobically-motivated rape when she was 12; her mother did not know this had happened to her until she disclosed the incident when she was in her 20s. In the interim, a suite of post-traumatic coping mechanisms, such as weight gain, self-harm, and severe emotional distress, were visible to her mother, but their cause was unknown.

5.2.3 Racialization

As discussed above, being marked as Muslim is a type of racialization that occurs through discourses of cultural racism which function to mark Muslim bodies as ‘Other’ with the same tenacity as biological racism. However, in addition to being racialized as Muslim, I asked research participants about their ethnicity, and made note of their racial identity. Notably, 9/21 of the research participants were Black. As discussed above, Islamophobia is linked with anti-Blackness, as Black Muslims face a combination of anti-Black racism and Islamophobic othering that renders them more vulnerable to violence. Further, Black Muslims have drawn attention to the ways in which they are erased from Muslim communities and spaces, through lack of representation on larger Muslim organizational decision-making bodies, through erasure of the historic reality that Black Muslims were the first Muslims in North America, and through reluctance of non-Black Muslims to show solidarity around current systemic oppressions affecting Black people. Although current hate crime data does not allow for an examination of the proportion of anti-Muslim hate crimes that were perpetrated against Black Muslims, it has
been asserted by community members that the brunt of Islamophobic violence is targeted not just toward visibly Muslim women – but to visibly Muslim women who are Black.

The proportion of Black participants coming forward with stories of targeted Islamophobia supports this assertion; approximately one out of two participants in this study are Black (see Table 1). Of the three participants in the study who reported chronic, frequent Islamophobic verbal assault in public spaces, two of them are Black, and the third is a South Asian woman who wears niqab.

Zainab, one of the two Black Muslimah participants who reported frequent verbal assault, described how he is regularly racialized as Pakistani or Afghani by perpetrators:

[T]hey told me “go back to your country! Go back, Pakistani! Go back, Afghani! Go back!” You know? Like that. They doesn't know where I am from [laughs]…. Everyone say, shout out, from the bike sometimes, the motorcycle, there was two – one driving, the other sitting – and then like show me the finger [makes middle finger gesture], [saying] “go back, go back, fuck you, go back, Afghani! Go back, Pakistan!” – Zainab

Zainab is from Kenya. As a Black Muslim woman, she is marked as the quintessential Other, with perpetrators filling in details about her imagined origins themselves. Zainab also wears hijab and abaya, which, as will be discussed below, is also used an excuse for targeting Muslim women for verbal assault.

In addition to the nine Black Muslimah participants, 6/21 of the research participants are brown (South Asian), 2/21 are Arab, 3/21 participants are of mixed racial background and one participant is central Asian (from Uzbekistan) (see Table 1).
5.2.4 Immigrant Status

Thinking back to the *We the People* image of the model Muslimah minority, whose very hijab is an American flag, it is fair to assume that the ‘ideal’ Muslimah – the one worthy of protection from Islamophobic violence – will be a Canadian citizen, and will not have precarious legal status in Canada.

The majority (16/21) of participants in this study were born outside of Canada and migrated here. In order to maximize interview participants’ sense of safety, I excluded questions about participants’ legal status in Canada, in case such a question made them feel vulnerable or lose trust in the interview process. However, through the course of their answers to my open-ended questions, two participants voluntarily divulged that there was a link between their precarious status in Canada and their response to the incidents of Islamophobia they faced. Shahnoza, an International Student at York here on a temporary Student Visa, said:

> Our situation here in Canada is not that stable ‘cause we are here on Student Visa…. [and] not permanent resident or citizen. So at this point we [are] kind of scared to report this [Islamophobic verbal assault] to people because you're scared of your own situation…. ‘Cause you know, I'm not citizen here, I'm not permanent resident, so maybe next time when I have to get my Visa, I won't get my Visa or they won't extend my Visa or something like that. – Shahnoza

Another participant shared about how her lack of permanent status in Canada made her afraid to speak back to the perpetrator who was verbally assaulting her on the subway:

> I was scared because I thought I didn't have papers here in Canada so because she's [the perpetrator’s] Canadian, I don't have any rights to talk. I don't have any rights to even
defend myself. So maybe that misunderstanding that made me feel more scared, more like mindful [that] I cannot speak up. So I suppress my voice. – Lailah

These two cases show that Muslimahs who do not have permanent status in Canada may fear that reporting – or even verbally responding to – Islamophobic abuse will impact their ability to obtain permanent status in Canada. This may partly explain why this form of violence is gravely under-reported (see Section 7.4).

5.2.5 Language Barriers

English is not the first language of 15/20 of the research participants, and at least 9 participants experienced language barriers when the incident of Islamophobic violence occurred: at that time, they had difficulty communicating with the perpetrator and/or with people they would have wanted to disclose to after the incident. For these participants, language barriers compounded the challenge of responding to the violence and accessing supports afterward. Hanifa, one of the participants who reported frequent verbal assault in public spaces, explained how language barriers pose a challenge for her in speaking back to perpetrators: “My second language is English, right? First language: Tamil. If argue with one man or woman [in] Tamil, I'm easy for talking. If they are talking with English, then little bit nervous for me.”

Another participant, Safiya, who has since taken classes and feels more proficient in English, reflected on how language barriers prevented her from accessing supports when she was physically attacked in downtown Toronto in 2011: “You know when if your language is not comfortable... you don't feel comfortable talking, so you don't know how to explain [the incident] properly. That's the problem. That's the problem too.” Similarly, Najma had very limited English skills when she was yelled at in the park in front of her young children. Now that
she speaks English more fluently, she reflected on what she would have wanted to say to the man who yelled at her:

If I understand language, I want to talk to him. I [would want to] say “that's good, don't worry, I am like your friend. Just like your children, just like you. I am a mom.” I want to say that [back then] but I don’t know, I don't talk English... that is problem. – Najma

While it is important to recognize the role of language barriers in Muslimahs’ experiences of and reactions to Islamophobic violence, we must avoid the generalization that all Muslim women face language barriers, as that in itself is a stereotype. Indeed, during the time that one research participant wore hijab (she no longer wears it), she was often assumed to be a newcomer to Canada with language barriers, even though she was born in Canada and only speaks English:

I can’t tell you how many times people were like “oh I was really surprised by the way you speak; I was expecting you to have an accent.” And like, okaaay. It's just like the fabric on a woman’s head... marks her completely as not being of this society. It’s really foreign to consider that like maybe she was born here. – Faiza

5.2.6 Visible Muslims

18/21 of the research participants were wearing some kind of Islamic clothing (hijab, niqab, and/or abaya) at the time they encountered Islamophobic violence. As Faiza pointed out, the “fabric on a woman’s head” often marks her as ‘Other’, and this – as this and many other research studies show – is an increased risk factor for being targeted for Islamophobic violence. However, in discussing the link between visible Muslimness and Islamophobic violence against women, it is important to not inadvertently construe hijab, niqab, or abaya as provoking violence. The hijab has been described “visually threatening” in well-meaning literature discussing Islamophobic hate crime and assaults against visibly Muslim women (Allen, 2015, p. 288); this
likening of clothing to a ‘threat’ of violence implies that the violence is somehow ‘instigated’ by the Muslimah who was wearing a niqab, hijab, or an abaya. Such an analysis elides the true source of the violence, which is within the body and mind of the perpetrator, who I contend is using the niqab, hijab, or burqa as an *excuse* to express hate and propensity for violence that already exists within him or her. Parallel arguments can be found in feminist efforts to dispel rape myths: the notion that a miniskirt somehow ‘provokes’ sexual violence is false. It is not the miniskirt’s (or the woman’s) fault; neither the skirt not the woman caused the sexual violence. The cause of sexual violence is entirely in the mind of the person (usually man) who committed it.

With this caveat in mind, we can discuss the clothing worn by participants in this study who faced Islamophobic violence, insofar as it was *used as an excuse* for perpetrators to act out their violent behaviour, not as a *provocation* for their violence. Such an understanding can help reinforce the notion that violence against women is never excusable, regardless of what a woman is wearing – whether it be a niqab or a miniskirt – and that this violence is not the woman’s, nor her clothing’s, fault.

**Niqab**

5/21 research participants wore niqab at the time of the incidents of Islamophobic violence. It is staggering that approximately 25% of all research participants who came forward to discuss experiences of Islamophobic violence wear niqab; in a recent survey of Muslims across Canada, it was found that 48% of Muslim women respondents wear hijab, whereas only 3% of Muslim women in Canada wear niqab (Environics Institute, 2016, p. 18). The high representation of niqab-wearing women coming forward for this study might indicate that they are more frequently targeted for Islamophobic violence. Indeed, one of the niqab-wearing participants,
Najma, stopped wearing niqab and now wears hijab only, because she wanted to be relieved of the Islamophobia she faces while wearing niqab (see Section 8.2.4). Two of the other niqab-wearing participants, Hanifa and Nayyirah, reported Islamophobic verbal assault as happening on a frequent, near-constant basis. The other two niqab-wearing participants, Jihan and Bahar, reported that they did not like leaving the house alone because of their experiences of Islamophobic verbal assault in public spaces.

According to one participant, Aisha, who wears hijab only and is a community leader who is entrusted with many stories of Islamophobic violence affecting families in her community, women who wear niqab are targeted more than women who wear hijab only:

> When you wear hijab that is my identity as a Muslim that carry huge on my shoulders, that comes to also responsibilities and also knowing that it could happen, anything, to you, when you present the way you present. Some of women wear niqabs... that also been very hard. The hijabs [are treated] better than the niqabs. So I give them a lot credit for... they keep going wearing niqabs and present themself in society. – Aisha

There is a pervasive and specific antipathy targeted towards women who wear niqab in Canada (Tumilty, 2017). A 2017 Angus Reid Institute poll of the religious tolerance of Canadians showed that although 75% of Canadians are comfortable with hijab, only 32% are comfortable with niqab; by comparison, 88% are comfortable with a nun’s habit. This data shows that niqab is singled out in particular as unacceptable. The practice of specifically homing in on niqab was introduced to the Canadian national stage by then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s focus on banning

![Fig 7. Zunera Ishaq, the woman who Stephen Harper attempted to ban from taking a citizenship oath unless she removed her niqab.](image)
niqabs from citizenship ceremonies in 2014 and 2015, in an obsessive campaign to prevent Zunera Ishaq, a 32-year-old school teacher in Mississauga, from taking the citizenship oath, unless she removed her niqab. At the end of a lengthy legal battle with the government, Ishaq eventually won the right to take her citizenship oath.

Choosing the moment of a citizenship ceremony to insist on niqab removal was read by many as a symbolic attempt to define niqab as inherently un-Canadian. As described above, the Canadian national project, and its ongoing processes of renationalization, has not only relied on the trope of a threatening or invading racial ‘Other’, but of a religious or spiritual ‘Other’, with un-Christian, immoral spiritual practices which must be stamped out in order for Canada to be pure. This logic is visible in the cultural genocide waged against Indigenous spiritual practices by the reservation system and residential school systems. The Indian Act of 1876 was amended in 1884 to prohibit religious ceremonies and dances of Indigenous peoples (Truth and Reconciliation Canada, 2015, p. 109), with precious spiritual items burned by so-called ‘Indian Agents’ in mass fires. These Indian agents were tasked with ensuring that Indigenous people were not engaging in any banned spiritual practices. At the same time, the residential school system was established, which was given the task of Christianizing Indigenous children.

It is perhaps due to this ongoing legacy of spiritual violence that the connections between Islamophobia and colonial oppression is not lost on the Indigenous peoples of Canada. When Zunera Ishaq’s battle with Stephen Harper reached national media prominence during the 2015 federal election, several Inuit and other Indigenous women activists came forward with a viral online activism campaign called

Fig 8. Lena Amaruq Aittauq, who started the #DoIMatterNow campaign with this photo.
#DoIMatterNow, which featured Indigenous women covering their faces, as if wearing niqab, and asking Stephen Harper if they mattered now. This tactic was meant to draw attention to the stunning disconnect between Harper’s lack of interest and action on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and his claim to be an activist for women’s rights by fixating on Ishaq’s niqab. However, this online action was not only meant to point out an immense irony. One of the activists, Janet Brewster, said that the issue of banning niqab resonated with Indigenous women, and said that “[w]e can relate to that because Indigenous women in this country have been violated and degraded to the point where it’s easier to view us as less than human” (Noël and Bastien, 2015, p. 1).

Even with Stephen Harper’s departure, specific anti-niqab antipathy remains across Canada, as demonstrated by the 2017 Angus Reid poll quoted above. Model Muslimah minority images featuring women in hijab – and not niqab – as worthy victims of Islamophobia have left niqab-wearing Muslimahs out of anti-Islamophobia public education discourse and organizing. For example, a recent #TorontoForAll poster campaign in the City of Toronto aimed to address Islamophobic verbal assault in public spaces, with two posters dedicated to depicting attacks against visibly Muslim women, while proclaiming that “Muslims are Part of Toronto”.

Both of these posters (shown in Fig 9), feature an image of a woman in hijab being verbally assaulted by a stranger, and then speaking back with a pithy comeback. While this poster campaign represents an important initiative for making the problem of Islamophobic
verbal assault visible, and does well to have one of the two posters feature a Black Muslimah, notice how in this anti-Islamophobia imagery women in niqab are missing. What would the impact of the poster be if one of the women was in niqab? Would that be considered too ‘controversial’? To what extent are anti-Islamophobia education efforts reinforcing the notion that certain *not-too-Muslim* Muslimahs are more deserving of inclusion and acceptance in Toronto?

The posters in Fig. 9 show Muslim women who appear to be relatively young. They are also both fluent in English, as they are able to quickly respond to the perpetrators of verbal assault. Also, as their speech text implies, these Muslim women were born in the GTA, and can therefore be assumed to be Canadian citizens. Looking at the profiles of the participants in my study, the demographic profiles of the Muslim women in these posters would represent the lived realities of only 5 out of the 21 participants.

Finally, the clever responses depicted by the Muslim women in these posters that Muslim women in Toronto are ‘from’ here, and therefore belong. These retorts erase the reality that all non-Indigenous bodies in Canada are part of a settler colonialist project that is linked to ongoing oppression, disenfranchisement and violence towards Indigenous peoples. While the intention of the poster is positive – to reinforce that Muslims belong – an anti-colonial Muslim feminist poster responding to Islamophobic verbal assault would not use this particular method of challenging Islamophobia.

Given the increased targeting of women in niqab, future anti-Islamophobia public education campaigns in Toronto should prioritize their images, stories, and needs.
Hijab

11/21 research participants wore hijab only (not niqab) at the time of the Islamophobic incident, and three of these participants no longer wear hijab. All of these participants flagged the hijab as an identity marker that was used as an excuse to target them for violence.

Abaya

Women who wore abayas along with their hijabs may also be particularly othered and targeted for violence. Indeed, images of model Muslimah minorities wearing hijab often have them wearing predominantly Western-style clothing in addition to their hijabs: they may be wearing, for example, jeans, a blouse, and a colourful hijab. This outfit is in stark contrast to Muslimahs who may choose to wear a black abaya and black hijab. According to Zainab, a hijab-wearing participant who reported facing experienced frequent verbal assault in public spaces, the combination of hijab, abaya, and the colour black was used as an excuse to target her and family for Islamophobia at a public festival. Zainab observed that “if they see hijab, they go crazy. And then I wear abaya – black to black – and then they more scared. Because all of us wear black, they [non-Muslims] say, “ohhh, what is this?””

5.2.7 Non-visible Muslims

Muslimahs who are not visibly Muslim are also affected by Islamophobic violence. 3/21 participants in this study were not wearing niqab or hijab at the time when they experienced Islamophobic violence – although they were not visibly identifiable as Muslim, they became known as Muslim to perpetrators due to other factors.

Two participants were identified as Muslim by perpetrators on the basis of their Muslim last names. One participant, Stephanie, has a ‘Western’-sounding first name, but her last name was
shared by a prominent Muslim who was associated with a war between America and a Muslim-majority country. Stephanie describes how her last name\textsuperscript{4} linked her to that conflict, and was used as a basis for Islamophobic bullying in school. As she explained,

\begin{quote}
kids would often like harass me about being related to Khomeini, which is not true, it’s just... white people, when they think all brown people are related to each other. And yeah, the idea of like you’re... a five-year-old terrorist…. I just remember from early, from being three years old, and like also like four years old and five years old, like knowing already that I was Muslim, like being aware that I was a Muslim and I just often faced a lot of bullying. – Stephanie
\end{quote}

Another participant, Alison, also has a ‘Western’-sounding first name and a Muslim last name from her father’s side. Alison described how when she went by her father’s last name on Facebook, she would receive online Islamophobic abuse, whereas when she used her mother’s last name, she would not. Alison also faced Islamophobic abuse by her non-Muslim ex-partner and her ex-in-laws. Although she was not a visible Muslim, her ex-partner and his family were aware of her religious background and they targeted her for it (see Section 6.3.5).

Another means by which women in the study who are not visibly Muslim faced Islamophobia was when they were within earshot when people were making Islamophobic comments, and not censoring their level of vitriol because they believed that there were no Muslims around to witness it. One research participant, Aissatou, a Muslim woman who does not wear hijab,

\footnote{\textsuperscript{4} For the purpose of this study, I have changed the Stephanie’s last name to the name of a Muslim leader from a country that she is not affiliated with, as a way to keep her identity anonymous while retaining the meaning of the story.}
described hearing a classmate advocating for genocide of Muslims in her Academic Upgrading class:

He said, “If I have a power, I would burn every Muslim alive.” I said, “What!?” … He go, “No no no, I'm not talking to you.” Well, I said, “You're talking to me! You said every Muslim!” I guess because I'm not wearing hijab, so I don't look Muslim to his mind? – Aissatou

5.2.8 Lower Income

Recent analysis out of the United States has argued that the intersection between poverty and Islamophobia is underexplored, even though 45% of Muslims in the U.S. live in poverty (Beydoun, 2016, p. 1468). Poverty places Muslims at risk for higher rates of Islamophobia, as poor communities are more targeted for hate activity, and those living in poverty also live with higher rates of police surveillance and police brutality, leaving less trust between police and community and lower levels of reporting of Islamophobic violence (Beydoun, 2016). Although no similar analysis of economic status and Islamophobia has been conducted in Canada, a starting point can be noting that 17/21 of the participants who approached this study self-identified as low-income. 3/21 participants described themselves as medium income and one reported being high income.

Being low-income means that there are less means at one’s disposal for legal fees and counselling fees. Devaluation of lower income people creates an added layer of dehumanization. Compounding low-income status with Islamophobia, language barriers and precarious immigration status creates further vulnerability to violence.
Given the increased vulnerability of low-income Muslims to Islamophobic violence, and the overrepresentation of economically marginalized Muslim women in this study, it is essential that strategies to counter Islamophobia be linked with anti-poverty initiatives and be developed using a lens that attends to socioeconomic inequities. Indeed, as noted above, the new app-based approaches to tracking and responding to Islamophobic violence (described in Section 10.6) presume that Muslim women are able to afford the mobile devices onto which these apps will be installed. In order for anti-Islamophobia initiatives to be accessible to the women who need them most, they must be configured and developed in ways that are accessible to the poor.

Indeed, an anti-poverty initiative in Regent Park – a community catering program that empowers Muslim women with a means to transform their culinary skills into sources of additional income – although it was not explicitly developed to address Islamophobia, nonetheless was a source of resilience and healing for several participants in the study. This example shows that anti-poverty initiatives in Muslim communities can bolster and complement anti-Islamophobia efforts by building social networks and economic capacities that are protective against the effects of Islamophobic violence.

As it stands, anti-Islamophobia organizing in the GTA does not always reflect the needs and voices of the most economically marginalized members of the Muslim community. Events bringing together Muslims to discuss Islamophobia can at times have an entry fee. Although this is understandable given the cost of space and food, it is vital that anti-Islamophobia workshops and events should be made free of charge wherever possible, including dispensations for transportation, food, as well as provisions for childcare. Ideally, they should also be held in lower-income communities, not just in universities or in corporate spaces. Making these events and discussions accessible to all Muslims, regardless of economic status, will enable
interventions for Islamophobia to be informed by the lived experiences of lower income Muslims, who indeed may be facing the highest rates of Islamophobic violence (Beydoun, 2016).

5.2.9 Trauma History

My interview questions did not include any questions about trauma history, nor did I ask for details about a participant’s past – at most, there was a general question at the beginning of the interview that invited the participant to “tell me a bit about yourself” in terms of their passions, interests, and goals (see full list of interview questions in Appendix D). Questions about trauma history were omitted so as to not unduly upset the participants, or shift them to a subject or topic that was not described as a focus of the research study in the promotional materials. Nonetheless, through voluntary unprompted disclosures, 4 out of 21 participants disclosed a trauma history involving child sexual abuse, rape, or trauma related to living in an active warzone. Moreover, through examining the ethnic and racial identities represented in the study, it is clear that 21/21 of the research participants have family histories that were affected by the colonization experience and/or the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade; these experiences are sources of historic, intergenerational trauma. Finally, 20/21 of the participants reported enduring more than one incident of Islamophobic violence, and it is likely that multiple incidents of Islamophobic violence cause a different impact than an isolated event, as the impact of violence can cumulate. These findings are particularly important because discussions regarding how to respond to Islamophobic violence, how to intervene as a bystander, or how to support someone who discloses, tend to begin with the erroneous assumption that the incident in question is the Muslim woman’s first encounter with Islamophobic violence, and that she has no significant trauma history that may shape her reaction to the violence and inform her particular needs in that moment. Given that trauma is cumulative, and subsequent episodes of violence can re-trigger
memories and emotional reactions linked to earlier experiences of violence, prior traumas must be taken into account in shaping support and care for a survivor of Islamophobic violence that will actually meet her needs.

5.2.10 Religious Identity

All of the participants identified as Muslim. This is not a given; as Islamophobic discourses broaden their scope, non-Muslims are subjected to Islamophobia by virtue of being perceived as Muslim. Sikhs and other non-Muslim women who wear headwraps, or even toss scarves over their heads because they are cold, have been targeted for Islamophobic violence. Non-Muslim Arabs and South Asians are also sometimes racialized as Muslim, as ‘Muslim’ becomes equated with brown skin.

Although all of the participants in the study self-identified as Muslim, they, like all Muslims, have diverse approaches to practising and identifying with Islam, and varying approaches to integrating Islamic belief systems into their understandings of the world. This diversity of approaches will become relevant when I discuss the faith-centered reasoning used by several participants in the study (see Section 9.2.2); such reasoning was strongly emphasized by some participants, but absent from the frameworks of other participants.

5.3 A Note About Perpetrators

This study did not seek to collect information about perpetrators of Islamophobic violence. I did not ask participants for details about the perpetrators of the violence they faced because, in re-telling an episode of violence, probing questions, especially about the perpetrator, had the risk of becoming emotionally distressing. In several cases, the participant voluntarily disclosed details about the perpetrator without my prompting. Of the perpetrators whose characteristics were
described by participants, 24 of them were white men, four were white women, two were men of colour, two were women of colour. In cases of physical or sexual assault, the perpetrators were uniformly male-identified.

These numbers do not encompass the total number of perpetrators referred to in the study: when participants were describing frequent verbal assaults they faced in public, the identities of the perpetrators were not mentioned; members of the public who shunned Muslim women are also not enumerated here. However, the cursory information available about perpetrators in this study demonstrates that in the vast majority of cases, Islamophobic violence is being perpetrated by a man against a woman; specifically, a white man against a woman racialized as Muslim. Hopkins (2016), who found similar racial and gender patterns in his study of Islamophobic violence in the U.K., argued that “White men who enact specific practices associated with masculinity and White supremacy… This is not only racist violence as it is inflected with gender and bolstered by sexism, patriarchy and White supremacy” (p. 187). In order to understand this particular form of gender-based violence “inflected” by white supremacy, we must employ intersectional theory to broaden our definition of gendered violence.

Hijin Park (2012), in her study of interracial violence against Asian women, points out that “[t]he majority of anti-violence scholarship and activism on racialized women and girls in North America is limited to examinations of heterosexual violence within racialized communities, or on what racialized men and boys do to racialized women and girls (Jiwani, 2006: Chapter 5)” (p. 492). To address this gap in the scholarship, Park advocates for a structural analysis of gendered violence that “brings into clearer view the systems of domination that violence secures” (p. 492); she further argues that “gendered and sexualized violence…both constitutes and is constituted by colonial and racial violence” (p. 492) and that this violence plays a role in constant reassertion of
racial hierarchies in North American societies. Park’s analysis resonates with the nature of Islamophobic violence described by women in the study; much of this violence appeared to be designed to humiliate, degrade, and put Muslim women ‘down’ – or, according to the perpetrators and the colonial constructs their violence upholds, ‘back in their place’.

Just as most perpetrators identified in this study were white males, Park also noted an overrepresentation of white male perpetrators in her study, and argued that “[i]n the North American context, white elite men have been, and still are, by and large, the ones who define legitimate and illegitimate violence, inflict it on others, are free from having it inflicted on them, and are least likely to be held accountable for the violence they commit (Collins, 1998)” (p. 493). This observation might explain why, even though participants in this study shared a clear pattern of being targeted by white men, there have not been inquiries or discussions regarding a crisis of white male perpetration of violence against Muslim women. Their identities remain invisible in discussions of Islamophobic violence, which is re-cast as a ‘Muslim (woman’s) problem’.

Indeed, if any other group of men were systematically targeting a specific group of women, it would be cause for social alarm (see Sections 10.2 and 10.3 for more on this double-standard).

The presence of a few white women and racialized perpetrators of Islamophobic violence against Muslimahs demonstrates how all non-Muslims are invited to participate in the oppression of Muslim women through discourses of Islamophobia. White women in particular can harvest social power by aligning themselves with white supremacy, and against Muslim women: as discussed above, white, non-Muslim women’s identity formation has been linked to their envisioning of themselves as empowered neoliberal subjects, free from any form of patriarchal oppression, and not oppressed, ‘like Muslim women are’ (see Section 6.1.6). Indeed, some of the
most vocal white supremacist Islamophobes in online neo-fascist movements are white women, such as Canada’s own Lauren Southern and Faith Goldy.

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The demographics of the participants in this study give us a complex picture of who is living with Islamophobic violence. Unlike the archetypal image of the model Muslimah minority, a survivor of Islamophobic violence may be an older woman, who is a mother or even a grandmother. She may be Black, or a darker-skinned South Asian. She may be living with language barriers, and have precarious legal status in Canada. She is likely to be low-income. She may not only be wearing a hijab, but a niqab and an abaya, perhaps made of black fabric. She may have a trauma history involving previous incidents of Islamophobic violence, other forms of violence, or generational trauma.

This picture is not meant to imply that Muslimahs who are young, light-skinned, who wear hijab only or no hijab, and who speak English, are not targeted for Islamophobic violence – indeed, a number of participants in this study fit that profile and have faced severe violence. It is meant to challenge hegemonic notions of the ‘acceptable’ Muslim women in Canada, that constrain our ideas regarding which Muslim women deserve visibility and protection. Anti-Islamophobia work must include all Muslim women, especially those who are most marginalized.
Chapter 6: The Nature of Islamophobic Violence

6.1 Discourses that ‘Permit’ Violence Against Muslimahs

In order to make sense of the specific manifestations of Islamophobic violence described by participants in this study, I will first examine the underlying ideologies and discourses that sanction and fuel violence against Muslim women. I will highlight these underlying ideologies and discourses through a combination of scholarly research and – perhaps more importantly – the insights shared by research participants regarding what they believe motivates the violence they have faced. Some of these discourses are applied to Muslims as a whole, while others are specifically targeted to Muslim women. All of them interact to create conditions that ‘sanction’ violence against Muslim women.

6.1.1 Muslims-as-Animals

A common, if not essential, way to create an environment of permission for violence against a specific race, ethnicity or other identity marker is for a dominant group to propagate discourses that dehumanize the targeted group. If someone is not human, then violence against them can hardly be considered immoral. For example, anti-Indigenous discourses of “Savagism” (Johnson, 2011), which inscribed notions of non-humanity on Indigenous bodies, were central to rationalizing the Canadian colonization project and continue to be used in the ongoing genocide of Indigenous people in Canada. During the Holocaust, the Nazis referred to Jews as Untermenschen, or subhumans; they also referred to them as ‘rats’ (“Less than Human,” 2011). The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade involved constant dehumanization of Black people: enslaved people were, for example, fed from a trough (Douglass, 1845). Currently, the genocide of Rohingya Muslims is predicated on their dehumanization: Myanmar state media has referred to
Muslims as “detestable human fleas”, and a prominent nationalist monk said, “Muslims are like the African carp” (“Rohingya Crisis,” 2017, p.1).

The Muslims-as-Animals discourse is now common currency, and easily be observed in the comments sections of online articles about Muslims in Canada. Indeed, when Liberal MP Iqra Khalid put forward a motion to condemn Islamophobia (discussed below, in Section 10.3), she received 50,000 emails, many of which included death threats and dehumanizing language (Payton, 2017). For example, one message read:

Real Canadians will rise up and get rid of the nasty blank Muzzie stench in Ottawa. They should all go the blank back to your blank hole where you belong. We will burn down your mosques draper head Muslim. (Payton, 2017, p.1)

In this comment, which is emblematic of the kind of online Islamophobic violence Muslims regularly face, the word Muslim is replaced with the epithet “Muzzie”, and these Muzzies are described as coming out of a “hole”, as if they are a group of rodents. The use of the word “stench” also implies that Muslims are foul creatures, rather than humans.

Anti-Muslim dehumanization in contemporary society has roots in a long history of Orientalist ‘Other’-ing of Muslims as exotic, barbaric, and in need of disciplining by Western and Imperial powers. In recent years however, processes of dehumanization of Muslims has relied on, as seen above, direct comparisons to animals. This has also been overlaid with discourses of the inherent, irreparable madness of Muslims, making them seem more like crazed zombies than actual human beings. According to Patel (2014), “[f]or Muslim bodies, their religious affiliation

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5 profanity was replaced with the word ‘blank’ in the news article that reported this message (Payton, 2017)
is itself taken as a sign of mental disorder. A Muslim can never be rational unless half-rescued by the civility of the West” (p. 209). Patel further notes how since Muslims are placed outside of realm of being able to ‘rectified’, they are positioned “beyond the category of human, and into the realm of subhuman and animal-like creatures” (Patel, 2014, p. 203).

If Muslims are animals, and are trapped beyond the realm of acceptable humanity due their inherent madness, then all manner of violence is justified against them, for they cannot be reasoned with. These discourses also sanction and normalize not only genocide against Muslims in global conflicts, but violence against Muslim bodies in Western countries. Indeed, the Muslims-as-Animals discourse was evident in participants’ accounts of Islamophobia in their lives. One research participant, Alison, described how staff and residents of a women’s shelter she works at treated an incoming Muslim family as if they were “animals”. Another participant, Aissatou, was told the following by a classmate in her Academic upgrading class:

[her classmate said:] "now, before people used to hate Jew people. Jews was hated, now it's the Muslims turn to be hated... it's the Muslims turn to be hated. It used to be the Jew people, now it's so... it's happened all over the world, it's not just us hating Muslims. It's not just us not want Muslim here, it's the world who don't want Muslims" – Aissatou

6.1.2 Muslims-as-Satanic

Islamophobic discourses, since they are processes of racialization that rely on religious tropes, sometimes involve notions that rely on religious frameworks. The discourse that Muslims are inherently Demonic or Satanic is borne of the ‘extreme’ evangelical Christian belief – a belief that is gaining more and more mainstream currency – that Islam is not a viable religion, but is in fact a Satanic, demonic belief system that is the anti-thesis of following Christ. In this framework, to be Muslim is essentially to be following and worshipping Satan (for example, see
McLelland, 2015). This concept may seem like it would be relegated to a limited amount of highly devout members of a fringe sect of Christianity, but due to the power of social media, this discourse is being spread to even nominal Christians and agnostics, leading to the development of individuals who may not even go to Church or have a strong faith practice, but nonetheless have accepted the idea that Muslims are inherently evil and Satanic.

This demonism is then inscribed on the Muslim body, making the Muslim not just beyond the scope of humanity, but inherently evil. If Muslims are Satanic, then they cannot be reasoned with or expected to act normally. In this framework, any attack on a Muslim could, by definition, be seen as a type of ‘self-defence’ against a demonic attack. The discourse of Muslims-as-Satanic also frames violence against Muslims as spiritually noble, sanctioned and perhaps even mandated by God. Such a framework creates a ‘space of permission’ for perpetrators to act out violence on Muslim bodies with impunity.

The Muslims-as-Demonic discourse showed up for one participant, Alison. Her current father-in-law, who at the time of the incident did not know that Alison is Muslim, posted a video on social media that claimed that if you take the word ‘Allah’ and break it down into numbers, and then translate those numbers into Greek, you get the word ‘Satan’. Alison lamented how the video was “literally talking about how Allah is actually Satan and how Muslims are actually Satan worshippers”.

