

Article

'We're Islam in Their Eyes': Using an Interpellation Framework to Understand Why Being a Woman Matters When Countering Islamophobia

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Abstract: Australian Muslim women are far more likely to be the target of Islamophobic attacks than men, and common narratives often paint Muslim women merely as victims of Islamophobia. This article takes a new approach and considers how Muslim women may counter Islamophobia and the various audiences they must contend with in their work. Using de Koning's interpellation framework, this research investigates why Australian Muslim women believe gender matters in public countering Islamophobia work and proposes new developments to the framework based on the way Australian Muslim women must mediate the ascriptions of both non-Muslims and Muslim men. This research draws on in-depth interviews with Sunni, Shi'i, and Ahmadiyya women from around Australia who are active in public countering Islamophobia education initiatives.

Keywords: Islamophobia; gender; Muslim women; Islam; social cohesion; interpellation; education; public religion



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1. Introduction

Muslims pre-date the arrival of the British and Christianity in Australia by hundreds of years (Ganter 2008; Stephenson 2010), making Muslims, as Ganter calls them, "[Australia's] most long-standing non-indigenous segment" (Ganter 2008, p. 481). Muslims have also been recorded in every Australian census since records were first kept in 1911 (Census of the Commonwealth of Australia 1911). Yet, despite this long and foundational history, Muslims are viewed with suspicion, contempt, and as "the Other" in Australia (Dunn et al. 2007; Kabir 2005; Cherney and Murphy 2015). They are also viewed as being greater in number than they are. Despite just 3.2% of the Australian population being Muslim—around 813,000 people (ABS 2022)—Australians will regularly overestimate how many Muslims they think are in the country (Alikhil 2018).

The current that electrifies this reality is Islamophobia. Islamophobia is a highly contested term (Allen 2010), as are its cognate terms, such as "anti-Muslim sentiment/prejudice" (Malik 2010; Gottschalk and Greenberg 2019), and even "Lahabism", the term developed by Abdal Hakim Murad (2020) to offer what he felt was a more historically and theologically coherent term. It is beyond the remit of this paper to litigate between the extensive academic and community arguments over the definition (and even existence of) "Islamophobia" that have raged for decades, and for the purposes of this article, "Islamophobia" is defined as "the fear of and hostility toward Muslims and Islam that is driven by racism and that leads to exclusionary, discriminatory, and violent actions targeting Muslims and those perceived as Muslim" (Green 2021). The use of this definition should be seen as a pragmatic choice that aligns with the understanding my participants offered and not a definitive adjudication of the debate.

It is important to contextualise this "fear and hostility" in Australia, with a particular focus on women. A decade-long study by the University of Western Sydney found nearly 50% of Australians self-identified as being anti-Muslim (Dunn 2011). Other studies have found that Australian attitudes towards Muslims are uniquely negative. For example,

while Australia's overall Social Cohesion Index has remained high for the last seven years, negative attitudes towards Muslims have persisted; approximately 40% of the population report themselves as negative or very negative towards Muslims (Markus 2019). Another study found that, while Victorian Australians are generally quite positive towards most other diversity, Islamophobia was widespread (Dunn et al. 2021). The Islamophobia in Australia II and III reports (Iner 2019, 2022) catalogued far-reaching negative verbal, digital, and physical abuse toward Australian Muslims and concerningly found Islamophobic attacks against Muslims in Australia after the Christchurch terror attack *increased* fourfold (Iner 2022). Alongside Australia, a rise in Islamophobia has been documented across Europe (Law et al. 2019) and the United States (Mogahed and Mahmood 2019).

