

Unknotting the Double-Bind: The Paradox of Muslim Women's Faith-Based Activism

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By
Sakina Bhatti

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Abstract

In this capstone, I identify and grapple with a paradox in Muslim women's activism in America that I call a double-bind: while the liberal Islamophobic West does not take seriously Muslim women's investments in Islam and encourages outspoken Muslim women activists to call out Islam's oppression and violence, if not repudiate their religion altogether, the Muslim community often deems Muslim women "un-Islamic" if they are outspoken and critical of the community itself. This double bind places an undue burden on Muslim women activists who are committed to their faith. It also overshadows the important work being carried out by Muslim women activists of different backgrounds, despite all the obstacles that have historically been put in their way.

This capstone seeks to take Muslim women's articulation of justice seriously on their own terms and to highlight their many contributions. In doing so, I demonstrate that the internet has become as a unique space for contemporary Muslim women's activism and consider the case study of sexual assault within the Muslim community by celebrity imams, which was primarily exposed through Muslim women's advocacy in virtual spaces such as Twitter. While I recognize that the internet is not immune to the double-bind that Muslim women activists face, I suggest that it enables the development of an online ummah (or Muslim community) which allows for transnational community building and the creation of counter-publics that allow Muslim women activists to negotiate the terms of their visibility. Ultimately, I argue that honoring and centering the voices of Muslim women activists on their own terms not only challenges Islamophobic assumptions about Islam and Muslim women, but it also strengthens the Muslim community as a whole by reminding it of the indispensability of the pursuit of justice to belief in Islam. The empowerment of Muslim women, in other words, enables everyone within our communities to seek justice as inspired by Islam.

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Introduction

“And so, their Lord answered them: “I will not waste the work of any worker among you, whether male or female. You are one of another. For those who emigrated, and were expelled from their homes, and were persecuted because of Me, and fought and were killed— I will remit for them their sins and will admit them into gardens beneath which rivers flow—a reward from Allah. With Allah is the ultimate reward.”

(Surah Imran, 3:195)

“And hold fast to the rope of Allah, altogether, and do not become divided. And remember God’s blessings upon you; how you were enemies, and He reconciled your hearts, and by His grace you became brethren.”

(Surah Imran, 3:103)

The *habl-ul-lah*, rope of Allah, is a popular Muslim metaphor used in the Qur’an and hadiths that refers to a covenant with Allah, through which Muslims maintain their faith. The rope of Allah is one that guides all Muslims in their daily lives, inspiring unity, fighting for justice, and engaging in goodness. In this capstone, I consider another metaphorical rope by which Muslim women activists in America are bound. I am interested in the impasse that Muslim American women activists find themselves at, both in the work that they do within the Muslim community and outside it. In forming and advocating for any opinion, Muslim American women are asked to answer to two different groups. On one hand, they are met by the Muslim community, which is suspicious of any outspoken Muslim women, particularly if they are critical of so-called Islamic principles, in which case their advocacy is deemed “unislamic”. On the other hand, they face the Islamophobic liberal West, which encourages Muslim women to call out Islam’s oppression, violence, and general incompatibility with a so-called American culture, but is unwilling to take their investments in Islam seriously on its own terms. American Muslim women are in other words forced into a monolith, and are chastised for having any opinion, whether those opinions conform to traditional Islamic thought or not, and whether those opinions appease the liberal West, or not. In many ways, it is as if there is not a situation where outspoken

and activist Muslim women can win; by choosing to engage in activism, we are bound to a variety of pressures that leave us defeated, bound in what I call the double-bind.

This project seeks to consider this double-bind in which many Muslim women activists find themselves, in hopes of finding ways to reconcile the dilemma for myself and young Muslim women who are asked to choose between their religion and their fights for justice. It is an attempt to speak back at it, and to render its effects on Muslim women's activism visible. Ultimately however, the foremost methodological aim of my work is to center and take seriously the voices of Muslim women activists in America, and to call on others both within and outside the Muslim community to do the same. There is countless scholarly work about Muslim women and communities written from outside that sees Muslim women without any agency, as oppressed and in need of saving. By presenting examples of advocacy by Muslim women in America, I hope to disrupt reductive narratives about Muslim women's lives, and their advocacy. In addition to this, I seek to take seriously religion, and particularly Islam, as a source of knowledge that need not be abandoned in the fight for social justice. This is especially important as mainstream academia often presumes that secularism is the only means through which problems in the world can be addressed. In this project, rather than seeing religion as an obstacle to finding justice, I recognize it as a path to justice in and of itself.

While this is of course an intellectual endeavor, it is one that is steeped in my lived and embodied experience; this work is entirely mediated by my life. As such, it is crucial for me to begin by acknowledging my positionality, as well as what is at stake for me in this work. Indeed, the ability to spend months thinking about the topics of Islam in America, Muslim activism, and online community, is a privilege that is not afforded to many of the subjects of my research. Keeping this in mind, I cannot and do not seek to speak for anyone's experience besides my own

and what is reflected in the research that I do. Considering this, this project is an attempt to tell a narrative of Muslim women's activism that takes seriously ways that Muslim women activists in America speak for themselves, rather than my own analysis. This is especially important because my understandings and experience of Islam are unique, and because Muslim women are rarely taken seriously on their own terms by white saviors and Muslim gatekeepers alike.

I grew up in a Kashmiri Sufi family, that immigrated to Kansas City, Missouri in the early 2000s. The Muslim communities I grew up in were primarily Sunni and conservative, which are also the same communities that make up a majority of the Muslims living in America. Further, I grew up on the Internet, learning about Islam from YouTube lectures by The Merciful Servant, Mufti Menk, and Omar Suleiman, as well as seeing the growth of hyper conservative Muslims such as Ali Dawah, Mohammed Hijab, and Gabriel Al Romaani. All of these people have shaped not only my understanding of Islam but also my understanding of the global Muslim community. It is this internet-mediated understanding of the global Muslim community that has in fact inspired the questions that I explore in this capstone.

In what follows, I begin with a brief summary of faith-based activism and describe how religion has played a crucial role in U.S. based activism and the pursuit for social justice. While I first provide a broad discussion of the history of faith-based activism in the country, I then turn my focus to examples of Islamic faith-based activism. In doing so, I explore the following questions: How does a grounding in a faith tradition inspire activism that is different from secular activism? What has faith-based activism in the American Muslim community looked like in the past and what does it look like now? And finally, what does it look like to be a Muslim activist without compromising on religious beliefs in the process?

The project then moves to thinking specifically about activism and organizing done by Muslim-American women. In this section, I consider the impact of Muslim women's advocacy on both the landscape of American Islam and American politics. This discussion seeks to provide concrete examples of the double-bind that I argue activist and outspoken Muslim women face in their pursuits of justice. The questions I seek to answer in this section are: What has Muslim women's activism historically looked like in America? What does Muslim women's advocacy work do to push back against narratives of a monolithic Muslim community and what is the impact of this? Lastly, how does Muslim women's activism challenge the dominant liberal, secular, and feminist notions that the pursuit of justice must be secular?

The final section of this project thinks about the internet as a unique space for community building among Muslims, particularly Muslim women. I focus on the example of sexual assault activism by Muslim women as a case study to illustrate the centrality of the internet to their activism, but also to highlight the dynamism of Muslim women's activism. Here I hope to answer the following questions: How have understandings of the prophetic notion of a globally connect ummah been developed as a result of the internet, and particularly Muslim women's use of the internet? In what ways have Muslim women used online communities to organize? What challenges does the internet pose to community building? The ultimate goal of this section is to consider the ways that the double-bind that Muslim women face is both combatted and amplified in different places on the internet, and what that means for the possibilities of Muslim women in America using the internet for the purposes of activism, organizing, and speaking out.

Throughout this project and as I write, I continuously consider the ways that my understanding of "Muslim", "Islam" or the "Muslim community" reinforce notions of monoliths that do not actually exist. As a Muslim woman writing this capstone, recognizing this can help

ensure that my work does not contribute to the impasse that I describe in this paper, namely in the notion that there is one correct way of being a Muslim woman, whether this is prescribed from within or outside the Muslim community. At the same time, my positionality contributes to my project through embodied, lived, and felt knowledge of being a Muslim woman in America and in doing so can ensure that the project offers a nuanced discussion of the topics and questions I am interested in, particularly as they relate to Islam. Additionally, I want to make very clear that throughout this project, I am in no way advocating for an abandonment of Muslims, Islam, or Muslim communities, no matter how much I am critical of them. There is a lot of research from outside the community that problematizes Islam as a religion and applauds anyone who vilifies Islam as inherently patriarchal, oppressive, violent, or intolerant, with no care to even acknowledge devotees as humans. I am not interested in adding to this research; instead, I hope to offer a perspective that in fact meets my aims of taking seriously Muslim women on their own terms, and honoring Islam as source of knowledge.

Faith-Based Activism

Since the country's inception, religion has consistently played an active role in American civil and political life. As a nation founded upon promises of religious freedoms, it is no surprise that there have been various movements throughout the course of the nation's history that were shaped and influenced by religion, from Quaker abolitionist movements in the late 18th century¹ to the Black Church's civil rights movements in the 19th century.² In these movements, religion was invaluable to achieving their goals of emancipation and social justice. The role of religion in contemporary American society, though, is becoming increasingly obscured by dominant secularist assumptions and discourses that conflate every religious movement with extremist ideas and politics; whether this is the conflation of Christianity with evangelicalism or Islam with Al-Qaeda and ISIS, secularism implies that religion and activism cannot coexist.³ This is particularly evident in American society where activism is often associated with liberal values and religion is similarly associated with conservative values, and the two are deemed mutually exclusive. These notions are exacerbated by the relationship between conservatism as a political movement and Christian fundamentalism in the contemporary U.S., which are often undertaken by the same groups of people, who advocate for sexist, racist, and xenophobic legislation, such as those prohibiting teachers from teaching "critical race theory" and those which criminalize women for seeking abortions. What these false binaries mask and occlude is that many

¹ Geoffrey Plank, "Quakers as Political Players in Early America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (2017): p. 35, <https://doi.org/10.5309/willmaryquar.74.1.0035>.

² Allison Calhoun-Brown, "Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, no. 2 (June 2000): p. 168, <https://doi.org/10.2307/420886>.

³ Adam Garfinkle, "How We Misunderstand the Sources of Religious Violence," Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 19, 2016.

religiously inspired movements have argued for social justice, income redistribution, gender equality, immigrant rights, and more.

Jonathan Fox in *Ethnoreligious Conflict in the Late Twentieth Century* argues that religion has four social functions: it offers a framework for understanding the world; it creates rules and norms to connect individuals to the wider movement; it connects individuals to each other; and it legitimizes behavior.⁴ In considering these functions of religion, the emergence of social movements that derive their inspiration from a faith tradition is almost inevitable. If religion creates rules, norms, values, and ideals, and connects individuals to one another, then advocacy for a certain set of norms over others can be traced, to some extent, to religious belief.

When considering the extent and impact of faith-based advocacy in America, the focus on extremism as religion's only influence undermines the work of various faith groups over the course of American history, such as that of the Black church. As institutions developed following the abolition of slavery, the Black church quickly became the center of Black life and offered a variety of services to their congregants, from food and clothing for the poor, to orphanages and schools.⁵ The Black church engaged in community outreach programs and eventually some Black churches supported and facilitated civil rights activism. While this was not the majority of Black churches, the impact of the church on the civil rights movements is evident in the celebration of Reverends such as most famously Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and less so, James Lawson Jr. and Kelly Miller Smith Sr.⁶

⁴ Jonathan Fox, *Ethnoreligious Conflict in the Late Twentieth Century: A General Theory* (Lexington Books, 2002), 103.

⁵ Fredrick C Harris, "Black Churches and Civic Traditions: Outreach, Activism, and the Politics of Public Funding of Faith-Based Ministries," in *Can Charitable Choice Work?: Covering Religion's Impact on Urban Affairs and Social Services* (Hartford, CT: Pew Program on Religion and the News Media, 2001), pp. 140-155.

⁶ Bernard LaFayette Jr, "The role of religion in the civil rights movements." In *Faith and Progressive Policy: Proud Past, Promising Future Conference, sponsored by the Center for American Progress*,. 2004.

In fact, it was from a conversation on faith-based advocacy with Reverend Charles Boyer from the Christian faith-based organization, *Salvation and Social Justice* (SandSJ) that I developed an interest in thinking about the intersections of religion and activism in this project. *SandSJ* “seeks to liberate public policy theologically by building Black faith-rooted communication strategies, advocacy, and public education campaigns.”⁷ Their work to support Black Americans is intrinsically linked to Black faith, and connects activist practices that are rooted in ritual, with the ultimate goals of salvation and liberation. *SandSJs*’ work focuses on racial justice in the American context and views the solutions to social problems such as systemic racism as being resolvable through faith practice and activism.

While there are a variety of secular critiques of this type of faith-based activism today, there is one important benefit that is relevant to the questions explored in this paper. Faith-based advocacy encourages communities that are historically underrepresented in America towards active civic participation. For example, Black people in America were not allowed to freely vote until the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, just 57 years ago. To this day, and despite being granted the right to vote, Black voters continue to face various attempts at disenfranchisement, such as gerrymandering and restriction of voting rights for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. This disenfranchisement has resulted in disproportionately low voting rates among Black Americans.⁸ *SandSJ* works to empower black voters through participation in the nationwide “Souls to the Polls” which encourages church congregants to vote and strengthens the Black American voting bloc.

⁷ Salvation and Social Justice, <https://sandsj.org/>.

⁸ Rashawn Ray and Mark Whitlock, “Setting the Record Straight on Black Voter Turnout,” The Brookings Institute, September 12, 2019.

The work of faith-based activism in America, although deeply indebted to the Black Church, is not exclusive to the Church or even to Christianity. The *Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF)* is a media, policy, and education organization that is centered around empowering Sikh Americans, and envisioning a United States where Sikh Americans are recognized and values for their contributions to the nation. *SALDEF* defines itself as an organization that is grounded in Sikh values including “optimism (chardi kala), humility (nimrata) and service (seva), inspired by the community (sangat) for the benefit of all (sarbat da bhalla).”⁹ A majority of the work that *SALDEF* does is to counter the racialized narratives and misinformation about Sikhism that have arisen in the aftermath of 9/11, particularly Islamophobic stereotypes that Sikhs also became subject to. *SALDEF* works with both the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI to push for stronger hate crime legislation and legislation to combat domestic terrorism. This is especially important work as hate crimes against Sikhs continue to rise across America.¹⁰ Additionally, much like *SandSJ* mentioned earlier, *SALDEF* also supports an initiative to increase voting among the Sikh community. SikhVOTE. offers voting materials in Punjabi so that voters have a thorough understanding of voting rights, regulations, and options in every major election.