The presence of this video brought Alison to tears of anger. Her partner spoke to his father, and the video was taken down. But how many more videos and articles like this are circulating, spreading this harmful discourse?
6.1.3 Muslims-as-Invaders

Hegemonic discourses that Muslims are inherently threatening to and ‘incompatible with Western (incl. Canadian) society’ have been used to push the notion that Muslims should be eliminated or expelled from Canada. The notion that a racially, culturally or spiritually distinct group is inherently threatening to the Canadian project is as old as Canada itself: Indigenous ceremonies, dances, prayers, beliefs, philosophies, and ways of governing were framed as incompatible with a relatively monolithic European Christian social and spiritual norm. Indeed, the discourse of Muslims-as-Invaders relies on the erasure of the history of colonization of Indigenous territories, cultural genocide and ongoing disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples and lands, in that it labels Canada as a ‘white, Christian territory’ at risk of being polluted by a racialized and/or religious Other. The fantasy of a pure, timeless, untouched white Christian Canadian society that is now being poisoned by the invasion of a Muslim Other, and whose very foundation is imperiled by this Other, perpetuates the ideology that white Christians have inherent and ultimate moral authority over the land and peoples inhabiting Turtle Island. The accompanying fantasy of the need to now ‘fight off an invading Muslim plague’ subtly functions to place the Canadian state firmly (back) into the hands of white Christian settler-colonialists, and mask the urgent need for reconciliation and restitution efforts with Indigenous peoples. In this way, not only does Islamophobia depend on anti-Indigenous racism and erasure of colonial history, but it reinforces processes of ongoing colonization and its continued erasure.

Alison recounts how the colonial and history-erasing fantasy of white lands, which are now being polluted by a Muslim Other, was expressed by her ex-mother-in-law:

And she [her ex-mother-in-law] looks at me, says, “This area used to be a really nice area.” And I’m like, “Used to be? What happened?” She’s like, “You know... all those,
um... *non-whites* moved in here.” And I looked at her and I'm like, “Non-whites?” And she's like, “Yeah, you know, those *scarf* people.” And I just, I didn't know what the hell to say. I was just like... literally I was at a loss for words. – Alison

Another participant, Zainab, describes how when her and her hijab-and-abaya-clad family took a trip to a public festival on Mill and Parliament, the crowds of white people who dominated the festival space reacted to her family as if they were “a snake coming in [to] follow them.”

Islamophobic discourses train Canadians to recoil from Muslims, whose presence is disrupting, polluting, and destroying *their* country.

Aisha references the discourse of Muslims-as-Invaders in her reflections on why Muslims are being targeted for violence and abuse:

> They [non-Muslim Canadians] feel threatened. That's what I've been seeing and I've been hearing also. They feel that we will become majority and they will become minority. That's the threat that I've been hearing again and again. So we are visible. They don't want us to be visible, so we are here to stay. We are not going anywhere. – Aisha

Stoking white settlers’ fears of ‘becoming the minority’ has become a central recruiting premise and propaganda tool for contemporary white supremacist movements. No longer are they (overtly) claiming racial superiority and an (immediate) desire to kill or enslave other races, but instead they are claiming to be ‘defending’ themselves against being outnumbered or replaced by other racial or religious groups. Richard Spencer, the most prominent and successful white supremacist leaders in America today, has said things like “Immigration is a kind a proxy war—and maybe a last stand—for White Americans, who are undergoing a painful recognition that,
unless dramatic action is taken, their grandchildren will live in a country that is alien and hostile” (“Richard Bertrand Spencer,” n.d., p.1).

After stoking this initial fear of demographic replacement, the neo-fascist belief system currently being propagated online – and increasingly in-person, as white supremacist groups grow more bold – is that white people need to be defended from a global conspiracy known as ‘white genocide’ (Jeffrey, 2000). ‘White genocide’, according to the conspiracy, is an orchestrated attempt by Jews and others who ‘hate white people’ to encourage whites to racially intermarry (thereby losing the next generation of pure whites), have fewer children, no children, or abortions (thereby depleting the number of white families), and allow mass immigration of racialized populations into majority-white countries. Through these methods, white people are ‘under attack’, and therefore need to ‘defend themselves’. Indeed, as noted above, in the infamous white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in which Heather Heyer, an anti-fascist protestor, was murdered, the torch-carrying white supremacists were chanting “Jews will not replace us” (Green, 2017, p.1), which indicates their belief in ‘white genocide’ and their Antisemitic assertion that Jews are responsible for it.

The conspiracy of ‘white genocide’ is used to further stoke Islamophobic hatred of Muslims, as Muslim immigration is framed as an invasion, heralding the destruction of the white race. A high-profile Canadian white supremacist Lauren Southern, for example, has made videos of a Muslim neighbourhood in France, proclaiming and lamenting that she cannot recognize France any longer (Southern, 2017).

Neo-white supremacist and neo-Nazi propaganda deploying Islamophobia to promote fear of ‘white genocide’ is coupled with the notion that the mere presence of Muslims indicates a
burgeoning political project to overtake the countries they inhabit in order to establish ‘Sharia law’. There is no absolute, monolithic Sharia law across the varied interpretations of Islam practiced across the globe; all legal rulings and frameworks in Islamic history have been developed by people in power according to their subjective interpretations of Islamic texts. Indeed, the re-interpretation of texts by progressive Muslim feminists may well develop versions of Sharia law that are entirely unrecognizable from the heinous examples often held up to shame Muslims. While an in-depth definition and debate about Sharia law is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that in the discourse of Muslim-as-Invader, Sharia law portrayed as a monolithic, unbending austerity, similar to what the Taliban imposed when they took over Afghanistan. It is further presumed that all Muslims ascribe to the Taliban’s interpretation, and are committed to transforming their societies to reflect the Taliban’s vision. This depiction, in addition to being ludicrous, misrepresents the people and history of Afghanistan. Afghanistan was once both Muslim and ‘progressive’, and was remembered as such by many of my family members. Then, in the 1980s, Afghanistan was funnelled with CIA money and military training in order to defeat the then-Soviet Union during the so-called Cold War (it was only cold for some). After beleaguered battle with the Soviets, in which 10% of Afghanistan’s population died, the country was littered with land mines and immense trauma. In this unstable setting, the country fell into the corrupted hands of first, brutal war lords, and then, to the brutal hands of the Taliban, with their violent and repressive interpretations of Sharia law.

Nonetheless, Islamophobia racializes Muslims as monolithic, and therefore their presence in Western countries is seen as not just an invasion that is bringing about ‘white genocide’, but the beginning of an imposition of a Taliban-esque governmental system. These notions frame Muslims as dangerous to the integrity of the state, and thereby render them vulnerable to people
who seek to excuse their propensity for Islamophobic violence by claiming that they are ‘defending’ white people from genocide or ‘defending’ Canada from Sharia law.

6.1.4 Muslims-as-Terrorists

The discourse of Muslims-as-Terrorists is perhaps the most widely discussed Islamophobic discourse; it is primarily perpetuated through popular entertainment media and biased news media coverage. A recent Georgia State University research study comprehensively analyzing news coverage of every terrorist attack that took place in the U.S. between 2011 and 2015 found that if the perpetrator is Muslim, it received a 449% increase in media coverage, compared to when the perpetrator was not Muslim (Kentish, 2017). There also has been considerable grief expressed by the Muslim community that bombings and mass shootings in Western countries are typically only deemed terrorism if they are committed by Muslim-identified perpetrators; if the perpetrator is white and/or non-Muslim, these heinous acts are treated as the individual crimes of a ‘lone wolf’, and attributed to mental health issues. Through this bias, Muslim bodies are framed as ‘owning’ terrorist violence.

A number of research participants expressed frustration with this double-standard, and the collective punishment directed at Muslims. According to Faiza, “Black and brown bodies are the terrorists and white bodies are lone wolves.” Similarly, Aissatou pointed out that:

If a Muslim kills one person it's called terrorism, when a non-Muslim kills, it's just called crazy killing, so to me that is so unfair. I want to check in the dictionary, it's not in the dictionary; [the dictionary does not] say you have to be Muslim to be terrorist, and so somehow society now have the name terrorism only for Muslim, when there is terrorism in every religion. It is in all religions, so we only choose to call Muslims terrorists. – Aissatou
In addition to making acts of terrorist violence the sole provision of Muslims, with five times the amount of media coverage being given to Muslim-identified perpetrators, the discourse of Muslims-as-Terrorists also posits that all Muslims are collectively responsible for the acts of individual Muslim-identified perpetrators of mass violence. Vitally, this notion of collective responsibility is singularly applied to Muslim communities, and creates an atmosphere of permission for ‘retaliatory’ violence against Muslim (women’s) bodies. For example, in October 2017, an atrocious act of mass murder was carried out by a white non-Muslim man, who killed over 50 people and injured hundreds more in a mass shooting in Las Vegas. Imagine, if in the aftermath of that crime, white non-Muslim women were attacked in the street as ‘revenge’ for that violence. One cannot imagine that scenario, because it is absurd and unfair. White women are innocent of his crimes; of course, they should hold no responsibility for nor affiliation with what he did. Now imagine if that same crime was perpetrated by a Muslim man. If that were the case, many Muslim women around the world would be afraid to leave their house, for fear of so-called ‘retaliatory’ violence. Their fear would be warranted: subsequent to any mass killing perpetrated by a Muslim-identified man, there are attacks on Muslim women in public spaces. We have become so inured to this pattern that it almost feels inevitable; like cause-and-effect. But it is not.

Violence against Muslim women in public spaces is not ‘caused’ by mass murder perpetrated by Muslim-identified men. We are led to believe that people are so upset by Muslim-perpetrated terrorism that they just can’t help themselves. I contend that this logic is backwards: perpetrators of violence against Muslim women have a pre-existing anger and propensity towards gendered and racialized violence; mass murder perpetrated by Muslim-identified men simply provides them with an opportunity or an ‘excuse’ to act out on it.
Indeed, when Warsan and her teenage daughter were verbally assaulted by a fellow co-op resident, he yelled at them, blamed them for breaking the front door (it was out of order), called them terrorists, and then claimed that he didn’t “feel safe”, even though Warsan and her daughter had done nothing to provoke the attack nor carried out any threatening behaviour. Warsan and her family had lived peacefully in this same co-op house for 20 years, but this reality was overridden by the perpetrator’s use of the Islamophobic discourse of the Muslim-as-Terrorist to excuse ventilation of his anger and violence issues. Moreover, the usage of the discourse of Muslim-as-Terrorist in order to target Warsan and her teenage daughter for verbal assault is, upon closer examination, disingenuous: if the perpetrator actually believed that she had even the remotest access to terrorist networks, weapons, or tendencies, would he scream at her in open air? Wouldn’t he be afraid that she would summon her large invisible army to get him?

Indeed, the disingenuous nature of these co-called ‘revenge’ attacks on Muslim women has been absent from several scholarly discussions of Islamophobia, which seem to take at face-value the explanation that people who attack Muslim women truly believe them to be terrorists, and fear them (Allen, 2015; Gulson and Webb, 2013). However, if perpetrators of this supposed ‘revenge’ violence thought that the women they were targeting had anything to do with terrorism, or had any connections to terrorist networks, wouldn’t they be too frightened to risk verbally or physically assaulting them? Wouldn’t that kind of behaviour put them in the crosshairs of Daesh? Indeed, I contend that the face-value explanation that violence against Muslim women is motivated by ‘revenge’ cloaks what is really occurring: a justification for white men to verbally and physically assault women who are Muslim, because they, like other

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6 I will use the Arabic word Daesh, rather than the term “Isis” in this thesis, as the latter blurs the distinction between this violent faction and the rest of Islam and Muslims.
violent men, enjoy the rush of power and domination gained from gendered and racial violence. The discourse of Muslim-as-Terrorist empowers white men to rationalize this violence and invisibilize its reality as racialized gendered violence. Such behaviour is not about countering terrorism, nor is it about self defense; it is about finding a justification to enact violence against women.

This kind of pseudo-positioning of Muslim women as ‘enemy combatants’ also sanctions sexual violence against Muslim women, since women are positioned within “binary constructions of ‘our’ women versus ‘their’ women.” (Anthias, 2014, p. 160). The notion that Muslim women are ‘their’ women creates vulnerability for sexual violence because “[p]erpetrating sexual violence against the women of the enemy reconfigures the object of reference of sexual violence away from all women (potentially) towards women who represent the enemy” (Anthias, 2014, p. 160). Indeed, war is associated with a toxic impunity for sexual violence, as rape is a weapon of war.

6.1.5 Muslimahs-as-Weak

And that’s I think that's a societal norm: you don't hurt women, you don't oppress women.

But when it comes to Muslim women, I think there's a double-standard. – Nayyirah

Many participants in this study, when asked why they believed that Muslim women were especially targeted for Islamophobic violence cited stereotypes that Muslim women are passive, demure, and oppressed, and are therefore seen as ‘easy targets’ by would-be perpetrators. In reflecting on a case of verbal assault she faced in the subway, Amira expressed that, according to her intuition, the perpetrator selected her not simply because she was Muslim, but because she was a Muslim woman:
According to Faiza’s insight, Muslim women are not targeted because they are perceived to be a terrorist threat; they are targeted because they are assumed to be passive, weak and incapable of retaliation. Indeed, men’s violence against women in general is about power and control, and is premised on the notion that women are weaker than men and therefore more susceptible to being dominated through violence. Insofar as specific groups of women hold less social agency and power due to intersecting layers of marginalization, they are even more vulnerable to male violence. This pattern is evidenced by higher rates of violence against Indigenous women in Canada, who live with three times higher rates of violence than non-Indigenous women (Brennan, 2011). Women with disabilities also face higher rates of domestic violence and sexual violence than women without disabilities (Perreault, 2009; Martin, 2006). Ableist discourses portray women with disabilities as weak, dependent and unworthy of protection, and they are therefore targeted by perpetrators at higher rates than other women.

Indeed, the ableist discourse that portrays women with disabilities as ‘weak’ subjects for perpetrators to predate upon is similar (although not identical) to the discourse of Muslim women as ‘passive and weak’ and therefore available to perpetrators of Islamophobic violence. It is as if this Islamophobic discourse, in its assertion of the Muslim woman as weak, demure, and haplessly oppressed function to ‘disable’ her as unable and incapable of defending herself from
violence. Through this highly gendered process of racialization, passivity and weakness is inscribed on the Muslim woman’s body, and seen as a fixed, intrinsic characteristic of her person. Indeed, one participant, Shireen, who faced two separate incidents of Islamophobic verbal assault, illustrates how she believes that the notion of the inherently submissive Muslimah is a motivation and driving force for perpetrators:

It’s because of the stereotype that Muslim women are passive, and that they are submissive and they're oppressed or whatever it may be. I think because of that, people are generally more okay with verbally or physically assaulting a Muslim woman, because I think it's like a power dynamic that they think they have in their head…. I think that might be one of the reasons people find it okay to do that. – Shireen

The discourse that Muslim women are passive or submissive can also be used in situations of intimate partner violence, to justify abuse of Muslim women in relationships. Alison’s ex-partner, a white non-Muslim man, was abusive towards her in several ways (see Section 6.3.5). One of the first manifestations of this abuse was that he would pressure her to perform domestic cleaning and cooking duties, because she was a Muslim woman. These demands seemed to stem from his Islamophobic fantasy of having obtained a demure Muslimah housewife for himself. Alison explained,

his racism was different... It was so subtle, it was so strange: …because I was Muslim, and because I'm brown, I was supposed to be the one to take care of the house. I was supposed to be the one to cook. I’m supposed to be the one to take care of these things, you know? I had to give him my money, stuff like that. – Alison
As documented in the next section, this weaponization of stereotypes of Muslim women, used to foster further violence against them, is a common tactic in gendered Islamophobia and Islamophobic violence.

6.1.6 Muslimahs-As-Victims-of-Muslim-Men

Staggeringly absent from literature on violence against Muslim women in North America is any discussion of gender-based violence perpetrated against Muslim women by people who are not her family members or spouse. As observed by Hopkins (2016), “mainstream debates about gendered violence almost exclusively cast it as a problem existing within ethnic or religious groups, rather than across them, therefore overlooking the relational nature of this phenomenon” (Hopkins, 2016, p. 189). This skewed focus has enormous consequences for Muslim women: the discourse of Muslimahs-as-Victims-of-Muslim-Men is used to paint Muslim women as eternally oppressed victims without agency, and then justify violence against them.

It may seem counterintuitive that such a discourse could be used to justify violence against Muslim women; if Muslim women are victimized by Muslim male violence, shouldn’t we be protecting them from any further harm? Unfortunately, in patriarchal logic, women who are ‘damaged goods’ (i.e. already perceived to have sexual experience or be abused in some way) are acceptable targets for male violence. This twisted logic can be found in the case of rampant violence against sex workers: since sex workers ‘already’ choose to engage in sex acts for money, they are seen as unworthy of protection from sexual and physical harm. In a similar vein, Muslim women, who, according to Islamophobic discourse, are ‘already’ victims of barbaric violence from Muslim men, are therefore open targets for ‘further’ violence by non-Muslim men. If Muslim women are eternal victims of the gender-based violence of their own religion, this ‘fact’ is quixotically taken as permission to load ‘more’ gender-based violence upon them. And
somehow this additional violence doesn’t count, because she is already ‘defiled’. In this way, the Islamophobic stereotype of the oppressed, battered Muslim woman – a woman who has endured forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and other violations – is deployed to justify violence of Muslim women by perpetrators. As one participant, Faiza, put it, the logic of perpetrators of Islamophobic violence is as follows: “Yeah, so a Muslim woman's oppressed, so let’s oppress her some more.”

The stunning level to which the discourse of Muslimah-as-Victim-of-Muslim-Men is weaponized in order to enact violence against Muslim women is apparent in a recent incident of Islamophobic violence reported in Toronto on September 10, 2017. This incident did not involve any of the participants in this study; it was reported to the National Council of Canadian Muslims, through their hate crime reporting system (see Section 10.6 for more on this system). According to this report, a Muslim woman was physically assaulted by another resident in her apartment, who said, during the physical assault, that “Muslim men always beat their wives up” (Tracking Anti-Muslim Incidents Reported Across Canada, n.d.). Indeed, when perpetrators are motivated by a disturbed notion that they are entitled to commit violence against Muslim women who (in their minds) have ‘already’ been subjected to Muslim male violence, they seem to relish the notion of committing ‘the same’ violence that they imagine Muslim men have.

One participant in this study, Shahnozah, faced an incident of Islamophobic verbal assault on the bus home from York University. It began with her first being asked by a stranger on the TTC about what she studied in university. When she told him that she studies International Politics, he flew into a rage:

He said, “Who are you to be here in Canada and study politics?” And then he was screaming at me, and he said in Afghanistan women are not allowed to go to school, the
Taliban shoot them, so that's my place where I'm supposed to be, so I have to go back to my country and I have no right to study here in Canada. And so he was screaming at me, I couldn't say anything. I was really scared. – Shahnozah

In this case, the perpetrator invoked the image of a Muslim woman in Afghanistan being oppressed and forbidden from going to school by the Taliban, and then used this trope in order to verbally assault a Muslim woman and (irony perhaps intended) tell her she has no right to study in Canada.

Another participant, Nayyirah, pointed out the inherent contradiction between the discourse of Muslimahs as oppressed victims, and the reality of violence perpetrated by non-Muslims against women who are framed in this way:

I think it's quite contradictory but the main stereotype regarding Muslim women is that they are oppressed but then sometimes when we go out into society, society oppresses us ‘more’ – I’m putting that in quotes – or oppresses us further if they think they're already oppressed, which... that doesn't add up to me. So, I think that it's not... they don't feel that we're oppressed. If that was actually true, they wouldn't want to oppress us further. So I think it's just hatred.... That's why I don't really understand the term Islamophobia, ‘cause I don't know if a lot of people are afraid of Islam or if they just more hate Islam or hate the way a Muslim woman dressed or hate that they kind of go against societal norms in terms of the way a woman should dress. So, I don't think that stereotype makes sense – of the oppressed Muslim woman or the weak Muslim woman. Because the weak in society, you're supposed to help them. – Nayyirah
Nayyirah calls the bluff inherent in the deployment of this discourse to justify violence against Muslim women and exposes the hatred that is actually underpinning gendered Islamophobic violence.

6.1.7 De-Veiling-as-Liberation

The preoccupation with de-veiling Muslim women is as old as Western civilization, and has been a central part of colonial projects in the Muslim world, such as the French colonization of Algeria, which sought to de-veil the exoticized Muslim ‘Other’ as part of a civilizing project. De-veiling can also be seen as the colonial demand to ‘know’ the other, and thereby dominate her (Smith, 2005). As such, veiling is seen as an affront to Western civilizational hegemony; it must be removed. The exoticizing colonial desire to unveil the Muslim woman has been exacerbated by the projection of terrorism onto the fabric of Muslim women’s clothing choices, which has produced an almost visceral revulsion to the veil by Islamophobic perpetrators.

According to Zainab, who faces frequent Islamophobic harassment in public spaces: “When they see hijab, they go crazy. I’m telling you. When they see hijab, they go crazy, they scared of you.”

As discussed in Section 5.2.6, 18/21 of the research participants were wearing some kind of Islamic clothing (hijab, niqab, and/or abaya) at the time they encountered Islamophobic violence. If any other item of clothing were homed-in on to target a group of women for the levels of violence that are faced by visibly Muslim women, defense of these women and their clothing choices would be readily and vocally taken up as a mainstream feminist cause. While everyone should be free to veil or de-veil as they so choose, the colonial discourse of De-Veiling-as-Liberation, not to mention Orientalist depictions of Muslim women as agency-less victims of Muslim men, have made feminist movements slow to show solidarity with Muslim women being targeted for choosing to wear the veil.
Violence against women who do not conform with unstated social dress codes is a practice that extends far beyond the targeting of Muslim women who are wearing hijab, niqab, or abaya. Women who wear short skirts are targeted by rape myths as somehow ‘provoking’ sexual violence, when in reality the responsibility for sexual violence is entirely on the shoulders of the perpetrator. Trans women face violence for dressing as women. Cisgendered women and men who do not conform to gender norms around clothing choices are also subjected to transphobic and homophobic violence. Women with larger bodies are harassed if they wear clothes that are reveal their body shape; women with large breasts are sexualized and shamed if they wear fitted clothing. The list goes on.

Muslim women, however, are particularly singled out as being unworthy of protection for their clothing choices. Perhaps this is due to the assumption that these choices are not their own, and therefore contempt and violence towards veiled Muslim women is justified. Without negating the fact that in some abusive cases Muslim women are forced to wear veils, just as non-Muslim women in other abusive situations are forced to behave or dress a certain way, this generalization is profoundly damaging. The blanket assumption that Muslim women do not have agency, and are passive automatons controlled by Muslim men, is used to invalidate Muslim women’s right to protection from violence and discrimination on the basis of their clothing. Indeed, this type of Islamophobic rationalization is demonstrated in a scene described by a participant in the poetry component of this study:

unfortunately in the land of the "free" your hijab is simply not welcomed here.

Imagine hearing that at 11 years old. See I wore my hijab because I wanted to look just like my mom. My teacher would pull me aside and ask me if my father forced me to wear "that thing" on and when I told her I wore it because I thought it looked beautiful, she
turned around and whispered "she probably rehearsed those words coming from her mouth".

What you don't understand is that I loved the bedazzled jewels that were stitched into my hijab. And if fashion for you is to show your new hair-do then I going to rock my one-piece crystallized hijab too!

- Excerpt from “Letter from a Terrorist” (poem written by participant)

If Muslim girls and women are framed as eternally coerced by Muslim men, this gives non-Muslims the ‘right’ to forcibly remove Muslim women’s religious clothing. I contend – and believe this should not be a debate – that any forcible removal of clothing is sexual violence: whether it be a T-shirt or a hijab, forcing a woman to expose a part of her body she did not consent to expose is a violation. One participant in this study, Asma, was physically attacked by a man in public who attempted to remove her hijab. The discourse of De-veiling-as-Liberation sanctions this kind of violence.

6.1.8 Muslimahs-as-Sexually-Repressed

A long history of Orientalism has provided a series of sometimes contradictory discourses about Muslim women’s sexuality, ranging from the hypersexual harem girl to the repressed Muslim wife. However, recent manifestations of Islamophobia have fixated on the notion of the pleasureless Muslim woman who controlled by her father until she becomes the sexual property of her husband, whom she was perhaps forced to marry. These discourses are deployed to rationalize ‘further’ sexual violence against Muslim women, and also insidiously discredit Muslim women survivors of sexual assault. Stephanie, who survived an Islamophobically-motivated rape when she was 12, looked for years for a therapist who would actually believe her.
Stephanie explained that stereotypes of Muslim women as “so so so repressed” leads people (including therapists) to believe and that “we don't know what sex is or something”. The discourse of Muslimahs-as-Sexually-Repressed explains how white therapists failed to believe Stephanie when she disclosed that she had been raped; instead, they engaged gendered Islamophobic notions about Muslim women’s sexuality to frame Stephanie as a naïve, repressed Muslim girl who couldn’t possibly have faced sexual violence. As Stephanie explains,

I didn't have people believe me that I was raped, because ‘Muslim girls don't get raped’,
according to a lot of white therapists... it's just like nobody believes Muslim women!
Like, people don't believe women in general, but people will not believe Black, Indigenous, women of colour. Like they will not. – Stephanie

The discourse that Muslim women’s sexuality is repressed and controlled by their fathers and/or husbands was used as a pretext for an Islamophobically-motivated sexual assault that Stephanie survived while she was an undergraduate at the University of Toronto. This incident will be discussed further in Section 6.3.4.

6.2 Islamophobic Violence as an ‘Omnipresent’ Threat

Upon reflecting on the various stories from the research participants, I began to understand that Islamophobic violence was not seen as an event that occurred once, twice, or multiple times; it was depicted more like an overcasting shadow that covered and encompassed all aspects of the participants’ public, and sometimes private, lives – a shadow that takes shape at unpredictable intervals, as it manifests in verbal, emotional, sexual, or physical violence.

The frequency or ‘amount’ of Islamophobic violence directed at Muslim women in Canada, or more specifically, in the GTA, is difficult to quantify. Islamophobic violence is under-reported to
police for a variety of reasons, which will be discussed in Section 7.4. As noted above, data provided by Statistics Canada tell us that the number of police-reported anti-Muslim hate crimes in Canada rose by 60% in 2015, with 159 police-reported incidents, compared to 99 the year before (Harris, 2017, p. 1). The report also notes that a majority of these of these incidents involved Muslim women. Another tracking mechanism for anti-Muslim hate crimes is the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM), which has an online mechanism that is unrelated to police reporting. In examining the NCCM online map of reported hate crimes for the Greater Toronto Area, I noticed there is only one incident recorded in the GTA for 2013, one in 2014, four in 2015, three in 2016 and two in 2017 (Tracking Anti-Muslim Incidents Reported Across Canada, n.d.). These numbers include vandalism, verbal abuse, physical violence, threats, online violence and hate propaganda. Even from my immediate circle of friends and personal anecdotes, it is abundantly clear to me that these numbers do not nearly reflect the reality of Islamophobic violence in the GTA, and that there is not a large uptake of this reporting tool in the GTA Muslim community.

While it is difficult, then, to provide a total number, or even a reasonable ballpark estimate for the amount of Islamophobic violence directed at Muslim women in the GTA, some participants in this study commented on how long it has been happening to them, and how frequently. One participant described Islamophobic violence as pre-dating 9/11, as it was then centered around other conflicts the West had with Muslim-majority countries. A couple of other participants described September 11th, 2001 as a clear juncture after which Islamophobic violence became an issue for them. Several participants stated that Islamophobic violence has been escalating in the last few years. Hanifa says the last two or three years has been a “very bad situation”; Safiya remarked that “recently, it’s more – now, it’s more”, and says that everyone in the Muslim
community is scared. Warsan expressed a sense of urgency around the need to recognize how severe Islamophobic violence has become: “This is \textit{real}. Now wake up – it's real. ‘Cause sometimes you don't really know what it is, you think it's joke, or something. But it's real. I see it all. We have to wake up. Something's happening.”

In addition to characterizing Islamophobic violence as increasing after 9/11, and then even more in recent years, for some participants, the \textit{frequency} of Islamophobic violence is also a painful aspect of their lived reality. As Hanifa expressed, “it’s happened, happened, happened…. oh my God, \textit{many} times. Yes sister, oh my God, I don't know how many times! \textit{Frequently} it happens, sister. It’s very… you know, what can I do? [Pauses, looks sad].”

At this point in her interview, the frequency of Islamophobic violent struck a painful chord with Hanifa. Whereas for most of my interview with her, she was upbeat and made jokes, even when she was describing individual incidents of Islamophobic violence, it was when she was discussing the \textit{frequency} of Islamophobic violence that she became visibly upset.

Another participant, Zainab, said that Islamophobic verbal assault in public spaces happened to her so frequently that she began humorously referring to it as her “luck”. She noted that even her daughter noticed how frequently her mother is targeted for Islamophobic verbal assault:

Yeah because [it happens] so many times… my daughter got this, she says, “Mama, it happens all the time when I walk with you, too…I can see from my eyes, \textit{so much} it happens.” I say [to my daughter], “I don't know, my luck!” [Laughs] I don't know why. It’s okay.” – Zainab

Although not every participant reported experiencing as frequent verbal assault as Hanifa and Zainab did, many described being regularly aware of the possibility of experiencing
Islamophobic violence again. The omnipresent threat of Islamophobic violence is captured by a participant in the arts-based part of this study, who wrote:

Everytime I leave my home I feel like I'm preparing for my very own funeral.

Will I be able to come back to see the smile on my beautiful mother’s face, will I be able to hug my youngest sister goodnight, will I return home alive??

Questions that I ask that seem to not have answers. It's as if my hijab has become a target and written on it is

"Kill me I am Muslim"

-Excerpt from “Letter from a Terrorist” (poem written by participant)

This poem hauntingly depicts the threat of Islamophobic violence that she feels overshadowing her every time she leaves her home.

Although it is important to emphasize that in most cases public spaces are the site of Islamophobic violence, it can also occur in private spheres: in the context of intimate partner violence, family violence, and acquaintance rape/sexual assault. When Islamophobic violence is occurring in the context of an intimate partner relationship or another setting in which repeated interaction with the perpetrator can be expected, this will of course increase the frequency of violence. One participant in the study, Alison, was for a period of time facing Islamophobic abuse both at her workplace and in her intimate partner relationship. She describes this time of her life as being rife with Islamophobia: “It was years and it was every– okay, to not exaggerate – it was at least, bare minimum, once a week, I was going through [something] like this. I was experiencing something of the sort.”
The omnipresence of Islamophobic violence – and the threat of incidents occurring – contour Muslim women’s experience of public spaces in the GTA. We all may be inhabiting the same urban space, but not everyone is experiencing the same city. For several Muslimahs in the study, because of the frequency of Islamophobic violence, public spaces became something to endure and to survive – not enjoy.

In her examination of interracial stranger attacks of Asian women by non-Asian men, Park (2012) conceptualizes racialized, gendered violence with an intersectional and structural analysis, describing it as “best understood as an assertion of the right to place and space in both national and global hierarchies”; in this vein, attacks on Muslim women by non-Muslims in public spaces in the GTA can be seen as an assertion of not just racial hierarchies, but of the right to the space – to the land – itself. According to Zempi and Chakraborti (2015),

the potential for future victimisation creates social and geographical yet ‘invisible’ boundaries, across which members of the Muslim community are not ‘welcome’ to step. From this perspective, Islamophobic victimisation acts as a form of emotional terrorism on the basis that it segregates and isolates Muslims, particularly in terms of restricting their freedom of movement in the public sphere and changing their patterns of social interaction. (p. 50)

In the case of gendered Islamophobia and violence targeting Muslim women, ‘invisible’ boundaries are drawn to specifically exclude the bodies of Muslim women from public space. I contend that the multiplicity of spaces in which participants reported facing Islamophobic abuse represents a discursive process of policing and marking spaces across the Greater Toronto Area as no-go-zones for Muslim women. This effect presents an enormous irony: a common
stereotype of the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ is that she is ‘not allowed to leave the house’. Yet the Islamophobic violence against Muslim women in public spaces risks having the effect of pushing her out of the public sphere, and ‘back’ into the home. Indeed, according to one participant in the arts-based portion of this study:

I know it's hard
To believe
But
I've never known oppression
Until I walked out of my house
Until I walked out
Into this "accepting"
Society
-Excerpt from “When is the Last Time You Heard the Truth About Islaam?” (poem written by participant)

According the reports of the participants in this study, Islamophobic violence occurred in essentially every public space that a person living in the GTA would need or want to visit. It also occurred in private spaces: in the home, apartments, and in private counselling offices. The plethora of spaces and overwhelming nature of the lack of safe zones is captured by Lailah’s sentiment: “I feel we are a target. We are a target. Like everywhere.”

A comprehensive list of incidents of Islamophobic violence reported by qualitative interview participants in this study is shown in Table 2, which also demarcates the space in which the
incident occurred. The majority of the incidents in Table 2 were perpetrated in the GTA, directly against the research participant. Looking at Table 2, it is striking that essential services such as health care, public schools, women’s shelters, and grocery stores are on the list; these are all spaces protected by the Ontario Human Rights Code, which legally mandates equal access to services, regardless of religious affiliation. This finding represents an important opportunity for future research and intervention: how does Islamophobia faced in health care and school settings impact Muslimahs’ ability to access services? What complaints mechanisms are in place in these institutions?

Participants also described several incidents of Islamophobic violence in grocery stores. This begs the question as to how codes of conduct are made known and maintained in grocery store spaces. Is there a way for store managers to be trained in responding to Islamophobic violence in their businesses? Can models of bystander intervention be developed that are best suited to grocery store spaces?

