

1

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 October 2018



Preserving Identity and Empowering Women: How Do Canadian Muslim Schools Affect Their Students?

Podcast with **Jasmin Zine** (29 October 2018).

Interviewed by **Mariia Alekseevskaia**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/preserving-identity-and-empowering-women-how-do-canadian-muslim-schools-affect-their-students/>

Mariia Alekseevskaia (MA): *Hello. My name is [Mariia Alekseevskaia](#). I'm here in Ottawa, at the Summer Feminist Festival, and it's my pleasure to welcome one of its key speakers, [Dr Jasmin Zine](#), Professor of Sociology, Religion and Culture, and Muslim Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. Her areas of research include Islamic feminism, Muslim education and Islamophobia. She has been involved in the national study on the impact of 9/11, and domestic security policies on Muslim youth in Canada. Also, as an education consultant, she has developed award-winning curriculum materials that address Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism. Today we are going to talk about Muslim schools in Canada, and their impact on their students' identity development and integration into society. To start this discussion, could you please first explain what Islamic schooling in Canada is?*

Jasmin Zine (JZ): Yes. Thank you for the question. Looking at Islamic schooling in Canada, there's actually many forms that it takes. There are a number, and a growing number, of full-time schools – Islamic schools – which teach the Ministry curriculum in whatever province they exist, as well as sort-of Islamic studies. And that's usually taught in terms of Arabic and Qur'an, but also often tends to try and integrate Islamic knowledge into what would be considered secular subjects, whether it is science, or world issues, or mathematics. And so that's one form that Islamic schools take is in the full-time school. And those are – at least in Ontario – they're not funded. Only Catholic schools are funded in Ontario. So they're, in that sense, private schools. But not private, in the sense of being elite. They're community-based schools. The teachers there, some have Ontario's teacher certification and Bachelors

Citation Info: Zine, Jasmine and Mariia Alekseevskaia. 2018. "Preserving Identity and Empowering Women: How Do Canadian Muslim Schools Affect Their Students?", *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 29 October 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 12 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/preserving-identity-and-empowering-women-how-do-canadian-muslim-schools-affect-their-students/>

2

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 October 2018

of Education. Others don't because it's not a requirement for private schools in Ontario to have certified teachers. So many aren't trained in pedagogy or in education, specifically. They've obtained post-secondary degrees, usually outside of Canada. And they, when they come to Canada they often elect to teach in an Islamic school, as opposed to finding other jobs, for which they often . . . find themselves under-employed, even though they've got education and qualifications. Because it's very difficult to find jobs in Canada, even when you're qualified, if you're here as a foreign professional. So they end up working within Islamic schools. So that's a bit about the formal full-time Islamic schools. There are also weekend schools, what they call *madrasa*, that usually happens on a Sunday or a weekend. And that's where children who are attending public school will go on the weekend – kind-of like a Christian Sunday school, for religious instruction. So they have that. And they also have the *hifz* schools, which is where children go, generally full-time, to learn the memorisation of the Qur'an. So that's another kind of Islamic school that exists. And then there's also informal sites of Islamic education through things like Summer schools, summer camps, *halaqah* – Islamic study circles that are held in Mosques and sometimes outside of them as well, through Community Centres and so on. So a lot of that informal education also happens in addition to the formal types of Islamic education that have developed in Canada, over the last couple of decades.

MA: *And if we talk about full-time Muslim schools in Canada: in your opinion, how have they influenced their students during the last several decades, as they existed?*

JZ: Well, my research has been primarily in Ontario, and I looked at four full-time Islamic schools with a number of concerns in mind. And if you're asking me how it has influenced or impacted Muslim youth: I think the idea of these schools was so that they would have a sort-of faith-centred education, and that they would have a strong grounding in their identity as Muslims. And they also became a sort of safe haven for Muslim children and youth who, in the public system, have to deal with racism and Islamophobia – particularly girls who are dressed with Islamic attire. Whether they're wearing hijab, or more modest clothing, or wearing niqab as well, many of them find Islamic schools to be a place where, you know, their identity is not in question. And where they can feel safe and comfortable. So I think it does provide that to the community. I think that they also have been . . . Islamic schools have also operated in ways where parents see them as a kind of way to sort-of discipline wayward youth. So if some youth have been getting in trouble at school, or with the Law, or getting in difficulties like that, that's seen as kind-of coming out of being in a public education system that doesn't have the values and discipline of Islamic teachings and an Islamic environment. They will

