

July 2013

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### Recommended Citation

White, Theresa Renee and Hernandez, Jennifer Maria (2013). Muslim Women and Girls: Searching for Democracy and Self-Expression. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 14(3), 64-82.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol14/iss3/5>

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## Muslim Women and Girls: Searching for Democracy and Self-Expression

By Theresa Renee White<sup>1</sup> and Jennifer Maria Hernandez<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

This project captures the stories of Muslim women and girls, and the individual ways in which they construct female identity and exercise religious freedom as a form of democracy and self-expression. Much has been written about Muslim women, their dress, hijabs, veils and more recently burqas (Shirazi, 2001; MacDonald, 2006; Haddah & Smith et al., 2006; McLarney, 2009), in the wake of the 9/11 events. Scholars have noted the increasing construction of hate, fear, and misunderstanding, as well as increasing incidences of "Islamophobia" through the construction of Muslims as "the other". Others have focused on Muslim women's negotiations of religious freedom and self-expression, concluding that they are either 'betwixt and between' or the synthesizers of two distinct cultures (Knott & Khokher, 1993). In California, particularly following the events of 9/11, there has been an increase in stigma, discrimination and a lack of understanding of Muslim women's experiences (Hopkins, 2007). The use of the burqa and the hijab by some Muslim women can create tensions between dominant cultural values in California and Muslim populations who seek equal rights and freedom of religion in this state. Some view the veil as a symbol of woman's subordination and Islamic fundamentalism that does not reflect the freedom and democracy these women practice.

This paper illuminates the experiences of Muslim women and girls in California, and how they navigate a terrain where they are constantly scrutinized, and often-times ostracized in public settings. As a means to foster community awareness, challenge stereotypes and assumptions associated with the Muslim faith, it presents the narratives of Muslim women and girls expressing their religious and gender-based identities in a democratic society, thus celebrating the empowerment of Muslim women's freedom of religious self-expression in Southern California.

*Keywords:* Muslim women, democracy, self-expression, visual storytelling

### Introduction

Muslim women are often seen through cultural and religious frameworks, oftentimes portrayed and essentialized as figures of oppression, victimhood and despair. These narrow representations do not offer the possibility of empowerment through social or political agency. This story-based, visual media project aims to capture the unique narratives of a small sample of Muslim women and girls in Southern California, and the individual ways in which they construct female identity and exercise religious freedom as a form of democracy and self-expression.

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Much has been written about Muslim women, their dress, hijabs, veils, and more recently, burqas (Shirazi, 2001; MacDonald, 2006; Haddah & Smith et al., 2006; McLarney, 2009; Zahedi, 2011), in the wake of the 9/11 events. The scarves, called *hijab* or *veils*, are worn by many girls once they pass puberty, as part of the Islam's dictates requiring women to dress modestly. Not all Muslim women wear them, as it is not explicitly required by the Koran, and some say there has been misplaced emphasis on the scarf as a marker of personal piety and religious devotion. The hijab is worn wrapped around the head to cover all the hair, and tied under the chin, with a corner hanging down the back. Women wearing the hijab must adhere to rules of modesty, such as keeping their arms and legs covered in public (Banks, 2001). A Muslim woman adorned in a hijab or any other form of head scarf is often a visible marker of difference and a target of prejudice in the U.S.

Scholars have noted the increasing construction of hate, fear, and misunderstanding, as well as increasing incidences of "Islamophobia" through the construction of Muslim women as "the other". Others have focused on Muslim women's negotiations of religious freedom and self-expression, concluding that they are either 'betwixt and between' or the synthesizers of two distinct cultures (Knott & Khokher, 1993).

International awareness and attention to the Muslim population skyrocketed after the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001. Read (2007) notes that there has been ongoing interest, and remains at "an all-time high due to the ongoing war against terror globally and escalating conflicts throughout the Middle East and Asia. This heightened awareness is amplified by the rapid growth of the Muslim population in major metropolitan areas around the world due to immigration, conversion to Islam, and natural population growth" (p. 231). This has been particularly true in western nations such as the United States and France, where Muslims now comprise the second largest monotheistic religious population in both countries (Read, 2007). According to Moore (2002), "in both nations, the global politicization of Islam has served to strengthen existing perceptions that Islam is incompatible with democracy and western civilization, inimical to human rights, in contempt of women and opposed to western values and interests" (p. 58).

