

Religious Influences on Muslim Women's College Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This project focuses on the influence religion has on Muslim women's college experiences. I wanted to see the role that religion played in different women's lives and how it could affect their college life. When I started this project, I knew that all women had different experiences with their religion and would most likely not give the same answers. I interviewed thirteen women from four different universities about their relationship with their religion and how it has impacted their college careers. The women I interviewed came from several different backgrounds, from several states and countries, so their relationship with their religion varied. I wanted to see how their religion has impacted their college life, but I also wanted to see if they had ever faced religious discrimination, particularly in college. As I suspected, these women all had different events in their life that made them who they are. After speaking with these women, I have realized that each woman has a different story to tell, but their religion has had an impact on their college lives in different ways. A common theme I found was that many women chose their major because it allowed them to help people and to better the world.

INTRODUCTION

Religion has always played a large role in my personal life. When I was choosing a topic to study for my thesis, I knew I wanted to include religion in study. I decided to focus on Islamic studies because I wanted to learn more about another religion and culture that I was not familiar with. I was raised Christian in a small farm town, so I did not have much exposure to different cultures. When choosing a topic, I decided to study the religious influences on Muslim women's college experiences. To start my project, I conducted a literature review that studied gender roles, women's careers and religious discrimination. I decided not to focus my literature review on just Muslim women, as I felt that there is more literature when I consider other religions.

Women of all religions have experiences in joining the workforce and combating gender roles. I did, however, focus religious discrimination on Muslims, as I feel they have faced more discrimination than other religions. By conducting this study, I wanted to know if religion has an influence on Muslim women's college experiences. If it does, how does religion influence their college experiences? Muslim women today face unique experiences in college through their religion and through discrimination they face because of it.

For my research methods, I conducted semi-structured interviews with thirteen Muslim women. Twelve of the interviews I conducted were in person or via video call. The interview questions were mostly open-ended, which allowed the women to speak as much or as little as they like. Some women provided great detail on their experiences and choices they have made without being prompted. Other women provided less detailed answers and gave more detail when I asked follow up questions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While conducting my literature review, I noticed most of the sources I found focused on three main areas: gender roles, women's careers and religious discrimination in school and the workplace.

In traditional western cultures, as well as in Islamic societies, women were homemakers and child bearers. In many societies, women did not have careers until the last century. Still today, there are some areas of the world that women are not allowed to have careers. While looking for articles regarding Muslim women in the workforce, I found several articles discussing Christian and Jewish women starting careers, and the criticism they received when they joined the workforce. Because I could not find many scholarly articles detailing Muslim women joining the labor force, I decided to use parts of these articles as I assume most women, regardless of religion, received similar reactions from the public when they started working in America. For example, there was an article published in *The New York Times* in 1988, in which the author seemed astonished with the fact that Jewish women are able to balance "marriage, [a] career, and childbearing... successfully" (Jewish Women, Careers, and Religion). Another article, titled "Standing on the Promises: Socialization of Southern White Professional Women in the American South" discusses the professionalism of white women in the southern United States during the 1980s. The traditional view of a "southern lady" was limiting and largely influenced by culture, such as religion and race. The article also discusses how women have changed the idea of a "southern lady" based on themes of religion, race and the Civil Rights Movement (Beaver). While I know not all of the information from these articles is useful in my study, I was able to make comparisons between my literature review and the research I collected. This shows

that the experiences the women I spoke with are not unique. I found one article, titled “Islamist Women and Feminist Concerns in Contemporary Turkey” that detailed women’s traditional gender roles within the Muslim community. The author talked about a columnist, Fatma Barbarosoğlu, who advocated for women’s employment and “criticized the Muslim community and tried to convince its members to allow women to be employed outside the house” (Arat). She has argued that Muslim women were encouraged to earn degrees and then expected to raise children and housekeep, instead of putting their degrees to use. Although, no matter how much she advocated for women’s employment, she never attempted to bring this change herself, “it was as if women’s employment was merely a family decision” to make, not the individual woman’s choice (Arat). When I conducted interviews with students and graduates, I was interested to see if this has any effect on the women’s answers. I was not sure if they are from an area of the world where women do not typically hold careers or if they planned on having a career after college.

