

# Muslim Women's Ethical Engagement and Emotional Coping in Post-Election United States

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## Abstract

Muslim women, especially those wearing headscarves or hijab, are targets of anti-Muslim stereotypical rhetoric and violent attacks in the United States, with expected adverse effects on their mental wellbeing. This pilot research examines Muslim religious practice related to frequency of Islamophobic experiences, socio-emotional/mental distress, and coping strategies among American Muslim women since the 2016 American presidential election. This is a mixed methods study surveying adult Muslim women (n=35) living in the United States. Quantitative analyses included overall frequency and percent differences in various experiences for Muslim American women who always wear hijab (n=22) compared to those that do not always wear hijab (n=13). Qualitative data analyzed were derived from a focus group and from essays by survey respondents. All respondents (100%) reported a perceived increase in Islamophobia since the presidential election, and 26.5% (n=9) of respondents reported altering their religious practice as a result of the political climate since the 2016. Places/situations associated with greatest perceived vulnerability included: airports (74.3%), airplanes (45.7%), public bus (28.5%), driving (28.5%), and shopping malls (28.5%). Places/situations associated with high vulnerability in Muslim women was similar by hijab status with the exception of higher vulnerability for hijab-wearing (40.9%) vs. non-hijab wearing women in public bus transportation (P-value = 0.04). Experience of personal direct anti-Muslim aggression, i.e., violent words and actions, occurred more frequently (50%, n = 11) among women who report always wearing hijab

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compared to non-always hijab-wearing respondents (38.5%, N=5). Likewise, self-reported experience of fear over the past year was elevated (54.6% vs. 15.4%, P-value = 0.02) for hijab-wearing compared with non-hijab-wearing women. On the other hand, respondents' experiences of anxiety (59.1% vs. 61.5% P-value = 0.89) and lack of safety (36.4% vs. 53.8% P-value = 0.31) over the past year was comparable for hijab wearing vs. non-hijab wearing women. Hijab-wearing women report more direct anti-Muslim aggression, experiencing more fear in general and feeling unsafe in more places than non-hijab-wearing women. That said, women's experiences of a post-election U.S. political climate were not as divergent as we had expected, regardless of hijab status. Rather, anxiety about Islamophobia and experiencing a lack of safety by Muslim women are generalized experiences in a post-election moment in the United States. More research will be needed to know whether our participants' responses reflected their immediate reaction to the election or a more long-term coping mechanism for the heightened visibility that Muslim women face in current American political rhetoric and foreign policy.

**Keywords:** Muslim women, hijab, Islamophobia, religion, coping strategies, ethical engagement

## Introduction and Description of the Study & Research Questions

The interdisciplinary research presented in this article analyzes the effects of the United States presidential election in 2016 on American Muslim women's ethical engagement and emotional coping, combining theories and methods from anthropology and mental health fields. American Muslims have been the focus of increased scrutiny and surveillance as aftereffects of the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, DC (Maira, 2009; Rana, 2011). This trend has worsened in the period leading up to the 2016 American presidential election, resulting in higher rates of anti-Muslim hate crimes.<sup>2</sup> Women wearing hijab, or Muslim women wearing headscarves, are particularly vulnerable to anti-Muslim attacks and are the object of stereotyping rhetoric and even violent attacks in the United States, France<sup>3</sup>, the United Kingdom<sup>4</sup>, and elsewhere. Adverse political climates affect Muslim individuals' emotional experiences (Adam & Ward, 2016; O'Connor & Jahan 2014) with some studies showing Muslim women to be particularly susceptible to increased emotional stress (Jouili, 2015; Tetreault, 2015).

In addition to addressing emotional coping, our research analyzes what we are provisionally calling *ethical engagement* in order to more fully describe

2. <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2015-hate-crime-statistics-released>

3. Statistics collected by the National Observatory Against Islamophobia, a watchdog group, cited in "French Muslims Say Veil Bans Give Cover to Bias", *New York Times*, Suzanne Daley and Alissa J. Rubin, May 26, 2015.

4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-37041301>

American Muslim women's responses to the current Islamophobic political environment. The research presented here thus attempts to contribute to the "anthropology of moral experience" proposed by Zigon and Throop (2014) by creating a more robust and inclusive understanding of which experiences and choices we can count as "moral" or "ethical". In scholarship across the social sciences, but especially in anthropology, researchers have identified the need to better understand "ordinary ethics" and "everyday morality", which requires scholarship that critically engages with "commonsense models of morality" and the understanding of ethics as social action (Mattingly & Throop, 2018).

There have been a variety of concepts proposed to capture the idea of everyday ethical engagement and how social actors respond to moral dilemmas or ethical choices, including, among others, "ethical praxis" (Robinson-Bertoni, 2017), "ethical practice" (Fadil, 2011; Valdez, 2016), "ethical labor" (Jouili, 2015), and "ethical action" (Shively, 2014). We have chosen "ethical engagement" to connote a morally engaged set of practices that social actors may use to confront ethical challenges. Although scholars use slightly different terminology, this work (including our own) can be grouped in terms of its commitment to a post-Kantian notion of ethics that is performed and embodied, rather than housed primarily in "logic."

Perhaps more important for situating the above scholarship in relation to the present study is to note that, seemingly, a lion's share of the innovative work on the ethnography of moral experience has focused on Muslim religious practice. Indeed, this approach has been particularly important among scholars who work with Muslim populations situated within society-wide social and political changes that spur a moral or ethical realignment, for example, in post-independence Egypt (Mahmood, 2011; Shielke 2009), post-colonial Europe (Fernando, 2014; Jouili, 2015), and increasingly since 9/11, the United States (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Maira, 2009).