In California, particularly following the events of 9/11, Hopkins (2007) noted the increase in stigma, discrimination, as well as a lack of understanding of Muslim women's experiences. While "Arab-looking" men were profiled as terrorists, Muslim women in traditional dress also felt the heat of a suspicious nation. News of sporadic violence aimed at Muslims reached new heights. Perhaps no single issue better captures the controversy over Muslim integration than the Islamic practice of veiling. Banks (2001) highlights reports from mosques and Muslim organizations across the country, including in Los Angeles, "of women being harassed, having their scarves yanked from their heads," while other females state that, "[in] some colleges and schools, young people have tried to light the tips of their scarves with a match, to set them on fire" (p. 36). Banks (2001) quotes Khalid Iqbal of the national Council on American Islamic Relations in Washington, D. C., when he states that, "in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, the hijab has also become associated with the notion of terrorism in the eyes of some angry Americans. We have had to suggest that women don't go out at night, that they stay in safe, public places and have a cell phone ready to call for help." He recalled how "one woman was literally dragged and almost strangled when someone tried to pull off her scarf" (p. 1). Thus the discrimination against, and marginalization of, Muslim women has been a consistent aspect of the cultural/religious landscape.

The use of the *burqa* and the *hijab* by some Muslim women can create tensions between dominant cultural values in California and Muslim populations who seek equal rights and freedom of religion in this state. Some view the veil (i.e., hijab or burqa) as a symbol of woman's subordination and Islamic fundamentalism that does not reflect the freedom and democracy these women practice. Banks (2001) contends that "the West looks at the scarf as a sign that Muslim women are oppressed, but Muslim women see it as a sign of dignity that shows respect for their religion and elicits respect from men" (p. 1). Read (2002) argues that although veiling predates Islam, many consider it a universal symbol of women's oppression within a patriarchal religious culture. This belief, according to Ahmed (1992), derives from the relatively subordinate status of women in the Middle East, evidenced by women's comparatively low levels of educational attainment and low rates of labor force participation in many Arab nations. In this essentialist discourse, images of women wearing headscarves function as symbols of anti-modernity of Islam. However, in practice, what it means to "be Muslim" varies for different individuals, categories and groups of people, based on their intersecting identities and social locations.

Studies of Muslims in the diaspora suggest considerable diversity in gender relations and more variability of the role of women in Western countries, such as the United States and France (Read & Bartkowski 2000; Killian 2006). Some women wear the veil against the wishes of their fathers and husbands, in part, to deal with the marginality they experience as outsiders in western society (Read & Bartkowski 2000). Others are motivated to veil in order to serve progressive ends. The veil allows them to attend co-educational institutions and work in male-dominated occupations that might otherwise be considered inappropriate for non-veiled Muslim women (Bartkowski & Read 2003). It is critical to recognize alternative discourses, to acknowledge diverse locations and to validate knowledge from other perspectives, thus potentially avoiding the essentialist ways of knowing that has been scripted within Western societies.

While many studies have focused on Muslim women's experiences, there has yet to be a study that incorporates visual storytelling to illuminate the personal experiences of Muslim women and girls in Southern California, and how these females navigate a terrain where they are constantly scrutinized and often-times ostracized in public settings. Capturing these visual narratives is significant because historically, the voices of Muslim women have been marginalized in U.S. society.

One of the goals of this pilot project is to provide Muslim women and girls with a space for highlighting their unique experiences and to share their stories as a form of self-empowerment. This project aims to illuminate how Muslim women's identities are constructed, represented, negotiated and contested in everyday life. The overall aim of this project is to not only initiate critical dialogue between current paradigms, but to also move beyond those critiques to document the Muslim female's lived experiences. Through visual storytelling, an empirical research methodology whereby participants actively engage in the social construction of knowledge by visually documenting their reality through self-selected photographs and collaborative video-taped interviews, our project goals are to (1) challenge stereotypes and assumptions associated with the Muslim faith, (2) to celebrate the empowerment of Muslim women's freedom of religious self-expression in Southern California, and (3) to create a heightened consciousness and awareness of these issues.

## Literature Review

### *Historicizing Muslim Women's Identity*

There are many Western stereotypes to define Muslim women as part of the Islamic "other". The adornment and clothing many Muslim women wear have been attributed to Muslim women's oppression (Husain 2006; MacDonald 2006; Shirazi 2001). Husain (2006), a Muslim woman and scholar, states that the veil is "seemingly the age-old symbol of our repression and the archetypical rationale for our rescuing by the West" (p. 1). Other scholars, such as Shirazi (2009), mention that Muslim women are not passive victims; but instead, Muslim women "resist the oppressive rule of Islamic fundamentalism" (p. 1). Haddad (2007) also cites Zayzafoon (2005) who states, "the veil has acquired new meaning and significance as it has been appropriated as a symbol of an identity threatened by a ruthless enemy," referring to Westerners as the "enemy" (p. 256). Haddad then concludes with stating that the veil is "an important tool in helping Muslims not only survive but respond creatively to the tensions of post- 9/11 society in the United States" (p. 265).