Citation Info: Zine, Jasmine and Mariia Alekseevskaia. 2018. “Preserving Identity and Empowering Women: How Do Canadian Muslim Schools Affect Their Students?”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 29 October 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 12 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/preserving-identity-and-empowering-women-how-do-canadian-muslim-schools-affect-their-students/>

3

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 October 2018

often send their children or youth to Islamic schools as a kind of place of rehabilitation for these youth. So that's another way, or role, that Islamic schools play within the Muslim community. I think that in terms of impact, it's a very big question. There's lot of positive impact in that. But there's also some negatives as well. My book went through a lot of those things, and it would take a while to enumerate everything. I myself had my sons go to Islamic school after about Grade Five in public school. Because I did want them to have a sense of their identity and a sense of their belief and faith. And so they did go to Islamic school, you know. But I found that, given that, the education is not necessarily even. Where you have some teachers who are certified, some who are not, the quality of education was very uneven. And I found that to be difficult. Over time, as well, I also found that some teachers, even though they're teaching subjects like math or science, would take it upon themselves to offer their Islamic teachings to the students – which were often really problematic, and coming from certain cultural backgrounds, in a very unauthorised way. They were offering their own sort-of take on Islam to the kids in the classroom. And I would hear things my sons would come home and tell me, which I knew were not correct. And then have to constantly be correcting what they were picking up. So that wasn't coming from the Islamic Studies teacher, it was just coming from, you know, teachers who weren't educated in Islamic Studies, but still felt that because they were in an Islamic school they could offer their views. And those were a lot also of the growing pains of Islamic schools. My kids were in school a number of years ago. More than a decade ago. So at the time I was doing my study on Islamic schools, as well, a lot of them were fairly new, but there were many of them. There were about 36 full-time schools in Ontario at that time. And otherwise students were, academically, in many of the school . . . They have, in Ontario, the [EQAO](#) which is a sort of standardised test that all schools do and Islamic schools were doing very well . . . or the students there were doing very well, on that level, academically. You know, but in other ways I think. . . I go through a lot of these things in my book. There were definitely challenges that schools still have to overcome. And the issue of how well-prepared are the graduates to go into university? I only know anecdotally, because I do know many graduates of Islamic schools who've then moved on, but there are definitely challenges for them going from a fairly sheltered system into a large university that is co-ed, and that is not sheltered in that sense. So there are some challenges there, as well. But I don't think anyone's done a study, as yet, that actually maps the transition of students from full-time Islamic schools to any form of post-secondary. But that would be interesting.

MA: *And in the [monograph](#) – this book that you have just mentioned which was issued ten years ago –*

Citation Info: Zine, Jasmine and Mariia Alekseevskaia. 2018. “Preserving Identity and Empowering Women: How Do Canadian Muslim Schools Affect Their Students?”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 29 October 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 12 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/preserving-identity-and-empowering-women-how-do-canadian-muslim-schools-affect-their-students/>

4

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 October 2018

you explain the role of faith-based schools in preventing this split of identity of students which they could have in a public school. Do you think the challenges which Muslim kids face in a public school today are different from those which their counterparts faced ten years ago?

