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Islamic Leadership Programs for Women

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ISLAMIC LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN: HOW SUSPENSION OF THE DOUBLE BIND ALLOWS US TO UNPACK THE ‘MUSLIMWOMAN’

Balawyn Jones* and Feda Abdo**

Abstract: The ‘Together We are Better Leaders’ program was run by Muslim Women Australia for the first time in 2020-2021. Together We are Better Leaders was designed for and run by Muslim women. This article explores participant experiences of the program, analysing the themes that emerged with respect to Muslim women’s leadership in the Australian context. The data analysis illustrates the importance of tailored leadership programs, designed specifically for Muslim women by Muslim women, to foster cultural and religious safety at the intersection of sexism and racism/Islamophobia. Through the creation of a culturally – and religiously – safe women’s leadership program, stereotypes about Muslim women could be displaced – replaced by personal narratives of complex agency grounded in empowerment through faith.

Keywords: *Muslimwoman, Muslim women, women’s leadership, double bind, religious and cultural safety*

INTRODUCTION

Established in 1983, Muslim Women Australia (MWA) provides services and advocates for Australian Muslim women using “faith as a tool for empowerment.”¹ The ‘Together We are Better Leaders’ (TWBL) program was run by MWA for the first time in 2020-2021. The inaugural women’s leadership program was designed for and run by Muslim women. This article explores participant experiences of the program. At its core, the TWBL program aimed to empower Muslim women in their leadership journeys drawing on principles grounded in their Islamic faith. The program objectives were to bring together diverse Muslim women from across Australia to build connections with one another, explore intersectionality as a part of Muslim women’s leadership and develop strategies to enhance each participant’s leadership journey.

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¹ Krayem-Abdo, “The Muslim Women Support Centre Plenary Panel,” *Muslim Women Association*, n.d (on file with author).

Muslim women from around Australia were invited to apply for the TWBL program. Over 70 applications were received. The initial scope for this project involved bringing together diverse Muslim women from around Australia for a face-to-face women's leadership program. However, the COVID-19 pandemic meant the program had to be moved online. However, this meant that women that otherwise would not have been able to be involved in the project due to family and work commitments were able to participate. The online space allowed for multiple avenues of communication, with follow up between TWBL sessions and relationship building taking place via phone calls, messaging, emails and online reflective surveys.

The program ran online from 5 November 2020 to 18 March 2021 across six sessions. The first TWBL session focused on the cognitive and emotional aspects of leadership, exploring development of identities, thoughts and values related to Muslim women's leadership using an intersectional lens. In this session, leadership was defined as "the ability to contribute to the community in productive ways,"² as opposed to being defined as a position, title or role. Building on session 1, the theme for the second session was activism and leadership, featuring guest speaker Senator Mehreen Faruqi, who spoke on how femininity, faith and diverse cultural backgrounds can strengthen Muslim women's leadership and provide authenticity. Participants were encouraged to explore their characters and cultural backgrounds in developing and defining their own leadership styles, acknowledging that Muslim women are not a homogenous group. Following on from this, sessions 3 and 4 focused on supporting participants to find and own their voices, including encouraging participants to practice telling their stories based on the Transformational Ethical Story Telling (TEST) framework.³

The TEST framework acknowledges power imbalances when it comes to the sharing and ownership of people's stories and seeks to remedy these imbalances to create a safe space for storytelling. Conditions within the TEST framework include storytelling readiness – that is, participants should be able to set boundaries when being invited to share their stories and feel comfortable sharing in the context as well as ensuring the environment where stories are being shared is culturally safe and participants have an opportunity for debriefing after sharing their story. Examples of how the TEST principles were implemented include that participants could choose whether to share their stories, use their camera or not if they chose to share their story via Zoom, and could share their story orally or in written form. Further, in terms of cultural safety, it was important that all participants in the group had built rapport over several weeks before stories were shared, story sharing was reciprocal within the group, all participants in the storytelling group were women, and all the participants in the storytelling group identified as Muslim.

The focus of Session 5 was on spirituality and leadership, including how to use faith to strengthen leadership and the role of spirituality in women's stories. As part of this session,

² Together We are Better Leaders program, 2020-2021, session transcript.

³ "Power to the Story Holder," Our Race, accessed October 29, 2024, <https://www.ourrace.com.au/>.

each participant shared an *ayat*⁴ or *ḥadīth*⁵ that inspired them related to the theme of spirituality and leadership (discussed below). Session 6 involved an address from the MWA CEO – Hajjeh Maha Krayem Abdo OAM – as well as participants being given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences during the program.

As explained in this article, the data analysis of participant experiences of the program illustrates that, through creation of culturally and religiously safe women’s leadership programs, the “double bind”⁶ that Muslim women experience in the Australian context can be displaced. Through the creation of a safe space at the intersection of sexism and racism/Islamophobia, stereotypes about Muslim women could be replaced by a presumption of individuality for each woman as a leader who has distinct strengths and faces distinct challenges in her leadership journey. By re-engaging the presumption of individuality for each of the participants, the catch-all idea of what it means to be a “Muslimwoman”⁷ was able to be unpacked and each Muslim woman who participated in the program could engage with the program’s objective of empowerment through faith on her own terms, illustrating complex agency.