### *Tenets of Islam, Religious Practices and Muslim women*

According to Curran, Maier, & Renzetti (2012), Islam was founded by the Prophet Muhammad, who "is said to have received over the course of his lifetime a series of revelations from Allah, which he in turn passed on to his followers in the form of rules of behavior [and] these are compiled in the Qur'an (Koran)], which Muslims accept literally as the word of God" (p. 352). Both Muslim women and men are expected to adhere to the Five Pillars of Islam, which include: only believing in one God-Allah, requiring Muslims to pray during five assigned times of the day facing towards Mecca, taking part in charity, fasting from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan, and partaking on a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a Muslim person's lifetime (Moore, 2006). Several scholars argue that it is patriarchy which does not allow Muslim women equal rights as men, rather than the teachings of Islam (Curran, Maier, & Renzetti, 2012; Shirazi 2009). Moreover, Curran, Maier, & Renzetti (2012), contend that Muhammad "recognized women's conjugal rights, their rights to ownership of their jewelry and earnings, their right to initiate a divorce, and their right to inheritance (although their share was half that of male heirs)" (p. 353). The authors cite scholars Engineer (1992, 2004), Hekmat (1997) & Roald (2001), who argue that women worshipped with men in the mosques during Muhammad's time. However, contemporary practices mandate the way in which men and women pray at the mosque. Women are either completely excluded from a mosque or they must sit in a designated area in the mosque, and are not allowed to lead prayers (Lazreg, 2009; Curran, Maier, & Renzetti, 2012; Shirazi, 2009). In addition, Shirazi (2009) explains that "Muslim women who follow the Sunni doctrine cannot attend the same mosque as men and those who follow the Shi'i tradition have segregated spaces for women within the same mosque" (p. 201).

Curran, Maier, & Renzetti (2012) explain that Islamic fundamentalism has "a particular vision of how their society should be structured and women's distinct place within that structure--a vision shaped by their religious beliefs" (p. 355). Shirazi (2009) notes that the terms 'fundamentalism' and 'radical Islam' are interchangeable, along with explaining that in "Sharia-based nations---nations based on Islamic law---Islamic authorities continue to embrace extremist policies and endorse political agendas that deny women their basic rights" (p. 2). Furthermore, Shirazi (2009) points out that "throughout the history of Islam, women have often been physically segregated and purposefully excluded from the public sphere" (p. 184).

### *Adornment*

Shirazi (2001) states that, “some people think of the veil as erotic and romantic, others perceive it as a symbol of oppression, still others consider it a sign of piety, modesty, or purity” (p. 180). According to Curran, Maier & Renzetti (2012), Islamic societies require that women dress “modestly, that is veiled (in some societies with only a headscarf or hijab...) and clothed in a loose fitting garment (variously referred to chador or abaya) that covers the body completely so that no skin is exposed” (p. 354). Shirazi (2009) points out that although most Muslim women are told it is their religious duty to wear the veil, “the Qur’an does not specify how much of a woman’s body must be covered, nor does it elaborate on the manner of veiling or the color and style” (p. 190).

Some researchers point out that women who wear the burqa, also called chador, that covers the entire body remain in “anonymity” and “unidentifiable” (Shirazi, 2009; Lazreg, 2009). Williams and Vashi (2007) found through their research with Muslim women that “along with its religious and social meanings, hijab is also a fashion statement” (p. 285). Additionally, the veil or hijab has become a symbol for terrorism for some people (Shirazi, 2001). Researchers contend that focusing on the veil is a form of taking away attention from other crucial issues, such as violence and patriarchal structures (Lazreg, 2009; Shirazi, 2009). According to Shirazi (2009), “While some women claim that their freedom and emancipation come from being a muhajjabe, or veiled woman, numerous others find wearing the veil to be onerous and unnecessary” (p. 189).

### *Discrimination/Oppression*

While researchers have found discrimination and exclusion within the Islamic religion and culture against women, there is also research which presents discrimination against Muslim women from non-Muslims. Sultan (2006) speaks about her own personal experiences as a Muslim woman living in New York City, who rode the subway often, and soon after the 9/11 events, found herself surrounded by racist commuters. Sultan (2006) explains that on the day she took out her Qur’an (Koran) to read in the subway, a commuter commented that her “Arabic shit” was “making people uncomfortable” (p. 49).

Many scholars document details related to discrimination against Muslim girls in the school setting (Rana, 2007; Mc Andrew, 2006; Moore, 2007). Rana (2007) mentions one particular event, which occurred in San Francisco to a student named Laila, in which another student shouted racist remarks about her, such as: “She has a bomb under her sweater! Everybody run, this jihad girl is going to kill us!” (p. 170). In addition, Moore (2007), states there was a particular discriminatory incident at a school, in which a sixth-grade student in Oklahoma was suspended from school for wearing the hijab (p. 244).

Moreover, Moore (2007) explains there is also discrimination in the workplace against Muslim women who wear the hijab, including a woman in North Carolina working as a nurse who was told to remove the hijab “because she had frightened a number of patients” (p. 245). With discrimination in the workplace, also comes sexual harassment and some women are fired from their positions when they do not allow for discrimination or harassment to occur (Lazreg, 2009).

