Building Social Cohesion through Community Leadership
Navigating Sources of Tension in Australian Muslim Women Leaders' Relationships with Governments

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BUILDING SOCIAL COHESION THROUGH COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP: NAVIGATING SOURCES OF TENSION IN AUSTRALIAN MUSLIM WOMEN LEADERS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOVERNMENTS

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Abstract: Within Australia's multicultural policy, the current social cohesion paradigm stresses the role of grassroots actors in building a harmonious society. A subcategory of this cohort are Muslim women leaders. Not only have these individuals been of specific policy interest, but anecdotal evidence and research suggests they play leading roles within grassroots social cohesion activities. Given their unique positionality, this article explores sources of tension that exist in Australian Muslim women leaders' working relationships with governments. It is argued that women feel gendered pressures to support government policies and be a certain type of leader. However, working too closely with governments creates credibility issues for women within their communities. Finally, it was found that women's understandings of their roles in building social cohesion go further than those conceived for them by policymakers to encompass female family leadership and the inculcation of Islamic values in their children. This highlights an underlying tension regarding the relationship Islamic values are seen to have to social cohesion in Western liberal democratic societies. Understanding these sources of tension is of strategic importance to Australia's social cohesion policy given its emphasis on grassroots approaches and solutions to complex social issues.

Keywords: *Muslim women*, *leadership*, *social cohesion*, *Australia*

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, "building social cohesion" has become a core pillar of Australia's multicultural policy.[1] While contemporary state and Commonwealth governments typically speak of a whole-of-society approach that shares responsibility across all communities and

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[1]   The definition of social cohesion commonly adopted by governments in Australia is the Scanlon-Monash understanding, which defines social cohesion as the product of five key indicators: feelings of belonging; sense of worth and financial satisfaction; social justice and equity; (political) participation; and experiences of acceptance or rejection. Other indicators include gender equality and the population's health and wellbeing. "What is Social Cohesion?" Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, accessed October 13, 2023, https://scanloninstitute.org.au/what-social-cohesion.

sectors of society, significant attention has been paid to Muslim communities.[2] This is in part due to allegations that Muslims in Western societies self-segregate and are unwilling to engage with non-Muslims.[3] Such narratives are often linked to concerns that siloing poses problems for some Muslims' sense of belonging, ability to access services, economic participation and socio-cultural integration.[4] More recently, an increase in Islamophobia has also sustained government interest in this group vis-à-vis building a harmonious society.[5] Per the Commonwealth Government, one way to build cohesion is "through local community-driven solutions that build self-reliance and empowerment."[6] Central to this approach is leaders who facilitate grassroots initiatives and programs that create greater socio-economic opportunities for parts of their communities. This policy strategy draws on robust networks of community organisations and is only made possible by the Muslim leaders who have shown a willingness and desire to work with governments to advance social cohesion agendas.

Anecdotal evidence and emerging research alike suggest that Muslim women are at the forefront of these grassroots activities and have established strategic relationships with governments in the process.[7] This includes women who occupy positions of religious authority or operate through mosque institutions and community organisations, either in a paid or (much more likely) volunteer capacity.

It is important to contextualise governments' interest in Muslim women leaders. This group has been the subject of continued attention, largely because policymakers seeking to influence Muslim communities see women, particularly those in leadership positions, as entry points for

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[2]   Department of the Premier and Cabinet, *Strategic Framework to Strengthen Victoria's Social Cohesion and the Resilience of its Communities* (Melbourne: Victorian Government, 2015), https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2015-12/apo-nid60689.pdf; Urbis. "Evaluation of the COMPACT Program: Final Report." Sydney: NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet, November 28, 2018. https://multicultural.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/COMPACT_Evaluation-Report_Final_010219a-3.pdf.; Mario Peucker, *The Civic Potential of Muslim Community Organisations for Promoting Social Cohesion in Victoria* (Melbourne: Victoria University, January 2017), 7, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315707534_The_civic_potential_of_Muslim_community_organisations_for_promoting_social_cohesion_in_Victoria_research_report.

[3]   Mario Peucker and Shahram Akbarzadeh, *Muslim Active Citizenship in the West* (Routledge, 2014), 83, ebook edition; Farida Fozdar, "Social Cohesion and Skilled Muslim Refugees in Australia: Employment, Social Capital and Discrimination," *Journal of Sociology* 48, no. 2 (2012): 167; Mario Peucker, "Muslim Community Organisations as Agents of Social Inclusion, Cohesion and Active Citizenship? A Cross-National Overview," in *Muslim Community Organizations in the West: History, Developments and Future Perspectives*, ed. Mario Peucker and Rauf Ceylan (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2017), 36, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-13889-9.

[4]   To define a socially cohesive society is an inherently political act, thus these perceived 'threats' reflect the integrationist model of multiculturalism pursued by governments in Australia.

[5]   Gary Bouma, "Quest for Inclusion: Australia and Islamophobia," in *Fear of Muslims?: International Perspectives on Islamophobia*, ed. Douglas Pratt and Rachel Woodlock (Cham: Springer, 2016), 76, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-29698-2.

[6]   "Strong and Resilient Communities," Department of Social Services, Australian Government, November 1, 2021, https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities-communities-and-vulnerable-people/strong-and-resilient-communities.

[7]   Susan Carland, "'The Whole Concept of Social Cohesion, I Thought, 'This is so Qur'anic': Why Australian Muslim Women Work to Counter Islamophobia," *Religions* 13 (2022): 671, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070670; Rachel Sharples and Val Colic-Peisker, "Social Cohesion Revisited: Policy and Practice in Migrant Concentration Areas of Sydney and Melbourne," *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 1 (2022): 7, https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.136.

developing social cohesion agendas. In the mid-2000s, against the backdrop of the War on Terror, the Commonwealth Government of John Howard (1996–2007) sought to develop social cohesion policy through consultation with Muslim community leaders.[8] To this end, the Muslim Community Reference Group was formed. Several of the advisory body's recommendations to the Howard administration concerned Muslim women. The Muslim Community Reference Group proposed that investing in Muslim female leadership would strengthen social cohesion, writing "leadership skills and self-esteem projects will enhance Muslim women's capacity to address issues of isolation and marginalisation in family and community environments."[9] The advisory body also "acknowledged the crucial role that women play in building positive links between Muslim and non-Muslim communities."[10] The explicit connection between female leadership and social cohesion outcomes saw the government fund training programs and initiatives designed to increase the capacity of Muslim women to represent their communities. Calls for greater representation of Muslim women in positions of community leadership continued in the following decade in the wake of the #MeToo sexual misconduct movement, which gained traction in 2017 as an online movement where women shared their experiences of harassment and abuse.[11] As the hashtag gained international attention, Muslim women created their own iteration, #MosqueMeToo, to give voice to their suffering and grievances.[12] Within Australian Muslim communities, Tasneem Chopra writes that this movement sparked debates around cultural norms and abusive behaviours towards women, including in regards to leadership.[13] Internal challenges to the status quo led by Muslim women were supported by external governmental pressures exerted on Islamic institutions to adhere to progressive mores and values relating to gender equality, which saw more women assume leadership positions within Muslim organisations. These social developments within the last two decades have resulted in notable changes to gender practices within Muslim communities and have challenged the male domination of community leadership and religious spaces.[14]

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[8]   Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, "Effectiveness and Implications: Impact on Arab and Muslim Australians," in *Review of Security and Counter Terrorism Legislation* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2006), https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=pjcis/securityleg/report/chapter3.htm.