In addition to organizations that are based in a singular faith, there are many organizations across America that employ interfaith discourse to advocate for social change. A remarkable example of a variety of faith-based organizations uniting for a common goal is *Together New Orleans*. Founded to address community problems in the greater New Orleans

⁹ Sikh American Legal Defense Fund, <https://saldef.org/about/>

¹⁰ Gujari Singh, “FBI Reports That Hate Crimes Continue to Rise Across the Nation,” SALDEF, November 18, 2020.

area, the coalition is made up of congregations and community institutions, from churches, synagogues, and masjids to unions and non-profit organizations. One of the three basic goals that *Together New Orleans* identifies is to “achieve change on concrete issues, as a part of our common call to justice,” acknowledging the ways that religion calls people to work towards justice, in contrast to mainstream representations of religion as intolerant and resistant to justice.¹¹ The major project that the coalition is working on is called the “Community Lighthouse Project” which intends to insure that everyone in New Orleans is less than a mile away from a center with solar power, in the inevitable case of natural disasters, that have in the past, been devastating to the community.¹² While this is work that is primarily centered around capacity building, it recognizes the necessity and impact of religious organizations coming together to fulfill faith ordained notions of justice that help the broader community.

History of American Islam and of Representations of Islam

As a Muslim-American, I am invested in considering the ways that Islam and Muslims participate in American society, and how Islam inspires a unique form of activism and advocacy. This is a particularly important task because it challenges the dominant depictions of Islam that permeate the U.S. media and are driven by “orientalism, anti-Blackness, anti-Muslim racism, patriarchy, and imperialism.”¹³ Practically speaking, representations of Muslims in the U.S. context, particularly in a post-9/11 and post Trump world, are nearly always intertwined with

¹¹ Together New Orleans <https://www.togethernola.org/about>

¹² Jennifer Hiller, “Wary of Being Left in the Dark, Americans Produce Their Own Power,” *The Wall Street Journal* (Dow Jones & Company, February 19, 2022).

¹³ Maytha Alhassen, “Haqq and Hollywood: Illuminating 100 Years of Muslim Tropes and How to Transform Them” (Pop Culture Collaborative, 2018); Additionally, see Said (1978) on Orientalism.

violence, whether it is the violence of the terrorist and the black nationalist, or the male oppressor of his wife and the repressive Muslim regimes abroad. This section counters these reductive narratives of violence by showing the ways that Muslim's engagement within the U.S. is motivated and shaped by Islamic notions of justice and peace. My aim in doing so is to suggest that dominant orientalist and Islamophobic discourses come in the way of taking Islam seriously as a source of justice and social change in ways that can be harmful to young Muslim Americans like me who are committed to both our faith and to the pursuit of social justice.

To understand the complex and delicate balance that Muslim-Americans tread in their activism, it is necessary to recognize the development of Islam in the country, and how contemporary representations of Islam have become solidified in American society.¹⁴ Whereas present-day depictions of Islam tend to primarily focus on South Asian and Middle Eastern immigrant communities, these are relatively recent characterizations of American Islam. The first Muslims in the country were forcibly brought here as slaves before the nation was even established. According to some estimates, up to 30% of the enslaved people brought to the US from West and Central African countries were Muslim, and although many were forced to give up their faith among other parts of their identities, these were indeed the first Muslims in America.¹⁵ Black Muslims continued to make up the majority American Muslim population throughout the 19th and early part of the 20th century, especially through the rise of Black Muslim movements such as early *Ahmadiyya* communities and the *Nation of Islam*. These Muslim

¹⁴ Due to the scope of this capstone and limited space, this section offers a highly condensed history of Islam in America that highlights only the most relevant points necessary to illustrate how Muslims in America came to be defined by stereotypes of violence in contrast to Islamic notions of justice. For a more detailed history see: Kambiz GhaneaBassiri's *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order* (2011).

¹⁵ Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 33.

communities and their history, though, have become obstructed by new dominant discourse surrounding Islam. The development of the identity of a “foreign Muslim other” in America began in the early twentieth century, with the advent of large-scale immigration from Anatolia, the Levant, Eastern Europe, and South Asia.¹⁶ With the increase of wars in the Middle East and the War on Terror, Islam came to be posited as a “foreign threat”, therefore emphasizing the religion as one that exists outside the U.S. Furthermore, the Muslims who immigrated to America from lands that are now known as the “Muslim world” came to view members of the Nation of Islam and similar groups as blasphemous and their beliefs as contrary to Islam.¹⁷

This began the shift in Muslim American demographics that has persisted through the present-day. It is important to note that there is no measure of accuracy in the number of Muslims that immigrated to America during this time because census officials did not distinguish immigrants by ethnicity or religion until much later. This is particularly evident as immigration officials prior to 1899 grouped anyone from Asian Ottoman territories as being from “Turkey in Asia” and anyone from the European territories as being from “Turkey in Europe”, with no recognition of the vastness and diversity of the Ottoman empire.¹⁸ There is further complication in estimating the number of Muslims who immigrated prior to the 1920s because of this diversity; while the Ottoman Empire and South Asia both had large populations of Muslims at this time, it is misleading to assume that all immigrants from these regions were Muslim. Nonetheless, there was an evidenced increase in Muslim immigrants, amounting to up to 1.1

¹⁶ Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 96.

¹⁷ Jennifer Williams, “A Brief History of Islam in America,” *Vox* (Vox, January 29, 2017).

¹⁸ Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 137.

million Muslim immigrants that arrived in the U.S. before the end of the 20th century.¹⁹ Throughout this time, American racism ran rampant, and anyone who wasn't white was discriminated against, and immigrants faced even more suspicion.²⁰ As a result, many Muslim immigrants changed their names and appearances to assimilate; among countless other markers of Muslim identity that were lost during this time, names like Mohammad became Moe, Maryam became Mary, Bassam became Sammy, and Yousuf became Joseph.

Despite these attempts of assimilation, a variety of events created the conditions for the contemporary treatment of Muslims in America. Anthropologist Zain Abdullah asserts that Muslim-American experiences have been shaped by the “geopolitical encounters between the United States and various Muslim nations.”²¹ From the Six Day War in 1967, to the oil embargos in the 1970s, to the First Gulf War in 1990, American involvement in the Middle East proliferated pre-existing orientalist representations of the violence of Islam.

The pivotal moment that solidified negative stereotypes of Muslims was 9/11. It was then that President George W. Bush stood before congress and said “Tonight, we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done.”²² While the former president went on to say that Muslims were not American enemies

¹⁹ Edward E Curtis, “The Study of American Muslims: A History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, ed. Omid Safi and Juliane Hammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 15-27.

²⁰ This is not to undermine the ways that racism is still rampant in America but point to the specific moment in the pre-civil rights movement America.

²¹ Zain Abdullah, “American Muslims in the Contemporary World: 1965 to the Present” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, ed. Omid Safi and Juliane Hammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 65.

²² George W Bush, “Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation,” *The Washington Post*, September 20, 2001.

but rather that it was Al Qaeda and terrorism that needed to be fought against, there was no going back from the Islamophobia that ensued from identifying the Middle East as the place where American freedoms were being put in danger. Further, it is interesting here that President Bush posits justice as needing to be brought to the Middle East and Islam, whereas this capstone shows the ways that justice is in fact integral to Islam. Later, First Lady Laura Bush spoke to justify the War on Terror saying, “[c]ivilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror -- not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us,” consequently affirming notions of the oppressed Muslim woman.²³ The Patriot Act allowed for the unwarranted surveillance of Muslim and Muslim-adjacent Americans, making every Muslim a possible terrorist in both the eyes of the government and American society.²⁴ Each of these incidents created the ideal conditions for an Islamophobic American public, as evidenced by the 500% increase in hate crimes against Muslims, and those who could be mistaken for Muslim such as Sikhs, between 2000 and 2009.²⁵

Islam’s Demand for Justice

Over the last twenty years in the wake of the War on Terror, Muslim activism has come to be primarily associated with a so-called “jihad”. This concept which was once reserved for interpretation by scholars of Islam, became plastered across newspapers, television, and blogs in

²³ Laura Bush, “Radio Address by Mrs. Bush,” The White House George W Bush Archive , November 17, 2001.

²⁴ For more information about the Patriot Act, see the ACLU’s “Myths and Realities About the Patriot Act” (<https://www.aclu.org/other/myths-and-realities-about-patriot-act>) and *Patriot Acts: Narrative of Post 9/11 Injustice* by Alia Malek (2011).

²⁵ Booth Gunter and Caleb Kieffer, “Islamophobia After 9/11: How a Fearmongering Fringe Movement Exploited the Terror Attacks to Gain Political Power,” Southern Poverty Law Center, September 17, 2021.

the United States. Depictions of jihad define it as a “holy war,” that is being fought by Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, ISIS, and Muslims organizations across the country. Islamically, though, jihad is defined as a “struggle”, which can be interpreted in a variety of ways. For example, a personal struggle in education or commitment, or a larger military struggle against an oppressor. Indeed, in the concept of jihad Islam in fact offers a profound understanding of the responsibilities of Muslims within society, which by many of today’s standards can be interpreted as requiring and encouraging a commitment to social justice. This understanding inspires many modern Muslim activists and movements, especially ones that view Islam as crucial to their mission. The following section of this capstone examines the ways that Islam encourages Muslims to seek justice. It challenges the narrow representations of Islamic activism and takes seriously the contributions of Muslim-Americans to social justice on their own terms.

The Qur’an is the foremost text of Islam, through which Muslims receive the unmediated words of Allah. As a text that was revealed 1400 years ago, there are countless exegeses that attempt to apply the principles outlined in the Qur’an to a given society and time-period. At a textual level, the Qur’an shows undoubtedly that Allah commands Muslims towards a more just world. Some examples of this are:

“Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct and giving to relatives and forbids immorality and bad conduct and oppression. He admonishes you that perhaps you will be reminded.” (Surah An-Nahl, 16:90)

"O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm for Allah, witnesses in justice, and do not let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to righteousness. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is Acquainted with what you do." (Surah Al-Maidah, 5:8)

“Say [Muhammad to followers]: 'My Lord ordered justice. Turn your faces to Him in every place of prayer and supplicate to Him, making the religion sincerely to Him’” (Surah al-A’raf 7:29)

"... Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly." (Surah Al-Mumtahanah, 60:8)

Similarly, in hadiths²⁶, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ encouraged followers of Islam to act justly. He said:

"Beware of injustice, for injustice will be darkness on the Day of Resurrection. Beware of obscenity, for Allah does not love obscenity and immorality." (Musnad Ahmad 9361- Narrated by Abu Hurairah)

"Beware of the supplication of the oppressed, for there is no barrier between it and Allah." (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 4090)

"There are seven categories of people whom God will shelter under the shade of His throne on the Day when there will be no shade except this." [One of them is] the just leader." (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 660)

Throughout these verses and hadiths, the Arabic words used to describe justice are "*adl*" and "*qist*". While both words are used interchangeably to refer to conceptions of justice, it is important to recognize that the Arabic words are not easily translated to English and refer to much more comprehensive definitions that underscore Islam's commitment to justice. These definitions include notions of equity, fairness, balance, correctness, fair distribution, nondiscrimination, and an obligation to rectify.²⁷ The renowned Islamic scholar and professor Mahmoud Ayoub, offers an interpretation of these verses which argues that while the meanings of the two words are relatively the same, *adl* refers to the theoretical idea of fairness, and *qist*

²⁶ Hadiths are accounts of the life and practices of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. It is important to note that there are various levels of reliability in hadiths, as they are historical texts transmitted over hundreds of years. In addition, different sects rely on many distinct narrators and interpretations of these hadiths, so while there is some consensus among Sunni Muslims on the interpretations of hadiths, not all sects of Islam have the same consensus. For the purposes of this project, I use Sunni hadiths because these are the ones that I am most familiar with.

²⁷ Mohammad Shafi, "Justice and Equity in the Qur'an," Dar Al Islam. <http://daralislam.org/portals/0/publications/justiceandequityinthequran.pdf>.

refers to the ways that humans must uphold conceptions of justice.²⁸ Examples of *qist* appear in every dimension of human interaction, from politics to interpersonal relationships.

A compelling illustration of *qist* that translates easily to modern understandings of justice is that of *zakat*. *Zakat* is often characterized as simply “charity” by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, but it is arguably more accurately described as a wealth tax.²⁹ While interpretations of *zakat* vary among different Islamic traditions, I argue here that the practice highlights Islam’s distinctive conception of a just society. As the third pillar of Islam³⁰, *zakat* is an obligation for practicing Muslims. Those whose wealth passes a certain threshold that indicates that they have enough to spare, are required to donate 2.5% of their wealth to the poor and needy on an annual basis. From hadiths, we learn that *zakat* serves the purpose of reminding Muslims that wealth is meant to be redistributed, rather than hoarded. Considering this goal in the context of the increasing wealth inequality in America and abroad, *zakat* addresses the need for the protection and support of people who are living in poverty and facing the harsh consequences of capitalism. Money redistributed through *zakat* is used in a variety of ways such as: giving monetary donations to those in need, building schools and houses, providing medical resources, helping refugees and orphans, and supporting bail efforts for incarcerated Muslims.³¹ Additionally, *zakat* offers a means of developing community cohesion that recognizes the poor as fellow humans,

²⁸ Mahmoud Ayoub. “The Islamic Concept of Justice.” Essay. In *Islamic Identity and the Struggle for Justice*, edited by Omar Afzal , Nimat Hafez Barazangi, and M. Raquibuz Zaman. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996.

²⁹ “What Is the Role of Zakat in Islam?,” Zakat Foundation of America, <https://www.zakat.org/what-role-of-zakat-in-islam>.

³⁰ The five pillars of Islam are the practices that are fundamental to Sunni Islam, and they are listed in order of importance: shahada (profession of faith), salah (prayer), zakat (charity), sawm (fasting), and hajj (pilgrimage). These pillars vary in different sects of Islam, but the basic concept of zakat is universal.