METHODOLOGY

Data relating to participant experiences of the program was collected by the researchers via observation and reflective surveys. Data was collected with the informed consent of participants and participant data was de-identified to ensure their privacy. The need for participant privacy is important for protecting participants who chose to share stories related to sensitive issues such as suicide, domestic and family violence, and child loss (discussed in the analysis below). The data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis is a form of qualitative data analysis that “facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns or themes in a given data set.”⁸ Coding of themes was developed iteratively, with the researchers identifying themes as “patterns of shared meaning across the dataset.”⁹

With respect to the dataset, 28 Muslim women participated in the TWBL program – ranging from 21 to 58 years old. Participants came from different states within Australia and a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, including Jordanian, Indian, Indonesian, Pakistani, Lebanese, Arab, UAE, Turkish, East African, Egyptian, Greek and Australian (see Table 1).

⁴ Verse from the Qur’ān.

⁵ Oral tradition or saying of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

⁶ Shakira Hussein, “Double Bind and Double Responsibility: Speech and Silence Among Australian Muslim Women,” in *Challenging Identities: Muslim Women in Australia*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh (Melbourne University Press, 2010) – see the ‘Theoretical Context’ section in this article.

⁷ miriam cooke, “The Muslimwoman,” *Contemporary Islam* 1, no. 2 (2007) – see the ‘Theoretical Context’ section in this article.

⁸ David Byrne, “A Worked Example of Braun and Clarke’s Approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis,” *Qual Quant* 56 (2022).

⁹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis,” *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (2019).

Table 1: TWBL participant data

Participant	Age	Level of education	Cultural background
1.	23	Masters' degree	Jordanian
2.	47	Year 12 or equivalent	Indian
3.	48	Postgraduate diploma	Australian
4.	51	Vocational qualification or diploma	Indonesian
5.	50	Masters' degree	Pakistani
6.	52	Masters' degree	Indonesian
7.	45	Masters' degree	Indian
8.	43	Vocational qualification or diploma	Lebanese
9.	36	Bachelor's degree (honours)	Indian; UAE/Oman
10.	-	Doctorate	Arab
11.	58	Bachelor's degree (honours)	Australian
12.	36	Bachelor's degree	Lebanese-Australian
13.	45	Masters' degree	Indonesian
14.	35	Doctorate	Pakistani
15.	38	Masters' degree	South East Asian
16.	21	Bachelor's degree (honours)	Lebanese
17.	37	Bachelor's degree (honours)	Turkish
18.	51	Vocational qualification or diploma	East African
19.	26	Bachelor's degree (honours)	Lebanese
20.	49	Postgraduate diploma	Indonesian
21.	48	Doctorate	Indonesian
22.	50	Postgraduate diploma	Pakistani
23.	52	Masters' degree	Indonesian
24.	35	Year 12 or equivalent	Indian
25.	29	Bachelor's degree (honours)	Lebanese-Australian
26.	47	Bachelor's degree (honours)	Egyptian-Australian
27.	44	Doctorate	Australian-Greek
28.	37	Doctorate	Lebanese

Participants also came from a range of professions, including academia, healthcare, social work, law, commerce and education. In terms of limitations in the dataset, the findings are limited to the small sample size of 28 participants and the single running of the program in 2020-2021. If the program was run again in the future, there would be a potentially expanded dataset to compare against these findings.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

This article draws on three theoretical concepts to frame the analysis – miriam cooke’s “Muslimwoman,” Shakira Hussein’s “double bind” and Fauzia Erfan Ahmed’s “spiritual colleague model,” which will be explained below.

First, this article draws on miriam cooke’s concept of the *Muslimwoman*, which describes the reduction of Muslim women to a “single image” at the intersection of religion and gender, depriving them of “individuality and agency.”¹⁰ As explained by cooke:

Under Western eyes, an essential (usually negative) Islam is encoded by the oppressed Muslimwoman; in Muslim societies under threat from non-Muslims the Muslimwoman represents an equally essential (but this time positive) Islam.¹¹

When trying to advocate outside their communities, Muslim women are often constructed as “gendered hypervictims,”¹² existing within a “religio-cultural patriarchy.”¹³ While, within their cultural/religious communities Muslim women may experience sexism – outside their communities, Muslim women often face dual forms of discrimination at the intersection of sexism and racism/Islamophobia. Hussein has described this as the *double bind*. Hussein explains that Australian Muslim women are marginalised as “symbols” within Muslim communities as well as within the Australian society more broadly.¹⁴

[C]aught in a double bind between patriarchy and racism...Muslim women feel constrained against expressing dissatisfaction with their communities’ gender norms by the likelihood that their voices will be appropriated by those hostile to Muslims in general ...[therefore] the double bind generates silence.¹⁵

In relation to the double bind, Hussein distinguishes between the “external” and “internal” worlds that Muslim women must navigate. It should be noted that the TWBL program was female-only and involved discussions internal to Muslim communities. In sharing the experiences of TWBL participants in this article, these discussions become communicated with an external audience. In choosing to share these experiences, the authors – who are both Muslim women – are cognisant of the double bind, which is ever present.