*Romantic Relationships/ Partnerships/ Marriage*

Peila (2010) states that in Islam, for some traditionalists, “marriage is understood as a union where women, in return for financial protection, are obliged to fulfill certain functions and behave in a specific way, such as the woman doing everything to please him, not the other way around” (p. 432). Furthermore, Peila (2010) contends that Islam traditionalists usually quote the Qur’anic verse (2:228), stating: “Men have a degree (of responsibility) over women,” when referring to why women are expected to be subordinate (p. 432). Research points out that women’s sexuality is constantly controlled and scrutinized by patriarchal and fundamentalist standards (Shirazi, 2001, 2009; MacDonald, 2006). Shirazi (2009) explains that “a woman’s basic right to control her sexuality---and by extension, her body---has always been an irresistible target for fundamentalists” (p. 193). Additionally, arranged marriages can also take place, but these marriages are not prescribed by Islam, but rather part of the Arab and Pakistan culture (Williams & Vashi, 2007). According to Curran, Maier & Renzetti (2012), women’s “duties are to serve their husbands, to keep house, to bear many children, and to instruct the children in the ways of Islam” in orthodox Islamic societies (p. 353).

According to Shirazi (2001), many Muslim scholars believe that “unconstrained, women’s sexuality has the potential to cause fitna, civil war, and the destruction of Muslim society (p. 107). MacDonald (2006) notes that, “in a society where Islamic law is prevalent, women’s sexuality is strictly controlled, limited to the confines of heterosexual marriage, and often violently repressed” (p. 13). For instance, Shirazi (2009) argues that a person who commits adultery is punishable through receiving lashes or being stoned; usually this adversely affects women more than men because a man can easily accuse a woman of adultery (p. 47). According to Shirazi (2009), women who are raped must have four Muslim male witnesses to “testify that she was not committing adultery” (p. 29). There is also the possibility of a woman being killed, as part of “honor killings,” where her family will kill her to avoid “shame”, if she is thought to be committing adultery or if she was raped (Shirazi, 2009).

*Sacred Spaces of Empowerment and self-expression*

Shirazi (2009) argues that, “what many in the West are unaware of (and have no way of knowing) is that Islamic women are remarkably resourceful and accomplish unimaginable good when united in common purpose” (p. 7). Researchers have found that Muslim women express themselves through various forms, including poetry, storytelling, writing and congregating in mixed-gender religious spaces. Abdullah (2006) states that she expresses herself and her identity through “chronicling my upbringing as a member of the first generation of African Americans raised Orthodox Muslim” (p. 218). She invites other Muslim women to tell their stories, and to “tell them loud and tell them true” (p. 219). Author Manaf (2006) expresses her feelings towards the veil through poetry. In the poem titled, “The Veil, My Body,” Manaf (2006) states, “The veil defines my cultural identity...the veil is who I am” (p. 246). Lazreg (2009) shares the story about a Muslim woman, Qama, who decided to begin wearing the veil after the 9/11 events. She states that, “Qama’s is a complex act of defining herself as a woman who lives across cultures (Middle Eastern and American), whose sociopolitical commitments place her at odds with other women who donned the hijab” (p. 55). Lazreg (2009) quotes Qama, as having stated: “I took up a challenged identity and made it my own,” through starting to wear the veil post 9/11 (p. 55).

According to Shirazi (2009), there are Muslim women “building mosques of their own, assuming leadership positions within those structures, and even conducting prayer among mixed-gender congregations” here in the United States. Furthermore, Shirazi states that Muslim women

have created all-female circles, which “include sharing ritual preparation and enjoyment of foods, honoring saints, visiting shrines, and reading the Qur’an or various books of Du’a (prayers to imams)” (p. 184). In addition, Shirazi (2009) points out that Muslim women are “peaceful warriors, fighting for breathing space and discovering clever pathways to solidarity, are achieving positions of religious, political, and social influence” (p. 226).

### **Theoretical Frameworks and Approaches**

No *one* theory or theoretical framework was adequate for conducting a qualitative study that seeks to explore and understand the complex issues related to the multifaceted lives of Muslim women. Therefore, a more holistic approach was required whereby several theoretical paradigms, including Feminist Theory, Grounded Theory, Freire’s (1970) approach to empowerment education (education for critical consciousness), and a participatory approach to visual storytelling were used as multiple flashlights to illuminate different aspects of the participants personal experiences.

#### *Feminist Theory*

Feminist standpoint theories (Collins, 1991; Harding, 2004) grant epistemic privilege to women, who are viewed as authorities on their own lives and hold the power of knowledge construction and self-empowerment through knowledge making. These are important paradigms for understanding the hegemonic forces of patriarchy, by challenging the dominant ideologies and calling into question “taken for granted” knowledge and standards. Utilizing the theoretical tenets of feminist thought allowed for expanded critiques of Muslim female behavior that reflects the interests of Muslim women, who have developed a distinctive standpoint, by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge.

