

## Article

# 'The Whole Concept of Social Cohesion, I Thought, "This Is So Qur'anic": Why Australian Muslim Women Work to Counter Islamophobia

Susan Carland 

School of Social Sciences, Monash University, Melbourne 3800, Australia; susan.carland@monash.edu

**Abstract:** Islamophobia is on the rise in many Western countries, and while previous research has considered the causes of Islamophobia and the impact it has on its victims, little research has investigated the attitudes and experiences of Muslims who are working to counter Islamophobia, and particularly those of Muslim women. This research investigates the motivations and intentions of Australian Muslim women who run public engagement events for non-Muslims to counter Islamophobia and build social cohesion. Data were obtained via in-depth interviews with 31 Sunni, Shia, Ahmadiyya Muslim women in four Australian capital cities. The three main themes that emerged were that the women wanted to connect with the non-Muslims who attended the events, create positive social change, and increase the knowledge that non-Muslims had about Islam and Muslims. Significantly, the women said that their most important motivator was their faith, and they rejected the idea that they were doing such work to appease non-Muslims. Instead, they saw work as an affirmation of their identity as Muslim women and their commitment to God.

**Keywords:** Islam; Muslim; women; Islamophobia; social cohesion; gender



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## 1. Introduction

While Australia's Social Cohesion Index<sup>1</sup> has remained high for the last seven years, negative attitudes towards Muslims remain a significant concern, with approximately 40% of the population reporting themselves as negative or very negative towards Muslims (Markus 2019). The prevalence of these negative attitudes is similarly identified in other population surveys, where nearly 50% of Australians self-identified as being anti-Muslim (Dunn 2011), and other research demonstrating that, in states such as Victoria, attitudes towards Muslims are uniquely negative—Dunn et al. (2021) found that not only is Islamophobia widespread in Victoria, it is unusually prevalent given the positive attitudes towards other diversity that Victorians hold. Islamophobia, defined as the unfounded hostility towards and fear of Islam and Muslims (Allen 2010), is not inconsequential; it undermines social cohesion for both non-Muslims who may be threatened by Muslims' presence in Australia, and Muslims who experience exclusion and discrimination. Research shows that Islamophobic discrimination is negatively associated with mental health, indicators of physical health, and health care access for Muslims in multiple Western countries (Samari et al. 2018), and the Islamophobia in Australia II and III reports (Iner 2019, 2022) catalogued extensive negative verbal, digital, and physical abuse toward Australian Muslims. Yet, while the 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand terror attacks brought into sharp focus the deadly potential of Islamophobia, the Islamophobia in Australia III report found that Islamophobic attacks against Muslims in Australia after that attack increased fourfold (Iner 2022). Thus, while the prevalence and damage of Islamophobia in Australia has been documented, effectively tackling it remains a challenge.

These issues are also not unique to Australia. Islamophobia is a global phenomenon, and alongside Australia, a rise in Islamophobia has been recorded across Europe

(Law et al. 2019) and the United States (Mogahed and Mahmood 2019), demonstrating the international need for solution-focused research. And while research has been conducted into the causes (Duderija and Rane 2019) and impact (Bouma 2016) of Islamophobia in Australia, very little research has investigated the range of activities being used within the Muslim community to improve social cohesion and counter this Islamophobia, or the motivations and experiences of the Muslims who carry out this work.

More specifically, gender is a central factor to how Islamophobia is expressed and directed (Carland 2011, 2017; Perry 2014; Allen 2015; Gohir 2015; Alimahomed-Wilson 2017). Investigations into the targets of Islamophobia, such as the Islamophobia in Australia III Report (Iner 2022) reveal that Muslim women are much more likely (82%) to be the target of Islamophobic attacks than men, and Dunn et al. (2020) found that one third of Victorians believe that Muslim women should not be allowed to wear the hijab. This Islamophobic targeting of Muslim women has been explained not as merely coincidental, but as emerging from a strategic anti-Islam ideology that claims to champion women's rights. Such an approach manages to unite the strange bedfellows of right-wing nationalists, feminists, and neoliberals into what Farris calls 'femonationalists', who all 'invoke women's rights to stigmatize Muslim men in order to advance their own political objectives' (Farris 2017, p. 3). Thus, the desire to ban the hijab by one third of Victorians, as Fekete argues, ironically weaponises women's rights *against* Muslim women (Fekete 2006). At the same time, Australian Muslim women are often prominent agents in attempting to counter Islamophobia through various initiatives they spearhead—mosque open days, 'speed date a Muslim' events, school visits, education programs, and interfaith activities. Given that they are the more likely recipients of Islamophobia, they may also play a particular role in countering it; the gendered Islamophobia they face may in fact require their specific responses. Research has primarily focused on Muslim women's experience as being more frequent recipients of Islamophobia, but has not considered whether being a woman may play a role in countering Islamophobia. And while previous research (Law et al. 2019) tracks initiatives to counter Islamophobia, very little has investigated the specific role of Muslim women in this work, as well as the experiences, attitudes, and motivations of the Muslim women who carry out this work. Common narratives often paint Muslims as threatening social cohesion (Dunn 2014) or Muslim women merely as victims of Islamophobia; this research takes a new approach and explores how Muslim women may *create* social cohesion and *counter* Islamophobia from a place of self-determination and the motivators that drive them to engage in such work.