Ahmed states, while it is recognised that “binary stereotypes silence Muslim women... little has been written about how Muslim women’s leadership can enable voice.”¹⁶ In her paper, Ahmed outlines the *spiritual colleague model*, highlighting “self-definition and solidarity as key components of voice for Muslim women.”¹⁷ As will be explored below, the

¹⁰ cooke, “The Muslimwoman,” 140–42.

¹¹ Ibid., 142.

¹² Faiza Khokhar, “Reclaiming the Narrative: Gendered Islamophobia, its Impacts and Responses from Muslim Women,” *Social Identities* 28, no. 2 (2022).

¹³ Fazila Bhimji, “Identities and Agency in Religious Spheres: A Study of British Muslim Women’s Experience,” *Gender, Place and Culture: Journal of Feminist Geography* 16, no. 4 (2009).

¹⁴ Hussein, “Double Bind and Double Responsibility,” 159.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Fauzia Ahmed, “Empire, Subalternity, and *Ijtihad*: Two Muslim Women’s Leadership Models in the Post-9/11 US,” *The Muslim World* 101 (2011), 494.

¹⁷ Ibid., 499.

spiritual colleague model is an important contribution to the literature, which currently lacks leadership models for women from marginalised backgrounds.¹⁸ Further, as a collectivist model, the spiritual colleague model challenges individualist constructions of leadership. Individualist constructions of a “civilized Muslim woman leader” – in contrast to “the *civilizable*” Muslim women¹⁹ – do little to displace, and even reinforce, the stereotype of the Muslimwoman.²⁰ However, collectivist models of Muslim women’s leadership, as seen through the TWBL program, recognise the inherent capacity of every Muslim woman to take leadership of her own life inside and outside her home and community.

Further, Ahmed outlines three challenges for Muslim women post-9/11, the first being to “maintain a sense of self-worth and integrity.”²¹ The second is to “contest Western feminist stereotypes without stereotyping white women...[because if] Muslim women are not a monolith, neither are Western feminists.”²² The third is to “defy Islamicist patriarchy without necessarily rejecting Islam.”²³ These challenges align closely to the challenges identified by participants in the TWBL program, as discussed in the next section.

To clarify, these theories were not selected in advance as the theoretical foundations of the TWBL program but were identified during the data analysis process as theories in the academic literature, which aligned with the emerging themes during the coding process. Therefore, while these theories closely relate to the design of the TWBL program and experiences of the participants in this program, the TWBL program cannot be expected to neatly align with every element of these theories.

ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES – UNPACKING THE ‘MUSLIMWOMAN’

The first theme emerging from the analysis is the *suspension of the double bind*. Specifically, how the creation of a culturally and religiously safe space for women resulted in the double bind being suspended. Once the double bind was suspended, the presumption of individuality for each woman was able to be re-engaged. The creation of a safe space for women to share their complex experiences of agency allowed the conversation to move away

¹⁸ While the spiritual colleague model was developed in the US, its core concepts are equally applicable to the Australian context, being a comparable Western democracy characterised by similar widespread Islamophobia post-9/11. In relation to scholarship on leadership, the literature with respect to the leadership experiences of women from culturally and religiously backgrounds is currently limited: Helen Skouteris et al., “No one can Actually see us in Positions of Power’: The Intersectionality between Gender and Culture for Women in Leadership.” *BMJ Leader* 8, no. 1 (2023).

¹⁹ Ahmed, “Empire, Subalternity, and *Ijtihad*,” 509.

²⁰ Shakira Hussein, *From Victims to Suspects: Muslim Women Since 9/11* (Yale University Press, 2019), 11. It tends to be taken as ‘self-evident’ – “the belief that ‘successful’ women must be the products of healthy and supportive social networks. Such women, it is implied, are too well educated, too independent, too strong, to be ‘victims’ of gender oppression. While it is undoubtedly true that many Muslim women benefit from belonging to supportive networks, this type of discourse also reinforces misplaced stereotypes of victimhood.”

²¹ Ahmed, “Empire, Subalternity, and *Ijtihad*,” 502.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

from symbolism and stereotypes. The diversity of experiences that women shared made the façade of the Muslimwoman impossible to maintain. The second theme that emerged during the analysis was *self-definition and solidarity*, values embedded in the TWBL program that align with Ahmed's spiritual colleague model. Third, the analysis highlighted the theme of *empowerment through faith* (also known as spiritual agency) as an outcome of the TWBL program, which aligns with the spiritual colleague model.

Suspending the Double Bind and Reinstating the Presumption of Individuality

As discussed above, Muslim women are often treated like symbols within Muslim communities and reduced to stereotypes outside their communities. Reflecting on her experiences as a Muslim woman within her community, a TWBL participant stated:

As a woman, there are a lot of challenges and I feel like when we try to question the authority, they will undermine you because you are a woman, and the community expects you to be quiet. Those kinds of things sometimes affect you and your mental well-being. It takes courage, I think, to voice your story.²⁴

Another participant identified lack of community support as a barrier to leadership as well as a tendency for her community to seek leadership from males, explaining:

even if a Muslim female holds expertise in field, community will often turn to a male to talk about an area where a woman holds expertise even if the male has no (or a patchy) understanding about the subject matter.²⁵

Working outside her community, another participant stated:

My faith informs how I interact in my work relationships. Femininity and cultural background sometimes present an obstacle in being taken seriously in strategic or leadership decision making or stepping up and being 'visible' and 'out there.'²⁶

With respect to the double bind that she experiences when advocating outside her community, another participant stated:

We are the representatives of our faith whether we like it or not, we are. Everything we do or say or whatever it is we represent an aspect of Islam. We have to be on our best behaviour and our best conduct all the times and be careful of how that is perceived.²⁷

Also speaking with respect to the double bind and burden of representation, one participant stated she suffered from a "fear of making wrong judgements and decisions which will embarrass...my religion and my community."²⁸

In the TWBL sessions, women were given a space not only to discuss challenges that they faced inside or outside their communities as Muslim women but, more broadly, challenges they faced as *individuals*, without the pressure of being expected to speak for or about issues

²⁴ Together We are Better Leaders program, 2020-2021, participant statement.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

specific to their experiences as Muslims and/or as women. Participants spoke of individual struggles, including mental illness, chronic pain, domestic and family violence, infertility and child loss, and intergenerational trauma. “These challenges are neither particular to, nor universal among, Muslim women”²⁹ – which is precisely the point. The space created by the TWBL program allowed women to be complex agents. As explained by Hussein:

responding to images of oppressed, passive Muslim women with sometimes equally two-dimensional images of happy, successful Muslim women reproduces the process by which Muslim women are used to embody entire communities and societies. This process of embodiment places immense pressure on Muslim women not only to represent themselves in a positive light, but also to provide positive, if often sub-textual, messages about Muslim men and Muslim communities.³⁰

By suspending the double bind, the nuanced experiences of Muslim women could be shared and, in doing so, there was an “unflattening” of the Muslimwoman as a two-dimensional symbol of Islam (positively or negatively construed). TWBL participants shared personal challenges including grief from losing a partner to suicide, battling cancer, and struggling with PTSD and depression. Speaking about her divorce and infertility, one participant stated: “I’ve realised that by normalising talking about things it brings to attention the fact that these issues are global challenges and Muslims are not immune to it.”³¹ One participant reflected on the “danger of a single story” for Muslim women and “how the world is feeding on it.”³² Another stated that: “Each of our stories matters and can be used to empower and humanise – by being vulnerable, courageous, and authentic.”³³

The diversity and complexity of Muslim women’s experiences would not be notable in and of itself if not for the broader political context where Muslim women are aggressively stereotyped and constructed as a socially homogenous group. When Muslim women do not fear sexist backlash or racist/Islamophobic appropriation of their stories, they can tell their stories authentically – including stories which involve hardship (but which do not necessitate their static or passive victimhood) and stories that involve triumph (but which do not position them as exceptional or symbolic of the success of Islamic communities in general).

Self-Definition and Solidarity: What do Faith and Femininity have to do with it?

As outlined above, in the spiritual colleague model Ahmed establishes the values of self-definition and solidarity as important components for Muslim women’s voices. Ahmed also sets out three challenges for Muslim women post-9/11, the first being to “maintain a sense of self-worth and integrity”; the second being to “contest stereotypes of Western feminism”; and

²⁹ Hussein, “Double Bind and Double Responsibility,” 162.

³⁰ Ibid., 159.

³¹ Together We are Better Leaders program, 2020-2021, participant statement.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

the third, being to “defy Islamicist patriarchy without necessarily rejecting Islam.”³⁴ The reflections of TWBL participants implicitly and explicitly engage with these themes.

Self-definition

Reflecting on the relationship between faith and femininity in her life, one participant stated that:

Faith has played a huge role. I think it’s the one factor that has kept me sane throughout my life. There have been moments where I have hit rock bottom. If I didn’t have faith, I’m not sure I would be alive today. For a good portion of my life femininity was the standard that I was told to live by. I’m not a feminine person but I was forced to be one and that felt very inauthentic. Now I’ve come to realise femininity comes in all shapes and sizes, and I’ve embraced that. On the other hand, I learnt early on that femininity was also a weakness when it came to leadership. Again, I realise that was wrong too. Culture has always been downplayed. I’ve learnt to keep the cultures I belong to myself and be quite culture-less. However now I’m beginning to embrace it more. There is strength in what culture can teach us.³⁵

This also raises the complicated question of the relationship between culture and religion. Alongside their experiences of living as Muslim women in a Western country, the TWBL participants came from diverse cultural backgrounds. Participants navigated the distinction between their personal cultural backgrounds and their Islamic faith in diverse ways. While some participants stated their faith, femininity and cultural background informed who they were as a person,³⁶ others clarified that they held their Islamic faith paramount above cultural norms. One participant explained:

In terms of faith, I give the first priority to my Muslim identity, I cannot compromise in it. As a Muslim woman I believe that in any society women have a big role to play at home and at work. Hence, it is important for women to have a leadership quality so that they can make a beautiful home for her family and build a better society. In my view, culture is important in some areas in our life but if our culture contradicts Islam then I prefer to go with Islam.³⁷

One participant rejected cultural norms that she perceived to be incompatible with her interpretations of Islam, as well as rejecting the use of the feminist label:

I have no use for feminism! It has nothing it can offer me that I don’t already have with *Allah*. And culture or cultural practices are sometimes in conflict with who our *deen* wants us to be as a Muslims, so I don’t pay much attention to it these days.³⁸

³⁴ Ahmed, “Empire, Subalternity, and *Ijtihad*,” 499.