One of my main focuses of study is future career paths Muslim women choose to take. Although I interviewed college students and recent graduates, who may not have a set career path, I was glad to see some of them know what they want to do with the rest of their lives. I wanted to know if they planned to use their major to create a career for themselves, or have they decided they want to do something different with their life, but are continuing their course of study? As I mentioned earlier, Muslim women, especially in the Middle East, are often encouraged to earn college degrees, but then are expected to not use their degrees and raise children. One article, titled “The Paths of ‘Return’: Palestinian Israeli Women Negotiate Family and Career After the University” I read discusses Palestinian women and their fight to have both a career and a family after they attend university. The article, which bears similarities with the one from *The New*

York Times regarding Jewish women, asserts that “educated women balance marriage and career[s]” has been studied since the women’s movement and the rise in women’s participation in higher education started in the 1970s (Erdreich). This article was based on women in Palestine, so it shows that this was not just an issue in the United States.

Women of all religions have faced discrimination in school and the workplace, most of the time just because they are women. However, this issue is slightly different for Muslim women. Many Muslim women wear hijabs or other religious garb, so it is easier to distinguish them. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, many Muslims living in the United States have faced religious discrimination. A 2016 New York Times article titled “Hate Crimes Against American Muslims Most Since Post-9/11 Era” said the “hate crimes against American Muslims have [recently] soared to their highest levels since the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks” (Lichtblau). This is in part due to the increase in terrorist attacks in the United States, as well as the anti-Muslim sentiments expressed by then presidential candidate Donald Trump (Lichtblau). Again, women are normally the easiest targets, as they generally wear articles of clothing that signifies their religion. After looking at several studies conducted regarding Muslim women in the workplace, they all reach similar conclusions: “Muslims face significant discrimination in employment, and we would expect women wearing the hijab would bear the brunt of that” (Abdelhadi, Religiosity). Muslim discrimination does not just occur in the workplace. In an article highlighting a 2016 legislative briefing on Islamophobia in California, it was found that “55 percent of American Muslim students attending California public schools experience some form of bullying based on their religious identity” (Pasquini). An article detailing Muslim experiences in Canadian schools tells a story of a young Muslim girl being discriminated against by her teachers; “when they first see me like on the first day of school, or maybe a supply

[substitute] teacher or something, they just look at me and their initial reaction is just shock, like, 'My God you're allowed out of your house.' And then they tend to talk to me like in slow English" (Zine).

Another study suggests Muslim women's employment rate is so low due to the disadvantage and discrimination hypothesis. This hypothesis suggests that Muslim women are at a disadvantage due to the fact that men are traditionally seen as "the breadwinners" while they are also being discriminated against, for being Muslim. The study found that "Muslims are half as likely to be employed as non-Muslims" (Foroutan). I have also examined articles that study women's choice to wear a hijab or not in the workplace. It is easier for a woman who wears a hijab to be religiously discriminated against than a woman who does not, because it is easier to tell the first woman's religion than the second. Many women who hold traditional careers, such as a corporate job, or anything that requires public interaction in the workplace, opt out of wearing the hijab at the workplace in fear of discrimination (Abdelhadi, Religiosity). One study that specifically focused on Muslim women who do and do not wear the hijab found "that the likelihood of employment for Muslim women who do not wear the hijab does not differ significantly from the likelihood of employment for non-Muslim women. However, women who wear the hijab have a much lower likelihood of employment than either non-Muslim women or non-veiling Muslim women" (Abdelhadi, The Hijab). Further, after September 11, 2001, many Muslim women became viewed as "terrorists, co-conspirators, or aiders and abettors to their male terrorist family members" instead of oppressed women who want equal rights to men (Aziz).

This was another topic I wanted to learn more on during my interviews. Obviously, I will be able to tell if the woman is wearing religious garb, but if she is not, I would like to know if there

is a reason why. Does she just not want to wear it? Does she feel unsafe wearing it on campus? Maybe she believes she will not get a job after college if she wears one. I find this interesting because I know women who do not wear their hijab all the time, and I would like to know if there is a reason why.