[9]   Muslim Community Reference Group, *Building on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security: An Action Plan by the Muslim Community Reference Group* (Muslim Community Reference Group, 2006), 7, https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2006-12/apo-nid1525.pdf.

[10]   Ibid.

[11]   Micah L. Issitt, "Me Too Sexual Misconduct Movement," *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, April 2021, https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=cd4becad-4745-3805-bbda-ca6ed3948e5d.

[12]   Tasneem Chopra, "The Pathology of Hyper Masculinity and Abuse in Muslim Leadership," in *Muslim Women and Agency: An Australian Context*, ed. Ghena Krayem and Susan Carland (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 106, https://brill.com/edcollbook/title/55050.

[13]   Ibid., 107.

[14]   Nafiseh Ghafournia, "Muslim Women's Religious Leadership: The Case of Australian Mosques," *Religions* 13, no. 6 (2022): 534, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060534; Hilary Kalmbach, "Introduction: Islamic Authority and the Study of Female Religious Leaders," in W*omen, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*, ed. Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach (Boston: Brill Publishers, 2011), 1.

Muslim women leaders have benefitted from their partnerships with governments in a variety of ways; however, these relationships have also been points of contention. While several Australian studies have explored some of the challenges Muslim leaders have faced when engaging with politicians and policymakers since 9/11, few have considered the impacts of gender on these dynamics and conflate the experiences of men and women. Furthermore, when researching how these relationships have negatively impacted leaders' reputations among their communities, studies often detail criticisms *of* Muslim leaders; largely missing from the Australian literature is analysis of *how* Muslim leaders understand their credibility and threats to it. This research opens the discussion to the views and experiences of Muslim women leaders – a group that deserves scholarly attention. Drawing on interviews with 25 Australian Muslim women leaders, this article delineates how these individuals understand the sources of tension, gendered and otherwise, that exist in their working relationships with governments. Understanding these issues is of strategic importance to social cohesion policy in Australia given its emphasis on grassroots approaches and solutions to complex social issues.

BACKGROUND

The role played by Muslim leaders in facilitating community level social cohesion activities has attracted the interest of a small but growing number of Australian scholars, revealing important insights into leaders' relationships with their communities and governments. In his top-down study of Australian multicultural policy, Sev Ozdowski argues that, following 9/11, the Howard administration returned to an older practice of consulting with ethnic community leaders, as introduced under the Malcom Fraser Coalition government (1977–83).[15] However, this was not merely a reversion to a past approach. As Nora Amath, Mario Peucker and Shahram Akbarzadeh explore, new roles were conceived for Muslim leaders in the 21st century: they were expected to be the public representatives of Australian Islam and their diverse communities, act as engagement partners for the police and media, and consult with local, state and federal governments.[16]

Offering gendered analysis absent from Amath and Peucker and Akbarzadeh's broader studies of community leadership, Shakira Hussein argues that Muslim women's voices in particular were highly sought after during this period given prevailing narratives in Western societies that these individuals needed to be liberated from their culture and religion.[17] Promoting Muslim women's leadership and involvement in community decision-making processes was therefore regarded as helping to uplift this "oppressed" group. While these

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[15] Sev Ozdowski, "History of Multiculturalism in Canada and Australia: Its Aims, Successes and Challenges to National Identity," in *Muslim Minorities and Social Cohesion: Cultural Fragmentation in the West*, ed. Abe W. Ata (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 226, 231, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003044529.

[16] Nora Amath, *The Phenomenology of Community Activism: Muslim Civil Society Organisations in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2015), 105; Nora Amath, "The Impact of 9/11 on Australian Muslim Civil Society Organisations," *Communication, Politics & Culture* 46 (2013): 116, https://doi.org/10.3316/ielapa.533136390245484.; Peucker and Akbarzadeh, *Muslim Active Citizenship*.

[17] Shakira Hussein, *From Victims to Suspects: Muslim Women since 9/11* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 11.

public narratives reflect Orientalist portrayals of Islam and Muslim women, Hadi Sohrabi writes that patriarchal attitudes within Australian Muslim communities constitute an ongoing obstacle to increased female representation within these spaces.[18] An aspect not discussed in Australian literature is that gender essentialist ideas relating to women may also underpin government interest in this cohort, especially regarding social cohesion objectives. For example, a study conducted in the United Kingdom by Ghazala Mir et al. explores how women of faith could help build socially cohesive communities, noting there is a prevailing view among participants that women possess qualities that aid this objective: they play a key role as mothers in educating the next generation and instilling in them values important for social cohesion; and, women are more likely than men to have the necessary "communication skills, passion and empathy" required to carry out this work.[19] Therefore, Muslim women potentially feel pressure to support social cohesion activities that stems from multiple sources – including gendered expectations that are not placed on their male counterparts.

Working with governments to build social cohesion often involves Muslim leaders taking on more visible roles within Australian society, such as by speaking with the media and non-Muslim public. Associated with this is an increased susceptibility to Islamophobic attacks. Derya Iner provides evidence of online abuse and "trolling" of prominent Muslim figures, whereas Susan Carland highlights the emotional distress women may experience when repeatedly confronted with public hostility when facilitating interfaith engagement initiatives.[20] It is currently unclear whether women leaders are more susceptible to these attacks than men but Iner's research nonetheless reveals troubling insights into the gendered nature of Islamophobia in Australia and the elevated risks posed to women.[21]

When stepping into public and political arenas post-9/11, Peucker et al. argue that Muslim leaders face significant opposition from an unexpected source: their communities.[22] Randa Abdel-Fattah writes that this is largely because some Muslim leaders and organisations are culpable of perpetuating the discourse surrounding Muslim youth's supposed susceptibility to violent extremism.[23] This is on account of their involvement in government initiatives that are connected to countering violent extremism agendas, including some social cohesion activities. Amath's interviews with the heads of Muslim community organisations and activists also reveal that even interfaith engagement is subject to internal criticism, much of which is aimed

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[18]   Hadi Sohrabi, "Identity and Muslim Leadership: The Case of Australian Muslim Leaders," *Contemporary Islam: Dynamics of Muslim Life* 10, no. 1 (2016): 11–12, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-015-0325-3.