³⁵ Together We are Better Leaders program, 2020-2021, participant statement.

³⁶ ‘My faith, emerging femininity and cultural background all inform who I am today and, as a result, my story’; ‘Be authentic, tell my story, own my culture, keeping *Allah* at the forefront of all my work, importance of patience’: Together We are Better Leaders program, 2020-2021, participant statements.

³⁷ Together We are Better Leaders program, 2020-2021, participant statement.

³⁸ Ibid.

Further, some participants drew on their Islamic beliefs as the source of their feminist principles, such as gender equality. For example, one participant described leadership in her work as requiring:

an understanding of Islam and gender equality in Islam as most of [my] client's struggles revolve around power imbalance in relationships and misconstrued meaning of the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* on women in Islam.³⁹

While some participants centred their faith and drew feminist principles from Islamic traditions, other participants drew from Western and Islamic traditions in their process of self-definition. With one participant explaining:

I seek to...amplify the voices of those who are less-privileged than I am. However, as a result of being an evolving young person in today's political context, I have had many crises of confidence about how I involve and include my Islamic faith and principles within my activism and leadership, and how I can do this proudly and without compromise to my faith...I have developed my activist principles from Western movements and contexts and believe [that these] neglect the history of activism in Islam, especially among our historically important Muslim women role models.⁴⁰

On the other hand, some participants explicitly rejected what they perceived to be 'Western' approaches to feminism,⁴¹ stating:

Every aspect of my life and every aspect of my being is filled with my faith. It is my faith that drives my thoughts, my actions. It is the stories from the Quran that guide and teach me. I try to follow the example of the greatest leader – our beloved Prophet Muhammad PBUH in the way he led his life and leadership. My faith defines my femininity. I try not to succumb to the definitions given by the Western model of feminism...Whilst as a woman who is proud and glad to be a woman and believe I should have equal and same respect as a man I do not want to be like a man just to get this respect. To do so is a denial of my femininity and ultimately says you only get respect when you compete on the same basis as a man.⁴²

This participant reflection touches on different interpretations of the concept of gender equality in feminist spaces. That is, whether gender equality implies sameness between men and women in terms of socialised gender roles and norms and questions whether some feminist approaches conceptualise equality with performativity of masculine norms. While not all feminist thought in the 'West' promotes understandings of gender equality in this strain, there have certainly been feminist debates in the past over these concepts.⁴³ On the

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Although some Muslim women avoid the term feminism because of its Western connotations, other women practice 'Islamic feminism': Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 44.

⁴² Together We are Better Leaders program, 2020-2021, participant statement.

⁴³ For an overview of 'sameness' feminism and 'difference' feminism see Rebecca Randell, "Beyond Dualism: The Challenge for Feminist Theory" (Masters diss., University of Adelaide, 2020), Section 1.2. For a discussion in the leadership context, see Ronit Kark and Claudia Buengeler, "Women and Leadership: Re-Thinking the State of Research on Gender and Leadership Through Waves of Feminist Thinking," *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 31, no. 3 (2024).

other hand, Islamic feminist theorists tend to conceptualise men and women's roles in society as equal but distinct.⁴⁴ While not all Islamic feminists treat constructs of gender in this way, the participant's reflections highlight (her personal understanding of) Islamic feminist approaches to gender equality in contrast to (her personal understanding of) West feminist approaches. Notably, the way in which the TWBL program was designed encouraged diverse self-definition among participants and while discussions in each session were facilitated – knowledge, relating to interpretations of Islam or otherwise, was not presented in a hierarchical way to the exclusion of self-definition (this is described in more detail in the next section).

Another participant reflected on these themes in a different way, telling a story about her young daughter who – coming home from school one day – innocently shared with her mum that she did not think she could beat the boys in her class at maths because she is a girl. The participant described herself as “a woman who was born and bred in Indonesia, raised by a strong, Muslim mother,”⁴⁵ who was taught that “ambitions were not gender-related [and] from a young age was always surrounded by the idea that girls and boys are equally capable in doing things.”⁴⁶ She reflected on what her daughter shared, explaining:

sadly this kind of feeling [of being less worthy] for girls and women, still happens until today. Both in our Muslim community and in society as a whole. Because of that conversation [with my daughter], I realised that teaching my girls to be honest, kind-hearted and positive is not enough. I need to teach them *self-worth* (emphasis added). I recognise that the only way to teach self-worth for my girls, and women in general, is to reclaim Islam as our religion so that their self-worth does not depend on men's opinions or based on society's interpretations of women but self-worth before God.⁴⁷

She went on to explain that she felt that the meaning of '*hayah*' (a Qur'ānic value often translated as *modesty*) is often misinterpreted in our society, stating:

For me, the real meaning of *hayah* in Islam doesn't make girls or women to be passive beings or quiet...*hayah* is much bigger than modesty [and] it doesn't mean weakness. *Hayah* is about self-respect, self-worth and respecting ourselves as women – about how we carry ourselves daily. *Hayah* doesn't mean that girls/women can't speak up for their own rights, it doesn't mean that others can take advantage of girls or women. *Hayah* doesn't mean that women can't express their views or opinions and let their rights go. *Hayah* in Islam is actually a strength, something that distinguishes you from others, from immorality that surrounds you and makes you brave enough to speak out the truth. The misinterpretations of the meaning of *hayah* in our society is only one example that confuses Islam with cultural practices and fails to recognise that actually Islam has

⁴⁴ Alimatul Qibtiyah, “The Conceptualisation of Gender Issues Among Gender Activists and Scholars in Indonesian Universities,” *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 30 (2012), accessed October 29, 2024, <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue30/qibtiyah.htm>, Table 1 ‘Summary of gender attitudes in Islam.’

