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Beyond Hate: Confronting Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism in Social Work

Siham Elkassem

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Article abstract

Canada has a significant problem with Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism (AMR), holding the alarming distinction of having the highest rate of targeted killings of Muslims among G7 countries. Beyond personal fear and hatred of Muslims and Islam, Islamophobia and AMR are deeply ingrained in institutional and structural systems, perpetuating violence and discrimination. This paper challenges the conventional view of Islamophobia and AMR as simply an individual moral issue, arguing instead that it is a form of racial and colonial violence occurring across multiple levels of Canadian society. AMR intersects with other forms of oppression, including sexism, anti-Arab, anti-Black, and anti-Brown racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia. Despite social work's stated commitment to social justice, the profession has failed to effectively address AMR due to its own ongoing legacy of racism, white supremacy, and coloniality. To truly uphold its stated commitments to equity and human rights, social work must confront AMR at all levels. Grounded in critical race and anti-colonial theory, this paper illustrates how AMR is a multifaceted issue. While advancing a framework for addressing AMR within social work, this paper emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach that encompasses direct practice, policy and community work, research, and education. Recommendations include adopting an antiMuslim racism approach that includes strategies that can be used to confront AMR and identify key challenges and opportunities for transformative change within social work.

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Research Article

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Siham Elkassem[a]

Abstract

Canada has a significant problem with Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism (AMR), holding the alarming distinction of having the highest rate of targeted killings of Muslims among G7 countries. Beyond personal fear and hatred of Muslims and Islam, Islamophobia and AMR are deeply ingrained in institutional and structural systems, perpetuating violence and discrimination. This paper challenges the conventional view of Islamophobia and AMR as simply an individual moral issue, arguing instead that it is a form of racial and colonial violence occurring across multiple levels of Canadian society. AMR intersects with other forms of oppression, including sexism, anti-Arab, anti-Black, and anti-Brown racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia. Despite social work's stated commitment to social justice, the profession has failed to effectively address AMR due to its own ongoing legacy of racism, white supremacy, and coloniality. To truly uphold its stated commitments to equity and human rights, social work must confront AMR at all levels. Grounded in critical race and anti-colonial theory, this paper illustrates how AMR is a multifaceted issue. While advancing a framework for addressing AMR within social work, this paper emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach that encompasses direct practice, policy and community work, research, and education. Recommendations include adopting an anti-Muslim racism approach that includes strategies that can be used to confront AMR and identify key challenges and opportunities for transformative change within social work.

Keywords:
anti-Muslim racism, intersectionality, Islamophobia, Muslims, Social Work

a. University of Windsor, School of Social Work, Windsor, Canada

Contact: Siham Elkassem siham.elkassem@uwindsor.ca

Introduction

We are living in a deeply troubling time, marked by a significant rise in Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism[1] (AMR) in Canada (York University, 2024; Toronto Star, 2023), the United States (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2023), and across the globe (Farazi-Saber, 2023). Anti-Muslim racism refers to discriminatory beliefs, speech, actions, and violence directed toward individuals or groups based on their Muslim identity or perceived affiliation with Islam (Meer, 2013; Meer & Modood, 2019). Canada has been the site of several major anti-Muslim racist crimes and has been labeled one of the worst among the G7 countries in terms of targeted killings of Muslims (Woolf, 2024). These crimes include the mass shooting in Quebec in 2017, which led to the murder of six people while they prayed at the Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec City (Montpetit, 2019); the stabbing murder of Mohamed-Aslim Zafis in 2020 while he was volunteering to screen fellow congregants for COVID-19 in the parking lot of the International Muslim Organization in Etobicoke (Casey, 2020); and the domestic terrorism attack in London, Ontario that resulted in the murder of four members of the Afzal family in 2021, leaving the youngest child injured and orphaned (Lupton & Dubinski, 2021). In 2024, with the ongoing genocide in Gaza,[2] there has been a surge of AMR and anti-Palestinian racism (APR)[3] in Canada, leading to several hate crimes (Khan, 2023; Wong, 2023). Across the border in the United States, a similar climate of hate led to the murder of a Palestinian Muslim child in Chicago (Yan et al., 2023), the shooting and attempted murder of three Palestinian college students in Vermont (Aljazeera, 2023), and another attempted murder of a small Muslim child in Detroit (Booth-Singleton, 2024). These incidents have left Canadian Muslims feeling increasingly vulnerable and fearful for their safety (Zimonjic, 2023).

[1] The terms *Islamophobia* and *anti-Muslim racism* (AMR) will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. However, the "Definitions and Theoretical Insights" section of this article will clarify how and why theorists make a distinction between the two terms.

[2] Several human rights organizations, including the United Nations Human Rights Office, have raised concerns since the start of the assault on Gaza, deeming the actions taken so far as violations of international law and potentially constituting war crimes, according to a recent report. See United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2024, November). UN Special Committee finds Israel's warfare methods in Gaza consistent with genocide, including use of starvation as weapon of war, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/11/un-special-committee-finds-israels-warfare-methods-gaza-consistent-genocide

[3] Anti-Palestinian racism (APR) is "a form of anti-Arab racism that silences, excludes, erases, stereotypes, defames or dehumanizes Palestinians or their narratives." Majid (2022), para 1. Although this is a distinct form of discrimination, it often intersects with anti-Muslim racism.