## 2. Background and Methodology

It is important to contextualise where this research took place and the environment in which the participants, all Muslim women, operated. As well as the two key factors highlighted above (Muslim women are far more likely to be victims of Islamophobic attacks than Muslim men, and negative attitudes towards Muslims in Australia are high). The other contextualizing statistic is the low number of Muslims in Australia. According to the most recently available Australian census figures, just 3.2 per cent of the Australian population is Muslim—around 813,000 people (ABS—Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022).

This study was conducted in Australia in 2021 as part of a larger three-year research project on Australian Muslim women countering Islamophobia and building social cohesion, and the attitudes of the non-Muslims who attend their programs. Conceptually, this research employs and extends lived religions and (in)tolerance theory (Ganzevoort and Sremac 2017), a hermeneutical tool that interrogates the way religion-in-action by everyday practitioners intersects with (in)tolerance to create meaning. Lived religion and (in)tolerance theory states that the connection between religion and (in)tolerance cannot be understood without interrogating the way ordinary people perform and practice their faith and (in)tolerance outside of traditional institutions. Muslim women countering Islamophobia in events they run themselves (often outside of mosques) is an under-investigated

avenue within this theory. As research that is qualitative in nature, it is most interested in the question, 'What is going on here?' (Bouma and Carland 2016).

This article focuses on the first year of this research project, which investigated the self-identified styles of approach that Muslim women use in their work and why they use these approaches (that is, their intentions and motivations). Later research in the second year of the project included ethnographic observation and an analysis of the events that Muslim women run, as well as surveys and focus groups with the non-Muslim attendees at their events. The participants were 31 adult Muslim women who were all engaged in various public programs and initiatives with non-Muslims to promote social cohesion and counter Islamophobia. The 'public' aspect of this research was important. While meaningful informal work can be, and is, carried out by Muslims to counter Islamophobia and build social cohesion through casually talking with others and interpersonal engagement (Harris and Roose 2014), the research in this paper targeted the organised, public-facing work Muslim women were doing to engage the non-Muslims in their community through the programs and events they developed.

Participants were in the capital cities of Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, and Brisbane, and comprised of a mix of Sunni, Shia, and Ahmadiyya women. These sectarian groupings were not intentionally targeted; instead, the Muslim women who were most active in the public countering of Islamophobia and social-cohesion-building initiatives were approached through a mix of targeted contacting (emailing women named in public advertising of events with a request to participate) and snowballing referrals from participants, and these women fell into the categories of Sunni, Shia and Ahmadiyya. The mix of participants is therefore a reflection of the types of Muslim women involved in this public engagement work, as opposed to a representative sample of the sectarian makeup of Australian Muslim women per se. While there are only an estimated 6000 Ahmadiyya Muslims in Australia (Bladen 2019), forming just 1% of the Australian Muslim population, they comprise 13% (4 out of 31) of the participants in this study. Ahmadiyya women are over-represented in the participants of this study because they are over-represented in this line of work. This is largely because of the Ahmadiyya doctrinal encouragement and commitment to proselytization and outreach (Jonker 2016; Moten 2018) that is not so present in other denominations of Islam.