³¹This is referring specifically to “Believers Bail Out” which is mentioned later in this project.

rather than as strangers to those who have wealth. This is not to say, though, that *zakat* is implemented in this way in all Muslim communities around the world, but rather that the practice encourages a sense of community, particularly in its purest sense, when redistribution is often focused on the geographically local.³² Reflecting upon the ideas of *adl* and *qist* in both the Qur'an and in practice, it is clear that acting justly and seeking justice is integral to Islamic belief and practice.

Muslim Faith-Based Activism

In considering Islam's demand for justice, there are various Muslim-American organizations that are doing the work of advocating for justice, both for Muslims and others living in America from within an Islamic tradition. Before examining these organizations, it is important to acknowledge the socio-political context in which they operate, especially because this context shapes the work that many Muslim-American activists engage in. The most apparent context is that of the aftermath of 9/11, which has proliferated anti-Muslim racism at every level of American society; from national surveillance programs as a part of the Patriot Act, to interpersonal violence, anti-Muslim sentiments as discussed earlier have permeated American society since 9/11. In addition to this, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 legitimized these sentiments, particularly when the president issued a ban of foreign nationals from predominantly Muslim countries as one of his first acts in office.³³ This is especially evident in the fact that in 2017, almost half of Muslim-American adults reported having experienced some form of

³² Ingrid Matteson, "Zakat in America: The Evolving Role of Islamic Charity in Community Cohesion," *Zakat in America: The Evolving Role of Islamic Charity in Community Cohesion* (The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, March 25, 2010), <https://hdl.handle.net/1805/5567>.

³³ "Timeline of the Muslim Ban," ACLU of Washington (American Civil Liberties Union, February 10, 2020), <https://www.aclu-wa.org/pages/timeline-muslim-ban>.

discrimination as a result of their religion.³⁴ Furthermore, the Trump presidency solidified anti-Muslim racism as a part of the conservative political platform, one that encourages policies like the “Muslim Ban” and emboldens politicians like Lauren Boebert to call Muslims in congress the “jihadi squad” and “terrorist sympathizers.”³⁵ This is not to say, though, that conservatives are the only source of anti-Muslim racism in the US; liberals harbor similar sentiments that are often masked by notions of secularity and so called tolerance.³⁶ In light of these sentiments, much of mainstream Muslim faith-based activism in America is centered around combatting Islamophobia and addressing discrimination against Muslims in the country.

The Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) was one of the first Muslim advocacy organization in America. Founded in 1988, MPAC defines its mission as “working to promote and strengthen American pluralism by increasing understanding and improving policies that impact American Muslims.”³⁷ MPAC works within existing government systems on four issues: immigration, human security, national security and civil liberties, and religious freedom and human rights. As a political advocacy organization, much of MPAC’s work is centered around addressing policy on a local, state, and federal level. Over the last 30 years, they have: developed legal briefs and policy papers on their four issues; sponsored the publishing of books that seek to disrupt misconceptions of Islam such as “American Muslim Identity: Speaking for Ourselves” by

³⁴ “The Muslim American Experience in the Trump Era,” Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, July 26, 2017, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/the-muslim-american-experience-in-the-trump-era/#half-of-u-s-muslims-say-they-faced-discriminatory-treatment-in-past-year>.

³⁵ Andrew Kaczynski, “Another Video Shows Lauren Boebert Suggesting Ilhan Omar Was Terrorist,” CNN, November 30, 2021, <https://us.cnn.com/2021/11/30/politics/lauren-boebert-ilhan-omar-video-comments/index.html>.

³⁶ For more information, see Wendy Brown’s book *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton University Press: 2006).

³⁷ “About MPAC,” Muslim Public Affairs Council, <https://www.mpac.org/about.php>.

Aslam Abdullah and Gasser Hathout (2003), and “In Pursuit of Justice: The Jurisprudence of Human Rights in Islam” by Maher Hathout (2006); and created programs to increase Muslim civic participation in the US. MPAC’s work promotes a very specific form of advocacy that serves to help Muslims better assimilate into American society, particularly through challenging the supposed exceptionalism of Islam.

Like MPAC, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), is a political advocacy organization that intends to “enhance understanding of Islam, protect civil rights, promote justice, and empower American Muslims.”³⁸ Much of the work that CAIR has recently undertaken focuses on responding to anti-Muslim violence across the country. In the past year, they’ve advocated on behalf of American Muslims in response to instances of Islamophobia such as students having their hijabs pulled off at school, citizens being denied entry into the US and placement of Muslims on “no-fly lists”, vandalism of masjids, discriminatory employment policies, and surveillance by CVE³⁹ and the Investigative Project on Terrorism.⁴⁰ CAIR also supports the election and appointment of Muslims to prevalent positions in the government, especially to increase positive representations of Islam. In addition to this work, the organization supports social justice initiatives such as the removal of Confederate monuments and memorials, enhancement of hate crime legislation, and condemnation of anti-Black violence. Considering all of the various initiatives that CAIR takes on to promote justice, it is unsurprising that donations

³⁸ “About Us,” Council on American Islamic Relations, https://www.cair.com/about_cair/about-us/.

³⁹ “Counter Violent Extremism” is a federal campaign that claims to steer people away from “radicalization” and “extremism”. In practice it is a legally sanctioned form of discrimination against Muslims. See more: <https://muslimjusticeleague.org/cve/>

⁴⁰ See more: <https://islamophobicnetwork.com/organization/investigative-project-on-terrorism/> and https://www.cair.com/press_releases/breaking-cair-to-release-new-evidence-showing-anti-muslim-hate-group-used-paid-spies-to-surveil-prominent-muslim-leaders-groups-for-more-than-a-decade/

to the organization are deemed zakat; this highlights the work of pursuing civil rights as a practice which is undoubtedly Islamic.

While MPAC and CAIR represent an establishment-oriented Muslim faith-based activism, there are many organizations that do work which advocates for social changes that are rooted in Islamic notions of justice. An example of such an organization is the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative (MuslimARC), which identifies as a “human rights education organization” that focuses on raising awareness in Muslim communities on issues of racial justice. Much of the work carried out by the MuslimARC is educational in focus, particularly directed towards Muslim organizations such as masjids and college Muslim student associations. This education work includes workshops and trainings to address racism in Muslim communities. MuslimARC’s work is centered around five values: appreciation of diversity, exchange of meaningful dialogue, self-reflection in the fight against arrogance, promotion of righteousness and unity, and belief in the applicability of theory to action. These values are each embedded in verses from the Qur’an, hadiths, and Muslim history, including the ones introduced earlier in this capstone.⁴¹

Believers Bail Out (BBO) is another organization which seeks out social justice that is rooted in Islam. BBO is “a community-led effort to bail our Muslims in pretrial incarceration and ICE custody.”⁴² The organization references two verses from the Qur’an to support their mission. First, “Do you realize what is a steep road?” It is the freeing of a human being from bondage” (Surah Al-Balad, 90:12-13). In these verses, Allah tells Muslims that there is a path to salvation, a difficult one, which is the freeing of a person from bondage. Second, “Alms are for the poor

⁴¹ “About.” Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative. <https://www.muslimarc.org/about>.

⁴² “Believers Bail Out: About,” Believers Bail Out, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://believersbailout.org/about/>.

and the needy, and those employed to administer the alms; for those whose hearts have been reconciled; for those in bondage and in debt; in the cause of Allah; and for the wayfarer: thus, is it ordained by Allah, and Allah is full of knowledge and wisdom” (Surah At-Tawbah, 9:60). Here, Allah describes what people can receive money that is given as zakat. BBO applies this verse to say that the American criminal punishment system holds Muslims in bondage, and are freed through the payment of bail, and therefore this endeavor is a justifiable use of zakat funds. Aside from bailing Muslims out of jail, BBO also participates in advocacy work, by supporting efforts to abolish money bail and raise awareness of the injustices of the prison industrial complex which are underscored by the bail bond system.

All in all, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative, and Believers Bail Out are just a few examples of the various ways that Muslims are involved in faith-based activism in America. In contrast to mainstream western depictions of Islam that foreground violence as inherent to Islam and reduce Muslim activism to caricatural understandings of jihad, Muslim faith-based advocacy calls to attention the indispensability of the pursuit of justice to Islamic belief. The following section of this capstone adds a layer to this understanding of Muslim activism and looks specifically at the work of Muslim women activists in America.

Muslim Women’s Activism

While Muslim men’s activism in America is discernable through names like Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, and Keith Ellison, the work of their female counterparts has been largely overshadowed. As a Muslim woman who has been seen by others as an activist from a young

age, even before I had any real understanding of what an activist is⁴³, my aim in this project is to contemplate what it means to be an advocate who is committed to social justice while also being a devout Muslim woman. While activism is often defined as actions aimed at the government and its institutions, I propose a broader definition that I think is more apt to capturing the complexity of Muslim women’s advocacy. Anjali Appadurai, a Canadian climate justice organizer, defines activism as “the practice of addressing an issue, any issue, by challenging those in power.”⁴⁴ Although much broader than mainstream notions, this definition is better suited for examining the history and impact of Muslim women’s activism in America. This is especially true considering that although there are many Muslim women who do advocacy work and explicitly identify themselves as activists, there are many Muslim women who do not identify in this way but still do considerable work inside and outside the Muslim community. In an attempt to honor and take seriously their contributions, I will be using a more capacious notion of activism to refer to their work.



Figure 1: Young Sakina at protests



⁴³ Photos in figure 1.

⁴⁴ TedxYouth, “What is activism? Anjali Appadurai at TEDxYouth@Biddeford,”

In doing so however, I want to acknowledge that for many Muslim women activists, what they are doing in the pursuit of social justice is, to them, merely to be a pious Muslim. Indeed, as researcher and Qur'an teacher Mona Rahman states "the term 'activist' to me, describes someone who goes beyond the call of duty to work for changes in society. As such, it is not a term I would use to describe myself. The "extracurricular" activities which I have taken part in throughout my life are not things that I consider as activism but, rather as a part of one's duty as a Muslim."⁴⁵ This is of course not to undermine the work of Muslim women who do call themselves activists, but rather to acknowledge the various ways that Muslim women show up for their communities, and take seriously the many ways that Muslim women engage in activism.

The history of Muslim women's activism in the US, consists of many powerful women who left lasting impacts on their communities. This history is multifaceted, and it includes many figures such as Margaret Sabir-Gillette, Tayyibah Taylor, and Amina Wadud.⁴⁶ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive account of the work that Muslim women have done throughout American history, in what follows, I look at the example of Betty Shabazz before I move on to discussing more contemporary examples of Muslim women's activism. As one of the most high-profile Muslim women activists, Betty Shabazz exemplifies the important fact that Muslim women's history in America is inextricable from the history of Black women, and further that Muslim women's activism has been integral to the pursuit of social justice in the U.S., and not just in the Muslim community.

⁴⁵ Katherine Bullock, *Muslim Women Activists in North America: Speaking for Ourselves* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), 135.

⁴⁶ For more information of the history of Muslim women's activism in America, see: Katherine Bullock's *Muslim Women Activists in North America Speaking for Ourselves* (2005) and Su'ad Abdul Khabeer's *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (2016).

While much of her story is tied to her husband, Malcolm X, Betty Shabazz was an activist in her own right. In her role as a Muslim wife, she pushed back against dominant notions of feminism as described by Betty Friedan and other white feminists at the time.⁴⁷ Particularly, she did not view her marriage as a constriction, but rather as a part of her practice of Islam. To her, marriage did not take away from her as a human but added to her ability to make an impact around her, especially in her home life. As the “first lady” of Temple Number, where her husband was the minister, she challenged the prescribed ideas of what it meant to be a woman in the Nation of Islam; she was outspoken, wore clothes that barely met prevalent codes of modesty, and pursued an education.⁴⁸ Following her husband’s assassination, Shabazz became enshrined in history, along with Coretta Scott King and Myrlie Evers Williams, as a widow of the civil rights movement. In contrast to the other widows, though, her identity as a Muslim woman meant that she was not only dealing with the grief of the loss of her husband, but also thinking about how to navigate the world as a woman whose practice of Islam was intimately tied to being married. Shabazz mourned her husband but continued to do work in the Black liberation movement, and even went on to get a PhD and teach at Medgar Evers College. Her daughter, Ilyasah Shabazz said that her mother “did not believe Islam required women to be passive creatures locked away somewhere. She believed she had the support of her religion in doing what she had to do—go out into the world and achieve for herself and for the sake of her family...”⁴⁹ The feminist scholar of American Islam Sylvia Chan Malik argues that following the

⁴⁷ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, NY: W.W Norton, 1963).

⁴⁸ Sylvia Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018), 121.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 129

death of Malcolm X, Betty Shabazz solidified her place as one of the most well-respected Muslim women of the 20th century by using her identity as a Muslim woman and prioritizing her role as a wife, to traverse the often difficult and dangerous political conditions that she faced throughout her lifetime.⁵⁰ All things considered, Shabazz represents an often overlooked example of Muslim women's activism in American history, one that alludes to the history of many other Muslim women whose work to better their communities has gone generally unnoticed.

Despite the substantial history of Muslim women's activism in America, their work is often undermined by the tension between upholding their religious commitments and assimilating into the nation. Muslim women activists in America face what I describe here as a double-bind between Islam and the West, in which they are unable to appease either side. The notion of a double-bind is not a new one; many scholars have theorized about it in the past, and especially in recent years given increasing representation of Muslim women in American activism. For example, the notion of a double-bind for Muslim women was spotlighted after journalist and activist Mona Eltahawy published an article titled "What Happened When I Was Sexually Assaulted during the Hajj," detailing her experiences of being sexually assaulted during hajj, at the holiest site in the Islamic faith.⁵¹ This article subsequently led to the start of a movement called #MosqueMeToo⁵² where Muslim women spoke out about their experiences of sexual assault within the Muslim community. Eltahawy described what I call the double-bind

⁵⁰ Ibid., 136

⁵¹ Mona Eltahawy, "Opinion | #Mosquemetoo: What Happened When I Was Sexually Assaulted During the Hajj," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, October 28, 2021).