A significant portion of this new research on everyday morality deals with how Muslims are responding to the ethical challenges associated with the rise of Islamophobia in Western, non-Muslim dominant countries; Muslim women are of particular interest in this research since they have been targeted by Islamophobic and anti-Muslim sentiment in these contexts. For example, comparative research conducted in France and Germany shows that practicing Muslim women incur increased "ethical labor" in order to cope with "experiences of ambiguity, suffering, and injustice" created by anti-Muslim political environments in both countries (Jouili, 2015, p. 4). Working in the U.K., Allen (2015, p. 299) writes, "Muslim women have been repeatedly shown not only to be disproportionately targeted in relation to Islamophobic attacks, but have become the symbol of Muslims, Islam, and all that is perceived to be wrong or problematic about them." However, women's responses to such unfair targeting can show innovative ethical engagement, for example, in Keddie's research

on gendered Islamophobia in Australia (2018, p. 522). Keddie finds that some young women engage with feminist *ijtihad* (jurisprudential interpretation of religious text) in order to counter Islamophobia, a pattern that has also been documented in the United States.

Understanding how Muslim women confront the increase in Islamophobia is of pressing importance in the United States since, as Droogsma notes,

since September 11, 2001, Muslim women in the United States who wear headscarves face greater scrutiny and suspicion due to a generalized fear of Muslims (Kavakci, 2004). To Americans, the veil often represents a tangible marker of difference, in terms of religion and often ethnicity as well. Still, few people pause to ask these women why they veil or how the veil affects their daily lives. (Droogsma, 2007, pp. 294-5)

In addition to examining women's ethical engagement in response to such scrutiny, we also attempt to describe and quantify Muslim women's emotional responses to increased Islamophobia since the 2016 presidential election. We are not alone in this endeavor: A growing need to document Islamophobia and Muslim Americans' responses has led to a rich body of scholarship, in a variety of fields. In the mental health scholarly community, one focus has been on increased coping needs due to the effects of increased stress and violent encounters (Adam & Ward, 2016; Nadal et al., 2012; O'Connor & Jahan, 2014).

We argue that research on women's coping might also consider addressing how and the extent to which American Muslim women are ethically engaging with the current political climate in new ways. For example, in the currently adverse U.S. political climate, a hijab-wearing woman might decide that, although she may prefer to no longer wear the headscarf, to continue wearing it as political resistance despite the potential dangers of doing so; conversely, she might decide to take off her hijab for fears of compromised safety although she prefers to continue wearing it. Both of these choices and lines of reasoning entail a high level of ethical engagement to deal with a stigmatizing political climate. The present study examines the frequency, types, and potential mental health consequences of Islamophobia in American Muslim women since the 2016 presidential election. Distinctions of experience by hijab status are noted with exploration of emotional and ethical challenges due to Islamophobia / adverse political climate. Equally important, coping mechanisms, resources, and reactions of women in the form of activism are highlighted. The following questions are specifically addressed:

1. How is wearing or not wearing hijab affecting Muslim women's reported experiences, coping strategies, and communicative responses with respect to the U.S. post-election political climate?

2. Do hijab-wearing and non-hijab-wearing Muslim women's experiences of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim aggression converge or diverge in the period leading up to and since the 2016 elections?
3. What coping, communicative, and ethical practices do Muslim women use in the current political moment that help them address fears of harassment or aggression?
4. Are technologies such as Facebook and Twitter playing a role in emerging communicative practices that Muslim women use to cope with and resist the possibility of increased aggression and violence?

## Participants

Our survey included 35 self-identified Muslim women between the ages of 18 and 65 who wear hijab (covering their hair with a headscarf), who do not wear hijab, and who situationally wear hijab (for example at the mosque or while traveling). Our participants included 20 American-born (57%) and 15 foreign-born (43%) Muslim women.

## Method

### Study Design

This is a cross-sectional study that combines quantitative and qualitative research approaches to collecting and analyzing data on Muslim women's experiences of and responses to anti-Muslim aggression and feelings of (un)safety in the period after the U.S. presidential election in 2016. Survey data was collected in 2017, between April 13 through May 17, roughly six months after the U.S. election results and three months after the inauguration; the goal was to capture Muslim women's responses to the political climate of the period. We combined quantitative data from a numerically based survey instrument (N=35) with qualitative data from essay questions on the survey and one focus group. Whereas quantitative survey data is primarily controlled and conceived by the researcher thus providing a structured approach, qualitative research in the form of open-ended essay questions and focus groups provide study participants opportunities to identify themes and patterns themselves (Nadal et al., 2012). We find this open-ended quality to be particularly important for empowering Muslim women to identify and communicate their own experiences, ethical responses, and coping strategies for the recent rise in anti-Muslim aggression (or Islamophobia). This study was reviewed and approved prior to data collection by Michigan State University's institutional review board.

## Focus Group

Our focus group was designed to mirror many of the commonalities and contrasts that characterized the larger survey group. The focus group was conducted by Sara Tahir, originally from Pakistan, who is a Ph.D. student in anthropology at Michigan State University. Sara is a member of our affected group, in that she is a practicing Muslim woman living in the U.S. in the post-election period who does not wear hijab. The focus group participants included two women, one in her 50s and who was born in Pakistan and a second woman in her 20s born in the United States. Both women are self-identified as Muslim and are practicing; the younger woman has worn hijab for her entire young adulthood and the older woman adopted hijab later in life.

## Researchers

Our team was composed of four female researchers, two in public and/or mental health and two in anthropology. Two of our researchers self-identify as Muslim women and two do not. Three of us were born overseas (2 in Pakistan and 1 in Nigeria) and one was born in the United States. Three of us are professors and one is a graduate student. We believe that our diverse set of life experiences will enhance our analysis of the collected data. Also, we bring together diverse professional expertise in that our disciplines and research encompass psychiatry and Muslim mental health (Dr. Farha Abbasi), psychiatry and women's health (Dr. Amara Ezeamama), cultural anthropology and transnational migration (Sara Tahir), and linguistic anthropology and Muslim youth (Dr. Chantal Tetreault). Our diverse disciplinary and research interests have influenced the design and analysis of this research project.