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7 I did not count experiences shared through the poetry in this process, as locations were not precise, given the nature of the poetic form.
Table 2: Incidents of Islamophobic violence reported by participants in the study. All incidents took place in the Greater Toronto Area, unless otherwise specified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incident</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Space</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Hanifa faced Islamophobic verbal assault by people in FreshCo and No Frills. She said that this happens to her frequently. Example of verbal harassment that was directed at her by someone behind her in line: “it’s very hurtful. You are ugly, why you are here… Many, many things, they say. You’re ugly, you are dirty, this, this, this.”</td>
<td>Grocery Store</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jihan also faced Islamophobic verbal assault at No Frills, and decided to no longer go there alone [double check]</td>
<td>Shopping Mall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bilqis’ and her 24-year-old daughter (who was wearing niqab) faced Islamophobic verbal assault in Dufferin Mall: “She was so swearing. Go back to your country. Go back to your country.” The perpetrator proceeded to circle her daughter, repeating these phrases and also saying “Jesus Christ!” over and over.</td>
<td>Shopping Mall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Asma faced Islamophobic attempted murder, Islamophobic physical and verbal assault in a parking lot when leaving a superstore with a case of pop. A man pulled up in the parking lot in a vehicle and shouted “terrorist, go back to your country” at her. Then the man tried to run her over with his car and tried to drive his car into her, so she walked between parked cars in order to avoid him. He then got out of his vehicle and tried to punch her when she was loading the case of pop her trunk. She engaged in self-defence, and the police arrived on the scene as they were called by bystanders.</td>
<td>Parking Lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hanifa faced Islamophobic shunning and selective mistreatment from front desk workers and nurses at a hospital she had to attend regularly when her husband was ill and needed surgery.</td>
<td>Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Zainab faces frequent verbally assault from strangers in the street: perpetrators have been on the same side of the sidewalk, the other side of the street, and also in passing cars or motorcycles: “They shout to me terrorist, go have to go back to your country. You're terrorist, go back. I don't say anything, I say thank you. I just then leave. That's it. Sometime in front of kids.”</td>
<td>Sidewalk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Safiya faced Islamophobic physical and verbal violence while she was loading a car near Jarvis and Sherbourne – this was on a Sunday, at around 5pm, with witnesses present.</td>
<td>While Leaving Mosque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Safiya faced Islamophobic verbal assault by people who were passing by when she was exiting a mosque near Dundas and Parliament. “we were in the mosque coming out… Oh, you go back to your country! You guys, what are you doing?! You go back to your country! This is not your country!”</td>
<td>Public Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Zainab was verbally assaulted by a stranger when waiting for the bus on Queen street.</td>
<td>Bus Stop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Zainab faced Islamophobic shunning when she went to Mill Street and Parliament to see the new housing built for the Pan Am games with her daughter and cousin: “Everyone [the other people in the communal area] ran away like they see like maybe something snake… the woman touch her husband like this [gestures frightened woman grabbing man’s arm] and they touch their purse like this [grabs her purse and clutches it to herself].”</td>
<td>Public Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Faiza faced Islamophobic verbal assault and threats by a group of men near Dairy Fest in Winchester: “they started approaching me and yelling things like towelhead, Sand******. And they were like go blow yourself up elsewhere. Get out of our fucking town, go blow yourself up elsewhere.”</td>
<td>Public Festival</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
12 Aisha faced coordinated Islamophobic verbal assault and intimidation by a hate group. She had developed an Islamophobia dialogue in the Regent Park community in partnership with the Christian Resource Centre, and other community agencies and allies. The format of the event was that there were three speakers who agreed to share their experiences of Islamophobia. Six white supremacists entered the event space and formed a line at the front of the event. They began yelling anti-Muslim hate speech in order to disrupt and shut down the event. Later, it became clear that these individuals were known to police as being part of anti-Muslim hate activity in Toronto.

13 Warsan and her teenage daughter faced Islamophobic verbal assault by a fellow resident at the front door of her co-op building.

14 Jihan faced Islamophobic verbal assault by a fellow building tenant on the bottom floor.

15 Faiza was Islamophobic verbally assault and continued harassment by her residence roommates in University: “it made that housing situation be really challenging for me.”

16 Alison faced Islamophobic verbal assault and financial and emotional abuse in the context of an intimate partner relationship which went on for years. Her ex-partner also perpetrated physical and sexual assault.

17 Faiza faced gendered Islamophobic devaluation from her ex-partner, who was physically, sexually, emotionally, financially and verbally abusive. He would not have felt entitled to treat a non-Muslim woman that way.

18 Stephanie’s childhood home in the Prairies was egged and vandalized after 9/11.

19 Shireen faced Islamophobic verbal assault by a man who exited his car and approached her car window when she was stopped at an intersection near Lawrence and Eglinton.

20 Amira faced Islamophobic verbal assault and intimidation on the subway on her way to work. The perpetrator came said “who are you going to kill next?”

21 Maryam faced Islamophobic accusatory questioning on the bus in the presence of her two children. The perpetrator aggressively questioned why “she made” her children wear those clothes.

22 Lailah faced Islamophobic accusatory questioning and verbal assault on the subway in the presence of her two children. The perpetrator said that they “bring terrorism for us”.

23 Shireen faced Islamophobic verbal assault and intimidation from a man sitting behind her in the bus. He said, “I’m gay, what are you going to do about it?”, referring, presumably, to the Orlando Nightclub Massacre.

24 Nayyirah has faced multiple incidents of Islamophobic verbal assault, harassment, and threats on the TTC, including being told to “go back to where you came from”, being asked invasive questions about her clothes, being deliberately spit in front of, and in one case having someone shaping their hand into a gun, pointing it at her and ‘firing’.

25 Najma faced Islamophobic shunning and social abandonment when four streetcars – with passengers, but not full – passed by her with her stroller in the middle of winter, with no one willing to help her bring the stroller up the streetcar steps.

26 Shahnozah faced Islamophobic verbal assault on the bus on her way back from class at York University, in which a man screamed at her for 10 minutes about how as a Muslim woman she had no right to study International Politics.

27 Tahira faced Islamophobic verbal assault and harassment on the subway ride home after picking her kids up from school. The perpetrator used profanities at her, called her a terrorist, and told her to “go back to your country”.

28 Najma faced Islamophobic shunning and verbal assault from another parent when she brought her children to a playground in a park near Lakeshore. The parent shouted and her and removed his children from the space.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Event Description</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Alison faced Islamophobic profiling and violation at the airport, where she was ‘randomly selected’ for a search which involved the removal of all of her clothing.</td>
<td>Airport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Alison’s job in Bronte, Oakville featured Islamophobic and racist comments from her superiors and peers; she took the issue to HR, and was told that since they weren’t saying it to clients, there was nothing they could do.</td>
<td>Workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Stephanie’s father was let go from his molecular biology job in the Prairies after 9/11. He and the one other racialized Muslim man in the lab were let go.</td>
<td>Workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Alison faced Islamophobic online abuse and harassment when she changed her Facebook profile name to include her father’s last name (thereby identifying her as a Muslim): “All of a sudden I’m a terrorist. All of a sudden I’m being oppressed and I don’t know what it’s like, I need to be saved.”</td>
<td>Social Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Stephanie faced Islamophobic bullying in elementary and secondary schools in Ontario (not Toronto), and survived an Islamophobia-rationalized rape that took place on school grounds when she was 12.</td>
<td>Elementary or Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Aisha, a community leader who offers information and support to the Regent Park Muslim community, reports that Islamophobia is a major problem in schools: “so I have to go in school and intervene, speak to the principals… The kids being picked on, being called terrorism and all horrible names… so I have to go to all the catchment area the schools and advocate on behalf of them…”</td>
<td>Elementary or Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Maryam’s daughter was bullied in school in Grade 8, and wrote a poem titled “Regent Park Muslimah” to respond to that time of her life.</td>
<td>Elementary or Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Aissatou faced multiple incidents of Islamophobic verbal assault and accusatory questioning in her Academic Upgrading class, including a classmate who said that all Muslims should be “burned alive”.</td>
<td>Adult Education Space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Najma faced Islamophobic shunning and social exclusion in her LINC class, where everyone would speak with each other and be friendly with each other, while shunning Najma, who was wearing niqab at the time.</td>
<td>Adult Education Space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Shahnnoza’s Muslimah friend faced and Islamophobic ‘compliment’ from a non-Muslim classmate who was surprised and impressed that should could be well spoken.</td>
<td>Adult Education Space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Faiza faced Islamophobic harassment from her residence roommates, who hid her political science textbook from her, which had a photo of Osama bin Laden on the cover. They found it ‘offensive’ that she (as a Muslim) should have this textbook.</td>
<td>University Campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Stephanie faced an Islamophobia-rationalized sexual assault at a party. The perpetrator asked, “would your dad blow up my house if I did this?” before groping her breast.</td>
<td>Counselling Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Stephanie faced gendered Islamophobic bias from mental health professionals, who did not believe that she, as a Muslim girl, could have been raped at school.</td>
<td>Counselling Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Alison heard fellow resident and coworkers at the women’s shelter she works at speaking poorly about a Muslim family, and ‘Other’-ing their hygiene practises and family structure using Islamophobic discourses.</td>
<td>Women’s Shelter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in Table 2, Islamophobic violence also occurred on sidewalks, parks, festivals, and parties, making enjoyment of public spaces a fraught issue for many participants in this study. This loss of enjoyment of public space highlights an underemphasized impact of gendered Islamophobia: social isolation. As discussed in Section 6.3.7c, shunning is a ‘method’ of enacting Islamophobic violence against Muslimahs; many participants reported loss of friendships and other social relationships because of Islamophobic abuse. Being pushed out of enjoyment of public spaces may compound the impact of social isolation that is caused by Islamophobic violence.

As discussed in Section 5.2.8, almost all of the participants in this study were low-income; therefore, these participants relied on public transportation (the TTC) for picking up their children from school, commuting to work, and accessing services. Eight participants faced Islamophobic violence on the TTC, and many of these participants expressed that after these incidents, they felt afraid, hypervigilant, and uncomfortable on TTC buses, subways, or streetcars. As described in Section 8.2.4, where I discuss the impact of Islamophobic violence, a number of participants modified their behaviour on the TTC after being targeted for violence, in order to feel safer.

It may seem like driving would be a solution to avoiding Islamophobic violence during TTC commutes, but unfortunately this is not the case. As shown in Table 2, Shireen, a participant in the study who was learning to drive with her father, was targeted for Islamophobic violence by a driver who got out of his car and came up to her window. Asma was targeted for physical violence by an Islamophobic stranger when loading her car in a parking lot. This unfortunate pattern points out a reality that holds true for other forms of violence against women in public spaces: the solution is not to tell women to stay away from spaces in which they are facing
abuse. The space (or time of night) is not the cause of violence against women; public attitudes and sanctioning of violence by perpetrators is.

The Islamophobic violence that participants reported enduring in public schools and university contexts demonstrates the extent to which these institutions are unaware, unable or unwilling to respond to Islamophobic violence, particularly Islamophobically-motivated sexual violence. Before Stephanie was targeted for rape by a boy in her elementary school, she was facing Islamophobic bullying. There were likely several opportunities for intervention and education that were missed by school staff. Moreover, in the aftermath of the sexual assault, Stephanie was not linked with appropriate supports, but instead faced more gendered Islamophobia from counsellors she was referred to, who did not believe her. This system failure, which Stephanie has nonetheless survived by virtue of her own tenacity and strength, demonstrates the gross inadequacies of public schools in understanding the forms of violence that Muslim girls and teens face, addressing systemic Islamophobia (including gendered Islamophobia) embedded in their own institutions, and committing to placing resources towards the needs of Muslim students through educational programs and accountability measures. The Toronto District School Board has recently launched an “Islamic History Month” for the month of October; while this is an important step, it is a long way from recognizing the reality of Islamophobic violence within public school spaces – including violence enacted by teachers – and doing something about it.

It is worth nothing that ‘debates’ about accommodating Muslim Friday prayers in public schools exposed vitriolic Islamophobia in the Peel District School Board community; in one meeting, for example, pages of the Quran were torn out by an attendee at a board meeting (McGillivray, 2017). Islamophobia is also present within the Toronto District School Board. As discussed above, Aisha, acts as a confidante and support person for many members of the Regent Park
Muslim community, and hears frequent disclosures of Islamophobic bullying in schools from Muslim families in the community (see Section 10.5). Nonetheless, the current realities of Muslim children and youth face in GTA public schools could not be captured by this study because the requirement for participation was that participants be over 18. Indeed, the incidents of school-based Islamophobia that Stephanie shared happened over a decade ago. An important future area of study is a focused investigation of elementary, middle and high school students’ encounters with (gendered) Islamophobic violence in public schools in the GTA.

Adult learning settings were also sites of Islamophobic violence. Najma described being socially shunned when she wore niqab to her LINC class, and Aissatou heard a classmate proudly advocate for genocide of Muslims in her Academic Upgrading class. Islamophobia in language classes and adult education settings is a particularly troubling in that, as discussed above in Section 5.2.5, language barriers make it difficult for Muslim women to speak back during an incident of Islamophobic violence, or report what happened and access supports afterwards. Moreover, LINC and Academic Upgrading classes serve a broader function than just curricular instruction; these are spaces of social connection that are vital for newcomers adjusting to life in Canada and developing new networks. If these spaces are poisoned by acts of Islamophobic violence, this can disrupt a newcomer Muslimah’s ability to adjust to life in Canada.

Although the presence of Islamophobic violence in public spaces disrupts Muslimahs’ sense of safety and belonging, for most participants, home was a place of refuge. That makes it all the more troubling when Islamophobia enters the private realm. Warsan was accosted by a fellow resident at the front of the co-op home that she lived in for 20 years. Alison faced Islamophobic abuse from her ex-partner who lived with her years. From both of their stories, it became clear
that having a home free of Islamophobic abuse is essential for the wellbeing of Muslimahs, for whom so many other spaces are already fraught.

6.3 Types of Islamophobic Violence Reported by Participants

The range of types of Islamophobic violence faced by participants in this study were as follows:

- Islamophobic attempted murder (2 incidents)
- Islamophobic physical assault (2 incidents)
- Islamophobic sexual assault (2 incidents)
- Islamophobic intimate partner violence (3 cases, including verbal, financial, emotional, sexual and physical abuse)
- Islamophobic verbal assault and intimidation (26 incidents)
- Islamophobic shunning (4 incidents)
- Coordinated attack by a hate group (1 incident)
- Online Islamophobia and exposure to Islamophobic hate propaganda (1 participant reported multiple incidents)

6.3.1 Attempted murder

Two participants in the study – one interview participant and one participant in the arts-based portion of the study – reported incidents of Islamophobically motivated attempted murder. In both cases, the perpetrator attempted to run over the participant with a car.

Asma, who participated in the interview portion of the study through written answers to her questions, disclosed that while she was walking in a parking lot, a man shouted “terrorist, go back to your country” at her from his vehicle, and then persisted to pursue her in his vehicle,
attempting to hit her and run her over with his car. She protected herself by running into the space in between parked cars: a narrow space that his vehicle would not be able to get through.

Another participant in the arts-based portion of the project disclosed an incident of Islamophobically-motivated attempted murder of her and her mother when she was a child:

Picture this, on a warm spring day in Ontario,

a young Muslim mother walking

her ten-year-old daughter.

her eight-year-old son.

home from school.

And then, a white, middle-aged man attempting to run them over with his car.

_I want to kill you all, you fucking terrorists._

-Excerpt from “Being Muslim in Canada: Part 1: Growing up Muslim” (poem written by participant)

These incidents of attempted murder of Muslim women and children both involve the use of a motor vehicle as a murder weapon, which appears to be a common tactic of white supremacist and Islamophobic violence. Using a vehicle as a weapon was also white supremacist James Fields’ method of murdering anti-fascist protestor Heather Heyer during a 2017 neo-Nazi and KKK rally in Charlottesville (Kennedy, 2017). Other participants in the study expressed fear of being hit or run over by Islamophobic drivers: Hanifa, for example, said that she takes extra precautions when crossing the road, to ensure that drivers have stopped and do not have ill-intentions towards her.
It is important to note that a troubling aspect of vehicle-based Islamophobic femicide is that it can potentially be made to look like an accident. Moreover, it is difficult for Muslim women pedestrians to be able to assess the emotional temperature or disposition of drivers behind vehicle windows, or predict whether or not they will perpetrate violence.

In both cases of attempted murder disclosed in this study, the perpetrator declared that the women (and child) he was targeting were ‘terrorists’ before attempting to run them over. As discussed above, had either of these perpetrators genuinely believed that the women (and child) they were attempting to kill were linked with terrorist networks, they would be too frightened to murder them, lest they be targeted for revenge by terrorist groups. I contend that in these cases, the term ‘terrorist’ is wielded to create a premise for unleashing femicidal rage onto innocent Muslim women’s bodies.

6.3.2 Coordinated Attacks on Muslim Gatherings by Hate Groups

The Quebec Mosque Massacre on January 29, 2017 demonstrated that attacks on Muslim spaces and gatherings are a reality in Canada – that hate groups are operating in the country, and are emboldened. Since the election of Trump and the rising normalization of open-air Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate speech, there have been organized anti-Muslim ‘demonstrations’ in front of mosques in Toronto by white supremacist groups.

The gathering of white supremacists and targeting of Muslim-centered spaces has put Muslim communities on edge, particularly in the wake of the Quebec Mosque Massacre. One participant, Safiya, described how recently in a mosque she attends in Lawrence Heights, congregants were too frightened to open the door to let air in, even though the building was very hot and lacked air
conditioning. Indeed, GTA Muslims are aware that their spaces of worship and congregation may have been mapped out by white supremacists and risk being targeted for violence.

One participant in the study, Aisha, was faced with a coordinated attack by a white supremacist group during an anti-Islamophobia community education event she had helped organize in Regent Park in May 2017. This event was advertised publicly, and intended to give a space for Muslims to share their experiences of Islamophobia and promote inter-faith understanding. In addition to having a panel of speakers, the educational event also featured different discussion tables for participants to be able to share in smaller groups. It was well-attended by members of the Regent Park Muslim community, as well as allies and supportive non-Muslims. As the event was getting started, 6 white supremacists, 5 of whom were men, lined up a row of chairs in front of the stage in what looked like a coordinated, pre-planned fashion. Then, they began yelling Islamophobic statements in order to shut down the event. During this coordinated attack, Aisha describes the body language, tone, and volume of these perpetrators as “vicious”. This ambush on the anti-Islamophobia event was only a few months after the Quebec Mosque Massacre, so the spectre of an organized white supremacist presence in a Muslim-oriented space was frightening for everyone there:

Everybody who were in the event were scared, they were terrorized, they [the white supremacists] were shouting and they were disturbing and we couldn't continue the programs, it was very intimidating for everybody…. We tried to continue, they just disturbing, and shouting about Islam and saying negative about Islam and we're trying to make them understand, their heart is sealed, there is no conversation. They look like vicious. Like you could tell they come with something, like they are here to attack or
something. It was very terrorizing experience and yeah it's unfortunate it's happening here. – Aisha

Although the violence perpetrated by the white supremacists was ‘only’ verbal, the coordinated nature of what they did created an enormous trauma for the community. The presence of an organized, coordinated white supremacist ‘actions’ can trigger life-threatening levels of fear among Muslim and other racialized people, especially if the group appears to have a ‘plan’ that they are carrying out. It is reasonable for any racialized person or Muslim in that space to have feared for their life in the presence of an ambush by white supremacists. Indeed, a white woman ally, who was also present at the event, told Aisha afterwards that in the presence of that coordinated attack, she had never been more frightened – even after decades of doing community work, through which she had been exposed to many stressors.

6.3.3 Physical Assault

Two participants in the study described facing physical assault in public spaces, perpetrated by strangers (cases where physical assault was perpetrated by intimate partners will be covered in a separate section). The man who had tried to run Asma over with his vehicle in the parking lot got out of his vehicle and followed her to her car, where he physically assaulted her while she was loading the trunk:

Before I could shut the [trunk] door, the man had now parked right behind me and had gotten out of his car. He slammed my trunk door shut, tried to tug at my hijab, at which point I leaned back, and then he went straight for my face with his fist. Luckily, knowing self defense, my immediate reaction was to go into taekwondo mode and grab his wrist and push it away from my face before the punch could hit me. I then pushed his arm away and noticed him coming at me with his other arm. By this time, another man got
involved and pushed the man off of me. Then a police officer showed up at the scene. –

Asma

In this case, the perpetrator was aggressive towards her physical property (slammed her trunk door), attempted to remove her hijab, and threw a punch. Even as she effectively defended herself, he attempted to continue attacking her, indicating a sustained and dedicated rage, which, as I will point out below, is a common feature of Islamophobic violence directed at Muslim women.

Another participant in this study, Safiya, disclosed an incident of physical assault perpetrated against her when she was unloading a car at Sherbourne and Dundas with her (also visibly Muslim woman) friend. In this incident, a white man came and yelled Islamophobic insults at Safiya and her friend. Even though they were both too stunned to respond to him, Safiya describes how the verbal assault quickly escalated to physical assault:

[H]e throw the punch to me but he missed. And the guy was so strong…. And that time, I was so scared if the guy hits me – he almost punched me – but I missed it. But I feel it: I feel even the air [gestures air flying beside her face because of how closely she missed the punch]. If this guy hit me, I could have died. Yeah, that is what happened to me. I was scared. And then he took my car.... I ran away – he took the mirror, the side mirror. He broke it…. And the guy is a heavy guy. He is heavy guy. – Safiya

Safiya also disclosed that while this physical attack was taking place, the perpetrator was yelling “go back to your country”. Through this combination of physical violence and invoking the discourse of Muslims-as-Invaders, the perpetrator is contesting public space, and policing who belongs in the Canadian state, which he is re-claiming and re-imagining as the property of white
men. Similar to Asma’s case above, the perpetrator also targeted Safiya’s property, by destroying the mirror.

6.3.4 Sexual Assault

Anthias (2014) notes that “there is a discourse about normalised or respectable femininities which constructs a binary division between women who are deserving of sympathy (as with rape) and those who are not” (p. 161). Generally white, Christian, cisgendered, heterosexual, middle class and able-bodied women are traditionally seen as being most deserving of protection. I contend that ‘Muslim’ has also become a maligned category such that Muslim women are seen as undeserving of sympathy for sexual violence, and are “rapable based upon their intrinsic identity” (West, 1999, p. 22).

Two incidents of Islamophobically-rationalized sexual assault were reported in this study (sexual violence in the context of intimate partner relationships will be discussed separately, in Section 6.3.5). Both were directed at Stephanie.

The first incident took place when Stephanie’s classmates regularly bullied her on the basis of her last name, which for the purposes of this study I am saying is ‘Khomeini’. Her classmates would repeat this name over and over and mock Stephanie as being a terrorist. This verbal violence then escalated to sexual violence:

I’m just gonna say this really quick ‘cause I just don’t... So when I was 12 like – he wasn't a classmate of mine but he was in the same grade – but like he... isolated me in like a private corner and like raped me. And he kept on, and everytime when he would always acknowledge me, he’d call me by my last name. So like I – like my family had to change my last name [Interviewer: I'm so sorry]. Yeah [Stephanie gets choked up]. So like I took
my mom's last name, because every time I would hear my last name like I'd just get really, like I'd have panic attacks. – Stephanie

Not only were Islamophobic discourses used to justify this rape, by equating Stephanie with terrorism on the basis of her Muslim last name and using that a premise to ‘justify’ assault, but (as discussed in Sections 7.3.3 and 10.7), Islamophobic stereotypes harboured by helping professionals prevented Stephanie from being believed and accessing proper support for her trauma for years after the incident. This incident also demonstrates that Islamophobic bullying of Muslim girls and youth can be highly gendered, and escalate to gender-based violence and sexual violence. Prevention education work regarding Islamophobic bullying in schools must address these gendered elements; supports available to Muslim girls and young women must account for and respond to the intersection of their gender identity and religious identity, and the unique forms of bullying, violence and discrimination they face at that intersection.

The second incident of sexual violence took place when Stephanie was an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto. When she was at a party with classmates, she was targeted for Islamophobic sexual harassment by a group of men, which escalated to sexual violence:

[T]he dudes just started to like circle me and started asking me invasive questions about virginity. like did I ever have sex and I would say, “Yeah, I did.” And they'd be like, “Oh my god, I'm so surprised!” …So then this guy like grabbed my boob and then said like, “What if I did this, would your dad come over and beat me up, or would he, like, you know, bomb my house?” – Stephanie

This incident demonstrates how discourses of Muslimahs-as-Sexually-Represse create a zone of ‘permissibility’ for sexual violence against Muslim women’s bodies. If Muslim women are
imagined to have no sexual agency, this rationalizes abdicating the requirement for their consent, for they have no consent to give. If Muslim women are imagined to be the sexual property of repressive Muslim fathers, then sexual violence against Muslim women is rationalized as a violation of repressive fathers, rather than the Muslim women themselves. Indeed, these imaginings of Muslim women as being eternal victims of sexual repression rationalize sexual violence against Muslim women as ‘sexual liberation’. Under this guise, the plain fact of sexual violence is masked as ‘liberation’, and the autonomous agency of Muslim women to determine their own sexual boundaries is annihilated. What’s more, in the aftermath of sexual violence, failure to believe and support Muslim women survivors is again rationalized by Islamophobic discourses: if she is upset by the sexual violence, her upset is said to stem from her sexual repression and lack of experience, rather than her own rational and valid agency as a woman who is able and allowed to have sexual boundaries and make choices about her own body.

6.3.5 Intimate Partner Violence

Islamophobic discourses also foster conditions for rationalizing intimate partner violence and control by abusive partners. For example, Alison’s ex-partner ‘Jim’ engaged multiple Islamophobic discourses in order to introduce abusive dynamics into their relationship and then justify the progression of abuse. From the outset of the relationship, Jim, a white non-Muslim man, knew Alison was Muslim. Even though Alison said that she “downplayed” the extent of her Muslim-ness in order to mitigate facing any Islamophobia from her partner, this did not stop Jim from engaging multiple Islamophobic discourses in order to establish a situation of intimate partner violence with multiple forms of abuse throughout an eight year relationship.

Jim was not overtly Islamophobic at the outset of the relationship. According to Alison, it started slowly. It began with Jim pressuring Alison to carry out the majority of household duties, as that
is the role he presumed that brown Muslim women would take in a relationship. Jim also relied on Islamophobic stereotyping of Alison’s role in intimate relationships to justify financial abuse and control; by the time Alison left Jim, all of the credit cards (and he had accumulated debt) were in her name, and all of the properties they had purchased were in his name. Jim’s use of Islamophobic discourses to perpetrate intimate partner violence also involved controlling and shaming behaviours related to her religious practices. He refused to go into a mosque or participate in any Muslim holidays or festivals. Alison explained, “He wouldn't come, he wouldn't even put his foot on the driveway in the parking lot for the mosque. Like he was just... it was just no. He wouldn't do it.”

Although partners in interfaith couples are under no obligation to engage with the customs of their significant others, Jim’s behaviour towards Islam and Muslims was one of over-the-top revulsion and shunning. Indeed, when it came to foods that (in his mind) were racialized as brown or Muslim, Jim would demonstrate not just a dislike for that food, but a contempt and disgust with it. He forbade the Alison from cooking anything that smelled like curry; if he ever smelled it, he would make a guttural “yukh” sound and at other times refer to it as smelling like “paki”. Alison still finds it deeply triggering if she hears anyone make that “yukh” sound today, indicating the depth of trauma that Jim’s revulsion and repeated shunning of her cultural practices caused.

Jim perpetrated gaslighting – a form of psychological abuse – if Alison ever complained to him about racism or Islamophobia that she faced from his family or by strangers in public. For example, when Alison told Jim that his mother said something directly Islamophobic to her (that “scarf-people” had ruined a neighbourhood; full quote can be found in Section 6.1.3), Jim
blamed Alison as “too sensitive” and told her that her reaction “scared” his mother, thereby invoking the image of a mad, inherently aggressive, brown Muslim, and painting his mother as the innocent (white) victim. Using this framework, Jim asked Alison to apologize to his mother, and she complied. Another gaslighting behaviour Jim engaged in was that if Alison ever complained about racism, he would accuse her of hating white people.

As the abuse worsened, Jim engaged discourses of Islamophobia to justify verbally abusing Alison. As Alison explained,

He would say, “You know Muslims are evil because everybody else is an infidel and they want every infidel to die.” That was a big one. Especially when he would drink, he would look at me and tell me that I and my family consider him an infidel and the reason he hates us and he hates Muslims is because he knows that we want him to die because he's an infidel. Yeah. That was a big one.

Jim also perpetrated marital rape, which Alison did not recognize as rape until she received professional care after the relationship was over. Lastly, the abuse escalated to physical violence; Alison went to the hospital after Jim perpetrated physical abuse for the first time – she described that moment as “the line” for her. When Jim physically abused her, Alison contacted a friend of hers who worked in a VAW shelter, who accompanied her home when Jim was not there to collect her things and leave. After leaving, Alison received support at the Scarborough Hospital for sexual and physical trauma and was linked to counselling services. After a healing process, Alison is now in a healthy relationship and is pregnant with her first child.

Jim’s abusive behaviour demonstrates how Islamophobic discourses can be wrapped up in ‘justifying’ and normalizing emotional, psychological, financial, sexual and physical abuse of
Muslim women in intimate partner relationships. As discussed in Section 2.2.2, most research on violence against Muslim women in intimate partner settings focuses on so-called ‘honour’ violence and forced marriage, perpetrated by Muslim men. Domestic abuse perpetrated through discourses of Islamophobia by non-Muslim partners is a manifestation of intimate partner violence that Muslim women are uniquely at risk for, and it has not yet been characterized and explored in scholarly literature.

Stephanie also has endured two abusive relationships – both with white non-Muslim men. One was ‘only’ emotionally abusive, and the other, was violent in multiple ways and Islamophobic. According to Stephanie however, the man in this latter relationship only showed his racism and Islamophobia in the second year of their relationship. He would chastise Stephanie’s parents as ‘oppressive’ and failed to believe her when she told him about the Islamophobia she was facing at her job. These patterns are similar to what Alison went through with Jim: a gradual introduction of Islamophobia into the relationship, that centres on gaslighting, disbelieving, and shaming the Muslim woman partner.

Another participant in this study faced intimate partner violence, though in her case, the perpetrator was ‘Hamza’, a South Asian Muslim man. Surprisingly, Faiza also said that Hamza’s violence against her had “roots of Islamophobia”, in that she believed that he would not feel justified in abusing a non-Muslim woman in the same way. Faiza’s insight provides a profound new perspective on Muslim men’s violence against Muslim women in intimate partner settings: could they be engaging the discourse of the Muslimah-as-Weak, and be viewing her as an oppressed receptacle of abuse, and through this reasoning justify selectively abusing her, ‘because’ she is a Muslim woman? If this is the case, it would emphasize the unique nature of
gendered Islamophobia, and demonstrate how male victims of Islamophobia can nonetheless be perpetrators of gendered Islamophobia in their harm of Muslim women.

Strikingly, Hamza’s first instance of abuse towards Faiza was to blame her for an incident Islamophobic violence that she faced in public. After Faiza was verbally assaulted by a group of angry and aggressive white men at Dairy Fest in Winchester, she called Hamza, her then-fiancée, to come and pick her up and drive her back to Toronto. When Hamza arrived and they were in his car, he proceeded to blame her for the violence:

And [Hamza] was like, “Are you stupid, are you dumb, like the fuck were you thinking?”

Like, “What the fuck were you thinking?” Like, “Why would you go to a small town and wear a hijab?” And like, “You're clearly really dumb.” – Faiza

When Faiza and Hamza arrived at his parents’ house, his parents blamed Faiza also, implying that it was unbecoming of a Muslim woman to be out for a weekend trip to Dairy Fest to begin with, and so the whole incident was preventable and therefore her fault. At the time, Faiza did not see this reaction as a red flag, because the experience of Islamophobic violence was so new to her, and she was so distraught that it was not clear to her at the time that this was in fact lack of support, victim-blaming and emotional abuse. She internalized the blame.

As the relationship continued, Hamza became financially abusive: all of the bills were put in her name; she was working two jobs, and he was working a limited amount only. Hamza also engaged in controlling behaviour: Faiza did not have her own key to the house that they lived in. The situation escalated to verbal abuse, and also involved him disappearing for stretches of time. Once Hamza started drinking and using drugs, he became physically violent and was a perpetrator of marital rape.
Since gendered Islamophobia positions Muslim women as endless and helpless victims of Muslim men, it is challenging to speak about violence against Muslim women by Muslim men without these discussions being systemically co-opted by Islamophobic discourses which are in turn weaponized against Muslim women. Yet however fraught the discussion may be, that is no reason to gloss over violence perpetrated against Muslim women by Muslim men. What is needed is an attention to how

    Racialised women are seen as victims of culture and not just individual men in a way that does not happen in instances of domestic abuse where men are pathologised as individuals. Also, there is an opportunistic use of such instances of culturally motivated crimes. Women are supported, but a demonisation takes place of a group’s cultural tendencies, thereby justifying forms of surveillance and control in the private arena of the home as well as within the private arena of tradition and cultural life (Anthias, 2014, pp. 163-164)

Thus in examining violence against Muslim women by Muslim men, it is of vital importance that we “need to move beyond, and indeed to interrupt, reductive and simplistic attempts to cast the Muslim subject in terms which reify and invoke binaries of impugned fundamentalist Islam and the idealized West as ‘the standard for enlightened modernity’ (Said, 1997, p. xxix)” (Martino and Rezai-Rashti, 2008, p. 419) and instead discover “effective strategies for tackling violence against women that co-operate with communities rather than demonizing and ostracizing them.” (Fernandez, 2009, p. 271).

