

# "You Need To Let Go of Control": Critical Reflections of a Participatory Action Research Doctoral Project with Muslim Women in Britain

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## Article abstract

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## **“YOU NEED TO LET GO OF CONTROL”: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS OF A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH DOCTORAL PROJECT WITH MUSLIM WOMEN IN BRITAIN**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article explores the ethical and practical complexities of conducting participatory action research (PAR) as a doctoral student and shares findings from a doctoral study co-developed with Muslim women living in Britain to promote social change. Through the development of a visual methods (Photovoice) project, 16 Muslim women collaborated to document new understandings of what Muslim womanhood, religious agency, and empowerment mean to them, within the broader context of gendered Islamophobia. The findings reveal the complexities of establishing an equal partnership, and negotiating power dynamics, trust, ownership, and group conflict in PAR, which problematises assumptions around community empowerment within participatory approaches. The article concludes with critical reflections captured during the project, which advances understandings of how diverse Muslim women respond to PAR within the British context.*

**KEY WORDS:** Critical reflexivity; Feminism; Islamophobia; Muslim women; Participatory Action Research (PAR); Photovoice ethics

### **DOCTORAL STUDY BACKGROUND**

Guided by a Black feminist thought framework (Collins, 2002), my doctoral study explored the various ways that a group of British Muslim women respond to the dominant narratives of Islamic gendered oppression and religious extremism that have been produced and reinforced by the Western media, political and liberal feminist discourses, and academic scholarship (Akalu, 2022; Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020; Khokhar, 2022; Mirza, 2013). Consistent with Mansouri's (2020) recommendation that research about Muslim women needs to include this group as equal collaborators in the research design and process, the study's broader objective involved developing a PAR project with Muslim women as the experts of their own lives.

This article examines the complexities of conducting PAR with British Muslim women, from the perspective of a doctoral student. Using critical reflections that were captured during the project, the article interrogates some of the ethical dilemmas that arose and discusses the need for institutional guidance and support for doctoral students conducting PAR PhDs. Through my analysis of focus groups, academic diary entries, and the planning and development of a visual methods project, this article further examines some of the tensions the women and I encountered in establishing and maintaining an equal partnership (as co-researchers) and how we worked together to overcome our differences and discover true group solidarity.

### **FEMINIST-INFORMED PAR: EXISTING DILEMMAS AND NEW POSSIBILITIES**

As part of my aim to value the intellectual contributions and knowledge production of Muslim women, I adopted a PAR approach, which is based on disrupting the power imbalances found within research and taking 'action' to promote social change (Brydon-Miller & Kral, 2020; Hawkins, 2015). Using this emancipatory approach, academic knowledge is combined with the expertise and knowledge of non-academic communities (Guishard, 2009) to address issues that contribute to their disempowerment. Many researchers agree that feminist-informed PAR facilitates opportunities to promote positive change in women's lives (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Ganann, 2013; Hawkins, 2015). However, beyond studies that document Muslim women's resistance to the approach (e.g., Barazangi, 2004; Bartelink & Buitelaar, 2006) there is limited scholarship on how Muslim women embrace PAR's principles. From reviewing the literature, Muslim women's resistance to PAR tends to be a response to the imposition of universalising notions of women's empowerment and agency that fail to allow for different understandings of these concepts as well as Muslim women's rejection of unequal power relations in research. Therefore, considering the critiques of other scholars who have attempted to use PAR with Muslim women in different cultural contexts, this study did so in the British context, incorporating culturally/religiously diverse worldviews and notions of female empowerment and agency. Using this approach, this article contributes new insights into how Muslim women in Britain engage with PAR, as a social justice approach, that build on previous understandings of Muslim women's resistance to PAR in the US context (e.g., Barazangi, 2004), and similarly in the Middle East (e.g., Bartelink et al., 2006).

### **USING PHOTOVOICE TO DEVELOP COUNTER-IMAGES WITH MUSLIM WOMEN**

To centre Muslim women's production of counter-discourses and images, photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1994) was considered a suitable visual method to capture the women's self-definitions from their own perspectives. As a visual tool, photovoice allows people to capture and analyse images that reflect community strengths and concerns (McIntyre, 2003) and develop collaborative solutions to promote social change. While other visual methods, such as photo elicitation, in which the researcher pre-selects the photos to be analysed, were considered as a potential option for our project, previous research using both photovoice and photo-elicitation found that photovoice facilitated higher input from participants (Hopkins & Wort, 2020). Therefore, due to the project's aims to engage high levels of participation, photovoice was considered better suited to meet the project's aims over photo-elicitation. Drawing upon these insights, it is through the explorations of Muslim women's visual stories and self-definitions that I aimed to produce knowledge with this group as my co-researchers.