## Sample Demographics (Table 1)

All participants were fluent or proficient in English; 35 adult women, including 20 American-born individuals (57%) and 15 foreign-born individuals (43%), were enrolled. Countries represented among foreign-born women were: Bangladesh (n=3), Bosnia (n=1), India (n=1), Iran (n=1), Iraq (n=1), Lebanon (n=1), Pakistan (n=4), Saudi Arabia (n=2), and Syria (n=1). Of the participants, 16 (n=16) were between the ages of 18 and 25, and 19 (n=19) of our respondents were ages 26 and older. The majority (88.6%) identified as practicing Muslims engaged in some combination of the following practices: prayer, dietary restriction, clothing choices, or other religious practice. A large portion (N=22, 63%) of respondents reported always wearing hijab in public; 37% (N=13) did not consistently wear hijab. A slight majority (n=20, 55.6%) of respondents had graduate-level education and 94.3% self-classified their English language proficiency level as native or excellent.

## Measures and Procedures

### Hijab Status & Women's Experiences of Anti-Muslim Aggression

Hijab status is a primary determinant in this study. Consistent (i.e., always) vs. inconsistent (i.e., sometimes, previous but not current, never) hijab-wearing was defined in survey respondents based on their response to the question "how often do you wear hijab?" In all analyses, women that inconsistently or never wore hijab was the reference category. One questionnaire item probed for respondent's direct experiences of anti-Muslim aggression, which we defined as violent speech or actions. Respondents were classified as having direct experience of anti-Muslim aggression if they responded affirmatively to this question.

One of our stated research goals is to better understand women's particular experiences of Islamophobia and whether women felt that these experiences were affected by gender and were affected by hijab status. To address these issues, in Section II, question 5, we asked: "Do you believe that gender is a factor in Islamophobia? Are Muslim women targeted more than men by Islamophobia? Are hijabi women targeted more than non-hijabi women?"

### Vulnerable Situations/Places & Timeline for Feeling Unsafe

In section II, question 3, we asked which public places (airport, street, work, campus, etc.) made the respondent feel uncomfortable or targeted as a Muslim, including 1. Airplane, 2. Classroom, 3. Driving, 4. Street, and 5. Other. In question 4, we asked the participant to define the time period when they began to feel unsafe in these places (if they had selected any).

### Emotional Experiences

Reporting frequent or infrequent experiences of fear, anxiety, depression, sadness and anger in the past year due to Islamophobia were in response to the question, "Over the past year, which of the following have you experienced as a result of Islamophobia in the United States?" Possible experiences included: anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, depression, and motivation (to protest, etc.). For each experience, frequency of occurrence was noted as never, once in a while, fairly often, and very often. For analytic purposes, responses of never or once in a while were coded as infrequent while responses of fairly often or very often was coded as frequent.



## Communicative and Technological Coping Strategies for Feeling Safe

We asked participants to report their communicative and technological coping strategies to avoid or redress being targeted as Muslims. Among our identified coping strategies were walking with friends, cell phone use and texting, and avoiding speaking a foreign language, among others.

## Community Organizations and Activism

In addition to individual coping strategies discussed above, we also measured communal responses by participants, including coping strategies relative to community organizations (mosque, MSA, etc.), and activism and political engagement using various means.

## Statistical Analyses

The research team descriptively summarized emotional, coping, and ethical engagement factors across the entire sample, by hijab-wearing status and demographic and socioeconomic data, using counts and percentages. Differences in proportions for categorical variables by hijab status were evaluated using chi-square or Fisher's exact tests as appropriate. In addition, logistic regression analyses for several outcome variables in relationship to hijab status was implemented in Statistical Analysis Software version 9.4. From these analyses, odds ratios (OR) and corresponding 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) were estimated to quantify the unadjusted association between "always wearing a hijab" and a range of outcome variables.

## Results

### Women's Experiences of Anti-Muslim Aggression

All respondents reported that, in their opinion, Islamophobia has increased since the 2016 United States presidential election. A vast majority, 85% (29/34 responses), reported experience of Islamophobia and/or racism and 83% (N = 29/35) of respondents believed that hijab-wearing women were more often targeted by Islamophobia than non-wearers. Of the total enrolled, only one respondent was definitively confident that hijab-wearing women were not more frequently targeted, three respondents did not directly answer this question, and two respondents were unsure. Nearly half of the sample, 46% (n=16), of women reported direct personal experience with anti-Muslim aggression and nearly 43% (n=15) reported low feeling of safety.



A relatively larger portion of our respondents who always wear hijab (50%, N=11) report having directly experienced anti-Muslim aggression—defined as violent speech or actions—than non-hijab-wearing respondents (38.5%, N=5). However, there was no evidence that experiences of anti-Muslim aggression varied systematically by hijab-wearing status (Table 1).

### Vulnerable Situations/Places & Timeline for Feeling Unsafe

Venues and situations associated with vulnerability were largely invariant by hijab status and included: airports (74.3%), public streets (54.3%), airplanes (45.7%), public bus (28.6%), while driving (28.6%), malls (28.6%), public parks (20.0%), college campuses (11.4%) and classrooms (n=8.6%). About 43% (n=15) of respondents reported feeling vulnerable in three or more places. Fifty percent (N=11) of hijab-wearing respondents report feeling unsafe in three or more places, as compared to 30.8% (N=4) of non-hijab-wearing respondents. Overall, the number of women reporting vulnerability in various settings/situations was generally similar by hijab status with one exception: always-hijab-wearing women reported 40.9% vulnerability compared to 7.7% (n=1) of inconsistent-hijab-wearing women in public transportation buses ( $p = 0.04$ , Table 1). The odds of feeling highly vulnerable in public transportation buses was 8.3 times higher for hijab-wearing women than inconsistent-hijab-wearing women ( $p = 0.06$ , 95% CI: 0.91, 75.1; Table 2).