[19]   Ghazala Mir, John Lawler, and Mary Godfrey, *Women, Faith and Social Cohesion: Models for Building Cohesive Communities* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010), 28, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325076496_Women_faith_and_social_cohesion_Models_for_building_cohesive_communities.

[20]   Derya Iner, "Islamophobia in Australia Report III (2018-2019)" (Sydney: Charles Sturt University and ISRA, 2022), 115–16, https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/208330970/Islamophobia_Report_3_2022_LR_Spreads_RA.pdf; Carland, "Whole Concept of Social Cohesion," 676–77.

[21]   Iner, "Islamophobia in Australia Report III," 2.

[22]   Mario Peucker, Joshua M. Roose, and Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Muslim Active Citizenship in Australia: Socioeconomic Challenges and the Emergence of a Muslim Elite," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2 (2014): 297, http://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2014.899967.

[23]   Randa Abdel-Fattah, "Countering Violent Extremism, Governmentality and Australian Muslim Youth as 'Becoming Terrorist,'" *Journal of Sociology* 56, no. 3 (2020): 373, https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783319842666.

at women's organisations.[24] While explanations for this gendered difference are not offered by Amath, this criticism of interfaith engagement is potentially due to it not being considered a worthwhile cause in some Muslim communities; additionally, women's organisations may be more heavily involved in this work than their male counterparts and therefore subject to increased criticism.[25]

Another key issue found within the literature is that Muslim leaders are, by choice or government pressure, speaking on behalf of individuals and communities that do not recognise them as authorities. Aly Anne and Lelia Green argue that, in the wake of the War on Terror, "the ethnic divisions within the Muslim diaspora are becoming less significant as Australian Muslims reconstruct their identity based on a notion of supporting each other in the face of a global alliance against Islam."[26] Consequently, an increased number of leaders have been speaking across ethnic, cultural and denominational divisions.[27] However, several scholars have challenged the assertion that these community divisions are becoming less important. Instead, David Tittensor et al. argue there is a growing chasm between leaders and young Muslims, the latter of whom do not see themselves reflected in the individuals or organisations with which governments engage.[28] Furthermore, Sohrabi and Jason Hartley and Nezar Faris posit that governments and the police handpick a select number of leaders to work with, often on the basis of their moderate views and capacity to relate to these institutions.[29] Whereas Hartley found this caused significant intra-community tension when leaders working with governments did not speak out against perceived injustices, such as Australia's involvement in the US-led coalition in Afghanistan and Iraq, Hussein Tahiri and Michele Grossman speculate that Muslims are particularly annoyed at the spokespeople selected to represent their communities within the media and the trend towards conservative older men usually born overseas – some of whom have made scandalising comments that caused public outrage and controversy.[30]

While previous research has highlighted challenges facing Muslim leaders who work with governments to advance social cohesion agendas, studies that employ gender-conscious

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[24]   Amath, *Phenomenology of Community Activism*, 123.

[25]   Muslim Community Reference Group, *Building on Social Cohesion*, 7.

[26]   Anne Aly and Lelia Green, "'Moderate Islam': Defining the Good Citizen," *M/C Journal* 10, no. 6 (2008), https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2721.

[27]   Hadi Sohrabi, "Islam and Community Organisation in Australia," in *Muslim Community Organizations in the West: History, Developments and Future Perspectives*, ed. Mario Peucker and Rauf Ceylan (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2017), 6, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-13889-9.

[28]   David Tittensor, Gerhard Hoffstaedter and Adam Possamai, "Hyper-Securitisation and Belonging: Understanding the Plight of Young Muslims in Melbourne, Australia," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 40, no. 3 (2020): 491, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2020.1819127.

[29]   Sohrabi, "Islam and Community Organisation," 7; Jason Hartley and Nezar Faris, "Leadership Legitimacy and a Conundrum of Justice between Police and Muslim Organizations in a Climate of Counter-Terrorism within Australia," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 40, no. 4 (2020): 646, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2020.1836597.

[30]   Jason Hartley, *Counter-Terrorism Community Engagement: Pitfalls and Opportunities* (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 87, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003134091; Hussein Tahiri and Michele Grossman, *Community and Radicalisation: An Examination of Perceptions, Ideas, Beliefs and Solutions throughout Australia* (Melbourne: Counter-Terrorism Coordination Unit, Victoria Police, 2013), 86, https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/ccdw/pdfs/community-and-radicalisation.pdf.

approaches to these issues are scarce within the Australian literature. Additionally, issues of credibility are often explored from the perspectives of lay Muslims and it is difficult to find research into how leaders understand their credibility and the factors that undermine it. Therefore, this article takes a different approach that foregrounds the views and experiences of Muslim women leaders.

METHOD

This study is part of a larger doctoral research project on the contributions Muslim women leaders make to social cohesion through community level initiatives in Australia. Data has been obtained, so far, through semi-structured interviews with 25 Muslim women. Participants are aged from 22 to 73 and have diverse ethnic backgrounds. Each woman occupies a position of leadership within her community and grassroots organisation(s), and while a small number work in paid roles, the majority are volunteers. Empirical data was analysed using Kathy Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory. This theoretical framework privileges the views and experiences of participants and uses these insights to develop theoretical propositions about the sources of tension in women's relationships with governments by constructing information on such relationships through interactions (i.e., interviews) with Muslim women leaders.[31] Given the limited number of gender-conscious studies of Muslim leaders' involvement in social cohesion activities in Australia, constructivist grounded theory is an appropriate framework for generating new knowledge on this issue that also identified the situated nature of participant's views and experiences.

Ethics clearance was obtained from the University of Melbourne's Office of Research Ethics and Integrity. To protect the anonymity of participants, each woman has been given a pseudonym and only a generalised description of their organisations is provided. All participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts before the data was processed, allowing them to clarify statements they felt had been miscommunicated and/or add information they felt was important. While only approximately one-third of participants opted to do so, the author believes this option was important to maintain trust and transparency between the researcher and participants, especially given that some felt misrepresented by non-Muslim interviewers in the past.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Interviews with participants were wide ranging. The women were asked about their experiences of leadership within their respective Muslim communities and organisations. These discussions also explored the types of grassroots social cohesion initiatives these women facilitated (including interfaith engagement, health and wellbeing initiatives, and community sporting programs) and their working relationships with governments – the latter of which is

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[31]   Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2014), 6, https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/constructing-grounded-theory/book235960.

the primary focus of this article. When analysing these dynamics, three main themes were constructed from the data. The first is that women feel a gendered pressure to support social cohesion policies and be a certain type of Muslim leader. However, being seen to work too closely with governments is considered detrimental to their credibility within their communities. Finally, moving towards a more ideological discussion, a source of tension lies in the types of activities that Muslim women leaders and governments, respectively, see as helping to build social cohesion. The following sections discuss these themes.