The women ranged in age from 18 to 65 and were from a range of cultural, employment, and education backgrounds, reflecting the strong diversity of the Australian Muslim community (Hassan 2018). The women in this study worked in a range of institutional settings. Some women had started their own organisations and were running them either single-handedly or with a team of all-female staff working for them.<sup>2</sup> Other participants worked as volunteers (or occasionally as paid staff) in Muslim organisations that comprised both men and women. All of these organisations had engagement with non-Muslims as either the central or one of the main focuses of the organisation. Two women who participated did not officially belong to any organization, but assisted Muslim organisations as needed (for example, if a local mosque needed someone to run a mosque tour, these women would do so despite not having any official role at the mosque). The women interviewed were engaged in various public initiatives to counter Islamophobia and build social cohesion with non-Muslims. These included:

- Mosque tours;
- Podcasts;
- Festivals;
- Workshops with school children;
- Tours of the Islamic Museum;
- 'Speed-date-a-Muslim' events;
- 'Introduction to Islam' sessions;
- Interfaith programs;
- Iftars (Ramadan fast-breaking meals) for non-Muslims;
- Digital campaigns;

- Media engagement;
- ‘Coffee with a Muslim’ sessions;
- Christmas toy drives for non-Muslim charities.

All the women participated in a single, in-depth, one-on-one interview that lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours, conducted by the author—an Australian Muslim woman, and an academic who has spent nearly two decades researching and working within the Australian Muslim community. The data were analysed using Applied Thematic Analysis (Guest et al. 2012), and participants were asked open-ended questions about various aspects of their experience engaging in this work.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of these interviews were conducted via Zoom (with most of the Melbourne interviews occurring in-person at a location of the participants’ choosing). Ethics clearance was obtained for this research from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID 27578), which endorsed that the project met the requirements of *the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*. To protect their privacy, all participants have been provided with a pseudonym.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

My interviews with the participants focused on the style of approach they used in their programs with non-Muslims: What were they hoping to achieve? What motivated their work, and what was their intention? Why did they use that style of approach in particular—did they think it was the most effective? I was also interested in how they felt the non-Muslim participants at their programs and events responded (in later stages of this research, I will ask the non-Muslim attendees themselves what they were feeling, but at this first stage of the research covered in this paper, I was interested to see how the Muslim women participants perceived it). From the interviews with the Muslim women participants, three main styles of approach used in this work emerged. When I asked the women, ‘Tell me about the work you do with a non-Muslim audience. What is your intention with this approach? What is your motivation?’, the three themes that emerged were that the women intended: to change, to connect, and to know.

#### 3.1. To Change

The majority of the women who participated in this study expressed creating change as driver of their work. The women in this study would often speak about it in grand ways, with participants saying, ‘I want to change the world’ (Amira) or ‘we can actually change someone’s life’ (Zainab). By this, they meant that they believed the work they were doing genuinely had the capacity to improve society by building social cohesion with people who may know very little about Islam or Muslims (and may even be fearful or hostile). And while they had big visions of change, the way they saw that change happening was in the small, human interactions they had with the non-Muslims who engaged with their programs. As Hannah said, ‘It’s just the positive feedback I get after, or someone going away with a smile on their face saying, “Okay, I understand it a lot better. Thank you.” That makes me feel like, “Okay, I feel like I’ve done something right.”’. The participants in this study said they wanted to create positive social change through giving non-Muslim attendees a different perspective on Islam and Muslims. As Sumaya told me, ‘Knowing that you’re planting seeds of change in other people, challenging people’s perspectives—you’re creating some kind of small change by breaking down those stereotypes’.

Often, the participants reported seeing the change, either intellectually or physically, in the people who came to their programs who were nervous or antagonistic at the beginning. What was striking was how often the participants in this study would say similar things to me about this change they were helping to create. They would often use the word ‘transform’, ‘seeing the penny drop’ or, ‘seeing something click’ to describe the change they witnessed in the non-Muslims who attended their initiatives. The participants often told me about the way they would watch the bodily transformation of people who came to their events. They reported seeing people who began with closed body language, and

watching them physically change as the event progressed, opening up their bodies, starting to smile, and sometimes hugging these Muslim women who they had coldly spoken to at the start of the event. One participant, Maryam, described conducting mosque tours for non-Muslims, and particularly school children who were reluctant or even fearful to attend an event about Muslims and Islam:

So many instances where you actually see that transformation. School kids who have left messages on the feedback forms saying they hid from the school bus because they were so terrified to come, [and that] they forged letters from their parents saying they're not allowed to come on the school excursion. Kids that actually looked terrified. Then they'd write on their feedback form at the end, 'But this has been the best excursion ever!'. I was doing cultural awareness training for a group of non-Muslim service providers, and one guy came up to me at the end of it and said, 'Look, I really appreciated your talk. My son converted to Islam 12 months ago. I have completely cut him off, have had nothing to do with him for 12 months. But now that I've attended this session, the first thing I'm going to do is go and ring up my son'.