Feminists have long espoused the need to recognize the subjectivity of knowledge, arguing that experiential knowledge should form the basis for scriptural knowledge, recognizing that experiences form a most important foundation for constructing what is written (Puwar & Raghuram (2003).

Feminist standpoint theorists acknowledge that “who we are” and “what we know” will shift and change, in response to the different material conditions, as well as to the fact that each individual occupies more than one experiential and identity location (Hirschmann, 1997). Therefore, feminist standpoint theories attempt to describe women’s experiences of privilege and oppression, explain its causes and consequences, and prescribe strategies for women’s liberation.

#### *Freire’s model of empowerment*

Freire acknowledges that established knowledge comes from those in power; therefore less powerful individuals are left voiceless. He emphasizes creating collective knowledge that comes from a shared group experience and understanding of the social influences that affect their lives (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988). Empowering education teaches more than individual development. Efforts are directed at individual change, community quality of life, and structural changes for social justice. Both feminist standpoint theories and Freire’s model of empowerment recognize the power of the oppressed and value the voices of those less privileged.

The philosophical underpinnings of Freire’s approach to empowerment education are very similar to feminist standpoint theories in that both acknowledge issues identified by individuals and their community. They use active listening and learning through the dialogue

process, thus engaging individuals to take action toward emancipation. Giving people an opportunity to visually narrate their own lives can be used to initiate dialogue, as well as educate and create awareness within a community for social change.

### *Grounded Theory*

Grounded theory involves the gathering and analysis of data that are grounded in the reality of the lived experiences of the target population. This approach mandates that the researcher remain open to all possible theoretical understandings; develop tentative interpretations about the data through codes and nascent categories; integrate and streamline data collection and analysis through making systematic comparisons throughout the inquiry, build inductive theoretical analyses and then identify emerging theoretical ideas about the data (Charmaz, 2007). This theory is appropriate for use in the present pilot study, because there is limited available empirical research on the topics targeted herein with regard to Muslim women.

### *Participatory Approach to Visual Storytelling*

This project is also rooted in a participatory approach to visual storytelling, informed by video-taped focus groups and documentary photography. Documentary photography is described as the social conscious presented in visual imagery (Rosler, 1989). By giving ordinary people cameras and allowing them to participate in representing their own lives, visual storytelling can be used within a community for social change.

By using a creative and powerful tool, such as video-taped focus groups and documentary photography, participants can visually tell their story, draw attention to the realities of their lives (Zhao, 1993), ignite public interest and curiosity (Wang, Burris, & Ping, 1996) and promote the well-being of themselves and their communities.

### *Methodological Approach*

In this project, we wanted to allow respondents to construct their personal stories based on their lived realities as self-identified Muslim women living in Southern California. We were interested in how Muslim women search for democracy and self-expression (in line with the 1967 classic grounded theory approach of Glaser & Strauss). The qualitative research methodology draws upon the collective memory and experience of the participants through videotaped focus groups as they discuss Muslim female identity and the ways in which they exercise religious freedom as a form of expression.

This pilot study examines a small sample of women and girls of different ethnicities and racial backgrounds, who self-identify as Muslim. Through videotaped focus group using photo-elicitation, we aimed to understand the individual ways in which the women and girls construct their female identity and exercise religious freedom as a form of democracy and self-expression. A "photo-elicitation interview" is based on the idea of inserting a photograph (in this case, generated by the participant) into a research interview (Harper, 2002). The small sample of photographs served as a means of communication between the researcher and the participants, providing an additional layer of understanding and representation of one's lived experience.

Before the focus group commenced, each participant selected a pseudonym. Selected video footage, based on specific themes identified through sorting and analyzing the transcriptions from the focus group, was used to illuminate the findings.

### *Recruitment*

In the present pilot study we gathered a small sample of five multi-racial, women and girls between the ages of 10 and 45. Research assistants recruited them as volunteers at a variety of community locations, including mosques and community libraries. The study followed a *purposeful sampling* approach (Patton, 1990), or what LeCompte and Preissle (1993) call *criterion based selection*. This strategy mandates that the settings, persons, or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that cannot be obtained as well from other sources. We, thus, concentrated our efforts on recruiting women and girls who self-identify as Muslim, within predominantly Muslim communities in Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley.

### *Participants*

The study included one African American female---Yancy, age 44, employed in the finance industry; One African American female---Stacy, age 16, high school student; One Caucasian female---Barbara, age 44, employed in environmental industry; One mixed race--African American /Caucasian female---Janet, age 10, in elementary school; One Egyptian female---Ricci, age 39, employed in the advertising industry.

### *Procedures*

The CSUN Institutional Review Board approved this study, which was conducted in full compliance with the ethical standards regarding research conducted on human participants. We did not collect identifying information on any participant; each woman was identified only by a pseudonym, which was put on her research packet once assessment began.

