CONTENDING WITH THE HYPHEN(S):
MUSLIM WOMEN NEGOTIATING IDENTITY, GENDER AND CONFLICT IN NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

This article examines processes of identity creation in the lives of Muslim women in New Zealand who have experienced their young-to-mid adulthood after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Identity construction for these women has subsequently become increasingly complex negotiating between popular essentialist stereotypes often ascribed to Islam, and dynamic conditions of diaspora and minority contexts. These macroscopic issues are negotiated in the processes of the women's identity articulations. Drawing on the narratives of individual women of Islamic faith, as well as theoretical perspectives regarding 'hyphenated identities', this article explores the syncretic formulations of identity that contradict stereotypical notions, and which advocate for women and create new avenues for the conceptualization of self-hood.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 (9/11), perpetrated by Muslim extremists in the United States, the lives of many Muslims living as minority communities in Western societies have become more complex as they negotiate ambiguous public spaces informed by international tension, and polarised political debates and enduring stereotypes. Zaal, Salah and Fine (2007:164) contend that the events of 9/11 resulted in an increasingly 'relentless series of legal, social and intra-psychic threats [that] challenged their [Muslims'] security, psychological well-being, social relations, and public life'. They go on to discuss American Muslims' experiences of surveillance and hostility in the post 9/11 social climate. In Europe and America, for example, these events have consequently increased legislation and policies geared towards antiterrorism (Esposito, 2010:160). Esposito (2010:160) also comments that while these legal implementations are necessary for security reasons, they have also created significant issues in terms of civil liberties and religious expression.

Public perceptions of Muslim people in this climate of increased suspicion have become more problematic. Marranci (2008:68) observes that the fallout following the terrorism of 9/11 has had an impact on most Muslims around the world, particularly in relation to the complex connectedness of 9/11 to Muslim communities and their interactions with states. Marranci (2008:59) discusses the implementation of legislation banning the headscarf and other overt religious attire in French schools in September 2004. This legislation was significantly influenced by the post-9/11 climate rather than being a viable solution to the ongoing issues surrounding the debate between secular and religious identity in schools, which has been growing as a source of tension in French society since the 1980s (Marranci 2008:59). In this context, overt religious identity – most specifically Muslim, female identity – has been prob-lematised as hindering assimilationist policies in France (as well as impeding the so-called 'emancipation' of Muslim girls), and has taken on meanings of counter-hegemony against imposed secularism (Marranci, 2008:125).

Identity negotiation has subsequently become more challenging for many Muslims in minority Western contexts. As the French example demonstrates, wearing a headscarf (or *hijab*) is a symbol of identity that can be imbued with multiple meanings, which have become increasing politicized. Multicultural societies necessitate cognizance of social diversity, which means constant re-negotiation of collective, group and individual identities in response to global events. Marranci (2008:68) contends 9/11 has meant that the lives of Muslims living in the West became inextricably connected with global events. In this context, the reconciliation of Islamic identity with Western principles has be-come integral to discussions of 'Islam' in relation to democracy, multicultural-ism, fundamentalism and terrorism (Marranci, 2008:68).

Multiculturalism is effectively approached through a focus on the individual or community experiences of social relations because it is at the 'everyday' (Wise & Velayutham, 2009:1) or 'neighbourhood' (Appadurai, 1996:181) levels where people experience diversity. This empirically informs 'top-down' and govern-ment-managed multiculturalism that is based on policy and its official imple-mentation in state structures (Wise & Velayutham, 2009:2). Hage (2003:109), furthermore, conceptualizes the notion of multiculturalism as being largely the ideal of the middle class. He relates a personal experience of attending a conference about Asian representation in Australia, in which various aspects of multiculturalism were theorized and debated by academics and students. As a counterpoint to this academic exercise Hage (2003:109) observed three Asian cleaning ladies who tidied up after the conference attendees, largely 'silent' yet actually living 'multiculturalism'. The cosmopolitan values of the middle class

may not adequately represent the everyday experiences of diverse citizens who are often under-represented in such gatherings, yet over-represented in, for example, occupations marked by low remuneration.

This article explores multiculturalism through the individual experiences of Muslim women in New Zealand. This discussion offers a lived inquiry into the processes of identity and self-hood among Muslim women in New Zealand and how international tensions and conflicts involving Muslims affects these women's experiences. The research participants whose narratives are featured in this article are mainly aged from eighteen to women in their forties, and many have experienced their young to mid-adulthood in a post-9/11 world. For these women, their Muslim identity has become an area of significant and complex identity negotiation that grapples with broader issues of multiculturalism and accurate representation. A focus on the experiences of some Muslim women in New Zealand enables an insight into the complex consequences of terrorism and international conflict in the everyday lives of these women. Marranci (2008:66) encourages anthropologists to engage in emotional and empirically-rich analysis as a counterpoint to socio-political examinations. This discussion contributes to this approach, exploring the narratives of New Zealand Muslim women and how they experience the effects of events further afield in terms of their identities and sense of self.