Canadian Muslims have been integral to the country's social, economic, and cultural landscape for over a century (Islamic History Month Canada, n.d.), yet they continue to face AMR, which compounds the systemic oppression they already experience due to their broader identities. Today, the ethnic heritage of Canada's 1.8 million Muslims spans diverse regions including East, West, and North Africa, South and West Asia, and the Middle East (Statistics Canada, 2022), illustrating the diversity of their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Many are first-, second-, or third-generation Canadians, living across several provinces (Statistics Canada, 2022). Canada, a nation built on the genocide of Indigenous Peoples and a legacy of racism, white supremacy, and settler colonial violence (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2021; Kingston, 2015), has become a fertile ground for Muslims to experience AMR as well as other forms of oppression including sexism, anti-Arab, anti-Black, and anti-Brown racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia (Akande, 2023; Elkassem, 2023; Khan, 2018; Shah & Khan, 2023). For example, several studies have revealed that Black Muslims in Canada often experience both anti-Black racism and AMR (Elkassem, 2023; Williams et al., 2025). South Asians may encounter both anti-Brown racism and AMR (Elkassem, 2023). Newcomers to Canada may face discrimination at the intersection of AMR and xenophobia (Elkassem, 2023). And Muslims from 2SLGBTQIA+ communities must navigate both AMR within queer spaces and homophobia and transphobia within Muslim spaces (Khan, 2018). For Muslim women from these communities, these challenges are further exacerbated by sexism, resulting in the compounding effects of AMR and gendered and racialized discrimination.

In this paper, I argue that AMR is persistent and multifaceted in Canada and, as a result, social work must respond with urgency. To advance social work's response and commitment to social justice, this paper aims to define Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism as part of an ongoing legacy of racial and colonial violence against racialized people. It will respond to the lack of understanding of AMR by exploring how it manifests at interpersonal, structural, and institutional levels, moving beyond simply a hatred of Muslims and Islam and offering a deeper understanding of its complexities. I will present challenges and future opportunities that the discipline faces in terms of AMR, illustrating how social work can move towards substantive change. In closing, I will offer an *anti-Muslim racism framework* for addressing this form of discrimination in social work on many levels of practice, enabling social workers to respond to AMR across all levels of society.

Systemic Inaction

Despite claims of progress in social and institutional responses to AMR in Canada following the murder of the Afzal family (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2021; Government of Canada, 2021), systemic

change remains insufficient. Initiatives such as the National Summit on Islamophobia (Canadian Heritage, 2021), the appointment of a Special Representative to Combat Islamophobia (Canadian Heritage, 2024), and the adoption of anti-Islamophobia strategies in school boards across Canada are notable steps forward (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2023; Griffin, 2023). However, these efforts often focus primarily on addressing interpersonal forms of AMR, such as individual acts of discrimination or hate, without adequately addressing the deeper, structural dimensions of AMR within Canadian institutions.

Although the Canadian government has taken steps to combat AMR, critics argue that AMR and other forms of oppression persist within its own services and policies (Khan, 2022; Public Service Alliance of Canada, 2024; Shaikh & Selby, 2023; Zine, 2024). One area where this is evident is in Canada's immigration policies. For example, there is a disproportionate level of support for Ukrainian asylum seekers (Government of Canada, 2024a) compared to those fleeing the ongoing genocide in Gaza (Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, 2024) or other Muslim-majority countries (Amnesty International, 2024b; Zhou, 2022). While supporting Ukrainian refugees is both important and necessary, this discrepancy highlights a form of institutional discrimination that raises doubts about the effectiveness of tackling AMR if the structural biases embedded within Canadian policies are not simultaneously addressed. These contradictions highlight a critical gap: the failure to confront the systemic entrenchment of racism within government and other institutions, which in turn limits the potential for meaningful, long-term change.

The profession of social work within Canada occupies a similar contradictory position, stating its values and ethical commitment to justice while simultaneously perpetuating oppression. The Canadian social work code of ethics explicitly affirms social justice as a core value and goal in responding to oppression (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005). However, numerous scholars highlight the persistent presence of racism, white supremacy, and coloniality within the field (Murray-Lichtman & Elkassem, 2021; Gregory, 2021). One of the most glaring examples of this is the overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous children in child welfare systems (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018), a sector in which social workers often find themselves. Interestingly, while social work acknowledges the harmful effects of oppression on individuals and communities (Dominelli, 2017), it has historically given very little attention to AMR (Elkassem, 2023). This apathy and inaction are not surprising; many critical scholars have argued that social work has continuously focused on the deficits of racialized individuals and communities rather than addressing the structural and institutional oppressions they face (Badwall, 2016; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Fortier & Wong, 2019; Murray-Lichtman & Elkassem, 2021), including the oppression of Muslims in Canada (Elkassem 2023).

Social work fails to actively adopt anti-racist and anti-colonial frameworks and to address the systemic racism, white supremacy, and coloniality that is embedded within the profession (Elkassem & Murray-Lichtman 2022). These entrenched issues often go unacknowledged, particularly by those outside racialized communities. However, for racialized scholars such as Murray-Lichtman and Elkassem (2021), this inaction is evident in the practice of *academic voyeurism*—the "non-performative white gaze" in social work that renders racialized populations as "bodies to be studied, exoticized, and theorized about, without any substantive anti-racist change or action required" (p. 179). This dynamic is especially apparent in social work's inadequate response to AMR: the profession may issue superficial statements condemning such discrimination (Canadian Association of Social Work Education, 2021) yet fails to take meaningful steps to address the systemic factors that perpetuate it. By failing to address AMR alongside other forms of racial and colonial violence, social work maintains a facade of progressiveness while obscuring its ongoing inaction in dismantling the structural dimensions of these forms of discrimination. To better understand how social work can begin to address these systemic issues, it is essential to first clarify the key concepts of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism, distinguishing between the terms and exploring their theoretical underpinnings.

