Hijabi Girlhood in the Intersections

Violence, Resistance, Reclamation

Salsabel Almanssori and Muna Saleh

Although hijab has long been a subject of fascination in western culture for some time, in the last several years the girl in hijab has been in the sociopolitical spotlight. As Katherine Bullock and Gul Jafri (2000) noted over twenty years ago, “Because of this Western cultural fixation on Muslim women’s dress as a symbol of oppression, Muslim women often have to focus on that aspect of their identity as well, even if they would rather talk of something else” (37). With hijab being the most visible way to identify and be identified as Muslim as Wahiba Abu-Ras and Zulema Suarez (2009) along with Hodan Mohamed (2017) remind us, those who observe hijab with their dress experience the world in unique ways. The experiences of girls and young women in hijab are undoubtedly shaped by what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and Patricia Hill Collins (2015) call intersectionality and under bell hooks’s (2013) conceptualization of interlocking systems of domination. Central to these systems of oppression that shape the lives of Muslim girls and women are Edward Said’s (1978) concept of Orientalism and what Jasmin Zine (2006) terms gendered Islamophobia as Lila Abu-Lughod’s (2013) discussion of dominant narratives of Muslim women as oppressed clearly demonstrates.

In Arabic، حجاب (hijab) literally means covering or partition. It is derived from the root word najaba that signifies concealing, covering, or hiding something from view. Although hijab, as modesty in dress and demeanor, is a religious requirement for all Muslims, it is understood, interpreted, and practiced in different ways. Hijab is often associated solely with how Muslim girls and women dress and is mis/understood as being synonymous with the headscarf that some Muslim girls and women don. However, the headscarf is only one way of interpreting and practicing hijab.
The ways in which girls and women take up hijab varies immensely and is often tied to personal beliefs, culture, geographic location, sociopolitical context, religious interpretation, and familial and community histories and contexts.

Hijab has numerous meanings, and it is written differently. For example, some authors capitalize the first letter of the word hijab, while others keep it lowercase. Neither is inaccurate, and both choices are intentional. Further, hijab for girls and women is taken up in a multiplicity of ways, including the headscarf, chador, burqa, niqab, and khimar among other individual, faith-based, and cultural interpretations and approaches. Importantly, many Muslims from different communities argue that hijab as veiling is not a religious requirement for girls until they reach puberty and some from different Muslim communities contend that hijab as veiling is not a religious requirement at all. However, many Muslim girls nonetheless don hijab for a variety of reasons including personal preference, familial and cultural traditions, and faith-based commitments, and their experiences of girlhood are unique and important. Finally, as two Muslim women in hijab, we chose to use the term **hijabi** in reference to Muslim girls and women who don hijab because this is often how we refer to ourselves and our sisters in hijab. However, we want to note that while we use this term affectionately and colloquially, it should be approached with care and caution by those who are not Muslim women and girls.

**Who We Are**

Our experiences as Muslim women, educators, and academics in hijab who continue to navigate systems and contend with narratives created about and for us by others shape us and our work, including that alongside each other with the authors of this special issue. We wanted to have named not only some of the ongoing systemic violence that Muslim girls and young women continue to experience globally, but also uplift the work of other (mainly Muslim women) scholars and creatives who highlight in this issue the powerful resistance(s) and reclamation(s) of hijabi girls and women alongside each other and their families, communities, and kin.

Here we offer our personal reflections on who we are and what brought us to guest editing this special issue.
Salsabel