Material in this article is based on doctoral and ongoing post-doctoral qualitative research conducted from 2006 to 2012 in the urban centers of Dunedin, Christchurch, Wellington, Hamilton and Auckland. The most recent interviews were conducted in June 2012. Interviews took place at women's homes and at local mosques. Currently, thirty-one women of Islamic faith have participated in this research. The women come from diverse backgrounds, differentiated by self-defined factors such as nationality, ethnicity and cultural plurality. Interviewees include women who have immigrated, or claim descent, from the Middle East, India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Fiji, the United States and Britain, as well as refugees from Afghanistan and Somalia. For those women in this discussion who are first generation immigrants to New Zealand, most have experienced their childhood or teenage years living in New Zealand.

New Zealand's Muslim community is steadily growing. The 2006 census recorded 36,072 Muslims living in New Zealand (New Zealand Census Data, 2006), but current estimates suggest that this number will have increased significantly.[1] New Zealand is described in popular discourse as a relatively 'tolerant' society, with rare and isolated acts of prejudice or discrimination. However, official surveys have demonstrated that prejudice and discrimination based on

perceived difference are enduring.[2] Most of the women participating in this study described New Zealand as a peaceful society with a lot of 'kind people', but they felt that discrimination manifested in the job market, basing these opinions on personal experiences of difficulties in securing employment. They also noted that a minority of people is outwardly prejudiced towards Muslims. The women commented that prejudice and discrimination have become more pronounced in the wake of recent international terrorist events.

While the participants all had experiences of prejudice to relate, they also emphasized the positive reception that they have received from fellow New Zealanders, both officially and unofficially. Although New Zealand is unofficially multicultural, freedom of religious and cultural expression is protected in the Bill of Rights Act 1990 and the Human Rights Act 1993 insofar as such expression does not contravene state laws. Official commitment to multiculturalism is also reflected in the Office of Ethnic Affairs, the Race Relations Commissioner and the Human Rights Commission. The Office of Ethnic Affairs (OEA) has a specific programme, in collaboration with the Muslim community, called 'Building Bridges', which is an example of an initiative geared towards encouraging constructive dialogue between New Zealand's Muslims and wider society (Pio, 2010:137). It works on raising public awareness as well as establishing and maintaining connections with other community groups and formal institutions. This programme demonstrates the official commitment to the challenges confronting Muslims in contemporary New Zealand (Pio, 2010:137). However, as Hage (2003:109) suggests, it is at the ground level of human experience that representations are played out in society in different social contexts, and it is from this perspective that I mainly base my discussion.

THEORISING IDENTITY

In this article I explore identity as a process that is located within intersecting paradigms of individual and community dynamics. Identity can be straightforwardly defined as the conceptions of self and others that are formed through the lenses of family, peer and community experiences, and wider notions of belief and praxis that are embedded in social groups defined by cultural and religious membership (Kabir, 2010:8). This suggests that identity is a multi-sited experience of individual and group negotiation, dependent on both individual self-conception and sense of community belonging. My research has suggested that self-identity is also located within wider social discourses and perceptions (Dobson, 2011). Research participants considered social perception – or, very generally, how members of a society perceive of one anther – as an important defining factor in social relationships. One woman of Fijian-

Indian descent summed it up succinctly: 'perception is probably the biggest pressure I think'. She went on to comment that public perceptions of Muslim women have a significant impact on women's sense of belonging and self-conception in New Zealand.

Sirin and Fine (2007:151) observe that identity construction has become increasingly complex for Muslim American youth, stating, 'negotiating their identities across different cultural terrains became decidedly more challenging after the events of 9/11'. Muslims elsewhere in the world have also experienced similar challenges (see, for example, Afshar, 2007; Cesari, 2010; Esposito, 2010; Ho, 2007). Sirin and Fine (2007:152) examine how discourses of suspicion of Muslims in minority contexts in Western nations have created reinforcing conditions in which Muslims, particularly Muslim youth 'are at once becoming more religiously grounded and nationally rootless; transnational yet homeless'. Increasingly, religious belief is problematized, even pathologised, defining Muslims within marginalising discourses and placing emphasis on the notion of Islamic faith as a significant prerequisite for social belonging or exclusion. Esposito (2010:12) cites a number of Western countries in which numerous public polls found that Islam was considered to be the religion most likely to be associated with violence. 'Islamophobia' is a term coined in a (1997) report by the Runnymede Trust, a leading think tank researching into issues of multi-ethnic diversity. It describes negative attitudes towards Muslims and Islam which have increased in intensity since 9/11 (Esposito, 2010:12–13; see Erdenir, 2010).