Faiza’s story poses an important question to reflect on: What if victim-blaming of Muslim women who survive Islamophobic violence was commonly understood as a red flag for abusive relationships? While it is not clear how often men who blame Muslim women for the

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Islamophobic violence they face will go on to abuse them in other ways, this awareness piece could represent an important intervention for Muslim women making determinations regarding their potential partners. They can ask themselves: what is this potential partner’s reaction to the Islamophobic violence I face? Is it to blame me, tell me to stay home, or tell me it’s my fault?

Faiza was failed by the justice system when she pressed charges against Hamza for his domestic violence. The case went to court, and she was, in her own words, “shredded on the stand.” What happened in Faiza’s case is common for survivors of gender-based violence, who regularly find that so-called ‘justice’ systems do not work for them, and support the perpetrator. Faiza found the court experience profoundly retraumatizing. After this process, she was pressured by many of the women in her circle to return to Hamza, and she did. She left again later, this time permanently. After a healing process, she is now in a healthy relationship and has two children.

6.3.6 Verbal Assault

As seen in Table 2, verbal assault was by far the most common form of Islamophobic violence reported in this study. However, the modes of verbal assault varied greatly. Currently, there is an assumption regarding what Islamophobic verbal assault looks like: typically, it is believed to involve a highly visible perpetrator yelling at a Muslim woman, perhaps telling her to go back to where she came from. Although this type of verbal violence was reported in the study, many other forms were present as well. Capturing the nuances of Islamophobic verbal assault is necessary in order to brainstorm a full range of possibilities for responding to and intervening against this phenomenon.
6.3.6.1 Clandestine verbal assault

Several cases of verbal assault described in the study were carried out in a very vocal manner, with the perpetrator raising his or her voice, or even yelling, with bystanders in the vicinity able to hear and therefore become aware of what was happening. However, there were a number of cases in the study where the verbal assault was ‘clandestine’, in that it was perpetrated in such a way that only the Muslim woman being targeted would be able to hear it.

For example, Amira was approached by a stranger on the subway who said, in a whisper that only she could hear, “Who are you going to kill next?” Indeed, Amira found the quiet, clandestine manner of this verbal assault to be particularly unsettling; as she put it, “he was speaking very calmly in a very quiet tone, which was even scarier because he wasn’t screaming or shouting.”

Moreover, because of the covert nature of the verbal assault, bystanders on the subway were unable to hear or notice what was going on. According to Amira, she and the perpetrator might have looked like two people talking who happened to know each other.

Similarly, when Shireen was being verbally assaulted by a man sitting behind her on the bus – who accused her of being affiliated with terrorism and made threatening, provocative statements to her – he was speaking in a regular, conversational, volume level. According to Shireen, “five or six people around us immediately could hear, but it wasn’t loud enough that the driver would be made aware.” In both Amira’s and Shireen’s cases, the ‘quieter’ form of verbal assault was no less threatening: both of them feared for their safety. Amira’s leg was shaking violently with fear. Shireen feared that the perpetrator was going to pull off her hijab, and her hands began to shake.
This ‘clandestine’ version of verbal assault poses challenges when considering interventions and hoping for bystander intervention, because it will be less easily spotted.

6.3.6.2 Enraged Tirades

If somebody has hatred, it never stops. – Warsan

Several participants described facing verbal assaults that took place in the form of a protracted diatribe, lasting for up to 10 minutes. These enraged tirades would continue even if the Muslim woman being targeted did not respond. This suggests that the length of time of these verbal assaults were not extended because they were engaged in an argument. Rather, the protracted, rant-like nature of these verbal assaults show that they are not caused by a slip of the tongue: these are intentional, targeted campaigns to destabilize, frighten, and threaten Muslim women using verbal abuse. Indeed, these ‘enraged tirade’ instances of verbal assault were frequently accompanied by yelling, polemics against Islam and Muslims, racial slurs, obscenities, direct threats, and threatening body language.

When Shireen was driving with her father and stopped at an intersection, a man who was irritated that she didn’t make a right turn at a previous intersection (Shireen was erring on the side of caution and had let a pedestrian cross instead), got out of his car and approached Shireen’s car. Shireen quickly locked her car door and rolled up the window. When the man arrived at her car, he banged on the window door and started yelling:

And then he started saying, “You effing Muslims, you should go back to your country, go back to where you came from,” and a whole bunch of stuff with just very, very colourful language intertwined. A lot of swearing... and this went on for about a solid one or two minutes. – Shireen
Shireen’s instinct in this situation was that it would be most effective to let the man expend his rage through this verbal assault, and not reply:

Let him whatever. Let him get it out, don’t instigate the situation any further. So he did his spiel and then kind of walked away slowly looking back, wagging his finger at us, got in his car, and then drove off. – Shireen

The fact that he continued yelling for two minutes, uninterrupted, indicates that he was consumed by the enraged, Islamophobic verbal assault he wanted to perpetrate. Although this might be dismissed as ‘road rage’, such an assessment masks the fact that it was a visibly Muslim woman driver who was targeted and subject to Islamophobic verbal assault. Also notable is the threatening gesture that accompanied the perpetrator’s tirade: he was banging on her vehicle.

The phenomenon of the enraged tirade was present in other incidents described by participants. Lailah reported being verbally assaulted on the subway, in the presence of her children for at least 10 minutes, or however long it takes to get from Broadview subway station (where the verbal assault started) to Dufferin station (where Lailah and her family got off the subway, and away from the perpetrator) – a distance of nine subway stops in total. Shahnozah reported being verbally assaulted by a man on a TTC bus for 10 minutes, which included him screaming at her that she had no right to study International Politics. Throughout this verbal assault, Shahnoza did not respond, as she was frightened into silence. And yet the diatribe continued.

These types of enraged tirades represent an aggressive contestation of public space; an assertion that Muslim bodies are not entitled to that space. The protracted nature of these kinds of verbal assaults seem to attempt to force Muslim women out of the public sphere by making these spaces
intolerable for them. In doing so, the perpetrators are attempting to reclaim Canada as a white Christian society, and in this way, are participating in the ongoing colonization project on a micro level. Indeed, across many forms of Islamophobic verbal assault is the refrain to “go back to where you came from”, which re-inscribes the myth of a timeless, uniformly white, Christian, colonial, and definitively non-Muslim Canada.

6.3.6.3 Profanity and Anti-Muslim Slurs

Islamophobic verbal assaults also regularly featured profane, graphic language, and anti-Muslim slurs. This aspect of verbal assault was particularly distressing to many research participants, especially Muslim women who, due to their adherence to certain Islamic customs and practices, are not regularly exposed to profanity and slurs in their media consumption and in their family lives. Some participants did not seem comfortable repeating the words that had been said to them, and instead just said that they were “very bad words”. The reticence on the part of some Muslim women to verbalize profane or graphic language levelled at them presents another challenge in reporting and tracking incidents of Islamophobic verbal assault: if participants would not repeat what was said to me, a Muslim woman carrying out an anonymous research study about Islamophobia – a topic that all participants expressed an urgent desire to raise awareness about – what are the hopes they would repeat them to a police officer, or to a helping professional? Because of the nature of my methodology, which was a non-intrusive, trauma-informed feminist interviewing method, I did not press any participant to tell me exactly what words were said to them. However if in situations of formal reporting settings, asking Muslim women to repeat profanity and graphic language out loud presents a barrier to their ability to report, they could be given an option to write, rather than say, the words that were used against them.
Other participants did share what was said to them verbatim, and phrases included things like “fucking terrorist”, “ugly”, “dirty”, “fuck you Afghani, fuck you Pakistani”, “towelhead”, “sand-n****”, and repeatedly being given the middle finger.

These kinds of verbal assaults rely on discourses of Muslims-as-Animals and Muslims-as-Invaders, whose mere presence is disgracing and defiling the Canadian landscape. When people are framed in this manner, graphic verbal assault against them becomes sanctioned.

6.3.6.4 Accusatory Scapegoating

Perpetrators of Islamophobic verbal assault regularly relied on the discourse of Muslim-as-Terrorist to turn Muslim women they are targeting into scapegoats and provide a premise for verbally attacking them (see Section 6.1.4). In addition to directly calling Muslim women “terrorists”, verbal assaults often began with scapegoating Muslim women for specific acts of terrorism. Faiza described how her university roommate became angry with her after 9/11:

She [the perpetrator] was swearing at me… it was very othering, there was a lot finger pointing and like, “Your people have done this” and “Now my people are suffering because of your people and how dare you do this.” And I was like, “What the fuck are you talking about?” Like they’re not my people, you know? – Faiza

In this case, Faiza’s roommate was collectively blaming all Muslims for the actions of Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda, a radical fringe group. She was also scapegoating Faiza, by taking her anger at Osama bin Laden out on her. Similarly, after the Orlando Massacre perpetrated by Omar Mateen, all Muslims became equated with mass homophobic violence, and all Muslims were presumed to be homophobic, even though there is a vibrant community of LGBTQ+ Muslims. In this vein, after the Orlando Massacre, Shireen was labelled as a homophobic Muslim by a
stranger on the bus, who proceeded to verbally assault her by scapegoating her for Omar Mateen’s crime. Shireen disclosed that the perpetrator “said something along the lines of “All you Muslims do is pray and kill people, and shoot.” And he was like, “I'm gay, what are you going to do about it?”

Asking this type of provocative question is a common feature of accusatory Islamophobic verbal assault: the question accuses a Muslim woman of affiliation with terrorism, and puts her on the defensive to prove that she is not in fact a terrorist, all the while tacitly initiating conflict with her. It bears repeating that these kinds of questions are disingenuous. In Faiza’s case, she obviously had nothing to do with Osama bin Laden, nor did she sympathize with his views. If she did, her roommate would have been (rightly) terrified of her, and need to move and/or report her to the authorities. In Shireen’s case, the perpetrator knew that she was not going to do anything to him for being gay. She was 17 years old at the time of the incident, and he was an adult man. Had he any belief that she was capable of homophobic violence, let alone lethal violence, he would not have come out to her. Nonetheless, the accusatory verbal assault of Shireen enabled him to scapegoat her for the actions of Omar Mateen and provided a ‘safe’ (safe for the perpetrator) outlet for his frustration and anger.

Many other participants were asked about specific acts of terrorism, as if they were spokeswomen for the people who perpetrated that violence. Aissatou was randomly asked, “What do you think about suicide bombing?” by a classmate in her Academic Upgrading class who found out she was Muslim. After a mass shooting in a concert in London, Bilqis was repeatedly asked by a stranger, “Do you know what happened in London?” over and over, as if she had something to do with it.
In addition to being verbally assaulted with accusatory questions regarding specific incidents of terrorism, several participants expressed frustration with being suspected of being affiliated with Daesh. Lailah, who migrated to Canada because of fleeing a war-torn country that has been impacted by Daesh, was particularly upset when she realized that Muslims were being associated with the very group that she and her family had survived and fled:

I mean that when they pre-judge us... for me as a Muslim they put me in the same side with Isis. With these – I call them “crazy people”, I don't call them Isis. Because it’s not Isis, they say it’s Islamic, no no no, it’s not Islamic! So I call them “crazy people”. They are crazy, they need treatment, they need to send them hospital. They need to focus on they are crazy. Because they just decide to finish somebody's life without nothing. So just crazy because we... my family we are all survivors of them. They are surviving now from them. So I know what I am saying.... People who are not Muslim, they look at us as a Muslim, all of us we are terrorists. They put us on the same side [as Isis]. No! We are victims like you. We are the other side, we are against them. We are not the same! – Lailah

Being affiliated with Daesh, or being held responsible for their heinous acts of mass murder, can be particularly distressing. To be accused of condoning acts that are so disturbing that one can barely stomach watching the news that describes them, is to be called evil. It represents a profound affront to the moral convictions that the Muslim women being attacked actually hold; convictions they live out on a daily basis. Many of the participants in the study are community volunteers, and work in community food programs, women’s shelters, and youth programs. Participants frequently stated that their goals in life are to help people, to be there for their families, and to make the world a better place. And, as we will see in Section 9.2.2, a number of
participants cited their religious beliefs as the reason they did not try to retaliate against perpetrators of Islamophobic violence or even argue with them, and instead stayed silent or tried to be kind. Regardless of these personal virtues, and no matter how dedicated Muslim women’s lives may be to non-violence and community service, discourses of Islamophobia rationalized scapegoating them for terrorist violence.

Lailah, who herself fled a country where Daesh is present, further expressed frustration with the notion that she should be held responsible or expected to prevent terrorist violence in any way, when she can barely even tell her own children what to do:

Can I control my son – he's 4 years – can I control him? No. Can I control the girl, 2 years and a half, Jamila? She has a very strong personality. Nobody can tell her, nobody can guide her, no. She will not. So how about somebody [who is] 20 or 25 or 30 [years old]? He doesn’t know me! Oh, let me call him [and say], “Please don't bomb” or “Please don't kill people?” – Lailah

The nature of scapegoating is that the scope of problems blamed on the targeted, scapegoated group tends to grow. Indeed, when Warsan faced an Islamophobic verbal assault by a man at the entrance of her co-op building, it began by the perpetrator noticing that the front door of the building was not functioning. He said, “oh, now I know why this door is not working: because of you guys”. He proceeded to fly into an Islamophobic tirade, screaming at Warsan and her daughter about being “terrorists” and saying they should go back to where they came from and be bombed. This incident indicates how accusatory verbal assault, whether it be for affiliation with terrorism or somehow ruining front doors to buildings, is a form of dumping frustration and rage on to what perpetrators believe are ‘easy’ or acceptable targets: Muslim women.
6.3.6.5 Othering Questions

Seemingly innocuous questions about Muslim women’s clothing are in many cases a type verbal assault. Systems of oppression permit invasive questions of subjugated groups; questions which, if asked of any other member of society, would be deemed inappropriate or rude. Black women are asked by strangers if they can touch their hair. Trans people are flippantly asked for details about their genitals, just out ‘curiosity’. Muslim women are asked invasive and Islamophobically charged questions about their clothing, sex lives, and families. Hanifa describes being asked by a stranger in a community centre if her husband forced her to wear niqab. She recalled, “One lady asking me, “You cover the face, right? Your husband told you? Your husband forced you?” I say no, no one forced! Why? Myself, I cover. We know which awrah⁸ we want to cover.”

Before being sexually assaulted at a university party, Stephanie was asked about her virginity by a group of men, who were pivoting off the stereotype that all Muslim women are sexually repressed. A participant in the arts-based portion of the project relays the types of questions that are regularly directed Muslim women through her poem, while showing how the impact of these questions can cumulate and escalate in what feels like an onslaught:

(Part II: Living as a Hijabi)

Did your Father force you to wear that thing?

Does your husband make you wear it?

Are you a Sharia Law Muzlum now?

Who brainwashed you into this?

Aren’t you hot in that? Aren’t you?

—

⁸ awrah is the Arabic term for the parts of a human body that should be covered by clothing in public
Aren’t you hot with all those clothes?
Poor thing, you must be so hot
You’d look a lot hotter without it
Who dresses like this in Canada?
Go back to your country
You have no right to be here
You’re oppressed
oppressed, oppressed
oppressed pressed
You fucking terrorist
You fucking Moozlum
You stupid Muzlim
Fuck terrorists
I will kill you.

- “Part II: Living as a Hijabi” (poem written by participant)

6.3.6.6 Criticizing Parenting
Islamophobic verbal assault also manifests in a type of haughty moral superiority to Muslims, and the perceived need to ‘morally educate’ Muslims in how to be ‘better people’ – particularly, better parents. This mentality is essential to colonization projects: colonized peoples are morally inferior and require the education of Christendom, including how to appropriately raise and care for children. This mythical deficit in parenting skills can be used to justify severing family relationships under the guise of colonial ‘care’. Indeed, the rupture of Indigenous children’s
relations with their families was enacted throughout the Canadian national project, through residential schools, the 60’s scoop, and the current ongoing overrepresentation of Indigenous children in foster care.

As we have seen, a large proportion of the participants in this study are mothers. As some of these Muslim mothers carried out tasks of picking up their young children from school, or travelling with their children to appointments and events, their parenting and mothering skills were criticized by strangers during Islamophobic verbal assaults. When Maryam was on the TTC with her son and daughter, who were both dressed in traditional Muslim clothing, a woman on the subway became angry and asked Maryam why her daughter was wearing hijab, saying that “summer is coming now” and accusing Maryam of making her daughter “hot”. The perpetrator also angrily asked Maryam why her son was dressed in an Islamic robe and hat. These questions and accusations presumed that Maryam does not have compassion for her own children and needed to be taught how to parent them by this ‘civilizing’ stranger on the subway. Similarly, when Lailah was on the subway with her children and feeling faint and exhausted after having to give blood in a medical appointment, she was screamed at by a woman on the bus when her children were running back and forth between her and her husband, who was standing a few feet away from her. Lailah recalls, “She started to scream at me and my kids: “Stop your daughter! You don't care? Yeah! Look at them, how they raise their kids. How they send for us terrorism!”” In this case, the perpetrator stated that Lailah did not care about her own daughter, and that the way she raised her kids is not only faulty and inferior, but somehow breeding of terrorism.
At a Toronto-based women’s shelter where Alison works as a staff member, a Muslim family in attendance at the shelter had young children in the family sharing in the chores assigned to the mother. This practice of children participating in chores was used by staff at the shelter to berate the Muslim family and the Muslim woman’s capacity to parent them. Alison’s coworkers at the shelter made statements amongst themselves like:

[they said] “Um, why does the kids have to take garbage out? Why do the kids have to do the chores? This is something the adults need to be doing. It's their culture, it's because of their patriarchy, it's because of the suppression of women.” – Alison

This practice of degrading and attacking the capacity of Muslim mothers to raise their children can have implications for Muslim mothers’ interactions with school systems, social services, and child welfare. As such, this particular form of verbal assault represents an important manifestation of Islamophobia that may be impacting Muslim mothers and their access to services across the GTA.

6.3.7 Non-Verbal Assault

Verbalization is not necessary for Islamophobic attacks or threats to take place in a public space. Several participants described experiences of Islamophobic non-verbal assault, enacted through a variety of methods. Accounting for these non-verbal assaults paints a fuller picture of the omnipresence of Islamophobia for Muslim women, and demonstrate how responses, interventions, and education about Islamophobic violence must take these non-verbal tactics into consideration.
6.3.7.1 Threatening Gestures

Nayyirah was subjected to a threatening gesture by a man on the bus, who did not verbalize anything to her. This silent and clandestine form of non-verbal assault meant that Nayyirah was effectively threatened in public, but in a way that no one around her was able to recognize or witness. As she explained,

it was late night, on a bus, the bus was packed, and it seemed as if nobody was paying attention.... He [the perpetrator] formed his hand into like a gun basically and pointed in my direction. And, I didn't really... nobody noticed what he had done and... he did it, and that was it. – Nayyirah

Similarly, Bahar described being honked at by a man in a car while she was walking on the sidewalk, while he was angrily and threateningly pointing at her, without using any words.

6.3.7.2 Spitting

Three research participants reported that perpetrators spat on the ground in front of them in a purposeful, directed way – notably, two of these participants were wearing niqab when this non-verbal assault occurred. The act of spitting signifies disrespect, disgust, and contempt; this form of non-verbal harassment should be taken seriously as potentially having a significant emotional impact on Muslim women.

6.3.7.3 Shunning/Recoiling

Unless you've been on this side of it, you can't understand what it's like when someone looks at you like that, when someone pulls away from you. You don't get it. – Alison

Another non-verbal form of enacting Islamophobia against Muslim women is through shunning them in social spaces, or recoiling from them when they are present. Najma described being
shunned and recoiled from when she arrived in Canada from Ethiopia with her husband and
young children. One day, Najma brought her children to a park near her home on Lakeshore, and
was playing with her children and with some other children, whose parents were there too. This
is a common practice among parents in playgrounds: multiple children interact with each other,
and all parents are collectively supervising the entire space. Najma noticed that while her
children were happy to play with her, the other children seemed nervous around her, because of
her niqab. In order to put these children at ease, she lifted up her niqab and said, “Don't worry,
I'm just like your mom.” At that point, the children’s parents became very angry with her, and
asked her why she was wearing the niqab. Since Najma’s English skills were limited at the time,
all she said in response was, “I’m sorry.” This response did not mitigate the parents’ anger.
Najma she tried to take her children out the park, but they started crying and insisted that they
wanted to stay and play. So they remained, and the other parents angrily removed themselves
and their children from the park. This act of shunning and recoiling gave Najma the message that
she was not welcome in the park, and that if she went there, other families would flee.

Najma also experienced shunning as a student in her LINC class, where she noticed that people
were not being friendly or social with her:

They [her classmates] not say anything for me. You know the people have friends, they
have fun together. But only me, I'm wearing niqab. When you wearing niqab, the people
is not close to you. I don't know why happens, they not close to you. They not say to me
anything, I think maybe that's the problem, [so] I take off my niqab. And then, that's
better. The people say hi, and talking to you, and happy face. – Najma
As Najma’s experience illustrates, non-verbal shunning can have a deep impact on Muslim women’s access to friendships and social relationships, which are essential for emotional health and wellbeing. Shunning can also disrupt community networks and connections that would normally promote adjustment to life in Canada for Muslims that migrated here.

Another research participant, Stephanie, describes how after she spoke up about an Islamophobic verbal assault she faced at a party in University, she lost a large network of friends who all sided with the perpetrator and blamed her for being affected by the verbal assault:

Like I basically lost 20 friends out of that because they just didn’t want to get involved.

And it's not as violent as the thing that I experienced when I was age 12, but it was like emotionally traumatic in another way because I just felt like I was being villainized. Like I couldn't even mention that somebody said a stupid joke, or grabbed me. – Stephanie

Stephanie described how devastating it was to lose all of these social connections at once and be abandoned after this incident of Islamophobia: “It was heartbreaking. Like I still feel like I'm not over it. And yeah like I just felt like I was going – it’s an ableist word – crazy.” Stephanie ended up reaching out to friends who were people of colour, and who were able to validate the reality of the racism she had endured from her ex-friend group, and affirm to her that it was not acceptable.

Islamophobic shunning can also take place in the context of intimate partner relationships, as networks of in-laws can become involved in shunning the Muslim woman partner. Alison shared about how her ex-mother-in-law – who had made overtly Islamophobic statements in other instances – had shunned and rejected her: “His mother never accepted me – she wouldn’t talk to
me, she wouldn't look at me.” This kind of purposeful ignoring has the impact of making someone feel like their existence is being erased.

Shunning can also take the form of socially abandoning Muslim women by refusing them assistance when, in any other circumstances, one would offer help. For example, it is common practice in Toronto for people riding a streetcar to assist women with strollers in getting up the stairs to enter the streetcar. As noted above, Najma described a cold winter day when four streetcars – each of which contained enough space for her and her stroller as well as enough passengers available to help – came and left her streetcar stop, with not a single person being willing to help her bring her stroller up. Najma describes this incident as one of the defining reasons she decided to remove her niqab, for the sake of her children:

For the streetcar time, nobody talked me, nobody helped me. I have children, I have responsibility for my children. I think it better for me if I take off. I have to open my face, I have to do myself something I need, something my children need. – Najma

Still other participants described being recoiled from in public spaces. Alison reported that one day, when she was dressed up in Islamic garb because it was Eid, a white woman in the elevator with her clutched her purse and moved away from her when she saw her. Zainab described how hordes of white people at a public festival recoiled from her and her family, as if they were “snakes” that had entered the space, with women again clutching their purses as well as their husbands’ arms from protection. These kinds of non-verbal gestures and actions have the impact of isolating Muslim women, and making them feel maligned and again unwelcome in public spaces.
6.3.7.4 Staring

The hypervisibility and extent to which Muslim women are Othered through an Orientalist gaze often manifests as abject staring. The impact of being gawked at by strangers can be objectifying, socially isolating, accusatory, or even potentially threatening. A participant in the poetry aspect of this project reflects on this non-verbal form of Islamophobic assault:

The stares. the huffing and puffing as I walk through a crowded train, they look afraid.

As if this born Canadian woman was shipped from an ISIS camp, when I'm just trying to get through my day.

-Excerpt from “Letter from a Terrorist” (poem written by participant)

These kinds of stares can escalate to other forms of dehumanizing objectification. Nayyirah, for example, reported that people sometimes take photos of her on the TTC without her consent.

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This chapter demonstrates that Islamophobic violence encompasses a wide range of behaviours, including some surprising forms, such as Islamophobic intimate partner violence and clandestine verbal assault. It is important to recognize that all forms of Islamophobic violence are unacceptable, and avoid setting up a ‘hierarchy’ of violence, in which some forms are taken more seriously that others. Indeed, all forms of Islamophobic violence reported in this study are evidence of hostile and malicious attitudes towards Muslim women – attitudes which urgently need to be shifted. And as I will discuss in Section 8, all of these forms of violence are potential sources of trauma.
7.1 Interrogating Popular Bystander Intervention Methods

The question of bystander intervention arises whenever a public incident of any form of assault occurs. Islamophobic violence against Muslim women in public spaces has been the focus of public education campaigns which encourage people to be active bystanders, and provide instructions on how to safely intervene. One Islamophobic violence bystander intervention method that has circulated widely on social media is a comic by Maeril (Maeril, n.d.), a freelance illustrator who lives in Paris. The approach illustrated in Maeril’s comic is centered around interacting with the woman being targeted and ignoring the perpetrator, as a way to de-escalate the situation and take away the perpetrator’s power. Recently, the City of Boston has decided to print this comic as part of a poster campaign around the city, to share with the public how to respond if they witness verbal assault of Muslim women.

While it is profoundly useful that this concrete, practical tool has been circulating as a potential method for bystanders to practice, I have a number of concerns with this approach and its depiction in this comic. First and foremost, this entire approach assumes that the Muslim woman being targeted for Islamophobic verbal

Fig. 10: Bystander intervention comic by Maeril, which has been widely circulated online
assault does not face language barriers. As discussed above, several participants in this study faced language barriers at the time of the incident of Islamophobia they faced; many of them would not have been able to participate in the kind of conversation illustrated in this example.

The final panel of the comic shows the bystander making physical contact with the Muslim woman being supported by putting their hands on her shoulders. There is no reason to touch a Muslim woman after one has supported her as a bystander, particularly given the traumatized, shaky state she might be in after the incident (see Section 8.1). Indeed, notions of consent are strikingly absent from the comic as a whole. In the blog post accompanying the comic originally published on Maeril’s Tumblr page, she suggests the following in a block of text below the comic:

Please make sure to always respect the wishes of the person you’re helping: whether they want you to leave quickly afterwards, or not! If you’re in a hurry escort them to a place where someone else can take over - call one of their friends, or one of yours, or if they want to, the police. It all depends on how they feel! (Maeril, n.d.)

However, this sentiment and guideline is not made clear in the comic itself, which appears unidirectional, prescriptive, and does not show the Muslim woman as having agency or say in how the bystander intervention takes place. And it is the comic – not the block of text accompanying it – that has garnered wide circulation.

Another assumption made in this comic is that the Muslim woman is travelling alone, rather than with children, or other friends or family. As shown by the stories of participants in this study, being targeted in the presence of children on public transportation is a common occurrence. The
presence of children would complicate a bystander intervention process, and potentially call for a different set of actions.

The scenario depicted also assumes that the bystander is non-Muslim. As seen in the incidents of bystander intervention recounted by research participants, bystanders who choose to intervene in cases of Islamophobic violence may also themselves be Muslim (see Section 7.2.2), which again complicates the situation.

Finally, the Muslim woman depicted in this scenario again fits the archetype of the model Muslimah minority: she is young, light skinned, and is wearing a pink (rather than Black) hijab, and not niqab. She speaks English, and smiles when the bystander intervenes. This choice of depiction reinforces the idea that there are certain Muslim women that are worthy of help, and erases the reality of Muslim women who do not fit this archetype.

There were several cases of bystander intervention reported by the participants of this study. Interestingly, though they varied in their level of helpfulness, none of the intervention methods described by participants relied on the framework described in Maeril’s comic.

### 7.2 Bystander Action Reported by Participants

Eight research participants described instances of public Islamophobic violence where a bystander spoke up and attempted to intervene. In two of the eight cases, the bystanders were also Muslim themselves.

#### 7.2.1 Non-Muslim Bystander Action

A common method of bystander intervention reported by participants was that the bystander directly questioned the perpetrator about his or her actions. This tactic goes against recommendations to avoid interaction with the perpetrator, and yet, in the cases reported in this
study, they appeared to be effective. When Maryam and her children were being verbally assaulted by a woman on the bus, a man intervened by directly questioning the perpetrator. He asked her why she was saying that to them, and then told the perpetrator that it was none of her business. In this case, it may be relevant that the perpetrator was a woman and the bystander was a man; perhaps male privilege afforded the man in this scenario the ability to speak back to a female perpetrator and question her actions.

Another instance, however, involved a male bystander questioning a male perpetrator. Lailah described an incident of verbal assault in her building, where a man yelled at her to “go back to your country”. In this instance, a male bystander intervened and asked the perpetrator why he was speaking to Lailah like that, and why he was screaming at her. The bystander then got in between Lailah and the perpetrator and escorted him out of the building. Similarly, when Zainab was being yelled at by a male perpetrator when she was waiting for the bus, a male bystander asked the perpetrator why he was saying that to Zainab, and then insisted that the perpetrator apologize to her.

In addition to questioning the perpetrator and directly standing up for the woman being targeted, another method bystanders used was to try to calm the perpetrator down and discredit his or her ideas. When Shireen was being verbally assaulted on the bus by a man accusing her of affiliations with terrorism, a man sitting next to the perpetrator was quietly trying to calm the perpetrator down, saying things like “it's okay” and “not all Muslims.” The impact of this bystander intervention is not clear, although it appeared to be somewhat ineffective. Firstly, because he was speaking so quietly, Shireen did not even hear the bystander say this to the perpetrator: she was told by her friend afterwards that she heard the bystander saying those
things. Secondly, the bystander’s intervention did not seem to stop the perpetrator, as the verbal assault continued until Shireen and her friend left the bus.

In contrast to situations involving a single bystander, Nayyirah experienced an incident in which bystander intervention was a communal, vocal effort by everyone on the streetcar:

I’m getting on a streetcar, where a woman she got on and... at first she didn't say anything to me but after a while she just started to just say things to me like, “Why are you dressing like that?” or “Nobody wants to sit beside you” and things like that. And every-literally everyone who was sitting around me before I could even defend myself, they began to defend me. So after a while she obviously couldn't say anything so like her power was taken away from her. Because of those around me, strangers. – Nayyirah

This incident powerfully demonstrates how Islamophobic violence isn’t simply promulgated through the actions of the perpetrator, but is compounded by the silence and inaction of witnesses. Group bystander action in response to Islamophobic violence has the capacity to shut it down and diffuse it of its power.

As noted above, other aspects of bystander intervention went beyond verbal questioning of or responses to the perpetrator, but involved actions to offer protection to the Muslim woman. In the example involving Lailah described above, the bystander got in between her and the perpetrator, and escorted him out of the building. In another incident of Islamophobic verbal assault Nayyirah faced on a bus, the bus driver asked her to come to the front of the bus, and the bus driver’s husband – who also happened to be there – got physically in between Nayyirah and the perpetrator. In Asma’s case, when the perpetrator was yelling Islamophobic slurs at her from
his vehicle – what she describes as “an elderly couple” called the police. Because of this intervention, the police arrived in time for when the physical assault of Asma took place. During this physical attack, another bystander pulled the perpetrator off of Asma.

7.2.2 Muslim Bystander Action

In 2/8 cases of bystander intervention described by participants, the bystander was also Muslim. In Tahira’s case, after no one in the crowded subway intervened to help her when she was being verbally assaulted by a man engaged in an enraged tirade, another Muslim woman intervened. Tahira describes the Muslimah bystander as a 20-something University student, carrying a backpack and wearing a hijab. When this Muslimah intervened, the perpetrator’s attack redirected onto her. However, in contrast to Tahira’s reaction to the verbal assault (which was stunned silence), the Muslimah bystander spoke back. When the perpetrator told the Muslimah bystander to “go back to your country”, she replied, “This is not your country either. This country doesn’t belong to you, so if I have to go back to my country, you go back to Europe where you came from.” As the perpetrator escalated in anger, the Muslimah bystander pressed the emergency strip to stop the subway, and the conductor arrived. Upon arrival, he questioned the Muslimah bystander about what was happening, and she told him what had occurred. He then asked three random non-Muslim young women if what the Muslimah bystander said was true, and they said yes. At no point did the conductor ask Tahira anything, even though the Muslimah bystander told him that Tahira had been verbally assaulted too. In the meantime, the perpetrator fled the scene.

9 Although in Asma’s case it was not harmful, it is important to not generalize that calls to the police will not always result in positive outcomes for Muslim women, particularly if they are Black, have a traumatic history with the police, or do not have legal status in Canada (see Section 7.4).
What is striking about the conductor’s actions is that he prioritized checking with non-Muslim women, instead of believing the Muslimah bystander’s description of what happened. He also failed to consult with Tahira in any way. This demonstrates the inherent distrust of Muslim women as reliable witnesses of their own experiences; discourses of the ‘mad’ Muslim, and the inherently oppressed Muslim woman, make her less likely to be believed when she plainly describes what happened to her. After the conductor left, the Muslimah bystander proceeded to tell Tahira that she should speak back to Islamophobic verbal assault, too. Tahira recounted that, “[the Muslimah bystander] told me, ‘Listen, you have to defend yourself. Don't be afraid. When you gonna keep quiet, they'll take more advantage. You see? You have to fight for yourself.’”

