

# “Still Dreaming:” An Interview Study Exploring the Intersectional Identities of Global Muslim, Female Migrants and Employment Discrimination

By

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## Abstract

This exploratory study examines the occupational experiences of female, Muslim migrants in a small American city and compares those findings internationally to investigate the impact of intersectional identity on the economic integration of migrants in global communities of displacement. Using a reflexivist approach to address positionality, the author interviewed eight respondents in Pittsburgh and discussed findings in tandem with research conducted in France and Germany. The study finds that religious discrimination is highly prevalent across Muslim communities internationally and impacts participants who wear the *hijab* most. Gender also plays a key role in determining the career choices and fields of employment occupied by the group. Muslim, female migrants experience gender and religious discrimination in conjunction with one another, culminating for unique experiences in both the work and private spheres. The author suggests improving the social resources available to female, migrant workers, especially accessibility to childcare. She also examined the available research on Muslim, female migrant workers in France and Germany, where political rhetoric reprimands religious garb. By reviewing the experiences of female, Muslim migrants in global communities of displacement, the study gives perspective on the experiences of unseen, overlooked, or marginalized communities in migrant research literature.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Migrant Literature, Gender and Work, Colonial Feminism

## Introduction

The thesis of this article is that intersectionality negatively impacts the economic integration of marginalized migrants in destination societies. The author utilizes the experiences of Muslim, female migrants in international work environments to examine the role of intersectionality in the economic integration of marginalized migrants in host societies. To accommodate for the lack of literature examining the employment experiences of intersectional migrant communities, she explores the experiences of Muslim, female migrants to gain insight into their employment. The author analyzes the findings of her case study of the subject group in an American city and compares it with research in two other countries on the experiences

of female, Muslim migrants. Additionally, she aims to bridge the gaps in the current migration literature which ignores the intersectionality of identities in migrant communities-- specifically religious and gender identities. By using employment as the focus of this exploratory investigation, she hopes to contribute to the research on the well-being and social status of this migrant community. Key dimensions the author explores include the influence of gender on career choice, career prioritization, and rate of discrimination as well as the role played by community support systems. After reviewing the findings of this case study, she discusses them in tandem with similar research conducted on female, Muslim migrants in two countries in the European Union: France and Germany.

## Literature Review

Gendered discourse is vital to understanding the differences in migrant experiences of participating in economic activities. Gender can be understood as the social meanings and identities that are based in reproductive and power relationships (Naere & Akhtar 2014). Gender is a meaningful tool of analysis when examining migrants in destination economies because both their status as a migrant and their gender identity can cause negative outcomes for female migrants. In her work, “Birds of Passage are also Women...,” Morokvasic (1984) argues against the previous ignorance and assumptions *against* including women in the migration literature. Her work confronts the “feminization of migration,” a term which refers to the increased participation of female migrants beyond the private spheres of work into destination economic labor markets (Morokvasic 1984; De Haas, Castles & Miller 2020). According to Morokvasic (1984), because women’s work does not always fit into the reigning definitions of economic activity, there has been a lack of adequate data collection on the variety of their work roles. Contemporary scholars still follow patriarchal claims when describing female migrant contributions. For example, in his highly acclaimed essay, King (2002) states that there are only three important occupational categories of female migrants: sex workers, women migrating as brides, and domestic/care workers. Unfortunately, these categories ignore the vast numbers and occupational contributions of female migrants, devalue the role of domestic care and perpetuate power inequities. Although the three categories of female migrants that King (2002) describes are important to studying economic labor of female international migrants, King’s (2002) limited categorization largely ignores the presence of female migrants who fall into the “knowledge” occupational sectors and educational institutions. Traditional migration literature and scholarship has long undermined the contributions of female international migrants who play other economic roles.

Gender identity intersects with the migrant status by enforcing social pressures to fulfill occupations in “women’s work<sup>1</sup>,” which constitute devalued, gendered occupations. In her essay on gendered labor migration, Kofman (2013) explores the classification of different types of knowledge that leads to the evaluation of migrants’ potential contributions to a destination

economy and concludes that the “male migrant guarantees the reproduction of the global system through his technical and scientific prowess.” By this statement, Kofman suggests that migration policies reproduce gendered ideologies of who should occupy certain fields when evaluating migrants’ potentials and reinforce the view that male migrants are reproducers of the global system.

In the nearly 20 years since Morokvasic’s (1984) essay was published, several feminist scholars have moved towards integrating a gendered lens into studies of migrant economic activities. A study by Tienda and Booth (1991) counters the traditional assumption of migration literature that migrant women experience an elevation in social status through immigration. Migration policies seem to assume that destination countries offer better social and economic opportunities for migrants, especially in the destination countries of Europe and North America. Their study counters these assumptions by mapping a complex array of factors that impact migrant social status. These factors include familial and marital obligations, economic roles in home countries versus the destination country, reasons for migrating, nature of the move (temporary or permanent), and cultural affiliation (Tienda & Booth 1991). By mapping out these factors, Tienda and Booth demonstrate how complicated the measurement of social status mobility is for female migrants. While these factors can apply to their male counterparts, female migrants are subject to gendered expectations in addition to the shifts in responsibility and economic liability that come with migration.