JZ: Well right now, we're talking about a generation of youth that I refer to in my upcoming book as the 9/11 generation of Muslim Youth. And just 2 days ago I was in a forum and there was a 14 year old who was talking about the impact of Islamophobia and how she's often reticent – she's in public school – to tell people that she's Muslim, because she's actually in fear of her physical safety, because of, you know, possible reprisal. People's views about Muslims can be very distorted and based on negative and false stereotypes and very sensationalised media representations, so that she prefers not to sometimes identify herself as Muslim to people she doesn't know. And the way she said it was, “Well, I don't want to get jumped after school.” So you know there is . . . and this is where my current research has really been looking at, is: what is the impact been of this sort of 9/11, the War on Terror, ongoing security policies, ongoing imperial wars, and an escalation of Islamophobia? What impact does that have on Muslim youth and their sense of identity, citizenship, belonging, and so on? And so my current study is looking at this very issue. So I think for, you know, when I talked ten years ago about the sort of split identity that some Muslim youth experience, because when they're in public school, because of the fact that they often are shielding their identity or they're trying to pass in other ways, they may not want to be identified as Muslim. So some would, for example, anglicise their name. Or some would . . . for example, girls might wear more modest clothing when they leave the home or wear hijab, and when they get to school they take it off. You know, so this is where that split personality tends to come in – when there's a conflicting set of expectations at school and home. There's no cultural consistency between what your expectation is at home and what's at school. So you have competing cultural demands. And that's where that split happens. So when kids are going to an Islamic school and they're coming from a practising Muslim home, there's more congruence with the values and expectations, in that sense. But youth are also trying to figure out their own identity in the midst of all this. So I've also found in my current study that Muslim youth – this 9/11 generation – when it comes to their sense of identity, are either investing more in that identity because of the fact that their identities are under siege So they're investing more in that identity to sort-of be able to stand up and counter and speak to, you know, the way that their community and their own identity is being vilified . And others are going through an estrangement, where there are, again, distancing themselves from their identity as Muslims, in order to avoid backlash. So I've identified that kind-of

Citation Info: Zine, Jasmine and Mariia Alekseevskaia. 2018. “Preserving Identity and Empowering Women: How Do Canadian Muslim Schools Affect Their Students?”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 29 October 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 12 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/preserving-identity-and-empowering-women-how-do-canadian-muslim-schools-affect-their-students/>

5

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 October 2018

investment or estrangement from the identity, depending on how it's affecting them as individuals.

MA: *Do you think this Islamophobia in Canadian society, and racialisation of this society, impacts the decision of Muslim parents to prefer a religious school to a public school?*

JZ: You know, when I did my study, it started in the late 1990's into 2000, so it was just ended prior to 9/11. But even at that time, that was one of the issues as to why parents were choosing to send their kids to Islamic schools. So one of the issues was the fact that their kids were experiencing racism and discrimination – Islamophobia – within the public system. So this was pre-9/11, and of course Islamophobia long predates 9/11. It didn't just begin on September 12th! So these issues were happening even prior. So definitely, since then, there's been an escalation of that type of scrutiny, and negative attention, and troubling stereotypes that Muslim youth – this 9/11 generation – have to deal with. So it would definitely still be, I think, one of the reasons that parents would look to Islamic schools as an alternative for their kids. But I haven't done a study to follow up on that in the post-9/11 context. But the research that I'm doing now, which looked at 130 Muslim youth across Canada, right from the East Coast to the West Coast, looking at their experiences – most of them actually were in public schools, some of them had been in Islamic schools as well, sort of in and out. Muslim kids often migrate in and out of Islamic schools. So they might be in there for their early formation, in elementary school, but then their parents may switch them to public high school, and so on. But definitely, a lot of them spoke of the kinds of alienation and discrimination they faced in school, as well as in post-secondaries, as well as in universities. So it's definitely something that youth are still dealing with and I think it would therefore make Islamic schools seem like a safe haven.

MA: *And many researchers who study religious schools have a concern about whether the schools are able to promote autonomy and critical thinking. Out of your research, based on your research, what kinds of tools do Muslim schools use to develop critical thinking in their students and build them as responsible citizens?*

JZ: Right. Well I think the issue of critical thinking, a lot of it depends on the teachers themselves, and whether they're well-trained in pedagogy to be able to help students become critical thinkers. And again, that tended to vary on whether the teachers had experience or had trained in education, versus those that hadn't. Because those teachers often who weren't trained specifically in pedagogy, did more things like rote learning. So, with rote learning, there isn't that space to question and challenge, or

Citation Info: Zine, Jasmine and Mariia Alekseevskaia. 2018. “Preserving Identity and Empowering Women: How Do Canadian Muslim Schools Affect Their Students?”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 29 October 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 12 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/preserving-identity-and-empowering-women-how-do-canadian-muslim-schools-affect-their-students/>

