

The Challenges for Muslim Women in Prison and Post-Release

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Research in the fields of criminology, sociology, and psychology on prison and gender that focuses particularly on women has certainly grown, yet very limited attention has specifically focused upon Muslim women,¹ and very few have mentioned their experiences.² This research lacunae provides us a unique opportunity to examine existing literature to understand the relationship between Muslim women and the prison experience more broadly. Indeed, given the intersections of marginalisation, greater attention must be paid towards this specific population and their gendered experiences.

To this end, we continue to see intersections of gendered marginalisation in criminal justice, especially along racial and faith lines. As we will discuss, Muslim women sent to prison face a triple disadvantage of gender, race, and faith discrimination, and a double sentence of prison followed by a lifetime of community stigma upon release.

Drawing upon scholarly literature and policy reports, our article explores the challenges Muslim women experience in terms of prison needs and service delivery, coupled with the stigma and shame they experience from their communities once they exit the prison. As a result, our article suggests a discussion focusing upon emerging areas of scholarly work that shed light on aspects of the carceral experience for Muslim women. We raise concerns about how religion

in prison spaces functions differently for Muslim men and women, and that the taken-for-granted assumption of religion as static in its effect is indeed in need of problematising. Recommendations for policy, practice, and future research will conclude our discussion.

Challenges for Muslim Women in Prison

While the latitudes of the carceral experience are vast, we argue there is still much more to examine. Indeed, religion increasingly plays a significant role in the rehabilitation of people in prison across developed nations, including but not limited to the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.³ For example, people in the U.S. and Canada are increasingly reconsidering their religious and spiritual identities.⁴ Incarcerated individuals are no exception. Still, corrections populations in these countries have become more diverse in terms of religion and ethnicity. While there is no shortage of literature on the effects of religion within penal institutions, scholarship dealing with Islam in carceral spaces is incrementally increasing.⁵

While religiosity and services have been explored through a carceral geographical lens,⁶ relatively scant attention has been paid to incarcerated women identifying as Muslim specifically. One example, however, is Dix-Richardson's research on the differences

1. We recognize that Muslims are not a homogenous group and that different sects may participate in differing practices. For a greater discussion of the religion of Islam as it relates to the prison experience see, for example, Bowers (2009), and Asfari, Gacek, & Shuraydi (2024), among others.
2. Marranci, G. (2009). *Faith, Ideology, and Fear: Muslim Identities Within and Beyond Prisons*. Continuum International Publishing Group.
3. Of course, as Gupta and Arditti remind us, there are vastly distinctive cultural realities between high-income, industrialised nations, often referred to the 'Global North' and developing nations referred to as the 'Global South', and while our article focuses upon and pulls information from Western nations in the Global North, we remain mindful of the challenges Muslim women face in the Global South. For examples see: Gupta, S., & Arditti, J. A. (2023). Women at the margins: Experiences with spousal incarceration in India. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 15, 313-331.
4. Thiessen, J., & Wilkins-Laflamme, S. (2020). *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the U.S. and Canada*. University of Regina Press.
5. When we speak of 'carceral space' we take our cues from Moran, Turner, & Schliehe's (2018) interpretation of the 'carceral', meaning we recognise the detriment, intent, and spatiality which, taken together, composes and comprises spaces of incarceration, imprisonment, detention, and punishment themselves; see Moran, D., Turner, J., & Schliehe, A. K. (2018). Conceptualizing the Carceral in Carceral Geography. *Progress in Human Geography*, 42, 666-686.
6. Asfari, A., Gacek, J., & Shuraydi, A. (2024). Islam, Islamophobia, and the Carceral Experience. In Danielle Rudes, Gaylene Armstrong, Kimberly Kras, & Talisa Carter (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook on Prisons and Jails, 8th edition* (pp.364-379). Routledge; Asfari, A., & Gacek, J. (under review). Muslim Mental Health in Prison: The Costs and Consequences of Inadequate Services.

between African American women and men in terms of conversion to Islam in prison.⁷ Dix-Richardson asserts that African American women convert to Islam far less often than their male counterparts, as institutional factors, such as the place of Muslim chaplaincy in prisons, played an undeniable role in the uptake or not of religion. Moreover, there remains relatively little attention towards islamophobia in prison, especially how it functions within prison environments or experienced by Muslim women.⁸ This also includes, but is not limited to, islamophobia and its impacts upon correctional staff perceptions of incarcerated Muslims, and prison Imam and chaplain experiences. Notwithstanding, we recognise changes in spaces of incarceration, confinement, and detention in overall Western society since 9/11; changing (and sustained) biases against Muslims and those appearing to be Muslim;⁹ and demographic changes of Muslims and their thoughts on carceral spaces, especially as in the U.S., American-Muslims become a multigenerational, rather than a primarily refugee and immigrant population.¹⁰ Therefore, it is important for us to recognise what care this particular population requires, and advocate for care to be provided in a way that is non-judgmental and welcoming; such challenges are compounded when one considers the milieu of hate which surrounded Muslims post-9/11.¹¹