### *Research Questions*

1. Religion: What (or who) contributed to your decision to pursue (or not pursue) Muslim religion?
2. Expression (Verbal): In what forum (spaces) are you able to express your passion, creativity, ideas, wants, needs, opinions?
3. Expression (Dress): In what forum (spaces) are you able to express yourself with/without your traditional Muslim attire?
4. How does gender complicate Muslim religious practices?
5. In what ways are Muslim women empowered or oppressed within a marriage and/or partnership?

### *Analytic Strategy*

Using Glaser & Strauss (1967) grounded theory approach, data analysis from transcriptions was an ongoing process in the study. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) method of categorizing data was used to establish emergent and organizing constructs. An important strategy of categorizing analysis involved sorting the data into broader themes and issues. In line with Maxwell (1996), the coding categories were developed inductively during the analysis. Coding was thus a way of fracturing the data to allow for comparison between the categories as well as within the categories.

## Results

### *Gender norms/restrictions*

One participant stated that though men leading prayer in the mosque is a contemporary mandate, she was not bothered, and that it did not make her feel lesser than, while another thought the practice to be unfair and oppressive.

*Yancy: Usually it's men you see praying in open spaces. For security reasons you will find that mostly Muslim men are more comfortable with the open display in public, offering their prayer. I don't think that a Muslim woman would feel safe enough to pray alone outside on the street. Early on in my transition to Islam, I would pray at work when it was late. I would find an empty cubicle and I would go pray, when no one was in the building. Would I pray openly like that in front of someone? Probably not. Not being a woman. Not in my current job.*

*Ricci: One of my biggest issues [related to differences between men and women] is about wearing the hijab and the interpretation of it as their requirement. I know it [hijab] speaks of modesty, but I can definitely speak for myself, in that I don't think it is one of the fair things in the religion, that women have to cover up in dress and the men are only required to cover up from the naval to the knee.*

### *Discrimination*

The occurrence of discrimination after 9-11, based on Muslim practices (i.e., wearing the hijab), as documented by numerous scholars, was ever present for the participants in this study, in the workplace, in school settings and in the community at large. Participants noted that these acts took place both within, and outside of the Muslim community.

*Ricci: I think that other Arab women that know, or sense that I am an Arab-American, will definitely look at me and wonder if I'm Muslim or not. There are times where I've actually been in stores where I'll hear them speaking Egyptian, and I'll speak to them and they will ask me my name. Once they know through my name that I'm Muslim I do get looks, and just that feeling of "oh, you're not covered up." I've felt that I've been judged because I was not covered up and they were.*

*Yancy: There are a few situations that I've found challenging. In one situation, I was in hijab and I extended a greeting to someone of Arab descent and was not responded to at all by the man or the woman. It was as if my greeting of "Salam" fell on deaf ears. That is something that I've experienced as an African-American woman in California that made me really uncomfortable.*

*Barbara: When I first joined Islam, I decided I was going in with both feet. I wore hijab everyday, even if I went to go move my car outside. Within a month I was fired from my job, and for no grounds, no reasoning. It was really*

*tough for me because I couldn't understand. My work didn't change, and I as a person hadn't changed.*

*Yancy: The only thing I can say is after 9-11, I chose not to wear my hijab at work. There were some pretty strong looks, from mostly men. It was challenging going in and out of the corporate office, at that time. When 9-11 took place I was married and my husband called me and said, 'take that hijab off your head before you leave the building.' That's how afraid he was for me because he knew that I travelled far, alone with my daughter in the car. Once I experienced what felt like, men in the elevator looking at me strangely, I did remove my hijab going to work.*

*Barbara: Since 9-11, I haven't felt any major discrimination towards me. I think it's because when I'm out I'm not covered, you wouldn't know that I'm Muslim. It's been more my family, or people close to me that know I'm a Muslim. The minute it [9-11] happened I was constantly defending that [my Muslim faith] with my family. I kept pulling up examples of Christians and comparing it to Islam, like, 'what about this guy, you know Jim Jones.' It was the only way to deal with it.*

*Stacy: One time, during the first year of middle school, one of the students wanted to know my religion. When I said 'I'm Muslim' she said 'Oh no I can't be your friend anymore.' And I said 'Why?' And she said 'because you're a terrorist.' I just looked at her and said, 'You don't have to be my friend anymore, but I'm letting you know I'm not a terrorist.' A lot of people have confusion and misunderstandings about what Muslims really are.*

### *Romantic Partnerships/Marriage*

Research points out that women's sexuality is constantly controlled and scrutinized by patriarchal and fundamentalist standards (Shirazi, 2001, 2009; MacDonald, 2006). One of the participants did not feel oppressed or controlled by the practice of women following the man, according to Muslim practices. However, the criteria, as it relates to "following" was clearly emphasized. Additionally, one participant who was ostracized by her parents for dating outside the Muslim faith, felt that the rules that state Muslim women should follow the man, is unjust and discriminatory. It was also evident that the youth in this study have a different set of values related to marriage, than that of the older generation.