⁵² This was in response to, and in some ways, a fringe of, Me Too, which is a movement against sexual assault and harassment where allegations are publicized; it was first used in 2006 on MySpace by Tarana Burke who is a Black feminist, sexual assault survivor, and activist.

saying “I am very aware that Muslim women are caught between a rock and a hard place: Islamophobes/racists who demonize all Muslim men and our community that defends all Muslim men. Neither side cares about Muslim women.”⁵³ Similarly, professor of communications and multimedia Faiza Hirji theorized about the double-bind in this context saying “Islamophobes used #MosqueMeToo as a way to validate misconceptions about abusive, sexist Muslim men, and some Muslims (male and female) rejected the accounts of sexual assault, insisting that it was impossible that Muslim men would have comported themselves in such a way in a holy place.”⁵⁴

I enter this this debate about the double-bind that Muslim women face by focusing specifically on manifestations of the double-bind in the American contemporary context, as it relates to Muslim women activists. On one hand, America asks Muslim women to fit into rigid homogenizing roles such as the oppressed, hijab wearing Muslim woman in need of saving, or the rebellious, outspoken, uncovered Muslim woman in need of protection from her oppressive relatives.⁵⁵ In both cases, the American mainstream perpetuates Islamophobic stereotypes about Muslims that tokenize Muslim women’s activism and, in many ways, pit them against the broader Muslim community. On the opposite side of this bind sit Islam and Muslim communities. Muslim women face scrutiny for their activism from within their own communities for a variety of reasons, many of which amount to norms regarding modesty that are common in Muslim communities and discourage women from having a public presence. This is especially evident in the majority American masjids where the only representatives for the congregation

⁵³ Aymann Ismail, “#MosqueMeToo Puts Muslim Women ‘between a Rock and a Hard Place,’” *Slate*, February 14, 2018.

⁵⁴ Faiza Hirji, “Claiming Our Space: Muslim Women, Activism, and Social Media,” *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (January 2021), <https://doi.org/10.13169/islastudj.6.1.0078>.

⁵⁵ Katherine Allison, "American Occidentalism and the Agential Muslim Woman." *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 3 (2013): 665-84. doi:10.1017/S0260210512000289

outside the masjid are men, and all leadership inside the masjid are men. Furthermore, some Muslim communities are critical of the intentions of Muslim women activists because of the ways that their activism seemingly positions them against Islam. The suspicion that Muslim communities have of activists is not undue, though; following 9/11 and the enactment of the Patriot Act, government surveillance became common place in Islamic centers across the country, and as such, many Islamic centers have valid fears of infiltration. Activists whose positions clash with those dominant in the Muslim community are deemed to be suspicious, and often labelled as sellouts. That said, these concerns do not, in fact justify the ways that Muslims women activists are made into easy targets by both the Muslim community and the West.

One of the most prominent female Muslim activists in America currently is Linda Sarsour. As a Palestinian-American who was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Sarsour's activist career began shortly before 9/11 when she was invited to work as an organizer at the Arab American Association of New York. She worked to help poor Arabs through charity, until the organization was transformed into an anti-Islamophobia organization following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. At a time when Muslim-Americans were being illegally profiled, searched, surveilled, and incarcerated, Sarsour was one of the first activists fighting against anti-Muslim racism. She quickly rose to prominence as a Muslim American activist who was called to speak for Muslims publicly on platforms such as CNN, Democracy Now, and MSNBC. She also worked closely with Black activists in the Black Lives Matter movement, arguing that Black liberation is intertwined with Muslim liberation. More recently, Sarsour was one of the co-founders of MPower Change, the largest Muslim digital advocacy organization in the US.⁵⁶ Sarsour says that while her identity as a Muslim woman is integral to her activism, it also

⁵⁶ "Vision." MPower Change. Accessed April 14, 2022. <https://www.mpowerchange.org/vision>.

produces two tensions in her life. First, although Muslim women are often “the back bones of the community, they usually are not the forefront.” She is doing work that is not common for Muslim women, let alone hijab-wearing Muslim women; this means that she is in many ways carving a path of her own, that is marred with obstacles such as not being able to be around her children as often as she might be expected to and being asked to speak for all Muslim women everywhere. Second, wearing the hijab marks Sarsour in particularly religious way, though she herself is honest about not being religious in the traditional sense, but rather upholding ideals about social justice that are integral to Islamic practice.⁵⁷ Considering this, Sarsour has been significantly scrutinized by American-Muslims for her activist work.⁵⁸ Debbie Almontaser, another hijab-wearing Muslim activist has openly criticized Sarsour’s lack of humility, which she says is a core Islamic value.⁵⁹ Older generations of conservative Muslims have said that she is too liberal or acts in ways unbecoming of Muslim women. Yet other Muslims have said that she is doing more work for communities other than the Muslim community. Black Muslims are also critical of the ways that Sarsour’s activism focuses on post 9/11 Islamophobia in ways that undermine the Islamophobia that Black Muslims have faced in America since the nation’s inception.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the work that Linda Sarsour has engaged in has been instrumental in

⁵⁷ Alan Feuer, “Linda Sarsour Is a Brooklyn Homegirl in a Hijab,” *The New York Times*, August 7, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/nyregion/linda-sarsour-is-a-brooklyn-homegirl-in-a-hijab.html>.

⁵⁸ Here I am simply pointing out the criticism that Linda Sarsour has received from within the Muslim community. I am not taking a position on whether this criticism is valid or invalid, but rather showing that she is in a position where she exemplifies what I call the double-bind, accused of being neither committed enough to Muslim causes nor to American causes.

⁵⁹ Alan Feuer, “Linda Sarsour Is a Brooklyn Homegirl in a Hijab,” *The New York Times*, August 7, 2015.

⁶⁰ Vanessa Taylor, “The (Anti) Black Ass Roots of America's Islamophobia,” *Medium*, January 27, 2017, <https://medium.com/@BaconTribe/the-anti-black-ass-roots-of-americas-islamophobia-374fa6d0947b>.

combatting Islamophobic stereotypes that have arisen since 9/11 and carving a path for Muslim women activists in America to be taken seriously on their own terms.

Additionally, Sarsour has had to face the consequences of not meeting the expectations of an ideal Muslim activist in America as defined by dominant western liberal ideals. This became especially apparent in her work with the Women's March, a massive nationwide protest movement that started in January 2017 following the inauguration of President Donald Trump to support gender equality and civil rights that were being threatened by his presidency. Sarsour was one of the founders of the march and played an instrumental role in its accomplishments especially that of highlighting the voices of women of color in America. Later in 2018, Sarsour was called to step down from the board of the march due to her so-called anti-Semitic positions, which, in reality, were anti-Zionist positions, and ones that have been important to her identity as a Palestinian-American Muslim activist since she first began her work. She was eventually pushed out of the board of the march and has had to fight against allegations of anti-Semitism on a larger scale than ever before. Most recently, President Joe Biden renounced Sarsour after her speech at the Democratic National Convention, saying that neither she nor anti-Semitism had any place in the Democratic party.⁶¹

Much like Linda Sarsour, Zahra Billoo is a prominent American-Muslim activist who challenges dominant discourse about the ways that Muslim women should engage in activism. In considering the path that led her to her current role as the director of CAIR San Francisco, she talks about how those around her suggested she become a lawyer because she “enjoyed arguing

⁶¹ Ebony Bowden, “Biden Camp Apologizes to Muslim Democrats After Condemning Linda Sarsour,” New York Post, August 24, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/08/24/biden-camp-apologizes-to-muslim-dems-after-condemning-sarsour/>.

and talking far more than was expected of a Muslim girl.”⁶² From a young age, she faced the politics of what a Muslim woman should be like, ultimately choosing to become a lawyer, an occupation that was and continues to be uncommon for Muslim women. She is now the director of the oldest chapter of CAIR and does advocacy work on behalf of Muslims in the San Francisco Bay Area. In addition to this role, she has had a variety of media appearances in national outlets such as MSNBC, NPR, and even Fox News.

Billoo has been associated with the Women’s March since its inception and in 2019, after Linda Sarsour was forced out of the board of the march, Billoo was appointed to the board, seemingly as a new token hijabi in Sarsour’s place. It was not long, though, before Billoo began facing smear campaigns from right-wing media outlets such as the NY Post that were quickly picked up by the Zionist Anti-Defamation League (ADL); Billoo was accused of being anti-Semitic because of statements she made regarding apartheid in Israel. Just two days after her appointment to the board of the Women’s March, she was removed for making “statements incompatible with the values and mission of the organization.”⁶³ This was not the only time that Billoo faced consequences for standing with Palestinian people in the face of Israeli apartheid. Billoo, along with the senior advocacy manager at Alliance for Girls, Haleema Bharroocha, were invited to be the keynote speakers at the 2022 San Mateo County Commission on the Status of Women’s RISE conference. In February of 2022, though, Billoo’s invitation was rescinded, citing her remarks she made in November 2021 speech, that encouraged the audience to oppose not only the extreme right-wing forces, but also “polite Zionists” such as the ADL, Hillel, and

⁶² “Muslim Women Changemakers: Zahra Billoo,” altMuslimah, March 1, 2015, <https://www.altmuslimah.com/2015/03/zahra-billoo/>.

⁶³ Women’s March [@Womensmarch]. Twitter Post. September 19, 2019, 9:47 AM, <https://twitter.com/womensmarch/status/1174711729483386880>

Zionist synagogues.⁶⁴ After Billoo was removed as a keynote speaker, Bharroocha removed herself from the conference saying that she would not be the organization's "token Muslim woman."⁶⁵ Perhaps most interestingly in each of these instances, it is clear that for many Muslim women activists in America, their positions on Palestine are the litmus test for whether or not they are accepted and taken seriously by the West; anti-Zionist positions are as good as a death sentence for American-Muslim women activists seeking acceptance in the West.⁶⁶ This is especially evidenced in the fact that while Zahra Billoo continues to be an important figure in CAIR and the Muslim community, she also continues to be quietly removed from the programs of conferences, workshops, and events centered around social justice, women's rights, and interfaith dialogue.⁶⁷ Billoo's activism only goes to show that Muslim women activists in America tread a fine line between being accepted and being thrown under the bus by the same organizations that claim to support them; they must be absolutely "perfect" by the dominant standards of liberalism in the West or they are abandoned, and by "perfection" here, I mean being non-threatening to the status quo and directing one's critiques only towards patriarchy, preferably of a Muslim type, lest one be considered a radical.

⁶⁴ Emma Goss, "Zahra Billoo Removed as Speaker at San Mateo Women's Conference," J. (The Jewish News of Northern California, February 10, 2022), <https://jweekly.com/2022/02/10/zahra-billoo-removed-as-keynote-speaker-at-san-mateo-womens-conference/>.

⁶⁵ Haleema Bharroocha [@HaleemaTheB]. Twitter Post. March 16, 2022, 1:12 PM. <https://mobile.twitter.com/HaleemaTheB/status/1504173682146492416>

⁶⁶ Although it is beyond the scope of this capstone to talk about the occupation of Palestine, it is interesting to note it as the one position that all Muslims are tasked with having a position on. Furthermore, if that position is pro-Palestinian, then the person is deemed anti-Semitic, and because of America's vested interest in Israel, anti-American. See more in John J Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt's *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2008)

⁶⁷ Emma Goss, "Zahra Billoo Removed as Speaker at San Mateo Women's Conference," J. (The Jewish News of Northern California, February 10, 2022).

While Sarsour and Billoo represent the most visible forms of Muslim women's activism in America, there are many other Muslim women doing activist work that does not garner attention as much. One phenomenal example is Angelica Lindsey-Ali, known commonly online as 'The Village Auntie'. Lindsey-Ali is a Black woman who was born in Detroit to a staunch Christian family. After converting to Islam at the age of 23, Lindsey-Ali has spent 20 years working in public health and advocating for women's wellness from an African perspective.⁶⁸ The Village Auntie moniker is derived from the women in some traditional African communities to whom girls and young women go to with questions regarding menstruation, sex, and reproduction. While discussions of sex, intimacy, and pleasure are often deemed taboo in Muslim communities, Lindsey-Ali asserts that in Islam, sexual intimacy is a sacred act, one that develops the connection between a married couple, affirming the notion that to be married is to complete half of one's *deen*, or faith in Islam. While Lindsey-Ali is employed in the public health sector and does work with HIV outreach, her activism as the Village Auntie consists of workshops, videos, and online resources that discuss sex, pleasure, relationships, body awareness, and other topics to help women learn about their bodies and do so in a way that is in accordance with Islamic belief. In 2020, Lindsey-Ali launched 'The Village Auntie Institute', which created a central space to share village auntie knowledge.

The Village Auntie Institute, although it began as just Lindsey-Ali using her knowledge as a sex educator to help educate Muslim women about their bodies and intimacy, has developed into a much larger movement that seeks to equip other Muslim women to be Village Aunties to their own communities. Lindsey-Ali argues that the Village Auntie Movement is not a movement

⁶⁸ Layla Abdullah-Poulos, "Real Talk with the 'Village Auntie' – On Intimacy Between Married Couples," The Haute Take (Haute Hijab, October 22, 2019), <https://blog.hautehijab.com/post/interview-with-the-village-auntie>.

about sex, but rather one that seeks to reclaim the “feminine power of sisterhood.”⁶⁹ This is especially true in the context of sexual abuse that Muslim women face from within the community, whether from spiritual leaders, their husbands, relatives, or others. There are rarely safe spaces where Muslim women can talk about these instances of abuse since it’s deemed immodest to speak about sex publicly in Muslim space, and outside of Muslim spaces, their testimonies get misrepresented in ways that sustain Islamophobic stereotypes about the abusiveness of Muslim men. In fact, many Muslim women who have faced sexual abuse have left Islam for this very reason. Lindsey-Ali speaks of when she herself was sexually assaulted by a Muslim man two weeks after converting to Islam, saying that she very well could have been one of the women who left Islam as a result of this experience; instead, she leaned into her faith because she knew that the man’s actions were not representative of Islam. The community that she seeks to build through the Village Auntie Movement is one that allows for Muslim women to speak openly about sex, whether that is in advocating for themselves in instances of sexual assault, or in discussions about receiving pleasure from sex. Lindsey-Ali has faced pushback from Muslims both online and offline, many of whom believe that her work is immodest and encourages Muslims to engage in pre-marital sex, allegations which Lindsey-Ali says are based in lack of knowledge of the sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ who spoke openly about topics such as these. All things considered, The Village Auntie’s work pushes back against dominant Muslim discourse that lacks understandings of women’s sexuality, and dominant Western discourse that views Muslim women as lacking agency.