Running parallel to the threat of terrorist activity and international conflicts are ongoing stereotypical perceptions of Muslim women and their position within their religious communities. The French headscarf controversy demonstrated these perceptions as framed within secular desires to 'liberate' women from their supposedly 'suppressive' religious practices. Mir (2011:548) provides an eloquent description of the ambivalence of stereotypes: 'Muslim women, often the first to be recognized as Muslim due to their clothing, were objects of fear *and* pity – as *Muslims* and Muslim *women.* Hyper-feminized as helpless and immobile...Yet, *associated* with terrorists'.

Counter-discourses have also emerged through research about Muslim women, which provides insights into Muslim women's lives and identity creation. This has gained momentum since the mid-1990s, challenging stereotypes through innovative approaches based on empirical material and 'insider' motivations (see, for example, Brown, 2006; Dwyer, 1999, 2000; Jeenah, 2006; Rouse, 2004; Sharify-Funk, 2008). In these conceptions, identity creation is foregrounded

within discussions of women's agency and their use of religious texts and attire to reinterpret gendered roles and expectations, and to challenge marginalising attitudes. These approaches give credence to the assertion that the Qur'an is a gender-egalitarian text, and that it is misinterpretation, combined with ingrained cultural ideas, that can produce gender relations that disadvantage women. Scholars such as Ahmed (1992), Barlas (2002) and Hassan (1999) have provided in-depth hermeneutical examinations of religious texts and cultural factors. Barlas (2002) and Hassan (1999), for example, examine the Qur'an as a powerful affirmer of women's status in contrast to secondary exegetic texts such as the *sunna* or *hadith,* which can be embedded with socio-historical factors contributing to distorted notions of women. Ahmed (1992) provides a comprehensive historical account of the political and cultural factors influencing gender relations in the Middle East. These academic accounts are reflective of many Muslim women's contemporary engagement with the Qur'an and religious interpretation. As I discuss further on, for the women in this research, individual and group exploration of the religious texts is a very important part of constructing their identity. This process often challenges assumptions about gender and Islam, creating solidarity and organization among Muslim women, which has wider community benefits (Dobson 2012).

Despite these insightful accounts and grass-roots activities, essentialising stereotypes are enduring. Fokas (2007:2) argues that given the 'black and white' representations of Islam, more empirically rigorous examinations of Muslim communities are needed to further counter dichotomous representations. This article explores the 'hyphens' of identity by acknowledging gender in terms of contemporary conflict discourses and identity conceptualisation. 'Identity' is a fluid process made up of internal and external factors that positions the individual across constructed social 'space' and geographical place.

Hall (1996:6) theorises identities as being discursively constructed 'subject positions' that people temporarily occupy. He suggests that individuals become bound to discursive representations through these positions. Understanding subjects' identities can only come from exploring the effect of the 'suturing' of subjects to prevailing discourses (Hall, 1996:6). He expands further on this demonstrating that 'suture' occurs via two processes: first the subject is positioned by being 'hailed' – or positioned by 'outside' or communal discourses or definitions; second, this positionality results in the subject investing in this definitional position in some form (Hall, 1996:6).

I understand this to mean that identity formation is a two-way process dependent on subject positions being created through wider discourses and

perceptions, as well as individuals actually acknowledging, 'investing' in or negotiating with these positionings in identity formulation. Redman (2005:31) provides another perspective, describing 'suture' as 'the means by which the 'subject' is said to 'appear within' or be 'stitched into' language…that to speak as a subject necessarily involves taking up a position in the Symbolic and this, in turn, necessarily involves a fundamental exchange of 'being' for 'meaning''. Hyphens of identity (and self-meaning) are thus created both as a result of being positioned and of negotiating with that positioning.

Many of the research participants discussed here are actively working on building New Zealand Muslim identity, and are New Zealand-born or long-term residents of New Zealand. Furthermore, for women who have backgrounds of recent immigration, '[m]igration, of necessity, demands that identities become fluid, not least because the very process of moving 'Otherises' the migrants … and the definition of identity at the boundaries in interactions with others, does not necessarily reflect the migrant women's perceptions of their own identities' (Afshar, 2007:240–41). Being part of structures of meaning 'at the boundaries' suggests that individuals must negotiate with these discursive frameworks and formulate acceptable and meaningful identities or self-conceptions in reciprocal processes.