6

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 October 2018

interrogate. You're just memorising, right? So teachers who were trained specifically with Bachelors of Education and Ontario teaching certificates, had a broader set of strategies and ideas and philosophical understandings of education, and how to integrate critical thinking within that. So they definitely did promote it in different areas. When it comes to religion and religious knowledge – because remember these schools are teaching, you know, also secular subjects and religious subjects. So in terms of secular subjects I think you know there's definitely a focus on thinking critically and being able to challenge and question and analyse. Within the religious component as well, I think that those bases were far more closed to be able to question and challenge tenets of the faith or ideas around it. I mean, I think asking questions was one thing. But having the freedom to really be able to question seriously – I don't think that that space was there. I think that in a lot of spaces, even when students, let's say, graduate from an Islamic school, they tend to go to university and if they join the Muslim Student association, you know, that's another sort of space where . . . they are spaces of knowledge production, as well, around Islam. And those spaces, you know, get a little more open. But there's definitely still a certain culture, a way of promoting specific kinds of religious practices and so on, that is sometimes pretty uniform. And you have to adapt to that cultural environment, right? So unfortunately, I think that the spirit of debate and interrogation and questioning around Islamic tenets, and around Islamic knowledge in general, has not been evident in the way Islamic schools are teaching the faith and the tradition. And therefore, I think, with a lot of youth that is something they end up often confused later in life. Because they were really . . . religion was something explained to them that is black and white. And I find that they look for that. They are sometimes uncomfortable when they do find out about the grey areas. So, for example when I've taught . . . I used to do Gender in Islam at the University of Toronto. And I had predominantly Muslim students, some who came through Islamic school, and some who came through public schools. When I would talk about things that challenged their conventional knowledge about gender in Islam, they had a very hard time with it. When they found out that there was actually a broader path of Islam than the narrow one that they had been socialised and educated about in the traditional channels of Islamic education – whether through their madrasa, or through their Islamic schools, or through the mosques and the halaqahs, they often get a very black and white sense. And when they come to university and we are representing it in a much broader way based on, you know, looking at the historical tradition, looking at a vast array of knowledge that they're not usually getting before they come to university, they have a very hard time with that. And I've had students say things to me like, “But why does it have to be so open-ended? Why can't people just go in a room and then tell us what is right and wrong?” And I said, you know,

Citation Info: Zine, Jasmine and Mariia Alekseevskaia. 2018. “Preserving Identity and Empowering Women: How Do Canadian Muslim Schools Affect Their Students?”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 29 October 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 12 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/preserving-identity-and-empowering-women-how-do-canadian-muslim-schools-affect-their-students/>

7

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 October 2018

“Well, why would you want that, first of all? Why would you want people somewhere sitting and defining your faith for you? Who would be at that table?” Right? And, “Don't you want to be at that table, too? To ask questions and to challenge and so on..?” So they were very much used to being socialised into things that are sort-of black and white. So the grey areas confused them. And I think it is really about religion is something that people hold onto for a sense of certainty. So if you start to say, “Well yes, the faith says this and it says that – but it also says this,” then they're confused. Because, “Just tell me which one I'm supposed to follow!” Right? So they have a hard time reconciling the multiplicity of ways that we can actually interpret the hermeneutics of faith have become more open, right? It's been different in the development of other faiths. In Christianity and Judaism there's been, I think, a longer tradition of looking at religion in a broader way. In Islam, I think that we're starting to come to that because now we have things like feminist hermeneutics of the Qur'an. So this knowledge of academic knowledge hasn't filtered down to the Islamic schools, or to the mosques, or to the halaqahs, or weekend schools. So they start to get that when they get to university, and it confuses them in many cases. And sometimes they also have a sense of dissonance within that. And I think it's a very sort-of critical time where they are trying to, now, outside of the confines of their community – Islamic schools and so on and family and community environment – and are in a very different kind of very plural space, trying to sort out their sense of identity, their relationship to their faith. And once they see that there's more options within it, and where they fall on this sort of continuum of belief, and their own journey within the faith . . .