In discussing the work and experiences these women, I hope to have shown the vastness of Muslim women’s activism, both within and outside of their own communities. Each of these

⁶⁹ Angelica Lindsey-Ali [@villageauntie]. Twitter Post. November 6, 2019, 11:24 AM. <https://twitter.com/villageauntie/status/1192145656674058240>

women offers a unique example of the ways that Muslim women activists in America have resisted dominant Western notions of how Muslim women should exist and engage in the world around them. In taking seriously activists like Linda Sarsour, Zahra Billoo, and Angelica Lindsey-Ali on their own terms, we are able to move beyond the Islamophobic stereotypes that dominate American society and that place undue burdens on Muslim women as they navigate these expectations of their own communities. The next section of this capstone seeks to build upon the ideas of taking Muslim women activists seriously on their own terms by suggesting that the internet is a unique space for Muslim women's community building, organizing, and activism. I will focus particularly on a case study of sexual assaults within the Muslim community that were brought to light primarily using social media such as Twitter.

Online Possibilities for Muslim Women's Activism

As I continue to consider the value of Muslim women's activism and solidarity, particularly in the wake of allegations of sexual assault that I discuss at the end of this section, I am inspired to reflect on my own experiences on the internet as a Muslim woman who has been on social media since the age of 12. For many young Muslim women who grew up in America, the internet has provided an otherwise nonexistent outlet. Coming from a conservative family, my parents rarely allowed my siblings and I to spend time outside of our house, unless it was for school. For me, this meant that I rarely developed close friendships with my peers, but online, developing relationships was easy. My internet friends saw my most authentic self in ways that I couldn't express in "real life" until college, and I know that many of them would characterize their internet experiences in the same way. Even those American Muslim women who did not come from conservative families found the internet a place that allowed them to connect with people who have similar religious beliefs and experiences, especially as Islam continues to be a minority religion in this country. Through the development of these connections, many young Muslim women feel enabled to voice their thoughts both on the internet and off. In this section I argue first that the internet has and continues to provide a space for Muslim women to cultivate their identities as activists and allows for the creation of unique networks among Muslim women that encourage and enable their work in ways that they are not able to find elsewhere. At the same time, I further argue that the internet is not immune to the double-bind that Muslim women activists face, but rather that it provides an example of the potentialities of Muslim women's activism if they find adequate levels of support. In arguing this, I offer the virtual space as one which can be used as a model for taking seriously Muslim women activists' words on their own terms, unmediated by the pressures to be perfect for the West or for Muslim communities.

Muslim women's activism in America is rich and multifaceted, as evidenced in the previous section. In highlighting the distinct capability of the internet to enable Muslim women's activism, I by no means want to undermine the existing history of activism. It is because of the Muslim women who were vocal throughout American history that it is even possible for Muslim women to be taken seriously on the internet today. Instead, I want to emphasize the accessibility of the internet and the impact of this accessibility on the ways that Muslim women participate in activism. This is especially significant in an internet age, where many Muslim elders do not recognize the impact of the Internet in being a nontraditional source of Islamic knowledge and Muslim community building. In this section, I identify two means through which internet enables Muslim women's activism: first, in the development of an online ummah (or Muslim community) that allows for transnational community building; and second through the creation of counter-publics that allow Muslim women activists to negotiate the terms of their visibility. This enablement is then evidenced in a case study of Muslim women's speaking out about instances of sexual assault and abuse by significant figures within the Muslim community. I argue here that speaking out against sexual violence is a means through which Muslim women pursue justice, and this activism should be taken seriously as such.

Muslim Women in the Online Ummah

Here I want to consider the intentional ways that Muslims use the internet to create online community, building on the ideas of a prophetic ummah. Ummah is an Arabic word that refers to community generally, but it is colloquially used by Muslims to refer to all the followers of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Despite the countless differences among the over two billion Muslims living around the world, through understandings of a global Ummah, Muslims find themselves

connected to people who they would otherwise not have relationships with. This idea was expressed beautifully by Malcolm X after his experience at hajj. He said:

“During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug) — while praying to the same God — with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white. And in the words and in the actions in the deeds of the ‘white’ Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan, and Ghana. We were truly all the same (brothers) — because their belief in one God had removed the white from their minds, the white from their behavior, and the white from their attitude.”⁷⁰

Although Malcolm X spoke from a very different time than the one that this project is based in, there are still vast differences among Muslims around the world, but through Islam, there is indeed an experience of universal connectedness. While this connectedness was theoretical for a long time considering both the physical and cultural distances between say a Muslim living in America and one living in France, Senegal or Indonesia, the advent of the internet created a place, besides the holy cities of Makkah and Medina, where Muslims from around the world encounter the idea of a prophetic ummah. For Muslim women in particular, the capabilities of the internet have allowed for a transnational connectedness that was previously impossible, whether due to lack of physical space in masjids to build cross cultural communities or geographic isolation from other Muslims. Focusing specifically on the Iranian context, professor of social sciences, Mehri Shahzeidi argues that Iranian women do not get to reap the benefits of public spaces such as plazas, parks, malls, and beaches in the same way that men do, inducing a certain sense of social isolation. She further argues that “cyberspace offers new forms of communication that potentially enable women to break through their often-isolated social

⁷⁰ “Malcolm X's Letter from Hajj,” IlmFeed, 1964, <https://ilmfeed.com/malcolm-xs-letter-from-hajj/>.

situation.”⁷¹ While this contextualized understanding of the value of cyberspace for Iranian women cannot be directly applied to the American context, there are similarities between the two. Many Muslim-American women experience levels of social isolation as a result of being unable to find community; in the wake of this isolation, some Muslim-American women today find community outside their faith, while others seek out those who share their beliefs through virtual spaces. These spaces are evident in a variety of modes, including through online forums that center Muslim women’s voices and experiences, countless YouTube videos teaching Muslim women how to style hijabs or dress modestly fashionable, and groups that connect Muslim women around the world.

Muslim Women’s Counterpublics

Although Muslim women’s use of the internet is in many ways comparable to internet usage among other groups in America, the true emancipatory potential of their usage is realized through the creation and usage of online counter-publics. Counterpublics refer to spaces that “stand in conscientious opposition to dominant ideology and strategically subvert that ideology’s construction in public discourse.”⁷² In other words, a counterpublic is a space that counters discourse within the broader public space. Because Muslim women are often policed by the Muslim community for the ways that they present themselves, especially if they are loud or outspoken, in which case they are deemed immodest, the internet is a place where modesty is more difficult to police. Further, in the construction of counterpublics, Muslim women can maintain certain levels of both modesty and privacy while still actively participating in discourse

⁷¹ Mehri Shahzeidi, Elaheh Shabani Afarani, and Younghoon Chang. “Can Women Benefit from Cyberspace as a Public Space?” September 5, 2013. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2331886>.

⁷² Alexander L Fattal, “Encyclopedia Entry - Counterpublic,” eScholarship (California Digital Library, University of California, 2018), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/73t260cm>.

and advocacy. Above all else, counter-publics allows for Muslim women to negotiate the terms of their visibility in ways that are not possible, or at the very least more difficult, offline.

The most evident example of this online counterpublic is through the creation of alternative accounts on social media, such as “finstas”, which is short for fake Instagram where, in contrast to a real Instagram account where a perfectly curated life is displayed for anyone, finstas allow for a less public social platform that is limited to only trusted friends. Similarly, the use of private stories and “close friends” settings allows for Muslim women to censor what they share with everyone, and what they share with those they trust. Although the idea of finstas is not one that is exclusive to Muslim women, it is one of the ways that Muslim women are able to create safe spaces for themselves on the internet. By creating alternative profiles and stories for a specific audience, young Muslim women share themselves authentically while maintaining notions of modesty, even online. Anthropologist Karen Waltorp argues that “these activities in social media may not be ‘public’ in the normative sense of the term, but for the young Muslim women a social platform where they can choose for whom they are visible and to what extent, can be empowering.”⁷³ Indeed this is true in a variety of contexts, take for example that of hijab wearing Muslim women, who in public profiles maintain their hijabs, but find empowerment in having curated spaces where they can safely share whatever they want to, without compromising their public hijabs. This empowerment is not limited to hijabs and posting selfies, though. In creating online counterpublics, Muslim women feel safe expressing opinions, engaging in activism, and developing identities that would otherwise be chastised by either Muslims themselves or the West.

⁷³ Karen Waltorp, “Public/Private Negotiations in the Media Uses of Young Muslim Women in Copenhagen,” *International Communication Gazette* 75, no. 5-6 (2013): pp. 555-572, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048513491912>.

For Muslim women activists in America, these counterpublics are especially significant. In a post 9/11 era, where the threat of surveillance runs rampant in nearly every aspect of Muslim-American life, and where publicly visible Muslim women are held to impossible standards of perfection as defined by an Islamophobic liberal West, finding spaces that circumvent this surveillance is crucial to sustaining Muslim women's activism. The threat of surveillance is not one that can be ignored for Muslim-American women participating in activism, both offline and online. While the internet provides the possibility of safety from surveillance for Muslim-American women activists, I do not intend to undermine the ways that the internet also exacerbates the fears that Muslim women have of being surveilled and harassed. The Israeli occupation in Palestine is a key issue that warrants concern in terms of activism; speaking out in support of Palestinian liberation induces allegations of anti-Semitism, which as previously evidenced, have detrimental effects on Muslim women. Canary Mission is a website dedicated to compiling dossiers on student activists, faculty, and organizations on college campuses across America. The site uses insidious social media surveillance tactics to track and document criticisms of Israel, whether it is from public or private social media accounts. Canary Mission, in effect, blacklists anyone who expresses support of Palestinian liberation, causing calamitous side effects including being harassed, fired from jobs, denied employment, and being interrogated by university administration and employers, not to mention the effects of this blacklisting on the mental health of those who are listed.⁷⁴ This type of harassment, though, is not limited only to Canary Mission; Muslim women in particular face many of the same forces they encounter offline in virtual spaces.

⁷⁴ Alex Kane, "'It's Killing the Student Movement': Canary Mission's Blacklist of Pro-Palestine Activists Is Taking a Toll," *The Intercept* (The Intercept, November 22, 2018), <https://theintercept.com/2018/11/22/israel-boycott-canary-mission-blacklist/>.

Despite these critical limitations of the internet's liberatory potential, there has been considerable value in the ability of Muslim-American women to organize collective action through the internet. Particularly in response to the larger #MosqueMeToo movement I mentioned earlier, there were large scale allegations of misconduct against a variety of popular figures in the Muslim community, which I explicate in the case study that follows. While I concede here that the power imbalances that allowed for much of this misconduct were facilitated by the internet, I use this case study to show the potentialities of internet when it comes to seeking justice, particularly within the American-Muslim community as well as the broader global Muslim community.

Case Study

Beginning in 2017, I became witness to a pivotal moment in Muslim American women's activism. As the internet became an increasingly popular place to give da'wah, an invitation for people to embrace Islam, Muslim internet celebrities, who I refer to in this section as celebrity imams, became very visible.⁷⁵ Because of social media such as YouTube and Facebook, speakers who were otherwise limited to their local communities, gained international platforms with millions of followers. These celebrity imams are primarily men, which is not to say that Muslim women haven't also gained massive platforms as a result of an increase in social media usage among Muslims, but rather that men's contributions to spreading Islam over the internet have

⁷⁵ The primary purpose of da'wah is to encourage people to practice Islam and worship Allah. See more: <https://www.ukim.org/media-centre/latest-news-&-updates/how-to-give-dawah-in-islam/>. Additionally, an Imam is a person who leads prayer in a masjid. The people mentioned in this section have a variety of Islamic titles, including Ustadh (teacher), Sheikh (leader/scholar), and Hafiz (one who has memorized the Qur'an). Imam is used to acknowledge the positions these people hold in the Muslim community, even if they do not refer to themselves as imams, each of these people were at one point an imam.

tended to be more quickly and widely validated than that of women.⁷⁶ As a result of the validation that these celebrity imams received from millions of people on the internet, many lost any sense of communal accountability that exists in spaces such as masjids, Islamic societies, and small scale Muslim organizations. Whereas communities have the ability to hold their members accountable for any transgressions they engage in, celebrity imams can sidestep this accountability precisely because they have considerable online platforms that transcend the geographical limits of their national communities. This means that even if they are called out by their communities, they can continue to share videos and posts for an international audience that is either oblivious to or willfully ignorant of the imam's actions. This is a cycle that has been replicated by various Muslim speakers on the internet. It is important to note here that this is not a critique of internet da'wah or even the vast majority of Muslim scholars and speakers who have found notoriety on the internet, but rather a specific critique of the pedestals of infallibility that I would argue have been constructed for celebrity imams. This case study looks at Muslim women's advocacy in response to allegations of sexual misconduct against celebrity imams. It is also an attempt to show the double standards that are applied to male versus female Muslim public figures, or what I have called the double bind of Muslim women's activism.

The initial and most publicly shocking allegations that I watched play out on Twitter and Facebook were those against Nouman Ali Khan, the founder of the Bayyinah Institute which was one of the first Muslim organizations to take advantage of the potentiality of the internet in spreading knowledge about Islam and the Qur'an.⁷⁷ Khan is an internationally renowned speaker

⁷⁶ Although not necessarily relevant here, I hypothesize this has some relationship to the mainstream Islamic conceptions of women's modesty and their role in society, which both discourage women from being "public figures."

⁷⁷ See more about Bayyinah: <https://bayyinah.com/> . I would also like to acknowledge Bayyinah's impact in the Muslim community by noting that Nouman Ali Khan, Mohammad Zeyara, and Fatih Seferagic (the latter two are mentioned later in this section) have all at some point in their careers had at least a working relationship with the

with a combined total of over 4 million followers, and hundreds of videos on topics ranging from Qur'anic tafsir⁷⁸ to discussions on how a Muslim should behave in everyday life. Once known for the firm Islamic conservatism that he exemplified in his online lectures, Khan was implicated in a 2017 Facebook post by Omer Mozaffar, the Muslim Chaplain at Loyola University Chicago, for having inappropriate relationships with women. In the now deleted Facebook post, Mozaffar said “[Khan] confessed inappropriate interactions with various women, violating agreed-upon bounds of Islamic law," and "He also told lies to cover up those relationships, and filed threats of litigation against multiple parties to further hide his misconduct. I am calling on him to focus on repentance and reform.”⁷⁹ At the same time, a number of women shared screenshots of inappropriate conversations that they had with Khan, and the scandal quickly became one not of a Muslim leader's hypocrisy or betrayal of his community, but rather one of “sexting”. In this scandal, while Khan was defended by his followers from around the world, the women's reliability and virtue was questioned for having engaged in the sexting. There was little mainstream discussion of the ways that a speaker with millions of followers across various platforms manipulated young and otherwise vulnerable women.