Gender adds another layer to the manifestation and experience of Islamophobia, i.e., Islamophobia is experienced differently by men (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2015) and women (Carland 2011, 2017; Perry 2014; Allen 2015; Gohir 2015; Alimahomed-Wilson 2017; Hussein 2019), a phenomenon upon which this article will focus. For example, the Islamophobia in Australia III Report (Iner 2022) revealed that Muslim women are much more likely (82%) to be the target of Islamophobic attacks than men, and this is tied to their greater visibility. As Iner et al. report in their analysis of gendered Islamophobic attacks in Australia, Muslim women's "vulnerability is a *product* of their visibility" (Iner et al. 2022, p. 289; emphasis added¹). Dunn et al. (2021) report that one third of Victorians, the second most-populous state in Australia, believe that Muslim women should not be allowed to wear the hijab. The experience of Australian Muslim women with gendered Islamophobia is similar to those of Muslim women in the United States, Western Europe, and the United Kingdom, although each region has its unique manifestations and challenges due to its specific political and cultural climates and histories (for example, US: Baboolal 2023; Kwan 2008; Selod 2015; Ghumman and Jackson 2009; Jamal 2017; UK: Allen 2014; Zempi 2020; Western Europe: Panighel 2022; Welten and Abbas 2021; Dierenberger et al. 2022; Easat-Daas 2019). The fact that Muslim women in Australia and in other Western countries are the more likely recipients of Islamophobia leads to the following questions: In what ways do Muslim women engaged in countering Islamophobia education initiatives feel their experience is gendered? Does the gendered Islamophobia they face encourage Muslim women's specific responses? Prior 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 particular role in countering Islamophobia through educational programs. Additionally, while previous research has tracked global initiatives to counter Islamophobia (Law et al. 2019), the causes of Islamophobia (Duderija and Rane 2019; Alimahomed-Wilson 2020), and the impact of Islamophobia in Australia (Bouma 2016), little research has investigated the specific role of Muslim women in this work and their experiences, attitudes, and motivations. Common narratives often paint Muslims as a threat to social cohesion (Dunn 2014) or Muslim women as victims of Islamophobia (Allen 2014; Iner 2022). This research wanted to take a new approach and consider why Muslim women may engage in countering Islamophobia and particularly why they think it is important for women to do this work.

This research is also an exploration of the dialectical relationship between the Islamophobia Australian Muslim women experience and their responsive educational engagement with non-Muslims to counter it. This exploration draws on and extends the framework developed by de Koning, who investigated the way Dutch Muslims respond to Islamophobia and "persuade or compel people to change" (De Koning 2016, p. 171). As the research in this paper is an investigation of the methods and motivations of Australian Muslim women in countering Islamophobia, de Koning's framework is a fitting analytical tool to analyse their work. In his framework, de Koning utilises Hage's (2010) classification of interpellation types, focusing on non-interpellation ("the individual's experience of being made invisible, of feeling ignored, or appearing to be non-existent" (De Koning 2016, p. 180)) and its intersection with negative interpellation (hypervisibility processes that make people targets of fear, such as Muslim women who wear the niqab) to explicate the

behaviours and choices made by Dutch Muslims in response to the Islamophobia they have faced. De Koning found that the Dutch Muslims in his study either rejected the negative interpellation or countered the non-interpellation they faced through racialized ascriptions by non-Muslims. This article will argue that de Koning's framework fits the experiences of the Australian Muslim women in this study well; however, many of the themes raised by the Australian Muslim women suggest an altered, gendered conceptualization for part of de Koning's framework, and this expansion of this framework may prove useful for other analyses of Muslim women living as minorities who counter Islamophobia.

2. Methodology

This article draws on data from in-depth, one-off interviews with 31 adult Australian Muslim women based in the capital cities of Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, and Adelaide. The women were all aged 18–65 and from diverse cultural backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of the Australian Muslim community, members of which hail from 183 different countries ([Hassan 2018](#)). The women in this study were also from a broad range of professional, educational, and denominational backgrounds—Sunni, Shi'i, and Ahmadiyya. The denominational backgrounds of the women in this study were not curated. Instead, the Muslim women who were most active in public Islamophobia-countering educational and social cohesion-building initiatives were approached, and these women fell into the categories of Sunni, Shi'i, and Ahmadiyya. The mix of participants is therefore a reflection of the types of Muslim women engaged in this public engagement work, as opposed to a representative sample of the denominational makeup of Australian Muslims. While there are only an estimated 4000–6000 Ahmadiyya Muslims in Australia ([Bianchi 2015](#); [Bladen 2019](#)), making them less than one per cent of the Australian Muslim population, they comprised 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 type of countering Islamophobia work. This is largely because of the Ahmadiyya doctrinal encouragement and commitment to proselytisation and outreach ([Jonker 2016](#); [Moten 2018](#)) that is not as present in other denominations of Islam, and the Ahmadiyya women in this study spoke of this theological encouragement facilitating their social actions (such as participant Amira, an Ahmadiyya university student, who told me that the motivation for her and other Ahmadiyya women's work in this area, "stems from our Caliph . . . so it sort of all lies on that premise that if his [current Ahmadiyya Caliph, Mirza Masroor Ahmad] idea around peace building [with non-Muslims] is to run these kinds of programs, then we have been guided in the way we should be doing it"). In comparison, only two of the participants in this study were Shi'i, who make up a much larger percentage of the Australian Muslim community than the Ahmadiyya; the Australian Shi'i community reports 50 Shi'i places of worship in New South Wales alone ([Shi'i National Network of Australia n.d.](#)), whereas the Ahmadiyya community report just four nationally ([Ahmadiyya Mosques n.d.](#)). Accurate figures on the numbers of different Muslim denominations in Australia are difficult to ascertain due to Australian census classification. While the Australian census breaks Christianity into four denominations from which respondents can choose, "Islam" is a singular category, and thus all Australian Muslims are grouped together without differentiation ([ABS 2018](#)).