After conducting my literature review, I have found that there are some areas the research is lacking in. First, many of the articles I have found that focused on Muslim women were based in the Middle East. I focused my study in Rhode Island, so it would be easier for me if there was more research focused on Muslim women in the United States. I know this is currently a popular research area, so I believe more research on this topic will be available soon. However, I believe the experiences documented in these articles may be similar to experiences Muslim women in the United States have had. I believe the lack of literature can be attributed to the second area I found was lacking: surveys taken by the United States government, such as the U.S. Census, do not ask for religious affiliations (Abdelhadi, Religiosity). This is most likely due to the idea of secularism, which is important in the United States. However, the lack of data makes it difficult to see if Muslim women have a higher unemployment rate, which could be used to determine if there is a religious discrimination problem within corporate America. Because these areas lack more than others, it may be difficult to compare my findings from interviews with my literature review.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, I aimed to examine if religion has an influence on Muslim women's college experiences. If so, in what ways? When conducting my research, I aimed to show that religion did play a role in Muslim women's college experiences, whether it be intrinsically or

extrinsically. Through this study, I wanted to see if my hypothesis is true, but that society cannot generalize of Muslim women based on my research. I believed that everyone has their own relationship with their religion, as well as their own college experiences.

To test my hypothesis, I planned to conduct semi-structured interviews with Muslim women (See Appendix A). The major criteria for participating was that they be college students or have already graduated. I aimed to interview women who fell within an 18-24-year-old age bracket; however, I relaxed that criteria in order to find more participants. Originally, I aimed to interview that age bracket because I felt that their experiences might be more relevant to today and that they were more likely to be willing to participate. In the end, I was able to interview thirteen women from four different universities. Twelve of the women I interviewed fell within the age bracket I was aiming for. When speaking with the women, I broke my questions down into four parts: Background, Major, Religion, and Experiences. In each section, I asked two to four questions and allowed them to answer with as much or as little as they felt comfortable with.

When designing the interview, I decided to leave most of the questions open-ended. This allowed for the women to provide as much or as little detail as they wanted on any topic. At the end of the interview, I allowed them to elaborate on anything they wanted, talk about anything they wanted to cover that I did not, and ask me any questions they had. This arrangement of interviews left an array of answers that made it difficult to draw conclusions.

To analyze my data, I conducted a content analysis. I looked for words and phrases that women repeated to see if they faced similar experiences. For example, many women discussed the fact that they commuted and lived with their parents. Because of that, some women mentioned finding it difficult to become involved on campus. As I conducted more interviews, I listened to

see if the woman I was speaking with mentioned similar experiences. As I mentioned earlier, I believe that everyone has different experiences, but I found some similarities when the women I interviewed discussed discrimination they faced.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

There were several setbacks I faced when conducting my research. The largest problem I faced was finding participants. Bryant University has a very small Muslim population, so it was difficult to find participants. Bryant just recently started holding Friday prayer times and had an Imam join the interfaith team on campus. The campus is striving toward inclusivity, especially as the number of Muslim students grows on campus. The Bryant community is also in the process of forming a Muslim Student Association on campus. The organization's president proved to be a useful resource for me, as she provided me a list of women on campus who might be willing to participate. To contact these women, I sent an email to their university emails, explained my project and asked them if they would be willing to participate. Unfortunately, many of the women I contacted did not answer the emails I sent them.

To find participants at the University of Rhode Island, I first emailed the Women's Center on campus. They directed me to URI's Muslim Student Association. I found the organization's email address, but no contact information for any members of their Executive Board. I emailed the club multiple times, but never received a response. Because I did not have any contact information for anyone in the club, I came to a standstill on my research. At this point, I decided to revise the scope of my project. Instead of looking at only current students from the University of Rhode Island and Bryant University, I decided to interview women from other universities, as well as women who had already graduated. To start, I contacted the Rhode Island Center for

Muslim Advancement. The woman who answered my email was able to participate, as well as connect me with Muslim women she knew.