Nusayba who ran workshops about Islam and Muslims for high school groups had a similar perspective:

You see them go through this transformation . . . [At the start] their body language isn't very open, and they come in and they're like that [gestures folded arms, and tight, hunched shoulders]—by the end of it, their body language is like that [gestures open arms, relaxed posture]. And so it's really cool to see. Like it's really had an effect on them. I think every session seeing their faces, that's what motivates me. Like, seeing that transformation in every session . . . it's amazing when you get to meet students who are genuinely, like, 'Oh my goodness', by the presentation. Not by you, but by the presentation. They're, like, 'Wow, I did not know that' or 'Wow, it was so good hearing your perspective'.

As these quotes demonstrate, the change the women are seeking to create is evidenced, they believe, in both the intellectual *and* physical change in the people who attend their programs; the changing attitudes played out physically for the participants as demonstrated by their more open, relaxed body language, creating an embodied transformation.

### 3.2. To Connect

Another recurring theme in my study was 'connection' or variants of the word (bridge, relationship, engage) in their interviews. The word 'connect' and its synonyms came up dozens of times in my interviews with the women across the range of participants; regardless of their age or sectarian background, the motivation to 'connect' with the non-Muslim attendees and genuinely get to know them was a main theme for the women. Rabia explained her approach to the work she does with non-Muslims to build social cohesion:

I think the intention and the foundation has always been getting to know each other. Coming together. Otherwise, we all live in our little bubbles. And for me personally, it's my responsibility. I really feel passionately about ensuring that people are respected for their faith or non-faith backgrounds.

What is also significant of the wish to connect is that its frequency stands in stark contrast to any desire to convert people. This was not a topic that I asked (nor even hinted at); the participants would often raise with me of their own volition that they were not trying to convert anyone with their initiatives. Indeed, often the women would hold connecting and converting as opposing concepts. Aaleyah explained the difference between trying to convert someone and her intention of trying to connect, 'Our general idea here is, we're not here to convert people. That's the one thing I can say we're not doing. Our aim is not that. If anything, our aim is more "get to know us as another member of your society that you are able to connect with."' Halima similarly contrasted connecting and converting, saying, 'This is actually a service that we have to do for humanity. Like, it's not

... converting people to our religion. It's really [us] believing that it's a really important tool for social cohesion'.

Nusayba similarly explained that her sessions with non-Muslim high school children were not about converting anyone, but about trying to find common ground and respect:

Even if we're different, even if we don't agree, I think that's really important. When I think of the sessions, even when we talk about, for example, Islamophobia, I always say, 'I don't need you to agree with me, you don't have to believe in Islam. That's not the point, I'm not here to convert you. But I just want to know that you agree that I shouldn't be treated differently because of the way that I look'.

On the motivation to connect with the non-Muslims who attended their programs, some of the women also spoke about the benefit that they personally received from connecting. They saw this connection not just as a one-way street of them imparting wisdom and information to others, but as an important spiritual gain for themselves as Muslim women. Connecting with other, non-Muslim people through the programs they were involved in was often seen as important for the women's own growth and learning, including their own spiritual growth. The Muslim women reported learning from others who were not Muslim, and that those non-Muslims' own thoughtful practices inspired them to deepen that part of themselves and be better Muslims. For example, one woman (Dana) said she was on an interfaith trip with a bishop who was doing his own religious practice of reflection, and how observing him do so inspired Dana to incorporate it into her own regular religious practice.

One participant (Ruby) referred to connecting with non-Muslims as 'filling her own cup', and another woman, Baseerah, said, 'I feel like I do it [working with non-Muslims] because it just feeds me. It feeds my spirituality in Islam'. Tasneem talked about the personal and spiritual growth she gained from engaging with non-Muslims through formal programs, saying:

I think for me to be better, I need to be engaged. So, when I do engage with people, I tend to grow, I tend to learn. I also learn about what I know and what I don't know, and so for me, I think just doing that is a service to myself ... So, for me, that means growing myself as a person, and part of that growth is, I think, to be engaged with others, beyond myself.

However, not all the women I spoke with felt they gained from these experiences. A small number (three) spoke about the significant toll this work had taken on them. All three of these women cried as they spoke to me about the pain of the experience, and it is important to discuss this here so as not to give the impression that this work was an entirely positive and beneficial experience for all the women in this study.