Although Tahira was grateful for the Muslimah bystander’s intervention, she explained to her the reason that she did not stand up for herself:

I say listen, I didn't respond to him because Muslim are not allowed to fight, they are not allowed to. So if you keep quiet, Allah is going to find somebody to reply for you. That's why I decided to keep quiet…. And I told her may Allah reward you for what you did. Because if, who knows what gonna happen. If she didn't fight with him. Maybe he could have stand and come to try to do anything to me. – Tahira

Perhaps Tahira’s and the Muslimah bystander’s differing approaches to responding to Islamophobic violence represent a generational divide. Tahira relied on divine intervention manifested through other people’s reactions, rather than speaking back herself. Nonetheless, the Muslimah bystander’s urging of her to speak had an impact on Tahira: she said that her words were the reason that she decided to be a part of this study – to speak up and share her story.
The other instance in which the bystander who intervened was Muslim was in Shahnoza’s case, where she was screamed at for 10 minutes by a man on the bus who was saying that she had no right to study International Relations, and that “her place” was with the Taliban, where women are shot for trying to go to school. While this was occurring, the bus was full, and for the first portion of the verbal onslaught, everyone was silent and no one interfered, including the bus driver, who was able to hear what was happening. Eventually, a Muslim man intervened. His intervention first focused on speaking to Shahnoza directly, telling her to ignore the verbal assaulter and to not respond. But then, after the verbal assault continued and worsened, the Muslim man bystander took a different action by addressing the perpetrator directly:

The Muslim guy he said he was born in Canada, and that he's Canadian and that no one has right to discriminate him, and then he told the bus driver to call the police, and only after that point that guy was silent. – Shahnoza

In this case, the Muslim bystander took the argument onto his own turf; rather than telling the perpetrator that Shahnoza had the right to study and live in Canada, he, as a Muslim, claimed his own Canadian-ness. A common defense from Islamophobia is re-assertion of Canadian-ness. Although I will not fault the Muslim man bystander for invoking this idea in a heated moment of defense, it is important to note how Islamophobic discourses pressure Muslims to participate uncritically in the colonial project by laying claim to Canadian identity and erasing Indigenous struggle. In contrast, the Muslimah bystander who stood up for Tahira, told the perpetrator to “go back to Europe” in response to his xenophobic statements; this kind of response disrupts the colonial logic underlying Islamophobia, rather than aligning with it.

The Muslim man bystander also told the bus driver to call the police without Shahnoza’s consent for police involvement. In this case, police involvement remained at threat level only, and the
threat was effective: as soon as the perpetrator believed there could be a consequence for his behaviour, he ceased it. This cessation goes against the notion that perpetrators of Islamophobia cannot control themselves: here, the perpetrator absolutely could control himself, if given a reason to do so. He was making a choice to scream at Shahnoza because he felt permitted to do so without consequence. Once a potential consequence arose, he stopped screaming.

In cases of bystander intervention where the bystander is Muslim, there are clear risks of Islamophobic violence being meted out against the bystander. In Tahira’s case, the Muslimah bystander was visibly Muslim. In Shahnoza’s case, the Muslim bystander verbally identified himself as Muslim when confronting the perpetrator. These examples make it clear that approaches for bystander intervention should include consideration of the possibility that the bystander is also Muslim. Indeed, given that one out of every three bystanders who took action in the incidents described in this study were Muslim, it may be that Muslims are more likely to stand up for other Muslims who are being targeted for violence in public.

7.2.3 No Bystander Reaction

Twelve research participants described facing incidents of Islamophobic violence in public spaces where witnesses were present but failed to respond or intervene. These participants described shock and hurt at not just the incident of Islamophobic violence itself, but at the social abandonment by witnesses, and society as a whole. When Safiya was physically attacked in the street, in broad daylight on a Sunday in downtown Toronto, there were witnesses, and she was stunned that nobody intervened: “All the people, they are passing! Nobody did anything, you know?”
There has been research into the so-called “bystander effect” and why individuals are hesitant to intervene when they are witnessing harm. In looking at how the “bystander effect” operates within situations of Islamophobic violence, it is important to locate it within the context of Islamophobic discourses; it is possible that an ingrained sense of the Muslim woman as the ‘Other’ prevents bystanders from stepping in. Moreover, there may be a higher amount of fear among bystanders when an incident of public violence involves Islamophobia, given the uptick in white supremacist violence directed at Muslims and even at bystanders who defend them. A harrowing example of this danger occurred in May 2017 in Portland, Oregon, where Ricky John Best and Taliesin Myrddin Namkai-Meche were murdered by a white supremacist Jeremy Joseph Christian when they tried to intervene as he was hurling Islamophobic slurs at two women in a Portland commuter train.

Indeed, some participants who were not supported by any bystander intervention posited that witnesses were too afraid to intervene. Still others suggested that perhaps the fact that the bystanders might be immigrants themselves mitigated their ability to speak up. Safiya, in reflecting on why no one intervened when she was physically attacked in the street, suggested that maybe people did not want to get involved in a situation that may involve the time-consuming process of having to testify as a witness. Still, there was a sinking feeling among some participants that inaction of bystanders was motivated by the same force motivating the perpetrators of violence: Islamophobia. Indeed, Tahira asserts that the reason that witnesses did not intervene when she was being verbally assaulted in a crowded subway was because she is a Muslim: “It shows that nobody show any interest there because I’m a Muslim. You know? It really hurt me, you all saw everything!”
Inaction of bystanders in situations of Islamophobic violence against Muslim women in public spaces can serve as a metaphor for how Islamophobia operates at a macro level in Canadian society: there are distinct perpetrators of legislative violence, symbolic violence, and state violence against Muslims in Canada. At present, these perpetrators are a vocal minority. However, large swaths of Canadian society are inactive ‘bystanders’ to these macro-level assaults, thereby tacitly condoning them or at least looking the other way to the extent that these violences can continue to operate without societal censure or opposition.

7.3 Reactions to Muslimahs’ Disclosure of Islamophobic Violence

A troubling outcome of dehumanizing Islamophobic discourses that rely on the notion of the ‘inherent madness’ of Muslims is that individual Muslims will be less likely to be believed when they disclose that Islamophobic violence has happened to them. They may be presumed to be irrational, hateful, or making it up. Indeed, many research participants expressed a desire to not just have their stories heard, but to be taken seriously and believed, which indicates that they may have been dismissed as ‘mad’ in other contexts.

Research has shown that in cases of sexual violence, the reactions of people whom survivors disclose to can be a source of secondary trauma if she is not believed, or if she is blamed (Edwards et. al, 2015). Conversely, if the people the survivor discloses to are supportive, this can speed up her recovery and rebuild her strength (Edwards et. al, 2015). This may also be true for survivors of Islamophobic violence. Therefore, in addition to the vital role played by bystanders while a situation of Islamophobic violence is occurring, the response of people to whom the incident is initially disclosed also may have an important impact on the Muslim woman survivor of Islamophobic violence.
7.3.1 Family/Partners

Family was by far the most common space for initial disclosure and support for the participants in this study: almost all of the participants told their parents, partners, or children what had happened to them. This shows that the families of Muslim women survivors of Islamophobic violence are often on the front lines of emotional support in the aftermath of an incident. Indeed, this reliance on family shows that Islamophobic violence does not just impact the woman who is targeted for it; an entire family unit can take on the emotional fallout of that violence. The emotional support that is offered by Muslim families after a disclosure is illustrated by Hanifa, a mother of adult children, who wears niqab and is frequently targeted for verbal assault in public. Hanifa appreciated how her adult daughter, who is studying social work, supports her when she discloses an experience of Islamophobic violence, along with the rest of Hanifa’s family: “She is very, very good with me…. They [her children] give me strength. It's good. Yeah, husband also.”

Shireen, a younger research participant, disclosed the incidents of Islamophobic verbal assault she faced to her parents and siblings, who were a source of emotional support, strength and sensitivity for her. In Nayyirah’s case (who is also a younger participant), although her mother was supportive when she disclosed incidents of Islamophobic verbal assault to her, Nayyirah wouldn’t always disclose incidents to her mom “just so that she wouldn't worry about me.” Shahnoza similarly didn’t want to tell her parents, who live overseas, so as not to worry them. This demonstrates an added burden of Islamophobic violence on some young Muslim women: some of them may not want to disclose incidents to their family, in order to protect them from worry. This inability to disclose even to family, further isolates these young Muslim women from emotional support.
When it comes to disclosure of sexual violence, particularly childhood rape, the issue of disclosure to family is much more fraught and complex. Stephanie, who was raped at 12 by an Islamophobic classmate, also faced the compounding challenge of not being believed by 22 distinct mental health professionals in the aftermath of that violence. The lack of being believed by these professionals may have impacted her ability to tell her family about what happened. Recently, Stephanie did disclose the childhood rape to her mother. Her mother believed her, and expressed that she felt like “it all makes sense now”, referring to the emotional breakdown and extreme distress Stephanie endured throughout her teens, and her insistence on changing her last name because of triggers and flashbacks.

In the few cases that participants reported that family members or partners were not supportive after a disclosure of Islamophobic violence, the impact was devastating. Alison, who had faced Islamophobic violence in public, was gaslit by her ex-partner Jim when she told him about what happened:

   I would tell my boyfriend about it, and he told me I was just exaggerating, didn't believe it, told me I was... what was it? Imagining things. I was too sensitive. That's a big word he used: I was too sensitive. – Alison

When Alison told her mother about Islamophobic abuse by Jim and his family, her mother, who seemed to have internalized racism, counselled her to just “hang my head and basically you know, accept it, and this is just my role and this is what society is.” These reactions to her disclosures left Alison in a situation where she was facing regular Islamophobic abuse from both her Jim and his family. This abuse escalated to financial, sexual and physical violence within that relationship.
As noted above, when Faiza was verbally attacked at a festival, she told her then-fiancée Hamza, a Muslim man, about it. His response was to blame her for being out at a festival (see Section 6.3.5, above). Hamza brought Faiza to his parents’ home, and her in-laws proceeded to also blame her for the Islamophobic verbal assault she had survived:

They were like, “Why on earth did you go there, what were you thinking?” You know? So it was like very victim-blaming and there was like a lot of responsibility and it was rooted in that whole notion of like as woman you have to be responsible for yourself and protect yourself and guard your dignity.... “Why are you travelling at night time? Why are you going on a weekend trip with girlfriends to the city, and who do you think you are?” And like as a pious Muslim woman you shouldn't be doing that.... “Why were you out at night, and what is this Dairy Fest?” All those questions. And that was his family, right? – Faiza

In Faiza’s situation, the intense blaming and shaming of her when she disclosed the Islamophobic violence that happened to her led her to decide to not disclose the incident to anyone else, and was therefore unable to address it, up until the point of this research study:

It’s interesting, I’ve never spoken about it. This is the first time I’m speaking about it. And I’ve never really like unpacked what happened that night. You know my friend called me up and was like are you okay and like did the checking in thing, and I was really like “Yeah I’m fine, I gotta go, like I don't want to talk about it.” But yeah like it’s... I’ve never unpacked it. -Faiza

7.3.2 Friends

Second to family, friends were another common space for disclosure of Islamophobic violence for participants in this study. As was the case with family, friends were described as helpful by
research participants when they had a supportive emotional reaction to the disclosure. For example, when Amira disclosed to her co-worker friends about the verbal assault that had just happened to her on the subway, she said that “it helped that James [her co-worker] was as angry as I felt.”

Participants also described it as helpful when the friends they disclosed to offered concrete supports. Jihan, for example, disclosed Islamophobic violence to her Muslimah best friend, who also faces frequent Islamophobia. This friend offered to accompany Jihan when she was in public, or go to the police with her. When Lailah told some non-Muslim friends about an incident of Islamophobic violence she faced, they said that she could call them if anything like that happened again, or if she felt stressed or depressed. When Aisha told some people in her community network about the coordinated attack on her anti-Islamophobia event by a hate group, she was put in touch with helpful resources, including a grassroots group who offer to function as a human shield at entry points of Muslim events.

On the other hand, friends who were not supportive when Islamophobic violence was disclosed to them caused further damage, perhaps even more than the incident of Islamophobic violence itself. When Stephanie disclosed an incident of Islamophobic verbal assault that was perpetrated by a man who was a mutual friend to her immediate circle of friends, these friends berated her for being upset; she was called an “emotional terrorist”, “over dramatic”, “inflammatory”, and was gaslit by being told that her upset reaction to Islamophobic verbal assault simply meant that she was “going crazy right now”.

When Stephanie disclosed a separate incident of Islamophobia-motivated sexual assault that occurred at a party to a white female friend, this friend suggested “Well maybe like you just need
to like be one of the guys” and justified this stance by saying “I'm just trying to play the devil's advocate because I want to advocate for both of you.” Reflecting on this lack of support from Stephanie’s university friends in the face of Islamophobic violence, Stephanie highlights how Islamophobia functions to paint Muslim women as “evil”, which harkens back to Muslims-as-Satanic discourses. Through this lens, Muslim women are not to be believed, inhabit a racialized body that is not worthy of protection; as she explained,

It makes me realize how people try to absolve themselves from any responsibility over their actions by trying to turn… turn the victim into the person who is the evil one in a situation…. So nobody believed me on that. And like, again my white friends who were like girls – like who at least believe in like the sexual violent part, not the racialized part – couldn't even like defend me. And I’m sure if I wasn't Muslim and if I was a white woman, that it’d be different. – Stephanie

7.3.3 Helping Professionals

Although family and friends were the primary sites of disclosure, and participants typically did not extend beyond that, a few participants formally disclosed what they had been through to social workers and counsellors. While planning to leave her abusive ex-partner Jim, Alison described receiving excellent help from a friend who was also a social worker in a women’s shelter:

She understood. She wouldn't tell me to fight it, but she would listen, she wouldn't downplay my feelings, and she just kind of asked me what I want to do.... She was the one that I called – I didn't even tell her I was running away from a man [laughs]. I called her that morning and I'm like, “Whatcha doing?” I'm like, “I need a ride to go to my mom's house.” And she's like, “I'm just having brunch.” I'm like, “Okay.” I'm like,
“When you’re done brunch, would you be able to get the car?” She’s like, “Yeah.” I’m like. “I just need to pick up a couple things to my mom’s.” And she’s like, “Okay.” And then she came and when she showed up I’m like, “So he tried to hit me last night and I’m leaving him.” So [she said], “Just have 911 on your speed dial.” And we went upstairs, and she stood at the door, and helped me move everything out of the apartment into her car, we shoved everything we possibly could – she’s the one who made sure I got my documentation, like my ID and stuff like that. – Alison

In this case, this helping professional, who was also a friend of Alison’s, both listened to and believed Alison, without rushing to judgement or enforcing a plan of action on her. She also showed up to physically support Alison in the act of moving, and had safety planning in place to be ready to contact police, stand at the door, and ensure that Alison had her vital documents. Alison also described receiving excellent support from the Hub, which is part of Scarborough General Hospital. There, she received support from a counsellor for sexual trauma, domestic violence trauma, and, according to Alison, “I don't think she meant to give me, but she helped me a little with the Islamophobia.”

Alison’s last point highlights how, even though her situation of domestic violence was perpetrated though multiple forms of Islamophobia, there are no formal counselling supports to directly address the specific impact of Islamophobic abuse.

In contrast to Alison, Stephanie was failed by helping professionals for years. After the Islamophobically-motivated rape when she was 12, she was referred to counselling by a school social worker. Following this initial referral, Stephanie proceeded to endure 22 therapists over the span of a decade who did not believe that she had been raped, misdiagnosed her, and failed to
recognize her racial trauma. When Stephanie was able to access a Muslim woman of colour as a therapist, she was finally believed, which highlighted for her the extent to which she was failed by prior therapists. As she explained,

It took me years for therapists to believe the violence that I experienced because all of them were white. Until finally the first therapist who was brown, and she just... believed me. And that tells you a lot. Having another Muslim as well... yeah and that kind of infuriated me because that took me over a decade – [and] for some people that is also never a reality: of finally, you know, having somebody believe you. And I'm just really infuriated, I have a lot of anger and a lot of hurt. – Stephanie

Through accessing appropriate support, Stephanie came to understand that she lives with complex PTSD. She passionately advocated, through the mouthpiece of this study, for funding for mental health supports and programs specifically for women of colour and Muslim women.

7.3.4 Adult Education Professionals

Professionals in adult education settings had varied reactions to disclosures of Islamophobic violence by the students they work for. When Aissatou reported an incident of Islamophobic verbal assault by a classmate in her Academic Upgrading class to the supervisor of the program, he took formal steps to speak to the perpetrator, make it clear that his comments were unacceptable in the space, and ask Aissatou whether she wanted the perpetrator to be expelled. Aissatou decided that she only wanted a formal apology, and her wishes were followed. This formal set of steps was made possible by the fact that there was a code of conduct that every student signed off on before joining the class, which included prohibition of discrimination. This process of signing a formal document gave Aissatou confidence that she had the right to report her classmate, and a concrete premise from which to move forward.
In another incident of Islamophobic verbal assault in an adult education setting, Aissatou’s classroom teacher took it upon herself to have a sharing circle with the whole class to ‘address what had happened’. In this sharing circle, each individual had the chance to share what had hurt him or her. This format had conflicting impacts. For one classmate who had made Islamophobic comments toward Aissatou, the circle facilitated a space where she could genuinely apologize to Aissatou, and they were able to make up. For another classmate who had made violent comments about Muslims, the sharing circle format allowed the person to make additional Islamophobic comments and attempt to justify what they had originally said. These mixed results indicate that open sharing circles may not be the best method of resolution for instances of Islamophobia in adult education classrooms.

Najma was shunned by her classmates in her LINC class, but it is unclear whether her teacher attempted to intervene, or even noticed. She did not, however, disclose what was happening to her teacher, or mention the teacher’s role in the situation.

When Stephanie disclosed the Islamophobically-motivated sexual assault to her residence don, the don did not take any action to hold the perpetrator responsible, and instead suggested that Stephanie “try to be friends” with him instead. The failure of the don to recognize the incident as sexual violence, perhaps because it was rationalized by Islamophobic discourses, speaks to the need for dons to be trained in gendered Islamophobic violence and be held accountable for responding to the needs and safety concerns of Muslim students in their residences.

**7.4 Police and Other Reporting Methods**

With a few exceptions (discussed below), none of the participants reported the incidents of Islamophobic violence they faced to the police, or to any other formal reporting system,
including the NCCM’s online hate crime reporting tool. The reasons for lack of reporting to the police were manifold. One participant did not want to report because of a lack of trust of police, based on a previous interaction with them; she had reported a rape to the police when she was 14 years old, and was disbelieved and blamed by the officer she reported to. Other participants did not report to police because the process seemed arduous and pointless – for example, Shireen did not report to police because it seemed like it would be a difficult process with dubious results:

I didn't really bother to do that because I wasn't sure... I think it would have been more difficult for me to go through that process and the outcome wouldn't have been what I would have wanted, in terms of the justice that should have been served. – Shireen

The feeling that reporting to the police was futile was common among participants. Bilqis did not call the police when her daughter was being harassed in the mall because “if you go to the police, they not going to do nothing, really. Just talking…. They're just report, taking report, that’s it.”

Similarly, Nayyirah has never notified the police about any of the multiple incidents of Islamophobic verbal assaults she has faced. In her words, “I think I wouldn't necessarily go to the police with these types of things just because I think they... sometimes they're easily dismissed; they're not taken seriously. And sometimes it's like… what will they really do about it?”

Although the police and formal justice systems were not involved in almost every case in this study, there were three exceptions. The first involved the coordinated attack by a white supremacist group on the anti-Islamophobia event Aisha helped organize in Regent Park. In this case, Aisha had, in the process of organizing the event, spoken to her local police division and arranged to have both special intelligence and community police present at the event. However,
even though this arrangement had been agreed upon, when it came down the actual event – and
the coordinated Islamophobic attack was occurring – Aisha discovered that the specific police
officers who were supposed to be present were not there. Instead, only TCHC security officers
were present. At this juncture, when the white supremacists were shouting at the front of the
event and everyone was terrified, Aisha called to see where the previously-agreed-upon officers
were. She was told that the special intelligence officer had heard that the event had been
cancelled and therefore did not show up. This angered Aisha, because there was no contact
person consulted to properly confirm the cancellation before the officer took this action.

At this point, while the perpetrators were still screaming, the officer on the phone asked Aisha to
take a picture of the white supremacists. This request terrified Aisha:

   And he [the officer on the phone] said, “Aisha, do me a favour, can you take a picture of
   them?” Okay, like this is a scary experience that I never felt that way – I’ve been working
   more than 7 years in the community – the feeling was it was a very scary experience.
   Taking a picture of them, and they were taking a picture of me! I was standing, helping
   out, and it was scary experience. And I [asked] one [of] my colleagues – she's white –
   and I told herm “Can you take a picture of them?” And she's a woman. And she was
   scared. I didn't know that she was scared until I see her face. It was a very intimidating
   moment. And the way she took her picture was like a selfie and facing like... holding the
   camera and she could see their face, that's how she – she couldn't even approach them,
   face them. And this is what I have, she said [after taking the picture]. – Aisha

When this picture was sent to the officer, the group of perpetrators was identified as being part of
a recurring pattern of anti-Muslim hate activity in Toronto. The officer therefore put Aisha and
her counterpart in the position of photographing an angry group of white supremacists who were
attacking an event that she had asked police to be present at. This failure to show up, failure to provide adequate protection, and then putting Aisha at risk by asking her to carry out an overt task of surveillance – which is the police officer’s job – demonstrates a lack of prioritization, protection, and professionalism in the care for Muslim communities and Muslim women facing white supremacist violence.

After the incident, Aisha spoke to a community police officer about the coordinated attack, and he suggested filing a report; however, the steps for reporting the incident were too overwhelming for her at the time. She described the situation as follows:

he [the officer] gave me the list of stuff, and said, “This is what you need to do: Complain and go to 51 Division and you're going to be testifying.” What?! I'm trying to like calm myself from last night, you want me to do all of this? Forget it… [Interviewer: So the hate crime report that he showed you was just too much?] Too much! Like I'm not equipped for that right now. It was attack to me, it was attack to the whole group, you know what I mean? Anyway, I reached out to a couple of people who were experienced in Islamophobia and they gave me some resources. – Aisha

Finally, in debriefing from the coordinated attack incident with her local police, Aisha was, intentionally or not, given misinformation regarding the police’s capacity to protect such events in the future:

And one of the things that just made me mad, I would say, when we had a debriefing and the police officer showed up and he apologized that he wasn't there but he said, “We cannot do anything because this is public event.” And the lady intervened and she said “Oh yes you could do [something]. This is private property, this is private property, you
could stop them.”…Having her [there] to back me up on this was very good…. And also she was white and having that privilege for her to speak about it in a way. – Aisha

It is fortunate that there was an ally with legal knowledge present in this case, but the misinformation given to Aisha by these officers creates further questions around to what extent protection of Muslim women’s bodies – particularly when these Muslim women are Black, low income, and immigrant, as many of the Muslims in Regent Park are – is a priority for police.

The second case in which police became involved was in the physical attack on Asma, where an elderly couple called the police when the perpetrator was yelling at her from his vehicle, before he tried to run her over and then physically attack her. In this case, according to Asma, the officer arrived on the scene, and carried out the following set of actions:

After discussing what happened with me, the witnesses, and the attacker, she asked if I wanted to press charges. I said no, and asked to let him know that I did not press charges but would like him to read up on Islam and talk to a real Muslim before attacking anyone and everyone. – Asma

It is strange that a case of attempted murder did not result in automatic charges being laid on the perpetrator. It is not clear as to whether Asma’s situation was recorded as a hate crime, or how the officer followed up with her request that the perpetrator be told to learn about Islam.

The final instance where police became involved in an incident described by a participant was when Faiza pressed charges against her violent ex-husband for domestic violence. This case went to court, and Faiza was, as she described it, “shredded on the stand”, and lost the case. This is a tragically common occurrence for survivors of gender-based violence who attempt to engage the justice system: a space rife with rape myths, victim-blaming, and systemic misogyny.
Chapter 8: The Impact of Islamophobic Violence

Although the fact of public violence against Muslim women has been depicted in media through interviews and stories of some women who have been targeted for it, the nuanced and longer-term impacts of this violence have remained largely hidden. Indeed, targeted violence on the basis of someone’s identity, even if it is ‘only’ verbal assault, can have a serious emotional impact. According to Allen (2015),

the ‘seriousness’ of any crime is rarely a factor in determining its impact on the victim, especially if the victim is a target of crime that is motivated by hate. Unlike an accident or illness where no harm is normally intended, as a victim of a hate crime the victim is likely to know that it was committed with the sole intention of causing them harm because of who or what they are. As Iganski (2008) explains, because hate crime directly targets the victim’s intrinsic identity, the crime is seen to target that which is central to their notion of self and being: of who they are. As such, the crime has greater impact. (p. 291)

How do Muslim women feel in the aftermath of Islamophobic violence? What, if anything, changes about their experience of the world around them? Indeed, many participants wanted to impress upon me the weight and gravity of what they went through. One participant, Hanifa, spoke about the deep wound caused by Islamophobic violence she regularly faces in public spaces as almost ineffable: “I don’t know how much, I can’t explain. That much it hurts sometime.”

Amira attempted to describe this pain. She drew a comparison between the impact of being verbally assaulted on the subway with the impact of her being molested when she was a child:
It's a strange comparison but I think it was as big a violation – you know how they say I don't know what percentage but a very large percentage of women are molested? They are somehow or the other assaulted. And I had an incident when I was a child in a playground. I was going home and, unfortunately, we had to walk through this dark street corner and there was a guy who was there. And so it only was a few minutes, but I remember that helplessness, and whenever now assault or the topics of molestation come up, I have that small instance, so it makes me uncomfortable…. It makes you realize you were just one of a very large unfortunate large percentage of women who go through that. So this incident [of Islamophobic verbal assault], as well. Whenever we now talk [about Islamophobia]… I'm like, yeah, I went through it too. – Faiza

Participants reported manifold effects of Islamophobic violence on their lives, most of which appeared to be longer term impacts. Before I explore and make sense of these impacts, it is important for my discussion to be grounded in an understanding of Islamophobic violence against Muslim women as a form of trauma.

**8.1 Islamophobic Violence as Trauma**

Trauma can be caused by any event that overwhelms a person’s regular capacity to cope, and can sometimes cause post-traumatic stress. Post-traumatic stress was originally conceptualized as a ‘syndrome’ affecting soldiers returning from war. Feminist theorizing and advocacy have expanded these concepts of trauma and post-traumatic stress to include rape and domestic violence, which also cause life-threatening levels of terror. Critical race theorists have further sought to name and define the trauma of racial assault and racism (Hardy, 2013).
Along these lines, it is easy to recognize that participants who faced Islamophobic incidents of attempted murder, sexual violence, and domestic violence endured trauma and had to cope with a traumatic aftermath. Asma was so debilitated with anxiety after the attempt on her life that she made the decision to stop wearing hijab. Stephanie came to understand that she lives with complex PTSD; she has coped with sometimes debilitating flashbacks and dissociation caused by her traumas. Both Alison and Faiza have received trauma counselling for the situations of domestic violence they survived, in order to process and heal from the impacts of physical, sexual, and emotional violence within those relationships.

But what of participants who faced Islamophobic verbal assault? These experiences risk being minimized as violence that is not ‘severe’, and therefore unable to cause a traumatic reaction and aftermath. However, it is vital to distinguish that verbal assaults faced by participants in this study took place within the context of contemporary societal Islamophobia, which is characterized by a rise in white supremacist lethal violence against Muslims. Indeed, many participants, when being verbally assaulted, had traumatic reactions that indicated that they too feared for their lives. It is important to underscore that such a fear, in the current socio-political environment, is entirely natural and rational. Thus, in the aftermath of an Islamophobic verbal assault, a Muslim woman may be coping with the embodied and psychological impact of enduring a tangible threat on her life, even if no direct death threats were uttered. It is only through this lens that we can make sense of the impacts of Islamophobic verbal assault reported by participants in this study. Indeed, one can imagine how, without accounting for the life-threatening fear added to Islamophobic verbal assaults by the normalization of Islamophobia and the rise of overt, white supremacist violence, a Muslim woman’s traumatic reaction to a verbal assault could be deemed an ‘over-reaction’, and used to silence and malign her as ‘mad’. Indeed,
a participant in the poetry aspect of the project, described a litany of fears she has in her poem, and emphasized and insisted that these fears are rational:

I fear walking by people with hot drinks or any sort of beverage
afraid they might spill it on me - or that it could be an acid attack
I may seem paranoid, but these are real stories with news coverage
These aren’t irrational fears - these are negative issues which we need to switchback
-Excerpt from “Strange Fear” (poem written by participant)

In order to make the case that some participants who faced verbal assaults appeared to experience a life-threatening trauma, I will review some of the basic mechanics around how trauma responses work, and show how the reactions reported by participants who survived verbal assaults mirror these trauma responses.

When faced with a traumatic stimulus, such as being run at by a tiger, humans have hard-wired, automatic survival responses that kick in. These automatic responses are quite useful; there is no time to think about or decide how one will respond to the tiger – we just react. These automatic reactions usually some in three main categories: fight, flight, or freeze (Herman, 1992). The fight and flight reactions have clear goals in mind: to fend off danger or flee from it. A lesser known automatic trauma reaction is to freeze. This also has adaptive survival effect: for example, mice often freeze, and let their muscles go limp, if they are caught by a cat – essentially playing dead. This freeze response can trick the cat into losing interest in the mouse, and moving on to another target. When humans are faced with grave danger, they too might automatically freeze.

Several participants in this study, when sharing their immediate reaction to being faced with Islamophobic violence, described what sounded like fight, flight, or freeze responses. Four
participants described automatically running away if they were verbally assaulted in public and there was a viable route of escape. Two participants described what sounded like a fight response – in the aftermath of being verbally assaulted, one participant shouted at the building manager she reported the incident to, even though she is typically very slow to anger, and does not yell at people. Another participant described going from “0 to 100” with anger when faced with Islamophobia. Still other participants shared what sounded like a freeze response, as they could do nothing and say nothing in response to Islamophobic violence. Shahnoza, for example, who was verbally assaulted by a stranger in an enraged tirade, described being immobilized into silence: “I couldn't say anything, I was really scared. Like I couldn't… [make] any response at all.” Note that Shahnoza says that she couldn’t say anything – not that she didn’t want to say anything. The overwhelming fear may have caused an automatic freeze response, which prevented her from speaking.

Trauma responses can also include something called dissociation, which is an altered state of memory recording and/or cognitive functioning due to a heightened state of alarm (Herman, 1992). If someone facing violence dissociates, she may feel mentally numb or have foggy thinking; she may have a sense of leaving her body; she may not be able to recall details of the incident clearly after it has passed. Like the fight, flight, and freeze reactions, dissociation is an automatic, natural, and adaptive response designed to protect humans from danger. If an event is overwhelmingly terrifying, the brain ‘copes’ by dissociating, spacing out, and not clearly remembering it, as a way to dampen its impact (Herman, 1992).

Trauma-induced dissociation appeared to be a common reaction to Islamophobic verbal assault by participants in this study. Amira, when verbally assaulted on the subway, describes how she
initially could not ‘comprehend’ what had just been said to her by the perpetrator: “And I just sort was like Whaat?... it took me a while, I was like what? what? what?”

Safiya describes how her mind essentially went blank and did not function in the midst of facing verbal assault and an Islamophobic physical attack in the street:

And that time we didn't have even – you know sometimes,, you don't have even... you don't think of calling police? You don't think of anything, you know? Something happen like you? Anything happen like [that to] you? [Interviewer: Yes.] Something like that? Sometimes you know even your mind is not function. Yeah, because you are scared or shocked. – Safiya

Shahnoza, even though she is a high achieving university student who speaks five languages and has a high level of comprehension of the English language, was “too scared to understand” what the perpetrator said to her on the bus:

But other than that, he was bullying me for the whole time. I think maybe for 10 minutes? I can't really recall what he said exactly because I was too scared to understand, but it was all about politics and I have no right to study politics in Canada. – Shahnoza

Feminist activists have long been pushing for the neurobiology of trauma to be taken into consideration in order to re-frame the legal system’s understanding of what constitutes a credible witness. Rape survivors are regularly ‘discredited’ in the legal system if they don’t remember the exact details or sequence of events that occurred during the rape, even though this lack of ability to remember is caused by dissociation: a neurobiological reaction to the extreme trauma of rape. Survivors of Islamophobic verbal assault, or other forms of Islamophobic violence, may also experience dissociation during the episode of violence, particularly if they experienced it as life-
threatening. They too should not be discredited if they are foggy on some of the details. Indeed, imagine if Shahnoza had reported the incident of verbal assault, and was grilled on why she didn’t remember ‘exactly what the perpetrator said’. Or if Safiya was asked to explain why, if she was so frightened of this perpetrator in the street, she didn’t call the police? Failure to account for dissociation can create a situation where the survivor of the violence is shamed, blamed and disbelieved.

When faced with what we perceive to be a life-and-death situation, our bodies can also flood with adrenaline, in order to prepare us to fight or run. This adrenaline spike can cause a racing heart or shaking. Some participants described this kind of automatic trauma response to verbal assault. Amira described how after a verbal assault, the perpetrator looked at her and, as she explained, “at that point my leg was shaking – badly - one of my legs was shaking badly… my right leg was shaking violently and I was like more embarrassed that he could see that my leg was shaking.” Similarly, Shireen, when being verbally assaulted by a man on the bus, reported that “my hands were shaking, my heart was racing.” Lailah also described chest pain in response to Islamophobic violence: “I feel like so my heart squeeze!”.