Studies on the intersectionality of religious identity, gender, and immigration status in relation to economic integration are necessary to understanding the experiences of social sub-groups and addressing gaps in feminist migration literature. These studies are important because they focus on subgroups which may otherwise be ignored. The tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive identities is harmful to those facing discrimination resulting from both ascribed characteristics, causing a “double jeopardy” (Crenshaw 1989). In response to her findings, the current study focuses on the ways in which gender interacts with religious identity and immigration status, specifically in the context of economic integration. Gender produces asymmetries in access to resources for new immigrants which can induce economic female subordination (Tienda & Booth 1991). With many pieces of migrant literature ignoring aspects of intersectionality, this study utilizes Crenshaw’s (1989) findings to justify

<sup>1</sup>Women’s work refers to occupations characterized as feminine or comprising of majority female workers.

the examination of female, Muslim migrants as an intersectionally-identified sub-group worthy of study. Because Muslim women face consequences based on migration status, religious identity, and gender, analysis of this intersectional group’s migration experience should be individualized.

Negative assumptions against Muslims in Western societies and influenced by the racist beliefs of Orientalism create an image of the oppressed Muslim woman. This picture of the Muslim woman is deeply rooted in the ideology of colonial feminism, where colonial sentiments, specifically Islamophobia, are disguised as feminism (Ahmed 1992). Colonial feminism perpetuates ideas from Orientalism and colonialism within modern feminist discourse. Western ideology, especially in the United States, supports beliefs of colonial feminism because “just as Americans ‘know’ that Arabs are backward, they know with the same flawless certainty that Muslim women are terribly oppressed and degraded” (Ahmed 1982). The assumption that Muslim women are oppressed by their religion may endanger and socially isolate the same population this assumption seeks to liberate, because this assumption socially isolates Islam in Western societies and silences the needs of Muslim women. Muslim women face oppression and discrimination, like other social groups globally. However, the unacknowledged but enduring assumptions of orientalism and colonial feminism can make Muslim women avoid discussing issues of discrimination in order to save their cultures from falling victim to inaccurate and prejudicial historical assumptions.

The assumption of colonial feminists that Muslim women are “liberated” when they escape Islamic societies silences consideration and discussion of the gender-specific issues they face within destination countries of the West. In these situations, Muslim female migrants are at a crossroads. As females, they get lower-status employment and wages. As Muslims, they are subject to higher rates of discrimination and colonial feminism. This intersection is important to examine because understanding how religious affiliation and gender interact in the integration of Muslim female migrants into Western societies can provide valuable insight for potential improvements in policies and resources for this growing population. Tienda and Booth (1991) contest arguments that assume a positive social progression as women migrate from home to destination countries, or from “traditional” to “modern” societies. But for Muslim women, particularly in Europe and North America, this progression is complicated by

the “backwards” perceptions of Muslims in the West.

## Research Methods and Sample

To explore the impact of displacement on female, Muslim migrants, this study conducted a series of descriptive, qualitative interviews<sup>2</sup> with migrants in the city of Pittsburgh. This study employed a non-probability sample, recruiting participants using snowball and convenience sampling strategies. The actual population of female, Muslim migrants can only be vaguely approximated in Pittsburgh. Therefore, completing in-depth interviews with a smaller sample was preferred over a possibly inaccurate probability sample. To be included in the study, participants had to be currently or previously employed migrants who identified as both female and Muslim.

The author conducted a total of eight interviews over the between July and August of 2022. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 59, with most participants (62.5%) identifying as students between the ages of 18-22. Recruiting participants around the universities in Pittsburgh could account for the greater participation of younger interviewees. Muslims in the United States tend to be younger than other Americans, with the median age for Muslim adults at 35 compared to the median age of the U.S. population at 47 (Pew Research Center 2017). Interviewees came from a variety of countries including: Saudi Arabia, Morocco, India, Brazil, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Predominant immigrant groups of Muslims in Pittsburgh come from India, Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan; however, the numeric representation of these immigrant groups and their religious identity is not known (Allegheny DHS 2017).

All interviewees described the nature of their migration as voluntary-- to pursue either education or family reunification. This means that when asked to identify the reason for their migration, participants felt that their reasons for migration were *not* involuntary, viewing involuntary migrants as those who are refugees, victims of war, or other victims of political violence<sup>3</sup>. Half of the participants immigrated below five years of age, whereas the other half immigrated as adults above the age of 20. This gap created a difference in responses among the participants, because the participants shared vastly different experiences in their origin countries.

<sup>2</sup>The interview questions are included in the Appendix at the end of this article.

<sup>3</sup>Although none of the participants self-described the nature of their migration as forced or involuntary, four of the participants migrated before the age of five. So their migration was technically *not* their personal choice (that is, was involuntary).

