Chained to the Kitchen Sink?
Sydney Muslim Women’s Public Sphere Activity

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any another degree or diploma at any other university or tertiary institution, and to the best of my knowledge and belief contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited into the university library, being available for loan or photocopying.

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Abstract

Previously, discourse on Muslims in the West has focused primarily on the agency of men, but Muslim women have also emerged as symbols of Muslim identity in these societies. Western media stereotypes of Muslim women as invisible, inactive and powerless have prompted the necessity to understand more about the public sphere activities, gender roles and viewpoints of Muslim women living in the West. For some Muslim women, public sphere activity has taken the form of higher education or paid employment, with many participants pointing out that they are changing people’s perceptions of Muslim women by wearing the *hijab* and excelling at their job or at university. For others, public participation took the form of voluntary work, undertaken both in Islamic and mainstream organisations, which was viewed as a significant part of their contribution to the community.

This thesis has been built around data collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews and social observations including open-ended research procedures. Fifteen in-depth interviews were undertaken with Muslim women in Sydney that explored the topics of family dynamics, employment, education, volunteerism, political activity and gender roles. Data was coded and a thematic analysis was undertaken of both the interview data and observational notes.

Negative depictions of Muslim women in the Australian mass media have prompted a change: gradually, activity by Muslim women in the public sphere is becoming more apparent. This emerging public activity or activism can be seen to be following a clear direction: Sydney Muslim women with family support and encouragement are more active in the public sphere and view their roles within their families and communities in a more progressive way. This research has successfully concluded that similar to Read’s findings (2004) in the U.S., that family support is the primary factor either supporting or inhibiting Muslim women in their public sphere activities.
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## Glossary

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<tr>
<td><strong>Abaya</strong></td>
<td>Long cloak worn by women over other clothing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adhan</strong></td>
<td>Islamic call to prayer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Allah</strong></td>
<td>Arabic for God used by Arabic-speaking Christians Jews and Muslims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alhamdulilah</strong></td>
<td>Thank God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aya</strong></td>
<td>A sign, proof, commandment, law, rule and/or guidance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ayat</strong></td>
<td>The plural of Aya.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dawa</strong></td>
<td>Inviting others to Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Halal</strong></td>
<td>A term designating any object or an action which is permissible to use or engage in, according to Islamic law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Haram</strong></td>
<td>Sin, wrongdoing, offence. It can also mean taboo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hijab</strong></td>
<td>Head scarf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ijtihad</strong></td>
<td>A technical term of Islamic law that describes the process of making a legal decision by independent interpretation of the legal sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Insh’Allah</strong></td>
<td>God willing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mahram</strong></td>
<td>A chaperone that is unmarriageable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PBUH</strong></td>
<td>Acronym- peace be upon him, said by Muslims about Prophet Mohammad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Qur’an</strong></td>
<td>The Islamic holy book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RA</strong></td>
<td>Acronym- Radhiyallahu-Anha- meaning may Allah be pleased with her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ramadan</strong></td>
<td>The Muslim holy month of fasting.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sharia</strong></td>
<td>Islamic law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shi’a</strong></td>
<td>The second largest group in Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subhan’Allah</strong></td>
<td>Often translated as &quot;Glorious is God”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sunna</strong></td>
<td>Customs of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him (PBUH).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sunni</strong></td>
<td>The largest group in Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sura</strong></td>
<td>A chapter of the Qur’an.</td>
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Chapter One
Introduction

The fact is, that Islam neither limits women to the private sphere, nor does it give men supremacy over the public and private life. One notices that the Greek and Roman cultures, which preceded Islamic civilisation, did not produce a single eminent woman philosopher or jurist. Likewise, until the 1700s, Europe failed to produce a single female social, political, or legal jurist. Islam did exactly the opposite in every respect, so much so that Hazarat Umar bin al-Khitatab used to entrust Shaffa bint Abdullah as an inspector over the market in Medina. Moreover, Islamic history is replete with examples of female professors who tutored famous male jurists (Abou El Fadl 1992).

Orientation: Islam in the West

Issues concerning Muslims living in Australia have become increasingly present in the news media over the last ten years. Among issues of national security and terrorism, women’s rights and gender relations are at the centre of Australia’s media discourse on Muslims. The visibility of Muslim women due to their distinctive dress places them at the forefront of the debate concerning the compatibility of Islam and the West. The perceptible nature of veiled Muslim women in the Australian public resulted in several politicians calling for a burqa or even a hijab ban. Anne Aly describes that in the Western media discourse, the image of the veiled Muslim woman is that of “a shrouded figure: a muted reflection of her emancipated Western counterpart, her voice stifled by the perceived gender imbalances of Islamic doctrine” (Dreher and Ho 2009, p. 19). This media discourse tends to give particular attention to the role and status of women in Islam and situates them as a cultural threat in discussions about women’s rights. The recent publication of edited volumes of scholarly articles on Muslim women in Australia (Yasmeen 2010) and (Akbarzadeh 2010) have also created a space to subvert this media discourse.