The flight, fight, and freeze reactions, dissociation, and surge of adrenaline described by many participants in this study indicate that Islamophobic verbal assault is also experienced as a life-threatening incident, and therefore can provoke a full range of traumatic reactions and aftereffects among Muslim women who are targeted. Indeed, another hallmark of trauma is that a traumatic reaction can be re-triggered if the survivor is exposed to a stimulus that reminds her of the situation of violence that she faced. In Stephanie’s case, her last name became a trigger for the Islamophobically motivated rape she endured when she was 12, because the rapist was
repeating her last name while perpetrating the violence. The trigger was so severe that she had to change her last name.

Triggers, however, are also present for survivors of Islamophobic verbal assault. Shireen was triggered when a stranger came up to her at a bus stop and asked her if she was Muslim. Even though the conversation ended up being a pleasant one, initially, her heart was racing and she started shaking in response to the question. Overall, Shireen reflects, “it’s just something I think like yes time helps, but you're in the moment again, and something happens which makes you think about it. It kind of brings those memories back and it’s always kind of there.”

Now that I have grounded our understanding of Islamophobic violence in the context of potential trauma, the multiple impacts of Islamophobic violence reported by participants can be effectively discussed.

8.2 Impacts Reported by Participants

8.2.1 Hypervigilance, Precaution, Avoidance

The most common impacts of Islamophobic violence described by participants in this study were hypervigilance, precaution and avoidance. Hypervigilance is a common feature of post-traumatic stress, and is characterized by heightened awareness of one’s surroundings, and a strong focus on screening for unpredictable threats and danger. Many participants described their experiences of Islamophobic violence as altering the way that they viewed strangers and acquaintances. In some cases, the experience of being targeted for violence by a stranger made participants feel that all strangers were potential threats. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Islamophobic verbal assault, attempted murder, and physical attack, Asma became afraid of interacting with strangers on a
recent trip to NYC, because of her perceived risk that they might become violent with her. She explains,

basic things like asking someone for directions or checking into hotels, became a scary thought for me because I wondered what would happen on the way there. What if someone hits me with a bat, or grabs my hijab, or shouts, etc. I became so paranoid and just so different. – Asma

Indeed, incidents of Islamophobic violence made other participants look at strangers and even acquaintances differently afterwards – each of them as a possible threat. Since her perpetrator was a fellow resident of a building she had lived in for many years, Warsan decided that:

even if you know them long time, doesn't matter. Anything can happen. You never know, if you're [in] school, or outside, or on the TTC, or might be you trust somebody, you go their house – you can't trust anybody, that's what I decided. Like be vigilant, more vigilant. – Warsan

Amira also described a loss of trust in the general public in the aftermath of the Islamophobic verbal assault: “It made me realize that people I work with or see on the road... I don't know what they're feeling inside. On the outside, they don't show it, but on the inside? I don't know.”

A loss of trust in the public also can occur at a community level. Safiya described how one day, when it was very hot inside a mosque she attends in Lawrence Heights, and there was no air conditioning, someone propped open the mosque door to let some air in, which frightened many of the congregants; as she explained,

everybody was scared. They [said], “Please close the door, please close the door, please close the - we have to close!” …It was so hot and we don't have A/C – it is only fan. So
we have to close the door because everybody scared. We don't know what's gonna happen. Nowadays we are scared. It's scary. – Safiya

Hypervigilance and awareness of the Islamophobic violence potentially enacted by strangers caused some participants to avoid people and public spaces. Asma, in the aftermath of severe Islamophobic violence, describes such a profound shift in her interactions with people and feelings of safety in public spaces that it felt like a “change in personality”:

I started to become very quiet and try to avoid being in the public eye, which is impossible because of the activities and sports I do. As a result, I didn’t want to go out for groceries, or gym or anything! I noticed the biggest changes in my personality on our recent trip to NYC…. Anytime we used public transport, I would go straight to the back quickly in a corner. I felt like a hermit in a shell, who’s continuously going into their shell when people are around. – Asma

Indeed, several participants described being afraid to go outside or walk alone in the aftermath of Islamophobic violence, though all participants insisted on eventually returning to public spaces. Many participants reported how after an incident of Islamophobic violence, they began to take precautionary actions to protect themselves in public. Hanifa described a practice of waiting a couple of minutes before crossing the street, so that she can watch the drivers to make sure they don’t try to run her over, even though this safety practice of hers makes some drivers angry and impatient. Maryam described making sure to always wait for the subway with her back to the wall, so that no one can get behind her and push her onto the tracks. Maryam also scans other subway passengers’ faces, and if they look angry, she quickly moves away from them. Shireen avoided eye contact with everyone on the TTC for the rest of the summer after she was verbally assaulted, because, in her mind, eye contact was what had ‘initiated’ the verbal assault she
endured. Shireen also shared how, when entering a new public space, she will always “look around the place and make sure that there weren't any glares or any threats...so it's always just in the back of my head.”

Some participants described specifically avoiding the space or region in which the Islamophobic incident occurred. Hanifa said that she has never returned to the Cabbagetown neighbourhood in which she was both verbally assaulted and followed. Nayyirah mentioned that she tries to avoid going to downtown Toronto. Najma moved from Lakeshore to Regent Park after facing Islamophobic verbal assault near Lakeshore, because she wanted to be in a community where more Muslims were present. Tahira described altering the subway route she takes in order to pick up her children, alternating between going to Castle Frank, Broadview and Sherbourne station, but preferring Sherbourne station because it is well lit. Zainab left the festival at Mill and Parliament Street after crowds there had an Islamophobic recoiling reaction to her and her family, and decided that:

I hate to go that place, I don't want to go any more. I will let them feel free. ‘Cause they're scared of us.... Yeah why? Why they scared? So it's okay, we're not going any more that place. It's not good to scare people. They're scared of us. – Zainab

These avoidance responses demonstrate the profound spatial impact of Islamophobic violence, as it has the effect of pushing Muslim women out of public spaces, both literally and in terms of their feelings of emotional safety and belonging.

8.2.2 Alienation, Not Belonging in Canada

Experiences of Islamophobic violence caused feeling of alienation and lack of belonging in Canada for many participants. Indeed, Islamophobic verbal assaults typically contained direct
statements about Muslim women not belonging in Canada, as communicated through the common refrain to “go back to where you came from.” Shunning and acts of recoiling from Muslim also indirectly communicated that they were not welcome. However, any incident of Islamophobic violence has the capacity to make Muslim women feel like they do not belong, because the violence itself is Othering and marks Muslim women as somehow different through the process of selectively targeting them for it. The alienating effect of targeted violence is compounded by the fact that in many cases, bystanders and witnesses fail to intervene or comment, which can intensify Muslim women’s experience of social exile.

Many participants described Islamophobic violence as having a direct impact on their friendships and their ability to form social relationships. Faiza lost a large group of friends in university when she started wearing hijab. As noted above, Stephanie lost over 20 friends when she spoke up about an Islamophobic verbal assault perpetrated by a man who was well-liked by her friend group. Hanifa mentioned that because of the incidents of Islamophobic violence she’s endured, she is now afraid to try to make friends or talk to people. Najma felt sad that she was initially unable to make any friends in Canada, because of Islamophobic shunning; she explained that “if you [are] wearing this [niqab], nobody close to you, nobody talk to you.”

In addition to causing ruptures in friendships and barriers to forming social connections, Islamophobic violence made some participants feel a lack of belonging in Canadian society as a whole. According to Amira,

you know how Trudeau now says a “Canadian is a Canadian?” But the fact is that people see something else before they see a Canadian. They see someone who is brown, or they see someone from somewhere else, or they see someone who is Muslim or with a hijab.
So my confidence as somebody who is just part of the crowd was shaken. I realized that I would be held accountable. – Amira

Similarly, Lailah felt like Islamophobic violence hindered her ability to feel like she was “on my land, on my home” in Canada. Aisha also felt that Islamophobic violence robbed her of a sense of being at ‘home’ in Canada:

Like I thought this is home, because I left when I was young back home, and this is the only home you know, and you feel this – like it just takes away... how do I put it?... the feeling that you have for the city and the country and your neighbour, it just takes [it] away from in you. – Aisha

8.2.3 Exhaustion, Entrapment

Several participants described feelings of exhaustion and entrapment as an impact of the incidents they faced. Bilqis lamented that presence of Islamophobic violence made her life “too difficult these days.” These feelings of burden and being overwhelmed likely stem from the omnipresent threat of Islamophobic violence, and the frequency and multitude of spaces in which it occurs. Moreover, Aisha, because of her trusted position of leadership in the community, is regularly approached by community members with stories and reports of Islamophobic violence, which can lead to vicarious trauma. Aisha described feeling of numb, overwhelmed and exhausted by the onslaught of stories of Islamophobic violence:

You cannot function 100% in work, you cannot function 100% for your kids - you are not ‘there’ because emotionally you've been drained…. I worked like zombie, I'm not 100% there. Like it was very draining experience when community members come and tell you their stories. When you have kids, what kind of future they will have? All of that, placed in your head – when this is gonna stop? Like you know, one after another. There is no
break. You're being bombarded by all of the media and being bombarded by all real-life community members who are experiencing Islamophobia every day. – Aisha

Other participants described feeling trapped or confined by the presence of Islamophobic violence. Lailah said that it made her feel like “I'm in the jail or something. In the court, maybe.” Maryam, in expressing frustration with Islamophobic violence, asked, “Where do you get free? Where do you get, like, freedom?”

This yoke of pressure caused by the ongoing threat of Islamophobic violence has a clear existential impact on Muslim women living in the GTA. It is like an oppressive heat, an odourless gas, that sucks the enjoyment and ease out of their lives.

8.2.4 Hiding/Modifying Muslim Identity

While many participants reaffirmed their right to be visibly or proudly Muslim in the face of Islamophobic violence, some participants described how the incidents of violence led them to downplay, hide or modify their appearance or behaviour so they would be less likely to be identified as Muslim. Even though the incidents of Islamophobic violence they faced did not involve being targeted for reading Quran, two participants decided, in the aftermath of Islamophobic violence, to never read Quran on public transportation again. Reading the Holy Quran is a fairly common practice for devout Muslims, as reading it in the original Arabic is believed to be able to bring blessing, and is seen as a form of worship. According to Amira,
Before that [incident of verbal assault], even I had a pocket Quran. And I would, you know, read the *aya-tul kursi*\(^{10}\) or whatever in the morning while coming to work. I was more hesitant now [after the verbal assault] to pull that out... I was not going to invite any such people's attention. – Amira

Shahnoza also decided to no longer read Quran on public transportation after being verbally assaulted on the bus, even though reading Quran while commuting used to be a regular practice for her also. The fact that these two women felt too afraid to read Quran in public shows that an impact of Islamophobic violence can be to prevent Muslims from practising their religion and accessing spiritual practices which may have otherwise been sources of strength for them.

Indeed, as I report in Section 9.2.2., reciting Quran was cited by several participants as a way of recovering from and coping with Islamophobic violence.

Shahnoza also noticed that, after the incident, even though she maintained wearing hijab, she tried to hide her Muslim identity in other ways, such as not divulging the fact that she was fasting during Ramadan:

> I wasn’t brave enough anymore to identify myself as a Muslim. So if there is a situation where I would normally say something like, for example, like if someone would say to me “Would you like to have a cake?” Normally I would say “No thank you, I'm fasting.” But maybe after that incident I was more like, “Sorry, sorry, I just don’t want that cake.”

\(^{10}\) *Aya-tul kursi* is the 255th verse of the chapter of longest chapter of the Quran. It describes the transcendent and all-powerful nature of God. Many Muslims have read or memorize and recite this verse for comfort and protection.
didn't go to explanation that I'm Muslim and I'm fasting, for example. You know I was trying to hide my identity. – Shahnozah

For many participants who were visibly Muslim by virtue of wearing hijab or niqab, Islamophobic violence led some of them to reaffirm or redouble their commitment to being visibly Muslim. However in a few cases, the incidents of violence led participants to choose to remove clothing that would identify them as Muslim. Asma, after surviving attempted murder and a physical assault, experienced such severe terror about being targeted again for Islamophobic violence that she decided to remove her hijab. Asma describes how relieved she was after making this decision: “When I removed it, and went out the next day, I was smiling, laughing and talking. I had so much confidence it was a day and night difference. For that reason, I chose to keep it off for now.” Asma also said that she hopes to go back to wearing hijab one day.

Alison also described being too afraid to wear identifiable Muslim clothing in public anymore, because of the violence it could provoke. However, she still wears such clothing on more private, special occasions: “I still live in fear, I mean I refuse to wear anything unless I'm going to the mosque. Refuse. Mind you, I wore it on my wedding [laughs].”

Najma was wearing niqab during the times she faced Islamophobic verbal assault and shunning. These experiences led her to decide to remove her niqab, and wear hijab only. In all of these cases, it is important to recognize how Islamophobic violence pressures Muslim women to alter their clothing choices, and the increase the proportion of their bodies that they show to the public. The impact of this pressure can be empathized with by non-Muslims through the following thought experiment: imagine being social pressured through violence to remove any
type of clothing that covered a part of your body you did not want anyone to see. Now, apply that feeling to how Muslim women might feel when they are coerced to remove articles of clothing they’d rather keep on. Indeed, Najma described how she felt after she removed her niqab due to the pressure caused by Islamophobic violence; as she explained it, “If you take off your clothes on body you know, you shy...all people you think you know people looking at you, but nobody looking at you but little bit, you know you little bit shy.”

I asked Najma, if all else were equal, and if people treated her the same whether she wore niqab or not, what she would now choose to do. Indeed, she hasn’t worn niqab for a while; would she ever want to return to it, assuming that there was no social consequence? Najma replied: “I want to wear it. Yeah, I want to wear. Still I like it, you know. Yeah still I like it. Still I want to wear... my heart. It's my favourite.”

The discourse of De-Veiling-as-Liberation leaves no room for Najma’s lived experience. The notion that de-veiling is inherently liberatory, whether the Muslim woman has consented to it or not, can lead people to believe that if Muslim women are pressured to de-veil, even if it is through Islamophobic violence, that the outcome of de-veiling is nonetheless healthy or helpful to them. However, all three participants who de-veiled in some way after Islamophobic violence nonetheless expressed a continued affinity for hijab or niqab. Asma hopes to return to it one day, even though the post-traumatic stress she faced as a visible Muslim after the Islamophobic attack was debilitating. Alison, though she refuses to be visibly Muslim in public because of the threat of Islamophobic violence, happily reports that she wore Islamic clothing during her recent wedding to her new (non-Muslim) partner, with whom she has a healthy and loving relationship. Najma calls the niqab “her favourite”, even though she has chosen to remove it so that she will be treated better by people in public.
8.2.5 Impact on Children

Although this study focuses on the impact of Islamophobic violence on the Muslim woman survivors who were directly targeted, as noted above, in many cases children were also present during the attack on their mother. In some cases, young children were impacted by being placed in the impossible position of having to defend their mother from another adult. When Lailah was feeling faint after drawing blood at a doctor’s appointment and was being verbally assaulted by a stranger on the subway, her five-year-old son was witnessing what was happening and spoke up; Lailah explained, “My son stand close to her and said “don't talk to my mom like that. Why you say that to my mom? She is sick! Why you say that?” And he kept [saying] to me, “Mama, don't care about her.” I said [to my son], “I ignored her, don't worry.””

A five-year-old should not have to face off with an adult racist assaulter, but the perpetrator’s lack of consideration of the presence of children, and his mother’s compromised state due to her physical health, forced him into a position to attempt to make the situation right.

In another case, a perpetrator verbally assaulted Maryam by referring to her daughter’s hijab and her son’s Muslim-identified religious hat, asking her why she ‘makes them’ wear those clothes. After that incident, her son started to say that he did not want to wear the hat outside of the mosque; Maryam commented that “sometimes my son say I don't want to wear hat, only I wear hat in the Masjid…I wear only in the prayer time he said. In the masjid I don't want to wear it in the subway. He puts it in the bag.” This incident indicates that witnessing Islamophobic abuse of their mother, especially if the abuse is tied to Islamic clothing, can lead Muslim children to want to avoid wearing Muslim-identified clothing in public.
After witnessing Islamophobic violence happen to their mothers, young children may ask why it happened, and struggle to understand. In order to illustrate the impact on children, I have structured Tahira’s recounting of a conversation she had with her seven- and nine-year-old children, when they all got home after an incident of Islamophobic violence, into the form of a script.11

Her children: “Why did they do this to us?”

Tahira: “It’s just a hatred. Did we do anything to him?”

Her children: “No mommy, we just came inside and all of a sudden he-”

Tahira: “That’s why.”


Tahira: *(I don’t know you know, what can I tell them? And everyday there’s a news in the TV, obviously they see it, you know?)* Don’t worry we have God to protect us. Always depend on God. Because He is always there for us.

This snapshot captures the impact of Islamophobic violence perpetrated against Muslim women on their children: mothers are tasked with explaining the hatred of Islamophobia to their children in an age-appropriate manner, and somehow help them make sense of it and give them a sense of safety. In Tahira’s case, she encourages her children to depend on God. We can only speculate about the long-term impact of violence against their mothers has on these young children, though it is important impact to keep in mind.

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11 All phrases in the script are direct quotes from Tahira. The script format simply omits the times Tahira said “then they said”. It is my hope that this script structure makes the conversation with her children come to life.
In addition to being direct witnesses, children can also be impacted by Islamophobic violence against their mothers if the impact of that violence hinders the amount and extent to which they can be emotionally present for their children. As Aisha points out,

stay-home moms with younger kids – and some of them wear niqabs – so it's been very difficult journey for them, even to do day-to-day stuff. And how can you be 100% for your kids when you're experiencing this kind of feeling? How do you tell your kids this is what you've been experiencing? – Aisha

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This chapter demonstrates that the impacts of Islamophobic violence against Muslim women are far reaching. Firstly, Islamophobic violence can cause trauma, resulting in flight, flight or freeze reactions, dissociation, and hypervigilance. Many participants described the grinding effects of Islamophobic violence as making them feel alienated and exhausted; violence even drove some participants to hide or modify their Muslim identity. Finally, it is clear that Islamophobic violence against Muslim women can have a significant impact on the children in these women’s families. Given these broad effects of Islamophobic violence, I contend that it is a social issue that has not yet received attention or care tantamount to its social impact.
9.1 Surviving Islamophobic Violence

Every participant in this study showed unique forms of strength through their ability to survive the incidents of Islamophobic violence they encountered. It bears emphasizing that the manner in which a Muslim woman is able to and chooses to survive an incident of Islamophobic violence will greatly vary depending on the specific situation; Islamophobic violence is a frightening and unpredictable form of gendered and racial targeting, which can be lethal – as such, there is no ‘right way’ to survive Islamophobic violence. The goal is to simply survive, and fortunately, every participant in this study tapped into strengths that enabled them to do so. Whether it be physical self-defence or an automatic freeze response, each survival method used by participants in this study is a valid way to navigate Islamophobic violence in the world.

Each participant in this study tapped into intuitive knowledge and automatic survival responses in her own way in order to move through the situation of Islamophobic violence as unscathed as possible. When being pursued by a violent man in a vehicle who was trying to run her over, Asma protected herself by with the intuitive idea to run into the narrow spaces in between parked cars, which the perpetrator’s vehicle would not physically be able to access. Asma also had training in Tae Kwon Do, and was able to deflect an attempted punch by the perpetrator by grabbing his wrist and pushing it away. Similarly, Safiya – who did not say that she had any martial arts training – dodged the punch of her perpetrator, with it being such a close call that she felt the ‘wind’ from his attempted punch rushing by her cheek.

While physical self-defence was important in both Asma’s and Safiya’s cases, it is by no means the only way that Muslim women chose to defend themselves.
Amira bluntly told the perpetrator of verbal assault in the subway to “fuck off”. According to Amira, his jaw dropped in response: he expected her to be demure, and she quickly put him off balance by disrupting those expectations. Aissatou disrupted expectations by directly confronting her classmate, who made the genocidal comment that every Muslim should be burned alive. She debated him while educating him on hate speech and the danger of generalizations:

I said, “Do you really believe my two-year-old son should be burned alive?” …He got offended that I didn't like his comment. He said, “Well it's my right to say what I think.” And I said, “No, it’s not your right to have that hatred speech. At least you can have it inside you and keep them for yourself. You cannot just burst it out. Even if I'm not Muslim, I would not accept you saying that of anybody or anybody thinking that is okay to say.” …He said, “You don’t look Muslim” and I said “How Muslims should look? Every Muslim not from the same corner, that we all have to look the same way, we all have to dress the same way, we all have to act the same way. Even in Christianity there's so many different cultures and background of Christians. So every Muslim don't have to be like the same.” – Aissatou

Here, Aissatou drew upon her knowledge of hate speech, and her knowledge of the diversity of the Muslim community and the Christian community in order to make her point and defend herself. Indeed, other participants tapped into their background knowledge and education in order to gauge how to respond to the Islamophobic violence they were facing. Amira tapped into her familiarity with global politics to quickly piece together why she was being targeted for verbal assault. She told me: “I knew exactly what had happened to the day or two days before. If I had not clued into that – if I didn't know what was going on – I wouldn't have the answers for him.”
Warsan drew upon her knowledge of her legal rights as a tenant in a co-op housing environment in order to take action to protect herself and her family from an Islamophobic tenant; as she put it, “if the co-op [is] not willing to take that action, I will…. I know what's legal.” Similarly, Aissatou recalled the code of conduct she signed off on before starting her Academic Upgrading class, and used her knowledge of that document to decide how she was going to respond to her Islamophobic classmate.

While direct engagement with perpetrators was a helpful method of survival in some cases, other situations led participants to choose more indirect methods in order to effectively protect themselves. Some participants defended themselves from Islamophobic verbal assault by using a “returning harm with kindness” method. Zainab and Najma both said “thank you” when they were verbally assaulted in public. Lailah used a similar method when she was being verbally assaulted in the subway, when a perpetrator was accusing her of being a bad parent and not caring about her own daughter. As she recounts, “All I said to her is thank you. Thank you, you cared about my daughter. Thank you sooo much. I appreciate your time for that. Thank you.”

Lailah put on a sarcastic tone for the latter part of this response, which got her chuckles from some of the other subway riders, who were not intervening. Lailah continued telling her perpetrator, in a kind voice:

Please, focus on yourself, focus on your clothes, focus on what you are doing. …Thank you so much, I am already sick, thank you. My daughter and my husband, we are okay. Thank you, I appreciate that you care about us. We appreciate that, thank you. Have a good day. – Lailah
This tactic of ‘kind’ responses to Islamophobic violence was an effective form of self-protection for these participants, as they disrupted the behaviour of the verbal assailters by de-escalating the situation. Such a tactic can also be understood as ‘killing them with kindness’.

Another indirect method of self-protection that a participant described using was reliance on prayer. Hanifa reported that she does not speak back when faced Islamophobic verbal assault, but instead prays: “Only I pray. It's working 100 percent. Aya-tul kursi I read, yes. Best weapon. Oh my God, Alhamdulillah. Always, always, always, yes. Nothing else!” By redirecting her attention to her spiritual beliefs, Hanifa ‘responds’ to Islamophobic verbal assault by empowering and strengthening herself by reciting aya-tul kursi from memory, which is a “powerful weapon” for her.

Still other participants chose to defend themselves by making a calculated assessment and decision to not engage with the perpetrator at all – either directly or indirectly – so as to not to escalate the situation. Shireen, although her hands were shaking and her heart was racing with fear, was still able to make a clear decision to protect herself in this manner, and prevented her non-Muslim friend, who was also present, from escalating the Islamophobic violence:

[I]n that moment I put that aside… ‘cause if we were both freaking out it just would have made a scene so... I think one of the strengths is that I kind of pushed – or just tucked my emotions to the side a little – [and] thought logically about it, instead of getting too emotional in that situation. Instead of saying something to him, which I saw her try to do, and I kind of grabbed her arm and I was like, “Don’t. Let's not push this any further.” …I think in that moment one of the things I did is [I] gauged the situation and responded accordingly. And if that meant pushing my emotions to the side until after we got off the bus, then so be it. – Shireen
Similarly, after Faiza was verbally assaulted by threatening group of men, she protected herself by not responding, running out of harm’s way, and then making a clear and calculated decision to go back home. She did not cave to the pressures and needs of her non-Muslim friends, who seemed to be focused on still having a good time for the rest of their weekend trip:

I picked up my phone and I dialed my support system network at the time. And I was very clear in my decision making around that, I was like, “Nope, gotta go, I can't stay here.” And they're [her friends] like, “But you know he's not gonna arrive for a bunch of hours so we're still going to go out.” and I'm like, “That's fine, I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to wait for him here, and I will be inside the house, and when he comes I will go. And have fun.” Yeah. So clear decision making of knowing my like boundaries with safety and accessing what I thought was a support system. – Faiza

Like Faiza, several other participants demonstrated firm and specific demands and boundaries regarding what they needed in order to feel safer after an Islamophobic attack. Warsan, after being verbally assaulted in front of her building, was firm with the building manager in terms of what she wanted to see happen to resolve the situation: this included a guarantor of safety and a letter of apology, or else the perpetrator would need to move – her family would not move. Najma, after being verbally assaulted in the park near Lakeshore with her children, insisted to her husband that they would have to move to a neighbourhood where there were more Muslims present. This led them to move to Regent Park, where she is much more comfortable. Aissatou was resolute in reporting the incident of Islamophobic verbal assault in her academic upgrading class to the program supervisor. As noted above, when the supervisor asked her what she wanted to see happen, Aissatou was candid in stating that she wanted an apology from the perpetrator, and she did not care if he meant it or not – he had to say it. Stephanie, when verbally assaulted
by a man at a party, stood her ground in stating that it was wrong, even though it meant losing an entire friend group, who did not believe or support her, and instead supported the perpetrator. Stephanie proceeded to shift friend groups, and deleted all of the prior friends from her social media networks, even blocking a few. As she explained,

Yeah it was like really massive – I was just like okay, done. I'm not dealing with this anymore. Like you use me as emotional labor all the time, and when I tell you about things about my life, you don't believe me. Or you just refuse to say it's racist. Even though you witnessed it. Like yeah like I... made a really dramatic like cut and I felt like I started having more energy to write, and my skin got clearer. – Stephanie

Like Stephanie, Alison’s use of firm boundaries also extended to the social media realm.

Recently, Alison began proactively blocking people online who were espousing Islamophobic views:

And I started blocking people. So when I notice that people are racist, or Islamophobic, or homophobic, or whatever it is, and they're making their comments, I will – if I'm friends with them – I will unfriend them and block them. And if I'm not friends with them, and I go on their page and I see that this is what they actually are like, and this is what they believe, as opposed to letting myself be angered by a post when I see their posts, I just block them. I reported them…. Block and report, block and report. – Alison

While acknowledging and celebrating the myriad of ways in which Muslim women defended and protected themselves in the face of Islamophobic violence, it is also important to discuss cases where participants were frozen or unable to respond in the moment due to overwhelming fear and trauma. These participants were still showing agency in fighting for their lives: a freeze response may have been the only way that they would have been able to make it out of the
situation without it escalating to even more severe violence. By remaining immobilized, and enduring the heinous experience, these women showed agency and self-protection by minimizing the amount of pain they would have to endure.

Finally, participants who experienced Islamophobia within the context of intimate partner relationships faced the added difficulties in protecting themselves because of the nature of domestic abuse, which includes perpetrators carrying out a type of psychological warfare against the women they are abusing, including telling them that they are ‘imagining’ the harm, that the violence is their fault, that they deserve it, or that the perpetrator means well, and that he loves them. In all cases of domestic violence described in this study, the women were not only able to eventually extricate themselves from their abusive partners – which in itself is a tremendous feat – but were able to heal and eventually move on to healthy, loving and supportive friendships or intimate relationships.

Across all of these methods of self-protection, Muslim women participants in this study showed prodigious agency in surviving Islamophobic violence. These women are not passive recipients of hate: they are active participants in navigating and surviving the violence in their lives, while showing tremendous creativity, tenacity, and agency in that survival.

9.2 Making Meaning of Islamophobic Violence

After an episode of violence or trauma, the survivor is tasked with ‘making meaning’ of her experience by finding an explanation for that violence, and situating it within its proper place in her life’s narrative and her understanding of the world. Participants in this study used different frameworks in order to process and make sense of the Islamophobic violence they faced, and thereby begin to heal from it. One framework was to understand the violence as being caused by
misconceptions about Muslims, and use the incident as an impetus to dedicate themselves to shifting people’s image of Islam. Another was a faith-based framework for understanding Islamophobic violence, where Islamic theological belief systems were used to make sense of and respond to the violence. Finally, some other participants focused on radical acceptance of the reality of Islamophobic violence as a way to come to terms with it.

9.2.1 Making Meaning by Shifting People’s Understanding of Islam

Many participants in this study made meaning of the violence they encountered by connecting it with the broader issue of Muslims being misunderstood and maligned. By making this connection, participants were able to develop a sense of agency: by bettering the image of Islam and breaking down barriers or misinformation, they would be able to shift the public’s image of Islam and Muslims, and thereby prevent this kind of Islamophobic violence from continuing or worsening.

Participants who used this framework to make sense of and respond to situations of Islamophobic violence demonstrated a profound dedication to this praxis: Asma, even after a man tried running her over with his vehicle and physically assaulted her, told the police officer that her only request was “to let him know that I did not press charges but would like him to read up on Islam and talk to a real Muslim before attacking anyone and everyone.” Here, Asma makes sense of the violence by attributing it to the perpetrator’s lack of knowledge about Islam, and what real Muslims are like. Similarly, Safiya, who also survived a physical attack, expressed that she wants there to be picnics and community films in the park that show non-Muslims the positive facets of Islam, thereby changing their minds about Muslims. Aisha spoke about the need for Muslims to be engaged in the community and helping others in order to “build allies and show what real Muslims [are] supposed to be doing.”
This approach of making sense of and coping with Islamophobic violence by shifting the public’s perception of Muslims was also taken up by Shahnoza. After the incident of Islamophobic verbal assault she faced on the bus, Shahnoza made it her new life mission to disprove negative portrayals of Islam and Muslim women. After being told she had no right to study International Politics, and belonged under the rule of the Taliban, she became more passionately committed to pursuing academic success; as she explained:

I was like more insistent to study politics.... I wanted to be more successful after this incident because that forced me to face the reality that not everyone is friendly around me, but maybe it's also because of the depicted picture of Islam. So I had that inspiration that I should work even harder now… to clean the image of Islam. – Shahnoza

In contrast to Shahnoza’s desire to ‘clean’ the image of Islam, Faiza wanted to share the complexity of Muslim women after she faced Islamophobic violence. Faiza mentioned that before she faced overt Islamophobia, she was an “aspirational Muslim” – and tried to depict a pious image while wearing hijab. After facing an Islamophobic verbal assault, she decided, “okay hijab's still on my head, and the world needs to see there are all kinds of different Muslims.” With this goal in mind, she allowed herself to smoke a cigarette in public, while wearing hijab.

Stephanie also expressed frustration with the two-dimensional image of Muslim women, that she felt similarly constrained by:

I feel like the only ‘acceptable’ Muslim woman right now is this quiet, poetic, soulful Muslim woman... Just only speak when they think it's worth speaking and stuff like that.... You can't be a loud Muslim woman, you can't be like a person who is like –
not to say that I *want* to be – obnoxious…. Like you're this quiet poetic Muslim woman –

I feel like that's the only palatable way for Muslim women right now. – Stephanie

In addition to using the power of personal example, other participants took on more formal methods of educating the public in order to shift their image of Muslims and Islam. Faiza developed two books, both of which have been published: one is a children’s book on Muslims’ historical contributions, and the other features the real-life stories of Canadian Muslim women. For Faiza, these books were created so that Muslims would be seen as “part of the Canadian fabric.” She also hoped that they would send the following message to would-be Islamophobes seeking to scapegoat Muslims: “We have our own shit to deal with. Don't offload your shit or what you watch on the news on us.”

Alison also expressed a strong motivation to educate the general public about racism, Islamophobia and equality. She focuses on shifting the views of younger generations through her work with children and youth. Alison recounted how a young white boy she was working with was taught to hate Black and brown people by his family. At first, this boy wouldn’t speak to Alison because of the colour of her skin. Slowly, she built a trusting relationship with him, and facilitated his unlearning of racism in a gentle way:

*When I finished working with him, he actually was in love with a Black Jamaican girl…. I know I had a small part to play in it, ‘cause I mean he went through a lot of stuff in that group home. And I stuck by him. And I mean down deep he was a good kid, he was just taught wrong information, and so I used a lot of that to re-teach him. And he was open to learning, and this kid learned this stuff. And was able to like accept people, and love people, regardless of colour. And it was just... it was so beautiful to watch a kid bloom like that…. I loved all of my kids and I used my experiences and hatred I've gone through*
and experiences I've gone through to teach them to be more accepting, to be more loving, you know? – Stephanie

Indeed, many other participants took on the task of shifting mindsets ‘one person at a time’, through relationship-building. Maryam, for example, proudly shared how she was able to win over her non-Muslim neighbour who lived across the hall, who was initially standoffish towards Maryam and her family. This neighbour would always ignore Maryam when she said hi to her – until one day, Maryam baked bread and shared it with this neighbour. The neighbour loved the bread. From then on, she said hi to Maryam. What’s more, in Ramadan, Maryam gave this neighbour some samosas, and the neighbour wished her a happy Ramadan. Maryam explains:

You have to do your own good way – you have to show. We are Muslim, we have to show good way…you have to give like sadaqa (charity), you know? [To] non-Muslims, you really have to. You have to show your own way. That's why I'm happy: I believe that one. Somebody treat [you] poor – not physical, they don't hit you – you can change them, you know? That is my opinion. – Maryam

Although taking on the task of shifting people’s perceptions of Islam and Muslims helped participants make meaning of the incidents of Islamophobic violence they lived through by transforming them into an impetus for action, there are potential drawbacks to this approach. Firstly, the severity of Islamophobia many people harbour extends beyond the level of ‘misconception’; discourses of Muslims-as-Satanic, Muslims-as-Terrorists, and Muslims-as-Invaders can work together to paint an image of sinister Muslims who follow Satan, are planning to take over the country, and/or harm others. Although no one in the study was claiming to be able to shift everyone’s views, it is important to recognize that it is unclear to what extent
individual Muslims will be able to re-humanize themselves and debunk these harmful discourses through ‘good works’.