As Gohir makes clear, failure to understand the experiences and issues at play for female Muslim prisoners leads to their invisibility at multiple levels, including but not limited to policy, research, family, and community.¹² In Gohir's study, 60 Muslim women across

seven women's prisons in the UK were interviewed and/or participated in focus groups over a 15-month period. In terms of study findings, 79 per cent of the sample reported experiencing domestic violence and abuse, and in some cases, violent, abusive, and controlling behaviour were linked to their offence. Moreover, cultural expectations of women are often unrealistic and were a source of tension for many in the sample; cultural norms, such as shame and dishonour, can have a silencing and normalising effect for many Muslim women-as-prisoners. Similarly, cultural and religious expectations of Muslim women often led to a type of religious fatigue, especially for convert women while incarcerated. In one study, a Black Caribbean

Muslim woman prisoner discussed her inclination to self-harm while incarcerated. She recounts that self-harm was a way for her to feel pain to feel alive.¹³ Continuing, Marranci tells us that the woman believed 'being a good Muslim in prison was very difficult if you had to spend so much time behind bars (in this case 8 years)' (p. 77).¹⁴ She was not alone, as many of the female respondents interviewed by Marranci reported that maintaining dignity constantly was difficult. They stated, '...here there are male officers, and they check on you during night, and well well you are not covered all the time because it is hot...so they can see you, and in certain situations...like, the shower is even worse' (pp. 14-15).¹⁵

Incarceration and religiosity for Muslim women seem to work and act in entirely different ways than Muslim men. In one study examining the effects of gender on the prison experience of Muslim inmates in the England and Switzerland, it was found that while

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7. Dix-Richardson, F. (2002). Resistance to Conversion to Islam Among African American Women Inmates. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 35, 107–24.
8. See footnote 6: Asfari et al. (2024).
9. Awan, I., & Zempi, I. (2015). 'I will blow your face OFF'—Virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime. *British Journal of Criminology*, 57(2), 362–380; Awan, I., & Zempi, I. (2018). 'You all look the same': Non-Muslim men who suffer Islamophobic hate crime in the post Brexit era. *European Journal of Criminology*, 17(5), 1–18.
10. See footnote 6: Asfari et al. (2024).
11. Zine, J. (2022). The Canadian Islamophobia Industry: Mapping Islamophobia's Ecosystem in the Great White North. Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project, Center for Race & Gender, University of California, Berkeley. <https://crg.berkeley.edu/publications/canadian-islamophobia-industry-mapping-islamophobia%E2%80%99s-ecosystem-great-white-north>.
12. Gohir, S. (2018). (In)Visible: *Female. Muslim. Imprisoned*. Muslim Hands and the Barrow Cadbury Trust.
13. See footnote 12: Gohir (2018).
14. See footnote 2: Marranci (2009).
15. See footnote 2: Marranci (2009).
16. Schneuwly Purdie, M., Irfam, L., Quraishi, M., & Wilkinson, M. (2021). Living Islam in Prison: How Gender Affects the Religious Experiences of Female and Male Offenders. *Religions*, 12, 1–17.

prison tended to intensify the experience of religion for Muslim men, it had a mitigating effect on the religiosity of Muslim women.¹⁶ Possible reasons for this include the lack of adequate support services, as well the relative absence of other incarcerated Muslim women with whom they could associate.

Gender disparities exist in Muslim chaplaincy throughout many prisons. In their findings, Schneuwly Purdie and colleagues, suggest that differences in the ways men and women experienced Islam in prison were multifold, but two are worth noting particularly: (1) (in)adequacy of chaplaincy activities, and (2) the need for gender-responsive chaplaincy. As women prisoners in this study were more likely to find themselves with a history of prolonged trauma, abuse, and neglect, it became increasingly apparent that traditional chaplaincy would not suffice. Some women reported turning to dancing and singing as ways to cope with their past traumas. Indeed, the authors found that there was a need to reimagine religious programming to avoid a 'one size fits all' model. While the Schneuwly Purdie et al. findings represent individual and institutional responses to living Islam in prison, they failed to account for how national and local contexts may impact their findings. Among possible factors that impact the lived experiences of incarcerated individuals are structural ones, such as the nature of chaplaincy services (e.g., paid or volunteer chaplains etc.) which may result from regional differences and policy concerns.