Muslim women are often represented in the Australian news media as muted and powerless, often reduced to the level of a symbol by their depiction in long black clothing with only their eyes visible. Lakemba, a suburb heavily populated by
Muslims is frequently featured as archive footage in news reports due to the high incidence of women walking the main street in niqab. A person that has never visited an area populated by Muslims could be forgiven for thinking that all Muslim women in Australia dress in this manner and are completely submissive. The act of Muslim women being represented in a passive manner strengthens this stereotypical view of Muslim women. Seldom are Muslim women highlighted in the media for their achievements, nor are they even represented giving their opinion (Imtoual 2005, p. 15). Even during calls from various politicians for bans on hijab and niqab Muslim women were not really portrayed as active in defending their cause, again they were made out to be a passive entity waiting for a decision to be made concerning the permissibility of their preferred mode of dress. The reality for Muslim women in Sydney Muslim communities is quite different. Muslim women lead lives that often directly contradict dominant media representations of Muslims and Islam.

These stereotypes extend to political discussions about citizenship; there have been strong suggestions of a supposed incompatibility between Australian values and Islamic gender relations. During 2006, the then Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, repeatedly drew critical attention to a minority of Muslims who have chosen not to “assimilate to Australian ways” and who have “backward views on the status of women” (Dreher and Ho 2009, p. 3). In this discourse, Australian women are positioned as at risk of losing their hard won equality and freedoms and Muslim women are seen as needing to be saved.

Rarely, if ever, do the popular media offer an insight into the reality of the diversity of the Muslim diaspora in Australia. Seldom do the news media offer an alternative image of Muslim women (Shohat and Stam 1994). This media discourse has positioned Muslim women as inactive, powerless and unable to speak for themselves. My thesis aims to question the accuracy of this discourse through examining the public sphere participation and gender ideals of a group of fifteen Sydney Muslim women. This thesis will explore how Muslim women might change the subject positions and roles imposed on them in the popular media. Consequently, the role of social structures, identity and religious belief as tools of resistance will be

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1 In Alia Imtoual’s 2005 study on media representations her interviewees strongly rejected these false stereotypes. For them, Nazra Ibrahim’s willingness to attend a public event, be photographed by newspaper photographers, and to meet the Prime Ministers’ entourage was evidence of her personal freedom, her intelligence and desire to be involved in non-family-centric events.
evaluated and the elements of choice and agency among Australian Muslim audiences will be addressed.

**Who are Australian Muslims?**

Australia is one of the world’s most religious and culturally diverse populations (Bouma and Brace-Govan 2000, p. 209). Recent migration has played a key role in this. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *Year Book 2006*, between 1996 and 2001 there were just over half a million new arrivals to Australia (Phillips 2007). Although Christianity is the most commonly reported religious affiliation for the majority of immigrants, followers of other religions have shown the largest proportional increase since the 1996 Census, including an increase of 40 per cent of those affiliated with Islam (ABS, 2006:1301.0).

At the 2006 Census there were more than 340,000 Muslims in Australia, of whom 128,904 were born in Australia and the balance born overseas. In addition to migrants from Lebanon (74,850) and Turkey (30,490), the other major source countries are: Afghanistan (15,965) Pakistan (13,821) Bangladesh (13,361), Iraq (10,039), Indonesia (8,656) (DFAT 2008). While they share a common religion, Australian Muslims are a culturally and linguistically diverse group. They speak a range of languages including Arabic, Turkish, Farsi, Bosnian, Bahasa Indonesia, Bengali, Malay, Dari, Albanian, Hindi, Kurdish and Pashtu. Most Australian Muslims are Sunni but there is a significant minority of Shi’a Muslims and smaller numbers of Bektashis, Ahmadis, Alawis and Druze (Phillips 2007).

In view of this diversity and in the absence of a concrete expression of common purpose, it has to be asked whether Australia is home to a single Muslim community. Mainstream public opinion in Australia, the media and policy makers, however, have tended to answer this question in the affirmative (Bouma 1994). Misconceived notions about the social and ethnic background of Muslims have often led to a neglect of their diverse social of ethnic heritage (2003). While in fact there is no single Muslim community with uniform needs and aspirations.

Sydney is the home of more than 161, 000 Muslims. The vast majority of Australian Muslims live in either New South Wales (50 per cent) or Victoria (33 per cent) with smaller populations in Western Australia (7 per cent), Queensland (5 per cent), South Australia (3 per cent) and the ACT (1 per cent) (Phillips 2007). Within
these states and territories, Muslims are concentrated in capital cities. Almost half of Australian Muslims (48 per cent) live in Sydney while another third (31 per cent) live in Melbourne. Thirteen per cent live in other cities while only seven per cent live in regional centers and towns (Ismae Report, 2003:12). Muslims comprise approximately 3.9 per cent of Sydney’s total population and amount to about half of Australia's total Islamic population (ABS, 2006 Census QuickStats). Sunnis are particularly concentrated in the suburb of Lakemba and surrounding areas such as Punchbowl, Wiley Park, Bankstown and Auburn, while the Shi’a population is centred in the St George region of Sydney, with the large al-Zahra Mosque being built at Arncliffe in 1983.