⁴⁵ Together We are Better Leaders program, 2020-2021, participant statement.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

empowered women with progressive rights since the 7th century [including] spiritual, intellectual, economic and social rights.⁴⁸

The concept of ‘*hayah*’ encompasses a far more multifaceted meaning than the translation of *modesty* provides. *Hayah* is not merely about external modesty but is deeply tied to the concept of living a life of integrity, consciousness of God and an inherent sense of dignity.⁴⁹ It refers to a moral compass that guides an individual’s behaviour, making them conscious of their actions in the presence of others and, more importantly, in the presence of God. It encompasses self-respect and dignity, a sense of humility, and is associated with an avoidance of arrogance and immodesty, as well as instilling a deep discomfort in engaging in actions that are displeasing to God or harmful to others.⁵⁰ *Hayah* is a value that goes beyond outward manifestations of modesty and can be understood as an internal state of character.

More broadly, participants engaged with feminist principles (whether labelled as such or not) when defining their personal leadership styles, highlighting the qualities of “emotional vulnerability,” “lived experience” and “empathy” as important to leadership.⁵¹ Another participant described herself as “soft, feminine, gentle” and “powerful, strong, an advocate.”⁵² Such reflections on the qualities of leadership are arguably inherently feminist as they do not prioritise traditionally “masculine” styles of leadership above traditionally “feminine” qualities, such as empathy and emotional vulnerability. Another participant shared that in the past they had struggled to find a leadership style that was not “masculine” or underpinned by Western cultural norms.

While some participants focused on leadership in the employment context, other women’s conceptualisations of leadership extended explicitly to their roles in the home. For example, one participant stated:

Being a *Muslimah* is part of my identity and hence my story, my story is incomplete without my faith – being such as major part of who I am. Being a woman, a wife and a mother has also equipped me with tools to navigate different avenues in my life.⁵³

It goes without saying that both forms of self-definition are valid. However, it must be noted that there have often been tensions in the feminist movement regarding the role of women in the public and private spheres.⁵⁴ TWBL participants tended not to conceptualise their personal roles or relationships as incompatible in any way with leadership in their community or places of work.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Zohreh Sadatmoosavi, “The Importance of Modesty Virtue in Islamic Communication; Ethics and Islamic Management,” *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2016).

⁵⁰ Bronwyn Wood, “The Notion of Modesty in Muslim Women’s Clothing: An Islamic Point of View,” *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 8, no. 2 (2006).

⁵¹ Together We are Better Leaders program, 2020-2021, participant statement.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ For example, see Jess Hill, *See What You Made Me Do: Power, Control and Domestic Abuse* (Black Inc, 2019), Chapter 2.

Solidarity

In addition to expressions of self-definition that participants shared within the TWBL program – spanning the themes of self-worth, combatting stereotypes related to faith and femininity, and navigating oppressive social structures related to sexism and racism/Islamophobia – women also spoke of a strong sense of solidarity within the group. For many women, all-female environments can be “affirming, immediately putting them at ease” to express their views more freely and confidently.⁵⁵ Further, in all-female environments women can feel a sense of “recognition, belonging and being accepted.”⁵⁶

As many Muslim women in Australia face racism and/or Islamophobia, spaces for Muslim women must be culturally and religiously safe – in addition to being all-female – to suspend the double bind. As Tanja Dreher and Christina Ho argue, there are long established “criticisms that white or Western feminism prioritises gender over race...It is partly in response to the dilemmas of confronting both racism and sexism that various feminist scholars have argued for intersectional work.”⁵⁷ Specifically in the context of women in leadership, many women from culturally and racially marginalised backgrounds experience “strong pushback in gender equity spaces, particularly from white women, when they tr[y] to suggest that a racial lens be applied to gender equity initiatives.”⁵⁸

In terms of solidarity, it is also significant to note that the TWBL program for Muslim women was designed by Muslim women. Nora Amath has previously argued there is a lack of literature that recognises the “Australian Muslim community’s role and agency in initiating and executing the programs needed to address...issues of social exclusion.”⁵⁹ In her article, Amath cites MWA’s CEO Hajeh Maha Abdo with respect to the work of MWA aiming to:

creat[e] a safe, secure, trusted space to practise and implement our Islamic-Australian identity, which involves every aspect of education, training, employment, [and] social issues...⁶⁰

This description of MWA’s model is broadly consistent with the aims of the TWBL program. By “harnessing trust, reciprocity and *mobilising solidarity*” (emphasis added), the TWBL sought to improve social capital for Australian Muslim women.⁶¹ One participant stated that her “sense of identity/belonging mostly comes from my sisters in Islam...I just feel I’m home.”⁶² Another participated reflected that the TWBL program:

⁵⁵ Gelaye Debebe, “Creating a Safe Environment for Women’s Leadership Transformation,” *Journal of Management Education* 35, no. 5 (2011), 687.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 692.