Marranci explores the experience of Muslim experiences in British prisons.¹⁷ In contrast to the male Muslim prisoners Marranci met, the female respondents indicated an impossibility of being a 'good Muslim' while in prison, and in addition, 'few mentioned the desire to perform the Hajj once released' (p. 77).¹⁸ Of course, in Islam, 'women do not need to fast during menstruation and also prayers, including Friday prayers, are, from some theological perspectives, less obligatory than for men' (p. 77).¹⁹ Notwithstanding, in Marranci's study Islam was used to form in-group communities of support and alliance that help protect against the harms of the prison environment and also

minimise the gossip from the outside group. In Marranci's view, Islam becomes a way to share emotions within a smaller group within the prison itself. Unfortunately, it is the idea that Muslim women are not mandated to perform certain religious rituals which often renders them underserved by not only prison staff, but Muslims communities, including chaplains.²⁰ This is not to suggest that Muslim communities are ignoring incarcerated Muslim women, but is likely tied to structures of prison demographics, such as a smaller number of incarcerated women, as well as a significantly smaller subset of Muslim women in confinement.

Challenges for Muslim Women Post-Release

There is scant research on the challenges Muslim women face upon release from prison. Muslim Hands, a charity organisation based in the United Kingdom, commissioned a pilot study into the experiences of former prisoners who identified as Muslim and female.²¹ Themes identified in the pilot study included shame and dishonour and the impact of both on the experience and lives of Muslim women-as-prisoners; a lack of family and community support, and in some cases a community backlash resulting in a 'second sentence' or complete

disownment when a Muslim woman is released from prison.²² Indeed, in Gohir's study, shame brings implications for resettlement, particularly for Muslim women, as many in the sample of respondents similarly experienced the 'second sentence' in order to be forgiven by their respective families. Muslim women 'disproportionately experience adverse socio-economic conditions and within their families and communities often experience further gender inequalities from the gender roles expected of them, and behaviours rooted in concepts of honour culture' (p. 7).²³

With respect to post-release experiences of Muslim women, there are several factors that need to be considered. First, not all incarcerated Muslim women are born into the faith, indeed, many women convert into the faith whilst in custody.²⁴ This distinction is

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17 See footnote 2: Marranci (2009).

18 See footnote 2: Marranci (2009).

19 See footnote 2: Marranci (2009).

20 Gacek, J., & Asfari, A. (under review). Islamophobia and the Benefits of and Challenges for Prison Imams.

21 Buncy, S., & Ahmed, I. (2015). *Muslim Women in Prison*. Nottingham: Muslim Hands and HPCA.

22 See footnote 21 Buncy & Ahmed (2015).

23 Gohir, S. (2019). *Muslim Women's Experiences of the Criminal Justice System*. Muslim Women's Network UK.

24 See footnote 2: Marranci (2009).

important because their experiences post-release are different from those returning to Muslim families and communities. Lacking strong connections to Muslim communities outside of prison may be both beneficial and harmful. On the one hand, lacking such connections may result in less stigma and exclusion from these communities. On the other hand, there are demonstrated reintegrative benefits in having community resources upon release that would otherwise benefit these women if accessible.²⁵ While we do not suggest that Muslim communities consistently shame recently released Muslim women, we do acknowledge that its occurrence can further complicate reintegration efforts.

Upon release from prison, Muslim women do not only contend with the stigma of being incarcerated, but they may also face backlash from their Muslim communities in part for the reasons they were incarcerated. The social stigma around women who have committed crime is not unique to Muslims. A study of formerly incarcerated Ukrainian women found that they faced difficult reintegration post-release due to the lack of employment opportunities, adequate housing, as well as the existence of social stigma from their communities, what the authors refer to as 'interlocking barriers confronting women post-release' (p. 373).²⁶ Indeed, faith-based programmes have shown efficacious results,²⁷ suggesting that similar outcomes may be achieved if such programmes are replicated within Muslim communities, and they properly address the unique needs of Muslim women upon release.