For most participants, Pittsburgh was not their first place of emigration, and most participants noted that they had not known of the city before moving to it. Among the student participants, gendered work expectations carried a tremendous influence on the occupational status of female, Muslim migrants in Pittsburgh. Furthermore, older participants were less likely to describe instances of discrimination using the term “discrimination,” but preferred “uncomfortable” situations. All participants reported some form of religious discrimination, especially those who wore hijabs. Migrants who departed from their origin countries later in life depended on community and social support systems with other Muslims more than those who migrated at younger ages.

### The Current Study: Gendered Work and Career Findings

Participants stated that gender played a significant influence on career choice and employment within the formal economic sphere. All participants occupy positions in education, medical services, or childcare. Common employment among the interviewees consisted of occupations like patient care technicians, a certified nursing assistant (CNA), a daycare teacher, as well as higher income positions, like surgeons. The occupations present vary in salary and education needed, but they generally fall into traditionally female occupational categories. Two of the interviewees believed that their gender identity influenced their career decision. Although the author suspected that gender would play a role on career choice, *most* interviewees did *not* overtly acknowledge their gender when talking about employment. However, the prevalence of predominantly female-occupied jobs among interviewees is noteworthy. As reported in prior migration literature, female migrants tend to work in positions deemed as “women’s work”. Whether the influence of gender on choice of job was conscious or not, gender *did* impact the occupational status of these respondents. The finding suggests that identity as a woman could have created a subconscious push towards traditionally-female career options. Religious and cultural influences *could* also play a role in the prevalence of women’s work occupations among the sample. Although none of the respondents cited cultural or religious influences for their occupational choices. Nevertheless, the separation of women and men in Islam and in Islamic societies could have influenced Muslim women to pursue occupations with a majority

female composition. When speaking to one of the younger participants about her choices to pursue work as a daycare and early childhood educator, she touched on cultural influences in pursuing her career choices.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel that you have faced any workplace discrimination in the U. S. because of your gender?

**Respondent A:** *Because of my gender, yeah, so far no. I mean teaching is a very women dominated job... When I wanted to be a lawyer, though, yes. People don’t think that girls can be like, strong enough.*

**Interviewer:** And do you feel that was a general assumption about lawyers, or was it specific to those in your surroundings?

**Respondent A:** *It wasn’t my family, like my parents, but some of my uncles.*

**Author’s Interpretation:** Respondent A indicated that her surroundings and some of those in the community shared assumptions about professions which may have been deemed inappropriate for a woman.

Gender also had some impact on the expected work duties of interviewees, specifically for those working within the education sector. Respondents within this field all admitted to different work expectations as compared to male counterparts in these occupations. Because of political action during the time the interviews were conducted, gender caused anxiety for some participants, especially those working in healthcare.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any worries because of being a woman or because of being a Muslim in the workforce, that you won’t be able to achieve your career goals?

**Respondent B:** *I feel sort of uncertain about the future, especially right now being a woman and being a Muslim in healthcare. I feel that the country is going towards unpredictable circumstances right now, and a lot of different groups are being discriminated against. So I worry that in the upcoming years, Muslims could be next. And foreigners could be next, and immigrants could be next. And it could be there, my fear that there might be additional obstacles that aren’t really clear right now that might make the future more difficult for me to pursue. Especially since, I mean, I work at a hospital and outlawing abortions has been really unpredictable,*

and it's difficult to know what will happen because I'm transferring to the labor and delivery unit where they do abortions as procedures. And my career there, I don't know what's going to happen with it. If we're unable to perform those procedures. And I don't know what will happen in my future career when I want to pursue women's health. And I want to be a gynecologist, or someone, a doctor who works in women's health. So I fear that, you know, something will happen to either not make me want to pursue that career or will make it more difficult for me to pursue that career. Because I don't really want to practice a career that is unjust to other people. So those are my main worries about it.

**Author's Interpretation:** Respondent B expressed an intersectionality of concerns when asked about her future career goals, because of her anxiety as a Muslim woman in the political climate of the time. Muslim female workers carry the burden of a double anxiety at times, with these two identities.

As previously mentioned, female migrants were historically excluded from economic studies on migrants because they were expected to contribute to other societal duties, namely duties within the private and informal spheres. This assumption continues to impact low-income and female migrant communities, because societal norms have shifted to expecting these women to contribute both within formal and informal economic spheres. While the intention of these interviews was to explore the impact of discrimination and displacement within the formal economic sphere, interviewees also cited their informal economic contributions, as well. The interviews revealed that most participants occupied multiple positions beyond the formal economic sphere, including running the local Masjid's<sup>4</sup> Sunday school program, voluntarily translating for refugees in hospitals, and working as nannies.

As one respondent reflected: “you're always doing double, always working for you and everyone relying on you.”