It should be noted that there is theological debate among some Sunni and Shi'i Muslims as to whether Ahmadiyyas are even "true Muslims" due to doctrinal differences ([Nijhawah 2010](#); [Burhani 2014](#); [Khan et al. 2023](#)). Indeed, there are significant doctrinal debates between Sunnis and Shi'i, with both Sunnis and Shi'is considering the other heretical based on creed (*'aqeedah*). However, these internal arguments are immaterial to the focus of this paper. What matters is not whether Muslim groups, denominations, or sects consider each other to be Muslim but whether *non-Muslims* engage with them as Muslims. To non-Muslims (the key audience of all the women's work), all these women *are* Muslims simply because they call themselves Muslim. Non-Muslims attending a mosque open day or "coffee with a Muslim" session run by Ahmadiyya, Shi'i, or Sunni women are not first

inquiring about internal theological debates of *'aqeedah* before attending; to the intended audience of non-Muslims, all these women fall into the broad category of “Muslim”, and their engagement with them and their work reflects that.

The women in this study were personally approached to participate based on their public activity in countering Islamophobia with non-Muslims. They were approached through a mix of targeted contacting (emailing women named in the public advertising of events with a request to participate) and snowballing referrals from participants. This research focused specifically on the organised, public-facing, educational work Muslim women were doing to engage the non-Muslims in their community through programs and events they personally created and/or led, as opposed to informal interactions with non-Muslims. The events and programs the participants ran 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, and Christmas toy drives for non-Muslim charities. All of these were implemented with the intention of countering Islamophobia through explicit (such as ‘Introduction to Islam’ sessions) or less direct (such as the Christmas toy drive) educational programs, where the women attempted to inform people about Islam and Muslims and counteract the stereotypes they faced.

As demonstrated above, the participants in this study operate in a landscape in which they are small in number (while people believe there are far more than there are), are regarded negatively by a significant portion of the population, and are more likely to receive Islamophobic abuse than their male counterparts. This research was conducted in 2021, and due to COVID-19 pandemic lockdown rules in Australia, the interviews were a mix of in-person and Zoom-conducted interviews. University ethics clearance was obtained for this research, and to protect the identities of participants, all have been given a pseudonym in this article. The data were analysed using Applied Thematic Analysis (Guest et al. 2012).

3. Discussion

3.1. The Role of Gender

All except one participant told me they believed it was important to have Muslim women specifically doing Islamophobia- countering work. When asked “Do you think Muslim women play a specific role in countering Islamophobia? How important do you think being a Muslim *woman* is for this kind of work?”, common responses were “absolutely”, “it’s very important”, “women are key”, and “women play a huge role”. It is to be expected that most of the participants felt this work was important for Muslim women—they themselves all actively participated in public countering Islamophobia programs as Muslim women and have devoted considerable time and energy to the work, often without pay; these women were clearly invested in this kind of work. The more important question was *why*, and particularly, why they thought Muslim women (implicit within that question was “as opposed to men”) should be, for example, running mosque tours and hosting interfaith morning teas.

When I asked the participants to elaborate on the reasons why they thought Muslim women played a particular, important role in countering Islamophobia, their answers fell into five main themes:

1. Stereotypes of Muslim women;
2. Greater visibility and all that comes with it;
3. Muslim women have a distinct style compared to Muslim men;
4. Muslim women needing to speak instead of Muslim men;
5. Muslim women need to reclaim the space from Muslim men.

The participants in this study generally provided more than one reason why they felt it was important to have Muslim women engaged in countering Islamophobia work, and as can be seen from the above themes, Muslim women distinguishing themselves from

Muslim men comprised three of the five themes, whereas themes one and two are a direct reaction to non-Muslims. Thus, their answers to the *why* of this gendered phenomenon elucidated a lot about the way these Muslim women saw themselves in relation to non-Muslims and to Muslim men, which will be explored using de Koning's interpellation framework.

3.1.1. Stereotypes of Muslim Women

The most common reason participants gave for why it is important to have Muslim women in public countering Islamophobia work was the rampant stereotypes about Muslim women and the need to repudiate them. More than half of the participants in this study offered the stereotypical views that non-Muslims have of Muslim women as an explanation for why Muslim women play a needed role in countering Islamophobia. I did not ask participants to give the stereotypes they faced from non-Muslims; they offered this list spontaneously. The following comments demonstrate the similarities in the negative ways the participants felt they were categorised by non-Muslims and the gendered nature of the Islamophobia they face:

Muna: [Non-Muslim] people would get shocked that I'm a Muslim woman and I have a "doctor" next to my name. "Muslim women are educated? They speak?"