In addition to identifying venues and situations, we asked participants to define the time period when they began to feel unsafe in these places (if they had selected any). The most common answer (34.3% N=12) was to report a period of time that coincided with the 2016 presidential election, such as “the Trump era”; “pre/post Trump election”; “when Trump ran for president”; or “the recent election cycle”. The second most common response (25.7% N=9) was the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, and most respondents simply wrote in “9/11”.

### Emotional Experiences

The most common frequent adverse emotional experiences over the past year were anxiety and sadness (each 60%), anger (45.6%), fear (40.0%), and depression (22.9%). Frequency of these experiences – with the sole exception of fear, was similar by hijab status. With respect to fear, 54.6% of hijab-wearing respondents compared to 15.4% of participants who did not wear hijab reported frequent experience of fear in the past year ( $P=0.02$ , Table 1). The odds of experiencing frequent fear was more than six times higher for hijab-wearing compared to non-hijab-wearing respondents (OR=6.6, 95% CI: 1.18, 37.02).

## Communicative and Technological Coping Strategies for Feeling Safe, Community Organization, and Activism

The most common communicative coping strategies to avoid or redress being targeted as Muslim in this sample included walking with friends and talking on a cell phone (each 48.6%). Other communicative coping strategies employed include avoiding speaking in native language (~26%), avoiding Qur'anic expressions (~26%), and avoiding eye contact (20%). The most used technological resources to improve their sense of safety were Facebook (42.9%), texting (37.1%) and email (17.1%). Types of technological resources employed and the frequency of using them to enhance feeling safe as a Muslim did not vary by hijab status (Table 1).

Table 1. Description of Muslim American female survey respondents from April 13 through May 17, 2017

	Overall N=35	Always Hijab (n =22 )	Not always Hijab (n =13)	P-value
<b>Sociodemographic Characteristics</b>	<b>N(%)</b>	<b>N(%)</b>	<b>N (%)</b>	
Age <25 years	19 (54.3)	14 (63.6)	5 (38.5)	0.15
Graduate level education	20 (57.1)	13 (59.1)	7 (53.9)	0.76
Born in America	20 (57.1)	15 (68.2)	5 (38.5)	0.09
Marital Status				
Single	21 (60.0)	13 (59.1)	8 (61.5)	0.13
Married	12 (34.3)	9 (40.9)	3 (23.1)	
Widowed	2 (5.7)	0 (0)	2 (15.4)	
Student	18 (52.9)*	12 (57.1)*	6 (46.2)	0.53
	*N=34	*n=21		
<b>Religious Practice</b>				
1 (practice)	31 (88.6)	22 (100)	9 (69.2)	0.01
2 (non-practicing, no-longer practicing /secular)	4 (11.4)	0 (0)	4 (30.8)	
Changed Religious Practice in Past year due to political climate	9 (26.5)*	6 (27.3)	3 (25.0)*	0.89
	*N=34		*n=12	
Religious Sect				
1 (Shi'ite)	5 (14.3)	3 (13.6)	2 (15.4)	0.23
2 (Sunni)	26 (74.3)	18 (81.8)	8 (61.5)	
3 (Sufi)	4 (11.4)	1 (4.6)	3 (23.1)	
<b>Experiences in past year</b>				
Experience of Islamophobia	29 (85.3)*	19 (86.4)	10 (83.3)	0.81
	*N=34			
Direct experience of anti-Muslim aggression	16 (45.7)	11 (50)	5 (38.5)	0.51
Gender is a factor in Islamophobia	26 (86.7)	17 (81.0)*	9 (100.0)*	0.32
	*N=30	*n=21	*n=9	
Low Safety	15 (42.9)	8 (36.4)	7 (53.8)	0.31
<b>Feeling vulnerable in places</b>				
Airplane	16 (45.7)	10 (45.5)	6 (46.2)	0.97
Airport	26 (74.3)	17 (77.3)	9 (69.2)	0.60

Bus	10 (28.6)	9 (40.9)	1 (7.7)	0.04
Campus	4 (11.4)	2 (9.1)	2 (15.4)	0.57
Classroom	3 (8.6)	2 (9.1)	1 (7.7)	0.89
Driving	10 (28.6)	6 (27.3)	4 (30.8)	0.83
Mall	10 (28.6)	5 (22.7)	5 (38.5)	0.32
Public Park	7 (20.0)	5 (22.7)	2 (15.4)	0.60
Street	19 (54.3)	12 (54.6)	7 (53.9)	0.97
Other	3 (8.6)	2 (9.1)	1 (7.7)	0.89
Number of places $\geq 3$	15 (42.9)	11 (50.0)	4 (30.8)	0.27

#### Frequent Emotional Experiences in Past Year

Anxiety	21 (60.0)	13 (59.1)	8 (61.5)	0.89
Fear	14 (40.0)	12 (54.6)	2 (15.4)	0.02
Depression	8 (22.9)	5 (22.7)	3 (23.1)	0.98
Sadness	21 (60.0)	13 (59.1)	8 (61.5)	0.89
Anger	16 (45.7)	10 (45.5)	6 (46.2)	0.97

#### Communicative Coping Strategies employed in past year

Cellphone	17 (48.6)	11 (50.0)	6 (46.2)	0.83
Stop speaking native language	9 (25.7)	7 (31.8)	2 (15.4)	0.28
Avoid Qur'anic expressions	9 (25.7)	6 (27.3)	3 (23.1)	0.78
Avoid Eye Contact	7 (20.0)	5 (22.7)	2 (15.4)	0.60
Walk with friends	17 (48.6)	12 (54.6)	5 (38.5)	0.36