Expectations to be a Certain Type of Leader

One source of tension in women's relationships with governments stems from the types of leaders they feel expected to be. Many spoke of a gendered pressure to support government social cohesion policies and be at the forefront of these community level activities. Not only has this resulted in some individuals positing that they are only ever engaged with from a position of otherness, it also creates intra-community friction regarding the types of leaders that are favoured by governments.

Having over three decades of experience in Muslim grassroots organisations, Fatima spoke of the expectation she felt to support social cohesion policy in the early 2000s following a notable increase in government interest in Muslim women. She said,

> women have actually had training on the ground in female leadership and Muslim representation without us even wanting it since 9/11 because the broader community did not want to hear from men which is, when you think back on it, incredibly unfortunate.

Considering the stigmatisation and public sidelining of Muslim men, women were expected to represent their communities and help advance government social cohesion agendas. According to Fatima, this "put a huge responsibility on women." The situation was further complicated by the reality that women were "the ones receiving the majority of backlash and Islamophobic attacks. We were at the forefront of it and we had to represent." Representing their communities and fighting Islamophobia in this climate took a significant emotional and psychological toll that was only truly understood in retrospect. When speaking to non-Muslim audiences, Fatima said,

> we didn't realise how much we were reliving our own traumas for the benefit of the audience because otherwise, they would not comprehend Islamophobia. They would say, "Well, what do you mean?" So, we had to relive it and tell them, "Well I was abused. This person punched me"…It's very disempowering. It took us a lot to work that one out.

For Jazeera, this responsibility to represent, while felt acutely by community leaders, reflects broader societal expectations placed on Muslims more generally in Australia to advocate for their faith, explain misconceptions and answer all questions about Islam posed by non-Muslims. This assertion is supported by academics Anita Harris and Shakira Hussein, who write that "Muslims who hold no formal position of authority or leadership find themselves called upon to provide insights into topics ranging from multiculturalism to geopolitics to theology" and subsequently destigmatise Islam and Muslims through everyday knowledge-

sharing.[32] Consequently, Maryam claimed that government social cohesion policy objectives have been "internalised" by Muslims. She said, "If you go to a Muslim community, they'll often be like, 'Yes, we must have better social cohesion.'" This prompts one to consider the extent to which Muslim leaders' use of this policy-specific language represents an internalisation of these concerns or their awareness of how they are expected to present when engaging with governments. Uzma provided insights into the latter, stating,

> There's the way I speak when I'm in Western Sydney where people are like, "You are so straight out of the area." There's no elitism about me. It's grassroots, don't care, rough, nothing polished. And then there's the polished, articulate, well-thought-out version. Politicians love you if you can package yourself well enough; when you articulate in a particular manner.

While some leaders' use of political rhetoric reflects their understanding of the challenges affecting their communities, others employ this vernacular because of implicit pressure from government authorities to do so. This is not to overlook the question of political expediency. As acknowledged by Uzma, it can be advantageous to frame her community level activities in ways that link them to broader government priorities involving multicultural communities. This can ultimately help advance these grassroots causes if it results in increased political and financial support.

Several women expressed frustration around the types of issues relating to social cohesion on which they are consulted. Uzma noted, when she sees Muslim women in the media or working with governments, "it's usually around specific issues" related to Muslim communities. She said, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if they were talking about the climate crisis and a Muslim woman is there because she's an expert in climate?" In her experience working with governments, it has been meaningful when her views have been sought on social issues outside "Muslim problems," such as improving community infrastructure. Noor similarly emphasised the importance of broadening governments' engagements with Muslim communities and leaders, stating "people don't really think about reaching out to Muslim communities about things that are not related to Islam or trying to be multicultural. They're always reached out to in a position of otherness." A consequence of this is that leaders and communities feel problematised by governments, which has unintended negative effects on social cohesion objectives.

Not only is there a view that governments need to expand the types of issues they consult with leaders on, but also the types of leaders they choose to engage with. Two women raised concerns that individuals are handpicked by governments because they represent a certain image of a "Muslim leader." Rabia commented that, for a period, whenever she saw women leaders in the media they had "a particular look," in that the garments they wore immediately identified them as devout Muslims. Iqra shared this observation and claimed it created internal conflict in Muslim communities as people thought "why is it only the Muslim women in hijab

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[32]   Anita Harris and Shakira Hussein, "Conscripts or Volunteers? Young Muslims as Everyday Explainers," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 19 (2020): 3975, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1516547.

who are talking to the media and not the other Muslim women who are not wearing the hijab but are equally articulate and equally devout?" This issue is not exclusive to female leaders, with Iqra also sharing examples of male figures who were selected to engage with political officials because they suited public perceptions and stereotypes relating to the image of a traditional Muslim man. For Iqra, if a Muslim leader looks "like any other person walking down the street…no one is interested in talking to them or seeking their views."

Since 9/11, Muslim women have felt a gendered pressure to represent their communities and support governments' social cohesion objectives through their actions and use of policy specific language. There is a perception that, following public sidelining of the voices and views of Muslim men, women were sought after as the representatives of their communities. This accompanied broader public expectations of Muslims to justify and explain their religion – and themselves. Furthermore, when helping to build social cohesion, Muslim women leaders expressed concern that they are solely engaged based on their "Muslimness," in terms of their appearance and the social issues they consult on, causing individuals to feel problematised and stereotyped by governments.

Issues of Credibility

Although Muslim women leaders feel an expectation from government authorities to support social cohesion policy, being seen to be too close to governments creates credibility issues for these individuals within their communities. As of result of these working relationships, some women in this study have been labelled "government agents," "apologists" and "sell outs" by their fellow Muslims. Within the data, issues of credibility appeared when leaders' social cohesion activities were connected to countering violent extremism agendas and when organisations were financially dependent on governments. Negative community perceptions surrounding both issues informed how Muslim women leaders navigated their distance from governments' social cohesion policy objectives.