⁵⁷ Tanja Dreher and Christina Ho, *Beyond the Hijab Debates: New Conversations on Gender, Race and Religion* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 9.

⁵⁸ Diversity Council Australia, *Culturally and Racially Marginalised Women in Leadership: A Framework for (Intersectional) Organisational Action* (Diversity Council Australia, 2023), accessed October 29, 2024, <https://www.dca.org.au/research/culturally-and-racially-marginalised-carm-women-in-leadership>.

⁵⁹ Nora Amath, “Australian Muslim Civil Society Organisations: Pathways to Social Inclusion,” *Journal of Social Inclusion* 6, no. 1 (2015), 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶² Together We are Better Leaders program, 2020-2021, participant statement.

provided a platform and safe space for Muslim women nationally, of different ages, qualifications, and culture to come together and share experiences. We were so different on many levels yet when we were together online, we all appeared the same.⁶³

Another participant described the TWBL program as:

the beginning of connections that will bring out giant changes in the future *inshaaAllah* in the national Muslim community – I believe when we do things together *Allah* puts *khair* [goodness] and *baraka* [blessing]...What stood out most, as invited speakers were sharing their accounts as well as my fellow Muslim sisters sharing their experiences, was...the versatility that *Allah* has created in leadership styles and we as women were connecting and *not competing* to grow.⁶⁴

However, other Muslim-specific, female-only environments will not necessarily yield similar results in terms of solidarity and social capital. This is because the TWBL program was purposely designed based on the principles of empowerment through faith in the context of leadership. However, in the context of the TWBL program, an outcome was to create solidarity between participants in addition to creating a safe space for Muslim women to freely self-define in the absence of the double bind. In relation to the spiritual colleague model, Ahmed argues that the female-only space is essential to the model as “Muslim women feel more comfortable talking to other Muslim women about their problems.”⁶⁵ The difference between female-only, Muslim spaces in general and the TWBL program as a program that mirrors the spiritual colleague model will be explained further below.

Empowerment through Faith: The Spiritual Colleague Model in Practice

As mentioned in the Theoretical Context section, while the TWBL program was not based on the spiritual colleague model, when analysing the TWBL participant reflections the program’s processes and outcomes were found to substantively mirror the principles of the model as outlined by Ahmed. Specifically, the TWBL program was designed to create a Muslim women’s specific space underpinned by empowerment through faith, with the program facilitators seeking to support women’s spiritual agency in the context of their personal leadership journeys. Ahmed explains how the model “creates a safe space for women...which is free of surveillance from the binary gaze”⁶⁶ – or, as it has been framed it throughout this article, which suspends the double bind.

Through the TWBL program, participants reflected on the role of religion in relation to the exercise of their agency as leaders. For example, one participant stated:

As a Muslim woman I have been asking, “What does society need from me?” and then responding with power, agency, and commitment that welled from my spiritual and

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ahmed, “Empire, Subalternity, and *Ijtihad*,” 505.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

religious resources. As we look to the *Qur'an* and our past and see individual women in every century, we can find a wellspring of hope and strength.⁶⁷

During the TWBL program participants shared *ayat* or *hadīth* that inspired their leadership journeys. The *ayat* and *hadīth* shared by the participants reflected Ahmed's description of the spiritual colleague model as allowing Muslim women the "ability to measure oneself on one's own terms...enabl[ing] followers to read the Qur'an and to interpret it on their own terms to define who they are and who they can become."⁶⁸ For example, one participant shared a surah:⁶⁹ "Surah Ar-Ra'd 13:11. *Allah does not change (the condition of) people until they change what is in themselves.*" This verse relates to the theme of agency and self-determination.

More specifically, Surah Ar-Ra'd 13:11 offers insights into the role of individual and collective action in terms of its impact on society. For Muslim women, especially in contexts where they may face challenges or barriers, this verse is a reminder that true empowerment starts with an internal shift. Through faith, women are encouraged to cultivate qualities such as resilience, confidence and a strong sense of purpose.⁷⁰ Drawing strength from faith and having a sense of self-awareness can be powerful catalysts for social change. This can include advocating for the rights of people from culturally and racially marginalised backgrounds, addressing injustices within their communities or leading initiatives that uplift others. The verse implies that empowerment is a spiritual and practical process. One is encouraged to draw on their faith for strength and guidance while also taking practical steps to improve their situation, acknowledging that the inner and outer aspects of oneself and society are connected.⁷¹ This message is not just about individual empowerment but also about the collective effort needed to bring about justice and positive change.

Another participant shared two verses:

Surah ash-Shu'araa 26:62. Verily with me is my Lord, He will guide me.

Surah al-An'am 6:153. ...this is My Straight Path, so follow it and do not follow the other paths lest they divert you from His way.