Brah (1996:181) explores the translocal politics of identity in place, where a central concern is that minority spaces are 'tenanted' by immigrants and their descendants in juxtaposition to those defined as belonging. Brah and Phoenix (2004:83) ask the question: in a post 9/11 world how are minority identities and outside ascriptions further problematised: 'What kinds of subjects, subjectivities, and political identities are produced … when the fantasy of the veiled Muslim woman "in need of rescue", and the rhetoric of the "terrorist"' intersect. Brah and Phoenix (2004:84) state the need for localised enquiry into how these discourses impact on people who are identified by factors such as religion, gender and ethnicity. Defining people specifically by their Islamic belief can also engender self-conscious Muslim identities (Akpinar, 2006:141) among the research participants as these women reconcile their own understandings of being Muslim in opposition to these stereotypical corollaries.

THE INSECURITIES OF IDENTIFICATION

My research with Muslim women in New Zealand suggests that global conflict and terrorist acts have had social consequences in the women's lives. The participants' discussions about the challenges of living in New Zealand led to women commenting about the stereotypes ascribed to Muslim people and

how this impacted on their lives and their conceptions of self-identity. Most of the women discussed the public preoccupation with the notion of Islam as a violent religion. A nineteen year old New Zealand-born woman of Malaysian descent made this statement:

> I do know people who'll be nice to me and everything, but you can still sense that…They think you're weird or, you know, they just really don't like your religion, or they think you're a terrorist, you know, these kind of things, it's just really…you know it doesn't really get to me because I don't really care, but…

This woman experienced her teenage years in the aftermath of 9/11 and made many comments regarding the associations of Islam with terrorist activity. She emphasised the frightening aspects of this in terms of the sense of perceived physical insecurity this has created for her. One coping strategy used by her and her friends was 'safety in numbers'. She explained that 'a lot of girls say that they feel more comfortable walking in groups or, you know, with friends or whatever just to be safe'.

All of the women participants in this study choose to cover their heads, which makes them very visible as Muslims. This visibility has meant that some of the women have endured incidents of discrimination, particularly in the job market. A woman of Indian descent in her forties related an example of this:

> I know of this woman who's just sold her house and packed up and left the country. She completed a pharmacy degree and then she was required to do her practical component of it where they have to go out and work in a pharmacy for six months or a year or something, and there was not one single pharmacy that would take her on. And she was just so upset that she'd spent all this money and effort getting that degree and she can't take it further because she can't get work. And she'd gone to, you know, and there'd be pharmacies, like she'd talk to them over the 'phone, and they'd say yes, yes we want someone, she'd go and they'd see that she was wearing the head scarf and say that they didn't need anyone…One pharmacy that she went back to a month later…they'd hired somebody else, an Iraqi woman who…was not wearing any scarf.

This example demonstrates the difficulties associated with the visibility of *hijab*. Another area of anxiety some of the women mentioned was the surveillance they had experienced when travelling. A twenty-six year old convert to Islam said:

> I came back from England about three months ago and I was stopped
> for one and a half hours at customs and they just went through
> everything and it was just…I can appreciate on the one hand but
> it's…'cause I was actually in London during the bombings and I was
> never stopped and searched…like we're very rare here dressing like
> this, so, I think you're seen more as a foreigner here. And I was in
> London when this thing happened and I travelled to France as well,
> and didn't get stopped or searched or anything like that, and then
> I came here at the end of the world and I was stopped for an hour
> and a half and all my stuff was went through. They've got the right
> to do that but I just…yeah. Things like that yeah.

Some of the women felt that Muslim women that cover were frequently targeted. The women considered it was important to ensure security at airports and when travelling, but they expressed concern that it was often Muslims who were singled out for surveillance, because of the negative associations with their faith, rather than security measures being applied to everybody. Ruby (2006: 34) observes that experiences of surveillance reinforce the sense of difference that Muslim women can feel despite being citizens of the 'host' country they are being surveilled in.

One of the most significant areas of stress for the women were the stereotypes of 'terrorist' often ascribed to them. Like the young Malaysian woman mentioned earlier, many of the women felt that incidents of prejudice or abuse that they experienced were a direct result of terrorist events elsewhere, which ignited hostility towards them. A thirty-one year old woman gave an example:

> Yeah I was spat on a couple of times…The first time I always remember…it was a pouring down rainy day, and for some reason I needed
> KFC…So I just did my things up, oh you know it's raining don't need
> an umbrella, I'll just put this on, and on my way back somebody spat
> at me. And I looked at him and he was about like, about the same
> age as my father and I just thought, oh I couldn't believe it. And I
> thought…if I hadn't worn it, he never would have known.