Despite articulating the benefits she saw in running public programs to counter Islamophobia and build social cohesion, Maryam explained the mental and physical impacts that doing this sort of work for more than twenty years had had on her:

It is very exhausting. It's relentless ... There was one Probus club [a social club for retirees] I think that I was speaking at, and there was a very, very rude woman. I thought, 'I'm an invited guest. I'm coming to your group. I'm [only] given a \$10.00 petrol voucher. I don't get paid for this ... and that's how you treat [me]? How dare you think you have that right to treat your invited guests like that?'. It is just so exhausting. It's frustrating. It's had a toll on my health. I've ended up in hospital three times, I think, as a direct consequence of the stress ... [At one point] I just made up my mind: I'm turning 50 this year. I want to do something completely different. I don't want to deal with Muslims. I don't want to deal with non-Muslims. I don't want to ... carry this burden of being this ambassador of my faith anymore ... Then Christchurch happened. And that ripped me to my core ... I said to myself, 'Maryam, this is what happens when hatred is allowed



to go unchecked. This is what people are capable of doing. So, you know what? No. Maybe you still need to keep dealing with people’.

Like Maryam, Rabia explained how much non-Muslim audiences seemed to want to hear stories about Islamophobic attacks to understand the reality of being a Muslim woman in Australia, and yet having to tell and re-live such traumatising stories was damaging. Similar to Maryam, Rabia discussed the importance and benefit of the work she did with non-Muslims, also describing the spiritual harm that this caused her, saying that carrying out this work for years, ‘started really eating up at my soul’. She continued:

I had to retell my story. ‘So, what happened? Did you ever get abused?’ It’s like I’m a clown at a circus. So I had to retell my abuse after 9/11 when a man followed me with a crowbar. I had to tell them when my daughter got harassed going to tennis. Retell the traumatic experiences, how a pregnant woman was dragged out of her car at nine months and being bashed. And I realised, I would get really affected. [We] shouldn’t have to relive [our] own experiences over and over again so we can make ourselves relatable, because that’s what the audience kept telling us. Until we told them how difficult it was, they just thought, ‘What’s your problem?’ So, we had to tell them how difficult it was. We had to tell them about the abuse. We had to tell them about how the hijab got taken off us. We had to tell them we got spat at. [And] it really felt like this is not right for us as presenters. I can’t do this anymore. And there have been times that I would walk out [of a presentation to non-Muslims] crying—not once or twice, many a times.

Like Maryam, Rabia had been carrying out public engagement work to counter Islamophobia with non-Muslims for more than twenty years, the longest continuous work of any of the participants in this study, and both these women had been at the forefront of trying to address issues with a non-Muslim public, sometimes being the main faces in the media or leading the most attended programs to counter Islamophobia in the country. The length of time doing such challenging work was undoubtedly a factor in their distress. Both women shared how they had faced unrelenting political events, from terrorist attacks to comments by politicians about Muslims, over the decades that they then had to bear the brunt of in their work by facing a freshly hostile public. While the anguish expressed by Maryam and Rabia was a minority experience among the 31 participants, it is important to capture, as it serves as something of a warning for the potential long-term effects of doing work that seems to demand a corrosive level of self-exposure. If the other women in this study had been engaged in this work as long as Maryam and Rabia (around 25 years for both), would they be similarly affected?

Overall, however, for most of the women in this study, engaging in this work was seen as a mostly positive and advantageous experience. As well as the giving of themselves—their time, their energy, and dealing with sometimes hostile people—they also spoke about what they acquired from the experience: the satisfaction of feeling that they were genuinely making a difference, learning about others and themselves, and personal and spiritual growth.

### 3.3. *To Know*

A significant motivator for the women was trying to improve the level of knowledge about Islam and Muslims for the non-Muslims who attended their programs and events. One study found, for example, that 70% of Australians say they know little to nothing about Islam or Muslims (O’Donnell et al. 2017). And with so few Muslims in Australia as stated above, many of the non-Muslims who come to the events have never met a Muslim before. Thus, the level of knowledge about Muslims, either theoretically or personally, is very low for the average Australian. As Nusayba reflected when I asked her what her intention was:

Probably for people to meet a Muslim. Because often—it sounds so simple, but for most of these students—especially young people—they haven’t met a Muslim

before . . . So one of my intentions is definitely for people just to meet a Muslim. I feel like often the sessions that we do, it's just to humanise myself. And that sounds really sad. But it is. It's like, 'I'm just like you'. Most of the time I try and come from an angle where it's like really on their level, and likeminded, and trying to just connect. Almost just to have a relationship. And I feel like even them just meeting me and humanising me, the rest is kind of easy to do . . . So definitely meeting a Muslim. I think a big one is also humanising me, humanising Muslims.