**Author's Interpretation:** This pressure to work almost “double” by contributing to a variety of social outlets and the cultural expectations to support families exerts considerable pressure on female migrant communities. The expectation for female Muslim migrants to participate in both informal and formal economic spheres demonstrates a hybridization of

migration literature's assumptions, indicating a “new”<sup>5</sup> norm for female migrant communities. Women from both migrant and non-migrant communities share expectations of working in both informal and in formal sectors to support their families. However, migrant women specifically bear the burden of carrying the “cultural torch.” This means that female migrants in destination societies are expected to teach their cultural traditions to their children while also integrating themselves and their children into these societies. The culmination of expected responsibilities for migrant women in both the informal and formal sectors can be overwhelming, leading to the feeling of working double with everyone relying on you.

**Respondent D:** *I was satisfied with being a physician and working part time, I didn't work full time. Because I also studied and taught Arabic and Islamic studies... So to me, it was perfect just part time and not wanting to go any higher.*

Another key finding of the interview data was the prioritization of a career in conjunction with one's identity as a migrant. Half of the interviewees cited migration as a highly influential variable on both career choice and the prioritization of a career. The prioritization of career emerged from two segments of the sample: young adults who migrated at early ages and older adults who migrated during adulthood. Participants who migrated at early ages and are currently young adults cited the colloquial “immigrant pressure” they felt from their elders as they grew. The pressure describes a desire to help others within the social group, usually by familial connection. It also relates to the necessity to show gratitude towards the “privilege” of migration and potentially to achieve a degree in higher education.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel that you were influenced into your occupation or career pursuit because of your immigrant identity?

**Respondent B:** *Yeah, so I definitely think being the child of immigrants who were unable to pursue professional careers, being the first person to pursue medicine and a professional career and my family was important to me. So that was why I wanted to get a job in healthcare early to sort of get that experience needed for my future*

<sup>5</sup>The term “new” is not strictly correct here because female migrants have long contributed to a variety of economic outlets, but their contributions continue to be largely understudied, especially in the informal sector.

<sup>4</sup>Masjid is another word for a mosque-- the place of worship for Muslims

*career and be motivated to pursue higher education and a professional career that my parents didn't get to pursue because they emigrated.*

**Author's Interpretation:** Older participants who cited migration as an influential marker on their career prioritization followed similar narratives of a want to "help." This societal "need" to help others and elevate others in the prioritization of one's career portrays the intersectionality of both gender and migration within the interview responses. As the expected caretakers of the family, women should contribute to the family's well-being and support other peers within their social group. Immigrants demonstrate a similar expectation to support their social group and ethnic enclave to show gratitude for their privilege.

**Interviewer:** What is your current job?

**Respondent C:** *Well, my current job, it's CNA and I do Sunday School at masjid. I do some translation with a company in Ohio for people who want to go to a hospital or doctors, I accompany them and translate into And that's it. I love it.*

**Author's Interpretation:** After listing three different jobs and social obligations, the participant ended her answer with "that's it". Her answer showcases the dedication older immigrants have to their communities, while seeming unphased by the plethora of commitments.

### Reporting Discrimination

A hot button issue of the interviews appeared within discussions on "discrimination." The interpretation and attitude towards discrimination varied among the participants, depending on the type of discrimination described. All participants reported a type of "uncomfortable situation" or form of "religious harassment" both within and outside the workplace. Wearing the hijab affected the type of discrimination described. In the workplace, self-reported gender discrimination remained low to none among participants. In response to this interview question, younger migrants were more likely to report instances of "internal discrimination"-- discrimination that occurs within one's social group (i.e., in the Muslim community). The author discussed discrimination based on migrant identity in conjunction with religious discrimination with the participants.

Religious discrimination was the *most common* form

of discrimination experienced among the interviewees. Participants described religious discrimination as ranging from "uncomfortable" to "outright alienating" in the workplace. Although some participants did not report experiencing religious discrimination, all participants told stories about being asked about their religion or background.

**Interviewer:** Would you say that in your profession, you have felt comfortable with your identity as a Muslim woman?

**Respondent D:** *Yes, but there are instances of microaggressions. So, I worked in the <hospital> and the veterans are a unique population. So it's not surprising sometimes, given their military history, they might not feel comfortable with a Muslim woman in a hijab.*

**Author's Interpretation:** While these experiences may not constitute outright discrimination, the commonality of these instances depicts the experience of Muslim women within Pittsburgh employment as others. This means that while Muslim, female migrants may not all report discrimination based on religion, identity as a Muslim woman within the workplace is not a common norm. Half of all participants reported discrimination or alienation within the workplace because of their religious identity. Older participants were more likely to brush off these instances. The hijab played a vital role in these instances of discrimination. Unfortunately, stories like this one were not uncommon among the participants.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel that you can be open about your religious identity in Pittsburgh?

**Respondent D:** *I wear it on my head, so yeah, it is kind of difficult not to be recognized.*

**Author's Interpretation:** Answers like this one revealed a type of dismissal towards religious discrimination and alienation-- because these instances were a norm for participants, even in everyday tasks.