Younger women in particular found this very distressing because many had been born here, or had grown up in New Zealand, or considered themselves 'Kiwis', and did not have any direct experience of the conflicts that were being associated with them. Terrorism was seen as something that happens in other places in the world and was far removed from their own sense of identity and community conceptions.

Four of the participants – one aged eighteen and three in their early twenties – are refugees from Somalia and Afghanistan. These young women and their families escaped from very insecure situations in which they, or their family members, experienced trauma and uncertainty. New Zealand is the destination of these journeys of necessity. A woman of Fijian-Indian and Dutch descent who runs a Muslim women's group talked about these resilient people:

> Here in Wellington we have Cambodian, about 120 Cambodian Muslims, which makes us quite distinct, you know, and they're just amazing people…When you talk to them about what they went through under the Khmer Rouge, and you look at these happy, beautiful people and think, I can't believe you went through that. You talk to some of our Somali sisters. So elegant, you know, striding down the street, and you talk to them about what they lost, how some of them had to choose four of their eight children in order to be able to come here; you know. How they've witnessed their husbands killed in front of them; how the children…I mean it's just, you know, and the thing is you would never have the chance to, to touch on that beauty…of the human spirit.

To be labelled as 'terrorist' in the aftermath of these experiences was seen as very unfair. Ruby (2006:32) considers popular prejudice, and these types of incidents, as a kind of 'terror' that is experienced by women who are perceived as 'terrorists'.

Does marginalisation and exclusion have follow-on effects? Rahnema (2006:36–7) implicates discrimination and prejudice as producing a cycle that may hinder integrative efforts and effectively produce further marginalisation. A woman in her forties commented: 'I think that we are suffering…and employment is one of those key areas that when you don't have employment, and you don't have financial security, that it leads to so many other social ills'. Rahnema (2006:37) suggests that constructive efforts should address discriminatory attitudes and work towards initiatives that emphasise belonging as diverse national citizens.

Sirin and Fine (2007:160), in exploring the lived effects of these issues on Muslim youth, draw on Foucault's (1997) discussion of the concept of the panopticon: 'the panopticon [is] a dynamic of profound, pervasive and penetrating institutional surveillance, a social prison, where all are witnessed, judged and watched, and soon all learn to watch themselves and watch others'. Like Sirin and Fine's (2007) young participants, the women in this research experience

the terror of surveillance and find it at odds with their conceptions of themselves as 'Kiwi-Muslims'. The next section will explore the women's constructive responses to the 'Panopticon' and how they reconcile their Muslim identity within these ambiguous social spaces while simultaneously building a sense of national belonging.

RESPONDING TO THE 'PANOPTICON'

Mir (2011:552–56) explores Muslim women's constructions of self in post-9/11 America. She provides two case studies of women reacting in markedly different ways to the perceived sense of exclusion and surveillance they feel in their lives as Muslims. She describes one woman's strategy: 'Sanjeeda crafted her representation of Islam very carefully, examining it from an Other's eye view, offering minimal information and reserving data that might be misconstrued or deployed against her. In doing so, she protected non-Muslims from misunderstanding and herself and her community from symbolic violence' (Mir, 2011:553). Sanjeeda chooses not to wear *hijab*, which she sees as being too difficult in terms of being seen by others to be legitimately 'American' (Mir, 2011:553). Another woman, Sharmila, provides a different perspective: 'To Sharmila, silences…were pernicious: the critical political situation demanded immediate action, not gradual change. Instead of being invisible and saving their skin, individual Muslims needed to 'step forward'' (Mir, 2011:554). Mir (2011:555) goes on to argue that 'assertive' identities are often 'necessitated' by wearing *hijab,* in that women are, in effect, 'cornered into the hard work of Muslim advocacy, or loud Muslim identity'. The notion of 'suture' discussed earlier is demonstrated by both of these approaches. Both women are responding to particular subject positions, and investing in them in terms of their personal articulations of identity.

These negotiations take on another level of complexity when theorized within the disciplining notion of Foucault's panopticon. The panopticon is a prison design, which is constructed in such a way to enable prisoners to be observed without them being aware that they are being watched. Foucault uses the idea of the panopticon as a metaphor (Zaal *et al*,, 2007:164) for the pervasive processes, structures and discourses that exert disciplining influences over people. People become aware of particular forms of surveillance and power, and may discipline or monitor themselves and their behaviour accordingly (Foucault, 1979:201–03).