**Perceptions of Islam and Muslims Through International Events**

It is perhaps in long-held European memories that the portrayal of Islam in the Australian psyche has its basis. Particularly given that for over two hundred years Australia has been a country of migrants, the largest share of which comes from Europe and in particular the British Isles. Australia itself has not had any significant conflicts with a Muslim nation, with the exception of the country’s involvement in the First World War against the Ottomans.

At the international level, Australia has a strong connection with Muslims via Indonesia, our neighbour to the North, and the largest Muslim country in the world. The largely Muslim Malaysia is another close neighbour. Nevertheless, certain world events have contributed to a shift in the level of negative discourse about Islam and furthered the widely held belief in Australia, as in the rest of the world that Islam and Muslims are somehow associated with extremism, intolerance and violence.

Examples of such events are as follows:

- The Iranian revolution of 1979 in which the Shah of Iran was overthrown. The revolution was seen as reflecting a rise in Islamic fundamentalism, in particularly an abhorrence of the West. Iranian hostility towards and depiction of the United States as the ‘Great Satan’ certainly provided a basis for this image. Although Iran was only one of more than 56 Muslim countries in the world, what was happening in Iran was generalised to Muslims everywhere (Saeed 2004, p. 184).
Another key event was the furore that erupted over Salman Rushdie’s book *The Satanic Verses* in the late 1980’s, when Ayatollah Khomeini issued his infamous fatwa identifying Rushdie as an apostate who should be killed. The fatwa generated much debate in the Western world, including Australia (Saeed 2004, p. 184). With book burnings occurring in Britain, Pakistan and Bangladesh, Islam was depicted at the time as fanatical, anti-modern and against freedom of speech – the antithesis of the best Western liberal values. Even if this fatwa was largely ignored by Muslims, and condemned as un-Islamic, Islam gained another strike in its image as a violent, mediaeval, fanatical and aggressive faith.

In some sections of the Western media, Arab/Muslims involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict are often portrayed as aggressive, violent, intolerant, fanatical, barbaric, uncivilised, murderous and bloodthirsty (Kahf 1999, p.132).

The Gulf Wars was another important factor in providing an association between Islam and violence. Several articles written by Australian journalists or reproduced from, among others, American and British media, managed to equate Saddam Hussein specifically with Islam and Muslims. Like Khomeini’s fatwa and the Arab-Israeli conflict, this was seen as another battle between Islam and the West.

Terrorist activities committed in the name of Islam whether in the Middle East or in such places as the Philippines and Indonesia, provided further stimulus for a negative portrayal of Islam. Militant Muslim groups have been identified as responsible for, among other things, the murder of foreign tourists in Egypt; the first World Trade Centre bombing in 1993, which bought terrorism onto American home soil; the American embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998; ongoing conflicts in Chechnya and Kashmir; sectarian violence between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia; the bombing of the warship USS Cole in Yemen October 2000, the kidnapping of locals and tourists in the Philippines by Abu Sayyaf rebels and the bombing in Bali in October 2002. Violence conducted in the name of Islam, particularly targeting American or Western Interests overseas, has meant a constant bombardment of news images associating Islam with violence from the Australian and Western media (Saeed 2003, p.186).
Possibly the most shocking example of an activity that cemented the connection between Islam and violence in the minds of many came on September 11, 2001 with the almost simultaneous bombing of the Twin Towers of the New York World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in Washington, and the crash of a fourth hijacked plan in Pennsylvania. Linked to ex-Saudi millionaire Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda network, the events of September 11 again brought Islam to the forefront of the world’s attention. Perhaps more clearly, than through any other event in the past, Islam was seen as providing a rationale for mass murder and terrorism, emphasised by bin Laden’s rhetoric. This has deepened the perception in certain sections of the Australian community that Islam is a global menace and a threat to the ‘free’ world (Dreher and Ho 2009, p. 5).

Both global and local events have contributed to the negative image of Islam and Muslims in general, and while there are many Australian journalists and academics who have provided other voices, a significant section of the media (particularly some of the tabloid newspapers and talk-back radio) focuses on a negative treatment of Islam.² From early on, doubts about the allegiances of Muslims living in Australia have been raised each time there had been a crisis in the world involving Islam or Muslims. These suspicions, which arose even during the First World War, have appeared to grow stronger over the last decade of the 20th century (Kafl 1999, p.120). Ignoring the fact that Australia is a multicultural and multi-religious society and that the Muslim community is extremely diverse, some influential commentators and even politicians have suggested that Australia should rethink its policy concerning Muslim migration.³

**Muslims in the Australian Media**

The most dramatic incident, just weeks before the September 11 attacks in 2001, involved the military boarding the container ship MV Tampa, which had rescued 438

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² Alan Jones and 2GB radio were ordered to pay $10,000 in damages after a court ruled he vilified Lebanese Muslims on-air.

³ Professor Israeli told the *Herald* "When the Muslim population gets to a critical mass you have problems. That is a general rule, so if it applies everywhere it applies in Australia” Zwartz, B. (2007). Limit Muslim migration, Australia warned. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Sydney. In early 2011 ACT Liberal Senator Gary Humphries presented a petition calling for a 10-year suspension of Muslim immigration into Australia. He also called for a review of the country’s immigration policy to ensure priority is given to Christians.
asylum seekers from their sinking boat off the Australian coast, and forcing it to turn back (Madigan and Dickins 2001). This was followed by the “children overboard” scandal, in which government ministers alleged that refugees threw their children into the ocean so that they would be rescued and brought to Australia (Dutter 2001). This was later exposed as a fabrication. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, however, with government ministers suggesting—without any evidence—that some asylum seekers might be terrorists, the Australian public was willing to believe the worst about the Muslim “other” (Poynting 2006, p. 86).