**Respondent E:** *I haven't really experienced anything too crazy. There was one time where my mom was like parking. She took somebody's parking spot by accident, I guess, and they were saying a bunch of curse words and 'go back to your country'. But, I mean, it really wasn't a big deal as a parking spot.*

**Respondent C:** *They say Muslim people are aggressive or don't respect women or oppressed women, you know. But you do your part and whatever you can to do a little correction... and you will find a lot of people telling you, we didn't know that, thank you for correcting us... They are very accepting and are very open minded.*

**Respondent G:** *Initially explaining that you're Muslim takes some people just a little bit more time. For example, when it comes to food at work and all that, seeming like they forget that you don't eat pork. But it's like repeating yourself quite often. But after 12 years, everybody pretty much picked up on it and are very respectful.*

**Author's Interpretation:** Self-reported gender discrimination remained almost non-existent among participants. The relative invisibility of gender discrimination could be attributed to an intersectional experience of discrimination as Muslim women, because participants who wore hijabs were more likely to report instances of alienation due to religion in the workplace. Because hijabs are an indicator of both one's gender and religious identity, discrimination resulting from wearing the hijab could be categorized under both gender and religious discrimination. However, participants generally spoke about the hijab while relating instances of religious discrimination.

**Respondent E:** *Yeah, I think because I wear the scarf it is very visible that I'm different. I don't think that if I didn't wear the scarf people would be as racist, basically.*

**Author's Interpretation:** Participants all worked in fields generally categorized as “women's work”. Because the participants of this study occupied employment positions in Pittsburgh generally accepting or exclusive to women, gender discrimination may have been avoided. Still, 37.5% of interviewees reported differences in work duties because of gender. These differences did not alter the overall workload or employment experiences of participants. One example of a difference in gendered duties occurred for a research assistant at a university who was told to wait for male assistants to carry lab equipment instead of doing the work herself.

**Respondent F:** *When I worked in the computer labs, you would have to move paper shipments, or whenever we were moving labs, it would be moving chairs, and like, desks and stuff. And sometimes they wouldn't assign me to that, because it'd be like, too heavy or whatever, too physically demanding. And then I would just have to sit*

*in the lab, sometimes. So kind of the basic, 'this is a man thing'.*

Participants who experienced gendered work duty changes did not report feeling alienated because of these changes, however, these changes imply the enforcement of hegemonic masculinity within modern workplaces. Overall, gender discrimination remained low among female, Muslim migrants, but this could be attributed to the role of the hijab as an intersectional status signaling both gender and religious identity, and significant levels of employment in women's work.

Younger migrants were more likely to report instances of internal discrimination within the Muslim community of Pittsburgh. Half of the participants experienced some form of internal discrimination. Those who had experienced internal discrimination described the Muslim community as judgmental towards career and lifestyle choices and felt a “pressure” to succeed.

**Interviewer:** Have you felt supported by the Muslim community?

**Respondent A:** *No, it's pretty toxic... They're very gossipy, very judgmental people. Any type of different person is like, going to be talked about, going to be stared at.*

**Author's Interpretation:** Instances of internal discrimination can also culminate with external discrimination from the non-Muslim community to make female, Muslim migrants feel alienated from society-- that is, “othered” both by their own community and by the general public.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel like you can openly display and talk about your religious identity in Pittsburgh?

**Respondent F:** *I think it depends on the person you're talking to, because some people are just not very understanding, whether that be people from my own religion or people who are not from my religion, because I don't necessarily follow every single little thing. So even people from my own religion sometimes will be like, 'Well, why are you doing this? You shouldn't be doing this'. Because there are always people who kind of question what you're doing and why you're doing it.*

**Author's Interpretation:** With high rates of internal discrimination reported among younger participants, it is important to consider the implications of internal

and external discrimination on occupational and social trajectory. Participants at younger ages, especially those still attending school, may struggle to balance different cultural influences from “home” and Pittsburgh, whereas older participants may feel more comfortable with their cultural identities by migrating at later points in life or establishing successful support systems. Regardless, younger migrants were more likely to report types of internal discrimination, indicating a potential lack in community support for occupational and personal decisions.

**Younger Respondent F:** *It was different whenever we moved to Pittsburgh, I think because I was a little bit older. So I was able to kind of perceive how people viewed who I was... Moving to Pittsburgh, it was like the first kind of culture shock and your teachers ask where you are really from.*

**Older Respondent C:** *Yes, I love Pittsburgh. I feel it more than Pittsburgher(s) themselves. I love this Pittsburgh, it might be my native city, it's in the mountains. I love Oakland. It reminds me of Marrakesh when I was at university with the red, red building and the young people in the crowd all the time and it's in life and up all the time, even nighttime...you know I love Oakland, and I love this university. Because my dream to get there somehow I'm still dreaming*

### Community Support

Depending on their demographics, participants engaged with community organizations differently. For example, Migrants who moved at older ages were more likely to participate in ethnic or religious based community organizations. For these migrants, participation in community organizations was vital to their social life. Therefore, for migrants who leave their home countries beyond childhood-- like as young adults young, forming social relationships with those who share similar beliefs was prioritized. Among these social organizations discussed, religious-based organizations, like a Masjid or Muslim Student Association, were most common. This may imply that female, Muslim migrants identify more strongly with religious affiliation than ethnic origin. Because the population of Muslims in the U. S. contains a high number of immigrants, having an immigrant identity is a common feature among these communities.