The allegations against Nouman Ali Khan coincided with the virality of the #MeToo movement. While there isn't evidence of a direct relationship between the #MeToo movement and the allegations against Khan, this moment in time spurred a movement among Muslim women to speak out about regarding Muslim community leaders who had committed acts of

Bayyinah Institute, including during the times that many of these allegations were developing. This is mentioned not to say anything about the institute's practices, but rather about its notoriety.

⁷⁸ Tafsir refers to the practice of exegesis with the primary aim to provide elucidation, explanation, interpretation, context or commentary for clear understanding and conviction of God's will.

⁷⁹ Leyal Khalife, “A Muslim Preacher Was Accused of 'Sexting' ... and People Have Mixed Reactions,” StepFeed, September 25, 2017, <https://stepfeed.com/a-muslim-preacher-was-accused-of-sexting-and-people-have-mixed-reactions-0859>.

sexual indecency. Of particular interest to me in this section are the allegations against Fatih Seferagic, Mohammad Zeyara, and Osama Eisa. These three men represent three unique positions within the global Muslim ummah and help to show the double-standard that is held up against Muslim women, particularly in terms of the ways that they operate on the internet's virtual space. Before I describe the allegations against these men, I acknowledge that some of the actions described here may not be considered sexual indecency in spaces that are not predominantly Muslim, especially considering that they take place between consenting adults. The argument I make, though, considers specifically Islamic moral grounds, in which there are significant boundaries in relationships between unmarried men and women, particularly that relationships of a sexual nature are forbidden. Of course, whether or not a Muslim engages in these actions is their own prerogative, but when people of considerable influence such as these celebrity imams are involved, the conversation is no longer about the individual's actions, and rather the exploitation of their positions of power and spiritual leadership for their own benefit, at the expense of Muslim women and the broader Muslim community.

Fatih Seferagic is a Bosnian-American *hafiz* and *qari*, reciter of the Qur'an. He is known around the world for his melodic recitations and beginning in 2013, he gained a particularly large platform among young Muslim women.⁸⁰ Seferagic has a combined total of over five million followers across Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. In July 2020, Seferagic's ex-wife, Anna⁸¹, said in a series of now deleted tweets that he'd abused her and drugged her on multiple occasions; she also insinuated that she was not the only victim of this. After her tweets, other

⁸⁰ This is my own evaluation of his fame, especially considering the ways that a lot of women would idealize Seferagic because he fits into many Eurocentric beauty standards. See examples of this in figure 2.

⁸¹ Pseudonym used to protect her privacy.

women came out saying that they had also experienced abuse at the hands of Seferagic. The overwhelming response on Twitter at the time was that the women making allegations could not be trusted.⁸² A year later in the summer of 2021, a Muslim-women led organization called Facing Abuse in Community Environments (FACE) released a report detailing various allegations against Seferagic, including those by his ex-wife. The 15-page report from FACE detailed allegations of drug facilitated sexual assault, sexual assault, physical abuse, misappropriation of funds, workplace misconduct, and reckless transmission of a sexually transmitted disease. Each of these allegations was deemed substantiated and the report outlines evidence of them all.⁸³

⁸² In addition to responses from his followers that are included in screenshots included in figure 3 and his response to the allegations in figure 4, see a commonly shared response to the allegations here: <https://muslimskeptic.com/2021/08/31/face-and-alia-salem-the-pro-lgbt-deviants-who-hunt-imams/>

⁸³ See the report here: <https://www.facetogether.org/investigations/fatih-seferagic>

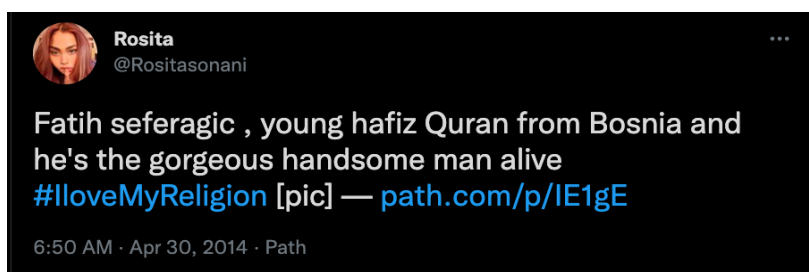


Figure 2: Fans expressing attraction to Fatih

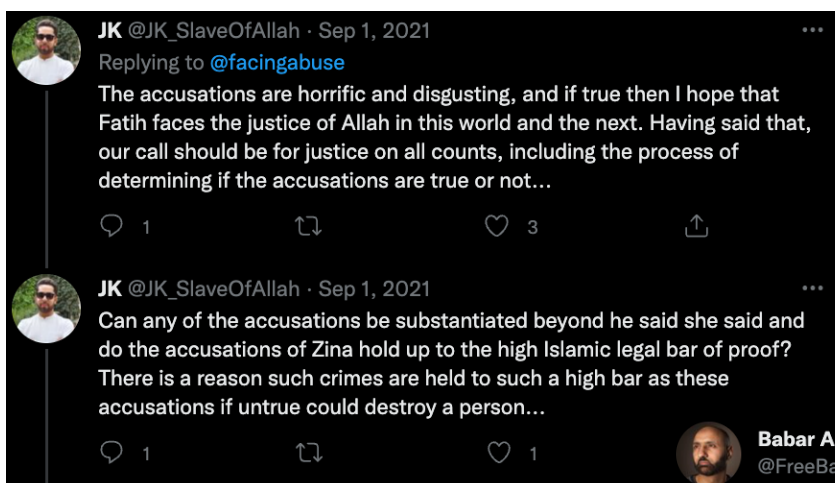
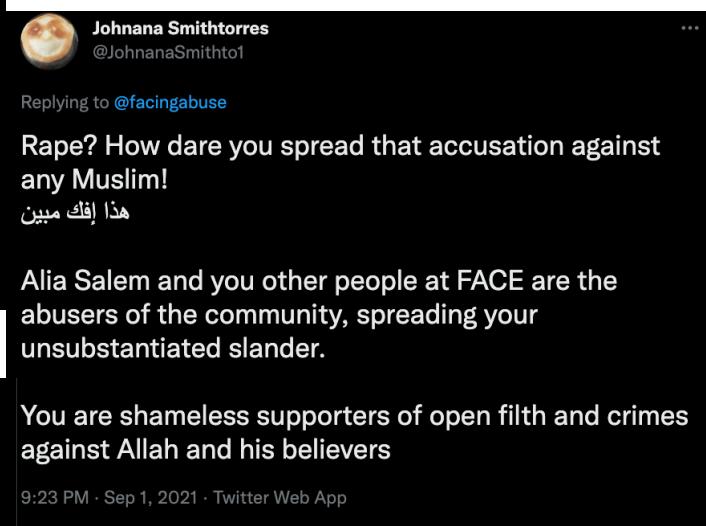


Figure 3: Common responses to the allegations brought against Fatih



therealfatih

muslim.daily

I am aware of the false allegations made about me, and I will be responding in due course. At this stage I can say with a clear conscience: by Allah these criminal allegations are completely false and baseless.

The organization claiming to have 'substantiated' these accusations is one that has not applied any Islamic laws, or gone through a legitimate legal process in the course of their 'investigation'. This is merely a group of individuals who have decided to carry out a campaign of character assassination by initiating and carrying out a trial by social media.

To clarify, I have never been approached by any law enforcement agency regarding these allegations. They have been fabricated, and propagated, by an organization that has an agenda, and no legal authority. I can also confirm that I have never been directly approached by the organization in question during the course of their "investigation". They only reached out 48 hours before releasing their report, which was published after a year long campaign of harassment and slander.

I refuse to engage with an organization that, by law, has no authority, and has actively sought to malign my character without providing me with an opportunity to respond. The insincerity of this organization is clear to see.

I invite the individuals involved to take their accusations, along with any evidence, to a court of law, where truth and justice can be made clear for all. This would also ensure an end to the circus that has played itself out over social media during the past 12 months. Until such action is taken, there will be no further comment on the matter from me.

Finally, for those who continue to abuse me and my wife, let me be very clear. The last 3 years of our lives have been very special for us, and continue to be. I request that you respect our privacy. When the time is right, you may hear from her, that is her decision and I ask you all to refrain from abusing and harassing her any further.



"O you who have believed, if there comes to you a disobedient one with information, investigate, lest you harm a people out of ignorance and become, over what you have done, regretful." (Quran 49:6)

Figure 4: Fatih's response to allegations against him

The allegations against Seferagic were horrifying on their own, but especially horrifying to me considering his proximity to the Muslim community in which I grew up. Anna is around my age, we grew up in the same place at the same time, we have many mutual friends. After they got married, Seferagic moved to Overland Park, Kansas, and became a member of the community at the Islamic Society of Johnson County (ICJC) where my family has attended Jummah, Ramadan dinners, and Eid Prayers for as long as I can remember. When the allegations about Seferagic's abuse came out, there was no mention at ICJC about his presence he had in our community, or discussion about whether there were other potential victims in our community. Although it could be argued that ICJC did not have a responsibility to make any public statements about the allegations against Seferagic since he had been divorced and left the community years before the allegations surfaced, the complete erasure of his involvement in our community meant that every other woman who faces a situation like the one Anna did, might never feel safe publicly talking about it. The consequences of ICJC's silence on this matter will continue to impact women for years to come, even if it is not evident now. Despite all of this, Seferagic continues to enjoy a considerable platform on the internet, that is reinvigorated every Ramadan when Muslims around the world share videos of his Qur'an recitations. He represents the ways that Muslim men can overcome allegations as grave as the ones he did, with little to no impact on their reputations, and continue to have significant positions within Muslim communities. Still, were it not for his ex-wife and others Muslim women who were abused by him having the courage to speak out against his actions, none of this would even be known.

Much like Seferagic and Khan, Mohammad Zeyara developed a platform through videos about Islam. Zeyara is a Canadian youtuber who moved to Chicago for medical school, and while in the US, developed close working relationships with many Muslim-American scholars

and organizations, such as Omar Sulaiman, the Bayyinah Institute, and the Islam Channel. From 2012 until 2021, Zeyara made tens of YouTube videos that garnered millions of views, his two most famous were: his “Inspiration” series that attempts to bring the sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ to contemporary life⁸⁴; and a video he made describing how he became a hafiz in two months while living in Palestine. Although none of his accounts are public anymore, reposted versions of his YouTube videos, as well as videos he made with other Muslim content creators are still accessible and continue to be shared among Muslims who use the internet.

In April of 2021, Zeyara’s ex-wife Ahlam made a Facebook post where she accused Zeyara of exploiting his public platform and using the pious Muslim image he represents to the internet to manipulate and abuse women.⁸⁵ The post details the nature of Zeyara’s abuse as being distinctly sexual, saying that he used escort services, sent explicit photos/videos, and lied about his marital status to deceive women into doing sexual acts with him. She said, “I have witnessed numerous interactions he has had with vulnerable women that he meets on his social media platforms,” indeed situating the abuse that Zeyara engages in as being directly related to the status he has as a celebrity imam. Ahlam also addressed a question that many Muslim women who come out about sexual assault publicly are met with: why is a matter of sexual nature between a husband and wife not being handled privately? She reasons that considering Zeyara’s public platform, it would be an insult to Islamic leadership to handle this privately and allow him to continue to have a platform or positions of power which he could use to harm more women. At the time, the reactions from Muslims around the world were varied: on one hand, many Muslim women expressed shock at yet another popular speaker being accused of spiritual and

⁸⁴ Sunnah is the lifestyle and practices of the Prophet Muhammad, and Muslims are encouraged to live their lives in a manner similar to the Prophet.

⁸⁵ Although the post itself has been deleted, screenshots are included in figure 5.

sexual abuse and there was a general sentiment about abandoning the very idea of Muslim “influencers”; on the other hand, some Muslim men expressed disbelief and urged members of the community to withhold any judgement until Zeyara made a statement, or there was an investigation done. Zeyara did not respond, but Ahlam reached out to FACE in October of 2021, and there is an ongoing investigation into Zeyara’s actions. Of all the men mentioned here, Zeyara is the only one who has, in some ways, completely disappeared from the online Muslim community; he no longer has a social media presence and has not been invited to conferences or other public engagements since these allegations were made. Additionally, he has lost all relationships he had with popular Muslim groups including the ‘Pious Project’ and the Bayyinah Institute. This is arguably because of the ways that Ahlam called for Muslims to recognize that Zeyara’s public platform enabled the abuse in which he engaged. In making sure of this, Ahlam is representative of the ways that Muslim women’s activism on the internet has begun the process of finding justice in the face of abusive men within the Muslim community.