I conceived of the call for papers for this special issue in the Summer of 2021, in the wake of the Afzaal family murders. On 6 June 2021, a man drove a pickup truck into a family of four visibly Muslim Pakistani Canadian pedestrians at an intersection in London, Ontario, Canada (“It’s Been 6 Months . . .” (2021)). Harrowed to learn of the events, and holding my then infant daughter in my arms, I thought about when I lived in London while I was in graduate school. I was once a girl in hijab who walked the streets of London to watch the sunset, grab groceries, and go to classes. I was always afraid, and I was right to be scared. The murders exemplified the troubling impact of Islamophobia on Muslim girls and women and underscore the urgency of addressing systemic violence against hijabi girls. I was born in Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War. I lived in a refugee camp for the first six years of my life before moving to Canada, when I first began donning hijab. My childhood was colored by the marginalization of being thought of as weird (for example, I did not speak English) and dressing weirdly (I wore hijab and baggy clothes). Throughout my girlhood, I was bullied violently. When I was becoming a scholar, I knew I would not focus on Islamophobia; it was too close to home. I study sexual violence, teacher education, and what young people learn online and in schools about rape. However, in the summer of 2021, I felt called to focus on hijabi girlhood.

Muna

As a Palestinian Muslim woman in hijab who was born and raised in amiskwaciy-wâskahikan (Edmonton, Alberta) in Treaty 6 lands, my work focuses on the intersectional experiences of Muslim girls, women, families, and communities. When Salsabel asked if I would be willing to be a co-editor of this special issue, I agreed immediately. Not only was I honored to work alongside her, I knew that a special issue focusing on hijabi girlhood was needed. For months prior to Salsabel’s initial proposal, Muslim girls and women in hijab (most of whom are Black Muslims) had been in the news as victims of physical and verbal violence in Alberta. As we worked on this issue, I thought of all the hijabi girls and women I love, and all the girls and women in hijab whom I have never met, who deserve to feel safe, loved, and valued. In truth, I have approached this special issue as a love letter to hijabi girls and women—to all my sisters—as we continue to resist violence.
Gendered Islamophobia

In part enabled and enacted by Islamophobia that operates as a global meta-narrative and through localized discourses, laws, and systems (Bakali 2016), violence against women and girls who wear hijab is further entangled in a gendered context (Zine 2016). Jasmin Zine (2006) discussed the phenomenon of what she termed “gendered Islamophobia” (239) that Muslim girls and women experience in western diasporas. While we use the term more broadly to explore the experiences of Muslim girls and women worldwide, our beliefs resonate with Zine’s (2006) characterization that gendered Islamophobia operates as a global system of oppression with “discursive roots [that] are historically entrenched within Orientalist representations that cast colonial Muslim women as backward, oppressed victims of misogynist societies” (240).

Islamophobia operates through power and discourse, institutionalized by laws such as Bill 21 in Quebec (see Roshan Jahangeer (2020) for details) and similar measures in France (see Haleh Afshar (2013), and Kawtar Najib and Peter Hopkins (2019) for more information.) Such institutional acts wed what we call save the Muslim girl narratives that position Muslim girls and women as oppressed victims in need of rescue (Abu-Lughod 2013; Sensoy and Marshall 2009), to the controlling images of the suspicious Other in the form of the save us from the Muslim girl narratives (Saleh 2021). Violence has also been enacted overtly through hate crimes, evidenced most recently in the attacks on mainly Black women in hijab in Alberta (see Paige Parsons’s piece in CBC News, 12 December 2020) and the London, Ontario murder of a Muslim family as mentioned above.

In educational settings, hijabi girls frequently encounter discrimination and violence because of their religious attire. An incident in Virginia, US, serves as a stark example: a peer assaulted a Muslim girl and forcibly removed her hijab (Roussi 2021). Cases of name-calling, ostracism, and physical violence have been reported in schools in different parts of the world. In the US, for instance, hijabi girls are also subjected to racial profiling by law enforcement agencies that leads to unjustified searches, questioning, and surveillance (American Civil Liberties Union 2018). Despite these realities, most of the research on Islamophobia to date has been focused heavily on
experiences of Muslim youth in the contexts of imperialism and white supremacy. However, intersectional and global perspectives that consider the unique and nuanced experiences of hijabi girlhood are not well represented.

Although the hijabi girl is often the location whereon the tenets of white supremacist, colonial, imperialist, and patriarchal violence is enacted, she is also the site where they may be fought. As Muna Saleh (2021) writes, “Our lives and experiences are also brimming with beauty, love, faith, and community” (2). Furthermore, the girl in the hijab resists expressions of power through everyday actions and activist engagements. In doing so, she challenges and subverts prevailing expressions of power.