RESULTS

Some of the women I spoke with were current students and some were recent graduates (two of whom are currently enrolled in a graduate program). I also had the opportunity to speak with a woman who was not a current student or a recent graduate. However, she is a professor at a local university and has earned four degrees at different universities. I felt that it was fit to include her responses in my evaluation as she had many different experiences throughout her time studying. Also, as she currently works as a professor, it is possible she feels similar to other Muslim students on her campus.

Background

Where are you from?

The question of where an interviewee was from was based on gaining background information on the women. I was surprised to see so much diversity as to where people identified from. Not surprisingly, many women said they are from Massachusetts or Rhode Island, one woman said she is from New York. However, two women said they are from Pakistan, two are from Lebanon, one is from Afghanistan, and one is from Bangladesh. It surprised me that there was so much diversity in where these women identify from (See Appendix B). Also, one woman (whom I counted as from Pakistan) said she identified with three countries: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. She says she was born in Pakistan, grew up in Saudi Arabia, and moved to the United States for college. She considers herself from all three places because they

have all impacted her identity (Interview 8). Another participant said she was born in Lebanon and grew up in Egypt before moving to the United States after college (Interview 7). Two women I spoke with indicated they were born in the United States, spent most of their childhood in another country, then moved back to Rhode Island. One of these women moved to Syria when she was seven years old and lived there for eight years. The other woman moved to Lebanon from first through sixth grade.

What university did you attend?

As mentioned previously, my original goal was to interview Muslim women from Bryant University and the University of Rhode Island. However, due to the small Muslim population at Bryant University, it was difficult to only interview women from these two schools. As a result, seven women I interviewed attended the University of Rhode Island. Four women attended Bryant University, one woman attended the University of Massachusetts Boston, and one woman attended American University in Cairo. Eleven out of the thirteen women I interviewed attended one of the universities I originally planned to include in my study. Also, three women I interviewed attended graduate school. One studies at the University of Rhode Island. Another woman studies at American University. Lastly, one woman I interviewed held two master's degrees and a doctorate. One master's degree is from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The other master's degree and doctorate was earned at Indiana University.

Major

What is your major?

Of the thirteen women I interviewed, there were five categories that their majors could be broken into: science, business, math, political science, and communications. Also, five of the women whom I interviewed had double majors. The largest category of majors was science. Of the thirteen women I interviewed, six majored in some form of science. The most common major was biology with four women majoring in it. Two of these women had double majors with health studies and Spanish. Additionally, one woman majored in pharmacy and one majored in engineering. The woman who majored in engineering went on to earn two master's degrees and a doctorate in a subject completely different than her undergraduate degree. She focused her graduate studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, which is not connected engineering at all.

The second largest category of majors was business, with four women earning some sort of business degree. Two women majored in international business, one of whom had a second major in fashion design. Another woman majored in marketing with a second major in graphic design. This woman happened to be the sister of the one who majored in fashion design and international business. I asked her if she planned on working with her sister in the future, which she did not seem like she planned on doing. Finally, I interviewed a human resource management major who paired it with a minor in legal studies.

The last three women I talked to did not fit into the science or business category, so I gave them their own categories. The first interview I conducted fell into the math category. She was an actuarial math major with a second major in communications. Next, I spoke with a communication disorders major. She is currently enrolled in graduate school for speech

pathology. Lastly, I spoke with a woman who majored in politics and law and is currently enrolled in graduate school for Human Rights and Social Justice.

Why did you choose your major?

When speaking to these women about why they chose their majors, I wanted to see what motivated them to choose certain degrees and, ultimately, career paths. When looking at this, I found four main patterns as to why women chose their majors.

First, many women chose their majors because it allowed them to help people. This includes many of the biology majors and the pharmacy major, as well as the communication disorders major and the woman who double majored in international business and fashion design. All of the biology majors indicated they wanted to pursue becoming doctors in the future, which I will discuss in more detail in the future. The pharmacy major indicated she wanted to know that she will be “making a direct impact in [her] patients’ day to day lives” (Interview 8). The woman that majored in international business and fashion design saw that there is a need for modest fashion in the United States. Since many clothes are designed to show a little bit of skin, she realized she could help fix this issue. Since graduating, she has founded her own modest fashion company in Rhode Island. Interestingly, another woman I spoke with said she considered going into fashion but did not see the point as most fashion requires showing skin. Since choosing her major, the demand for modest fashion has grown and she now realizes that could have been a viable career option. Lastly, a woman said she was inspired by the Sudanese revolution, which was led by women, to show that Muslim women are not oppressed and to help give them a voice in society (Interview 11).