*Ricci: I think that the most poignant limitation that I've had to experience in my life was when I graduated from college and I fell in love with a non-Muslim man. My parents indicated that that was not appropriate for a Muslim woman, unless he was Muslim. So I was disowned for five-years while I was with him. My parents definitely wanted their daughter to marry a Muslim. A Muslim man can marry a woman from any religion, but a Muslim woman must marry a Muslim man. My parents indicated the reason why a Muslim woman should marry a Muslim man is if she has*

*children, it will carry on his Muslim name, and therefore it continues the religion. I think that's really unfair.*

**Yancy:** *The man is the leader of the home, so when you have a Muslim woman marry someone who is not Muslim, you're putting a leader in your home, someone that does not have the same belief system as you. For a lot of Muslim parents, it is a concern that you raise your children as Muslims. And if she marries someone who is not Muslim, there is a possibility that her rights as a Muslim woman could be infringed upon or not respected. He could lead her astray, and that could be challenging for a lot of parents.*

*I believe that Muslim women are led by their mate, that's what we should do. But in the same sense follow is not follow him, as in follow his actions, or follow what he says to do. We stand side-by-side. He has the right over me as a woman to provide certain things to him, to fulfill certain needs, and the same for him for me.*

**Stacy:** *To me, it's not about religion, but it's all about the foundation you came from at home. You can be a Muslim guy and still act like you don't have any sense. If he [my future mate] happens to be Muslim, then that's a plus. But, no, I don't think it's mandatory [to marry a Muslim man], but I think that I should. There are a lot of Muslim guys in my community, but it's not like you see them a lot. You only see them when there's a Muslim event, so it would be hard to say that I'll find a husband that's Muslim.*

#### *Self Expression: Adornment*

Banks (2001) contends that “the West looks at the scarf as a sign that Muslim women are oppressed, but Muslim women see it as a sign of dignity that shows respect for their religion and elicits respect from men” (p. 1). Most of the participants refuted the ideas that wearing the hijab is oppressive, but stated that “wearing adornment is a choice.” They indicated that they “feel more respected” as women because attention is not sexually driven, but rather based on character and a genuine interest in them.

**Barbara:** *Islam is a universal religion. It's not telling you, you must wear the Arab style of dress. You wear your own culture, your customs. We wear jeans in America. It [Koran] is just telling you this is the minimum requirement that needs to be covered. This is how you need to be dressed to preserve your dignity and to represent Islam. The rest of the details are up to you. Usually when you see women who are fully covered and only showing their eyes, that's for their husband. To me, being a native born Californian, I think that our clothes and our appearances, or lack thereof, is over saturated in our society. At the onset of my conversion to Islam, I would say that the idea of putting more clothes on was appealing to me. It forced me to think that there is more to me than just how I look, or what I wear. Now that I'm a little older in my Islamic practice, I have found my*

*true balance, and I do not believe that I wear my religion in my clothes. The way I feel about Islam is in my heart and in my soul, in my conduct and how I represent myself. Do I think it's fair that men have less to cover than women? Actually it doesn't really bother me. Islam is a religion that is trying to prevent something, an evil, before it happens. So if that means I'm covering to try and prevent all different types of men attracted to me, then that's what it is.*

*Stacy: I feel that I shouldn't have to wear all that to know who I am, so it doesn't really bother me that women have to wear more clothing than Muslim men, because women have more elements to their body. As a Muslim young lady, I've always claimed my religion. If I'm feeling like I want to wear my hijab out, I wear it because I feel like it. But it's not because I'm forced to.*

*Janet: Sometimes I wear the hijab out to the masjid, but not all of the time. Sometimes I wear it when I want to show it off. I like to wear it to represent Muslim at school, because only three other people are Muslim. I'll wear my scarf whenever, 'cause it doesn't really matter. I don't care if I'm judged.*

*Ricci: The only time I wear the hijab is when I go to a mosque for prayers or events that occur in the mosque. Otherwise I do not wear it at any time during my life. I think it's a personal choice. I don't think that not wearing a hijab means that I'm not Muslim. I would say I just choose not to cover in the way that most Muslim women cover up. I wear what is culturally accepted, I mean I definitely don't have any restrictions.*

### *Self Expression*

Contrary to the majority of the research reflected herein, most of the participants were fully aware of their power as women, and felt that they have a voice in determining how they move about in the world. There was little indication that these women and girls feel inhibited in expressing themselves in any forum. There was no indication of seeking separate spaces from men for religious exploration, since the participants indicated that they are not experiencing oppression:

*Yancy: I think with the group that you have here today...I don't think we're having a problem expressing ourselves. Me, I swim, I do own a bathing suit, but I try to be modest. Then there are times where I just feel like I want to have on a long dress, or I just want to have on long sleeves. It's not so much a place or time, for me, it's 'how am I feeling today? Where am I at today?' That kind of dictates, for me, whether or not I want to put my hijab on.*