MA: *I think it's only during the last years that Muslim community is more and more changed by the society. And you know that in Canada there have been long debates about religious symbols in public space, and predominantly female weighting – so always targeting Muslim women in those kind of discussions. And, in your opinion, do Muslim schools empower or disempower female students? What is the influence of the schools on female students?*

JZ: Well first, just to respond about the sort of gendered Islamophobia in Canadian society, and it is very much there now in policies, as we know, in Quebec. There's been the [Quebec Charter of Values](#), which is trying to ban the niqab in public spaces. Even prior to that there's been attempts to ban *hijab* whether they're on soccer fields, or banning *niqab* at citizenship ceremonies, and so on. So Canada has a history of this sort-of gendered Islamophobia that's been enshrined in various policies that we have. So of course this has an effect on the day-to-day lives of Muslim girls and women. So it's another

reason why often parents are more comfortable having their daughters in Islamic schools. But it isn't

Citation Info: Zine, Jasmine and Mariia Alekseevskaia. 2018. “Preserving Identity and Empowering Women: How Do Canadian Muslim Schools Affect Their Students?”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 29 October 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 12 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/preserving-identity-and-empowering-women-how-do-canadian-muslim-schools-affect-their-students/>

8

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 October 2018

just the parents, it's actually the girls themselves, who feel more comfortable in an Islamic school environment. Because, you know, if they're wearing hijab it's not an issue, if they're in *niqab* it's not an issue. However, those who aren't necessarily wanting to wear the *hijab* – you know, it is part of the school uniform in the Islamic school, so when they're in school they have to wear it – when they leave sometimes they just take it off, because it's not a consistent practice for them. So it is considered part of that uniform at the time that they're in school. But outside of veiling, there's other still, what I found in my study, some patriarchal understandings about Muslim women that are a large part of how the religion has been interpreted, right? Because it generally has been men, historically, who interpret religious texts. As I said, we're starting to see more feminist hermeneutics, we're starting to see more women involved in that exegetical practice of looking at Islamic text, and finding other more gender-neutral meanings to the way that it's been traditionally understood. And there are, in other ways, just patriarchal structures of governance and of understanding Muslim girls, and how to develop them into Muslim women, that come from fairly, I think, patriarchal understandings of notions of piety and notions of You know, one of the things I talked about was this idea of honour. And that it wasn't really . . . you know, if girls were sort-of stepping out of what were considered the legitimate boundaries of Islamic behaviour for young women, it was really compromising the honour of the school. So girls were, in some schools, kept very regulated in terms of their movements outside of school. So during school hours they had to be at the school, whereas boys had more freedom to, let's say, go to [Tim Horton's](#) at lunch, sort of thing. It really was about regulating and controlling the behaviour of the girls because parents are sending them there in order to be in a particular environment – a sheltered environment. So if they're seen sort-of running around, then that would also be compromising for the school's reputation. So, you know, there was that happening. But there were a lot of ways that . . . So how it's empowering for girls is, you know, the freedom to dress in a modest way, to wear the hijab, or niqab and for that not to be source or harassment, daily harassment and micro-aggressions, and now as we see a lot of violence as well. So it's that safe space, in that sense. And also because the classes are gender-segregated from about grade 5 or 6, and right through the high school, there is a sense of freedom that a lot of them talk about, and that research has also shown, about female-centred educational spaces, where girls actually develop a stronger voice, a stronger sense of being able to speak in class and put their views forward. Because when they're in a co-ed environment, it's often boys who gain the floor to answer questions. And there's also sometimes . . . you know, all these sorts of little tensions: you like this guy, so you don't want to say anything, because you don't want him to think you're stupid, or whatever! Those kinds of interactions that

Citation Info: Zine, Jasmine and Mariia Alekseevskaia. 2018. “Preserving Identity and Empowering Women: How Do Canadian Muslim Schools Affect Their Students?”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 29 October 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 12 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/preserving-identity-and-empowering-women-how-do-canadian-muslim-schools-affect-their-students/>