Secondly, some women said they chose their major because it provided economic security. Like many students around the world, they wanted to choose something that will allow them to create a career. One woman says she is studying actuarial math and communications because there is a financial prospect to becoming an actuary and communications is more for fun (Interview 1). She also believed that her communications courses gave her more of an understanding of herself and her relationship with Islam. According to her, communications studies are similar to Islamic teachings (Interview 1). Another woman said she “never considered religion in [her] economic life” and that her major choice was based on financial prospect and personal interests (Interview 3).

Many women said that they chose their majors based on personal strengths and interests. This is another reason why many people choose their majors, so it is not shocking that several Muslim women made choices based on that. One woman said she originally had a different major but decided to change based on what field she wanted to work in in the future (Interview 2).

Another woman said she changed her major several times before deciding on human resource management because she found herself solving other people’s problems (Interview 3). Lastly, one woman said she is a biology major on a pre-med track because she found that her strengths lied more with science and math than other subject areas. She also said she found science and medicine interesting, which motivated her more to choose this area to study (Interview 5).

Finally, some women said they chose their majors based on familial and societal expectations, not based on religion. This is the category I expected most women to fall under, but I was surprised that I found the exact opposite. Only three out of thirteen women indicated their major choice was influenced by their family and society. One woman said she was stuck between two very different majors but chose biology because her parents encouraged it. Another woman said

she chose to major in biology because her older siblings were already doctors, so her parents expected her to follow in a similar fashion (Interview 10). Lastly, one woman told me that she picked her major based on societal expectations. Where she grew up, she said, if you earned a high GPA in high school, you were expected to pursue one of three majors, so she did not have the opportunity to explore other majors (Interview 7).

What kind of career do you plan to pursue after college?

According to many of the articles I read for my literature review, many Muslim women do not pursue careers after they finish university. They are expected to raise children and become housewives. In my study, I wanted to see if this was true, or if this was only applicable in certain societies. When speaking with the women I interviewed, I asked them what kind of career they planned to pursue. I was pleasantly surprised to find that every woman I spoke with planned to pursue a career after finishing school. Many women wanted to go into the medical field by becoming doctors, pharmacists, and physician's assistants. One woman wanted to become a speech pathologist. I found it interesting that one woman ultimately wanted to join the FBI, but her major had nothing to do with national security or another field you would expect to join the FBI (Interview 3). The engineering major pursued graduate degrees in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies and became a professor at the University of Rhode Island after being an engineer for some time. She now teaches Middle Eastern and Islamic studies (Interview 7). As I mentioned earlier, one woman is in the process of starting her own modest fashion company in Rhode Island with the goal of producing clothing that fits the Islamic lifestyle (Interview 4). While many women had an idea as to what they wanted to do upon graduation, some women were still unsure. For example, one woman was unsure if she wanted to go to graduate school to earn her MBA or enter the field (Interview 9). She was related to a woman who is starting her

own modest fashion company and is working to earn a business degree along with a degree in graphic design. I asked her if she planned on going into business with her sister, to which she replied she is unsure, but would like to gain experience in the field to learn from her own and others mistakes before considering opening her own company (Interview 9).

Is there a major you wanted to choose but could not because of religious restrictions?

Next, I asked the women if there was a different major they would have chosen instead. I received mixed responses based on how the women chose their major. As mentioned earlier, one woman was conflicted between deciding on a biology major or an English major and ultimately chose biology. She stated her decision was more based on parental influence than religious influence but says she might have chosen differently without those influences (Interview 12).