### **ETHICAL APPROVAL, INCLUSION CRITERIA, AND INFORMED CONSENT**

Due to ethics requirements, my initial research questions were formed without prior consultation with the community. However, these questions were later amended based on dialogue and self-reflections that took place after these consultations. Guishard (2009) discusses undergoing a similar process, in which her initial questions changed organically through PAR and by engaging in a deeper reflection on whether she had unintentionally chosen research questions that restricted her co-researchers' responses to either a critical or false consciousness. Similarly, I had not fully factored in the complexities around hierarchies and differential power relationships within this community. After reflecting on the importance of how I framed these questions and engaging in consultation with Muslim women, the initial questions were revised into the following two questions:

- 1) How do Muslim women challenge, resist, and internalise Western misrepresentations and Islamophobic discourses?
- 2) How do experiences of inequalities differ amongst Muslim women and how do factors such as 'intersectionality invisibility' contribute toward this?

Prior to participant recruitment, I received ethical approval from Glasgow Caledonian University. The inclusion criteria included participants who were Muslim women, over 18 years of age, and English speakers. The inclusion criteria were important in ensuring that the project was ethical and reached the target population (Muhammad et al., 2015). The women in this study were provided with written information sheets explaining the purpose of the project and required to provide written informed consent before being able to take part. Upholding PAR's aims, there was an ongoing commitment to ensuring that the project remained ethical. For example, a set of agreed ground rules were co-developed at the start of the project to establish the behaviours that were expected to be adhered to during each workshop, including confidentiality and respecting different opinions. As PAR aims to be a collaborative form of enquiry, the women were given the choice of whether they prefer to be named as co-authors on any material relating to PAR outputs (e.g., images). The women indicated no positive preference on whether their names were included, so pseudonyms were used for confidentiality. The issues of confidentiality and anonymity in using photovoice were discussed with the women, and they understood and agreed with the implications.

### **PROJECT FUNDING AND DEVELOPING AN EXTERNAL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP**

One aspect of the PAR project I reflected on were the potential costs involved. I wanted to ensure that it was inclusive and that nobody would be prevented from participating for financial reasons (e.g., travel expenses). Having looked at different ways to fund the project, I applied for funding, and was awarded £4000. The funding received was intended to access visual methods training, purchase photography equipment, hire a community space for the fieldwork, provide lunches, reimburse participants' travel costs, and hire an exhibition space to disseminate the visual outcome. This funding proved to be invaluable, and the women and I consulted on how we should spend the budget. Prior to the project starting, I used some of the funding to attend a three-day photovoice training course in London. The training consisted of learning the key theories involved in photovoice (e.g., Wang & Burris, 1994), ethical issues, project facilitation, and conflict resolution techniques. Through this training, I developed more confidence in my ability

to conduct an inclusive photovoice project as a PhD student and knowledge in how to safely use photography as a tool for social change.

While I had full use of my university campus building to run the project, as a more formal academic setting, I questioned whether using that site would lead to a lack of engagement amongst Muslim women. As a small satellite campus, my university did not have allocated prayer facilities and generally did not permit children onto the premises, citing health and safety reasons. Reflecting on these potential barriers, I recognised that running a PAR project that fully centred the needs of Muslim women required providing an inclusive space that included an area for the women to pray and where they could bring their children if needed. I then contacted the Eritrean Muslim Community Association (EMCA) and entered into a partnership to run the project at the Al-Nagashi Mosque and Centre in Vauxhall, London. The partnership granted project members full use of the main hall one day a week, use of the kitchen to prepare food, provision of technical equipment, and EMCA’s help with recruiting interested community members. EMCA declined to accept payment for hiring the use of the mosque, as they believed the project would benefit the community. I enquired how I could show gratitude for their generosity and was informed that they needed assistance with writing funding applications for other projects, which I agreed to help with and have since completed.

#### INTRODUCING MY CO-RESEARCHERS

The PAR project was conducted over a six-month period at EMCA, once a week (depending on the women’s availability), with each workshop lasting approximately three hours. At the first meeting, I set up the area we would be using for the workshops, which contained a table in the centre of the room, chairs, a flip chart board, and a projector screen connected to my laptop. Information sheets, consent forms, demographic questionnaires, and the proposed workshop schedule were placed in front of each seat. When the women arrived, they were given the option of helping themselves to a drink and were seated in the room. Ten Muslim women (aged 29-69) from various ethnic backgrounds attended the first workshop. Table 1 provides demographic information for everyone who participated in the project (at any point).