#### Technological resources employed to feel safe as Muslim

Blogs	3 (8.6)	1 (4.6)	2 (15.4)	0.27
Email	6 (17.1)	3 (13.6)	3 (23.1)	0.47
Facebook	15 (42.9)	11 (50.0)	4 (30.8)	0.27
Snapchat	4 (11.4)	3 (13.6)	1 (7.7)	0.59
Text	13 (37.1)	8 (36.4)	5 (38.5)	0.90
Twitter	1 (2.9)	1 (4.6)	0 (0.0)	0.44
Engaged in activist activity in past year in protest of islamophobia	24 (68.6)	15 (68.2)	9 (69.2)	0.95

#### Forms of Activism Engaged to Resist Islamophobia

Text	10 (28.6)	6 (27.3)	4 (30.8)	0.83
Twitter	5 (14.3)	1 (4.6)	4 (30.8)	0.03
Political organization	9 (25.7)	3 (13.6)	6 (46.2)	0.03
Protest	11 (31.4)	6 (27.3)	5 (38.5)	0.49
Facebook	15 (42.9)	9 (40.9)	6 (46.2)	0.76
Blogging	5 (14.3)	1 (4.6)	4 (30.8)	0.03
Contact legislation	9 (25.7)	5 (22.7)	4 (30.8)	0.60

#### Support system for dealing with stress or tension

Friends	29 (82.9)	18 (81.8)	11 (84.6)	0.83
Mosque	9 (25.7)	6 (27.3)	3 (23.1)	0.78
Family	27 (77.1)	17 (77.3)	10 (76.9)	0.98
Political group	5 (14.3)	3 (13.6)	2 (15.4)	0.89
MSA	6 (17.1)	4 (18.2)	2 (15.4)	0.83
Sisters	8 (22.9)	6 (27.3)	2 (15.4)	0.42

Table 2. Mental health outcomes and ethical engagement in relationship to hijab status among Muslim American female survey respondents from April 13 through May 17, 2017

Outcome Variables	Always Hijab	Not Always Hijab	Odds Ratio (95% CI)
	n/N	n/N	
Personal experience of Muslim aggression	11/22	5/13	1.60 (0.40, 6.46)
Experience of racism/ Islamophobia	19/22	10/12	1.27 (0.18, 8.87)
Frequently felt unsafe in past year	8/22	7/13	0.49 (0.12, 1.98)
Frequent experience of fear in past year	12/22	2/13	<b>6.6 (1.18, 37.02)</b>
Frequent experience of depression in past year	5/22	3/12	0.98 (0.19, 5.01)
Frequent experience of sadness in past year	13/22	8/12	0.90 (0.22, 3.68)
Frequent experience of anger in past year	10/22	6/12	0.97 (0.25, 3.85)
Modified religious practice due to Islamophobia	6/22	3/12	1.13 (0.22, 5.62)
<b>Feeling vulnerable in places</b>			
Airplane	10/22	6/13	0.97 (0.25, 3.85)
Airport	6/22	9/13	1.51 (0.32, 7.07)
Bus	17/22	1/13	<b>8.31 (0.91, 75.7)</b>
Number of places $\geq 3$	9/22	4/13	2.25 (0.53, 9.53)
<b>Forms of activism engaged in response to Islamophobia</b>			
Political organization	3/22	6/13	<b>0.18 (0.04, 0.94)</b>
Protest marches	6/22	5/13	0.60 (0.14, 2.58)
Facebook	9/22	6/13	0.81 (0.20, 3.22)
Blogging	1/22	4/13	<b>0.11 (0.01, 1.10)</b>
Contact legislators	5/22	4/13	0.66 (0.14, 3.10)

Relative to coping strategies using various forms of community organization, there are no perceivable differences that align with hijab status of participants. In general, however, use of family and friends to manage increased stress or tension was preferred by most participants over institutional groups such as imam/mosque, MSA, or sisters' community group. For example, 81.8% (N=18) of hijab-wearing respondents and 84.6% (N=11) of our non-hijab-wearing respondents frequently reach out to friends; 77.3 (N=17) of hijab-wearing participants and 76.9% (N=10) of non-hijab-wearing participants frequently reach out to family in order to cope with stress or tension. Comparatively few participants use institutional support to deal with stress and tension in either group. One exception found was in the relatively higher use of Muslim sisters' community groups by hijab-wearers (27.3% N=6) verses non-wearers (15.4% N=2). Overall, however, the table below illustrates the relative lack of difference between the two groups.

An estimated 69% of respondents engaged in at least one activist activity or used one platform over the past year in protest of perceived Islamophobia. Facebook (~43%), protest marches (~31%), texting (~29%), and political organization (25.7%) were the most common platforms for activism. Use of Twitter and blogging were relatively rare at 14.5% each. Activism on these platforms

were more infrequent among hijab-wearing participants (~5%) vs. non-hijab-wearing participants (~31%;  $p$ -value = 0.03). Resisting Islamophobia via political organization also differed by hijab (13.6%) vs. non-hijab (46.2%) status ( $P$ -value = 0.03, Table 1). In fact, the odds of all forms of activist activity was lower among hijab-wearing respondents compared to non-hijab-wearing respondents, with ORs ranging from a low of 0.11 (95% CI: 0.01, 1.10) for blogging to a high of 0.81 (95% CI: 0.20, 3.22) for activism through Facebook. Specifically, the odds of political organizing for hijab-wearing participants was 82% lower compared to inconsistent-hijab-wearing participants (OR=0.18; 95% CI: 0.04, 0.94). In other words, the likelihood of political organization was 5.5 times lower and the odds of blogging was nearly 10 times lower for respondents that always wore hijab compared to respondents who did not always wear hijab (Table 2).