The woman who decided to start her own modest fashion company claims she probably would have stayed in the arts, but she might have chosen to pursue a different art major. She chose fashion design because there was a societal and personal need for modest fashion, but if she did not have a personal need for this, she probably would not have chosen it (Interview 4). One woman said she considered majoring in performing arts, as it has always been a passion for her. However, she chose a different major in the end as performing arts can be seen as vulgar or risqué in the eyes of Islam. She says this is mostly due to the fact that a lot of female characters show more skin than a Muslim woman should. Many actors also have to change on stage, or in the wings, frequently, which would also be heavily frowned upon (Interview 1). One woman, who did not have much of a choice in her major, says she might have pursued a second artistic degree. She says she always liked reading and drawing and might have pursued something along those lines. Although, she does not know exactly what she would have chosen, as she did not really have an option.

Women who chose their majors based on their personal strengths and interests seemed more likely to say no to this question. Many of these women said that their choice in major was not affected by their religion in the slightest. I found their differing opinions interesting, as some women believed their religion does not prevent people from choosing any major they wanted, while others clearly felt that there were majors they could not choose due to their religion. One woman said her undergraduate degree was not affected by her religion, but her graduate studies were influenced by her religion and personal identity (Interview 11). Lastly, one woman said that she never considered her religion when choosing her major because she believed her religion is separate from her education (Interview 3).

Religion

How religious would you consider yourself?

This question also garnered split answers from the women I interviewed. I purposely left this question vague, so they could interpret it in a way they wanted to. What I found interesting was that there was no way to solidly group people who are “moderately” religious and “very” religious. As one woman put it, “we are all on a [religious] journey,” which I believe explains the variation in answers that I received (Interview 2). Eight of the women I spoke with said they are “moderately” religious for various reasons. One woman said she was confused for a long time about what people taught her about religion and what Islam actually teaches her (Interview 3). Many women said that they practice and pray as they should, but they believe they can always improve themselves. This is interesting because one of the women who identified themselves as “very” religious says she prays five times a day but does not cover her hair like she is supposed to. I found it interesting that women, who appear to be doing more to practice

their faith consider themselves less religious than this woman. This relates to the quote I mentioned earlier, though. As human beings we all have our own relationship with our faith and religion, which means we would all consider ourselves on a different scale. One woman who placed herself in the “moderately” religious category, claimed that she is “too religious for the non-religious and not religious enough for the too religious,” which is why she placed herself in that category (Interview 9). One woman I spoke with says that she felt her religion impacts every part of her life and influences the decisions she has made (Interview 6). I found this interview particularly interesting because this woman was raised Catholic and converted to Islam in high school. I found it shocking because I have never met a person who has converted religions before, especially because it seemed that she went full force into it. She says she does not do anything considered haram, or forbidden, and follows the five pillars of Islam. She also said she has worn the hijab since she started practicing in high school. Because in the variety of answers, it is difficult to make overarching categories as to where Muslim women would fall in their faith. As shown here, two women can be practicing the exact same way and consider themselves on a different level than others. It is all a matter of personal belief.

Do you wear any religious garb? Why/why not?

Next, I asked the women if they wore any religious garb and if there is a reason why they do or do not. Nine out of thirteen women said they wore a hijab on a regular basis. Most of these women indicated they wore the hijab as a symbol of modesty. One woman explained to me that the purpose of the hijab, and dressing modestly in general, is to cover the areas of a woman that can be sexualized, such as the hair. This way, when people speak to the woman, they see the human they are speaking too, not a sexual object. When the sexual appeal of a women is taken away, it helps stop people from being molested and protects the woman (Interview 7). Many

other women expressed similar sentiments to this woman and felt that their hijab has become part of their identity. One woman told me she moved to a new town in high school and that she started wearing her hijab then. She felt that this was the best time for her to do it because people would not question her putting it on if they never knew her without it. Although she started wearing it several years ago, she feels like she is just starting to understand the meaning behind wearing it (Interview 9). Another woman told me she started wearing the hijab as a statement in college. She felt that she was alone on her campus, so she started wearing it as a “I’m here too” kind of statement. She says she is trying to wear it for herself now, not as a statement (Interview 11). Lastly, one woman said she started wearing it because she felt that she was ready to wear it. It is important to note that all the women who said that they wore the hijab chose to wear it and were not forced to.