Definitions and Theoretical Insights

Although the terms Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism are often used interchangeably in public discourse to describe racism, violence, hatred, and discrimination against both Muslims and Islam as a religion, there are scholars who make a distinction between the two terms. To advance social work's response, the following section presents definitions and a theorization of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism to illustrate these concepts are both distinct and linked, rooted in a legacy of racial and colonial violence, and experienced across intersections of social location. Using the Critical Race-Anti-Colonial (CR-AC) conceptual model outlined by Elkassem and Murray-Lichtman (2022), which integrates critical race theory—particularly its concepts of race, racialization, whiteness, white supremacy, and intersectionality—as well as anti-colonial theory, with its focus on coloniality and orientalism, we can gain deeper insights into these forms of oppression.

Critical Race Theory is a framework that examines how racism and race are embedded in and manifest across social and institutional systems and structures of power and privilege (Bell, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991). Concepts like race and racism help us theorize how Muslims, as racialized individuals, experience discrimination not only based on their religion but also through phenotypic characteristics such as skin color, name, religious dress, and broader societal structures of whiteness and white supremacy. Anti-colonial theory is a framework that examines the structures of orientalism

and colonialism (Fanon, 1963; Said, 1978). Coloniality and orientalism enriches an understanding of AMR and Islamophobia by helping to explain how power dynamics continue to shape the racialization of Muslims, positioning them as "the Other" in both Western imagination and policy. Orientalism, as articulated by Edward Said (1978), illustrates how Muslims and Islamic culture have been historically constructed as exotic, backward, and threatening, reinforcing stereotypes that justify their marginalization and exclusion. The CR-AC framework integrates critical race and anti-colonial principles to examine the systems of power that underpin Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism (Elkassem & Murray-Lichtman, 2022).

Islamophobia

Islamophobia is commonly defined as fear, hatred, or negative stereotyping of Islam and those perceived[4] to be Muslim (Bridge Initiative, n.d.; Runnymede Trust, 2017). According to scholars, Islamophobia encompasses a range of discourses, attitudes, and beliefs that often involve attributing negative characteristics to Muslims and the religion of Islam (Allen, 2016; Jiwani, 2010). These Islamophobic assumptions emerge from orientalist narratives and racist representations used to portray people from the "Orient" (for example, from Asia, Africa, the Middle East), and have long been employed to dehumanize and "other" racialized communities, while simultaneously elevating Eurocentric culture as superior and default (Allen, 2016; Said, 1978). Islamophobia manifests through modern-day coloniality—the enduring structures of white colonial power and influence—where orientalist narratives, still prevalent today, fuel dehumanizing rhetoric about Muslims and Islam (Beydoun, 2016; 2018; Said, 1978). Islamophobia occurs across discourses and within society through negative stereotyping among people (Farokhi & Jiwani, 2021; 2023; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2018), negative media portrayals (Farokhi & Jiwani, 2021; 2023; Kanji, 2018), and hate speech (Razack, 2022; Zine, 2022b). Islamophobia is part of Canada's ongoing legacy of white supremacist settler colonialism, which, according to Sunera Thobani (2007), has always been exclusionary and rooted in racialized violence. Positioning racist narratives and stereotypes as tools that manufacture consent for systemic violence against Muslims in Canada, Islamophobia becomes more than just individual biases, and instead, manifests as racist narratives that are deeply ingrained in Canadian society, providing a foundation for repressive actions, practices, and policies.

[4] Islamophobia has contributed to an increase in hate crimes against Sikh communities in the United States and Canada. Many Sikhs are wrongly targeted and mistaken for Muslims based on their appearance, skin colour, and religious attire. See Sian (2014).

Anti-Muslim Racism

Anti-Muslim racism (AMR) refers to acts of racism, discrimination, and violence directed against individuals or communities because they are, or are perceived to be, Muslim (Meer, 2013; Meer & Modood, 2019). AMR occurs through the process of racialization whereby people are placed into racial categories through phenotypic characteristics often linked to their racial, ethnic, and religious identities (Bell, 2018; Omi & Winant, 2014). This process manifests within societal and institutional structures in which whiteness[5]—as normalized and default—and white supremacy—the claimed superiority of white people and culture—are prevalent and help maintain racial hierarchies (Razack, 2022; Zine, 2022a). In this context, society continues to categorize Muslims, or those perceived as such, as a distinct race based on certain characteristics such as their skin colour, name, religious dress, accent, or facial hair (Elkassem, 2023; Meer & Modood, 2019). Within a climate of increasing Islamophobia, the process of racialization becomes imbued with racist representations of Muslims. For example, several theorists, such as Kundnani (2014), examine how the War on Terror[6] has shaped-dominant narratives that link colonialism, racial violence, and Islamophobia. In Canada, scholars have shown how Muslims have been historically and politically racialized, particularly within post-9/11 contexts (Razack, 2022; Zine, 2022a). Through the racialization of Muslims, shaped by these narratives, AMR manifests in various forms, including social exclusion (Elkassem, 2023; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2018), hate crimes (Moreau, 2021), and discriminatory policies (Razack, 2022; Zine, 2022b). These interconnected forms of discrimination contribute to the ongoing marginalization of Muslim communities.