Since being introduced as a policy priority in the early 2000s, social cohesion has been explicitly and implicitly linked to governments' countering violent extremism objectives.[33] This connection has commonly been emphasised following domestic and international instances of jihadist violent extremism. For example, after the 2005 London bombings, then Prime Minister John Howard met with Muslim community leaders to discuss how the government might "enhance social cohesion" and "support the leaders of Australian Muslim communities to eradicate extremist views and prevent violence."[34] At state level, in 2015, during the peak of Islamic State's foreign fighter phenomenon, which saw several hundred Australian Muslims travel to Syria and Iraq to join the jihadi Salafist terrorist organisation, the Victorian Government released a "Strategic Framework to Strengthen Victoria's Social

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[33]   Randa Abdel-Fattah, *Coming of Age in the War on Terror* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2021), Kindle edition, 61.
[34]   John Howard, "Meeting with Islamic Community Leaders," Prime Minister of Australia News Room, August 18, 2005, https://web.archive.org/web/20060919224023/http://www.pm.gov.au/news/media_releases/media_Release1509.html.

Cohesion and the Resilience of its Communities," with the document framing social cohesion as a mitigating force against violent extremism.[35] Similarly, the 2016 Lindt Café siege in Martin Place, Sydney, prompted the New South Wales Government to launch the COMPACT Partnerships Projects Grants scheme, designed to create more "socially cohesive" and "resilient communities" that can respond to the threats posed by violent extremism.[36]

Although in recent years state and Commonwealth governments have removed explicit references to violent extremism within policy, the association of social cohesion with this objective is not a bygone of the War on Terror; this link remains fresh in the minds of Muslims and shapes how some regard government interest in their communities.[37] In their 2020 study of how social cohesion was understood by policymakers, practitioners and residents in socioeconomically disadvantaged Melbourne and Sydney suburbs with high proportions of Muslim residents, Rachel Sharples and Val Colic-Peisker found, among some Muslims, the social cohesion paradigm was understood and criticised as "a coded policy formula" for countering violent extremism.[38] This view was also expressed by one participant in this study, Maryam, who said the term "social cohesion" was "very triggering" for Muslims on account of this legacy and its deeply harmful and stigmatising effects on communities.

The conflation of social cohesion and countering violent extremism agendas has caused significant tension between Muslim leaders and governments, as well as between Muslim leaders and their communities. In the mid-2000s, Wajiha was one of the Muslim community leaders involved in the Commonwealth's Muslim Community Reference Group. According to Wajiha, the advisory body proved to be an unsuccessful venture because the Howard Government's focus on countering violent extremism sowed distrust and resentment within Muslim communities. She said,

> …all this money was being thrown at the Muslim community but because the source of it was from a government that had distrust towards Muslims there were some in the community who didn't want to get involved in it. Even though there were good intentions – it was a reference group, it was Muslim community leaders, it was a diverse group of people – because it was coming from a government that wasn't trusted, it didn't matter what kind of individuals you had in that group, it just didn't work.

Community distrust and suspicion did not stop at government level, but also extended to the Muslim leaders working with the Howard administration and who were seen to be supporting its agenda. Consequently, fellow Muslims called Wajiha an apologist, among other hurtful labels, which damaged her credibility within the community. These criticisms also wounded Wajiha, who engaged with the government out of her love for her faith and desire to improve relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. She said, "I expect that kind of negativity or hatred from right-wing extremist groups, I don't expect it from my brothers and sisters." This strong community backlash against Muslim leaders resulted in heated discussions with

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[35] Department of the Premier and Cabinet, *Strategic Framework*.
[36] Multicultural NSW, *COMPACT*.
[37] Abdel-Fattah, "Countering Violent Extremism," 375.
[38] Sharples and Colic-Peisker, "Social Cohesion Revisited," 226.

governments behind closed doors and Wajiha said, "I can't tell you how many times I've been at a roundtable discussion and Muslims there are saying, 'What part of this do you not get?! You can't use those terms like violent extremism.'" It also prompted some to explicitly distance themselves from government social cohesion agendas, such as Maryam who refuses to accept government funding that is connected to countering violent extremism in any way, including some social cohesion grants. To do so, she argues, would mean "you're accepting that [violent extremism] is a problem that we [Muslims] have. And I don't. I reject that." Therefore, being seen to be connected to countering violent extremism proved detrimental to the credibility of Muslim leaders within their communities and resulted in some choosing to distance themselves from government social cohesion policy objectives, sometimes at a financial loss.

When discussing issues of credibility, an unexpected finding was that, among women leaders, there are widely held negative views of Muslim grassroots organisations that are financially dependent on governments to serve their communities – especially those that are the beneficiaries of the lion's share of available grants. This was surprising given that government funding is often essential to the activities and services that many leaders offer to their communities. Nonetheless, there is a prevailing sentiment that the more reliant an individual or organisation is on government funding, the less capable they are of genuinely serving the interests of their grassroots.

The women leaders interviewed in this study occupy vastly different positions along the government social cohesion funding spectrum: some receive no financial support; others have received an occasional community grant over the years, valued as several thousand to tens-of-thousands of dollars; and a small handful head organisations that are recipients of upwards of one to two million dollars in funding annually. Salma exists in the middle category and occasional government grants have allowed her organisation to expand its community services and upgrade its infrastructure through extensions and renovations of their building. However, the sparsity of funding, coupled with a strong desire to remain independent from government, has seen her organisation primarily rely on community donations to keep its doors open. When discussing this financial model, Salma said, "I didn't want to become another office for the government. We are not an office for the government. We are an independent non-profit organisation. We would like to do what we feel is good for the women and the community at large." The implication is that her organisation would not have the ability to do so if they were more closely tied to government.

Although having worked with various levels of government over the years, Maryam questioned the credibility and intentions of Muslim leaders who were seen to be playing "too nice" with governments. She said,

> The minute [your funding and profile] increases, you've jumped out of your grassroots because you no longer reflect what your grassroots is trying to achieve. And you're probably driven by the wrong motivators, if that's what's getting you out of bed every day and running your organisation. A lot of people in the community are really jaded because people have misused power to get what they wanted – whether it's misuse of funding, whether it's being an advocate on behalf of the whole community because it increases your profile. You want

to be seen in the media. You want to be the spokesperson. You want to excel your own personal brand.