Amira: there's a general thing about [Muslim] women being oppressed, that's such a well-known stereotype about Muslim women and I've spent a lot of my life trying to fight against that.

Madina: There's so many misconceptions about [Muslim] women, and just, sadly, that can be a huge blockage for people to understand and appreciate Islam . . . The fact that they think they're oppressed, that they're looked down on, they don't have any rights. Honestly, I would say at least 90% of non-Muslims think that Muslim women are disadvantaged or oppressed.

That negative stereotypes exist about Muslim women is neither new nor limited to a certain place, and so it is unsurprising that the participants in this study have experienced these attitudes and see them as a reason that Muslim women have a specific role to play in countering such attitudes. While the Muslim women in this study had, as listed above, developed many thoughtful and innovative public initiatives to counter the gendered Islamophobia they experience, some also believed that, because perceptions of Muslim women were so negative, simply standing in front of an audience to speak could counter stereotypes about Muslim women, and thus Islamophobia. Aisha explained that, due to attitudes of Muslim women's oppression, half the work of countering gendered Islamophobia was done by her before she had even said a word, "The example about Muslim women being oppressed—it's like you already busted the myth even before you open your mouth to speak, because no oppressed woman will stand in front of you and speak. So, 50 percent of the work is already done before you even open your mouth". Feeha felt similarly, saying, "That idea of [Muslim] women being oppressed, and they have to be really submissive, and all that, it just immediately goes, I think, when they see you up there, and you're the one who's going to conduct the whole session. I think it kind of answers a lot of their questions immediately".

These perspectives demonstrate that, according to participants in this study, at least some of the public countering Islamophobia work performed by Muslim women is effective and/or necessary simply because Muslim women are doing it. Perspectives about Muslim women are so negative that, according to the participants, addressing an audience and running a session may be enough to help change minds.

When using de Koning's framework, this theme is an example of the Australian Muslim women rejecting negative interpellation—that is, rejecting the stereotypes created in hypervisibility processes that make them targets. However, in de Koning's framework, negative interpellation makes them the targets of *fear*. While Muslim women can certainly be the targets of fear (Hussein 2019), in this context and through the examples provided by

the Muslim women in this study, they are primarily the targets of *pity* (and possibly scorn) brought about by the negative ascriptions foisted on them by non-Muslims. Australian Muslim women counter Islamophobia to actively reject this interpellation of oppression.

3.1.2. “We’re Islam in Their Eyes”: Greater Visibility and All That Comes with It

The participants discussed Muslim women’s visibility (through wearing identifiable religious clothing, such as the hijab) as a key reason that Muslim women play a specific and important role in countering Islamophobia—whether they liked it or not. They were aware that Muslim women were more likely to be the recipients of Islamophobic abuse, and many participants saw that increased likelihood of abuse as being caused by their greater visibility.

Being targeted for Islamophobic abuse is objectifying, as these women are being abused solely because of their appearance and what non-Muslims think that represents. They are not seen as individual and diverse subjects but as a cypher, an archetypal representative that embodies Islamophobic stereotypes (such as those listed by the participants above) and nothing more. Therefore, Maryam explained that Muslim women must be involved in this work, “because they’re the ones that bear the brunt, for the most part, of Islamophobia. They’re so visible. So, it’s important that their stories are shared and that they have that opportunity or are given a platform to speak”. Maryam saw Muslim women countering Islamophobia as a corrective and responsive act to their objectification. By telling and sharing their stories and being given the opportunity to speak, Maryam believed that Muslim women limit objectification and instead *subjectify* themselves in the minds of non-Muslims.

Feeha agreed with Maryam that the greater visibility of many Muslim women increases their vulnerability to Islamophobia and was thus a reason for Muslim women to counter Islamophobia. Feeha also identified something quite a few of the participants in this study noted—that non-Muslims judge Islam by the behaviour of Muslim women—observing, “Absolutely [Muslim women need to do countering Islamophobia work], because I think people judge Islam mostly by Muslim women, and we are the main targets whenever something happens, because we stand out so much—those who cover”.

Zahrah agreed with Maryam and Feeha and saw this identifiability of Muslim women as always making them the representative of their faith:

Interviewer: Do you think Muslim women play a specific role in countering Islamophobia?

Zahrah: Yes, because I guess the lens in which Muslims are viewed is gendered in the broader community. Often, Muslim women are more identifiable. So . . . you are the flagbearer of your faith group all the time . . . I would love to not have to worry about that, but it’s always top of mind. Whether it’s really silly things, like whether it’s walking out in public and being conscious of the fact that if my husband happens to walk in front of me, it might look bad [laughs]. And [so I say], “Hang on, let me walk first”.