While Islamophobia and AMR are distinct concepts, they are also interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The primary difference between the two is that Islamophobia encompasses negative rhetoric, ideologies, and beliefs directed at Muslims and the religion of Islam itself. The results include harmful narratives, stereotypes, and misconceptions about Islam, such as associating it with violence or extremism, or portraying it as incompatible with Western values. In contrast, AMR is specifically revealed through the racialized nature of discrimination, focusing on the experiences and treatment

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[5] Whiteness in the context of IP and AMR often positions Christianity and secularism as the normalized, default viewpoints, with Christianity being the assumed religion when religion is emphasized. Despite Christianity's Middle Eastern origins and the racialized status of many Christians, it remains the dominant, superior and "acceptable" religion, particularly in societies shaped by colonial and imperial histories.

[6] The "War on Terror," was initiated after the September 11 attacks and has fueled heightened AMR in Canada and the United States by associating Islam and Muslim communities with terrorism, leading to widespread discrimination, hate speech, and violence against Muslims. See Zine (2022b).

of individuals who are identified as, or perceived to be, Muslim. This form of discrimination often targets people based on their racial or ethnic markers, such as skin color, accent, or dress. However, it is important to note that Islamophobia informs anti-Muslim racism, and vice versa, as they are interrelated and reinforce one another: discourses and belief can shape actions, and actions can, in turn, uphold and perpetuate discourses and belief (Beydoun, 2016; 2018). This interplay highlights that AMR is not simply an issue of personal prejudice or morality, but rather a systemic and structural problem embedded within various institutions. Social work needs to be critically examining how AMR is perpetuated not just through individual actions, but also through institutional practices and policies that sustain discrimination against Muslim communities.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, a key tenet of critical race theory, is essential for understanding how multiple social identities converge to create distinct systems of privilege and oppression that shape Muslim experiences with AMR (Crenshaw, 1991; 1995). This convergence occurs through the racialization of Muslimness, the process by which individuals are identified and treated as Muslim based on racialized markers, such as skin colour, accent, or religious dress, rather than their actual religious beliefs. This process targets individuals across a variety of social locations, impacting those who fall outside of Eurocentric norms and affecting people in complex, intersectional ways. As a result, Islamophobia and AMR manifest across various axes of identity, including race, gender, gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, religious dress, and immigration status (Elkassem, 2023; Miled, 2020). In Canada, several scholars have analyzed how AMR violence is experienced by Muslim women, who are targeted by intersecting forms of violence, including racism, classism, and sexism (Bannerji, 2000; Razack, 2004; Zine, 2009). This violence also includes AMR at the intersection of xenophobia, anti-Brown racism, anti-Palestinian racism, anti-Black racism, and homophobia (Akande, 2023; Elkassem, 2023; Williams et al., 2025).

Experiences of AMR are informed not only by a Muslim's intersectional social location, but also by their proximity to whiteness. Proximity to whiteness refers to the degree to which an individual or group aligns with or is granted access to the cultural and social privileges typically associated with whiteness, relative to other racial or ethnic groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). This factor is crucial to consider in Canada, where racial and colonial inscriptions are deeply embedded in discourses, practices, and policies, and are integral to the ongoing project of white nation-building in society (Razack, 2022; Zine, 2022a). As a result, a Muslim's racial and cultural identity, along with their proximity to whiteness, can influence the extent to which they experience varying levels of privilege or marginalization. The result is that Muslims who are perceived to align more closely with

whiteness—whether through lighter skin, no hijab, or anglicized names—may experience less Islamophobia and AMR compared to those who are perceived as more distant from whiteness, such as those with darker skin, wearing a hijab, or having Muslim or "foreign" names. This distinction can be seen in media in which Muslim men are frequently depicted as violent, dark-skinned figures with beards, while Muslim women are often portrayed wearing hijabs or burqas (Farokhi & Jiwani, 2021; 2023; Jiwani, 2010), thus working to present them in ways that places them further away from "whiteness." AMR experiences may also vary based on factors such as skin tone and religious expression. For example, Muslim female youth who are lighter-skinned and do not wear a hijab report facing AMR when they reveal their religious identity, while a darker-skinned Muslim woman wearing a hijab cannot conceal her racial or religious identity, so they may experience AMR regularly (Elkassem, 2023). In this case, intersectionality and proximity to whiteness helps us to understand how a Muslim may experience Islamophobia and AMR while also occupying a variety of social locations across the spectrum of privilege and oppression.

The discussion above highlights how Islamophobia and AMR are both distinct and interconnected. While these terms are often used interchangeably in public discourse, AMR will be used throughout the remainder of the paper. This term emphasizes the process of racialization in discourse, hate speech, and acts of violence against Muslims, while also highlighting the power structures of race, racism, whiteness, white supremacy, and coloniality that uphold racial hierarchies. Social workers and others engaged in anti-racist and social justice work must understand how Islamophobia and AMR manifest and intersect with other forms of discrimination in order to choose the most effective conceptualization to inform responses to this multifaceted form of oppression.

Interpersonal, Structural, and Institutional Dimensions

AMR is deeply embedded in the social, economic, and political fabric of Canadian society. On an *intrapersonal* level, AMR manifests through the internalization of negative beliefs and stereotypes, shaping an individual's worldview (Razack, 2022; Zine, 2022). Internalized AMR beliefs then translate into *interpersonal* interactions, influencing how people engage with others and often leading to racist and hostile behavior (Bakali, 2016; 2017; Elkassem, 2018; 2023). At a *structural* level, AMR permeates various social and economic contexts (Hasan et al., 2024; Canadian Council of Muslim Women, 2024). *Institutionally*, it is reflected in policies and practices within systems like government and education (Razack, 2022; Zine, 2022a; 2022b). The following section will explore how AMR manifests across these dimensions, providing evidence to support a multi-level response within the profession of social work.