As we discussed earlier, incarcerated Muslim women share many of the antecedent conditions as their non-Muslim peers, such as having been victimised and physically and emotionally abused, or having a history of substance abuse, among other factors. In this way, Muslim and non-Muslim women who are incarcerated share the same needs, and the success or

failure of their integration back into society falls largely on their respective communities. The Welcome Home Ministries (WHM) in San Diego, run by Reverend Carmen Warner-Robbins developed a re-entry programme aimed at assisting formerly incarcerated women through the use of faith-based peer-mentors. They identified eleven transitioning factors: (1) belief in God, (2) freedom from drug addiction and the importance of rehabilitation, (3) role of support groups and their 'sisters' (p. 300) in WHM, (4) nurse chaplain visits and support, (5) role of supportive friends (not former drug using friends), (6) role of supportive family, (7) significance of role models, (8) personal strength and determination, (9) significance of employment, (10) role of helping others, and (11) role of learning to deal with feelings and issues from the past.²⁸ Findings from similar research studies have identified five categories for successful integration which include: (1) finding shelter, (2) obtaining employment/legal income, (3) reconstructing connections with others, (4) developing community membership, and (5) identifying consciousness and confidence in self.²⁹ Given the similarities in findings, we suggest that services of this kind are likely to enhance the probability of successful re-entry for formerly incarcerated Muslim women.

Aside from the basic material needs alluded to prior, such as employment and housing, it is the relationships with peers and community, coupled with a lack of judgementalism within these faith-based programmes that seems to render them successful. Given that Islamic centres have historically functioned as preservation centres for immigrant Muslims and their children,³⁰ it is unsurprising that they would maintain strong exclusionary practices for formerly incarcerated women, who may be viewed as deviant and corrupting influences within the broader Muslim community.

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25. Nowotny, J., Panuccio, E., Shlosberg, A., & Reyes, T. S. (2022). Survival, self-sufficiency, and repair: reentry strategies and resources for wrongfully convicted people. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, pp. 841-864.
26. Korzh, A. (2022). 'You have been punished in prison. And then when you are released, you are punished for life': Post-incarceration barriers for women in Ukraine. *International Sociology*, 37(3), 373-390.
27. Danise, C. M. (2009). Faith-based organization welcomes women back home into the community: Changing lives, restoring families, and building community. *Family and Community Health*, 32(4), 298-308.
28. See footnote 27: Danise (2009).
29. See footnote 27: Danise (2009).
30. Asfari, A., & Askar, A. (2020). Understanding Muslim assimilation in America: An exploratory assessment of first and second-generation Muslims using segmented assimilation theory. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 40(2), 217-234.

Taken together, we witness multiple levels of marginalisation and discrimination manifesting in the lives of Muslim women inside and outside of prisons. Recommendations for policy, practice, and future research is where we turn next.

Recommendations and Ways Forward

Muslim women consistently face intersectional inequality throughout their lives, and it is imperative that prisons, faith institutions, and our communities begin to address this. The voices of Muslim women are often unheard, and they remain somewhat invisible in policy, families, and communities. Such marginalisation is compounded when one also considers 'the additional hyper visibility in media and public attitudes (including inside prisons) and this especially impacts those who are 'visibly Muslim' (i.e., identifiers such as hijab wearing or certain surnames).'³¹ Hannah-Moffat calls upon researchers and policymakers to identify and resist systems that discriminate against incarcerated minorities and women.³² Protecting the rights of incarcerated Muslim women remains important because, like their counterparts in the community, they have the right to practice their religion free from discrimination, whether they are incarcerated or freely walking the streets.³³ In order to promote change, we must first challenge our attitudes, norms, cultures, and systems to understand the causes and normalisations of these inequalities.

Indeed, research in the intersecting identities of Muslim women who are incarcerated is lacking but sorely needed. We suspect that a typology of incarcerated Muslim women, disaggregated by racial, religious (sect), socioeconomic, and immigration status would serve to better understand the diverse needs of this understudied group. Considering the varied ways in which Muslims outside of prisons are integrating into

American and western cultures,³⁴ it is important to examine the ways in which similar integration and assimilation patterns may yield interesting results among first- and second-generation incarcerated Muslim women.