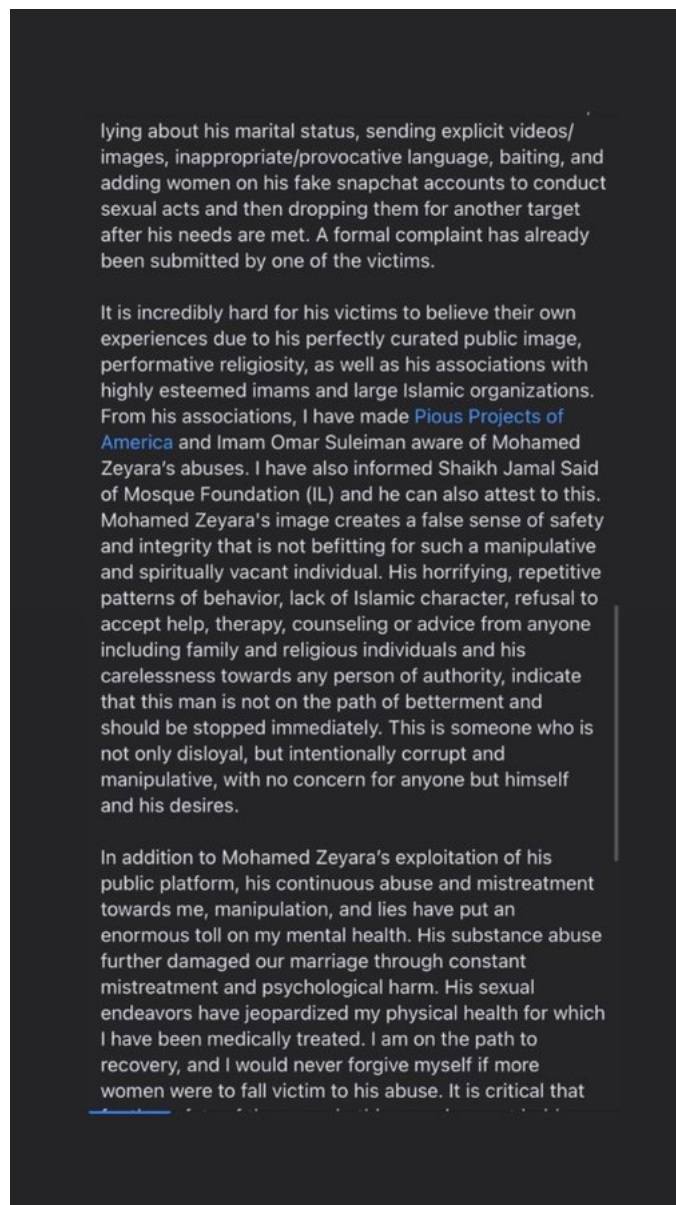
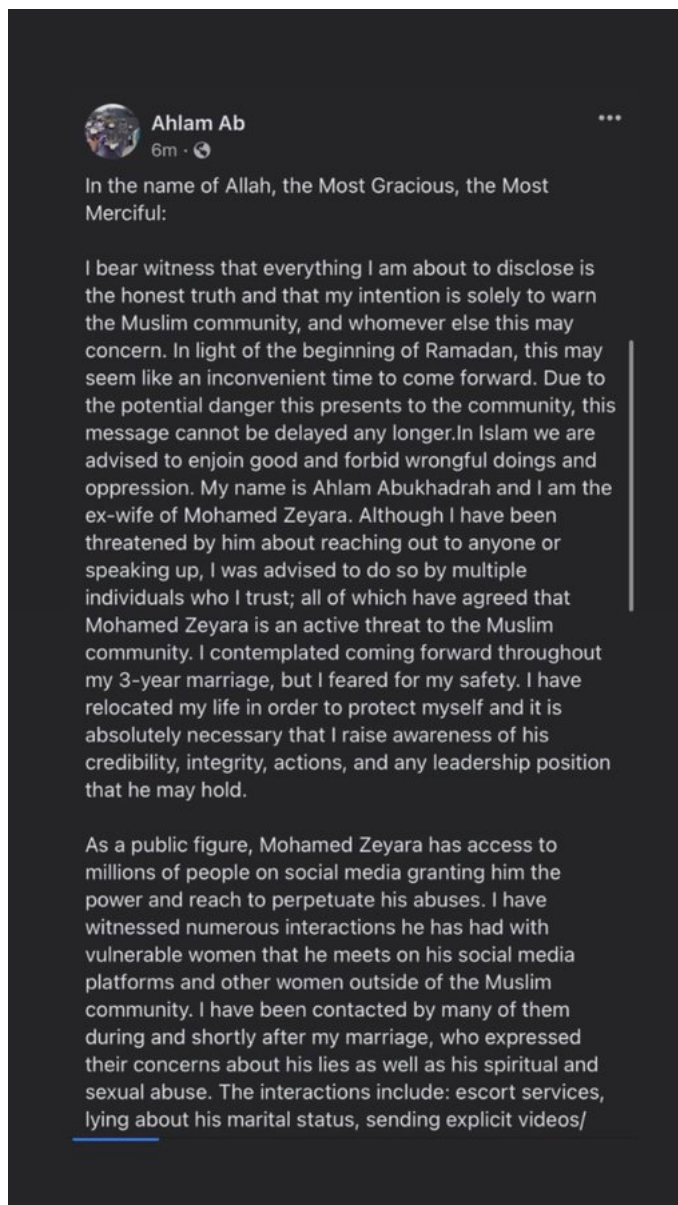


Figure 5: Ahlam's allegations against her ex-husband Mohamed Zeyara

mistreatment and psychological harm. His sexual endeavors have jeopardized my physical health for which I have been medically treated. I am on the path to recovery, and I would never forgive myself if more women were to fall victim to his abuse. It is critical that for the safety of the ummah, this man does not hold any position of power, leadership role, or public image in any capacity. That is the least we can do to protect women from his oppression and misuse of power.

For those who may ask why this is being handled publicly instead of privately: I was patient with Mohamad Zeyara for three years, urged him to seek support, gave him many chances, and did all that I could in hopes that he would change. I spent thousands of dollars on mental health services and private counseling and tried to maintain the marriage despite the abuse I suffered. I married him because of what my family and I saw of him through his public persona, but by Allah, it is nothing but a mask. It would be an insult to Islamic leadership, scholars, and organizations, to give this person any platform or involvement in projects or positions where he will have unrestricted access to harm more women and deceive more people.

I advise all Muslim leaders and Islamic organizations, for the sake of Allah (swt) to take this statement seriously. If you need any evidence or wish to speak to me, you can contact me at ahlamabu045@gmail.com .

If you or anyone you know has firsthand information on or was affected by any spiritual abuse, sexual abuse, coercion into performing sexual acts online and/or in person or was a victim of Mohamed Zeyara's manipulation and misuse of his platform, please contact me at ahlamabu045@gmail.com .

WaSalamu Alaykum

Figure 5 (cont.): Ahlam's allegations against her ex-husband Mohamed Zeyara

Osama Eisa is situated differently than the other three celebrity imams mentioned here, and although his notoriety isn't evidenced through millions of followers or hundreds of inspirational videos, he has undoubtedly had a massive impact on the American and global Muslim community.⁸⁶ Eisa first gained a following on the social network Tumblr, on which he has a blog called "PartyTilFajr". His blog name alone departs from many perceptions of Islam as being a religion that requires Muslims to mourn the experiences they lose if they do not assimilate to American notions of partying. Instead, he argues that he wants young American Muslims to "realize that [Islam] should be a source of joy in their lives, rather than some restriction."⁸⁷ His platform was designed to appeal to an audience that otherwise felt disconnected from an older generation of imams, many of whom struggle to relate to uniquely American experiences.⁸⁸ Eisa capitalized on this and created an identity as an Islamic scholar and speaker who could be relevant to the youth, particularly with cultural references, gifs, memes, and short "instagramable" snippets. From 2011 to as recently as April 2021, he posted inspirational and encouraging messages about Islam from the Quran and hadiths. As a result of his popularity on Tumblr, he was invited to speak at countless Muslim Student Organizations across the country, regularly lead prayers at masjids, and was asked to speak about Islam in a variety of contexts. Over the last decade, Eisa has constantly made himself accessible to young Muslim by allowing them to ask questions about Islam on his Tumblr blog and more recently on

⁸⁶ Tumblr does not allow users to see the follower count of any other users, so it's difficult to pinpoint exactly how many followers he has, especially because his popularity from Tumblr did not transfer to other social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook.

⁸⁷ See Eisa's explanation and other archived posts here: <https://partytilfajr.tumblr.com/post/29484733504/why-is-your-tumblr-twitter-name-party-til-fajr>

⁸⁸ This is in reference to the practice on many Masjids across America to invite classically trained scholars from the Middle East and South Asia to be imams in America because they have decades of knowledge on Islam, with no recognition of the deep cultural disconnect between older immigrants and the younger American generation.

ClubHouse⁸⁹, that would otherwise be too taboo to ask of classically trained scholars. This included questions about questioning faith, sex, and drugs. Eisa is in many ways representative of a growing online presence of Muslim American scholars attempting to connect young Muslims to Islam.

In August of 2021, Eisa’s ex-wife Shamiyan posted on Instagram an alarming account of their relationship from 2014 to 2019.⁹⁰ She shared that over the course of their marriage, she’d faced religious, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse by Eisa. Shamiyan described the ways that Eisa avoided getting a legal marriage and maintained that their Islamic nikkah⁹¹ was enough for their marriage to be considered legitimate. This is a common manipulation tactic used by abusive Muslim men through which they are able to use their wives for their own sexual benefit, while the wives get no legal benefits or protection under American law. Her post also stated that Eisa has used the trust he has accumulated in Muslim communities to access and abuse other women. After Shamiyan’s post about her relationship with Eisa gained traction among Muslims on Twitter, many expressed the betrayal they felt after having seen Eisa’s portrayal of himself as a pious Muslim scholar.⁹² Others expressed that they had been groomed and abused by Eisa in the past, arguing that his Tumblr blog allowed for “routine, carefully planned violence.”⁹³ Yet

⁸⁹ I mention Clubhouse, although it was a relatively short-lived platform, because I personally had interactions with Osama here, and saw the ways he was validated by other celebrity imams there.

⁹⁰ @Shamiyan. “Allegations of abuse against Osama Eisa by his ex-wife Shamiyan.” Instagram, August 27, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CTFk1C_LWcO/?utm_medium=copy_linkS

⁹¹ Marriage ceremony that unites a couple in the eyes of Allah but is not recognized by secular law.

⁹² See responses expressing this betrayal in figure 6.

⁹³ Mahroh [@Mahrohj]. Twitter Post. August 27, 2021, 6:11 PM, <https://twitter.com/mahrohj/status/1431409015637041153>.

others, claimed that Eisa misrepresented his Islamic training to appear more credible when making claims about Islam.

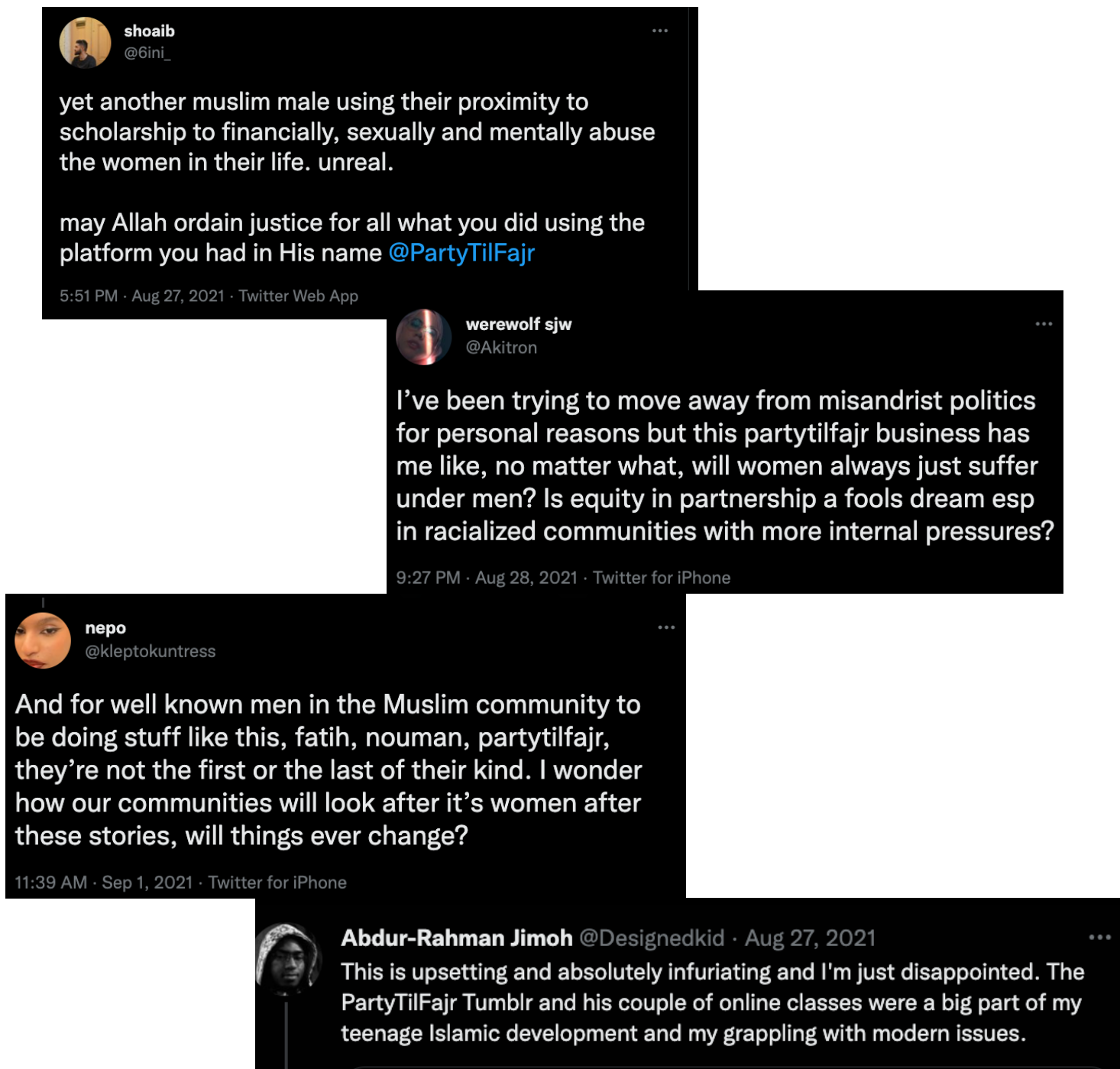
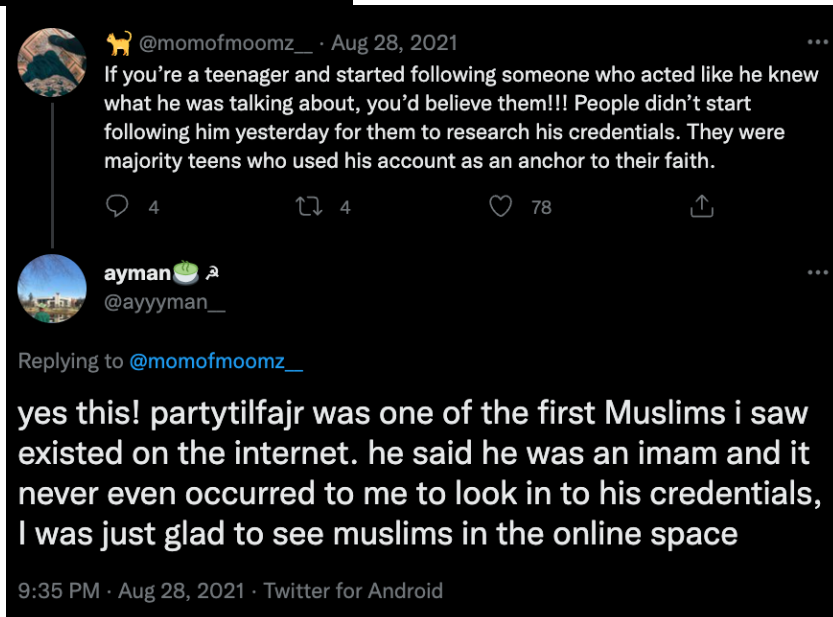


Figure 6: Responses to allegations against Osama Eisa



seen a lot floating abt online re the osama eisa incident with people belittling those who used to learn from him. "how were you taking deen from a guy called partytilfajr 🤔🤔👉" THAT HANDLE WAS THE WHOLE POINT LOL. he intentionally built his entire persona around being relatable to/attracting young muslims and making deen palatable to them on a platform that otherwise would've led them down a different route. let's not victim blame/shame and reduce this entire situation to the frivolity of his tumblr/twitter handle. men who use deen to abuse are well aware of what they're doing. by victim blaming you are taking the onus and accountability off the rotten, depraved individual (who, btw, is fully cognisant of the power/gender dynamics/imbalance and uses that to his advantage) and putting it on the the victims, the majority of whom were vulnerable and young women. when are we going to stop blaming women for being abused and actually support them? why do we think women are at their limit and will turn to anything to escape a community that does nothing when confronted with evidence of abuse?