Kareema echoed this perspective of visible Muslim women having to be an ambassador for their faith and the role that may play in countering—or reinforcing—Islamophobia:

I think because we’re so visible, we are really key. We’re key in both ways. We’re key in making a positive difference, and also a negative difference. So, if you have . . . some of our *ummah* [Muslim community] out there dressed in scarves behaving badly, it’s going to do as much damage as we can do good. So, I do think that we probably have an unfair load in that regard because by wearing the scarf we’re on show constantly, so we always have to be on our best behaviour.

Feeha, Kareema, and Zahrah identify the unfairness (and, in Zahrah’s case, the absurdity) of the burden that comes with visibility. Multiple threads of Islamophobia are carried in this unfairness of visibility—being recognised as Muslims means they are more likely to

attract verbal and physical abuse from non-Muslims, and the prejudice that exists about Muslim women means that, as Kareema and Zahrah demonstrated, these visible Muslim women's actions are read as either reinforcing or countering stereotypes; their actions are never seen as meaningless or unrepresentative. Thus, a Muslim woman who innocently falls behind her husband when walking does so *because* she is inferior to him. A Muslim woman in a hijab who "behaves badly" is seen as reinforcing negative stereotypes about Muslim women, as opposed to just being a random individual doing the wrong thing. In an Islamophobic context, Muslim women's behaviour can only be telegraphing that they either reinforce or challenge stereotypes non-Muslims hold about them; there are no neutral actions. This theme is another example of rejecting negative interpellation from de Koninck's framework. The Australian Muslim women are actively rejecting the hypervisibility processes that position them as targets for fear manifested through Islamophobic abuse but also install them as unwilling flag-bearers.

Through this theme, the women in this study identify a new manifestation of an old practice that has been identified within Muslim societies for years. Muslim women being seen as the flag-bearers (as Zahrah called it) of religion and morality is also a phenomenon in Middle Eastern and Muslim societies, as discussed by Badran, who states, "women have both been expected to mark culture and be its faithful carriers as well as to scrupulously follow what is understood to be religiously prescribed morality in their daily lives" (Badran 2005, p. 16). This burden of being the public upholder of faith and morality was, according to Badran, imposed on Muslim women by Muslim men and Muslim societies. Yet, in this research, the participants report this pressure to represent Islam and behave perfectly as coming from *non-Muslims*. Warda thus explained the need for Muslim women to engage in countering Islamophobia, saying when I asked if Muslim women are necessary in this line of work, "Yes, because [of] the hijab, the identify us. We're Islam in their eyes".

This continuation of the burden of representation coming from a new audience is unsurprising. Muslim women are often caught between Muslim men's and non-Muslim's expectations, proclivities, and prejudices, and used either as the battleground to play out clashes between the two groups (Zine 2008; Aquil 2011; Carland 2017) or as the screen on to which both groups project their fears and fantasies (Abou El Fadl 2001; Yegenoglu 1998). The women in this study reveal that, just as Badran identified of Muslim men in Muslim societies, non-Muslims in Australia also expect Muslim women to be "faithful carriers" and that there is a price to pay for this expectation.

3.1.3. Muslim Women Have a Distinct Style of Connecting with Non-Muslims Compared to Muslim Men

When I asked participants "Do you think Muslim women play a specific role in countering Islamophobia? How important do you think being a Muslim woman is for this kind of work?", nearly 20 per cent (6 out of 31) said they felt that Muslim women have a distinct style of countering Islamophobia compared to Muslim men. Muna spoke of the uniquely "compassionate nature" and a "lack of egos" that women have compared to men. Warda declared that, when doing this work, Muslim women "can convey a story a lot better than men", and Sumaya told me about the "female energy" in the approach she and her Muslim women's organisation use in their countering Islamophobia work, which focuses on connection, as opposed to a myth-busting approach which she saw as more "masculine".

Fatimah similarly saw the importance of women doing counter-Islamophobia and social cohesion work as crucial not just because of what she saw as the essential difference between men and women but because that essential difference made Muslim women *better* than men at such work:

In terms of social cohesion, I think really, we as women are created in a way that we are more social and we are more verbal. We are able to better connect and communicate. This is women's nature and I think women don't always have these power issues [that men do]. Women's nature is about connection, talking,

understanding, and they talk from heart to heart. We don't have any big agendas or power authority arguments, so I find women's nature is more relevant to build social cohesion or them being the initiators in terms of defeating Islamophobia.