**Respondent C:** *It's crazy, it was very nice and welcoming. Everybody felt welcome there. It's not like only Pakistani, Egyptian, or Afro-American, It's all diverse and more inclusion there.*

**Respondent H:** *Right away, I had so many friends, both from the masjid and from the (chemistry) department. They're very nice people.*

**Author's Interpretation:** Migrants who relocated at younger ages, however, utilized these community organizations less. For these migrants, constructing a social support system around cultural identity may have been prioritized less as this group balanced a blend of influences from both home and destination countries. Reduced participation could also be attributed to reports of internal discrimination by the younger participants, thus discouraging involvement with ethnic or religious based community organizations. Students were more likely to participate in university based religious or ethnic organizations rather than seeking out a local Masjid. The findings of these interviews suggest that community organizations play an important role in the social lives of migrants who departed at older ages but become less influential among participants who migrated during childhood.

### Community Support Versus Career Services

Overall, career services were not typically used by the participants interviewed. Fewer than half of the interviewees reported using any type of career services, either from a university, a non-profit, or the government. The participants who utilized a form of career services sought these services from a university or educational setting. Most participants learned about their current jobs through self research or their social networks, indicating that social networks were more important to seeking employment than outside services.

**Respondent B:** *I think the Muslim community is one of the most supportive ones that I have. And that, really, they make me feel like anything is possible with pursuing whatever career I want or whatever degree I want. I find that they're not only very supportive, but they also pray for me and they also wish for the best for me and that's probably one of the most supportive communities I have.*

**Author's Interpretation:** The lack of usage of career services by the interviewees could indicate that these services are inaccessible in Pittsburgh to the female,



Muslim community. With the variety of job opportunities available online, an outside career services agency may be less appealing than applying with a seemingly foreign agency. The role of community support and social networks proved to be more important to the career services and employment opportunities for female, Muslim migrants in Pittsburgh.

**Interviewer:** Would you describe the services in Pittsburgh as useful to new migrants?

**Respondent F:** *I think they still need improvement. And they need to have people that work, there be people who have gone through these experiences. So like, I had more help from students who are older than me, who already went through the experiences rather than going to the Career Center, which just had people working there that never went through these experiences, especially for people who were migrating.*

### Summary of Findings: The Pittsburgh Study

All the interviewees reported working in occupations considered female-friendly, indicating that the occupation is traditionally seen as “women’s work” or contains a significant portion of female workers. Career remained a top priority for most participants along with a feeling of gratitude for the opportunity to migrate. Though childcare was not addressed, many participants engaged in informal work sectors, like community daycares and Sunday schools. Younger participants used the term “discrimination” more outwardly than older participants to describe instances of discrimination within the workplace. All participants reported some type of religious discrimination or discomfort in the workplace, specifically citing the role of the hijab. Though gender discrimination was not commonly reported, some participants mentioned changes in work duties based on gender identity and the hijab has a role of intersectionality regarding gender and religious identity. Those who migrated at later stages in life relied on religious or ethnic community organizations for social life more than participants who migrated in early childhood. Career services were only utilized in university or education settings, as participants sought social networks or self-research for employment opportunities. The results of the study suggest that female, Muslim migrants may require more outside support systems to integrate into destination formal employment spheres. Occupational trajectory is shaped by social gender expectations, so without proper

support systems intact, female working communities may struggle to overcome social boundaries.

### Strengths and Limitations of the Pittsburgh Study

This exploratory study of eight respondents is based on a non-probability, convenience sample. Because of the small sample size and how interviewees were selected, the results of this exploratory investigation *cannot* be generalized to the population of female, Muslim migrants in Pittsburgh. Rather, the findings reported here should be viewed as suggestible. Unfortunately, there is no accurate census data on the actual population of female, Muslim migrants in Pittsburgh. Therefore, this study represents an initial attempt to explore the experiences of this understudied population.

The small sample size also contributed to a limited representation of the ethnic Muslim populations in Pittsburgh. Study participants only came from five countries. In contrast, Pittsburgh includes Muslim populations from more regions. The lack of national diversity in the sample also affects the racial demographics of those represented. None of the participants identified as Black or East Asian.

The responses from younger participants tended to be similar to each other and differed from those of the older participants. Again, because of the small sample size and limited age range of participants, the author was unable to do further investigation of the findings by age. Furthermore, all participants work in occupations considered female-friendly. Therefore, their occupational experiences *may not* accurately depict the experiences of those working in other fields, especially male dominated jobs. Additionally, none of the participants identified their migration as “involuntary” or described themselves as “refugees” or “asylum seekers.” Therefore, their experiences may not reflect the employment experiences of female, Muslim migrants from different migration backgrounds or legal statuses.