The women in this study felt that many of the non-Muslims who came to their programs had a genuine desire to learn. Hannah believed that '85% of people who come are open-minded', and Tasneem observed about the non-Muslims who came to her programs that, 'they actually want to know. They really want to know, they really want to understand'. While average knowledge about Islam and Muslims is documented as quite low, many of the women in this study felt that many of the people who came to their events had a sincere desire to change that.

Beyond just imparting information, some women felt a personal and passionate desire to correct misinformation about the faith that was so important to them. As Ayah said when I asked her why she did this work, 'I think it would break my heart to know that there are people around me that have a completely different understanding, and think that what Islam promotes is division and discrimination and things that are so opposite to what is actually the case'. Maryam felt similarly, saying she ran mosque tours for non-Muslims 'to counter that [ugly] image of Islam and counter Islamophobia, and I felt this huge sense of injustice that my beautiful religion had been adulterated in the eyes of non-Muslims. And I wanted to restore the beauty of Islam in their eyes and, you know, show them the true teachings of Islam and debunk myths about Islam'.

### 3.4. *The Interconnection of Change, Connect, Know*

While 'change', 'connect', and 'know' have been addressed as discrete themes, as is alluded to in some of the participants' quotes (such as Nusayba's comment on knowing a Muslim for the first time being tied to humanising Muslims), they are in fact intertwined. For many of the women, the three themes and intentions of change, connect, and know were interconnected: non-Muslims knowing about Islam and Muslims would lead to positive social change, and connections between Muslims and non-Muslims would create an environment that facilitated knowing. The three themes were interdependent, and the women in this study felt the absence of one would prevent the others from occurring.

For example, Hannah saw connection as a necessary pre-cursor to knowing, observing that her intention was in 'creating, I guess, a comfortable relationship where if somebody wanted to ask me something and they were curious, then to create a space where they can'. Similarly, Aaleyah felt that not knowing prevented proper connection between Muslims and the non-Muslims: 'I think human connection is so important. I do [this work] because I think it will help our connection, as a society, and I feel that misinformation is a big hindrance of connection. And so therefore, it's really an interaction or knowledge or information sharing that can help to overcome that misinformation, or misunderstanding, and [that] helps with that that connection'.

### 3.5. *Religion and Framing*

In qualitative research, sometimes the most telling data are the opinions that many participants offer unprompted. In this study, what was striking to me were the topics participants raised with surprising frequency (to me as a researcher), across denominational, cultural, and age backgrounds, without me asking them about them. This suggests that these themes are particularly important to the participants—that their feelings about them or their desire to convey them was close to the surface. And while the above three concepts were identified as key motivating themes across the interviews with the participants, there was one overarching theme that came up repeatedly in the interviews with the



women, despite no explicit question asking about it: the role of religion. This theme emerged as an umbrella, dominant theme to the three subsidiary themes raised by the participants of ‘change’, ‘connect’, and ‘know’. This is noteworthy as Muslim women are often considered as social, cultural, or political beings, but less frequently as religiously motivated entities. They are framed as citizens (Fernando 2009; Harris and Roose 2014), security threats (Rashid 2008), feminists (Al Wazni 2015), victims (Allen 2014), or agents (Krayem and Carland 2021), but less often as religious beings, with their faith being the primary motivator and explanation for their behaviour. If their religion is discussed, it is often subsumed to other narratives. Perhaps this is to be expected—since 2007, many countries and particularly high-income countries, have become less religious (Inglehart 2021), which lends itself to positioning Muslim women’s actions as having non-religious motivators for two reasons: (1) These Muslim women may indeed be following the global trend of declining religious adherence, and thus are motivated by other political or social forces, and/or (2) the researchers interpreting Muslim women’s behaviour are instinctively framing Muslim women’s actions primarily through a non-religious lens even if that is not necessarily the way the Muslim women in question frame themselves. Yet, the women in this study clearly articulated their motivation as principally theological; other reasons (connecting, or changing people’s opinions, or creating greater knowledge) were secondary to this drive. When I asked them why they engaged in this work, they told me:

I have a need to represent Islam and be an ambassador of my faith, and I do believe that that is grounded in Islamic teachings. I believe that Muhammad, *sal-lallahu alayhi wasallam* [peace be upon him], encouraged us to . . . talk about Islam. I do believe that it’s very much grounded in the Islamic teachings. [Maryam]

As a Muslim, it’s my obligation to ensure that we create harmony and understanding and respect with people of other faiths and non-faith backgrounds. I think it’s my responsibility. I believe it’s what Allah expects. [Rabia]

The whole concept of social cohesion, I [thought], ‘This is so Qur’anic’. We are meant to get to know each other. There is no ulterior motive to that. Just, each from their own frame of reference. And that was really the intention. [Manar]

This religious drive is particularly important because the women in this study did not talk about power nor victimhood. Much current framing in social sciences (Burawoy 2005; Sadi and Ergas 2022) and the media (Aly 2020) uses critical theories, which conceive of the social world as one of unequal power relations (Scott 2008), and thus consider hierarchy and power relationships as the dominant social organizing force. Yet, the women in this study did not perceive their work, nor their motivations, in this way. Contrary to how Muslim minorities in the West are sometimes framed, particularly in their engagement with non-Muslims, these women were not motivated to resist nor appease non-Muslims (Naderi 2018), but instead motivated by a confident affirmation of who *they* were and what *they* believed. Their actions were a manifestation of their firmly held beliefs of who they were and what it meant to be a Muslim, and thus they were a secure affirmation of their own identity, not a cowering appeasement of non-Muslims, nor a perception that this engagement was hierarchical. And, based on what the women said, this was anchored in their faith. Wanting to engage non-Muslims and teach them about their faith and themselves was not framed as placating non-Muslims and contorting themselves as Muslim women into something palatable to non-Muslims. Being connected, educating, outward-facing Muslim women was an expression of *themselves*, and if it was hierarchical in relation to anything or anyone, it was to God, not non-Muslims.

The criteria they used to decide how they behaved were their own, based on their religious beliefs, which included a desire to create positive social change and greater understanding. The criteria were not the proclivities of non-Muslims. As Nusayba stated, ‘We really try and avoid coming from a point of being apologetic and justification, and [instead] really just [from] the point of understanding and [asking participants] to understand: why?’

Why have you seen that image? Where does it come from? Is it true? Is it not true? What are the facts of what you're seeing?'

The women in this study were adamant that how they behaved was not about pacifying non-Muslims, nor was it because they felt disempowered in the engagement. In fact, they outright rejected that concept. Sunni and Ahmadiyya women, younger and older, pre-emptively raised this with me. They were clearly aware that this was an attitude that existed about the work they do, and they forthrightly refuted such a framing. One participant, Amani, told me, 'I am not doing this to oblige the government'. Another participant called Maryam rejected that she did this work to ingratiate herself to non-Muslims, and instead saw her behaviour as aligning with her religious commitments:

It's not about trying to appease non-Muslims. I believe it's a duty to educate these individuals. And [some people] are very antagonistic towards this kind of approach and believe that Muslims should just, like, stick it to non-Muslims and basically, 'if they want to hate us, they can hate us, that's their problem'. And it's a very ugly, politicised view of Islam. I think, 'Well, hang on. What is the Prophet Muhammad telling me to do? What does the Quran teach us? What does our religion teach us? How should we deal with our enemies?' Prophet Muhammad was always so compassionate with his enemies. In the Quran Allah tells us, 'You will be insulted about your religion. It's a given. You're going to be insulted about your religion, but you must patiently persevere and do not transgress' ...

And the other thing I get frustrated about is when I am targeted [by people saying], 'You're just trying to be apologetic'. But I genuinely want to do good ... Why can't people understand it? I genuinely want to be a good person and be good to non-Muslims, because I believe my religion teaches me that's how I'm supposed to treat people, regardless of their background or race or religion. So, I find that very offensive that people are interpreting my actions as, 'Are you just trying to appease?' And I'm like, 'Actually, no. I just believe that that's how I'm supposed to treat people'.