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Information*

Pseudonym	Age	Employment	Education	Time in UK	Ethnic Background	Heritage (born) or Revert Muslim
Ruqayyah	30	Self employed	BSc	28 yrs.	Bangladesh	Heritage
Cassie	29	Full time	BSc	Birth	Nigeria	Heritage
Sara	45	Self employed	BSc	44 yrs.	Pakistan	Heritage
Inaya	36	Part time	MSc	Birth	Iraq	Heritage
Zara	52	Self employed	A level	45 yrs.	Pakistan	Heritage
Nasrin	67	Part time	MSc	Birth	Pakistan	Heritage

Amara	51	Part time	BSc	25 yrs.	Sudan	Heritage
Amilah	36	Student	BSc	Birth	Jamaica/ Guyana	Revert
Shamsa	38	Self employed	MSc	Birth	Pakistan	Heritage
Mariah	35	Full time	PhD	1 yr.	Tunisia	Heritage
Fawzia	48	Full time	PhD	20 yrs.	Sudan	Heritage
Gabby	33	Part time	MSc	15 yrs.	Pakistan	Heritage
Ustadah	69	Retired	MSc	45 yrs.	Egypt	Heritage
Hafsa	29	Full time	MSc	28 yrs.	Eritrean	Heritage
Halima	33	Full time	BSc	33 yrs.	Egypt	Heritage
Malika	38	Full time	MSc	6 yrs.	Egypt	Heritage

As shown in Table 1, the women’s ages ranged from 29 to 69, with one being a revert and the rest being heritage (born) Muslims. Seven of the women had completed MScs and two were completing PhDs. The women’s educational backgrounds included History, Psychology, Art, Fashion Design, Business Studies, Accounting, Medicine, and Media Studies (a fuller discussion around the final core group’s composition is included later in the article).

Along with details about each workshop's attendance, Table 2 provides details about the project's phases, workshop locations, and facilitators. Each phase of the project involved a workshop, during which the women participated in planning, designing, and training sessions. The workshop in week 7 involved a day trip to Central London to capture images for the photovoice element of the project. All project workshops were held at EMCA, except the photovoice trip and caption writing workshops in weeks 7 and 8.

**Table 2**  
*Project Phases and Workshop Locations*

Time Frame	Project Phase	Project Attendees: (*Facilitators)	Project Location
Week 1	Initial project planning	Cassie, Inayah, Sara, Amilah, Zara, Nasrin, Halima, Ruqayyah, Fawzia, Shamsa, *Bibi, *Hanna (N=12)	EMCA
Week 2	Visual methods training	Cassie, Inayah, Ruqayyah, Amilah, Zara, Fawzia, *Shamsa, *Hanna (N=8)	EMCA
Week 3	Visual methods training	Ruqayyah, Gabby, Mariah, Amilah, Zara, Fawzia, Amara, *Shamsa, *Hanna (N=9)	EMCA

Week 4	Photovoice planning	Gabby, Amilah, Zara, Fawzia, Amara, Cassie, *Mariah, *Hanna (N=8)	EMCA
Week 5	Research & media training	Ruqayyah, Amilah, Zara Fawzia, Amara, Cassie, *Mariah, *Hanna (N=8)	EMCA
Week 6	Photovoice planning & training	Ruqayyah, Mariah Amilah, Zara, Fawzia, Amara, Ustadah, *Hanna (N=8)	EMCA
Week 7	Photovoice trip & core group	Ruqayyah, Mariah, Amilah, Fawzia, Amara, Ustadah, *Hanna (N=7)	London Trip
Week 8	Photovoice analysis and captions	Ruqayyah, Mariah, Amilah, Zara, Fawzia, Amara, Ustadah, *Hanna (N=8)	Campus

**Table 3**  
*Summary of Project Workshops*

Time Frame	Project Activity
Week 1	Introductions and ice breakers. Discussion on PAR's aims. Brainstorming topic ideas. Identifying skill sets and training needs. Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation introduced to monitor group participation.
Week 2	Presentation on historical Orientalist images of Muslim women. Visual methods training. Group asked to bring in personal photos to share with the group at the next workshop.
Week 3	Group share and discuss personal photos. Training on visual methods. Brainstorming the most important things for people to understand about Muslim women. Group conflict on the project's focus. Three main themes identified through a group thematic analysis.
Week 4	Icebreaker activity to restore the group's bond after last week's conflict. Community conference about the project held at EMCA for public to attend.
Week 5	Media training and developing effective counter strategies. Examples of previous Photovoice projects shown (photovoice.org).

Week 6	Cameras and image consent forms provided. Photovoice ethics and safety training. Group practice using the cameras. Photovoice day trip planning.
Week 7	Photovoice trip to London. Recap on aims and safety. Group split into pairs. Images taken in different locations followed by a group meal at a restaurant.

#### DATA ANALYSIS AND POSITIONING MYSELF WITHIN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The dataset consisted of approximately 30 hours of audio-recorded workshops, individual interviews, and photovoice images and captions. In total, eight workshops and eight individual interviews were conducted over a period of six months. Each workshop lasted approximately three hours and was used to design the project and generate group discussion. I conducted the data analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2019) approach to reflexive thematic analysis (TA). Many of my co-researchers had little or no experience of conducting research, so TA provided me with an easy-to-teach qualitative technique, allowing us to conduct a group analysis together during the project. I also applied a Black feminist epistemological stance (Collins, 2002), positioning myself as both a Black Muslim woman and participating co-researcher, meaning that my interpretation of the data reflects these multiple positions.