Future research should use a stratified sample to examine Muslim migrant women’s experiences of discrimination, using age as the stratifying factor. The responses in the present study showed *low variation* among interviewees of similar age groups and higher variation between age groups, suggesting that a larger, stratified sample could yield more representative results.

## Discussion with Global Findings: France and Germany

According to available research, female migrants in France are over-represented in “women’s work” such as care positions. Lemiere (2013) found that 14% of home care workers were migrants, although migrants comprised only 8% of the active labor market in France.

Because Muslim women are already subjected to gender discrimination in occupational trajectory and availability, the over-representation of migrant women in home care demonstrates how vulnerable this population is in the French labor market. Furthermore, 9% of migrants report working in a position below their qualifications, compared to 7% of French people (Domergue 2015). Although two percentage points difference is small, this number is suggestive of the occupational disadvantages that female migrants face in the French labor market. This reality is highlighted in the over-representation of female migrants in homecare work. Following reunification in 1990, Germany’s reform policies included the flexibilization of the labor market, which meant the liberalization of legal framework for minor employment and fixed-term contracts (Kontos, Haferburg, & Sacaliuc 2006). The flexibilization of the labor market meant that occupations of “women’s work” were expanded. Migrants largely fulfilled the occupations created in the flexibilization of Germany’s economy, with female migrants working mostly in the domestic, hotel and restaurant, and sex industries (Krieger, Ludwig, Schupp, & Will 2006). Flexible occupations can be detrimental for women because they are highly unstable. The occupations are generally paid hourly, rather than as a salary, and women occupying these positions may not be able to work full-time. At a glance, female migrant workers in France and Germany are more likely to enter occupations gendered as “women’s work”, for which they are likely overqualified for and will compensate for stability in favor of employment.

A lack in childcare and language services in these countries is leading to inequities between female migrants and their male counterparts. The UNHCR found that most unemployed female asylum seekers and refugees in France did not seek employment because of childcare issues and problems with education (Freedman 2009:51). Since the release of this report, former Prime Minister Philippe announced that all legal migrants in the country will receive 400 hours of free French language lessons, with childcare included (Mohdin 2018); however, issues in language

proficiency and childcare limit economic prospects of female migrants and can lead to wage disparities. In Germany, a 2017 survey found that only 26% of female refugee respondents felt that they cultivated strong German language skills compared to 44% of their male counterparts (Bruecker, Jaschke, & Kosyakova 2019:24). The language disparity among migrants in Germany may cause power imbalances within families and reduces the possibilities of economic independence for female migrants. Following these issues, the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) began offering child care assistance in March of 2017 for migrant women seeking employment or taking German language classes (Esposito 2022). Still, women’s rights organizations in Germany say there is a lack of safe accommodation and integration services for female migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Germany’s lack of assistance programs to female migrants in language and childcare programs is creating inequalities in migrant communities and can lead to power imbalances in familial relationships. Research in both countries demonstrates a widespread need in European Union countries for female-centered migration policies to assist in language education and childcare services to diminish occupational gaps.

Female migrants globally face issues in breaking away from traditional women’s work, but Muslim women are especially vulnerable to seeking positions only in these fields because of their gender and religious marker, the *hijab*. In the U.S. study, the hijab led to discomfort and some harassment. Muslim women in Germany and France face political scrutiny from the headpiece and may face legal repercussions when wearing the *hijab* in those destination work forces. Religious discrimination and hijab regulations negatively impact the integration of female, Muslim migrants into these work forces.

Muslim women residing in the European Union have faced political scrutiny because of the *hijab*. France’s political actions against hijabs began in the late 90s, leading to its ban in schools in 2004 and the complete ban of face veils in public spaces in 2010 (Lang 2021). These bans reflect France’s struggle with the hijab and assimilating its formerly colonized populations into French society. The hijab in France carries more than a religious identity; it connotes some political affiliation with anti-France sentiments and decolonization along with deviations from French society. France’s history with Muslim populations as subjects of its colonial past is vital to understanding the placement of Muslim migrants as ostracized members of modern French society. The hijab controversy has extended to other

countries in the EU as well since a controversial ruling in 2017 by the European Court of Justice allowing employment discrimination of religious symbols. In 2017, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) set a ruling allowing employers to adopt “neutrality policies” banning religious garb in the workplace (Niebergall 2017). This ruling led to mixed reactions across the EU, including questioning if the ruling was discriminatory. Although the ECJ rejected accusations of discrimination, the ruling targeted religious minorities in Europe, like Muslim women and Sikh men disproportionately. These rulings do not mean that Muslim women in the EU will be unable to work, but the rulings negatively impact the potential employment experiences of hijab wearing women in the EU. The rulings reinforce ideas of colonial feminism and orientalism by ostracizing the hijab and its religious connotations.