Like other racist and colonial ideologies in Canadian society, AMR proliferates through various layers, beginning with intrapersonal racist beliefs and attitudes. AMR beliefs can manifest in both covert and explicit interpersonal actions. Covert forms include racially charged assumptions, questions, and comments, such as inquiries about one's place of birth, clothing choices, or level of education (Elkassem, 2023). Explicit AMR encompasses verbal and physical abuse, discrimination, racial profiling, hate crimes, and even targeted killings (Moreau, 2021; Woolf, 2024). For instance, a study examining the experiences of Muslim youth who have experienced AMR found frequent occurrences of verbal harassment, racial slurs, and aggressive behaviour in public spaces such as shopping areas and public transportation (Elkassem, 2024; Mercier-Daphond & Helly, 2021). Muslim women, particularly those who wear the hijab, are especially vulnerable, experiencing harassment and even violent attacks more frequently than their male counterparts or other Muslim women who do not wear the hijab (Ataullahjan & Thomans-Bernard, 2023). Their racial status and outward religious attire make them easy targets for both covert and explicit forms of racism (Elkassem, 2023; Mercier-Dalphond & Helly, 2021).

Structural AMR occurs within the workplace, in educational settings, across forms of media, and within social movements in society. Several studies have highlighted Muslims experiences with AMR in the workplace, including from co-workers, supervisors, and managers (CCMW, 2024; Hasan et al., 2024). AMR also extends to the job market, where Muslims often fear being overlooked for positions due to their identity (CCMW, 2024; Hasan et al., 2024). Additionally, workplace practices influenced by AMR may include the denial of prayer spaces or questioning time off for religious holidays (CCMW, 2024; Hasan et al., 2024). Reports of increased AMR are prevalent across social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, with several studies documenting this rise (for example, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2023). In film and television, AMR often manifests through racist stereotypes portraying Muslims as inherently violent, terrorists, foreign, and incompatible with Western values (Massoumi et al., 2017; Jiwani & Dessner, 2016; Perigoe, 2007; Razack, 2004, 2008).

Media narratives and political discussions often perpetuate AMR stereotypes, using them to incite fear and garner support for national and foreign policies, initiatives, and movements (Allen, 2016; Beydoun, 2016; 2018; Razack 2008). Previous studies found AMR in media discussions about refugee crises (Abbas, 2020; Bazian, 2018). AMR is evident now in discussions about the genocide in Gaza (Baroud, 2023; Reuters, 2023). News coverage and political commentary often include language that dehumanizes Muslims and stereotypes them as extremists or terrorists, fuelling existing prejudices and resulting in the encouragement of individuals and groups to act on these fears (Kanji,

2018; Kearns et al., 2018). In fact, AMR can inspire organized movements that seek to marginalize Muslims. Several far-right groups, driven by AMR ideologies, promote propaganda calling for restrictions on immigration and even violence against Muslim communities in Canada (Perry & Scrivens, 2019; Razack, 2022; Zine, 2022b).

AMR is embedded within legal policies, practices, and procedures across government and public institutions. These formalized policies, such as laws and federal and provincial regulations, often perpetuate AMR, framing Muslims as security threats and criminalizing their religious practices. The most notable example of institutional AMR in Canada is Bill C-21, which effectively prohibits Muslims in Quebec from wearing religious clothing while working in provincially and federally funded jobs, such as in education and government (Hasan et al., 2024; Syed, 2013). Within Canadian surveillance programs, AMR is justified through the fear of terrorism within Muslim communities and has contributed to widespread discrimination and stigmatization (Ahmad, 2023; Razack, 2022; Zine, 2022a). Several experts illustrate how Public Safety Canada and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service perpetuate dominant discourses emphasizing counterterrorism, often with an exclusive focus on Muslim youth (National Council of Canadian Muslims, 2013; Razack, 2022; Zine, 2022a). Within Muslim organizations, AMR occurs through surveillance; for example, a recent report demonstrated how the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) unfairly targeted Muslim non-profit organizations (Emon & Hasan, 2021).

Canada's foreign and immigration policies reflect global patterns of AMR, particularly through their treatment of Muslim asylum seekers and foreign policies that disproportionately affect Muslim-majority countries (Mithoowani, 2023; Razack, 2022; Zine, 2022b). The occupation and invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan by Western powers is frequently portrayed as necessary for global and national security, creating a narrative that positions Muslim communities in Muslim-majority countries as inherently violent or threatening (Razack, 2022; Zine, 2022b). A recent example is Canada's inaction in response to the genocide in Gaza (Amnesty International Canada, 2024b; Independent Jewish Voices, 2023). These actions, often justified under the guise of regional and national security, illustrate both institutional and systemic AMR (Razack, 2022; Zine, 2022b). Interestingly, recent government initiatives, such as Canada's new Anti-Racism Strategy, suggest some efforts to address racism within practices and policies (Government of Canada, 2024b). Several questions arise, however, regarding the level of readiness and substantive commitment of the Government of Canada to its anti-racism strategy, particularly in the context of ongoing forms of AMR within these policies and actions.