Significantly, the participants saw their uniquely female approach or skillset as not just an alternative to men but as advantageous and even superior. These women felt there was an essential difference between the nature of men and women that made women better equipped to engage in countering Islamophobia, and was thus another reason why it was important that this work was performed by women. This was the one theme raised by the women that did not fall within de Koning's framework. It did not reflect either rejecting negative interpellation nor countering non-interpellation, and this is because this was the strongest example of Muslim women asserting their (perceived essential) nature as defined by themselves, as opposed to being in response to the ascriptions of others. In their comments about why they felt this was an important reason for Muslim women to engage in countering Islamophobia work, this was the only theme in which they did not reference how others perceived them. While it was an example of Muslim women asserting their perceived essential nature in contradistinction to Muslim men, they did not reference it in terms of the ascriptions of others (either non-Muslims or Muslim men) but instead as an affirmation of their own nature, which they saw as uniquely suited to the work of countering Islamophobia.

3.1.4. There Are Some Topics about Which Only Muslim Women Should Speak, and Muslim Men Should Not

More than a quarter of the participants (8 out of 31) considered there were at least some topics that came up when running events for non-Muslims that only Muslim women should answer; the participants felt Muslim men should not speak on these topics.

Some of the women in this study felt there were only certain topics that Muslim men should not address with a non-Muslim audience when trying to counter Islamophobia. Often, these were questions from non-Muslims, specifically about the experiences of Muslim women; Naeemah gave the example of Muslim men talking about domestic violence, stating, "with certain topics, it's essential to have females addressing that, to just debunk some of those myths that people have about Muslims. It's those kinds of things that gender becomes an important tool in debunking a lot of stereotypes". Rachel also identified topics pertinent to women, such as the hijab, as being those men should not answer:

As a Muslim woman, I don't think I want a man speaking on my behalf about why I wear the hijab . . . we're very intellectual people, we have our own minds and we are able to articulate things ourselves, so I think we have that responsibility to try and push our own message out there and change the narrative from a woman's perspective.

Other participants argued that it was better for Muslim women to do *all* the countering Islamophobia work instead of men, not just to focus on the women-specific questions. Maryam explained why:

If I ever need to find someone to give a talk [to non-Muslims] . . . It's always a female. Because I think that women can talk about everything, but men can only talk about some things. So, women can talk about Islam and al Qaeda and all that stuff, *and* they can talk about gender—but men can't . . .

Nusayba felt similarly, telling me about the male Muslim colleague she has who does countering Islamophobia workshops for non-Muslim students at high schools, and how he was not as well received as the female speakers:

I remember speaking to [the schoolteacher] and asking them, "How did [the male Muslim presenter] go?". And he's like, "Good. But it's not the same impact as a woman". He's like, "Because I feel,"—and this is really sad—"because Islamophobia and the people's general perspective of woman in Islam is so negative compared to men in Islam, hearing a woman speak has a different affect

than hearing a man speak" . . . so I think, even for the young men in the class, whilst I'm sure they connect with a man, I think it's important to hear it from a woman.

This theme raised by the participants is an example of de Koning's countering non-interpellation, where the Muslim women in this study were countering "being made invisible, or feeling ignored, or appearing to be non-existent" (De Koning 2016, p. 180) by or to non-Muslims. By insisting on their need to address certain topics relating to themselves (or even all topics) instead of Muslim men speaking for them, the participants were opposing the way their voices and experiences had been ignored or removed from conversations they felt they had a right to address, and were asserting themselves into the conversation.

3.1.5. Muslim Women Need to Reclaim the Space from Muslim Men

One of the main reasons the participants in this research felt it was important for Muslim women to do this work was because they wanted to claim a platform they felt was rightfully theirs and had been usurped by Muslim men. Feeha's story is illustrative of this experience. She shared an experience about the extent to which Muslim men have tried to take over her mosque tours for non-Muslim school students and how upsetting this was for her:

Feeha: it was a case of this particular person wanting to conduct these [mosque tour] sessions, an elderly male, and [my Muslim women's organisation] didn't want him to be doing it. So, he did come to two of my sessions, and kind of ruined it and it was very—it was quite traumatic, actually, so—

Interviewer: What happened?

Feeha: Well, he wanted to do these sessions, and every time I would go to that particular mosque, the imam would inform him, so he would also be there at the same time. And halfway through, he'd just kind of jump in and take over, and he'd be answering questions in a very, you know, sort of a rough way, which doesn't go well with students. So, I said to [my Muslim women's organisation], "Look, I really don't want him to be there. What can I do?" And they said, "Well, why don't you just reach out to the imam and tell him, 'Don't invite him'?"

So, I did that, and the imam got upset, and he said, "He's got more experience, and you're supposed to respect your elders," and honestly, [my request for the man not to attend my sessions] was done in such a respectful way, but they didn't like it. So, I did have to sort of let [my organisation] handle it for me [from there], because I was a bit traumatised. I mean, when he sort of just took over the whole session, it did leave me in tears, I mean, because of the way he did it.