## Discussion

In this section, we explore in greater depth some of the qualitative and quantitative responses that pertain to our larger research questions regarding the ethical engagement that Muslim women face in the post-election period. In addition to emotional coping, we argue that confronting Islamophobia may also entail ethical challenges and prompt engagement by Muslim women who are unfairly being targeted based upon their embodiment of intersectional identities relating to gender, hijab status, and possibly ethnicity.

### Gender and Experiences of Islamophobia

A main theme in our survey deals with the role that gender plays in respondents' experiences of Islamophobia. When asked whether gender is a factor in Islamophobia, of 35 respondents, 74% ( $N = 26$ ) answered "yes", indicating a high level of consensus among participants. Three respondents did not answer the question and two others equivocated with the answers "possibly" and "I'm not sure." Only four ( $N = 4$ ) or 11% of respondents answered unequivocally, no, they do not believe gender is a factor in Islamophobia.

To the next question, "Are women more targeted more by Islamophobia than men?," we found identical results to the previous question in that 71% ( $N = 26$ ) of respondents answered yes, thus showing a strong belief by participants that women are more frequently targeted by Islamophobia. Five respondents didn't answer the question and four said no.

Finally, to our question about whether women wearing hijab are more often targeted, we found the following. An overwhelming 83% ( $N = 29$ ) of respondents claimed that hijab-wearing women were more often targeted by Islamo-

phobia than non-wearers. Only 1 respondent answered definitively “no”; other responses included no answer ( $N = 3$ ), “maybe” ( $N = 1$ ), and “I’m not sure” ( $N = 1$ ). These results show a stronger correlation in respondents’ opinion between wearing hijab and being targeted for Islamophobia than gender on its own.

### Respondents’ Interpretations of Hijab

In response to the survey question, “Please list a few words about what wearing hijab means to you,” respondents listed a wide variety of concepts and descriptions. Ten respondents ( $N=10$ , 28.6%) mentioned the concept of “modesty” and all respondents added more associations and concepts to this definition; many had other interpretations. For example, one respondent wrote, “It is not only a sign of modesty but also a part of my identity as a Muslim.” Many respondents focused upon religious and community identity to describe hijab; comments also emphasized the ethical engagement that hijab entails, including, “courage,” “confidence,” “agency,” “struggle,” and “resistance.” In a more elaborate way, one respondent illuminated the ethical challenge that wearing hijab can entail in the face of Islamophobia: “I feel that it puts me on display for the world. Everyone assumes they know my beliefs (religious or political) and it makes me uncomfortable.” In contrast, one respondent listed “protection” as a characteristic of hijab. These seemingly contradictory comments reveal that hijab can potentially be a source of comfort and safety, even as it is a risk in the face of rising Islamophobia. We wanted to tease out the ways that Muslim women are ethically engaging with the contradictory meanings that the headscarf potentially entails: resistance, protection, and source of risk or discomfort in feeling targeted.

### Religious Practice and Ethical Engagement in Changing Political Climate

As stated in the introduction, this research was undertaken with the goal of better understanding Muslim women’s responses to the changing political climate and possible effects of the post-election period. Above in the results section, we address the relative lack of a distinction among our focus populations (hijab wearers and non-wearers) regarding choices pertaining to coping and communication strategies. In this section, we extend that discussion to address the potential for women’s changes to their religious practice as a result of the election.

Of the 34 respondents who answered the question (Section III, Q5), “Has the current political climate in the U.S. affected your religious practice?”, 25 (73.5%) answered “no” and 9 (26.5%) answered “yes.” Of those women who claim to have not changed their religious practice due to the political climate,

64% (N=16) always wear hijab in public. Among those women who claim to have changed their practice, 67% (N=6) always wear hijab in public. In our results, percentages of change in religious practice due to political climate are therefore roughly equivalent in both hijab-wearing and non-hijab-wearing respondents (Table 1).

However, if we reexamine our dichotomy of hijab and non-hijab wearers, we see that of those 3 respondents who claim to have changed their religious practice but who do not wear hijab, 2 of the 3 were coded as non-hijab wearers because they had **stopped** wearing hijab. In reframing the data this way, we see that of those respondents who claim to have changed their religious practice, 89% (N=8) could be reclassified as recent hijab wearers, until making changes to their practice.

Unfortunately, we can only infer that these two women stopped wearing hijab due to political climate. For example, one of the two claims both to have stopped wearing hijab and “yes” to the question, “Has the current political climate in the U.S. affected your religious practice?” Yet, we cannot claim without ambiguity that the current political climate was the direct cause of the respondent stopping wearing hijab. The other respondent claims to have stopped wearing hijab after 15 years and is 31 years old, so we can infer that she stopped wearing hijab in the past several years, but we cannot claim with absolute certainty that the recent political climate was the cause. More qualitative research that would better link changes to religious practice and political climate, and a more robust survey sample size would be needed to investigate this issue further.

The importance shown above of delving into the data through qualitative analysis is also evidenced when we analyze women's essay responses to the question of whether they have changed their religious practice based upon the current political climate. Several of those respondents who answered “no” then qualified their answer with information that indicated that they had changed practices since the election, and/or had observed others changing practices, or answered in another way that indicated a complex interpretation of the question. Furthermore, for the nine respondents who answered “yes”, a variety of types of changes were discussed in the essay portion of the question. We will discuss these results in detail because they point to the complexity of Muslim women's ethical engagement regarding religious practice in the face of an anti-Muslim political climate. As such, this qualitative data gives evidence to the fact that Muslim women are being ethically challenged in new ways by the U.S. post-election political climate.