To effectively address AMR, it is essential to recognize that it operates at multiple interconnected levels that reinforce and uphold each other. AMR also intersects with other oppressions Muslims face, which persist across intra/interpersonal, structural, and institutional levels

of society. These ideologies create and sustain unequal access to power, resources, and opportunities, leading to negative social and economic outcomes. As a social justice profession, social work must go beyond addressing individual prejudices and interpersonal incidents and examine how AMR manifests within larger social and institutional structures and how it intersects with other forms of oppression. By understanding how these levels compound and reinforce one another, social workers can better develop strategies and interventions to AMR and its impacts.

Calls to Action: Confronting AMR in Social Work

Social work must urgently respond to the multifaceted nature of AMR at all levels of society. The negative social, emotional, and psychological impacts of AMR on Canadian Muslims demand immediate action. Across intra/interpersonal, structural, and institutional dimensions, AMR creates an interconnected ecology, where personal beliefs and action shape—and are shaped by—broader institutional and structural practices and policies. The following section outlines the profound consequences of AMR, the challenges social work faces in addressing it, and the steps the profession must take to respond effectively.

The Impact of AMR on Muslim Communities

AMR's pervasive impact on Canadian Muslims is both wide-reaching and deeply felt. Several studies have highlighted the negative social, emotional, and psychological impacts of AMR on affected individuals (Abu Khalaf et al., 2023; Kennedy-Turner et al., 2023; Samari et al., 2018). Scholars examining the impact of AMR on Muslim children report a poor self-concept, difficulties with identity formation, and social isolation (Elkassem et al., 2018). Among Muslim youth in Canada, AMR exacerbates feelings of not belonging, social exclusion, and hopelessness (Elkassem, 2023; Jamal et al., 2023; Miled, 2020). For Muslim women experiencing AMR in the workplace, discrimination often prevents them from securing stable employment and creates negative social and emotional outcomes (CCMW, 2024; Hasan et al., 2024). There is evidence that demonstrates that increased exposure to AMR and its resulting social isolation and rejection contributes to higher rates of anxiety and depression (Kennedy-Turner et al., 2023). Scholars note that many Muslims may be hesitant to seek social and mental health support due to the pervasive nature of structural AMR (Samari et al., 2018; Zia et al., 2022). The persistence of AMR and other forms of oppression, whether intra/interpersonal, structural, or institutional, has had a profound and detrimental impact on Muslim populations in Canada. As a profession dedicated to the promotion of mental health and wellbeing, social work must confront these pressing issues as the social, emotional, and psychological effects of AMR are serious and lasting.

A History of Silence and Apathy

However, to effectively address AMR across all levels, social work must overcome several significant challenges within its own practices, policies, community organizing, education, and research. The profession has long struggled with a history of silence and apathy regarding racial and colonial injustices; the racism, coloniality, and white supremacy that is deeply entrenched within the profession (Elkassem & Murray-Lichtman, 2022); and the resulting emotional and psychological consequences faced by racialized communities (Elkassem & Murray-Lichtman, 2022). Numerous anti-racist and anti-colonial social work scholars have critically examined these issues and have made urgent calls to action (Adjei & Minka, 2018; Giwa et al., 2021; Mullings et al., 2016; Murray-Lichtman & Elkassem, 2021). Similarly, scholars focusing on a variety of Muslim populations in Canada have urged the profession to respond to AMR and other intersecting forms of oppression (Baksh, 2023; Baksh & Khan, 2023; Elkassem et al., 2018; Elkassem, 2023; Jamal et al., 2023; Khan, 2018; Moosa-Mitha, 2022).

Historically, social work has positioned itself as a "virtue body," a profession that embodies and promotes virtuous values such as anti-oppression and anti-racism, as reflected in its code of ethics (CASW, 2005). However, its historical practice with racialized populations, initially as "friendly visitors" through charitable organizations and in early settlement services aimed at assimilating newcomers, has instead contributed to the perpetuation of racism and oppression (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Johnston, 2016). This contradiction also presents itself today in the silence surrounding the genocide in Gaza and the subsequent rise in AMR and APR across Canada (Independent Jewish Voices, 2023; Rachini, 2023; Zimonjic, 2023). At both the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (2024) and the Council on Social Work Education (2024) conferences, there was no institutional mention of the genocide in Gaza and rise in AMR in Canada and the United States, an omission that contradicts their conference calls and codes of ethics that claim to support anti-racism, anti-oppression, and decolonial practices (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005; National Association of Social Workers, 2021). The absence of meaningful discussions on such urgent topics directly contradicts the profession's stated values of anti-racism, anti-oppression, and decolonial practices. This contradiction, in which social work positions itself as a "virtue body" while simultaneously perpetuating racial injustice through silence and apathy, is alarming and requires a sincere change if we are to uphold the values we claim to embody.