Feeha's story is a powerful example of the way Muslim women can experience sexism within the Muslim community and be understandably sensitive to the way it impacts what non-Muslims think of Islam and Muslims, particularly Muslim women. This is the double bind Muslim women challenging sexism regularly face (Ho 2007; Hussein 2010), which is the intersection and competition of sexism and control within the Muslim community and gendered Islamophobia in the wider community (Carland 2017). From Feeha's example, we see the way the imam tried to exert control over Feeha and the process, not just by regularly inserting an unwelcome man into Feeha's presentation, but by then admonishing her when she tried to argue against his presence, and Feeha's understandable concern over the man's "rough" approach to the students, which may consolidate or even increase the students' prejudice. The double bind is an incredibly difficult one for Muslim women to face and balance, and as Feeha's tears and use of the word "traumatised" demonstrate, it requires constant balancing and can even lead to the silencing of Muslim women (Carland 2017).

Alma also had an experience of men trying to dominate the mosque tours:

When we would initially do the school tours, it would always be just the guys running the tours. So, we'd have, like, the President and the imam, maybe

another committee member. More recently I said to the committee, “when we do have school tours, I feel it is really important for at least one female to be part of the school tours”. We had, like, a boy’s school come [for a mosque tour], and I made sure, I really wanted to be there and to speak to them. I feel it’s really, really, really, important to have a female speaker as well as a male speaker.

While Alma’s experience is not as upsetting as Feeha’s, and it seems the men at her mosque were willing to accommodate her request, this is another example of a Muslim woman facing the double bind in this work. Alma needed to assert herself to Muslim men in part because of an awareness of the way her absence, as a Muslim woman, from the countering Islamophobia work would be perceived by a non-Muslim audience.

Bilqis identified the way Muslim men, such as those in Feeha’s story, have historically prevented Muslim women from having the platform to counter Islamophobia:

We [Muslim women] have been severed from the conversation for so long, yet it’s the antithesis of Islam. Whenever you hear anybody ask about Islam and women, [male Muslim] scholars go, “Oh, Islam elevated women”. Yeah, but *you* don’t. Islam did historically, absolutely, but there’s a disconnect between that and what’s happening to [Muslim] women now. So, I’m simply reclaiming our rightful entitlement in Islam and from that space engaging the communities we live in.

Here, Bilqis argues that, while women have been prevented from doing so for a long time, this opportunity to speak is a religious right of Muslim women and must be reclaimed, something supported by the literature (Carland 2017). Warda affirmed this idea, declaring in our interview, “I don’t want a man to talk and explain my role, I want to do that. When you’ve got a question about a Muslim woman, ask a Muslim woman. Don’t ask a Muslim man. We have a voice, let us speak for ourselves”.

This theme is an expansion on de Koning’s countering non-interpellation response as, while it is an example of Australian Muslim women opposing the way they have been silenced, made invisible, and ignored in the context of engaging and educating non-Muslims, the category of people they are opposing is not non-Muslims, but Muslim men. This is a development of the framework de Koning developed, which focuses on the racialized experiences and ascriptions of Muslims by non-Muslims. While Australian Muslim women are indeed racialized in their experiences with non-Muslims and bring that to their countering Islamophobia work, non-Muslims are not the only category of people that the Muslim women in this study must contend with. Their gendered Islamophobic experience is mediated through their encounters with both non-Muslims *and* Muslim men; thus, both groups of people factor into what they must negotiate in their response. In this case of non-interpellation, it is Muslim men who have silenced Muslim women and who the Muslim women must counter in their work to respond to Islamophobia.

While the participants in this study believed Muslim women did have a specific and necessary role to play in countering Islamophobia—both because of the way non-Muslims viewed them and to carve out a space for themselves from Muslim men—this belief was not without tension. Rabia explained the unfairness of the burden Muslim women carry in having a greater onus to respond to Islamophobia:

Interviewer: So, do you think Muslim women play a specific role in countering Islamophobia or building social cohesion?

Rabia: They have, and they do. However, in the future, I don’t think they should be the ones that are carrying this . . . It’s like women are at the receiving end of family violence, and they’re the ones that are doing the work about it. [Similarly with Muslim women countering Islamophobia,] why are we doing the work about it? Why are we carrying that flag? Because we’re the recipients of it. But it’s not my problem. It’s your [non-Muslim’s] problem. So, I don’t understand why we keep carrying this burden.