Ruby (2006) draws attention to the insecurity produced in the lives of Canadian Muslim women as a result of negative perceptions associated with Mus-

lims. She emphasises the profound impact this uncertainty creates in women's lives in terms of belonging and feeling 'at home' in a Muslim-minority country. 'Home' is self-consciously constructed against these perceptions and is constituted by multi-sited social spaces. These included membership in Muslim communities, belonging to specific ethnic groups, as well as being Canadian citizens (Ruby, 2006: 38). This necessitates negotiating 'hyphenated' lived spaces, where being Muslim becomes a site of heightened social significance. Afshar, Aitken and Franks (2005: 273) consider that hyphenated or 'multiple identities… may have a situational aspect. Where individuals have a choice in defining their identities then aspects of identity may be mobilised in different situations'. They explore British-born Muslim youth in the post 9/11 climate as being identified as 'Muslims' associated with violence, whereas prior to September 11, they were defined as 'migrants' (Afshar, Aitken & Franks, 2005: 276).

Afshar, Aitken and Franks (2005: 277) observe that '[m]any [Muslim youth] reacted [to discourses of terrorism] by defining themselves as Muslims'. Sirin and Fine's (2007: 152) aforementioned notion of Muslims identities reflecting a religious, rather than national, foundation suggests that Muslim people, especially youth, are creating a strong Muslim identity that contradicts these exclusionary stereotypes and is constructed on their own terms. For the women in this research, Muslim identity is conceptualized primarily in faithful terms and as a social support network. Despite popular essentialist assumptions, most of the women also considered that there was very little difficulty in being a Muslim and claiming New Zealand or 'Kiwi' identity. A woman in her thirties commented: 'I'm a fifth generation New Zealander and there's no conflict at all to being a Muslim and a New Zealander…I'm a citizen of New Zealand, I'm a mother, I'm a wife, I'm actively involved in the community'.

Development of strong Islamic faith was a significant part of active identity construction for the women. A woman of Pakistani descent in her early twenties considered that her faith was stronger in New Zealand than in Pakistan because of her minority status:

> I've become more religious being in New Zealand than I would have been in Pakistan, yeah. I think the reason is because you're not in a Muslim environment and you're practicing it, you really practice it, and you understand and you realize that more and appreciate it more than you would have if you were in an environment where there's all Muslims. Yep it's just a matter of appreciation of your religion and your background.

This young woman consciously develops her Muslim faith within her own individual conceptions of belief and praxis. New Zealand's small and diverse Muslim population suggests that emphasizing Muslim identity may help to create religious bonds across ethnic, cultural or national boundaries, and, I surmise, as a buffer against stereotypical discourses about 'Islam' and Muslims. The women stressed that their understanding and practice of Islam were based in peaceful, charitable paradigms. One woman in her late thirties drew on the example of the Prophet Muhammad who, she said, would respond to conflict by stating '*salaam*' (peace). The participants also articulated the necessity for engaging in dialogue with the wider non-Muslim community. Some women actively sought to challenge stereotypes by reaching out to members of the public. A woman in her late thirties, a recent immigrant from Morocco, described her grass roots efforts with this example:

> Sometimes people here say things [like] oh look at her where does she come from? I heard this before [from a woman] when I was in Nelson, but of course I had an open mind and I did ask her to come and have a cup of coffee with me at home. She didn't like at first and I didn't thought [sic] that she would come. Two months later she did come because I left my phone number and address with her. She did come and it was beautiful because I told her many things, things that she never new before 'cause she always had in her mind that the Muslim woman must be oppressed, she must be, and when I explained to her and I showed her how I live. I live at home with my husband and children [and] she was very surprised. Because, first of all, she saw me differently at home because I'm not wearing this [her head scarf], because I'm at home with my husband and children [with] really nice clothes at home, happy...So I explained to her about a lot of things and she was very happy. But…how could I say this…if I never invited her?

Active, 'authentic' Islamic faith was discussed as being the opposite of violent action. Most of the women discussed 'culture' as a subjective positioning. In this conception, developing Muslim faith based in Qur'anic scripture is seen as constructive activity that encourages humanitarian interpretations of religious texts, as opposed to unreliable 'cultural' or ethnically based interpretations that might encourage biased readings of scripture. Women's interpretive explorations demonstrate the self-conscious, active development of religious understanding and praxis that is constructed against prevailing stereotypes of violence. For example, a woman in her early forties commented that 'within the Islamic world...there's a sort of a distrust of institutionalised religion, you

know…certainly a distrust of perhaps of bankrupt religious scholarship, you know, which is being used to justify oppression and so forth'. Another woman in her early forties stated:

> I mean personally I think it is so hard today for people to accept Islam because of…the terrible things that Muslims do in the world to each other, you know, that it becomes more and more difficult for [the majority of] Muslims…and the sad thing is that these are Muslim people doing these things and what it's making is, it's just making life for Muslim people harder.