For Maryam, these elites are disconnected from people's realities on the ground on account of "sitting in an ivory tower" and exploit their working relationships with governments for personal and financial gain. However, within her interview, Maryam also spoke of how the tall poppy syndrome is present within Muslim communities and, as a leader and activist, "you cannot be seen to be this overachiever because at the end of the day [you are expected to] hold your values true to the grassroots."[39]

Another issue expressed by several women was that they are operating on an unlevel playing field because more prominent organisations run by individuals that are well-connected to governments and politicians consistently receive the majority of available community grants. For Zeinab, a consequence of this perceived nepotism is that some organisations are given millions of dollars "and they've done nothing." Equally, there are myriad smaller organisations and leaders who are "doing so much work for peanuts." As she sees it, "governments should be working to level the playing field; they should have open eyes and ears to who's actually doing what" to prevent the misuse and abuse of funding. Issues with evaluating the use of community social cohesion funds were also flagged in a 2021 review of the Commonwealth Government's Strong and Resilient Communities (SARC) grants scheme awarded in 2018, worth a total of $63 million.[40] It was mildly disturbing the frequency with which the SARC evaluation reported it was "not possible" to assess whether funding outcomes were achieved, given the inadequacy of established assessment measures and reporting infrastructure.

As the head of a community organisation that receives multi-million-dollar grants annually, Fiza offers a different view on this issue. Speaking from an anti-capitalist perspective, she stated,

I know that there has historically been a lot of tension [regarding funding] and I'm not sure if it's an intentional thing or that the nature of capitalism conditions us to think through the scarcity mindset where everyone is pitted against each other. To be fair, we are all going in for the same pool of funding every time a new grant is announced.

She also offered interesting insights into how government funding impacts her organisation's ability to offer important services to the community. Her organisation primarily

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[39]   Scott Pierce et al. describe tall poppy syndrome as "an observers' tendency to closely scrutinise high-profile individuals, search for reasons to 'cut them down to size', and experience satisfaction if the individual suffers a reverse of status. The high-profile individual, or tall poppy target, is typically a high achiever and is publicly visible as a result of their success. He or she is perceived to be flaunting their success (fairly or unfairly), and consequently attracts envious notice, hostility, and is denigrated for their success." Scott Pierce et al., "Tall Poppy Syndrome: Perceptions and Experiences of Elite New Zealand Athletes," *International Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology* 15, no. 4 (2017): 352, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2017.1280834.

[40]   Social Research Centre, "Strong and Resilient Communities Evaluation Report" (Melbourne: Social Research Centre, 2021), https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2021/sarc-evaluation-report-final-word_0_0.pdf; "Strong and Resilient Communities", Department of Social Services, Australian Government," November 1, 2021, https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities-communities-and-vulnerable-people/strong-and-resilient-communities.

relies on government funding to run their programs and pay staff wages. A few years ago, funding from a Commonwealth Government social cohesion grants scheme allowed her organisation to finally provide a Muslim women's leadership program that it had envisioned "for a long time." The leadership program engaged Muslim women from diverse social, cultural and migrant backgrounds who experienced social isolation. It was reported that women underwent a transformational process in this program and it positively impacted their social and employment prospects within Australia, as well as those of their families. This program was only made possible by government funding, but at the same time this presented some challenges. One drawback is that the organisation was "beholden to government priorities" and, as Fiza explained, the Commonwealth is "very big on employment outcomes…English literacy…social cohesion and resilience and all those things." Therefore, to qualify for funding, these aspects had to be built into the leadership program and the government used employment outcomes as the primary measure of its success. Fiza found this to be somewhat problematic because it did not align with what the women in the program sought to gain from the experience. Fiza said, "our women want very clear financial support. They want leadership. They want to know about parenting. They want settlement support, for their kids to get into schools. They want some education around navigating systems, like public transport." However, as a funding recipient, the organisation's priorities must reflect to an extent those of the government, which can be a barrier to offering the community services and programs they would ideally like to provide. Consequently, part of the organisation's current strategic plan involves developing "a more sustainable funding model" that "gives us a bit of freedom to work on some of the areas that we are not often able to because we're beholden to what the government prioritises as issue areas."

When facilitating grassroots programs and services that help build social cohesion, Muslim women are hyper-aware of how their working relationships with governments can impact their credibility as leaders within their local communities. Being seen to be connected to countering violent extremism agendas or financially dependent on governments has the potential to undermine leaders' trustworthiness. During the War on Terror, governments' countering violent extremism objectives placed leaders in challenging positions: some had a strong desire to represent their communities and engage with policymakers and officials; however, in instances where governments' approaches and language proved harmful to Muslim communities, these leaders were publicly rebuked. Even though they may have strongly objected to and challenged policymakers behind closed doors, leaders were held publicly responsible for the governments' actions. These past experiences and government agendas have stigmatised and politicised grants and funding within Muslim communities. Accordingly, although women spoke of their gratitude for the funding they received, much of which was vital to their community work, most agreed that financial relationships with government can be detrimental for the credibility of Muslim community leaders and organisations. Consequently, leaders are forced to make difficult decisions that at times see themselves turn down much needed financial support to maintain the trust of their grassroots. On other

occasions, the potential risk to themselves and their organisation's credibility is justified by what their community stands to gain.

Reconceptualising the Role of Islamic Values and Family Leadership in Socially Cohesive Societies

Having explored some of the more practical issues that impact Muslim women leaders' relationships with governments, the final section sees this article navigate a conceptual source of tension relating to the types of activities that are understood to help build social cohesion. Muslims leaders and governments are alike in their views that grassroots programs and activities that create greater socio-economic participation are integral to these efforts; however, some women's understandings of actions that aid the creation of a cohesive society go further than those of governments. These women argue that one important contribution they make occurs within their homes, where they are responsible for instilling strong Islamic values in their children. This sits in contrast to the ways Western liberal democratic states have problematised the inculcation of "ethnic values" in migrant communities, having presented this as a threat to national mores and identity.[41] Such characterisation is more in line with clash-of-civilisation style narratives that "have argued that there is a fundamental divide between 'Muslim' and 'western' values."[42] Therefore, moving away from these reductive, essentialist characterisations potentially involves government policy recasting the role of Islamic values and female family leadership in socially cohesive societies, as has already been done by women in this study. At the same time, it involves navigating a key issue of leadership within some Muslim communities: the underlying perception that women should be relegated to the home arena while men occupy public leadership positions.

State and Commonwealth social cohesion policy consistently emphasise the need for citizens to be united in their shared Australian values and, at times, the values of Muslim and other migrant communities have been positioned as a threat to the "Australian way of life."[43] During the War on Terror, the perceived need for migrants to adopt Australian values resulted in changes to the process of acquiring Australian citizenship, with the Howard government introducing the Australian Citizenship Test, which included 30 multiple choice questions on Australia's history, culture, values and government.[44] The Commonwealth's focus on values also impacted grassroots social cohesion initiatives. In the mid-2010s, Maryam was involved

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[41]   Jocelyne Cesari, *Why the West Fears Islam: An Exploration of Muslims in Liberal Democracies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), xiii, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137121202; Maria Chisari, "The Return of Australian Values in the Australian Citizenship Test," in *Muslim Minorities and Social Cohesion: Cultural Fragmentation in the West*, ed. Abe W. Ata (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 85, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003044529; Thijl Sunier, "Diversity and Islam: The Case of the Netherlands," in *Muslim Minorities and Social Cohesion: Cultural Fragmentation in the West*, ed. Abe W. Ata (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 190, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003044529.