Sandy felt similarly about the unfairness that is baked into the expectation for Muslim women to counter Islamophobia:

I think a lot of Islamophobia is rooted in women in Islam and the fact that [non-Muslims] think women are treated in one way or another. And that's why I think there is . . . a greater obligation placed on Muslim women to counteract Islamophobia and to be more active in promoting that social cohesion. Even though I don't think it's necessarily fair, I should say.

Rabia and Sandy identify an unjust tax Muslim women must pay because of the prejudice of others, a prejudice Sandy believes is built on the incorrect stereotypes people have about the treatment of women in Islam. Both these women spoke about the importance and value of Muslim women doing this work, particularly, as Sandy argues, some of this Islamophobia is due to the erroneous beliefs non-Muslims have about what it means to be a Muslim woman; Sandy believes Muslim women are the best-placed people to correct this view. However, Sandy and Rabia also highlight an uncomfortable dynamic that expects them to fix the problems of which they are the victims. Islamophobia is not a phenomenon the women have created. They are the greatest recipients of it, and they are also expected by non-Muslims to be the ones to not just *help* solve it, but to take the lead in doing so. Rabia calls this “a burden”, and Sandy says it is not “necessarily fair”. Yet this is the environment in which they, and the other women in this study, must operate—either fight against a prejudice they have not created, or leave the problem unaddressed.

4. Conclusions

This article investigated Australian Muslim women engaged in public countering Islamophobia educational activities and explored why they felt it was important to have women doing this work. Using de Koning's interpellation framework, it examined the way the participants thought Muslim women, in particular, might counter Islamophobia through rejecting negative interpellation or countering non-interpellation. The findings indicate that the participants did follow de Koning's framework; however, several of the themes raised by the Australian Muslim women suggest an altered and gendered conceptualization for parts of de Koning's framework.

The Australian Muslim women in this study raised five themes as reasons for why women should be involved in countering Islamophobia. Both the stereotypes of Muslim women and the greater visibility of Muslim women (leading to greater suffering of abuse and the expectation from non-Muslims to be “flag-bearers” of religion and morality, a new development of the old phenomena whereby Muslim women were/are expected to behave that way by Muslim men, whereas now, this expectation is also perpetuated by non-Muslims) were examples of rejecting negative interpellation. That is, rejecting the hypervisibility imposed on them by non-Muslims that classifies Muslim women so negatively. The theme relating to stereotypes expands de Koning's framework beyond just considering Muslim women as objects of fear and incorporates pity and scorn due to the emphasis on Muslim women being oppressed.

The next three themes centred on Muslim women differentiating themselves from Muslim men, as opposed to focusing solely on non-Muslims. This is significant and adds another element to the gendered consideration of countering Islamophobia, reinforcing the notion that (as has been shown in other research) Muslim women are often wedged between Muslim men and non-Muslims in presenting themselves and managing the way in which they are perceived. The theme of Muslim women having a distinct style because of their nature was the one theme raised by the participants that did not fit with de Koning's framework, and this was because it centred on how the women viewed themselves, as opposed to responding to the ascriptions of others (whether it be non-Muslims or Muslim men) and needing to contour their actions around externally imposed attributions with which they did not agree.

The participants' belief that some (or all) topics should only be addressed by Muslim women when countering Islamophobia formed the fourth theme (which followed de

Koning's countering non-interpellation framing) and Muslim women needing to claim the space from Muslim men was the fifth theme raised. This final theme was an expansion on de Koning's framework, as the people being opposed were Muslim men as opposed to the non-Muslims of de Koning's framework. It was the Muslim men who were silencing and ignoring Muslim women, and the gendered (and racialized, as de Koning posits) Islamophobic experience is mediated through the participants' encounters with both non-Muslims and Muslim men, and thus both groups of people factor into what Australian Muslim women must negotiate in their response. This study demonstrates that several of the themes raised by the Australian Muslim women offer an altered, gendered conceptualisation for part of de Koning's framework, and this expansion of his framework may prove useful for other analyses of Muslim women living as minorities who counter Islamophobia.

De Koning's framework, as he stated, investigates the way Muslims "persuade or compel people to change" (De Koning 2016, p. 171), and while the framework which this research uses and on which it expands focuses on "countering" and "rejecting", this should not position the participants as only resisting. When considering why it was important to have women engage in countering Islamophobia, many of the reasons they provided (which helped form the five themes listed above) were about trying to engage non-Muslims in the most effective way. Thus, their work does not end with rejecting or resisting; their goal is to remedy.

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Note

- ¹ See also Kwan (2008, p. 667) who emphasises the link between increased visibility of Muslim women who wear religious clothing and verbal and physical abuse, citing the need to "foreground the importance of a visible difference that often makes Muslim women more vulnerable to discrimination and harassment in their daily lives".

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