The Moroccan woman quoted earlier stressed the peaceful, community-minded nature of Islamic teachings:

> The prophet of Islam has really, really talked about neighbours. You have to be nice to your neighbours and he clearly said if your neighbour does not have enough to eat and you have a full tummy and you go and sleep you are not a Muslim. Imagine this! You're not a Muslim. You've had enough to eat; your neighbour didn't? How can you sleep? You see? So this why it is really important to love your neighbour…To see that they've got enough to eat, and especially children…Can't be fully human if you don't care.

The women felt that it was very important to talk about and demonstrate these humanitarian principles in their community interactions, so that non-Muslims would become aware that Islam was not a violent religion. Likewise Sirin and Fine (2008:162) reported a desire among their young women respondents to create dialogue and 'find common ground'. Similar to the participants in this research, they considered it a responsibility to educate others and build constructive community relationships. These types of activities are seen by the women in this discussion as positive strategies that allow women to 'own' their own identity, effectively challenging notions that misrepresent the women's personal self-conceptions of humanist Islamic identity.

Vertovec (2003:316) comments that Muslim groups in minority conditions may make a distinction between what is universally applicable to all Muslims, and what is specific to a particular cultural, linguistic or regional group. Being in a minority context, in which people must interact with 'difference', can produce social conditions that encourage this conscious reflexivity. Hojabri (2006:222), for instance, considers that for the Canadian Muslim women in her research, identity was significantly shaped by interaction with wider society in

Canada. Both Vertovec (2003) and Hojabri (2006) highlight two broad factors in the construction of identity: first, exploring how being in minority situations enables a spatial 'distance' in which minority members may reflexively engage in identity creation; and second, demonstrating how 'host' perceptions of difference contribute in large part toward self-conscious constructions of identity that must contend with wider notions of 'difference'. Hall's (1996: 6) notion of identity construction occurring at the point of 'suture' to prevailing 'subject positions', provides theoretical substance to these empirical processes.

Another area of significant identity reflexivity is the response of Muslim women to popular ideas of gendered inequality in Islam. New Zealand is certainly not immune to these perceptions; in fact this was a significant area of discussion for the women who experienced these misperceptions in their daily lives. The respondents articulated a desire to be seen as autonomous individuals who practice Islam, rather than as religious 'victims' who are forced to cover. Reasons for covering are many and varied, and I have explored some of these in earlier publications (Dobson, 2011 & 2012). The important point in this discussion is that, like specific attire in other religious systems, the practice of *hijab* (modest dressing) is based in faithful belief and commitment.

The women participants considered that dressing modestly and covering one's head was not in response to patriarchal expectations, but rather a requirement of a faithful relationship with God. El Guindi (1999) discusses the sacred space that is created by wearing *hijab*. A practicing woman of Islamic faith is forever mindful of her continuing relationship with Allah and can effectively carry her faith around with her embodied in her dress. Some of the women articulated the sacred space that they physically inhabited. A Palestinian woman commented that her covered body was 'sacred' (Dobson, 2011: 198). A thirty-five year old Moroccan woman related a proverb that demonstrated another perspective on the female body being precious:

> Because when you keep something beautiful – that's you – [you don't] show it to other people, so it's beautiful...you know? There is one proverb we say: Woman with us who has...[something] to hide, she is most beautiful. If you saw everything, you know, if you saw her body and things like this….so you are most beautiful. So you must keep beautiful things covered.

These understandings of the 'precious, sacred body' interrelate with one another to embed covering with ontological meaning and are in contradistinction to prevailing stereotypes of Muslim women being forced to cover by men.

Distinguishing between what is universally religious and what is cultural was also a strategy employed by the women in terms of advocating for women's rights. A number of women explained to me that Muslim women enjoy many rights, if not an elevated status within the Qur'an, but this is often overlooked by cultural interpretations that effectively distort the religious scripture. This statement from a young Afghan woman in her early twenties is typical of these assertions:

> Most of the people, you know, they think that Muslim womens [sic] are under pressure and that they are not equal, they don't have equal rights, and they are being beaten. It's not actually part of the religion. It's what their culture, culturally they are like…It [mistreatment of women] has nothing to do with the religion. If you go to the book of the religion you will find that how Islam has told, given proper rights to women, which is really great…Because before our holy Prophet, how the women were treated, you know, they were [mistreated]. But…Islam came and they told that you should respect your women; you should give the right. Of course there [is] equality.