These verses relate to the theme of faith and steadfastness in belief. Reflecting on the words of Prophet Musa (Moses), when he was faced with the seemingly insurmountable challenge of crossing the Red Sea to saving his people from Pharaoh's army, the first verse highlights the leadership qualities of confidence and trust in Allah's guidance, even in the most desperate circumstances.⁷² Women leaders, in particular, can draw on this verse to cultivate a sense of inner calm and confidence, knowing they are never alone in their struggles. The second verse highlights the importance of knowing and connecting with one's

⁶⁷ Together We are Better Leaders program, 2020-2021, participant statement.

⁶⁸ Ahmed, "Empire, Subalternity, and *Ijtihad*," 502.

⁶⁹ A *surah* is a chapter from the Qur'an.

⁷⁰ Anna Mansson McGinty, "'Faith Drives me to be an Activist': Two American Muslim Women on Faith, Outreach, and Gender," *The Muslim World* 102, no. 2 (2012).

⁷¹ Muhammad Shafi', *Ma'ariful Quran*, vol. 5 (Maktaba e darul 'Uloom, 1998).

⁷² Ibid.

purpose and staying focused.⁷³ For Muslim women who face the challenges of racism and discrimination, alongside the challenges that other women may face in their professional and personal lives, this verse is a reminder to not get caught up in distractions and to realise that articulating an alignment between faith and action will strengthen their leadership.

Further, the following *ḥadīth* shared by participants relate to the theme of social justice and social responsibility:

Imam Ahmed bin Hanbal: All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black, nor a black has any superiority over a white - except by piety and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood. Nothing shall be legitimate to a Muslim, which belongs to a fellow Muslim unless it was given freely and willingly. Do not therefore, do injustice to yourselves.

Sahih Al-Bukhari 7138. Surely! Everyone of you is a guardian and is responsible for his charges: The Imam (ruler) of the people is a guardian and is responsible for his subjects; a man is the guardian of his family and is responsible for his subjects; a woman is the guardian of her husband's home and his children and is responsible for them... Surely, everyone of you is a guardian and responsible for his charges.

These quotes reflect on the inherent equality of all human beings, and the interconnections between justice and mutual responsibility. This is a challenge to any notion of gender-based superiority or inferiority and affirms that women, just like men, are judged by their faith and actions rather than their gender.⁷⁴ This is a powerful foundation for advocating for women's rights and leadership roles within the community, highlighting that leadership is not just a position of authority but one of responsibility and accountability. Women are acknowledged as leaders and encouraged to take responsibility with a sense of purpose and accountability. Leadership is therefore not defined in a limiting way, but in a manner that emphasises integrity, justice and connection to community.

As can be seen from the analysis, Ahmed's description of the spiritual colleague model as – "deriv[ing] its legitimacy from wisdom based on Islamic canon" – substantively aligns with the TWBL program. Ahmed further explains:

This wisdom is not necessarily based on scholarly research. Rather, it is a combination of common sense and reflection on how to apply the meaning of the *Qur'an* in the quotidian ...this model challenges the definition of who can, legitimately, be described as having the power of knowledge.⁷⁵

Further, referencing the spiritual colleague model, Piela emphasises the "need for discursive spaces...where Muslim women do not need to fear abuse or being silenced by

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Mohammad Akram Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Interface Publications, 2007).

⁷⁵ Ahmed, "Empire, Subalternity, and *Ijtihad*," 505.

male interlocutors,” where “women actively assist each other in attainment of Islamic knowledge and provide emotional support to those who ask for it.”⁷⁶

CONCLUSION

Post 9/11, the complex agencies of Muslim women have been flattened into homogeneous stereotypes and Muslim women face a double bind at the intersection of sexism and racism/Islamophobia when seeking to speak out about their experiences. Against this background, the more nuanced representations of Muslim women that are shared, the more control Muslim women regain over the Muslimwoman monolith. More broadly, analyses of Muslim women’s agency are “vital in the process of defining, and redefining” understandings of Australian Islam.⁷⁷

The analysis in this article has illustrated that, through creation of a safe space at the intersection of sexism and Islamophobia and/or racism, the double bind can be suspended and, in doing so, stereotypes about Muslim women are replaced by a presumption of individuality. By re-engaging the presumption of individuality, the Muslimwoman can be unpacked, with each woman in the program given the opportunity for self-definition supported by solidarity between participants. The analysis showed that Muslim women exercise their agency in diverse ways in relation to personal understandings of femininity, feminism(s), culture and interpretations of Islam.

The TWBL program aimed to bring together Muslim women to network and explore the Muslim women’s leadership experiences in the Australian context underpinned by the principle of empowerment through faith. While the TWBL program design was not based on the spiritual colleague model, the analysis in this article illustrated the substantial alignment between this model and MWA’s leadership program. Therefore, it is argued that the TWBL program is an example of what the spiritual colleague model may look like as well as illustrating the benefits of such a model in practice.

⁷⁶ Anna Piela, “‘Women are Believers in their Own Right’: One Muslim Woman’s Challenges to Dominant Discourses Shaping Gender Relations in Islam,” *The Muslim World* 103, no. 3 (2013), 395.

⁷⁷ Ghena Krayem, *Freedom of Religion, Belief and Gender: A Muslim Perspective*, Supplementary Paper – Freedom of Religion and Gender in Australia (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010), citing Haddad et al. in the American context: Yvonne Haddad, Jane Smith and Kathleen Moore, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 122.

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