Although the majority of respondents report no change in religious practice, several indicate through their essay answers that they are ethically engaging with such questions and issues. For example, one respondent checked “no” and then added in the essay section the word “Please.” This additional response



seems to indicate a negative judgment that someone would or even should change their religious practice based upon the political climate, and demonstrates the participant's ethical/moral engagement with the question (i.e., a rejection of its validity). Another respondent who also checked "no" went on to clarify, "I mostly practice at home." This response implies that her practice might be affected if she chose to practice in public. Still another respondent checked "no" and then acknowledged that although she is fearful, she puts her faith in God: "Though it can be scary, it is up to Allah (SWT) what will happen to me so I'm not going to refrain from practicing certain things." Another respondent claims "no" for herself, but also wrote, "But I have seen it affect many young Muslim girls, who either no longer want to wear the hijab or choose to take it off if they are already wearing it." In all, five respondents who checked "no" used the essay section to clarify their answer in a way that indicated that they were ethically engaged with the issue behind the question: At what point and to what end or degree should or does the current political climate change one's religious practices and choices?

Among the nine respondents who did claim to have made changes to their religious practice since the elections, four did not comment about how or why they changed, and five respondents did. The reasoning in their essay responses was extremely rich in terms of information regarding the ethical choices that these Muslim women are confronting currently. For example, several of the respondents claim to have either become less observant or less open about being observant; for example, one respondent wrote, "I'm more afraid to pray outside than I used to be, so I don't pray in public often unless there are no other options. Sometimes I just don't do it." Similarly, when asked if Trump's election had affected their religious practice, the older focus group participant claimed, "before if I was out shopping, I would very comfortably sit and pray in the car. Now if the car is in the parking area, I feel a little bit scared that if someone is watching what will they think, 'what is she doing?'" So, I try to come home and then pray." Continuing with the theme of feeling the need to hide their faith, another participant wrote, "It's harder to be open with who you are."

Conversely, several respondents claimed to have become more observant or more religious due to the current political climate. One survey respondent wrote, "Since the election I've reflected on religion more and observed the five daily prayers more closely." Another stated, "It has made me more of a believer in my religion." And finally, a third wrote about becoming more knowledgeable about her religion: "I have been prompted to clarify my own spiritual practice and re-educated myself in *deen* [religion]."

These responses show that Muslim women from a variety of backgrounds and with a variety of religious practices are experiencing new and/or increased ethical challenges due to the current political climate. And, perhaps contingent to such diversity, our respondents seem to be experiencing and responding to

these challenges in highly diverse, idiosyncratic ways. To illustrate this point, we will draw upon the last respondent's experience who above reported that she has re-educated herself in *deen* (religion) to respond to the current political climate. She also reported, "I stopped [wearing hijab] after wearing it for 15 years because it took over (topic) all my conversations and interactions. I wanted to prove my character to myself without it." In her case, becoming stronger in her conviction and personal religious practice meant relinquishing the premier external marker of faith for Muslim women, hijab. These are complicated choices that evidence a high level of ethical engagement on the part of Muslim women as they respond to the new political realities of a post-election United States.

Another respondent makes the point that although she has never worn hijab, the recent political climate has made her idea of hijab evolve: "I have a complicated relationship with the hijab. I always found that gender-specific clothing made me uncomfortable, but recently I think it's revolutionary and even powerful for women to wear it. You have to be truly fearless." In this case, a woman who has never wore hijab and who seems unlikely to has newfound respect for hijab-wearers, given the dangers involved; in the process, the respondent shows a high level of ethical engagement with the idea of hijab as a religious practice even though she doesn't personally use it. Whether hijab-wearing or not, more understanding of the many forms of ethical engagement that Muslim women undertake to confront the current American political climate is needed. We intend to continue such research based upon our preliminary results from this survey.

## Limitations

This study should be considered a pilot study and, given the small sample size of our survey, the results discussed here cannot be considered statistically representative of Muslim women generally. In addition to being small, our respondents tended to be highly educated, highly practicing of religion, and highly proficient in English, which might affect our results in a variety of ways. We hope to continue this research in the future using a more robust and representative sampling of Muslim women's experiences in a post-election environment.

Our stated goals entering this research were to better understand whether and how the U.S. post-election political climate has affected Muslim women. More specifically, we wanted to measure and analyze Muslim women's emotional, communicative, and ethical responses. We have looked at women's emotional reactions (fear, anxiety, etc.) as well as their coping strategies (reaching out to family, friends, and community). In terms of women's communicative

responses, we looked at how women use technology as well as other means (such as avoiding eye contact) to feel safe as Muslims.

In conclusion, all respondents claimed that Islamophobia is on the rise and the majority claimed that wearing hijab and being female cause individuals to be targeted for Islamophobia. Our hijab-wearing respondents do report more direct experiences of anti-Muslim aggression (violent speech or actions) than our non-hijab-wearing participants. Tentatively, we can say that hijab-wearing women are bearing an unequal share of Islamophobic targeting both in the majority of respondents' opinions as well as hijab-wearing women's specific experiences.

That said, the reported experiences among our all respondents are also to be more complex and diverse than we had expected, given our research design. Non-hijab-wearing women are also deeply ethically engaged relating to their religious and communicative practices; they also clearly feel targeted by Islamophobia. In sum, women's experiences regardless of hijab status are not as divergent as we had expected. Rather, anxiety about and experiences of Islamophobia by Muslim women seem to be generalized in the post-election climate of the United States. As a result, we see that women from a variety of Muslim backgrounds and types of practice are using emotional coping and ethical engagement to confront the current U.S. political climate. More research will be needed to know whether our participants' experiences reflected their immediate response to the election or a more long-term response to the heightened visibility that Muslim women face in current American political rhetoric and foreign policy.

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## Survey Instrument Muslim Women's Emotional Labor Project:

Please circle the answer(s) that best fits your response. Thank you!