#### STRUCTURE OF THE FIRST WORKSHOP: INTRODUCTIONS, AIMS, AND SETTING GROUND RULES

In order to establish trust with the group, I began the first workshop by introducing myself and outlining my status as a Muslim woman and a PhD student. The women were then asked to introduce themselves and share what had brought them to the project. The next activity involved discussing the women's views on research with Muslim groups. They were asked if anyone had any prior experience conducting or taking part in research, to which two replied they had participated. As studies show that Muslim women may be suspicious of research (e.g., Mansouri, 2020), and to understand the women's initial feelings toward the project, I asked the group to share their thoughts on research conducted about Muslim women.

**Shamsa:** "It's very limited. Cherry picked people who aren't representative, so it becomes a bit skewed... which therefore means that it's not impactful because it's not meaningful enough."

**Sara:** "It's trying to understand the 'why.' Why are you doing what you're doing, which influences your methodology and your outcomes?"

**Bibi:** "But I suppose Hanna's question was... what are our feelings about the kind of research we know about? Particularly on our communities?"

**Nasrin:** "There's an agenda. A lot of the research that is done, there's an agenda... and therefore because of the hidden agenda you're encouraged to follow a certain path"

**Everyone:** Murmuring in agreement

**Nasrin:** "It looks like you're actually going through a maze for the researcher. But you're going through a carefully managed maze!"

**Shamsa:** "I think it's misused. So many things are influenced by research, like the Henry Jackson foundation, and then it's used to underpin policy. So, it's kind of this vicious cycle."



**Nasrin:** "How do we break that vicious cycle of policy? That don't actually work for the community?"

The general feeling amongst the group was that traditional research tended to be focused on the researcher's agendas and lacked real impact for the communities involved. Additionally, the women expressed mistrust for research and feeling manipulated by researchers via a "carefully managed maze" (Nasrin). Despite my insider status as a Muslim woman, I was also a researcher and aware that I would need to prove my integrity to gain the women's trust. Some aspects of how I initially set up the project, such as using a mosque setting with prayer facilities and child-care access (instead of my campus) and having funding for the women to decide how it would be spent, helped to build initial trust. Following this discussion, I described PAR, its aims, and how it differed from traditional kinds of research. Toward the closing of the workshop, we engaged in a discussion of our individual hopes for the project, and a key concern to emerge was that it would not result in wasted effort. I explained to the women that as a community-led project, it would be designed collaboratively. The project's impact, which some of the women were skeptical about, would be the result of mutual knowledge exchange between myself and the women. To shift the existing power imbalance, I realised that we would need to work on disrupting the researcher/participant hierarchy in subsequent workshops. More specifically, in terms of decision-making authority, the women needed to shift their perspective from that of participants to that of my co-researchers.

#### **CORE GROUP MEMBERS**

Nine women were included in the final core group (including late comers). The core group consisted of Amara, Amilah, Cassie, Fawzia, Mariah, Ruqayyah, Ustadah, Zara, and myself. Four of the core group were African, two were Arab, two were South Asian, and one was Caribbean. The core group were educated to varying levels, one with an MSc, four with BScs, and two completing their PhDs. Ustadah, an Egyptian Muslim woman and Qur'an teacher, was the last person to join the project after attending our community conference and demonstrating keenness to get involved. Ustadah and Zara both held conservative beliefs, which led to tense debates with the younger members of the group. However, as I discuss later, these were important issues for us to collectively work through.

#### **REFLECTIONS FROM MY ACADEMIC DIARY AND NEGOTIATING POWER RELATIONS IN PAR**

Understanding how to handle group conflict that may emerge when researching sensitive topics is a crucial factor for PAR projects. PAR's collaborative nature also means that co-researchers' may have competing ideas on the project's direction, leading to disagreements within the group (Ganann, 2013). One such moment that stood out within the project involved a discussion around the different views about the role of Muslim women as mothers and wives, which escalated into our first group conflict. I give an analysis of this conflict later, but it is important to highlight the work needed to ensure that differences in opinions would be respected during this process. During my photovoice training, I engaged in conflict resolution strategies, which included working on a hypothetical scenario involving inter-group conflict during a Palestinian youth photovoice project. Due to this training, a concern I raised with my supervisory team was the number of dominant personalities within the group. Another aspect I had not expected was that most of the women were professionals, including a TV personality, TV

producer, consultant, and former prison-governor. This assumption also reflected some of my biases around the kinds of women who would be interested in PAR and was in opposition to research that emphasised how it "involves groups and communities who are vulnerable and oppressed" (Khanlou & Peter, 2005, p. 2336). As such, doing PAR with women who did not view themselves as lacking power was an often-contradictory process.