Multiculturalism and Cultural Competency

Compounding the issue of apathy and silence towards AMR is social work's reliance on the concepts of multiculturalism (Constance-Huggins, 2019; Pewewardy & Almeida, 2014) and cultural competency (Beck, 2019; Crudup et al., 2021; Keenan et al., 2021) as approaches to addressing oppression. While these

frameworks are intended to improve practice with racialized communities, including Muslims, they often fail to address the prevalence and consequences of racism and oppression, including AMR. Scholars have long critiqued these approaches for being insufficient, with multiculturalism and cultural competency often labeled as "colourblind" or as a new form of racism (Adjei, 2013; Pon, 2009; Pon et al., 2016; Elkassem & Murray-Lichtman, 2022). These frameworks tend to essentialize Muslim populations, treating them as homogeneous, and failing to account for the diversity within Muslim communities, including variations in ethnicity, religiosity, and intersectional identities (Elkassem, 2023). Additionally, cultural competency and multiculturalism overlook the historical and contemporary impacts of colonial and racial violence, missing the opportunity to critically examine how these forces continue to shape the lived experiences of racialized people in Canada, including Muslims. The failure to adequately address AMR and other forms of oppression within these frameworks overlooks the historical and ongoing impacts of colonial and racial violence, missing the opportunity to critically examine how these forces continue to shape the lived experiences of racialized communities, including Muslims, in Canada.

For social work to effectively respond to AMR and truly live up to its social justice commitments, it must adopt a more substantive, anti-racist approach that moves beyond cultural competency and multiculturalism, which have proven insufficient, and develops an explicit anti-Muslim racism framework. Social work must address its historical silence on issues of race and colonial violence by recognizing the ongoing harm caused by this neglect. The profession must also move beyond performative actions, such as virtue signaling through ethics codes and public statements and take meaningful steps to integrate racial justice into all aspects of practice, policy, and education. Social work's current emphasis on virtue and ethical guidelines must be matched by tangible and systemic change, with a clear focus on addressing the specific ways Muslim communities experience AMR and other forms of oppression.

An Anti-Muslim Racism Approach

AMR is consequential and occurs across all levels of society through violent actions, policies, and narratives, creating a dangerous cycle in which this form of discrimination becomes normalized. AMR also has a devastating effect upon Muslims who are experiencing other forms of intersecting violence, such as the negative implications for social, emotional, psychological wellbeing and health. To effectively challenge AMR and address its consequences, social work must move past its performative statements and cultural competency to engage in tangible action through the adoption of an *anti-Muslim racism approach*. An *anti-Muslim racism approach* includes not only providing direct support for Muslim individuals and communities

impacted by this form of discrimination, but also working to challenge the systems that perpetuate AMR structurally and institutionally. The following section will illustrate what this could look like in direct practice, community organizing, advocacy and policy initiatives, education, and research.

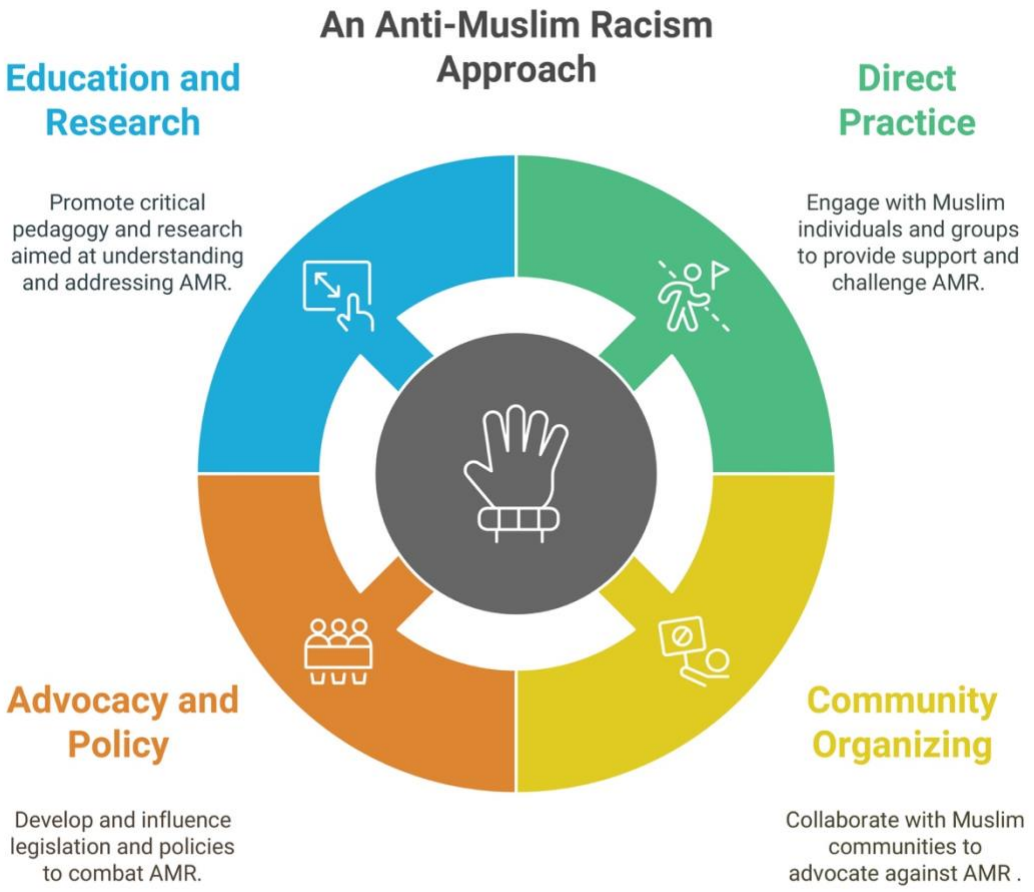

Figure 1. An Anti-Muslim Racism Approach.