Another problem with the framework of making meaning of Islamophobic violence by focusing on educating others is that it is slippery slope between attempting to change harmful behaviour and taking on responsibility for preventing that behaviour. Very much like how the majority of labour of mainstream anti-violence against women activism is carried out by women, anti-Islamophobia work is falling on the shoulders of Muslim women, who are Islamophobia’s primary targets. This kind of skewed responsibility can incorrectly frame Islamophobia as a Muslim women’s problem, when really it is a *white supremacist problem, a men’s problem, and a non-Muslim’s problem.*

These criticisms are not meant to suggest that Muslim women who make sense of Islamophobic violence by dedicating themselves to fighting Islamophobia are wrong – it is only meant to suggest an exercise of caution in taking this approach. We can hold space for celebrating the ways in which Muslim women transform their experiences of Islamophobic violence into motivation to promote social change, while acknowledging the fact that it is *not* Muslim women’s job to solve Islamophobia. Shireen had some useful advice for Muslim women, which lets Muslim women “off the hook” and reinforces the fact that they are *not* responsible for ending Islamophobic hate, let alone transforming bigots:

> I think Muslim women just need to know that if someone else has the mental capacity to carry that much hate, it's on them. It's their problem, it's something that they have to deal with, and get over hopefully, but…there's nothing that we can do to – in terms of changing ourselves or acting a certain way or behaving a certain way – to change their opinions. – Shireen

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I therefore contend that Muslim women should feel free to engage in attempts to change people’s minds and behaviour insofar as these actions feel empowering, healing, and supportive of their wellbeing. Ultimately, it is not up to Muslim women to change anyone; they do not ‘owe’ this labour to a society that is rejecting them. Nor are they responsible for the violence that perpetrators subject them to. As Shireen puts it: *that’s on them.*

9.2.2 *Making Meaning through Islamic belief systems*

Contrary to the monolithic image of Muslims created by the racialization process of Islamophobia, Muslims’ religious or spiritual beliefs can encompass a vast array of possibilities. The Muslim feminist theoretical lens I employed in this study allowed me “to move religious issues from the margins to the center of discursive focus” (Zine, 2004, p. 184). As such, I was able to identify participants’ use of religion and spirituality to make meaning of Islamophobic violence. Several participants relied on Islamic theological belief systems in order to make meaning of the violence they encountered. This phenomenon surprised me; perhaps because anti-Islamophobia activist and scholarly discourses rely on secular frameworks, and I have been trained to make sense of Islamophobia through analysis of power and systems of oppression. Hearing participants refer to theological beliefs to explain everyday incidents of Islamophobic violence reminded me of conversations with my mother that I used to have when I was young. In this way, this section is the heart of the thesis; it contains highly unexpected, and emotionally impactful findings for me.

Several participants in the study relied on the Islamic concept of *Qadr*, or divine ordainment and predestination, to both make sense of Islamophobic violence they faced and cope with the fear of it recurring in the future. In order to explain the concept of *Qadr*, Muslims often quote an old
Arab proverb: “What is destined will reach you, even if it be underneath two mountains. What is not destined, will not reach you, even if it be between your two lips!”

This proverb captures the essence of *Qadr*: the notion that for the broad strokes of fate, there is nothing one can do to either prevent a calamity or to create one. This may sound like a hopeless kind of fatalism; but when ingested the right way, it can be a source of bravery. It does not matter if the whole world’s army is against me: if it is not in my fate to die – if it is not *Qadr* – I can believe that I will be safe. On the other hand, if it is my fate to be harmed, there is no amount of effort I can put forward that will succeed in protecting me; these efforts will be futile. So why worry? Worry and fretting are sourced in the notion that there may be a way to thwart impending danger; but with *Qadr*, fate is so inevitable that such worry is quashed. Indeed, Bahar, who is frequently verbally assaulted in public, calms herself by remembering: “I believe my Allah. Whatever anything happen, then I am dying? I am dying. He is the one that take care of me.”

I recall seeing my mother use the logic of *Qadr*, holding fast to the notion that her fate is up to Allah, not in any worldly power’s hands, in order to calm herself down and walk tall in times of extreme difficulty. So did participants in this study who were faced with Islamophobic violence. Zainab, who encounters frequent verbal assault in the street, used to be too afraid to go outside because of fear that Islamophobic perpetrators would beat her, until found her freedom from fear through *Qadr*. As she puts it: “Nothing is gonna happen to me unless Allah write down for me. I forget everything. I leave home safe, I come safe, I say *Alhamdullilah* (praise be to Allah) and that's it.”

By “write down for me”, Zainab is referring to the Islamic theological belief that all of one’s life is metaphorically ‘written’, in the sense that Allah has determined it and knows what fate will
befall everyone in advance. In this sense, it has ‘already happened’. As Bilqis puts it, “I’m not really that worried because I believe in God: whatever it happen to you, it already happened. You cannot control. That's what I believe.” Indeed, belief in Allah’s sovereignty provides comfort to Bilqis and Zainab by removing the sense of randomness and distress about the unpredictable potential of being attacked. It puts the locus of control into ‘the hands of Allah’, Whom they trust, rather than with whims of a random perpetrator on the street, whom they fear. Tahira similarly relies on Qadr to ease her worries about Islamophobic violence, and teaches her children this practice as well:

Because I always recite my du'a (supplications) before I come out of the house, and I say I know my trust is in Allah, and Allah is there to protect me, then it [worry] goes away. I always support myself like that. I say anything happen, it's already been written for me. You know? But I always tell my kids [to] make sure that whenever you come out of the house, you recite your du'as. Allah is there with you, and anything happen to you, know this has already been written, it's gonna happen. – Tahira

Tahira’s use of prayer, reliance on Allah, and strong belief in pre-ordainment of Qadr gives her a sense that there is an overarching force shaping her day, rather than being stranded and alone and at the mercy of Islamophobic violence. She, like my mother did, passed this framework on to her children.

Zainab took her reliance on Qadr one step further: she wanted to share, through the mouthpiece of this study, that she believed that if people started believing in Qadr, the issue of Islamophobic violence would be solved. She theorizes that non-Muslims’ lack of belief in Qadr stresses them out to the point that they are willing and able to perpetrate Islamophobic violence:
So many [non-Muslims], they are stressed…. They are stressed more than us, ‘cause us we believe [in] Qadr. Anything that happens from Allah, right? Allah plan. They don’t believe that. Anything that happens they say, “Why it’s happened?” They go more stressed. Us, anything happens we say, “Qadr Allah. I plan this, Allah plan this – just, Alhamdulillah.” Then they [non-Muslims] doesn’t have that, they stress, more stress and then they put another stress. That’s why they go coo-coo, I’m telling you. – Zainab

It is vital to mention that the participants who used Qadr as a faith-based method of making sense of Islamophobic violence were not participants who had been physically or sexually assaulted. Without minimizing the impact of targeted verbal assault, it would most likely not be empowering, but rather cruel, to suggest that an act of physical or sexual violence was Qadr, or to comfort oneself about the prospect of physical or sexual violence recurring through notions of fate. I would emphasize that utilization of Islamic theology to make sense of Islamophobic violence must be nuanced and led by the survivor herself: if believing in Qadr empowers a specific Muslim woman to walk outside with less debilitating fear, then this is empowering and helpful. According to Zine (2004), “[a]lthough religion and spirituality can be sites or sources of oppression, they also offer powerful spaces of resistance to injustice” (p. 185). However, the use of the notion of Qadr, or any other theological precepts, to make sense of Islamophobic violence should never be imposed on Muslim women. Indeed, I contend that the particular uses of Islamic beliefs to make sense of Islamophobic violence must be carried out with an eye to “exegetical reform [that are] based on antipatriarchal readings of religious texts” (Zine, 2004, p. 176). Indeed, in many cases, rather than focusing on Qadr, Muslim women may choose to focus on believing that what happened to them is not deserved, and that Allah somehow did not want it to
happen to them, as a participant in the arts-based portion of this study seems to imply in her poem:

I will apologize to the Muslim sisters who go through the struggle of victimization every single day, you don't deserve this. I don't deserve this, none of deserve this.

My sisters our hijab is a god sent jewel that wraps you up so beautifully leaving you Nur shining upon you.

We are liberated and confident and refuse to confide into the society norms that try and tell us what beautiful is.

Ya Muslimah, Ya Muslimah, My sisters, My sisters

Your heroic efforts of representing your deen, your Muslim sisters, an entire nation will not be forgotten by He. For our lord, Is Ar-Rahman Ar-Raheem.

-Excerpt from “Letter from a Terrorist” (poem written by participant)

In this poem, the author refers to Islamic theology, but steers away thinking about violence in terms of Qadr. Rather, she focuses on the Nur (divine light) shining from Muslim women’s faces, and compliments and shares a feeling of ‘family’ with other Muslim women. She reminds readers at the end of the poem that Allah is Ar-Rahman Ar-Raheem (Most Beneficent, Most Merciful), presumably as a way to comfort the reader.

In addition to referencing Qadr, several participants relied on the Muslim practice of “trust in Allah” as a way to make sense of and cope with Islamophobic violence. Nayyirah, who faces frequent Islamophobic verbal assault, describes the way that she applies trust in Allah to supersede her fear of violence:
Seeking refuge in God: with words, putting your trust in God with words; with your heart, with your faith... how do I describe it? With your being. You leave it to God, you put your trust in God that he will help you, that He will aid you through it. – Nayyirah

This kind of trust was practiced by many other participants. Hanifa, although she also faces frequent verbal assault, says that she does not need any help, because she trusts Allah. Indeed, Hanifa does not even carry a cell phone because she entrusts Allah to protect her from Islamophobic violence and empower her to stand up for herself. She emphasized, “You want to stand up for yourself. It’s very important. Every woman, I think you want to stand up ourself. No need anybody help! With Allah, then you stand up yourself. It’s very important.”

Hanifa’s statement shows the importance of being able to support survivors of Islamophobic violence in terms that reflect and resonate with their worldview. If we were to try to convince Hanifa to carry a cell phone by attempting to convince her that it was foolish to trust Allah with her physical safety, we would likely not succeed in anything except for offending Hanifa. In contrast, if we were to refer the Islamic notion of asbab, which is the idea that Allah puts things in the world for human benefit, which act as conduits for the help of Allah, this might be an effective approach. We could remind Hanifa that medicine is an asbab: it isn’t the medicine itself that is curing is; it is the asbab through which Allah cures. Therefore, we trust Allah but also take our medicine. Similarly, cell phones can be seen as an asbab through which Allah provides us with protection from violence by enabling us to call people for help. Therefore, we can trust Allah and also carry a cell phone.

Tahira trusted Allah to protect her in instances of verbal assault, to the point that she did not speak back to the perpetrator, and instead waited for Allah to intervene through another person:
“I didn't respond to him because Muslims are not allowed to fight, they are not allowed to. So if you keep quiet, Allah is going to find somebody to reply for you.”

It bears emphasis that Tahira, who was called a terrorist, actually believes that Muslims are not allowed to fight, even if it means not speaking back against a verbal assault. The gulf between the violence projected on Tahira and the reality of her beliefs and actions could not be more vast. Regardless, in line with Tahira’s belief that “Allah is going to find somebody to reply for you”, in both cases of Islamophobic verbal assault that Tahira faced, a bystander did in fact intervene.

In the second case, the bystander was a young Muslim woman, who, after the incident had passed, encouraged Tahira to stand up for herself next time. It is not clear whether this advice shifted Tahira’s beliefs, but she did say motivated her to join this study and tell her story.

Another belief some participants relied on to make meaning of Islamophobic violence was the Islamic theological precept that there is an inherent hardship that comes with being Muslim in the world. This concept is based on the Islamic notion that this world was never meant to be perfect; that life is a test, and Allah will test Muslims so that they can demonstrate their faith.

Thus, some participants viewed Islamophobic violence as a test, and perhaps even an opportunity to demonstrate fortitude. Nayyirah said that she understands that “there are hardships that will come with the way I choose to dress.” Aisha explained that “[I] know being a Muslim is not easy, and looking at the history of Prophets, it wasn't easy for them. I'm not expecting it to be easy.”

Still other Islamic concepts were used by some participants to make sense of how to interact with perpetrators of Islamophobic violence. It can be overwhelming and destabilizing to stare at the reality of another person’s hate: Islamic methods of conceptualizing perpetrators and how to
interact with them gave some participants a sense of stability and clarity. Indeed, many participants’ understandings of how to interact perpetrators were shaped by the dictate to ‘repel evil with what is better’, which is described fully in the following Quranic passage:

Not equal are the good deed and the bad deed. Repel evil by that which is better, and then the one who is hostile to you will become as a devoted friend. But none is granted it except those who are patient and none is granted it except one having a great fortune.

(Quran 41:34-35, Sahih International)

Guided by this notion, some participants chose to be kind to the people that were harming them, perhaps in the hope that they could transform their enemies into friends. Although this may appear to some as placating behaviour, this concept enabled some participants to hold on to strong moral guideposts when faced with violence that might otherwise have tempted them to sink to the perpetrator’s level, and perhaps yell a slur in return. Indeed, Safiya, who had been verbally and physically attacked in the street, when asked her how Muslims should respond to Islamophobic violence, seemed to be referring to the Quranic verses above:

[We should] be nice to others. Even if they do bad, return – do good to them. Show them how you are... how you are. Because if we show them, if you have neighbours, you know, we have neighbours: they don't talk to you because you are Muslim. They don't talk to you because you are Black. They don't talk to you, you [should] just try to be nice to them. [Say], "Hi, how are you?" everyday. "Hi, how are you? How are you feeling?" They don’t want, they don’t want, then one day they [are] going to come back. You help them, you serve them with curry something. You help them - that's what we going to do. Nothing else we can do. We have to be nice to them. Show them how we are, then it's going to be great. – Safiya
It is important to recognize that many (although not all) Muslim women’s responses to Islamophobic violence may be shaped by beliefs similar to Safiya’s. In some social justice circles, kindness to people harbouring racist views is sometimes seen as poor praxis, evidence of internalized racism, or of not fully understanding how oppression works. Without making a normative judgement around whether responding to Islamophobia with kindness is a better or ideal approach, there needs to be space created for Muslim women survivors of Islamophobic violence who do want to respond ‘with what is better’, and who seek to interact with Islamophobic people through the lens of their religious beliefs.

That is not to say that this framework should be above criticism: in cases of domestic violence, for example, the notion of ‘repelling evil with good’ could easily lead to further entrapment in cycles of abuse, rather than safety for the survivor. This quandary shows the need for people capable of having feminist and social justice discussions using Islamic theological terms, who can interpret and apply these concepts in manners that are helpful to women. For example, in a situation of domestic abuse, a Muslim woman could be told that the way to “repel evil by that which is better” in this case is to get support, a safety plan, and leave.

9.2.3 Using Radical Acceptance

Although some participants made meaning of Islamophobic violence by using it as a motivation to change people’s minds about Muslims, and others relied on Islamic theological concepts to restore their sense of stability and trust in the world, not all participants in this study had a lofty way to make sense of things. Some took a more blunt approach of simply acknowledging that something terrible happened, and that was all there was to it.
As Amira put it: “Shit happens.” Amira continues: “And it's happened to other people. I'm part of an unfortunate large percentage of people who have gone through this, so carry on, move on.”

This plain recognition of the existence of Islamophobic violence was echoed by other participants. According to Warsan, it’s important for Muslims to simply recognize that “discrimination exists”. Similarly, Aissatou described this kind of radical acceptance as helpful to her in the face of Islamophobic violence: “What get[s] me through is to know that injustice exists, unfairness exists.”

This kind of wide-eyed lack of denial is helpful in that it validates the reality of what participants have gone through. It can be even more helpful if the acknowledgement that “shit happens” is linked to the causes of that shit: specifically, discourses of Islamophobia that dehumanize Muslim women and make them vulnerable to violence. Indeed, for Stephanie, connecting her experiences of violence to an understanding of racism, intersectionality, and social justice empowered her to make sense of what happened to her, push back against ‘friends’ who did not believe and support her, and stand up for herself in the face of Islamophobic violence when she encountered it again. Stephanie expressed a desire for other Muslim women to be believed and validated, and be able to connect their experiences to the dehumanization of Islamophobic discourses:

> It's not in your head. The emotions that you're experiencing as reaction to that violence is real. And it's not an over-reaction; it's a human reaction, because you have been dehumanized. And you are allowed to feel these things. You don't need anybody's permission to feel these things. But what you're going through is real, and... I believe you.

– Stephanie
9.3 Recovering from Islamophobic Violence

Although many participants did not use the term ‘healing’, they described a variety of methods they used to ‘feel better’ after the incident upon returning home, and in the days, weeks, and months after. These methods of ‘feeling better’ demonstrate the participants’ strength and resilience: even as there are little to no accessible or appropriate supports for Muslim women survivors of Islamophobic violence in the GTA, they nonetheless have tapped into what are largely healthy and effective recovery strategies of self-care, expressing their feelings, addressing their needs, and reinforcing their sense of connection with others.

Self-care and self-help discourses have been rightly criticized as neoliberal processes that place the responsibility for healing and resilience from experiences of systemic violence and oppression on the individual, rather than emphasizing the need for community care and system change. Nonetheless, I want to catalogue some of the individual healing and self-care practices that Muslim women participants reported as useful to them, so that their practices can be put forward as options for other survivors of Islamophobic violence to use.

As discussed in detail in Sections 7.3.1 and 7.3.2, many participants began the healing process by disclosing what happened to their families and friends, and sharing their feelings with them. Safiya described talking about what happened to her as a way to provide relief; suggesting that “it's good when you talk and you feel relief. And tell friends. And always I used to tell people what happened. I told everybody. Whenever I have something like that I always talk. I talk, I talk – so it's a relief when I talk.”
Although many other participants obtained relief by talking to their immediate support networks, some described a desire for more community spaces in which they can discuss Islamophobic violence with others. I will discuss participants’ ideas for how to create and organize these spaces in Section 10.7.

Another healing practice that several participants reported as helpful was prayer. Bahar said that when she arrives home after an incident of Islamophobic violence, she will pray or read Quran, which helps her feel better. Hanifa also engages in a series of devotional acts to feel better, including prayer, reading Quran, and repeating supplications on Muslim prayer beads, which are called *tasbeeh*:

> Prayer is helping, and read Quran, yes. Many, many time I did that. And tasbeeh. These three things are amazing. [Interviewer: Do you always carry a tasbeeh?]. Yes. – Hanifa

Aisha, who has a significant burden of being a hub of community support for Muslims in Regent Park, describes how getting up before dawn for an optional Muslim prayer called *Tahajjud* helps her ‘recharge’. Aisha describes *Tahajjud* as “my quiet communication time… for a long time God make it easy for me, and I just wake up in the middle of the night: *Salatul Tahajjud*. So that is my communication time and recharge time.”

After being physically attacked in public, Safiya read Quran when she got home. She also recites *aya-tul kursi* before leaving the house because, like Hanifa, she believes that it offers her protection:

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12 Muslims are supposed to pray five times a day; those five prayers are considered ‘compulsory’. *Tahajjud*, on the other hand, is an optional prayer.
I have to do *aya-tul kursi* all the time. For my protection. I read *all* the way. When I walk I read *all* the way until I reach anywhere I go. …read it *so* comfort me when I read. All the way I read... I read. – Safiya

That some participants read Quran to feel better and were comforted by it in the wake of Islamophobic violence makes the fact that other participants felt pressured to hide their Muslim identity and not read Quran in public anymore more profound: if they are too afraid to be seen reading Quran, this potential source of strength is closed off to them, at least in public.

Not all participants engaged religious methods of accessing comfort and peace. After incidents of Islamophobic violence, Zainab described a ritual of treating herself at home: she will take a shower, sit down, watch her favourite Indian shows, and eat – preferably something sweet. Zainab said this routine helps her relax and “forget everything.” Exercise was also a common self-care activity described by participants. Asma, an accomplished athlete and martial artist, “takes frustration out at the gym and through sports.” Hanifa participates in swimming lessons and aquafit in her community pool during women-only hours. Aisha takes part in community yoga classes and goes for walks. Jihan enjoys gardening, both for the exercise and for the outcome of home-grown vegetables.

Several participants described cooking and baking as a source of comfort, relaxation, and happiness for them. Quite a few participants were part of a Catering Collective, which not only gave them an outlet for their cooking and baking skills, but provided a source of economic empowerment. Maryam brightened when she told me about making Ethiopian coffee for the Catering Collective, and showcasing the coffee in Farmer’s Markets. Indeed, Safiya described not just cooking, but cooking and sharing with others, as a way for her to decompress and feel
better after Islamophobic violence: “Me, when something like that happened, I like to cook. I cook and then I like to give neighbours. I have to cook and invite people. That…takes me out of the thinking or, yeah, that’s what I like.” Tahira also enjoyed cooking and baking for her children as a source of fun and healing, specifically scones with cheese inside, which her children love.

A few participants described writing as a form of healing and source of strength for them. Stephanie described writing as being helpful to her, whether it be journaling, or writing stories that “channel that energy”, or fiction that helps her “get away from it”. Through her writing, Stephanie “can make up another reality”, and for her, this is an opportunity for “not having to be in that world for a second.” As noted above, in addition to these personally helpful writing practices, Stephanie is a published journalist and short story author.

Nayyirah writes poetry, and found that poems she wrote before certain incidents of Islamophobic violence were helpful to her when they occurred: reflecting on and referring back to that poem in her mind helped her get through the incidents and heal.

In addition to poetry, some participants looked to music and singing to feel better and heal from Islamophobic violence. Warsan says that she sang when she was upset, and that it was a form of relief for her. Alison also sings happy songs and blasts music to feel better: “it helps me deal with my day, it helps me deal with that kind of stuff.” Stephanie also sings, and shares about how this practice takes away feelings of voicelessness:

Sometimes when I'm alone in my apartment, I will just sing. It's just nice like it's not even like related to the incident or anything, it's just I'm singing and sometimes it's just so cathartic. ‘Cause I can just hear my voice and I feel often voiceless and I feel like I have to just not speak out loudly. But I can just belt and sing and, I'm not a good singer too, but it just, the fact that I can just sing, and to like a limitless way without anybody
smirking or having any response, like nobody can take it away from me, like I'm alone and I can just sing. – Stephanie

Asma also discussed using art – in the form of henna and painting – as an outlet for her.

Finally, according to my observation – rather than participants’ self-reporting – many participants seemed to heal from Islamophobic violence using humour. There were countless instances in the research interviews in which both the research participant and I burst out laughing at the same time. In some cases, it was when the participant was describing the bizarre behaviour of the perpetrator, as was the case when Zainab was described being treated like a “snake” at a Mill street festival. In other cases, it was a macabre “laugh so we don’t cry” moment after discussing, for example, the pressure to hide one’s Muslim identity, as was the case when Alison was describing her attempt to ‘downplay’ her Muslim-ness to her ex-partner so that she would be able to avoid his Islamophobia. Overall, there were many conspiratorial giggles which reminded me of humour that I grew up with in sisters’ gatherings in the mosque: a particular brand of ‘Muslim woman humour’ that consists of inside jokes, relishing absurdity, and biting wit. As Zainab quipped, when speaking about how often she was targeted for Islamophobic verbal assault: “I don't know how lucky I am, people they shout out to me [laughs].” Zainab flips the frequency of Islamophobic violence on its head and takes out its sting by giving it the amusing explanation of it all being due to her ‘good luck’.
PART 3: TAKING ACTION
Chapter 10: Participants’ Recommendations for Action

We have to do something about it before it is too late. – Safiya

Lived experience with the daily reality of Islamophobia gives research participants a keen awareness about not only the causes and nature of Islamophobic violence, but of potential solutions for it. Honouring the feminist framework that survivors of gendered violence are the experts on their own lives and what they need, I have reserved a special section solely dedicated to the recommendations of participants in this study for courses of action in better preventing Islamophobic violence, effectively responding to it when it occurs, and offering support to Muslim women survivors.

10.1 Increase Public Awareness of Islamophobic Violence

As the title of this thesis suggests, even though participants reported that the threat of Islamophobic violence in their lives was omnipresent, frequent, and potentially lethal, they felt that the general public was not aware of this reality. Many participants thus recommended that the public be made aware of the prevalence and severity of Islamophobic violence. Indeed, the hope of getting this very message out to the public was a motivation for several participants to join the research study.

Aisha recommends that would-be allies to Muslim women first acknowledge the reality of Islamophobic violence. She cuts through any potential minimization and denial of this reality by saying, “Let's not pretend. Let’s not water it down.”

Shireen, after facing Islamophobic verbal assault on the bus, realized that most people in her majority-white and non-Muslim high school were not even aware that Islamophobic violence was a reality. To address this awareness gap, she told her class the story of what happened to her:
I wanted to show them, that even someone they know as a happy-go-lucky, loving, caring person – like this kind of stuff happens. ‘Cause they don't necessarily think about that stuff. And they don't need to, it doesn't affect them…. But I remember wanting to make sure that other people – specifically my class members – understood that this kind of stuff happens to people they are friends with. – Shireen

In addition to the reality of existence of Islamophobic violence, it is important for the public not to minimize the danger that perpetrators of Islamophobic violence pose to Muslim women. In Faiza’s case, after she was verbally assaulted by a group of men near Dairy Fest, she understood that “if they're willing to approach me like that once, and have seen me run, they will do it again. That is a guarantee. ‘Cause assholes are assholes.” Faiza’s friends, however, did not seem to understand that she would not feel safe about the possibility of encountering this group of men again, and tried to convince her to stay on for the weekend trip. Their lack of acknowledgement of the real threat that these perpetrators posed to Faiza created a situation where she was less supported and understood.

Warsan understood that the perpetrator of Islamophobic verbal assault posed a threat for further targeting of her and her family, and she was right, as his harassment of her family continued after that initial verbal assault. According to Warsan, “if somebody has hatred, it never stops.”

Given this potential for unceasing hatred, if a Muslim woman expresses a desire to be separated from a perpetrator of Islamophobic violence, this wish should be respected; the real threat that these perpetrators posed to her should be taken seriously. Stephanie’s don, for example, suggested that she should “try to be friends” with a man who perpetrated an Islamophobic sexual assault against her. Here, the don failed to acknowledge not only the violence done to Stephanie,
but the ongoing danger the perpetrator would necessarily pose to her, especially since he had a demonstrated capacity for Islamophobic sexual violence. This situation clearly demonstrates the need for the public to aware about the severity of Islamophobic violence and the hateful and violent nature of its perpetrators, so that they do not mistakenly pressure survivors into the position of interacting with these perpetrators in order to ‘reach mutual understanding’.

10.2 Increased Public Awareness about Islam and Muslims

Many participants identified increased public knowledge about Islam and Muslims as a key component to countering Islamophobia. Almost every participant honed in on media portrayal of Islam and Muslims as a major catalyst for Islamophobic violence. According to Safiya, “Media, they are the ones who create all these problems. All these problems is because of the media.” Lailah explained how the media’s homogenized portrayal of Muslims is particularly harmful and dangerous when groups like Daesh are equated with all Muslims:

Not all people are bad…. There is good people and bad people. And this is the problem like, why [do] they look at all Muslim people like we are bad? And we as Muslims we look at them like they are [a] mix of people, bad and good people everywhere. Why they pre-judge us? It's not fair. Why they look at us like…all of us, ‘oh we cut heads’. No, [it’s] not like that! …You are surviving from them [Daesh] now, but we did [survive Daesh] until now, and we did long time ago. And it's not fair you brought us with them [Daesh] on the same side. No! …my family, we are all survivors of them. They are surviving now from them. So I know what I am saying. So people here they... they look at us as a Muslim, all of us we are terrorists. They put us on the same side [as Daesh]. No, we are victim like you! We are the other side, we are against them. We are not the same!
– Lailah
Alison further detailed the specific anti-Muslim stereotypes propagated through biased news coverage:

Big things for me are that they cover a lot of what happens to white people, as opposed to what happens to everybody. I mean, when you tell people that the majority of these attacks are against Muslims, they don't want to believe it, they refuse to believe it, they think it's wrong, they think you're lying. – Alison

Alison is right: the majority of people killed by Daesh are Muslims (Dearden, 2017). Even though Muslims are victims of Daesh and other terrorist groups, these attacks on Muslim bodies are not valued or covered by Western news media. Moreover, as discussed in Section 6.1.4, a recent study has demonstrated that when terrorist attacks occur, the attack gets five times the amount of media coverage if the perpetrator identifies as Muslim. These media biases foster Islamophobic discourses that sanction Islamophobic violence against Muslim women.

Zainab echoes Lailah’s sentiments, in pointing out the importance of people understanding that there is a stark separation between Muslims and Daesh. For Zainab, people who commit heinous acts of violence are, according to her beliefs, are no longer Muslims:

The people who do bad things, they are not Muslim. They're Muslim, but... if you're doing this, we believe you're not Muslim anymore. Right? That's why I believe that. ‘Cause a Muslim doesn't say to kill each other, right? You kill each other, you're not Muslim! Understand? That's it I believe. Because Muslim are peace. That's it. – Zainab

In order to disassociate terrorist acts of violence from the Muslim community, Warsan wants to see perpetrators of terrorism labelled as individuals, not as representatives of religions, and collective blame brought to an end. She explained, “If somebody bad person did something…I
can't say he's white, bad. I can't say he's Jewish, bad. I will say that person is bad. So one thing they can do to help is not attacking ... this collective punishment... not do that.”

Shahnoza, the student of International Politics, echoes Alison’s sentiment (above) in her critique of the role of media in fostering Islamophobic violence:

For example, there are some attacks going on in Western world, which are always on the highlights of news, but there are some events which... going on in the Muslim world like committed by terrorists as well, and no one knows about them, they are not even... heard at all. So that's really upsetting. For example, [a] couple of weeks ago there was a terrorist attack in Afghanistan and no one even heard of that, but then when there was one in Manchester then it's – you know. – Shahnoza

Several participants also pointed out the double-standard between how Muslim and non-Muslim mass shooters are covered in Western media. According to Faiza, “Black and brown bodies are the terrorists and white bodies are lone wolves.” Aissatou agrees and points out that

If a Muslim kills one person it's called terrorism, when a non-Muslim kills, it's just called crazy killing, so to me that is so unfair. I want to check in the dictionary, it's not in the dictionary [that] you have to be Muslim to be terrorist, and so somehow society now have the name terrorism only for Muslim, when there is terrorism in every religion; it is in all religions, so we only choose to call Muslims terrorists. - Aissatou

She also points out the double-standard in blaming all Muslims for an extreme, violent faction that claims affiliation with the faith, whereas the same collective responsibility is not placed on Christianity:
For somebody's action, we condemn the rest of the people for the same action. Somehow we don't condemn the Christians for the KKK, and even though they do it in the name of Christianity. And it's a double-standard: we don't condemn the Christians for the concentration camps, but we always want Muslims to come out and to have an excuse for bombing. The bomber they didn't ask me for permission before they bombed themself or somebody else. So why do I have to come out or condemn or not condemn? – Aissatou

Highlighting this double-standard and skewed coverage is not meant stoke a tit-for-tat morbid ‘competition’ regarding in civilian casualties or identities of mass murderers; rather, it is vital to point out that such media coverage fosters the image of Muslims as the quintessential violent, monolithic ‘Other’, against whom ‘retaliatory’ violence against Muslim women is justified. Indeed, the net effect of this skewed news coverage is a depiction of Muslims which can only be described as grossly inaccurate. Disappointment with the media’s portrayal of Islam is echoed in a poetry participant’s poem:

They preach "multiculturalism"

And tolerance

When really

They're just puppets

On TV

And they say

Honesty

Is the best policy

But when's the last time
They told the truth

About Islaam?

-Excerpt from “When is the Last Time You Heard the Truth About Islaam?” (poem written by participant)

Aissatou also expressed grave concerns with the media’s depiction of Muslims, and asserted that these days the news is not about journalists bringing information to the public, but it is a “billion business” functioning to get ratings, and plays a role in “promoting Islamophobia”. Aissatou’s observation fits with research coming out of the United States exposing lucrative ‘Islamophobia industries’, churning out hateful discourses for profit (Lean, 2012). She also underlined the power of television news and entertainment to shape the way that the public views Muslims, and Muslim women in particular, saying that “somehow the TV control the way we see the world. The TV control how we should, how I should see you with your hijab.” Indeed, many hit TV shows, such as the atrociously Islamophobic Homeland, rely on recycled stereotypes of barbaric Muslim terrorists and haplessly oppressed Muslim women to form their plotlines (Durkay, 2014).