Domestically in the late 1990s, and in 2000 and 2001, a series of sexual assaults described as “ethnic gang rapes” became the symbol of the failure of Australian multiculturalism and the social threat posed by Muslims in particular (Devine 2002). The rapes were committed in western Sydney by two groups of men, from Lebanese and Pakistani backgrounds. In the blanket media coverage they received, these rapes were described as racially motivated hate crimes because the attackers allegedly targeted “Aussie” women (Devine 2002). The public outrage at these crimes led to the passing of new legislation in New South Wales that dramatically increased the sentences of gang rapists, and one group’s “ringleader” was sentenced to 55 years’ jail (Crichton 2002). These cases dramatically brought together issues of race, religion and gender, instigating widespread vilification of Islam and of Muslim men for their alleged misogynistic attitudes, and leading many to argue that multiculturalism posed a threat to women’s rights. As the gang rape court cases continued, public discussions again turned to the veil, a topic never far from the surface in debates on culture and diversity. In one particularly memorable episode, 2002 saw the NSW Christian Democratic Party MP, Reverend Fred Nile, unsuccessfully calling for a ban on the chador, the Islamic headdress that covers the entire body, which he argued could be used to conceal weapons and explosives (Riley 2002). Debates about the veil again took centre stage in 2005, when federal government MPs Bronwyn Bishop and Sophie Panopoulos called for the hijab to be banned in schools, arguing that it was mark of defiance and difference, and rejecting the argument that it gave women a sense of freedom (Williams 2005). In 2010 Fred Nile successfully introduced a private members bill to the New South Wales Parliament calling for people to be banned from wearing a full-face covering in a public place (Hall 2010).
Anxieties over gender, race and religion erupted yet again in the Cronulla riots of December 2005, which saw thousands of Anglo-Celtic Australians gather to “take back” Cronulla beach from the “Lebs” [sic], whose alleged anti-social behaviour and harassment of women had caused widespread resentment among local residents (Silkstone 2005). The gathering ended in groups of drunken young men hunting down and attacking anyone of “Middle Eastern appearance” at the beach (Murphy 2005). This in turn was followed by revenge attacks over the next few days by young Arabic-speaking men who attacked people and property in beachside suburbs (Silkstone 2005). These incidents marked somewhat of a turning point in Australian multiculturalism, which has not generally featured mass inter-group violence as was witnessed on these hot summer days (Kabir 2007, p. 39).

Relations with Muslim Australians took a further battering in 2006, following inflammatory comments from Sheik Taj el-din Al Hilaly, who in a sermon, compared immodestly dressed women to “uncovered meat” inviting sexual assault (Shears 2006). While many Muslim community members quickly condemned the comments, the incident fuelled further public castigation of Australian Muslims as a whole and demands for Muslims to integrate or “ship out”. “Respect for women” became a symbolic test of migrant integration in 2006 and 2007, with political leaders defining gender equality and speaking English as core “Australian values” that Muslims had to learn to integrate fully into Australian society (Poynting 2006, p. 106).

It was against this historical backdrop that the Australian popular media developed an interest in the hijab—the traditional veil worn by some Muslim women. For many Muslim women, those who wear hijab in its various forms and those who do not, the Australian media’s apparent fascination with the veil is somewhat perplexing, often frustrating and at times utterly amusing. In March 2006, an article in the Canberra Times on the practice of veiling in Cairo somehow linked hijab to the number of violent crimes against women and even a ban on abortion in the US state of South Dakota. “Lifting the veil off Yasser Arafat”, an article on Middle Eastern politics in The Sun-Herald, makes an equally tenuous link between a Muslim woman’s dress and the (now deceased) Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (White 1991).

The enduring orientalist inspired image of the muted Muslim woman, swathed in black, gazing pleadingly from the grim shadows of religious oppression, adorns a
plethora of books about Muslim women published over the last two decades or so. It is an image that signifies Islamic orthodoxy; that marks Muslim women as subordinate, backward, oppressed; and that masks a deep concern over the threat of an Islamic presence in Australia to an ill-defined set of Australian values. My Forbidden Face (Latifa and Hachemi 2003); Princess (Sasson 1993); Mayada: Daughter of Iraq (Sasson 2004); Voices Behind the Veil (Mehmet Caner 2003); Price of Honour: Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World (Goodwin 2002); The Face Behind the Veil (Gehrke-White 2006), and Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women (Brooks 1995), are mostly authored by non-Muslim women who claim to have somehow infiltrated the Islamic world and offer readers a compelling (Western oriented) insight into the clandestine lives of Muslim women.

The first Gulf War in 1991 marked the beginning of the veiled symbolism in the Australian popular media. During the mid 1990s, news headlines began using the *hijab* in reference to news articles about Muslims, mostly in connection with the status of women under Taliban rule in Afghanistan, with examples such as Veil of Tears: Cruel regime plunges Afghans into Dark Ages (Willsher, 1996).