[42]   Abdullah Saeed, "Muslims in the West and their Attitudes to Full Participation in Western Societies: Some Reflections," in *Secularism, Religion, and Multicultural Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 200, https://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/bitstream/handle/11343/31715/Saeed_281275_102424.pdf.

[43]   Chisari, "Return of Australian Values," 99.

[44]   Ibid.

in helping facilitate a Commonwealth Government mentorship program that addressed refugees' employment outcomes in Australia. Although this engagement did not see her working "on the ground," the stories she heard from Muslim mentees horrified her: women were forced to shake hands with men, despite objecting and showing visible distress; and a man was taken to a pub by his non-Muslim mentor and forced to drink alcohol. For Maryam, the underlying message conveyed to these Muslim refugees was to leave your cultural and religious practices "in your home" because they were not seen as benefiting broader Australian society nor aiding migrants' participation in it. In a similar vein, Noor expressed that people feel the social cohesion paradigm pressures multicultural communities to "act white" and adopt the cultural practices and values of the Anglo mainstream.

Instead of seeing inherent antagonism between "Muslim" and "Australian" values, many women in this study expressed the view that their Islamic values supported, not undermined, efforts to create a socially cohesive society. As they see it, their leadership within their homes is an important contribution to this objective, with this view based on a traditional religious understanding of the role of Muslim mothers within the family unit. This gender role has been explored in academic and Islamic scholarship. While overarching generalisations across cultures should be treated carefully, Iranian sociologist Valentine Moghadam notes the commonly held view within Muslim families that "stresses the mother's role in the socialisation of children – particularly in raising 'committed Muslims' and transmitting cultural values."[45] Australian scholar Aziza Abdel-Halim has written on the complementary roles Islam envisions for men and women, positing that "Allah (*swt*) [may He be glorified and exalted] has really honoured women in their roles as bearers and nurtures of children and put paradise under their feet."[46] Such an elevated honour is accompanied by "very serious responsibilities, not only raising children, but mostly towards *building a truly cohesive family unit and naturally and equally a healthy cohesive society*."[47] Participants expressed similar views regarding their contributions to social cohesion. For Badah, policy approaches should not ignore the home given the family unit "is part of the whole…you're not just a family that sits in your home, closes the door and doesn't engage." Within this unit, Muslim women play a unique role in shaping the values of society on account of their positionality as mothers. Sumayah said,

> There's a saying that I love in Islam. They would say half of the population is women and the other half is raised by women…Most of the time…most of the values are taken from the mother. Regardless of what religion it is, the mother has a special space so, really, she is society in the end.

These sentiments were also held by Salma who, when speaking of her understanding of female leadership within Islam, drew on historical examples of how women have always

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[45]   Valentine Moghadam, "Patriarchy in Transition: Women and the Changing Family in the Middle East," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 35, no. 2 (2004): 138, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41603930.

[46]   Aziza Abdel-Halim, "The Impact of Women on their Societies Throughout History," Muslim Women's National Network Australia, June 2, 2015, http://www.mwnna.org.au/2015/06/02/the-impact-of-women-on-their-societies-throughout-history/.

[47]   Ibid [emphasis added].

helped shape the values and morality of their families and, by extension, communities. For example, during the time of the Prophet, women

> used to be so pious and conscious of earning any unlawful money. They would say to their husband, "Go and work and bring home pure money that didn't have any dealings with interest or usury or bribes." They would tell their husbands, "Go and bring home pure money because we can put up with hunger, but we cannot put up with being punished by hellfire."

Referencing the women's classes she teaches at her Islamic organisation, she said, "this is still how we push our women to raise their children" – to have a strong understanding of their Islamic tradition and act in accordance with their religious values in all aspects of their life. As she sees it, this has been a force for social good in her local community and Australian society more broadly.

Looking at the societal effects of the inculcation of Islamic values, it is important to note that, when Muslim women leaders were asked why they engaged in initiatives that help build social cohesion, their core motivator was largely the same: their faith. The majority of participants cited Islamic values such as service, volunteering, justice and striving for excellence. Others such as Badah and Hannah believed that verse 13 in *surah* (chapter) Al-Hujurat (the Private Apartments) is a religious imperative to engage with people outside themselves and their Muslim community: "Oh, humankind, we created you from a male and a female, made you into nations and tribes so that you may know each other, not despise each other." This theme was also found in Carland's research into interfaith engagement initiatives, with her writing that Muslim women "articulated their motivation as principally theological; other reasons…were secondary to this drive."[48]

Equally important is where Muslim women learnt these values. For non-converts, values that support social cohesion were primarily instilled in women during their childhood by their families. Maryam said, "I've always grown up with this concept of having to give back to the community. It's something that's been entrenched in us from my parents, largely." Sumayah spoke specifically of the example set by her late mother: "We lost our mum really young, but she was always very active [in the community] so I think somehow we [my siblings and I] got that from her." Rabia said,

> I've grown up in a home that has been informed by values around volunteering and contributing to the community. I think those are strong Islamic values, actually. The idea of not being a passive actor in the world and needing to contribute and be involved and using your skills to help others, whether they're Muslims or not Muslims – that's a really strong part of Islamic culture. There are also the values of my parents who were brought up as very strong volunteers involved in many community organisations. All my family members that I grew up with contribute in those ways.

For these women, their Islamic values and upbringings are not barriers to achieving social cohesion; instead, they constitute the underlying reasons why they are deeply committed to creating a more just and inclusive society, and work with governments to these ends.

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[48]   Carland, "Whole Concept of Social Cohesion," 678.