It is important to note that even the women who struggled the most emotionally from this sort of work, such as Maryam and Rabia, were strongly of the opinion that carrying out this work was an affirmation of who they were and their faith, as opposed to trying to placate non-Muslims. And, as Rabia stated, if she thought her work may be tipping into that framing (such as when she had to keep re-telling her experiences of abuse to make herself, as she stated, 'relatable'), then she altered the approach she used in her work. Even they did not see their work in political or power-based engagement with non-Muslims, despite being very aware of the personal cost of the work. Indeed, the women in this study described their work as centred on what they believed God required of them, and thus what they wanted of themselves as Muslim women, and not what non-Muslims may want from them.

#### 4. Conclusions

This research aimed to explore how Muslim women create social cohesion and counter Islamophobia from a place of self-determination, and the motivators that drive them to engage in this work. The highly diverse Australian Muslim women in this study were united in what they were trying to achieve in their engagement with non-Muslims: they wanted to bring about positive social change, connection, and knowing.

The participants felt the significant social change they were trying to facilitate was evidenced through the small physical changes that they witnessed in their participants, as they shifted from a closed-off, anxious, or hostile physicality to being open, smiling, and even embracing. The women in this study saw this embodied transformation as a small-scale proof of the large-scale change that they hoped to create. This change was also evidenced in the healing relationships they helped facilitate, such as Maryam's story of the

man who spoke to his Muslim son for the first time in a year after listening to Maryam's mosque tour.

The participants expressed a wish to truly connect with the non-Muslims who attend their programs, and contrasted this sentiment with no interest in converting people to Islam. They also felt that connecting with non-Muslims at their events benefitted them as Muslim women, and that their work was not a one-way interaction but a reciprocal engagement that helped them, particularly spiritually. The social and personal benefits of this work must be balanced, however, by the pain and distress of three of the participants, who expressed trauma and negative health effects by the corrosive effects of doing this work for long periods of time. Knowing was the third motivation for the participants in this study, who separated 'knowing' into knowing Muslims and knowing about Islam. Knowing Muslims was seen as an important and corrective humanising step for non-Muslims who had never met a Muslim before, and knowing about Islam meant teaching non-Muslim attendees about "my beautiful religion" (as one participant called it) in contrast to the "adulterated" version of Islam to which they felt non-Muslims had been wrongly exposed.

The findings of this research demonstrate that these three broad themes are inextricably linked; one theme would lead to the other, and each theme could not exist without the other. Connection would lead to knowing, knowing would lead to change, change would lead to greater connection.

The work of the participants in these three areas ties into and contributes to lived religion and (in)tolerance theory, as these "religious actors" (Ganzevoort and Sremac 2017, p. 5) felt they were creating meaning, either for their non-Muslim attendees or for themselves, in each of the three categories. Their convictions that their faith was their overarching motivator in the events they ran at cafes, schools, business workshops, and dinners was a manifestation of the way they performed and practiced their faith and built tolerance outside of traditional institutions.

The way participants framed their work was significant and must be given its proper weight, especially when using an applied thematic analysis (ATA)<sup>3</sup>. For most of the women, their work was religiously driven. It was a demonstration of how they believed God required them as Muslims to engage with non-Muslims—respectfully, curiously, confidently, and with no interest in converting anyone—and thus how the women saw themselves. They were clearly frustrated by the suggestion that they were carrying out such work for other reasons, particularly reasons that imposed a power dynamic with attendees they did not accept. This was seen as an "offensive" (as Maryam labelled it) misinterpretation of the reason for their behaviour, which came from a reasoned and thoughtful commitment to God and what they felt it meant to be a Muslim woman living in Australia. When understood in the context that these Muslim women give to their countering Islamophobia work, what they are doing and why is a coherent and authentic response to the environment in which they live, and one that is being conducted very much on their own terms.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are not publicly available for the purposes of privacy and confidentiality of research participants.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Scanlon-Monash Social Cohesion Index began in 2007 and has been calculated annually in Australia since 2009. It is drawn from the annual Mapping Social Cohesion national survey. The index recognises the differences in the way the term is understood and implemented, and the tensions that exist within it, and clarifies that their use of the term is not synonymous with multiculturalism, nor a ‘wistful imagination of past assimilationist practices’ (Scanlon Foundation Research Institute n.d.).
- <sup>2</sup> Some of these staff also participated in this study and were recruited through snowballing referrals from their managers.
- <sup>3</sup> ATA includes, among other areas, grounded theory (Guest et al. 2012), which requires research to be guided by the empirical data gathered and privileges the experiences and opinions of participants, and then uses these data to chart theoretical implications—in this case, of Muslim women’s motivations in countering Islamophobia and building social cohesion.

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