*Stacy: I don't feel like I want to do what other girls are doing that aren't Muslim. But when I first found out at my school that I couldn't wear scarves or anything on my head, I was kinda' like, 'so I can't wear my hijab if I*

*chose to one day?' At first I was uncomfortable, but then I was just like, 'ok I'll go to school as is.'*

*Barbara: I don't think there is any place where I don't feel comfortable expressing myself, but for me, it ties back to the cultural aspect. Like if we are at the beach and the thing is to wear a string bikini and a thong, well that doesn't feel right for me. I don't feel severely restricted in my clothing, as I feel like I have choices and can exercise them as I please, within limits.*

### **Significance**

This project is significant because it places the power of representation in the hands of Muslim women themselves, providing the opportunity for re-definition, empowerment and resistance to stigma. Through the use of videotaped storytelling as a form of activism, this project engages an audience beyond academia, creates community awareness and a heightened social consciousness.

### **Limitations**

This pilot project does have limitations, particularly related to the small sample size, as it is not generalizable to the larger population, and to all Muslim women living in Los Angeles. Moreover, the focus group and the visual images taken by the women captures only one moment in time. We acknowledge that the women's realities are fluid, dynamic and ever-changing, thus additional photos taken by the participants would illuminate more varied aspects of their lives. We also would suggest that additional focus groups be conducted in order to reveal a more full-bodied narrative of Muslim women and girls in Southern California.

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

With this project we attempted to get a glimpse into the world of Muslim women residing in Southern California. The findings from this study will serve to challenge stereotypes and stigma about Muslim women and their communities, contributing to a more open dialogue about religious oppression, Christian privilege and intersectionality. It will contribute to understanding feminist theory and arts-based research methods, as well as participatory approaches with individuals for co-creating knowledge.

This pilot study, by no means, provides the definitive answers to the questions raised. Rather the voices of the participants are meant to stimulate interdisciplinary and cross-national dialogue on a topic that is central to understanding women's relationship to religion, individual rights, self-expression and empowerment. It provides insight into Muslim women and girl's diverse motivations for veiling and re-defines the boundaries of individual, cultural and religious practices.

There has been very little space to construct or express alternative narratives that allow for the complexity of multi-racial and multi-ethnic Muslim women's religion identity and subjectivities. One of the aims of this project is to shift the terms of debate and to initiate new dialogues by looking at the complex ways in which gender intersects with religion in the construction of "otherness." We hope to challenge the image of passivity that has so often been

ascribed to Muslim women, one that connotes a subaltern female, as a highly heterogeneous and fractured entity.

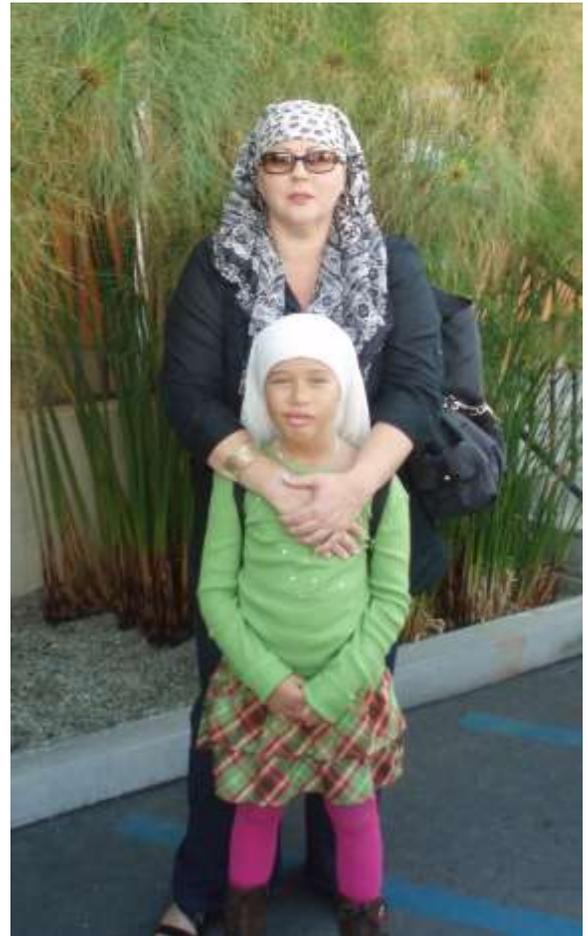
Our vision is to provide new information and heightened consciousness and awareness about Muslim female's lived experiences; to challenge stereotypes and assumptions associated with the Muslim faith; and to celebrate the empowerment of Muslim women's freedom of religious self-expression in Southern California. The stories that we aim to tell are significant because historically, the voices of Muslim women have been marginalized in U.S. society.

## Appendix

### Research Participants



Janet



Barbara and Janet



Janet



Stacy



Ricci



Ricci and her mother

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