There is a need for more and better data, especially data disaggregated by religion, to be able to identify those at risk of discrimination based on gender, religion, and ethnicity.³⁵ Future research should incorporate an intersectional lens, and maximise efforts to raise awareness of the unique experiences of female prison populations and minority groups. Indeed, how gender and faith influence experiences within prison and post-release shines a light on the unique

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combination of marginalisation Muslim women face. In doing so, what should be considered are the needs of incarcerated women when developing programming, to ensure proper fit for maximising rehabilitative outcomes. Islamophobia for incarcerated Muslim women was often a byproduct of their small number compared to their co-religionists, therefore, they do not have similar shared group cohesion as their male Muslim counterparts do and are less able to resist the privations of prison. As we have discussed elsewhere,³⁶ how religion in prison spaces functions differently across racialised, gendered, and faith groups, and that the taken-for-granted

assumption of religion as static in its effect is indeed in need of problematising. Current chaplains and correctional staff would greatly benefit from a general framework that provides appropriate religious programming for Muslim women. In terms of correctional programming, Bowers contends that establishing a teaching model and a set of ground rules that promote accurate Islamic thought and practice will give chaplains, religious contractors, and interfaith volunteers the freedom to educate and discuss topics of their choice without any confusion as to the

31. See footnote 12: Gohir (2018).

32. Hannah-Moffat, K. (2004). Gendering risk at what cost: negotiations of gender and risk in Canadian women's prisons. *Feminism & Psychology*, 14(2), 243-249.

33. Ammoura, A. (2013). Banning the Hijab in Prisons: Violations of Incarcerated Muslim Women's Right to Free Exercise of Religion. *Chicago-Kent Law Review*, 88(2), 657-684; Beydoun Khaled, A. (2018). Islam Incarcerated: Religious Accommodation of Muslim Prisoners before *Holt v. Hobbs*. *University of Cincinnati Law Review*, 84(1): 99-151; Saei, Y. (2019). *Fulfilling the Promise of Free Exercise for All: Muslim Prisoner Accommodation in State Prisons*. Muslim Advocates.

34. See footnote 30: Asfari & Askar (2020).

35. See footnote 23: Gohir (2019).

36. See footnote 6: Asfari et al. (2024).

appropriate teachings of Islamic doctrines for people in prison.³⁷ How, and the ways in which, Muslim women factor these pedagogical considerations and practices remains a topic of warranted interest in future research.

The challenges Muslim women experience in terms of prison needs and service delivery, coupled with the stigma and shame they can experience from their communities once they exit the prison, merit exploration. Consideration should be given to the cultural competency of housing alternatives to prison, as well as temporary accommodations and hostels post-release.³⁸ In turn, resettlement providers must consider how culturally competent their services are for this group and address cultural barriers, such as shame, that block Muslim women from accessing these services. There is an opportunity for communities (Muslim and otherwise) to stop stereotyping and stigmatising Muslim women-as-former-prisoners, and to increase access to and representation of Imams in community chaplaincy so that Muslim women leaving prison have more supports in place upon release. Mosques are well positioned to raise awareness, promote open minds, and change perceptions of offending amongst their communities; such changes could be achieved through activities, faith groups, drop-in sessions, and regular sermons. Of course, there is a real need for Islamic faith-based groups specifically for

women after release from prison, so that they are able to continue to learn, practise, and strengthen their faith upon release.³⁹ By raise awareness and creating supportive environments, we begin to crystallise a more capacious understanding of women experiencing things like domestic violence, being a former prisoner, mental health challenges, 2SLGBTQ+ identities,⁴⁰ and more.⁴¹

This also raises questions regarding 2SLGBTQ+ prisoners who identify as Muslim too, and how gender identity and expression intersects for racialised prisoners, and their experiences of access to meaningful religious and/or spiritual services. For example, in December of 2020, Statistics Canada recognized that 2SLGBTQ+ communities had been disproportionately disadvantaged throughout the COVID-19 pandemic including through higher risks of financial insecurity, and higher risks of a lack of access to safe and secure housing.⁴² Compounding these concerns with racialisation and marginalisation, incarcerated Muslims and their post-release counterparts who identify with the 2SLGBTQ+ community face an ongoing barrage of hurdles to overcome.

The importance of Muslim women should not be forgotten, and greater empirical exploration of their experiences in prison and post-release remain timely and warranted in equal measure.

37. Bowers, A. (2009). The Search for Justice: Islamic Pedagogy and Inmate Rehabilitation. In Yvonne Y. Hadid, Farid Senzai, & Jane I. Smith (Eds.), *Educating the Muslims of America* (pp. 179-208). Oxford University Press.

38. See footnote 12: Gohir (2018).

39. See footnotes 12 and 23: Gohir (2018); Gohir (2019).

40. Referring to Two-Spirited, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and others in the 2SLBTQ+ community.

41. See footnote 12: Gohir (2018).

42. Prokopenko, E., & Evans, C. (2020). *Vulnerabilities related to COVID-19 among LGBTQ2+ Canadians*. Statistics Canada, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00075-eng.htm>.