For example, through her athletic excellence and in her pioneering role as a prominent hijabi Black American fencer, Ibtihaj Muhammad has contributed to counternarratives about hijabi girls and women navigating the intersections of anti-Black racism, misogyny, and gendered Islamophobia. Muhammad not only showcases the diversity of Muslim girls’ and women’s experiences but also promotes inclusivity, empowerment, and a broader sense of belonging in various spheres, including the sporting arena. Her achievements inspire conversations about representation, discrimination, and the importance of dismantling biases in both sports and society. In her children’s book with S.K. Ali and Hatem Aly on hijabi girlhood, “The Proudest Blue,” we read, “‘Some people won’t understand your hijab,’ Mama had said. ‘But if you understand who you are, one day they will too.’” (Muhammad et al. 2019: n.p.).

Our Invitation

For this special issue of *Girlhood Studies*, we invited articles that use a range of methodological approaches to explore the multidimensional, interdisciplinary, and intersectional experiences of girls and young women who wear hijab and/or identify as hijabi. In particular, we encouraged articles that focus on hijabi girls and young women as political actors who practice resistance to systemic domination. We invited a broad range of submissions, including empirical research, case studies, and autoethnographic experiences in addition to theoretical or methodological insights. Along with conventional articles and visual essays, we also invited creative submissions. In our initial call for abstracts, we invited authors to respond to questions such as:

- How do the intersections of gender and race impact girls’ experiences of wearing the hijab in various contexts?
• How do dominant political forces (patriarchy, white supremacy, imperialism, colonialism, capitalism) and their intersections shape the Muslim and hijabi girl experience?
• How is Islamophobia a gendered and racialized experience, and what are the implications for the hijabi girl?
• What are the complex controlling images of hijabi girls that operate in the social world, and what are the implications for Muslim girls and women?
• How do Muslim and hijabi girls practice resistance and activism, broadly defined?
• How do Muslim and hijabi girls experience and resist gender-based and sexual violence?
• How does the narrative of the ‘good Muslim’ impact hijabi girls’ lives?
• Who gets to use the word ‘hijabi’ and in what context? How might the use of the word ‘hijabi’ by non-Muslims be a form of co-optation? How might it be a form of reclamation for girls and women in hijab?
• How are Muslim girls (hijabi and non-hijabi), at various intersecting identities, portrayed across various media (social media, TV, movies) platforms?
• What types of images and narratives of hijabi girls dominate in influencer culture across various social media platforms?
• What are the unique experiences of girls who wear the hijab in education systems? What are their experiences in health systems?

In addition to distributing widely the call for papers, we sought intersectional perspectives by emailing scholars individually.

Notably, the intensification of the 2022 Iran hijab protests following the tragic death of Mahsa Amini coincided with the deadline for submitting full articles for peer review. Together, we reflected that the protests underscored the global significance of hijabi girlhood, serving as a telling reminder of the ongoing struggle for autonomy, agency, and the recognition of diverse narratives in this context. It is important to acknowledge that some scholars backed out of participating in the creation of this special issue in the wake of these protests. This emphasizes the emotional challenges of engaging with scholarship about the experiences of Muslim girls and women in hijab for many authors whose identities are implicated. Indeed, the contributions highlight the complexities of experiences of hijabi girlhood in various contexts.
Contributions

In “Girl in American Flag Hijab,” Noha Beydoun complexifies the phenomenon of girls donning the American Flag as a protest. Although young American girls and women acted in protest, donning the hijab flag also worked to perpetuate ideas related to banal nationalism and constructs of freedom shaped by neoliberal interests, as well as to conceal complicated US histories regarding Muslim immigration and broader imperial interests. Beydoun’s article untangles the images of the American Girl and the American Flag, revealing that the representation of hijabi girls in media can be flawed insofar as it is colored by imperialism. Ultimately, Beydoun’s analysis evidences that the “American flag as hijab for girls and women reinforces the larger constructs it seeks to resist.”