Given the power of media to poison public opinion about Muslims, participants recommended that counter-messages, which more accurately portray what Islam is about and what Muslims are like, to be just as widely shared. Safiya suggested that films with more accurate depictions of Muslims be shown in free community film screenings in the park, with food and drinks available. According to Safiya, these movies would help with countering the single story that is propagated by media, and show “how the Muslim are, how good they are: they are human being like others.”
Safiya is not alone in believing that in order to combat Islamophobic violence, there needs to be an education process for people to understand ‘who Muslims are’. As discussed above, Asma, after the perpetrator tried to run her over and physically attacked her, told the police officer that showed up on the scene and asked her what she wanted to do “to let him know that I did not press charges but would like him to read up on Islam and talk to a real Muslim before attacking anyone and everyone.” Asma’s assertion that knowledge of who Muslims are and what they believe in was an antidote for Islamophobic violence was shared by many participants. Maryam says that in order to end Islamophobic violence, people have to understand “what is the meaning of Muslim.” Warsan agrees: “I hope they learn and go research or find out what is the Muslim, what it says the Quran.”

The notion that research and education will assist in ending Islamophobia was echoed by Bilqis, who recommends that people who want to help end violence against Muslim women should “read what we believe in; they should know we harm no people. That Islam is peaceful…they have to educate themself, and they will know what we are and who we are.”

Like Bilqis, many participants wanted the public to be aware that Islam does not condone violence; quite the opposite. Tahira believes that if the public knew that Islam explicitly forbade the kinds of actions that violent Muslim-identified people in the news were perpetrating, they would be able to distinguish Muslims from the acts of these individuals:

I think they should educate people about who Muslims are, you know? Because sometimes even Muslims who do [violent] things, they are not allowed to do this, you know? They should go through Quran and read and know – read the translation to know who Muslims are. Because by educating them, and let[ting] them know what Islamic is, maybe something is gonna happen – maybe they will know who we are and maybe they
will respect us, you know? Yeah. They should be educated [about] who Muslim are. Maybe they don't know, [or] just whatever they hear, it's “terrorist, terrorist, terrorist Muslim kill people, Muslim did this, Muslim” – that's why it build their hatred, you know? But if they are educated and they know.... Then maybe it [Islamophobia] will go away from their heart and everything. – Tahira

Warsan expressed similar sentiments as Tahira: she asserted that Islamic teachings do not condone terrorism, and are in fact rife with examples of living gentle, non-harmful lives:

We are not terrorists, our Quran doesn't teach that. Not even Quran…nobody teach to terrorize. Especially, they [Muslims] say even the leaf of the floor, you see it, don't step on it. Take [it] out and put it somewhere else. That's what they have to know. - Warsan

Given the consensus that a more sophisticated knowledge about Islam and Muslims than what the media currently provides is an essential tool to counter Islamophobic violence, there is one challenge to executing this education work that bears mention. The Muslim-as-Invader discourse posits that any concerted effort to educate people about Islam and Muslims – especially in public school settings – represents an encroachment of Muslims on ‘our society’, and a nefarious attempt to brainwash people into accepting what will eventually be, according to Islamophobic fantasy, Taliban-esque Sharia law. This type of backlash has already been foisted against the new Islamic History Month initiated by the Toronto District School Board. Unfortunately, Islamophobic discourses can thus be deployed to counter anti-Islamophobia work. But the work must continue.

In addition to public education countering negative portrayals of Muslims in the media, there appears to be a need for greater public awareness regarding the varied reasons Muslim women
may choose to wear hijab and niqab, and to de-stigmatize those choices. This education cannot be carried out through intrusive questions to individual Muslim women; as we saw in Section 6.3.6.5, these questions are often asked in bad faith, or act as a segue to open hostility and Islamophobic violence. Nonetheless, it would be helpful for the public to have a cursory understanding regarding Muslim women’s veiling choices, and to de-bunk the stereotype that every Muslim woman who is veiled has been forced to do so by her father or husband. Such public education and de-stigmatization work must include the full range of Muslim women’s clothing choices – not just pink hijabs worn by Muslimah model minorities. Muslim women who wear black niqabs or abayas, and Muslim women who wear no hijab at all, must be encompassed in the image of the acceptable Muslim woman, worthy of inclusion and care.

10.3 Shift Social Attitudes to De-Normalize Islamophobic Violence

In addition to being aware that Islamophobic violence occurs, participants also wanted to see more non-Muslims engaged in prevention and education work, and in creating social norms that preclude Islamophobic violence. Given that violence against Muslim women has been normalized, efforts must be made to de-normalize this violence and (re-)subject it to social censure. At present, Islamophobic discourses ‘exempt’ Muslim women from the general social taboo against perpetrating violence against women, and render them ‘acceptable targets’ for violence and harassment. Nayyirah wants to see this toxic ‘exemption’ removed:

It's not acceptable to... discriminate or to harass or to be violent against women in general. And that's I think that's a societal norm: you don't hurt women, you don't oppress women. But when it comes to Muslim women I think there's a double-standard. – Nayyirah
To rectify this double-standard, Nayyirah wants people who want to take action against Islamophobic violence to “just make it known that it's not acceptable.” Aissatou agrees that this attitudinal shift needs to happen, and that non-Muslims have a role to play in speaking to other non-Muslims about Islamophobia: “The non-Muslims should stand up and tell other people who have those kinds of minds what is right.” Indeed, Shahnozah emphasized that non-Muslims could begin by engaging their immediate circle and local communities in education and prevention work:

I think you can change the society by doing a change in your neighbourhood or individually. So maybe we can do in [that] way. Maybe as one individual you can't change many things in a high level but still you can start doing it from your own surroundings. – Shahnozah

Aisha suggested a simple way to begin to shift social norms in one’s immediate surroundings: making an announcement at the beginning of events that made it clear that Islamophobia was not acceptable in the space, followed by some myth-busting around the history of Islam and the ongoing plight and genocide of different groups of Muslims globally.

Alison regularly educates people in her surroundings on what Islamophobia is and how it affects Muslims. She recommends taking an active listening approach while one is having these important conversations:

And listen. That's a big one, is listening. Because the thing is, even when you're educating people, if they don't feel heard, they're not going to listen to you. You know? And you've gotta understand that a lot of people are getting their information off of what they believe to be trusted sites....when you're educating somebody and you're advocating, you can't dismiss other people's feelings. You have to listen to their experiences and why they've
come, like that little boy I was working with. If I never listened to him, I would never have known that it was because of his parents that taught him that people were dirty and wrong and cheap and smelled bad and whatever... you know what I mean? And hearing this from him and seeing where he came from gave me somewhere to start, to help break down... ‘cause you gotta break that base down to be able to build up something, you know? And I think that's a big thing, because when we are educating people and believe, and know we're right, we don't seem to understand that they themselves know they're ‘right’ too. You know? So when you're sitting there and you're putting up a wall, they're gonna act the same way to us... So I would really definitely say listen to people. – Alison

Although one-on-one education work with peers was recommended by many participants for shifting attitudes and de-normalizing Islamophobic violence, Aissatou also wanted to see this work being supported by government action. She wants to see Islamophobia more strongly condemned at the governmental level, and for the government to “be very strict about people who is very Islamophobe in open air.”

In practice, the role of the Canadian government in relation to Islamophobia has been complex. When Prime Minister Harper was in power, he framed Islamophobia as central to a re-nationalization effort, through his positioning of Zunera Ishaq and her niqab as inherently ‘anti-Canadian’ (see Section 5.2.6). While Prime Minister Trudeau’s election marked a sharp rhetorical shift towards inclusion of Muslims within the Canadian project, some 2017 Conservative Party leadership candidates continued to stoke the flames of Islamophobia through their campaign strategies, such as Kellie Leitch’s barely coded racism proffered through her proposal to ‘screen’ immigrants to Canada for ‘Canadian values’; and her meeting with a hate
group that called for a ban on Muslims (Bell, 2017). Indeed, Kellie Leitch, and all other Conservative Party leadership candidates except for Michael Cheong, opposed Motion 103 (M-103), which was put forward in the House of Commons on December 5, 2016. M-103 was a call to "condemn Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination" and ask the government to "recognize the need to quell the increasing public climate of hate and fear". The motion also called for further study on how to reduce racism and religious discrimination, and for data collection regarding hate crimes and impacted communities’ needs. Although M-103 passed on March 23, 2017 by 201-91, the debate leading up the vote was vitriolic, with hate groups staging well-attended public protests against M-103, heralding it as the beginning of Sharia law in Canada. These kinds of scenes fail to send a unified message to Muslims in Canada that violence against them is unacceptable to their government.

Finally, Aissatou believed that Islamophobia prevention work necessitated shifts in the justice system and media narratives. She wants to see the Quebec Mosque Massacre be legally defined as terrorism, and reported on in media as a terrorist attack.

10.4 Increased Public Awareness on How to Intervene in Islamophobic Violence and Support Survivors

Many participants expressed an urgency around increased public capacity to recognize Islamophobic violence, increased willingness to take action, and increased public awareness on how to carry out effective bystander intervention. According to Tahira, lack of action by bystanders enables the problem of Islamophobic violence to spread. As she explained: “If…they’re not going to take any action, it will grow and grow and grow, you know? Because today it happened to me, the day before maybe it happened to somebody else.”
Indeed, Nayyirah agrees that lack of bystander intervention will lead perpetrators to keep believing that they can attack Muslim women with impunity:

I think they think they can get away with it. I think that they know there's nothing anyone's gonna really do or there's nothing that you can physically or like do in terms of law. So they can say whatever they want…. So I think it's important in the moment to stand up for Muslim women. – Nayyirah

Lailah used her platform as a research participant in this study to directly ask the public to take action if they witness Islamophobic violence: “I…wanna ask them through this [study], please, please when you see [something] like my situation that day, please stand up and stop her or him [from] talking. Stop, please, do something.” Shireen also asked bystanders to take action if they witness Islamophobic violence, and describes what she would like that action to look like:

Even if you're not actively going on the other side of the street and being like, “Hey you stop saying that stuff,” just walking beside her [the Muslim woman], being like, “Listen, like my name is so-and-so, I'm here just in case.” …I think that's something that other people can do. – Shireen

Recalling that shunning is one of the tactics of Islamophobic violence, and that Najma was abandoned at a streetcar stop in the winter with a stroller, it is important to also recognize that bystander intervention for Islamophobic violence can look like reaching out to help, include and connect with a Muslim woman who is being shunned or socially abandoned.

Participants also wanted to see the public becoming more aware about how to offer effective support in the aftermath of Islamophobic violence. Aisha mentioned that it is important for potential allies to be sincere, to actually listen, and offer concrete support to those affected by
Islamophobic violence. When Aisha organized a community vigil after the Quebec mosque massacre, 95% of the people who showed up the vigil were non-Muslims. According to Aisha, even though these allies showed up physically, the attitude they brought to vigil was not supportive:

People showed up here and the feeling that I had... and some of them I talked to them [and they said], “Oh we've been doing this” – kind of like ‘suck it up’... that's how I felt…. Like I didn't felt any support, even though they showed up…. When I had a conversation, the feeling that I had it wasn't like, “We're here to support you”...maybe I'm wrong or right, that's the feeling that I had. It was yeah. They were there. I take them, they who showed up, but it wasn't sincere. I felt it wasn't sincere. – Aisha

Aisha also mentioned that in the aftermath of the Quebec Mosque Massacre, many non-Muslims reached out to her and asked what they could do to help. Aisha found this kind of question to be burdensome, and offered this alternative:

[People ask], “What can we do, where can we help?” Instead of saying that, [think about] what do you do when people get sick? What kind of support and extend hand are you supposed to be giving? When people are sick you cook food and take food, and send a card, making sure that they are emotionally okay and physically okay.... It takes a lot of people’s life, emotionally, physically, it's very draining experience that people are going through. – Aisha

In contrast to this draining experience, Aisha mentioned that it is helpful and strengthening for her when she receives thank you messages after she organizes anti-Islamophobia events.
10.5 Anti-Islamophobia Work in Schools

Schools were flagged by a few participants as a space where meaningful interventions and changes could take place. Aisha, who does a lot of advocacy work for Regent Park Muslim families, emphasized that anti-Islamophobia action and education in schools was urgent and necessary:

> The kids being picked on, being called terrorism and all horrible names, yeah... so I have to go to all the catchment area the schools and advocate on behalf of them and speak.... They are intimidated by everything in the media and the school is not supportive and they don't talk about it. So all of that I've been meeting with the trustee – TDSB trustee – to do anything, to educate the schools. I didn't see any action yet, I'm still talking about it. I'm speaking also the principals and I'm talking with MPP, our representative, we met with them as well. And I told them this is the issue this is happening, and they have a plan to do it but kind of slow motion. – Aisha

In order to combat Islamophobic violence schools, Aissatou suggested the development of anti-Islamophobia workshops, patterned after anti-smoking or anti-homophobia workshops:

> They should inform kids more about what's going [on], what Muslims are facing. We are better off to educate kids for future generation, than to convince adults, who already have their brain fog. They do a lot of promotion about smoking, about drugs in school... they should add Islamophobia as the social justice awareness. They teach kids about not hating gay people, they even have a gay day, or pride or pink day, something like that… Have a day at least to remind kids to make them put their shoes in other people's shoes. To you as the kid who is non-Muslim, just like a play, like an acting, to feel like discriminatory,
to feel be treated bad, for them to understand – excuse my English – to understand if this was you, how would you feel? – Aissatou

Tahira also wanted to see educational interventions in schools, but she focused on the need to equip Muslim children and youth with knowledge and skills regarding what to do if and when they face Islamophobic violence: “Our kids should be educated about this – that something is going on – so if anything happen to you, you have to speak. Don't keep quiet.”

Still other participants wanted to see teachers become more aware about Islam so that they would be able to make accommodations for Muslim students without punishing or isolating them. Hanifa, for example, was surprised that her son’s teacher did not know about the parameters around fasting.

The Toronto District School Board recently launched Islamic History Month, which took place over October 2017. Although this is an excellent start, as it addresses the erasure of Islamic history from the curriculum, it does not meet the educational intervention needs expressed by participants in this study, who voiced a desire for anti-Islamophobia workshops focused on unlearning biases and gaining empathy, and on equipping Muslim children and youth with tools for responding to Islamophobic violence. While Islamic History Month may inadvertently serve to educate teachers about the basics of Islam so that they can better accommodate their Muslim students, but is not explicitly designed to meet this goal. It also does not specifically aim to address teachers’ biases.

10.6 Improved/Easier Reporting Tools

Let it be led by Muslim women. – Faiza
Even though most women in the study avoided reporting to the police, they nonetheless expressed a desire for incidents of Islamophobic violence to be tallied, recorded, and made known. Indeed, having their experience ‘seen’ was a big motivator for many participants to take part in this study.

Tahira wanted a “special number” to be able to contact the police and explain everything to them – presumably, this would be something like a hotline, specifically designated for Islamophobic violence. She also wanted there to be cameras everywhere in the subway, so that even if the survivor was unable to accurately recount an Islamophobic attack because she had blacked out or fainted, the incident would be recorded and there would be “proof”.

No participant in this study reported their experience to the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM). Although it is not clear why there is not a large community uptake of reporting incidents of Islamophobic violence to NCCM, the fact that the reporting form is online, and in English only, might pose a barrier. It is possible that a phone number with a few language options may be preferable to some Muslim women. The NCCM reporting form also asks for a full name, address and phone number, which may be frightening for some people to input online in an incident related to violence, even if their name won’t be shown in public records. Finally, there may not be a high level of community awareness about the existence of the NCCM reporting tool, and what the benefits of this kind of data collection might be for the community.

The TTC recently launched a new campaign called #ThisIsWhere, which aims to combat crime and harassment on the TTC. In order to file a report through this new initiative, one has to download the SafeTTC app. Since this app was launched after the completion of the interviews for this study, it is not clear what the extent of uptake this app will be in the Muslim community,
particularly among those populations of Muslim women who are most frequently and aggressively targeted for Islamophobic violence. Given that the TTC was reported as a site of Islamophobic violence by many participants in this study, interventions and reporting tools that focus on public transportation will be vital. Indeed, Amira suggested that announcements be made on the TTC, similar to those made on planes, about codes of conduct:

"I've noticed that now I was on WestJet or Air Canada I just flew back from Vancouver. And at the start you know how they make those announcements: “Please fasten your seatbelts this is your captain speaking”? The last line they added was “no disrespect towards any fellow passenger or crew member will be tolerated on this Airline.” So I like that, because of all the stuff we hear that goes on in airplanes with Muslims. I wish sometimes that the subway would make the same announcement. – Amira

Future areas of study on Islamophobic violence against Muslim women in the GTA should include an investigation of what methods of reporting would be most accessible for them. Would a hotline be best? Who should run that hotline? At what point and in what way, if at all, would they be comfortable having police involved? Do they want an online app specifically designed for them? What level of detail would they feel comfortable filing out in these reports? These questions will help hone in on the kinds of reporting tools that need to be designed, so long as a wide range of Muslim women – not just model Muslimah minorities, but older Muslimahs, Black Muslimahs, Muslimahs facing language barriers, and niqab-wearing Muslimahs – are asked about their needs.
10.7 Improved Support for Survivors of Islamophobic violence

Stephanie, after enduring 22 therapists over the course of a decade who did not believe that she was raped and had no awareness of racial trauma, wants to see far more social supports available for Muslim women and women of colour survivors: “I just think that like there should be more funding for mental health programs, and healing programs and trauma programs for women of colour and also Muslim women of colour. There should be more resources.”

Indeed, Stephanie further points out that even though trauma caused by Islamophobic violence is real and has a serious impact, there is no matching level of understanding and recognition of this kind of trauma from counselling services, which often neglect to account for the impact of racially based trauma endured by racialized women. She explained: “I think a lot of people don't have access to trauma therapy or anything trauma based, because their trauma is not believed…. [I]t's as if there's like rubric for trauma, and racialized trauma is not a thing, apparently.”

The dearth of resources for survivors of gender-based violence in the GTA has been identified by women’s advocates, who speak up about the troubling facts that shelters are often full, and that waiting lists for free sexual violence trauma counselling services are often over six months long, or closed. But what about resources for women who have survived gendered, Islamophobic violence? At present, there are no specialized services to meet these women’s needs. The vast majority of counsellors and helping professionals are not trained in how to recognize and respond to gendered Islamophobic trauma, have not sought out a basic working knowledge about Islam and Muslims, and indeed may carry biases about Muslim women and Islam themselves. In my lived experience seeking out counselling supports in the GTA for the traumas I have faced, I have encountered therapists who have googled basic information about Islam in front of me during session, randomly asked me to ‘explain my culture’ to them during session, and told me
that my Muslim background was the cause of my anxiety because Muslims were obsessed with death. These incidents occurred through three different therapists. I echo Stephanie’s assessment that there is a stark void in capable counselling supports for Muslim women that needs to be filled.

In contrast to wanting counselling supports, some participants wanted to see more in-person community workshops for Muslim women. Maryam emphasized that she wanted these workshops to take place in the community, rather than online: “Some people, they don't want to see media, they don't want to go YouTube, internet – that’s why people they need like workshop in the community.” Aisha wants to see community workshops that equip Muslim women with self-defence skills and knowledge of other practical steps for self-protection. Bahar also wants information on how to stay safe, and how her daughter can stay safe.

Still other participants expressed a desire for community gatherings that were not so much formal workshops as they were safe spaces to talk about Islamophobic violence and share knowledge. Maryam suggested community get-togethers in the mosque where women would have space to share and support one another. Alison had a similar idea, and also suggested the mosque as a potential safe space for this kind of community building; she explained that then you have somewhere to unwind, don't keep anything in, you know, and have the place where you can go and just like, a safe place, and you can just vent and talk about it. It'd be great if they educated people in mosques and stuff like that - women on how to handle these things, you know…. Until we educate ourselves and we have these safe places and stuff like that, we're not going to feel particularly bonded. And I feel that once we start doing that, if we can open it up, not just to Muslims, but to non-Muslims who are also allies so they can come in and help so we feel more supported… that's a big thing….
If we're able to open the mosque when we're having these groups for women, to teach us how to react and how to keep safe, how to advocate, and safe places to talk.... And we start that developing with us, and we open the mosque up to our allies. You know, to our non-Muslim women to come in there and talk. And even our non-Muslim men. In certain areas – I know it's forbidden in parts of the mosque, but there are communal areas in the mosque. And have them come in, I think, and then she would feel a lot more supported, we would feel a lot more strong. And we'd have a bigger community and we'd be able to fight more. You know in a more positive sense. – Alison

Alison’s vision of a community space for sharing, bonding, learning, and building solidarity would be a strong force of change for Muslim women facing Islamophobic violence, and the broader communities that they live in.
Chapter 11: Future Directions

11.1 Centering Muslimahs’ Voices

This is real. I’m glad this is what you’re doing. Perfect fit, and I think we need to do more of this. Capture the stories. – Aisha

Many participants in this study expressed a sense of appreciation and relief that the study existed. Aisha saw a social media post advertising the study right after getting home from the coordinated Islamophobic attack by a hate group on the anti-Islamophobia event she had organized. The study felt like a lifeline to her in a moment of distress:

I had very intense evening and I came home and opened my Facebook page and I saw your poster. And that's when I reach out to you and said, “Okay this is perfect.” I think God answered my stress in a way. And it does, always God has a plan, and it coordinated perfectly. And I said this is perfect fit [for] what we went through, through the [anti-Islamophobia] dialogue. – Aisha

Stephanie described the study as an important starting point for her, and the community, in sharing about the impacts of Islamophobia, asserting that “we need to keep speaking up and doing things like this, like this study.”

Other participants saw the study as a vehicle through which their knowledge and experience could be put to use, particularly to inform the public. For Faiza, the study represented a unique opportunity to reflect on her strengths, and have her experiences shape our understanding of the gendered aspects of Islamophobia:

I saw online was that it seemed like it was being framed as like a resilience study on how people overcame and continued moving forward. And I liked that it was focused on
gender-based Islamophobia, and not just like Islamophobia at large, ‘cause it does look
different and more often than not women and children are like the first people who are
impacted by Islamophobia and then it like reaches the men. So I wanted to…offer my
experiences so that they could be included in understanding what that looks like in a
larger context. – Faiza

Still other participants were drawn to having the opportunity to have their voices heard. Maryam
was happy about the opportunity to speak for herself, rather than being spoken about:

That's why I like this study. It's good for us and for Muslims, they have to stand up, they
have to talk by theirself. Nobody talk about you – you have to defend yourself. That's
why I like to have this interview… I said I am happy I am coming. – Maryam

Lailah also saw the interview as an opportunity to be heard, and explained that “I think other
people need to hear our voice. They need us to share with them our experience.” Shireen also felt
that it was “it's important to have our voices heard. It's important that our views are shared so
that there is a face put to the violence that happens and it's not just swept under the rug.”

Other participants felt that it was important that their experiences to be shared, so that it could
perhaps affect change. Nayyirah said that she reached out because she felt that “it was an
important study and it was important to be a part of it so that my perspective could be heard and
perhaps some change could come about.” Shahnoza shared that she wanted to participate
“because I wanted to share my experiences, what happened to me, so that my experience can be
put to a productive something, you know.” Alison also wanted a productive outcome of her
participation; it is her hope that the outcomes of this study will be used to educate people:
And it bothers me that so many are scared of something that really have no idea about, and they are scared to the point of hatred and I would do anything really to educate people. And I figured this would educate people, so... that's why I'm participating. - Alison

Participants’ reactions to the study reflect a deep desire to be heard, and have their stories affect change. My identity as a Muslim woman likely contributed to their comfort and openness in sharing their stories with me, as Muslim communities are often burned by media who portray stories of their communities using Islamophobic stereotypes. According to Aisha:

I'm happy that you've been doing [this study]. There is so many voices [that] need to be covered. So when something like this exists, you get excited… capturing it and having our platform that could showcase, in Muslim hands, I think it's very important… Our stories need to be told in a way that, the way we want to tell it. Not other media outlets need to be cutting and doing whatever they want. – Aisha

Throughout this thesis, there are multiple areas of possible future investigation, to continue to characterize the nature of Islamophobic violence and the strength and agency of Muslim women in the GTA. I contend that this future research, in order to be successful, will need to continue to center the voices of Muslim women, listen closely to where they lead the conversation, and be guided by anti-colonial Muslim feminist praxis.

11.2 Developing an Anti-Colonial Approach to Challenging Islamophobia

Although everyone deserves to have the feeling of being at home, Muslim immigrants to Canada are settlers, and complicit in an ongoing process of colonization and erasure of Indigenous peoples. From this perspective, the feeling that Muslim women have of this not being ‘our land’
or ‘our home’ demonstrates that Islamophobic violence has, in a way, ruptured the colonial fantasy that Muslims have been fed: that by immigrating to Canada, this land can too become ‘ours’.

While racism and xenophobia is by no means an ideal path to the Truth and Reconciliation process, its unfortunate presence can be a starting point from which critical conversations about ‘belonging’ in Canada can be explored, and the impact this ‘belonging’ has had, and continues to have, on Indigenous peoples. After all, the same logic that allows someone to say “go back to where you came from” to a Muslim woman underlies the rationale for the reservation system. Both rely on the ‘fact’ of Canada, belonging to white settlers. By interrogating the sense of displacement and alienation caused by Islamophobic violence, Muslims are afforded an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which we may inadvertently participate in colonization and erasure of Indigenous peoples. Are we aware of our responsibilities in as treaty people? Do we show up as allies and activists for causes prioritized and led by Indigenous peoples? These questions can be the beginning of forging powerful and much-needed connections between Muslim and Indigenous peoples in Canada, and represent a more transformative and just response to Islamophobia than ‘insisting’ on our Canadianness.

Indeed, the process of connecting my lived experiences of Islamophobic violence with the struggles of Indigenous people have inadvertently helped with my ability to heal from Islamophobia: I feel less alone, and have gained much inspiration and strength from my Indigenous sisters and brothers, whose commitment to relationships building has both humbled me and opened up my world.
11.3 Final Thoughts (Ameen)

I’m sitting around the kitchen table at eight years old; my family is eating a pre-dawn meal in preparation for the first day of fasting during the month of Ramadan. My stomach growls. At this moment, my mother is a hero to me: she is a magician whipping up omelettes and potato pancakes from the stove, filling the room with excitement, and smiling at me knowingly, as if to tell me that Allah is very pleased with me, indeed. It is as if I can feel the presence of Allah enveloping me, like a warm hug. After eating, my family says a du’a together, asking Allah to bless the day of fasting ahead. We end the prayer by collectively saying Ameen.

When I first embarked upon this thesis, it was an intellectual exercise: my goal was to use what I had learned over the past five years at OISE to bring together a piece of work that would provide meaningful insight into the experiences of Muslim women in the GTA, and shed light on the daily violences that so many of us endure without it ever being told to a counsellor, recorded in a hate crime statistic, or even shared with our closest confidantes. But once I met the first interview participant in this project, this thesis transformed into something much more to me than an academic project. It became about reconnecting with fragmented parts of myself; about hearing my sister, mother and grandmother echoed in the cadences, gestures, and emotions of the research participants. There were many stages of this journey of research and writing in which I wept; sometimes from overwhelm of the stories that were entrusted to this project, but more often, when I was struck by the incredible spirituality and genius expressed by the women who chose to be a part of this project.

It is my hope that moving forward, more people see that Islamophobic violence is a women’s issue and a feminist issue, and clearly recognize it for the gendered, racial violence that it is. I also hope that people stop falling for the bait-and-switch that first asserts that Muslim women are ‘oppressed
by Islam’, and then proceeds to mercilessly bash Muslim women down. It is vital that people develop a literacy in decoding these gendered, racist, Orientalist and Islamophobic processes, especially in an era of heightened online hate propaganda.

I also hope that Muslim women in the GTA and across Canada can become known for who they truly are: for their humour, intelligence, creativity, faith, kindness, and ambition; for their angst, hope, fear, and joy. And for the ways that some of them rely on their faith to make sense of their world and find profound strength. By knowing Muslim women more deeply, the caricatured Islamophobic depictions that ‘justify’ violence against them will fall by the wayside. Indeed, a common concept in Islam used to combat racism is the idea that different peoples have been created so that we can “know one another”:

O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted. (Quran 49:13, Sahih International)

Such a mutual knowing and understanding would be so helpful in our current era, but it takes work. It takes work to step into the world that is unfamiliar; particularly a world that has been so maligned and misrepresented by popular media and hegemonic discourses. But it is worth it. The light I saw in each participant’s eyes is worth it.

It was the same light I saw in my mother’s eyes, so many Ramadans ago. And may that light continue to shine in all of us, as we continue to do our best work for the betterment of humanity.

*Ameen.*
APPENDIX A

References


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APPENDIX B

Qualitative Interview Outreach Material

Are you a Muslim woman survivor of Islamophobic violence?

Seeking participants for an OISE/University of Toronto study

I am a Muslim woman Master’s student investigating how Muslim women are affected by and recover from Islamophobic violence. I am looking for research participants who are self-identified Muslim women in the GTA between 21-60 years old who have lived through violence that was targeted against them because they are Muslim women. This violence may have been physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, psychological, financial, spiritual, or online violence.

This study will focus on incidents of violence that are in your past (not ongoing in your life today).

If you are involved in a case before the courts, you will not be eligible to participate in this study.

Participants will take part in a 1 to 2 hour confidential interview.

Participants’ identities will remain anonymous.

Participants will be compensated for their time.

If you are interested in participating, please contact sidrah.ahmad@utoronto.ca
APPENDIX C

Poetry Outreach Material

Call for Poetry
by Muslim women survivors
of Islamophobic violence

This poetry will be published in a Zine and
used for an OISE/University of Toronto study

I am a Muslim woman Master’s student who is interested in analyzing poetry by Muslim women survivors of Islamophobic violence. If you would like to submit a poem to my study, you must be a self-identified Muslim woman in the GTA who has lived through Islamophobic violence that was targeted against you because you are a Muslim woman. The violence may have been physical, sexual, verbal, psychological, emotional, financial, spiritual, or online violence. You should also be willing to write an original poem about this issue.

If you are involved in a case before the courts, you will not be eligible to participate in this study.

This study will focus on incidents of violence that are in your past (not ongoing violence)

Participants will submit an original poem between 100 and 2000 words.

Participants’ poetry will be published in a Zine.

Participants have the option of keeping their identity anonymous.

Participants have the option of performing their poetry at a public event.

If you are interested in participating, please contact
sidrah.ahmad@utoronto.ca
APPENDIX D

Interview Questions

Introductory Script

My name is Sidrah and I’ll be interviewing you today. I’m a Muslim woman and a Master’s Student at the University of Toronto. I’m doing a research project on violence specifically targeted against Muslim women because this is an understudied area of violence. I hope this research can be used to shape policies and programs to respond to this violence. I really appreciate you choosing to share your story with me. I too am a survivor of violence – so this is a personal passion of mine.

At any point in this interview, if you feel uncomfortable with a question please let me know and we can skip that question and move on to the next one. If you want to stop the interview, you’ll still be compensated for the interview.

I want to acknowledge that although the research focuses on violence against Muslim women, there may be other identities you have which are relevant to your story. For example, if you are Black, Indigenous, queer, trans, or if you have a disability, this may have been part of the violence. Please feel free to discuss these pieces in your answers, as I have a commitment to addressing anti-Black racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism.

I also want to let you know that there is zero blame here or any religious judgement against you in this interview. If you were drunk, high, having sex, or doing anything else people might consider “haram” when the violence happened to you, it is still NOT your fault. None of those things justify violence against you. There will be no judgement or evaluation of you in this interview.

Before we begin, let’s read over the Consent Letter together to make sure all of it is clear. [Take time to read Letter of Consent and answer any questions about it. [Specifically, it will be affirmed that the events the participant will be discussing are in the past, and not ongoing in their life today. It will also be affirmed that they do not have a case open before the courts. In addition, all items the participant initialed in the Letter will be verbally reviewed and affirmed.]

Interview Questions

I will stick to these questions for the interview. If any of your responses are not clear to me, I will ask minor follow-up questions to clarify your answer.

1. The first thing I am going to ask for is demographic data. The reason I am asking this is so we can show how racism and other forms of oppression may be part of the violence you faced. Could you please let me know your
   a. age?
   b. gender identity (cis/trans)?
   c. racial identity?
   d. ethnicity?
2. The first question is just to tell me a bit about yourself. What are your interests, passions, or goals?

3. What made you want to be part of this study?

4. Could you please tell me about the incident of violence that brought you to the study? Specifically, I am looking for a description of when someone was violent towards you because you are a Muslim woman. This violence could have been physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, psychological, financial or spiritual. It may have happened online or in person. Please share the story of the incident with as many details and background information as you are comfortable with.

5. After the incident, who did you tell? Were they helpful to you?

6. After the incident, did you go anywhere for help? For example, a community service, social service, call a helpline, go to police. What was their response? Was it helpful to you?

7. Were there any people or places you did NOT trust to tell about this incident? Why not?

8. How did you feel after the incident?

9. What areas of your life did the incident affect? For example, work, school, family relationships, friendships, social life, intimate life?

10. What strengths of yours did you tap into to get through the incident?

11. What strengths did you use to recover from the incident?

12. What choices did you make that made things easier for you or helped you deal with the impact of the incident on your life?

13. What else helped you recover and heal from this incident?

14. Did you ever use creativity to help recover, heal or respond to this incident? What did that look like?

15. What stereotypes or ideas in society do you think leads to this kind of violence against Muslim women?
16. What is one piece of advice you’d like to be able to tell people who want to end violence against Muslim women?

17. What is one piece of advice you’d like to give other Muslim women who have been targeted for violence?

18. Is there anything else you’d like to share?