9

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 October 2018

happen. And just a lot of things like mansplaining, right? Men who think that they always have the answer and have the authority. And so that can be stifling for girls. So in a female-centred educational space, there's a lot of empowerment for them, because they don't have those impediments of having boys or men in the room. . . . And another sense of empowerment that young women have is that they can actually lead spiritually centred lives in these schools, in ways that you can't in a secular education system. So I mean that's something for everyone, but I think also for a lot of the girls. They talked about that – about really being a space where your actions weren't just something that's existential, but it's something that you look at for the afterlife, right? So they have this concept of the *achirah*, or the life after – the afterlife. And so a lot of the way that they understood their behaviour, their actions, and their motivations had to do not just with the existential issues they're dealing with, but how they wanted to be in the afterlife. So that ability to be in a spiritually-focussed space was also something that was empowering.

MA: *Have you ever had to struggle as a scholar, because you are a religiously-oriented Muslim woman?*

JZ: Do you mean in the Western academy, have I ever had to struggle?

MA: *Yes.*

JZ: I think for all women of colour in general, and I am a woman in colour as well as being a Muslim When I started in the academy I wore No, *before* I started a full-time job in the academy, for about 17 years I wore a *hijab*. When I was looking for work I had sort of *de-jabed* around that time. But not specifically because I was looking for work, but because my understanding about the *hijab* and whether I wanted to wear it, the way I saw it within the context of my faith had changed, after a lot of study and a lot of consultation. But it didn't hurt that fact that I was also in the job market. I think it would have been a lot more difficult for me to land a job if I was wearing the *hijab*, particularly in social sciences. And I was in Sociology, which is traditionally a very left-focussed kind of discipline. And when you wear a *hijab*, especially like 14 years ago when I was looking for work, there was a tendency for people to presume that you're very fundamentalist, conservative and maybe right-wing in your beliefs. So I found, when you wear the *hijab* you have to really perform your politics for people, because they have a lot of judgement about you on a number of levels, but also politically. And so I think some of that has changed now – but definitely at that time it would have always been about

Citation Info: Zine, Jasmine and Mariia Alekseevskaia. 2018. “Preserving Identity and Empowering Women: How Do Canadian Muslim Schools Affect Their Students?”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 29 October 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 12 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/preserving-identity-and-empowering-women-how-do-canadian-muslim-schools-affect-their-students/>

10

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 October 2018

reassuring people that I wasn't a sort-of right-wing fundamentalist, and then I would constantly have to perform my politics. So at that time I wasn't wearing the *hijab*. But I did have a friend who actually was looking for a job in Religious Studies and she made the decision at that time to actually *de-jab* because she didn't feel she would get a position in Religious Studies if she was wearing a *hijab*. Because there, in particular, you are expected to be neutral, right, when you talk about religion or talk about the subject of study? And if you have a religious identity, I guess they perceive it as being biased. And so, for that reason, she *de-jabed*. But my experience, you know, was for a very long time the only person of colour in my department. You know, there's always challenges to that. There's not a lot of racially marginalised women in the academy in general, in Canada. There's more that are coming in but, those of us who have become more senior scholars, there's fewer of us. And we also end up being mentors to racial minority students on campus, Muslim or not. So there's a lot more responsibility on us that the universities don't recognise. There's a lot more emotional labour that goes with that, that the university don't value or recognise. And then we also often, as I do, play a role as public intellectuals in the community. So we become scholar activists. We are working both on the academic side – we're also looking, doing community development, which I have done, in addition to academic work. I've started organisations in the community like MENTORS: the Muslim Educational Network, Training and Outreach Service. And we were an advisory board to the Toronto District School Board. And we also started an organisation that actually brought together all Islamic schools under one sort-of banner, as well as doing anti-Islamophobia curriculum teaching and training. So that was one organisation I founded, along with others, along the way. So because of our role – and there's not as many of us doing it – we tend to get spread very thin in what we do. So, struggles were very much in line with what a lot of other women of colour have to deal with in the academy.