Perhaps one of the most helpful things I decided to do when starting the project was to keep an academic diary to document the journey that the women and I would be undertaking. These diary reflections also provided insight into some of the complexities that would otherwise be difficult to explain within the PAR journey. Previous studies documenting the complexities that arise within participatory relationships, beyond theoretical practices and communities' suspicions, are scarce. For example, Arieli et al. (2009) mention the challenges in accessing accounts of how trusting relationships are negotiated in PAR, explaining that "the voices of community members and practitioners are rarely heard when it comes to the relationship itself, how they perceived the researchers, and what they expected to get from it" (p. 265). To provide insight into some of the dilemmas the women and I encountered in building trusting relationships, I include some passages from my academic diary. These passages highlight some of the unexpected situations that arose early in the project, based on conversations with the women. It also reveals how I was initially perceived by one of the women, and the difficulties that emerged as we negotiated our mutual roles and expectations.

**Academic Diary: Friday, September 27<sup>th</sup>**

*Today I spoke to one participant [Sara] who is insisting on giving me six sessions of coaching skills to make me, in her words, "the perfect host and facilitator." She advised that I have a desire to be liked and accepted by people and that I need to "let go of control." She said that my role in this is to sit back and be the host and serve the food, and facilitate the discussion, but to let the others be part of that. As one of my PhD colleagues said after I discussed these issues with him, "You will be lucky to even get an invite to your next workshop!" The project is being well and truly taken over and not sure how to reign it back in.*

I cringed on reading this back, particularly regarding how I had referred to the woman in the project as a 'participant,' which perhaps reflects the relationship as I viewed it initially, or was a reaction to what I perceived as Sara's attempts to push me out of the project and turn me into the "perfect host," rather than an equal contributor. Beyond my concerns around my competing academic obligations, it was evident that Sara felt it was important to remind me not to stifle the women by controlling the research process. Interestingly, whilst emancipative approaches, such as PAR, are often seen as a logical remedy to more distant research, it may not necessarily always prove the ideal solution. In this case, Sara felt that the women wanted me to promote an inclusive space where they could take full ownership of the project, redefining its goals and collaborative nature. While the rest of the women seemed keen to involve me in our mutual production of knowledge by, for example, asking me to provide research training, similar conversations took place within the group. This contradiction produced its own set of questions including: How does my position of privilege as the researcher, legitimised through my redistribution of 'power' within PAR, risk engaging in tokenism? And how do I fully "let

go of control" whilst also fulfilling the obligations of my PhD? These questions perhaps reflect what scholars describe as the "tensions around authority, trust, cohesion, and power in a co-research group" (Arieli et al., 2009, p. 265) and the dilemmas that can surface within PAR PhDs (Klocker, 2012). Nonetheless, I had a duty to conduct PAR ethically, agree on collective outcomes, and respect the voices of each member. To honour this commitment, I needed to listen to and implement what the women were telling me and shift into a mode of doing PAR that they felt benefitted them. Overcoming these tensions also required further discussion on the women's expectations from me as a co-researcher.

In relation to the offer of life coaching that Sara felt I needed, out of curiosity of what it involved, I agreed to the coaching, which took place privately outside the workshops. I also found it interesting that Sara perceived that I needed her expertise. Perhaps rather than just saying the women were the 'experts,' I needed to reflect that in my actions by allowing the women to demonstrate their expertise in meaningful ways. These interactions were further highlighted during the project, as the women were keen to co-facilitate different workshops, using their professional talents in media and photography to equip one another with various skills. However, as I discuss later, there were points where frustrations, disagreements, and strong emotions led to conflict, which had to be resolved for the project to continue.

**Academic Diary, Friday 11<sup>th</sup> October**

*Had coaching session with [Sara]. Was told that the project was not structured, my supervisor is a stumbling block in my life and that I needed to take control. She offered me to work for her as a director in her company. She told me to think about it and that if I agreed I needed to take the exhibition as my own and she would help me to make it huge and successful using her contacts. But I would need to take ownership of the exhibition and be its leader, not the women within the project. Too many cooks spoil the broth. She said I reminded her of herself twenty years ago and she liked me. Very surprised to receive an offer like this. Goes against PAR.*

Following the life coaching session, Sara discussed her desire to separate the project and offered me a paid role within her organisation to expand this small PAR project into a global project. In addition, during our previous conversation Sara had insisted that I need to "let go of control" of the project and let the women take over, yet here she was encouraging that I take more control of things. This was a surprising and confusing conversation, particularly because of the nature and ethical aims of PAR and the importance of inclusivity, democracy, and equal partnership (Brydon-Miller & Kral, 2020) that we had previously discussed as a group. I respectfully rejected the offer and Sara then advised me that she was not prepared to contribute to a small-scale project in its current format. However, Sara and I maintained an amicable relationship and she continued to reach out to monitor the project and offer her encouragement. Interestingly, our conversation also revealed the different agendas amongst some of the women, which seemed to mirror tensions of ownership in PAR (Ganann, 2013). By requesting to move the project to within her own organisation, Sara was also attempting to take the project out of the academic context, which possibly reflected the group's initial concerns around their efforts being wasted. My main objection to this idea was that Sara did not intend for

the other women to be involved in this global project she intended to expand, which would have been disempowering to the women, and gone against PAR's ethical aims.