Similarly, a young Somali woman in her early twenties stated that Somali culture could be very traditional, but her generation of women here in New Zealand practiced their faith fully knowledgeable of the Qur'an and the position of Muslim women.

These informal and personal interpretive explorations are also occurring on an organised level. Many of the women participate in Qur'anic study groups at their local Mosques as well as being actively involved in youth groups and wider events organised by regional and national Muslim women's organisations. One woman in her thirties is very involved with these initiatives of claiming agentic, faith-based, authoritative spaces for Muslim women:

> We have, for example, a *Shura* Council, which is a council of people that are nominated from within the community to administer the affairs. Previously we were the only association in New Zealand that said that a minimum of two women must be on that *Shura* Council, which was quite radical for its time, but reflective of Islamic principles, and so I'm a member of that council. I also teach on Sundays. I have a women's group that meets every Sunday and I'm part of the Islamic Women's Council.

Her comment that these activities are 'reflective of Islamic principles' suggests

the positive gendered identity and inclusion that Muslim women in New Zealand are working towards. It also demonstrates identity that is based within women's faith. Hojabri (2006: 232) observes that changes in gendered roles are salient features of diasporic, minority contexts. Women in this research negotiate gendered relationships through the lens of Islamic knowledge.

The dynamism demonstrated here shows how faithful identity is a syncretic process that not only responds to stereotypical notions but also reflexively engages with wider negotiations between gendered 'cultural' notions and religious standpoints. It also shows how localised contexts play an important role in these processes. Notions of community-minded 'Kiwi-Muslim' identity, combined with women's interpretive agency, emphasises self-conscious identity creation that enables constructive combinations of these 'hyphenated' aspects of identity. This process is made all the more multi-layered with the participants being minority citizens in a non-Muslim nation like New Zealand. These women also negotiate the complex factors of social plurality within their communities, constructing, or 'suturing' (Hall, 1996: 6) their identities in relation to prevailing discursive structures.

CONCLUSION

This discussion has focused on the effects of conflict and stereotypical perceptions in the lives and self-conceptions of various Muslim women. The discourses of terrorism and women's suppression often ascribed to Islam mean that the women must contend with these issues in terms of their Muslim identity as minority citizens in New Zealand. Paradoxically, while many of the women participants had no direct experience of international conflicts, they never the less experienced the 'terror' of being ascribed a violent identity – with subsequent experiences of public harassment – defined by essentialising misrepresentations. Some of the women had experienced the displacement and loss of conflict elsewhere in the world. They had escaped from violence through their journeys of necessity as refugees or migrants. For these women, the added burden of marginalizing public perceptions can be even harder to bear.

Women respond to these perceptions by self-consciously creating identities that tally with their own self-conceptions of Islam and being Muslim. The women's efforts in New Zealand are very constructive, involving interpretive exploration – particularly in relation to women's rights – and agentic initiatives that are based on creating dialogue with wider New Zealand society. This articulation of identity is both community-minded and 'Kiwi' in its applica-

tions, while advocating for women's increasing inclusion and voices. However, as Hall (1996:6) contends, the notion of 'suture' suggests that 'subject positions' are influential. Conflict discourses and stereotypical perceptions ascribed to Muslims and 'Islam' therefore creates 'hyphens' of identity and definition that necessitate responses from Muslim women in New Zealand. This, combined with contexts of diaspora and minority, mean that their identity construction is a dynamic process that at once challenges stereotypes and reconfigures gendered roles and expectations, in the negotiation with 'subject positions' (Hall, 1996:6).

I will end this discussion with a thought-provoking quote from a woman of Indian descent who has lived in New Zealand for most of her life. Commenting on stereotypes and experiences of prejudice and discrimination she said:

> Well I guess the other thing that I have to say is that it's not just a problem of Muslim women…Muslims are the forefront of it because we're the most visible and it's all part of the 'war on terror' machinery, but that it really goes to roots of all ethnic conflict in this country in the sense of how we want to develop as a nation…Whether, you know, how are we going to see each other, you know, because the ethnic populations are growing. The Pacific Islanders and the Maori and whatever, they're all growing and, and to some extent, the way that Muslim women are treated is reflective of the way that ethnic minorities are going to be treated.

Her insights suggest that the women's experiences of marginalisation have broader social consequences and are reflective of deeply engrained discourses of 'difference'.

NOTES

1 See, for example, Kolig (2010) and Shepard (2006), who estimate the contemporary New Zealand Muslim population to number well over 40,000.

2 See, for example, the recent (March 2012) report from the Human Rights Commission: 'Tūi Tūi Tuituiā Race Relations in 2011', which surveys discrimination and harassment experienced by ethnic minorities in New Zealand.

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