MA: *Thank you. And one of my last questions is about the research of Muslim communities. You mention in one of your interviews that one of the main challenges to studying Muslims is to recruit the participants, but also to build trust in the community. So could you please provide a few tips to those scholars or students who are working on, or willing to work on, studying Muslims in North America: how to overcome these challenges, how to handle and cope with them?*

JZ: Right. Definitely, because the Muslim community is a community, as I've talked about in my [new book](#), it's a community under siege. And it's also a community that a lot of people are trying to research or learn about. So there's a lot of people who just don't want to be part of certain kinds of

research, because they don't have the discursive authority and control over how their narratives are

Citation Info: Zine, Jasmine and Mariia Alekseevskaia. 2018. "Preserving Identity and Empowering Women: How Do Canadian Muslim Schools Affect Their Students?", *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 29 October 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 12 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/preserving-identity-and-empowering-women-how-do-canadian-muslim-schools-affect-their-students/>

11

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 October 2018

going to be used. For me, I was someone who was an insider in the community. I was known, at the time I was doing, for example, the Islamic Schools study, I was a parent in an Islamic school, I was on a Parent Association. And I did, as part of my ethnography, participant observations as well as taught in one of the schools. So I was very much embedded. So I had trust, I thought. But there were still a couple of schools that would not give me access. So even, sometimes, when we presume that we have trust, because we're a member of the community, there are still spaces that will be hesitant to allow you in. Because they don't necessarily want to air their dirty laundry, they don't necessarily want someone coming in and You know, the environment among these schools can be competitive too. So they don't necessarily want someone coming in and scrutinising what they're doing, whether you're a member of the community or not. So, there's those challenges. There's always a matter of gaining trust. I work a lot with Muslim youth and so my reputation and standing matters, because of that. So because I have that insider . . . and I have had research assistants, as well, which I found was important in cities that I don't live in. So that they had the trust and they built the relationships already. They had relationships in the community where they could go and do interviews for me. So that was important. But I also have to say that I feel very strongly that research in Muslim communities is best done by Muslims scholars. And my book that I edited, *Islam in the Hinterlands*, looking at Muslim cultural politics in Canada, was an edited collection, and all of the contributors were Muslim, except one. And that was a very purposeful decision on my part, to showcase the work of Muslim scholars reflecting on the state of Canadian Muslims in Canada. And while I think there are, you know, people who are doing good research from outside the community, with good intentions, at the same time there can be a sense of academic colonialism. And there can be a sense of then, "Now these people become the experts about Muslims." So you know . . . I mean, I've been in situations on panels with some people who are non-Muslim who have done research. And we're on panel, and a question will come about, "What do Muslim women think about X?" And it will be the non-Muslims reaching for the microphone. And I was, like, thinking, "OK. It takes a certain amount of entitlement to think that because of your research, you've interviewed a few people or whatever you've done, that you have the right to respond to that question when there is a Muslim woman, who is also a scholar, on the panel." So I think that because of the power relations of knowledge production and the history of orientalism that has shaped and defined how people come to understand Muslims Not to say that there are people with a good idea of politics who are engaging in research in the community with good intentions and so on. But it's still matter for us, as a community, to have discursive control and discursive authority, and to begin to privilege those scholars who are up-and-coming in the

Citation Info: Zine, Jasmine and Mariia Alekseevskaia. 2018. "Preserving Identity and Empowering Women: How Do Canadian Muslim Schools Affect Their Students?", *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 29 October 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 12 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/preserving-identity-and-empowering-women-how-do-canadian-muslim-schools-affect-their-students/>