By the late 1990s, the veil had become standard reference in news headlines—a handy blanket term for news items that, even remotely, involved Muslims (Dreher and Ho 2009). The saturation of the veil reference in the Australian popular media is evident in headlines such as: The Hijab Jihad (Lopez 2005); Veiled Threat an Insult to All (Devine 2005); Veiled Threats (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2004); Unveiling Feminism in the Koran (Stapleton, 2002); Liberator or Oppressor, Paradox of the Veil (Neill 2002), Hiding Behind a Veil of Outrage (Shanahan, 2002), For Women, the Hijab and the Burqa Reflect their Subjugation (Bone, 2005), Shrouded in Strife (Kerbaj 2006); Nile Warns of Veil Strife (Daily Telegraph 2002), Lifting the Veil on Muslim Women (The Sydney Morning Herald, 1995), and Life Behind a Veil of Islam (Bone, 2005).

In October 2001, an editorial in the Cairns Post entitled What Price Freedom? suggested that accommodating the needs of Muslims in “secular, liberal and democratic” societies would ultimately result in the loss of “the very liberties that differentiate the Western way of life”. The construction of Islam expressed in the Cairns Post is that of an ideology in direct conflict with those values that are assumed to characterise the Western way of life: secularism, liberalism, democracy and,
implicitly, gender equality: “Will Western women, for instance, be forced back into second-class status simply to avoid offending the tender sensibilities of insecure Muslim males?” (cited in Kampmark 2003, p. 86-87). Articles such as this are typical of the media discourse that tends to give particular attention to the role and status of women in Islam and that situates the cultural threat of Islam in interrogations about women’s rights. In this discourse, Australian women are positioned as “at risk” of losing their hard won equality and freedoms (Dreher and Ho 2009, p. 18).

**Muslim Women as Australians**

In some Muslim communities men and women are considered equal and there are laws to protect this equality. However, in several Muslim communities, there is systematic discrimination against women. This can be in a number of areas such as employment, political participation and education. Women in these societies are largely confined to taking care of the household. Much of this diversity is the result of local cultural practices, values and norms. There is a substantial difference in how women are treated in Afghanistan (particularly under the Taliban) and for example Tunisia, Indonesia and Malaysia. Although the situation differs somewhat from country to country and even within one country from region to region or from class to class, women in all these latter countries generally enjoy rights equal to men in many areas. Iran for example, considered by the West as one of the most conservative societies, had women professors, parliamentarians, bureaucrats and ministers at all levels of society. Women’s representation in all levels of government is then comparable to that of some Western countries. This representation allows women to participate in formulating policies that affect not only women, but also the whole society.

In Australia, Muslim women have not been completely absent from the public sphere or political stage and have not be relegated to the private sphere only. Rather, their participation in these spheres has been slowly increasing since the early 1990s (Yasmeen 2007, p. 18). The available data indicates that the national percentage of Muslim women participating in the labour market rose to 26.3 per cent in 1991. It registered a further increase to 30 per cent in 2001 (ABS 2001: E01, E17).

The process was paralleled by increased activity among Muslim women. This, in turn, was necessitated by the increased immigration of Muslims into Australia and
the changing international environment. As Muslims arrived from diverse geographical areas with different cultural backgrounds, it became apparent that their settlement needs reflected both their ethnic and religious background (Yasmeen 2007). The variety of cultural practices among these Muslims also raised issues such as the prevalence or absence of the practice of female genital mutilation in some of these communities. These changes coincided with the end of the Cold War and heightened awareness of Islam and Muslims in global politics. In Australia, the Gulf War of 1990 and Australia’s participation in the coalition against the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait played a special role in this process. Against the background of limited knowledge of Muslims, some in the wider community began to view and portray Muslims in a negative light as explored above (Yasmeen 2007, p.20). Faced with this, some Muslim women opted to become more active in the wider civil society with the twin objectives of ‘correcting’ the negative images about Islam, and helping the recent immigrants to settle into Australia (Yasmeen 2007 p. 23).

The 1990s were also marked by the emergence of groups and organizations in which Muslim women acknowledged the centrality of their Islamic identity but combined it with an equal emphasis on liberal-democratic traditions prevalent in Australia (Yasmeen 1997, p. 20). Initially this outlook was reflected in a group of Muslim women securing State Government grants to hold regular seminars for their communities to impart knowledge about their rights and duties as citizens in Australia (Yasmeen 1997, p. 22). These contacts served as a channel for learning about services for immigrant women as well as articulating their concerns to government authorities. These meetings led to the creation of Al-Amara, a non-governmental organisation, dedicated to helping Muslim women with issues of citizenship. Others began to use the media, such as community radio, to talk to other Muslim women about rights and duties in their respective ethnic languages. Still, others focused on their respective ethnic communities organisations as the vehicles for linking their cultural traditions with their identity as Australian citizens (Yasmeen 1997, p. 20).