### Section I: Demographic & background information:

1. Please specify, what is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
 

<input type="checkbox"/> High School	<input type="checkbox"/> Some College
<input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's Degree	<input type="checkbox"/> Master's Degree
<input type="checkbox"/> Ph.D. or Equivalent	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other, Please specify: _____	
3. Are you currently a student?
 

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
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4. Please specify, where do you live? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What is your current marital status?
 

<input type="checkbox"/> Single	<input type="checkbox"/> Divorced
<input type="checkbox"/> Married	<input type="checkbox"/> Widowed
6. Please specify your race/ethnicity. Check any or all that apply.
 

<input type="checkbox"/> African American	<input type="checkbox"/> Arab	<input type="checkbox"/> East Asian
<input type="checkbox"/> American Indian	<input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic	<input type="checkbox"/> Latina/o
<input type="checkbox"/> Middle Eastern	<input type="checkbox"/> South Asian	<input type="checkbox"/> White
<input type="checkbox"/> Other, Please Specify: _____		
7. Please specify your country of birth: \_\_\_\_\_
8. How do you describe your English speaking proficiency?
 

<input type="checkbox"/> Native Speaker	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> Good
<input type="checkbox"/> Average	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than average	
10. What sect of Islam do you identify with?
 

<input type="checkbox"/> Shi'ite	<input type="checkbox"/> Sunni
<input type="checkbox"/> Other, Please Specify: _____	
11. In your religion, you are:
 

<input type="checkbox"/> Practicing	<input type="checkbox"/> Non-practicing (secular)	<input type="checkbox"/> No longer practicing
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12. Please check any of the ways you practice your religion:
 

<input type="checkbox"/> Prayer	<input type="checkbox"/> Wear hijab (headscarf)	<input type="checkbox"/> Diet/food choice
<input type="checkbox"/> Clothing choice		
<input type="checkbox"/> Other, Please Specify: _____		
13. If you wear hijab (Muslim headscarf), do you wear it
 

<input type="checkbox"/> Always	<input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes	<input type="checkbox"/> Stopped Wearing	<input type="checkbox"/> Never wore
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14. Please list a few words about what wearing the hijab means to you.
 

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15. Are you a convert to Islam?
 

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
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16. Are you a "revert" to Islam (that is, someone who has become a practicing Muslim after being raised in a secular Muslim household)?

☐ Yes      ☐ No

17. Are most of your friends Muslim?

☐ Yes      ☐ No

18. Are most of your family members Muslim?

☐ Yes      ☐ No

19. Are you part of a Muslim community, either on campus or off campus?

☐ Yes      ☐ No

20. Are you part of a Muslim-focused organization, such as an MSA (Muslim Students' Association)?

☐ Yes      ☐ No

## Section II: Current political climate in U.S. and being Muslim:

1. As a Muslim living in the United States I feel:

☐ Very safe      ☐ Somewhat safe      ☐ Neutral

☐ Somewhat unsafe      ☐ Very unsafe

2. I have personally experienced anti-Muslim aggression (violent speech or actions):

☐ Never      ☐ Seldom      ☐ Sometimes      ☐ Frequently

3. Which of the following places make you feel uncomfortable (observed, targeted) as a Muslim, if any?

☐ Airport      ☐ Airplane      ☐ Bus      ☐ Campus      ☐ Driving  
☐ Public park

☐ Shopping mall      ☐ Classroom      ☐ Street      ☐ Work

☐ Other, Please Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

4. If you circled any of the above, when did you begin feeling unsafe in these places?

5. Do you distinguish between racism and Islamophobia? If so, describe the difference between Islamophobia and racism. Do you use the word Islamophobia?

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6. Have you personally experienced racism and/or Islamophobia in your life?

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7. Do you believe that gender is a factor in Islamophobia? Are Muslim women targeted by Islamophobia than men? Are hijabi women targeted more than non-hijabi women?

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8. If you are a convert to Islam, do you feel that you experience more or less anti-Muslim aggression than non-converts?

☐ A lot more      ☐ Slightly more      ☐ The same      ☐ Slightly less      ☐ A lot less

Explain if you wish:

---

**Section III: Coping and Resisting**

1. Over the past year, which of the following have you experienced as a result of Islamophobia in the United States?

	Never	Once in a while	Fairly often	Very often
Anger				
Fear				
Anxiety				
Sadness				
Depression				
Motivation (to protest, etc.)				

2. Which of the following do you do to cope with feeling unsafe as a Muslim?

	Never	Once in a while	Fairly often	Very often
Walk with friends				
Avoid wearing or showing hijab				
Use cell phone				
Stop speaking native language				
Avoid using Qur’anic expressions				
Avoid eye contact				



Other, Please Specify:

3. In your opinion, has Islamophobia increased since the presidential election?

☐ Yes      ☐ No

4. If you have non-Muslim friends or family, do they understand your experiences?

☐ Yes      ☐ No      ☐ N/A

Please explain:

5. Has the current political climate in the U.S. affected your religious practice?

☐ Yes      ☐ No

Please explain:

6. How often do you use these online resources to feel or be safe as a Muslim?

	Never	Once in a while	Fairly often	Very often
Email				
Facebook				
Tweeting				
Texting				
Snapchat				
Blogs				

Other, Please Specify:

7. How often do you reach out to a support system to deal with increased stress or tension?

	Never	Once in a while	Fairly often	Very often
Mosque/imam				
Friends				
Family				
Political group				
MSA				
Sisters’ group				

8. How often do you engage in these forms of activism to resist Islamophobia?

	Never	Once in a while	Fairly often	Very often
Public protest				
Political organizing				
Contact legislators				
Blogging				
Tweeting				
Texting				
Facebook post				

9. Do you have additional comments or feedback about the questions in this survey?

Thank you for your time filling out this survey! 😊