### MANAGING GROUP DISAGREEMENTS AND CONFLICT IN PAR

The third workshop involved brainstorming ideas to develop key themes for the photovoice element of the project. The following discussion included a debate about women's gendered roles in Islam, as well as the women's concerns about the potential for simplistic narratives to further stereotype Muslim women as culturally inferior. Zara, a widow and mother of two, wanted our project to emphasise the high-status attached to mothers and wives in Islam, in order to counter discourses of Muslim women's gendered oppression by male relatives:

**Zara:** "What's our roles in our families? That's really important, I think. People don't understand what Muslim women's role is within her family. I think Muslim women themselves don't understand that- how important they are."

**Shamsa:** "But I think it feeds a stereotype... People expect Muslims women's roles in society to be solely as mothers and wives. And that's an important part of people's identity of course, but that's not all they are."

**Amilah:** "I don't want to just be known as a 'mum'."

**Zara:** "No, but it's not appreciated enough. It's not given value. We're devaluing the role of a mother... we're devaluing our own roles, because this is our main focus... main role as Muslim women."

While the women stated that motherhood and marriage shaped their identities to some extent, several added that these roles were not their primary purpose in life or all that they aspired to become. Shamsa, a married woman who did not have any children, further questioned Zara's generalised statement about marriage being the main role of all Muslim women:

**Shamsa:** "Is it though? My role isn't just primarily a wife."

**Zara:** "But this is our main role!"

**Shamsa:** "It's not my main role. Being a wife- that's not my main role!"

**Amilah:** "Yes, Islamically... we are under the banner of being the mum and being the wife and being the daughter and being all this, and I'm not diminishing that at all. However, that's not all we are. We are beyond... we are other stuff."

**Zara:** "I know that, but why are we just, like, a lot of the younger generation they are just so against the idea, oh 'just a mum' 'just a housewife'..."

**Shamsa:** "Cos' that's society. That's society that is diminishing the value of women. So, it's a universal problem. Whether you're white, brown, Muslim, Christian, whatever. Women are... not given the same respect that they should for those things. It's not just a Muslim thing."

The women's struggles with stereotypical images of Muslim women as limited by preferences for traditional domestic roles can also be understood through broader liberal feminist discourses on marginalised communities. For example, hooks (2000) explains how the internalisation of sexist ideology, amongst its various consequences,

results in some women devaluing the role and labour of motherhood whilst centring their careers.

**Cassie:** "I don't see myself - as a Muslim woman - as *just* a wife and a mother. There are some women who are not even married. Some women who cannot have children... it's very unfulfilling to think that it's all a woman can be."

**Amilah:** "You'll be surprised, you'll be surprised of how much culture..."

**Amara:** "It's the culture. It's not Islam... it's more in Asia. Because in Africa we don't see that..."

**Shamsa:** "I agree with you, but I think you could go round this table, and everyone will have a slightly different theological understanding or perspective."

**Zara:** "But that's how it's supposed to be... why we try to justify our desires and wishes?"

**Shamsa:** 'We're not...'

**Zara:** "If Allah made a rule. That's it [claps hands]. We're not supposed to say 'why'?"

**Shamsa:** "But it's one interpretation of that rule."

**Amilah:** "Yeah, but I think, what it is, people find their comfort. You know... in Islam... how they feel comfortable practising. But nobody is saying 'this is wrong.'"

**Shamsa:** "No, but what I'm getting to... from a Fiqh perspective [Islamic law], you will have solid evidence for different ways of doing things."

Whilst some of the women remained silent for much of this discussion, Amilah, Shamsa, and Zara continued their debate on Muslim women's roles in Islam. All three women spoke passionately and had strong opinions on the topics discussed as well as the project's overall direction. I understood Shamsa's point that each member of the group has their own theological interpretation of Islam, and I understood Zara's offense at what she perceived as the group "devaluing the role of mothers" in Islam. Amilah's comments on people finding their "own comfort" in how they practice Islam was also an important middle ground that respected each woman's individual belief and interpretation. As the facilitator, I decided that this was a necessary point at which to interject and attempt to connect the broader issues the women were discussing in terms of their differing worldviews and perspectives. As a complex and heterogeneous group, we were likely to hold opposing views shaped by our individual upbringings, varying ages, religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, and personal experiences. In addition, the goal of our photovoice project was not to portray Muslim women as a monolith or to reinforce Western stereotypes of our homogeneity. As tensions continued to rise within the group, I commented to the women: "So, I feel like we've hit something actually... I feel like we're having some sort of breakthrough."

[Group laughs]

**Hanna:** "I feel like we're picking up on diversity as Muslims?"

At this comment, the women all burst into laughter and appeared to visibly relax.