Figure 6 (cont.): Responses to allegations against Osama Eisa

While neither unique to the Muslim community nor unheard of in the past, these three allegations of sexual misconduct I have described have incited a unique outrage among practicing Muslim women today, specifically because of the ways that the actions of celebrity imams are public and deeply hypocritical. While preaching about living a pious lifestyle and using social media to make it appear as if they also lived pious lives, these men participated in targeted violence towards vulnerable Muslim women who believed their public personas. Furthermore, while Muslim women are asked to answer for every strand of hair that falls out of their hijabs, Muslim men such as the ones mentioned here can transgress every boundary of Islam and are still protected by hadiths that encourage Muslims to not expose the faults of their brothers.

The Islamic logic behind this is varied; some scholars say that if a person has repented for a sin to Allah, then it is as if it never happened and therefore should not be used against a person in this world. Other scholars say that to expose someone's sins is a form of backbiting, which is forbidden in Islam. Yet other scholars argue that to expose a sin without witnesses and evidence is a sin in and of itself. A particular hadith is often referenced to make this point, "A servant does not cover the faults of another servant in the world, but that Allah will cover his faults on the Day of Resurrection."⁹⁴ Muslims are encouraged to cover the sins of their fellow believers, but this hadith has been carelessly thrown around in response to Muslim women speaking out about abuse they've faced at the hands of Muslim men. This is further done with no acknowledgement of the stipulation that sins which are being covered cannot be ones that create harm within the community, such as sexual or spiritual abuse. The abuse of power committed by celebrity imams is not only a sin because of the sexual nature of it, but also specifically because of the ways that

⁹⁴ Hadith, Sunan Ibn Majah 225, accessible here: <https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah:225>

it impacts the trust that people have in their community leaders. This is especially true because even after having been accused of egregious acts of sexual misconduct, most of the men mentioned in this section still have considerable platforms, they still get paid speaking engagements, their videos still accrue millions of views, and they still have prominent roles in Muslim communities across the country. With a few exceptions, they have faced little, if any, consequences for their actions, while the women who faced their abuse are left again in the double-bind. If they continue to advocate against these celebrity imams within the Muslim community, they themselves become the target of attacks on their character and faith; they are either not believed because they don't offer "credible evidence" or shunned since a good Muslim woman would not publicly air out her private matters. If they seek out support from outside the Muslim community, then they validate Islamophobic stereotypes about Muslim men being abusive, and Muslim women being oppressed. At the same time, though, Muslim women's usage of the internet to expose these celebrity imams provides inspiration for seeking out justice, even if it is through nontraditional means.

Conclusion

While justice is often associated in dominant Western discourse with secular forms of activism and rights, I have argued in this capstone that the pursuit of justice is indispensable to belief in Islam. As such, Muslim women are called in the same ways as Muslim men to pursue justice in every way possible. Through this project, I hope to have shown the various means through which Muslim women activists in America have strived for justice as outlined in the Qur'an and hadith and have shown that it is not necessary to abandon or suppress faith to seek justice, be an advocate, or engage in activism. This certainly counters dominant notions that caricature Muslims, and particularly Muslim women in America with terms such as terrorists, violent, oppressed, and backwards. At the same time, I have shown that this pursuit of justice from within Islam comes at a great cost to Muslim women activists who face Islamophobic savior discourses on one hand, and chastising efforts to silence their critiques on the other.

In thinking about ways of remedying the double-bind that is the focus of this project, Katherine Bullock offers autobiography as a means of reclamation. As she argues, autobiographical narratives “challenge [the] singular image, because they illuminate the women’s unique struggles, dreams, goals, triumphs, and challenges” and “autobiographies by Muslim women individualize and humanize the ubiquitous poster image of “the oppressed Muslim woman.”⁹⁵ Although this capstone has made evident that the disruption of stereotypes about Muslim women in America by taking them seriously on their own terms is integral to addressing the question of the double-bind, it has also made clear that it is not enough to simply disrupt the narrative. While these disruptions are helpful to addressing the part of the double bind

⁹⁵ Katherine Bullock, *Muslim Women Activists in North America: Speaking for Ourselves* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), xvii.

that is induced by the liberal and Islamophobic West, they fail to address the question of the Muslim community's role in subjugating Muslim between a "rock and a hard place."

Although I have attempted to give a full and balanced discussion of the double-bind throughout this capstone, here I want to make a case for the American Muslim ummah doing more to support Muslim women both within the community and in their work outside of the community. As a Muslim woman who is going into advocacy work and has been seen as an activist for most of my life, I see the impact that dominant Western notions have had on my work, but even more so, the impact that my own communities have on my work. The largest detriment to the success of Muslim women's activism in America, I argue, is the lack of internal agreement and support among Muslims for advocacy and Muslim women's work specifically. While I recognize the risks of making an argument that places blame within the Muslim community, especially in an Islamophobic context that is continuously searching for inadequacies of Islam, any critiques I make are done out of deep love for my community, and a desire to witness the fulfillment of Islamic calls to justice, both within and outside of Muslim communities. The pressures of the double-bind would undeniably be relieved on both sides if Muslims offered unequivocal support of Muslim women engaging in activism and if this activism was seen as responding to the call to always center and uphold justice in Islam rather than a threat to it. Internal conflicts, though, have created the conditions that make it so the main source of support of Muslim women's activism is from outside the community, and is one that encourages us to repudiate Islam, and our fathers, brothers, uncles, and male relatives, in favor of being saved by the secular West. So, while Muslim women activists are going to face the pressures of Islamophobia regardless of what work we engage in, the very least our own communities can do is provide support in this cause and release us from one part of the double-

bind. Arguably, bearing in mind Islam's call to justice, this support is in fact demanded of all Muslims, as long as the activism remains within the bounds of Islam.

The support of Muslim women's activism in America is not one that will benefit Muslim women alone though; to empower Muslim women to speak out in the face of injustices within our communities is to do the same for all others in the community. I reflect particularly on an Islamic seminary in Buffalo, New York, Darul Uloom Al-Madania. In 2021, allegations of abuse and sexual assault emerged that implicated the founders and various teachers at the school. The allegations were based on a 10-year period between 1995 and 2005 and outlined gruesome and unwarranted violence, from inhumane beatings and sexual assault of children to marriages with former students and spiritual abuse of people throughout the community.⁹⁶ Although these allegations were brought about by the primarily male former students at the school, they came in the wake of the #MosqueMeToo movement that exposed the likes of Nouman Ali Khan, Fatih Seferagic, Mohammed Zeyara, and Osama Eisa. In many ways, it can be argued that the former students of Darul Uloom Al-Madania were empowered by the prospects of justice that arose when Muslim women spoke out about abuse that they had faced at the hands of spiritual leaders. The empowerment of Muslim women therefore enables everyone within our communities to seek justice as inspired by Islam.

The internet is one untraditional means through which Muslim women find empowerment. As examples have shown, the potential of virtual spaces like Twitter for community-building, organizing, collective action, calling out, and calling to are endless. While granted, the double-bind is not one that disappears in the virtual context, the creation of counter-publics that allow for Muslim women to negotiate the terms of their visibility, and the liberatory

⁹⁶ Allegations in figure 7.

potential of mass organizing on the internet make way for activism that appreciates Muslim women on their own terms and in their own words. Ultimately, this project seeks to consider the potentialities of redefining Muslim women's activism along lines that center their voices and the Muslim community, rather than catering to an Islamophobic liberal west; in doing so, I argue, we can seek qur'anic notions of *adl* and *qist*. Certainly, Islam urges believers in the pursuit of justice, and it is only through unknitting the double-bind that Muslims can hold fast to the rope of Allah.

“O believers! Stand firm for justice as witnesses for Allah even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or close relatives. Be they rich or poor, Allah is best to ensure their interests. So do not let your desires cause you to deviate from justice. If you distort the testimony or refuse to give it, then know that Allah is certainly All-Aware of what you do.”
(*Surah An-Nisa* 4:135)

To Dr. Ismail Memon, Imam Ibrahim Memon and their Minions,

This letter is an open and informal letter addressed to the above persons for matters that can no longer go unnoticed. Undoubtedly, you know we call you out publicly as the false teachers and charlatans that you are. Let us be clear, that we do not hate you. We do not want you to go to hell. In fact, we pray for you. We pray that Allah (SAW) will guide you towards repentance and recognize the wrong doing you and your minions have administered all those years. We want you to accept responsibility for the misdeeds you have committed in the guise of Islamic instruction and Fiqh. Most notably, those misdeeds against many helpless men, women and children in your trust. The young men and children you have burdened with savage beatings so gratuitous in violence that they needed prompt medical attention, which you denied. Some of those children were diminutive with frail bones and an undeveloped musculature. They could not physically endure the powerful kicks, punches and caning by you, Imam Ibrahim, a full grown well developed adult male. It was observed that you took great pleasure in liberally dispensing those inhumane beatings. Before you deny these claims, bear in mind there were dozens upon dozens of witnesses. Because you would produce these beatings as a public spectacle to strike fear in to the hearts of the student observers.

While the beatings delivered with unimaginable brutality were for a public consumption. The amorous infatuations and sexual conquests of your female students, were of a private matter altogether. The serial manipulation and stalking of these young female students were perpetrated over many years. These *chases* culminated in 'secret' marriages, their consummation and eventual separations. This sordid device is still being practiced to this day. Recently, you had a child with a former student. You promptly disowned her and your conceived child. Hence, you were sued for child support when you refused the responsibility to care for your own child. Because to you, the child was merely a product of a miscalculated tryst. Now, before you follow through with your lame attempt of a defense through denialism; bear in mind we have absolute evidence of the previously stated surmise. The evidence of court documents of a settlement with one of your former students. And a settlement agreement promising your expulsion from the very institution you have shamed and continue to shame. Beyond the documentary proof, there is also the evidence of your DNA which you still deny. That being said, there is nothing more disgraceful in life than parents purposefully failing their own children—
NOTHING!

The bad parenting and other forms of negligence maybe a genetic trait. Because all roads lead back to you, Dr. Ismail Memon and your appallingly sick social philosophy. A philosophy you gladly instituted in to the very schools you presided over as the figurehead and spiritual leader. How does a 'blessed' figure allow such horrors in his supposed proud civilization? The answer; there is no such descriptive quality as a civilization in association with you Dr. Memon, as it pertains to being, first and foremost, civilized. Your legacy is that of an anti-intellectual as you program your students to adjudge any form of knowledge outside of your seminary as embedded with Luciferian context and social engineering. However, one need not look any further than the monumental blunder and paper bound sulfur pit; *Consequences of Debasing the Auliya-Allah*, as an example of cult like social engineering and anti-intellectual transmission.

Figure 7: Open letter detailing allegations against Ismail Memon, Ibrahim Memon, and their associated by former students of Darul Uloom Al-Madania

This anti-intellectual travesty being your landmark work, the monstrous 67 page book details the “divine nature” of consequences for defying your will. In this book, you colloquially go on to anoint yourself a SAINT no less! Albeit, a 'Saint' who presides over an institution which enables and covers up serial pedophilia perpetrated by members of your own organization. This is not an effrontery, but a well known fact of the various schools you have owned and operated since their inception. You had been confronted by many horrified parents over the years as they were trying to understand the meaning of these loathsome activities you have fostered and defended.

As a victim's mother once exclaimed, after learning of both the molestation and beating of her son, “What kind of Saint are you!” So you pathetically planted your forehead at her feet and prostrated before her, begging for forgiveness. The parents, in this case, were sympathetic enough and so you were spared for some time longer. Unfortunately the list of victims continued to grow longer as well. Many victims of abuse were too embarrassed to even tell their own parents and so the abuse continued. A terrible cycle in perpetuity presided over by you, *Saint/Dr. Ismail Memon*.

The cover ups were a key component in the control and operation of Dr. Memon's seminaries. This was clumsily and surreptitiously performed by the student minions, who themselves were social deviants. They were a product of the aforementioned institutional mechanism administered by Imam Ibrahim Memon and his father, Dr. Ismail Memon. In addressing you the minions, we can only attest to the complete and utter disappointment we have in you for sharing our lives as fellow students but neglecting to act with support and understanding in our terrible plight. You helped further damage our esteem and community through practicing your ambiguous group cohesiveness as minions and the diffusion of responsibility that reinforced denial through deception. This may have been because some of you were also confirmed serial pedophiles yourselves.

Let us reiterate, we do not hate you. We hate what you do. You have been exceedingly immoral and deceitful. The fact that you have done this for so many years, decade after decade without any semblance of a conscience. Vividly illustrates that you are **not** indwelt by the power and sanctity of Allah (SAW). Dr. Memon; one of these days you are going to die. Given the fact that you are over 80. It will not be too terribly long from now. You *reap what you sow*. You will be judged for all of your actions and inaction. You will be judged for your knowledge. You will be judged for your intentions. In Islam we have Kifarah, and Kifarah will collect sooner or later. Both in this world and in the hereafter. But while you and yours are still on this earth, publicly confess your sins and submit yourself to Allah (SAW). You may still have a chance to be granted forgiveness for your sincere repentance. May Allah (SAW) have mercy on your souls.

Respectfully,

Your many VICTIMS

Figure 7 (cont.): Open letter detailing allegations against Ismail Memon, Ibrahim Memon, and their associates by former students of Darul Uloom Al-Madania

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