Religious discrimination against Muslims in the European Union remains an issue for those working in labor markets. France struggles with Islamophobia towards its Muslim population, which subsequently affects labor market outcomes for the population. A study conducted by the Institute of Labor Economics examined the effect of religion on the hiring process in France. This study compared the callback rates of immigrants from Muslim and Christian affiliations for different occupations in France. After analyzing thousands of applications, the study found that inclusion of Muslim affiliation (in name or relevant experience) decreased the callback rates of applicants by 6.7 % (Valfort 2018:3). These findings demonstrate a clear bias towards Muslim communities in the labor market of France and highlight the issue of discrimination in the French labor market. In their research entitled “A job interview for Mo, but none for Mohammad,” Forstenlechner & Al-Waqfi (2010) found that religious discrimination seriously impacted employment experiences of Muslims in Germany and Austria. Sixty percent of their respondents across these two countries reported religious discrimination as a theme when seeking employment, with one respondent explaining “I understood soon enough that I won’t find a job with a headscarf on” (Forstenlechner & Al-Waqfi 2010). The hijab is specifically labeled as a reason of discrimination when seeking employment in Austria and Germany, signaling the difficulty in seeking employment as Muslim in these countries. Rulings controlling the hijab’s presence in public in Germany and France support the ideology of colonial feminism and reinforce the ostracism of those considered outside their cultures. Without adequate and accessible career

services, Muslim, female migrants cannot break out of these social norms or gender expectations.

Compared to the experiences of the interviewees, female, Muslim migrants in EU nations face less discrimination in the workplace based on the *hijab*. Political scrutiny and legal repercussions endanger the employment prospects of the social group in these countries. Despite the presence of microaggressions and discrimination in the interviews, female, Muslim migrants in the United States experience a more “normal” social integration into economic life. This difference in social integration could stem from differences in colonial history with Muslims and the implications of colonial feminism in the social hierarchy of France versus the United States.

## CONCLUSION

The Pittsburgh study examined the employment experiences of female, Muslim migrants in Pittsburgh to explore issues impacting societal integration and drew comparisons to the experiences of similar migrants in France and Germany. As a group facing politicization, Muslim women globally experience higher rates of religious discrimination. Discrimination regarding the hijab can be interpreted in tandem with gender discrimination because the hijab symbolizes both one’s religious and gender identities. Furthermore, the hijab plays a special role in discrimination against Muslim migrants because it specifically targets Muslim women in the guise of colonial feminism. The interviews highlighted the significance of community organizations for social and economic opportunities. Local communities or governments should implement resources like social programming for immigrant communities that allow social networking opportunities among women, offer childcare services, and educational opportunities to directly support female migrant communities, who face different societal expectations than their male counterparts. Although these programs will not directly combat discrimination, the programs would further the integration of female, Muslim migrants into diverse employment opportunities in different fields and reduce the need for informal employment.

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**Acknowledgment:** The author expresses her sincere thanks to Dr. Cynthia Salter, Professor of Behavioral and Community Health Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh, School of Public Health, for her mentorship during the process of writing this article.

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**About the Author:** **Jasmine Al Rasheed** is a recent graduate of the University of Pittsburgh where she majored in Sociology and International and Area Studies. The research she discusses here reflects her passion for migrant and feminist literature which motivated her to conduct a series of interviews investigating the impact of intersectional identities on migrant work experiences. Jasmine is currently a Fulbright Research Scholar in Morocco where she is continuing her research on gender and religious intersectionality.

**Appendix: Interview Survey**

- 1 a. What was your reception like when you arrived (in the U.S.)?  
b. Have you felt welcome in the United States? In Pittsburgh?  
c. Can you think of any examples?
- 2 a. Have you faced workplace discrimination in the United States because of your gender?  
b. If yes, did this discrimination occur in Pittsburgh?  
c. Do you feel that your gender has made a difference in your job?  
d. Do you feel that people treat you differently because you are a woman/Muslim?
- 3 a. Have you faced workplace discrimination in the United States because of your religious identity?  
b. If yes, did this discrimination occur in Pittsburgh?
- 4 a. Do you feel that you can openly display your religious identity in Pittsburgh?  
b. Examples?
5. How did you receive/ learn about your current occupation?
- 6 a. Have you used any career services through an organization in Pittsburgh?  
b. If yes, was it governmental or non-profit?  
c. How helpful were these services?
- 7 a. How would you describe the services Pittsburgh offers to new migrants?  
b. Should more resources be allocated to refugee and migrant resettlement?
- 8 a. How does pursuing your career rank in terms of your priorities?  
b. Has this been prioritized more since moving to Pittsburgh?

**Background Questions:**

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. What country did you emigrate from?
4. How old were you when you migrated to the United States?
5. Follow ups: Did you migrate anywhere else in between?
6. Would you describe your migration as forced or voluntary?
7. When did you settle in Pittsburgh? How long have you lived here?
8. What is your current job?