**Shamsa:** "Yes. Yes absolutely."

**Zara:** "Yes, definitely."

Both Shamsa and Zara, who had expressed the most opposing views during the discussion, agreed that the group's diversity was the source of their disagreement. However, it is worth noting that my interpretation of their conversation echoed many of Shamsa's points about us having "different ways of doing things." Yet, due to rising tensions, Shamsa's points about our different religious worldviews were either not being heard, or not well-received by some of the group. Returning to hook's (2000) work, she emphasises the importance of women learning to appreciate their diversity as a social justice strategy for uniting our efforts in combating structures of sexism, racism, and oppression. Similarly, to collaborate, we needed to avoid self-homogenisation, by recognising and embracing our multiplicity and diversity as Muslim women. I then suggested to the group that: "Maybe that could be one of the focuses of our project? To say that we're not all the same, and it isn't just this culture versus that. Showing the diverseness of women." This proved to be a pivotal moment for the group and the development of solidarity amongst them. Despite their recent moment of difficulty, the women responded positively to this suggestion. This included discussing the various ways that Muslims practice Islam, which they identified as a deeply personal experience based on one's individual relationship with God. The women further deconstructed the various meanings of diversity as they applied to their lives and the wider community:

**Shamsa:** "Exactly. Because we're allowed to have that individuality. Because we have an individual relationship with Allah. That's the thing."

**Gabby:** "So, showing what we wear, diversity in what we wear?"

**Zara:** "Diversity is the key here. Diversity in every form [laughs]."

**Amilah:** "Yeah [laughs]."

**Shamsa:** "Exactly, and it's all acceptable. Because we don't necessarily just want to be representing people who want to be practising their faith. I know so many people who don't practice, but they're definitely Muslim, they have that belief. They might live in a very cultural way. I'm not gonna tell them 'you shouldn't do that.' They're also very much 'Muslims' who need to be represented. So... we need to factor that in as well."

Through this critical dialogue, the women acknowledged that there is no single way to collectively represent Muslim women as having uniform identities, based on a shared religious identity. Through the interrogation of our own implicit assumptions and sharing personal experiences, we discovered that our identities are aspects that should unite, rather than divide us. By doing so, the women demonstrated their ability to self-reflect, resolve conflict, and collaborate, while remaining dedicated to our pursuit of social justice.

#### **ADDRESSING AND MOVING ON FROM GROUP CONFLICT: DEVELOPING GROUP SOLIDARITY**

Despite the group reaching an agreement on our differing worldviews as Muslim women, I was aware (based on my previous conflict resolution training) that we needed to do some work to reconnect as a group. To facilitate this, I began by introducing the women to a group bonding activity called 'Similarities and Differences.' The goal of this activity was for each group to identify five things that each member shared in common, excluding

any physical or social characteristics. The first group to complete the task would win the game. I hoped that by participating in this activity, I could encourage the women to see our similarities and shared goals rather than our differences (as barriers). The women were thus split into two teams. Each team was assigned to a different room and given five minutes to complete this activity before returning to the main room and discussing what they discovered in common. The activity generated a lot of laughter and joy, and the women learned more about one another and were able to bond as a result of it. I then explained that the real goal of the task was for us to rediscover our common ground and make everyone feel heard and valued as co-researchers. After explaining the purpose, the women agreed that it was a valuable exercise:

**Ruqayyah:** "I can see that there's a process taking place. We feel like we're part of the discussion and we feel like we're shaping it. So, it feels like our project just as much as it's your project."

**Gabby:** "It's a safe environment for everyone to say how they really feel."

I then asked the women to share how they felt about the project's future and the new focus on promoting our diversity as Muslim women.

**Ruqayyah:** "I think the conversation went well... there was a lot of discussions, but I felt like we came to an understanding that we all agreed on."

**Cassie:** "I think that disagreement is very important because we're trying to have ideas...and this question is gonna come outside of this room. So, if we're not disagreeing with each other and criticising what we're saying, people are gonna do that for us. So, if we've already done it, we prepare ourselves a little bit."

The women also commented that having these difficult conversations early on had been beneficial, as they helped prepare the group for the questions that may be asked by critics in future, e.g., during the photovoice exhibition. The significance of Muslim women's diversity led to the group collectively deciding it was important to create images and self-definitions that showcase our various interests, lifestyles, personalities, and identities in authentic ways, from students, to career professionals, to our roles as wives and mothers.

#### **CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT (DIS)EMPOWERED GROUPS IN PAR**

Through this collaborative work and dialogue, we discovered that the constant bombardment of negative discourses can impact how we perceive ourselves and one another, leading to some women (including myself) underestimating the diversity of our community. I also entered the project carrying my own assumptions about the types of women who would be interested in attending, which included my interpretations of the groups PAR typically involves, such as youths and economically deprived communities. Indeed, many of these women were media savvy, political activists, and public figures, and thus possessed very dominant personality types (that I later came to know well and deeply appreciate). The fact that this particular group of women was assembled meant that the perspectives were, at times, limited. However, the group acknowledged these issues and agreed that they could not speak for Muslim women in various contexts who may be economically deprived or face political violence. Some of the women were also keen to assist me in becoming a better facilitator through coaching and facilitate different

workshops, using their expertise in TV, media production, and photography to equip the group with various skills. This was an unexpected outcome that fostered the trusting relationships that were built over the course of the project, and that have continued long after its completion.