While it is important to recognise the contributions to social cohesion Muslim women make through female family leadership, one must also acknowledge the other side of this argument – that being, there are parts of Muslim communities that seek to limit women's public representation and authority.[49] Some scholars and communities hold restrictive views on issues of leadership and seek to relegate women to the home arena, based on their interpretations of sacred texts.[50] This includes the *ḥadīth* (normative practices of the Prophet), "Such people as ruled by a lady will never be successful."[51] Others have cited the religious concept of *qiwamah* (custodianship), arguing that Islam supports men assuming the roles of leaders over women.[52] Such interpretations have been challenged by scholars who advocate for gender-conscious analysis of societal relationships in Muslim societies, which results in more liberal interpretations of sacred texts.[53] Within these approaches, *qiwamah* is understood to "mean men serving and protecting rather than leading or reigning over women's affairs."[54] Furthermore, when researching the position of women in Islam, some scholars privilege the Qur'ān for its in inerrancy over the "historical contradictions within the *ḥadīth* literature," which are considered the result of historical patriarchal cultural practices.[55]

Despite scholarly debates and more liberal readings of sacred texts, women leaders continue to come up against patriarchal oppositions to their leadership enforced by those seeking to relegate them to their private lives.[56] This includes Maryam, who previously sat on the board of a Muslim peak body. Here, she faced opposition from male counterparts who sought to consign her to "women's work," such as party planning and baking. She said,

> I've had people say to me, "You don't need to come to a board meeting if you don't want to. We just need to tick this box to say that we've got a female on our committee." And I

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[49] Tamer Koburtay, Tala Abuhussein, and Yusuf Sidani, "Women Leadership, Culture, and Islam: Female Voices from Jordan," *Journal of Business Ethics* 184 (2023): 347, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-4036-6.

[50] Noor Mohammad Osmani, Mohammad Omar Farooq, and Abu Umar Faruq Ahmad, "Women Empowerment and Leadership in Islam: Between Myth and Reality," in *Economic Empowerment of Women in the Islamic World: Theory and Practice*, ed. Toseef Azid and Jennifer Ward-Batts (World Scientific Publishing Co., 2020), ebook edition, 39, https://doi.org/10.1142/9789811212154_0003; Nina Hoel, "Sexualising the Sacred, Sacralising Sexuality: An Analysis of Public Responses to Muslim Women's Religious Leadership in the Context of a Cape Town Mosque," *Journal of the Study of Religion* 26, no. 2 (2016): 27, http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/jsr/v26n2/03.pdf.

[51] Muhammad al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, trans. M. Musin Khan, *ḥadīth* 4425, https://sunnah.com/bukhari:4425.

[52] Yusuf Sidani, *Muslim Women at Work: Religious Discourses in Arab Society* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), ebook edition, 64, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-63221-6.

[53] Koburtay, Abuhussein, and Sidani, "Women Leadership," 348.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xvii; Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (OneWorld Publications, 2014), ebook edition; Jawad Syed and Abbas Ali, "Principles of Employment Relations in Islam: A Normative View," *Employee Relations* 32, no. 5 (2010), https://doi.org/10.1108/01425451011061630.

[56] Koburtay, Abuhussein and Sidani, "Women Leadership," 348; Tamer Koburtay, Jawad Syed and Radi Haloub, "Implications of Religion, Culture, and Legislation for Gender Equality at Work: Qualitative Insights from Jordan," *Journal of Business Ethics* 183 (2023): 347.

told them, "I'm not here to run your high tea events. I'm not here for your box-ticking exercise. I'm here to have a voice."

When speaking of Islamic female family leadership, women in this study are not advocating for a removal or reduction of women from positions of public leadership. Instead, they emphasise the need to acknowledge the diverse forms of leadership Muslim women embody. This includes the contributions made within the home, even when this does not fit neatly within Western liberal and feminist understandings of women's liberation.

This is a pressing concern for Badah. As she sees it, there is increased focus within her Muslim community on those who embody the "Western" way of understanding leadership, such as high-profile figures who consult with politicians, engage with the media and publicly represent their communities. This is potentially because of leadership programs that seek to build Muslims women's capacity to be public advocates for their communities, as well as the impact of contemporary feminist movements. While Badah sees benefits to acknowledging this type of leader, "there's a missing bit there." This is the simultaneous community recognition of women who do not fit this contemporary archetype, but nonetheless lead in other ways. For example, her late widowed grandmother who after her husband's passing raised her children with a strong spiritual upbringing. For Badah, these different positions of public and private leadership that women inhabit are not antagonistic but complementary.

Muslim women leaders' understandings of how they help build social cohesion in Australia go further than those conceptualised for them by governments and policymakers. They not only consider their involvement in community level programs and public-facing initiatives, but also their actions within the private domestic arena. Using a traditional Islamic understanding of family leadership and the role played by mothers, they argue a vital contribution they make is through raising children with a strong religious upbringing. The interviews from this study also revealed that Muslim women leaders are committed to helping build a socially cohesive society and see their Islamic values as supporting this objective. While this reveals tension with how the values of migrant communities have been framed in political discourse, as well as intra-community issues surrounding gendered leadership, it also provides the opportunity for governments and policymakers to reconceptualise socially cohesive liberal democratic societies – chiefly the role of religion and female family leadership within.

CONCLUSION

Within Australia, some Muslim women leaders work with governments to strengthen social cohesion because they support these objectives and benefit from these partnerships. At the same time, these women engage in critical reflection and analysis of these relationships, revealing key challenges and points of contention. A prominent theme is that women have felt an expectation to support government policy and be a certain type of Muslim leader that fits non-Muslims' preconceived assumptions. This creates a tension when individuals feel they are only consulted on the basis of their Muslimness; it also causes intra-community friction when it seems that only specific types of leaders are engaged by governments. Furthermore, although

leaders are expected to work closely with governments, being seen to do so creates credibility issues for individuals within their communities. This has been observed when Muslim leaders were connected to countering violent extremism objectives, with a deep-seated distrust of the government in some communities extended to the Muslim leaders they engaged with. Issues of credibility also arise when leaders and their organisations are seen to be financially reliant on governments, with these actors and bodies considered less autonomous and therefore less capable of representing the interests of their grassroots. These tensions impact how Muslim women leaders navigate their distance from social cohesion policy and the extent to which they are willing to engage with governments around these issues. Finally, it is argued that Muslim women leaders' understandings of how they contribute to building social cohesion go further than the actions outlined in government policy. Whereas the latter focuses on women's involvement in community level and public-facing activities, Muslim women leaders also consider their leadership within their homes as a significant contribution to social cohesion. This is based on traditional understanding of Islamic family leadership and the responsibility placed on Muslim mothers to instil religious values within their children. This highlights an underlying tension in how Muslim women leaders and policymakers conceptualise Islamic values in relation to social cohesion. Understanding the sources of tension that exist in Muslim women leaders' relationships with governments and how they are understood is of strategic importance to social cohesion policy, given its reliance on grassroots strategies.

Even though this article has provided deeper understanding of the experiences of Muslim women leaders within Australia's current social cohesion paradigm, it recommends avenues for potential future research. As mentioned earlier, a frustration expressed by several women is that they are exclusively consulted on "Muslim problems," such as issues of Islamophobia and interfaith engagement, and are overrepresented in these activities within their communities. However, these are far from women's only grassroots contributions to social cohesion, with many spearheading local sporting, health and employment initiatives. Future research on women's involvement within their areas is warranted.

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