Of the women who said they did not wear the hijab regularly, two did indicate that they try to dress modestly and that they do wear it when they are praying or in the mosque. One woman said that she will wear it in the future, but she does not feel ready now (Interview 10). This is similar to the woman who said she just started wearing her hijab recently because she felt that she was ready to wear it (Interview 13). Lastly, one woman told me she does not wear the hijab because she feels that wearing it is not religious, but cultural. She felt that it was not her religion that told her she should wear the hijab, but certain societies that believe that (Interview 3). I found this interesting because every other woman I spoke with told me it was a religious choice to wear the hijab. To many, it was not a matter of whether they will wear it or not, but when they will choose to wear it.

Experiences:

Have you ever felt restricted/excluded because of your religion?

I asked the women I interviewed if they had ever felt restricted or excluded because of their religion. Three of the women I spoke with said that they did not feel that they had been restricted or excluded due to their religion. Although one of those women said she has felt excluded, but she believes it is due to personal biases. Sometimes, she said, people would stare at her, “especially during the 2016 election and when the ‘Muslim ban’ was in the media” (Interview 8). She says that she never felt excluded because of her religion but tried to believe the stares were due to people’s lack of education about her religion. One of the other women who said she never felt excluded said that she always put her personal religious beliefs aside while she was in college (Interview 3). The other woman said that she never felt excluded because she goes to a very diverse school with a lot of other Muslim students (Interview 5).

The remainder of the women I spoke with said that they had felt excluded in some way.

Opposite of the woman from Interview 5, many women said that they felt there was too small of a Muslim population on their campus. They said they often feel alone on campus. According to one woman, she felt that she was the only Muslim woman on her campus for her entire undergraduate career (Interview 11). Another woman said she felt that, while the holiday festivities on her campus included Islam, they had nothing to do with her religion and that they were a last-minute thought. She said her campus does not offer any activities for Ramadan or Eid al-Fitr (Interview 1). Another woman I interviewed said she is frequently stopped in airports for “random security checks” because she wears a hijab. She also said that her university refused to take her ID photo with her hijab on. She argued that no one would ever see her without it on,

so why should she take the photo without it? The woman who was taking the photo told her it was university policy to not take photos with any head coverings. This woman then went to the provost and told them that this circumstance is religious discrimination. Luckily, she said, she was able to get the policy changed within a few days (Interview 7). Multiple women noted that they are often treated differently, especially if they are wearing a hijab. They said they receive strange looks in public, people often talk to them slower, and people are not as friendly toward them. I felt this was similar to the article I read for my literature review in which a Canadian girl said her teachers often spoke to her slower (Zine). One woman said that people she knew from high school would often say hi to her on campus but when she started wearing a hijab, people stopped saying hi to her (Interview 13). Another woman said she never traveled anywhere without her family, so she felt that she missed out on the opportunity to travel with her friends. Nine of the women I spoke with commuted to campus, which, they said, made it more difficult to find a social group and participate in clubs and other activities. When I asked why so many of them commuted, I was told that Muslim parents often did not like their children to move out before marriage, including for college. In one woman's family, she told me she made a deal with her parents that if she earned good enough grades, she would be allowed to move out for college (Interview 12). I found this interesting as many students cannot wait to move out for college, even if they live within a reasonable driving distance to their campus.

Are there social activities you have wanted to participate in but did not because your religion disagrees with it?