The emerging discourse of fear and citizenship prompted Muslim women to become more publicly active than had been the case in the 1990s (Yasmeen 1997, p. 26). Nationally, the change manifested itself in Muslim women’s organisations broadening their agenda. Instead of restricting themselves to women’s needs emanating from their preoccupation with the family sphere, these organisations began
to emphasise the need for political activism and advocacy (Yasmeen 1997, p. 21). The Muslim Women’s National Network of Australia (MWNNA), based in Sydney, for instance, identified “representing the views of Muslim women to federal, state and local Government and to Government agencies throughout Australia” as their second most important activity after networking (Muslim Women’s National Network of Australia, 2006a). In this context they organised training sessions for other Muslim women on understanding the Australian political system, the functions of various federal and state agencies, and the best approaches to engaging them (Muslim Women’s National Network of Australia, 2006b). Similarly, the United Muslim Women Association Inc. (MWA), which had been operating in the Lakemba area (N.S.W) since the mid-1980s, began to organise Media Advocacy Network workshops for Muslim women. The stated aim of these workshops and other activities of the association are to “provide Australian Muslim women with the opportunities to enable them to actively participate in and contribute to Australia’s culturally and religiously diverse society” (United Muslim Women Association Inc., 2000). My thesis seeks to understand not just the ways in which Muslim women’s organisations are representing and advocating for women in the public sphere, but to recognise and investigate the participants’ individual public sphere activity.

With intense debate over women’s status in the Muslim world, paradoxically relatively little is known about the effects of differing cultural backgrounds on the public sphere activity of Australian Muslim women. The transfer of Muslim culture to Australia is thought by some to have a liberating impact on Australian Muslim women. However, the degree to which Islamic values influence attitudes and behaviour among Australian Muslim women is unclear. The Muslim community is far from monolithic, and mixed opinion among Muslim Australians on social issues suggests various outcomes for women’s aspirations and achievements. For example, some Muslim Australians feel that adhering to cultural traditions is essential for maintaining an ethnic or cultural identity, and that women should remain in the home. Other Muslim Australians demonstrate attitudes more in keeping with ‘Western’ ideals of gender parity, supporting women’s education, employment and political and community participation (Bouma and Brace-Govan 2000, p. 43). Could it be that these women are employing Islamic feminist thought?
Within Western Muslim communities, women’s participation in the public sphere is conditioned by several factors. Religiosity, ethnic identity, family support and social class often exert “contradictory influences” on women’s attitudes and behaviour (Read 2002, p. 22). Many Muslim women are able to maintain their piety and family life without having to sacrifice their careers. This distinction between family roles and responsibilities and the importance of labour force participation greatly influences Muslim women’s activities in the public sphere (Read 2002 p. 22). Women in liberal Muslim families are more likely to be members of the labour force and to have more decision making power within their families (Read 2002, p.24).

Muslim women in Sydney have been stereotyped as inactive within the public sphere and this thesis seeks to dispel these myths by showing how this is untrue. Women from my sample are involved in education, volunteer work and paid employment. My research seeks to understand more about the level and types of public sphere activity that women in my sample are undertaking and also the factors affecting their participation.

**Chapter Summary and Thesis Outline**

Khadija’s interview data is exemplary of my choice of chapter topics and order as she has undertaken multiple and varied roles at different times in her life. Just as in the majority of cases in my sample, family support proved to be the most important factor in permitting her public sphere activity. This is also supported by Read’s work, “family and gender relations are among the most important for all major religious traditions” (Read 2003, p. 208). Gaining a higher education was an important step that allowed Khadija to achieve access to other areas of the public sphere like volunteer work or paid employment. She is a twenty-eight-year-old mother of two of Pakistani origin. Previously she has worked as a primary school teacher in an Islamic school and holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Diploma in Education. She also volunteers within various Islamic organisations running the mothers groups. At the moment she is not working outside the home but is dedicating her time to raising her young children. She states that she feels that Australians believe Muslim women are not active, “They think we just stay at home”.

Family support has proven a very important factor in the level of public sphere activity in my sample. Participants agreed that being active in the public sphere was
acceptable for Muslim women as long as the family unit did not suffer because of it. Khadija’s stance on this was replicated across my sample:

It depends on what they do but I don’t think it’s against Islam. It’s only if they neglect their home. As long it doesn’t affect the family balance its fine. Khadija has a lot of family support to be active in the community and to undertake paid work she explained, “My husband is very supportive of anything I want to do. He used to look after my daughter while I taught, I rely on my husband a lot”. Even within the family unit Khadija reported that she had a lot of input, that her husband always consults her on household decisions. This wasn’t always the case as Khadija’s parents had different ideas about how she should live her life.

My parents just really wanted me to get married when I finished school. I went to university more for the social life and the connections. I guess my older sister helped because she used to take me to school when I was in year ten. I think because my parents used to discourage me I wanted to do it more. The first year [of university] my father insisted I study externally but the second year he allowed me to go on the campus.

She reported being heavily influenced by her sister to go into teaching, “My sister was teaching and I looked up to her, I imagined I could also be independent like her”. Having even one supportive family member at home during her younger years made Khadija’s steps into the public sphere much easier. She affirmed the importance of education, “I think all women should be educated to the fullest, they should continue studying for the rest of their lives”. She admits that attending university changed everything for her, “University was amazing. It was a life changing experience for me”.