Social workers can play a crucial role in addressing AMR in direct practice by critically reflecting on their own intra/interpersonal biases and actions as well as the actions of others within the systems in which Muslim clients and populations seek services. An anti-AMR approach in direct practice begins with addressing the racist beliefs that may be held by social workers and others in multiple sectors. Studies have shown that racism is pervasive in the justice system (Ramsay & Cavanagh, 2020), community mental health (Williams et al., 2022), settlement services (Agoston Villalba et al., 2024), child welfare (Quinn et al., 2022; Ontario Association of Children's Aid

Societies, 2016), healthcare (Williams et al., 2024), and education (Cameron & Jeffries, 2021). AMR can show up in direct practice when a social worker may stereotype a Muslim client based on negative perceptions or internalized racism and, as a result, inflict violence and provide inadequate support. An anti-AMR approach in direct practice also involves reflecting on one's own practice and responding to and challenging AMR biases held by colleagues and co-workers. Ultimately, this approach means challenging racist actions, stereotypes, and biases within oneself and others to provide a safe space for Muslim individuals and communities who are seeking support.

An anti-AMR approach in direct practice also includes recognizing and affirming the social, emotional, and psychological distress experienced by Muslims because of their exposure to any form of AMR, across all levels of society. This approach includes questioning how AMR influences people's presenting problems and acknowledging the profound impact these problems may have in their lives. Silence or a lack of acknowledgment can undermine the sense of safety among Muslim individuals and communities, perpetuating feelings of disconnect in a service delivery or counselling space. A shift can begin by developing and utilizing assessment tools that account for Muslim experiences of AMR as well as other intersectional form of oppression at all levels. Social workers need to understand how the outcomes of AMR across multiple levels can present, such as feelings of powerlessness, insecurity, and anger, which can manifest as anxiety and depression (Abu Khalaf et al., 2023; Elkassem, 2023; Kennedy-Turner et al., 2023). A thorough and intentional examination of the ways in which intra/interpersonal, institutional, and structural AMR and oppression may impact an individual's mental health and wellbeing is vital for effective social work practice.

Muslim communities across Canada have been actively organizing and advocating to address AMR through community organizations such as the National Council of Canadian Muslims and the Council of Canadian Muslim Women. Social workers should support these efforts by partnering with local and national Muslim communities and organizations. This support can involve creating community-based programs with agencies wherein social workers are involved and promoting funding for initiatives focused on mental health, education, and community development amongst Muslim communities. Social work organizations like the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers, the Ontario Association of Social Workers, or the Canadian Association of Social Workers can develop policies and campaigns to help address and respond to AMR in programs and institutions that marginalize Muslim populations. Social workers and these institutions should support initiatives addressing AMR in settings such as schools, communities, and workplaces. They should also engage in campaigns against hate crimes and advocate for policies that combat institutional AMR, including Bill C-21 and other legislative measures that uphold discrimination.

These efforts can also include responding to structural inequalities, such as discriminatory immigration policies, limited access to services, and unequal educational opportunities that contribute to the marginalization of Muslim communities. As members of a social justice profession, social workers, their associations, and their regulatory bodies should engage in advocacy to address systemic inequities impacting Muslim populations.

Social work education plays a key role in addressing AMR at all levels. An anti-AMR approach to social work education begins by promoting critical pedagogy that helps students understand that AMR occurs across all levels of society and includes more than just hatred or fear of Muslims and Islam. This approach should also incorporate understandings of how AMR intersects with other forms of oppression and the effects on an individuals' social, emotional, and psychological well-being. Assignments, readings, and discussions should engage students in exploring topics such as AMR, Islamophobia, and racial and colonial violence, along with their impacts on all marginalized groups, including Muslims. Educators should be trained to recognize and combat AMR and other forms of oppression in educational content and materials and within the classroom environment. Universities should develop and enforce AMR and other anti-racist and anti-oppressive strategies in their departmental policies and training. Social work research should prioritize critical, anti-racist, anti-colonial community-based approaches that involve Muslim communities in the process, ensuring their voices and experiences are heard. Studies should examine the impact of racism, white supremacy, colonialism, and other systemic oppressions on Muslims and people of colour, focusing on intersectionality—race, gender, gender identity, sexuality, immigration status, ability, and economic status—and the psychological effects of racial trauma and minority stress. More research is needed to understand the manifestations and social, emotional, and psychological consequences of AMR and intersecting forms of oppression.

Conclusion

Anti-Muslim racism (AMR) is a pervasive and systemic issue, manifesting across intra/interpersonal, structural, and institutional levels in society. Social work must recognize that AMR is not solely a matter of personal prejudice but a reflection of entrenched racial and colonial structures. AMR is fueled by racism, racialization, whiteness, white supremacy, orientalism, and coloniality. Scholars and practitioners within social work have long highlighted the impact of these systems of power and oppression upon racialized populations, including Muslims. These systems are entrenched within societal structures such as education and workplaces, as well as within institutional policies and practices, making AMR not only pervasive but legitimized. AMR's social, emotional, and psychological impacts on individuals and communities is

detrimental and Canadian Muslims, while seeking support, often experience oppression both within society and in the very spaces where they seek support and social workers operate. A comprehensive approach to AMR involves not only supporting individuals and communities directly affected by this form of racism but also challenging the structural and institutional systems that perpetuate it. Social work must confront its historical and ongoing silence and complicity in racial injustice, including its role in perpetuating racism, white supremacy, and coloniality. Meaningful anti-racist and decolonial efforts are crucial to actualizing social work's ethical values and effecting real change in practice, policy, community organizing, education, and research. It is time to cease our silence and apathy, acknowledge the various forms of AMR, and take meaningful action for a future that promotes equity and justice for all marginalized communities, including Muslims in Canada.

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