12

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 October 2018

community, as well as established scholars, to be able to understand the realities that our communities are facing, and be able to speak to that from within. Rather than having research done from outside that is trying to, then, impose meanings on our community, on our identities, on our realities and so on. And so, for that reason, I feel that the research is better taken up by Muslim scholars. I think that, unfortunately, that understanding isn't as widespread as it is, let's say, now people are beginning to understand with indigenous communities – that unless you're indigenous you should not be doing that research. And there's a lot of indigenous scholars that are there and are positioned well to take that on. So there's, I think, fewer people who would think it was ok for them to just go into an indigenous community and just start doing research. But you know, recently, even at my own university, I was contacted about supervising a student and they had already started on a study about Muslim women in the local area of my university. And we have a Muslim Studies programme, but none of us were asked about this. This was being done by another department in the university. None of us were consulted, none of us were asked to be part – this was a part of a larger project – to be a part of it. But I was asked to come on and help supervise a student once it was already *fait accompli*: the study had begun – they were working on it, you know? And so there is that sense of trying to recruit you to come in to legitimise what they're doing, but not to consult with you in the beginning to say that, actually, “*You* have the expertise in this area, this is *your* community. How can we be of assistance?” So there's a real lack of humility, sometimes, in how people want to engage in research in communities that are not their own. And it really plays into a kind of academic colonialism that I find really problematic. So I think there are ways that scholars can engage with Muslim communities around certain kinds of questions, but there are other questions that I think are better addressed by scholars from within the community. So if I can give one example, I had a student – a male white Christian student – who came to me, who wanted to look at the [Sharia tribunal affair](#) in Ontario, a few years back. And he wanted to interview Muslim women about whether or not if those tribunals were set up, would they go and avail themselves of it? And I said, “Well you know the reason that women would go to one of these tribunals would have to do with divorce or custody, or some kind of marital strife. So what makes you think that as a white, Christian male they want to talk to you about those issues?” Right? So I said, “Think about the boundaries you're crossing: as a male, trying to do women's studies; as a Christian, trying to do a study about why Muslim women would specifically want to participate in a faith-based arbitration, on these very personal matters; and really think about is this your project?” And so I had him read a book on [decolonising methodology](#). Because I think what we need to be thinking about is how do we decolonise these practices, right? And then he came up with a study that made sense for the

Citation Info: Zine, Jasmine and Mariia Alekseevskaia. 2018. “Preserving Identity and Empowering Women: How Do Canadian Muslim Schools Affect Their Students?”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 29 October 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 12 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/preserving-identity-and-empowering-women-how-do-canadian-muslim-schools-affect-their-students/>

13

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 October 2018

work that he is now doing, and sets him up better in an academic arena, which was to look at it from a policy framework, from the framework of multiculturalism – which was already his area of study. And to expand the study to look at not just Sharia-based or faith based arbitration among Muslims, but also among Jewish communities as well, who actually stood to – when faith-based arbitration was taken out – stood to lose the *beth dins* that they'd been doing for a decade before. So that became a different kind of way that this particular scholar could engage the topic, without presuming to go in and talk to Muslim women about private things. So had he gone to someone else, they probably would have said, “Yes, sure. Go and do that.” And it wouldn't have been the best decision for him – even personally, as a scholar – it would not have been the best decision. And certainly, I think, is a very entitled way of approaching research with marginalised communities. And so I think the role of our bodies matters in the knowledge production that we do. And that we need to be aware, specifically among marginalised communities, how these communities have not been in control of the discourses through which their identities and realities are shaped. And that there needs to be a space for them to regain the narrative control. And to be able to, without being considered to be biased, or considered to be . . . I think all of that idea of positivism is false. This idea that anything is neutral – in terms of research, anyways, right? So we can dispense with that. Then we can, you know, actually do research, and talk about the limitations of that – if there are (any). But we don't have to presume that there is, in any way, this sort of neutral or unbiased way of doing especially qualitative research. So that's my opinion on looking at research within the Muslim community: gaining trust, but also looking at whether or not the projects you're undertaking are . . . you are well-placed to do that. Or whether there are actually people within the community that would be better placed to take that on.

MA: *Jasmine Zine, thank you very much for his interview. Thank you for your time, and I wish you all the best with all your research projects. I hope to see you again at the Religious Studies Project Podcast to discuss how academia is changing, and we hope all goes well.*

JA: Thank you very much.

14

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 October 2018

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with transcribing the Religious Studies Project archive, or know of any sources of funding for the broader [transcription project](#), please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution- NonCommercial- NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. The views expressed in podcasts are the views of the individual contributors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of THE RELIGIOUS STUDIES PROJECT or the British Association for the Study of Religions.

Citation Info: Zine, Jasmine and Mariia Alekseevskaia. 2018. “Preserving Identity and Empowering Women: How Do Canadian Muslim Schools Affect Their Students?”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 29 October 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 12 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/preserving-identity-and-empowering-women-how-do-canadian-muslim-schools-affect-their-students/>