Khadija reported gaining self confidence through taking part in volunteer activities. About this she says:

I have contributed to the community immensely; I used to teach in Muslim schools. The children looked up to me as a role model. Also helping my students to learn Arabic, it’s a great reward to see them progress.

Khadija believes that it is very important to help the Muslim community, “My husband and I talk about the ways that I can help. We need to provide more services for ourselves as Muslims”.

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Khadija spoke very positively about her time in paid employment and revealed that she would like to return to the workforce one day. For her teaching was a very rewarding experience. She had an opportunity to act as a role model and encourage her students to undertake higher education and to take part in community activities. Khadija reinforced the importance of employment for Muslim women:

I think employment is really important only because we [Muslim women] should be role models, we should be active. We need to show that we have a brain and that we can be part of society.

To answer the aim of my thesis, my thesis will be organised into eight chapters. Chapter two ‘Theory and Context: Muslim Women and the Public Sphere’ sets out to provide a context for my research through examining Public sphere theories and Islamic feminism, which underpin my methodology. Chapter three ‘Methodology’ provides a review of the literature and particularly past studies on which my research is based. This provides my study with a starting point from which new types of data and information can be sort. Chapter four ‘Gender and Family’ is the first of the results chapters because of the integral nature and influence of family and gender roles on all the other following topics. Chapter five ‘Education’ provides an overview to my participant’s views and level of educational participation. Because education was seen by many participants as a type of pass or entry to other areas of the public sphere like volunteerism or employment, this topic is the next logical progression from the discussion on family. Chapter six ‘Volunteerism, Social Involvement and Political Participation’ sets out to highlight the next step or level in Sydney Muslim women’s public sphere participation. Many participants undertook volunteer work as a way of gaining experience and confidence in the public space before entering the workforce or even while occupied with raising their young children. This chapter outlines the importance of these informal activities for my participants. Chapter seven ‘Employment’ is the final results chapter and presents my participants’ views and experiences with paid work. This chapter was left as the final in the series of results chapters as for many of my participants, paid employment was the final goal or the most public and life changing of their activities. Chapter eight brings together all the elements of these four results chapters and sums up the results of my study.
Chapter Two
Theory and Context: Muslims in the Public Sphere

The introductory chapter of my thesis set out the aims, located the parameters of this study and gave some background on gender in Islam and Muslims in the West. In this chapter, I set out to outline the approaches and theories that will be used to interpret the results chapters of my thesis. By looking at these selected approaches and theories we are better able to understand the lens through which the data is understood.

It is difficult to undertake a contemporary analysis of Muslim women, especially in the West, without first gaining a simple understanding of the influence of modernity on Islam and the way in which patriarchy has shaped gender roles within Muslim communities. The recent emergence of the Islamic feminist movement has also made great inroads into returning to the original Islamic texts and re-examining them in order to grant or restore women’s gender parity. The impact of gender parity movements on women’s public sphere participation levels is an important point of investigation in my research. This chapter will discuss Islam and modernity, Islamist movements and modernisation, patriarchy and modern Islam, gender roles in Islam and Islamic feminism.

Islam and Modernity
One of the major thrusts of the Islamist movements in modernity is for Muslims to return to, or hold on to, an “original” Islam and an “authentic” indigenous culture. There is an assumption that the initial Islamic scriptures and tradition (hadith) - the Prophet Mohammed’s deeds and acts - are unambiguous and precise (Ahmed 1993, p. 145). Yet, as the writings by Muslim feminists have demonstrated, this is far from the truth. It is recognised by some that throughout history the different interest groups have taken advantage of the ambiguous nature of the Islamic scriptures and used them to their advantage. In a way, it is this deliberate manipulation of Islamic scriptures for political reasons that continues to be one of the main problems with the definition of a

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4 Modernity typically refers to a post-traditional, post medieval historical period, one marked by a move from feudalism towards capitalism, industrialisation, secularisation, rationalisation, the nation-state and its constituent institutions and forms of surveillance. Conceptually, modernity relates to the modern era and to modernism, but forms a distinct concept (Barker, 2005:444).

5 See Mernissi, Ahmed, Wadud, Barlas, Mahmoud.
woman’s position in Islam or rather in the name of Islam. In her book *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Fatima Mernissi skilfully illustrates the mechanics of such political ploys (Mernissi 1987). Similarly, Leila Ahmed argues that:

… The meaning and social articulation of gender informing the first Islamic society in Arabia differed significantly from those informing the immediately succeeding Muslim societies, including most particularly those of the society that contributed centrally to the articulation of the founding institutional, legal, and scriptural discourses of dominant Islam (Ahmed 1993, p.165).

The androcentric and misogynist biases of this dominant Islam have the effect of marginalising the egalitarian tendency of Islam. Thus, Ahmed goes on to argue that even as Islam “instituted a sexual hierarchy, it laid the ground, in its ethical voice, for the subversion of the hierarchy” (Ahmed 1993, p. 166).