Interestingly, our group discussions revealed we had similar expectations of one another; for example, Amilah stated, "I was really surprised that these women had such high positions... I wouldn't have assumed that". Interrogating our assumptions involved recognising our diversity as Muslim women, as well as a process of unlearning and critical reflection. In the contemporary post-Brexit British context, Muslim women's survival through Western patriarchy, racism, gendered Islamophobia, and community sexism (Akalu, 2022) shows that our creation of self-definitions is not only a means through which we can resist multiple oppressions (Collins, 2002), but a way to raise "critical consciousness" (Freire, 2020, p. 73), self-empower, and create change within. From this perspective, adopting PAR and photovoice in this study allowed us to examine aspects of our identities that were shaped by Western stereotypes, including recognising our internalisation of dominant discourses.

#### **BUILDING TRUSTING PARTICIPATORY RELATIONSHIPS WITH MY CO-RESEARCHERS**

The women's shift in attitude toward research was also a significant outcome of the project. Early conversations revealed the women's views of traditional research, which included expectations of data extraction with no meaningful benefits for those participating. Despite my insider status, some of the group's prior experiences and/or assumptions of research had shaped their initial perceptions of me and the project. My academic diary entries described how I felt I was initially perceived by some of the group, as well as the tensions encountered as we negotiated our new relationships as co-researchers. Upon reflection, I realised that the group needed more time to get to know each other and for us to form a group bond. However, as the weeks passed, the women's trust in PAR and in me increased, as evidenced by Ruqayyah's statement that "it feels like our project just as much as it's yours".

#### **CRITICAL REFLECTIONS OF ADOPTING PAR WITHIN A PHD**

As a PhD student doing PAR, I sometimes felt ill-equipped to manage some of the complex issues which arose during this study. I also found the participatory process challenging, contradictory, and, as others have noted, "emotionally, physically and mentally draining" (Hawkins, 2015, p. 475). I further discovered that my institution offered no proper guidance on using participatory approaches and lacked sufficient understanding of the level of ethical issues involved (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003) (such as building trusting relationships with communities, which often mean that PAR projects can take much longer than traditional studies). To overcome these challenges, I made an ethical commitment early on to protect myself and my community from becoming part of the legacy of exploitative scholarship (Muhammad et al., 2015) within UK higher education, which "sets the terms and conditions of its dominating power relations with those who are excluded within and beyond its walls" (Beckles-Raymond, 2021, p. 174). This included completing adequate participatory, ethical, and photovoice training in advance, seeking funding for the women to have the means available to co-create a meaningful project, hiring experts to train project members in visual methods, seeking an inclusive



space for fieldwork, and taking the necessary time to build trusting and reciprocal partnerships with community organisations and members.

## CONCLUSION

One issue I reflected on throughout the study was whether I could conduct a meaningful participatory project in the eyes of the women. At times, I felt that leaving the project open meant that those who joined might have perceived it as an opportunity to create an ambitious global project (which Sara desired) or to continue it as an ongoing longitudinal project. I also reflected on what Liebenberg describes as the "ethical complexity of photovoice projects and in particular our responsibility with regard to participant and community expectations of social change" (2018, p. 7). Seeing the women become increasingly enthusiastic and in charge of the project as the weeks passed led me to reflect on how I could have set clearer parameters at the start of the project to avoid disappointment. I further struggled with the project's emotional intensity and negotiating the blurred relationships with the women, which formed into friendships outside of the project. These challenges reminded me of Hordge-Freeman's (2018) concept of "bringing your whole self to research," which involves how we epistemologically position ourselves as researchers as well as acknowledging the emotional aspects of collaborative work. These experiences further taught me that doing a PAR PhD involves much more than just co-production, promoting social change, and disrupting power imbalances in research; it also involves setting realistic parameters and making transparent decisions about what is possible in a PAR project or not - before the research begins. ■

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**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:**

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**Dr. Hanna Akalu** (CPsychol) is an early career researcher and received her PhD from Glasgow Caledonian University. Her PhD applied decolonial, participatory, and visual methods to explore identity negotiations, intersecting inequalities, and social justice activism with British Muslim women. Hanna is a recipient of the British Psychological Society's Psychology of Women and Equalities Section and Feminism and Psychology Journal's joint Postgraduate Prize for her doctoral research. Her recent projects include co-developing a pedagogical toolkit to enhance postgraduate students' belonging and engagement at GCU. As an educator and social justice researcher, Hanna's main areas of interest include concepts of social inclusion and exclusion, gender-based violence, intersectionality, and community-driven ethical participatory approaches.

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