Lastly, I asked the women I spoke to if there were any social activities that they wanted to participate in but could not. This response was also very split, although most women said no. There were several reasons as to why they said no, but more than one woman said their

involvement had more to do with their personalities than their religion. For example, one woman said that she does not like big crowds, so she does not go to parties (Interview 4). Another woman said that she was too shy to get involved on campus, although she might have liked to (Interview 9). Multiple women said that they are alright with people drinking around them, and that they go to parties on campus and have fun, they just do not participate in the drinking. One woman said the exact opposite of that. She said that while she is able to go to clubs and parties, she does not because being there looks bad on herself and her faith. Another woman said that she found it difficult not to go out for her friends' 21st birthdays, but in the end, she valued her religion more, so she never regretted not going out (Interview 8). A different woman told me a story of when she was in high school, she used to play on the tennis team. She said she was okay with wearing leggings under her uniform, but her coach was not as okay with it. She said he used to make her work extra hard to prove that she should be on the team, which led to her quitting the team. She was unable to participate on a sports team because her coach would not make accommodations for her (Interview 12). Lastly, one woman told me that, because drinking culture is so prevalent in the United States, she has considered participating in the "deepest pits of [her] mind", but she knows she would regret it in the future, so she never participates (Interview 1). She also told me that some of the organizations she is a part of on campus hold events for the holiday season. She says she cannot participate in these events because Islam teaches that people should not imitate people of other religions (Interview 1).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, religion does play a role in Muslim women's college experiences. However, as I thought going into this project, every woman has different experiences in college. They also all have different relationships with their religion, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions. I can say that these women's college experiences were influenced by their religion, in one way or another. However, I cannot make any generalized conclusions that can be applied to all Muslim women. One of the major findings I discovered is that a lot of the women I spoke with decided on their major because it allowed them to help people. I am not sure if this can be applied more broadly to Muslim women, but it would be interesting to study further in the future.

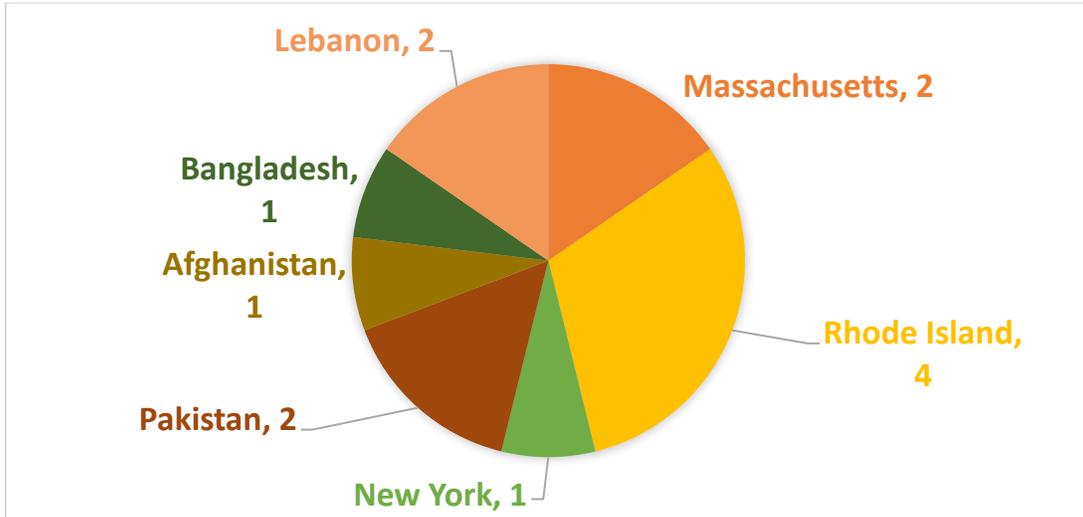
To further this research, more interviews should be conducted with women in different regions. This will show whether the research I have conducted and drawn some general conclusions on can be applied to Muslim women in the United States, or if the answers they provided are only valid in the northeast region of the United States. This research can be applied by universities to help them become more diverse and provide more opportunities for Muslims on their campus. As a lot of the women I interviewed commuted to campus, universities may be able to use this information to provide more activities to their commuter population.

APPENDICES

Appendix A - Questions for Interviewees

1. What is your major?
2. Where are you from?
3. Why did you choose your major?
4. How religious would you consider yourself?
5. Do you wear any religious garb? Why/why not?
6. Have you ever felt restricted/excluded because of your religion?
7. Is there a major you wanted to choose but could not because of religious restrictions?
8. What kind of career do you plan to pursue after college?
9. Are there social activities you have wanted to participate in but did not because your religion disagrees with it?

Appendix B – Where the Interviewees are From



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