Salsabel Almanssori’s “Public Pedagogy of Hijabi Girlhood: An Analysis of #MyHijabStory Vlogs” is narrative inquiry into Hijabi girlhood on YouTube through the girl-created trend #MyHijabStory, a response to public misunderstanding of Hijab. Almanssori finds that girls narrate their experiences of coming to Hijab in the contexts of dominant discourses related to gender and racialization. In conducting a Listening Guide analysis, she attends to the multiplicity of voices in each vlogger’s narrative to capture the political aspect of experience in tandem with their psychological component. At once, Hijabi girls use a convicted voice, a conflicted voice, and a critical voice to tell their Hijab stories. By shifting the focus from prevailing narratives, they generate alternative accounts, contributing to epistemic justice by presenting more authentic understandings of Hijab rooted in lived experiences.

Alongside five hijabi girls, Ana Antunes, in “Do you Shower with your Hijab?: Racialization of High School Muslim Girls” uses Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) to study experiences of hijabi girlhood in the American state of Utah. Antunes highlights how unconscious bias and microaggressions hinder a positive sense of belonging among hijabi girl students, thus having an impact on their academic success. This study also reveals that unconscious anti-Muslim sentiment and bias in schools affects the everyday experiences of Muslim girls, leading to disconnection from the school community. Despite this, the research demonstrates that these young Muslim women, empowered by the project, actively challenged oppression, reshaped their sense of belonging, and asserted their right to occupy space in the educational environment.
In “‘Why Don’t You Just Take it Off?’: Hijab as Resistance in Social Work Practice and Education,” Amilah Baksh and Bibi Baksh, as daughter and mother respectively, engage in collaborative autoethnography. Using a critical feminist analysis, they narrate and explore their divergent and shared journeys through the oppressions of misogyny and white supremacy. As they reflect, “Our stories reveal a complicated relationship with the hijab as an important faith practice which also functions as a marker of otherness that signals unbelonging in all spheres of our lives including the academy and social work practice.” Writing from their lived experiences as Indo-Caribbean social workers and university educators, in their article they re/assert hijab as a form of resistance and resilience in their personal and professional lives because, in their powerful words, “[I]t was never the hijab that rendered us voiceless. It is Islamophobia.”

Athira B.K. and Nidhi Balyan, in “‘#HANDSOFFMYHIJAB’: A Digital Ethnography of Indian Hijab Stores’ Instagram Pages,” investigate hijabi girlhood in India. They employ digital ethnography to inquire into the multifaceted meanings of the hijab practice in an Islamophobic socio-political context, analyzing how Muslim women engage digitally to raise consciousness, discuss rights, and challenge norms on Instagram. Their research highlights the complexity of Muslim women’s identities, influenced by diverse factors, and underscores the significance of documenting the interplay of cultural context and identity in framing body concealment norms. The authors point out that the “digitally mediated visibility of Muslim women and girls contests the notion of Islamic fashion as oxymoronic.” Moreover, B.K. and Balyan propose a need for new research approaches to understand Muslim women’s lives, their conversations on oppression, and their resistance to gender and religious-based hierarchies within the framework of South Asian anthropology.

Aatina Nasir Malik’s “Young Hijabis in Kashmir: Everyday Perceptions, Practices and Politics,” explores what it means in the lives of Muslim girls and young women in Kashmir to don the hijab. Drawing on narrative analysis of research observations and interviews, Malik highlights Kashmiri girls’ and young women’s discussions of, and experiences with, hijab while situating their stories within a broader sociopolitical and historical context. Resisting essentializing binaries of oppression vs. resistance, personal vs. political, and emotional vs. social, Malik offers more nuanced and context-specific narratives of the hijab and reconceptualizes limited and limiting notions of agency.
In “The Hijab and Anti-Colonial Feminism in Muslim Girls Sports: Strategies of Refusal, Resistance, and Reclamation,” Mary Christianakis and Malek Moazzam-Doulat explore how Muslim girls and women in hijab resist colonial Western discourses in relation to their participation in sports. They begin with a discussion of how “public discourse on hijabs in sports often overlooks their complex symbolism and the athletes’ choices.” Using critical, post-colonial, and Indigenous feminist theories, Christianakis and Moazzam-Doulat highlight how Muslim girls and women in sports reject politicized binaries and dominant narratives imposed on them by asserting and reclaiming the diverse and complex roles, meanings, and forms of agency associated with the hijab.

In the moving poem, “Dear Hijab…”, Kadi Sow reflects on her journey of having embraced the hijab since the age of twelve, inspired by the strength of past generations. She addresses the challenges and structural injustices she faced in donning the hijab, describing a defiance against systemic harm, and celebrating her resilience in being heard. The poem touches on Sow’s struggle with identity in resisting oppression and finding empowerment and self-discovery through the hijab that has become a symbol of her voice, strength, and belonging; as she writes, “It is my safe haven and my home.”

In her creative contribution, “(In)Visible Muslim Girls,” Sakina Dhalla traces parts of her journey as a Brown Shia Muslim girl and young woman in hijab. In narrating some of her experiences over time, Dhalla explores how dominant narratives and misrepresentations compelled her to question the many different parts of her identity and the creation of feelings of (in)visibility. Her reflections illuminate how she continually and simultaneously navigates misogyny, anti-Brown racism, and anti-Muslim racism alongside anti-Shia hatred in Muslim communities. However, she asserts powerfully, both explicitly and through her artistic testimony, that she refuses to be reduced, narrowed, or defined by others since she is “a direct contradiction to these dominant narratives.”

Emergent Threads and Future Directions

We noted similar themes to which authors re/turn. They all discuss the different ways in which hijabi girls and women face, and simultaneously resist, violence in many forms in different contexts. They highlight how hijabi girls and young women worldwide are forced to navigate the violence of
systems of imperialism, colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy. Another thread that is woven across the authors’ contributions is the weightiness of facing and resisting dominant narratives imposed from inside and outside of Muslim communities. However, the authors illuminate how, because the very nature of the violence that hijabi girls and young women around the world face is intersectional and situated within particular historical, geographical, political, and temporal contexts, the nature and forms of agency and resistance will necessarily differ as well.

Indeed, the agency and resistances of hijabi girls and women is reconceptualized across the articles and artistic contributions in this special issue. Authors, in various ways, focus on how Muslim girls and women in hijab are narrating themselves and their stories creatively alongside each other. What we find particularly relevant are the ways in which the authors re/ assert that while hijabi girls and young women are not necessarily seeking the labels of role model or activist in the process of living authentically even as they resist many different forms of violence, they are co-/creating opportunities for being and becoming for themselves and others.

In acknowledging the limitations of our work in this special issue, it is crucial to highlight the geographical and intersectional boundaries that shaped our scope. As Muslim women and scholars rooted in the settler colonial context of Canada, our perspectives inevitably reflect this context. While we tried to capture diverse global experiences, we recognize that vast knowledges are neither included nor referenced in this issue. Variations in our own country, such as the contrast between rural and urban settings or the nuances between and among experiences in Western and Eastern provinces in Canada, exemplify the intricate tapestry of experiences even within one country.

Moreover, the lack of narratives from Africa, South America, and various parts of Europe, for example, underscore the necessity of future research and exploration to provide a more comprehensive global picture. In addition, although we actively sought and invited intersectional analyses, many perspectives are missing such as the experiences of Black Muslim girls and young women in hijab, for example. A strength of this issue lies in its composition primarily by emerging and early career scholars many of whom are writing from personal experiences as Muslim women in hijab. This offers a dynamic outlook, while also inviting the need for further investigations and collaborations to address the limitations and expand the horizons of this work in future research.
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Notes

1. We choose not to capitalize western as a purposeful de-centering of western culture and narratives.
2. Salsabel Almanssori chose to capitalize Hijab and Hijabi.

References