**Islamist Movements and Modernisation**

In practice, Islamist movements often share considerable common ground with secular political positions in Islamic societies, and with Third World nationalist movements. Both have tended to respond to the challenge of the West by creating a division between an outer public male sphere - that of government, industry, and public life - and an inner private sphere. In the public sphere, traditional practices were seen as backward and obstructive, and were appropriately replaced by the modern state. The inner and private sphere of the domestic life and the family, had to remain sacrosanct. This female and private sphere was the appropriate place for the maintenance of the traditional cultural heritage, symbolised and ensured by the maintenance of a woman’s traditional role within the family (Rouse 1996, p. 32).

For the Islamists in particular, modernism, colonialism, and feminism were combined into a single composite enemy (Rouse 1996, p. 40). However, all three forms of discourse—Western, indigenous nationalist and Islamist - conspired, in effect, to marginalise and silence the lived reality of women’s experience in Islamic societies. Women became symbols, either of oppression or of cultural survival. The ‘Muslim woman’ served her purpose for the West as she did for the indigenous male elites of Muslim societies, while the variety and complexity of positions, roles, and
identities for women within Muslim societies disappeared behind this generalised stereotype (Lazreg 1990, p. 89).

**Patriarchy and Modern Islam**

For women living in Muslim societies, endorsement of Islamic values, or adopting the *hijab* as a mode of dress in public, therefore, does not imply a simple submission to a male elite. Instead, it can best be seen as part of what Deniz Kandiyoti has referred to as the “patriarchal bargain”, in which women accept the structures of the dominant system but negotiate a more positive position and role within it (Kandiyoti 1991).

Women strategise within a set of concrete constraints, which are identified patriarchal bargains. Different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct “rules of the game” and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance. This can be accomplished through wearing prescribed religious dress, through marrying and giving birth to male children and also in obedience to one’s husband and mother in-law. “Modern” changes in the socio-economic spheres have led to changes in gender relations everywhere, weakening what Kandiyoti called “classic patriarchy” (Kandiyoti 1991, p. 141). Nevertheless, despite some gains made by women, “it is clear that sexual politics is at the centre of Islamist movements”, which seek the reordering of society and the construction of a new moral and cultural order based on rigid sex roles and the exaltation of the patriarchal family (Kandiyoti 1991, p. 54).

Women living in Muslim communities in the West are in a more complex situation again, particularly for those who are born and educated in Muslim societies. The espousal of Islamic values, in a form of the “patriarchal bargain,” may be an attractive option for many of these women, particularly those from middle-class and relatively privileged backgrounds (Kandiyoti 1991, p.150). Writers such as Rana Kabbani in the United Kingdom have presented the positive aspects of Islamic identity, for women as well as men (Kabbani, 1986 p. 21). Some women report a feeling of freedom within these religious and community rules explaining that this way everybody knows their place in the family and community.

For other Muslim women, such options may be more problematic. Younger, Western-born or predominantly Western-educated women, particularly from working class and poorly educated families, are perhaps most likely to find themselves in
conflict with their family and community over issues such as marriage, relations with men outside the community, and personal autonomy in general. Living in a country where its values may contradict those of their own community offers these women the possibility of contesting Islamic values, but to do so means to reject their own community, and the personal price can be high.

**Gender Roles and Islam**

In Muslim societies or diaspora communities, women and men are expected to behave according to socially, culturally and religiously constructed gender roles. These are created to distinguish between what is considered to be part of ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ gender. These gender roles are learned within a particular social and cultural context and are affected by education and economics. In practice, gender roles often adversely affect women, impeding their self-determination in areas like their socio-economic status, place within the family, health, life expectation, independence, freedom and rights (gender bias).

The complex relationship between women and Islam is defined by both Islamic texts and the history and culture of the Muslim world. While men and women have different roles within Islam, the Qur’an makes it clear that they are equal. Shari’a, or Islamic law, provides for differences between women's and men's roles, rights, and obligations. Conservatives argue that differences between men and women are due to different status, while liberal Muslims, Muslim feminists, and others argue in favor of other interpretations. Although the Qur'an views women and men to be equal in human dignity, this spiritual or ethical equality has not been reflected in some Islamic laws. For example, women do not have equal rights to a divorce and custody of their children. Reformists and feminists have challenged women’s lack of rights and lack of control over their own lives under Islamic laws (Mernissi 1987; Barlas 2002).

Central to this challenge has been the reinterpretation of Qur'anic verses, which seemingly privilege men over women and reinforce gender roles. Qur'an verse 4.34, which refers to men as ‘guardians’ (qawamun) over women, has been used to justify gender roles and male privilege over women.⁶ Reformist and feminist scholars have argued that the concept of guardianship has formed the basis of particular

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⁶ For details of this and other verses see Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan & Fatima Mernissi.
‘gendered’ roles in Muslim societies. Women are often expected to be obedient wives and mothers, staying within the family environment and men are expected to be protectors and caretakers of the family (Wadud 1999).

These reformist scholars have explored how verse 4:34 has been interpreted and used to limit women’s autonomy, freedom of movement and access to economic opportunities and independence. They believe that the concept of ‘guardianship’ was meant to ensure that a woman who is bearing and or nurturing children, is provided for by her husband while undertaking this task. Feminist scholars believe this economic safeguard has been extended through the concept of guardianship to create a rigid division of gender roles and social control of men over women. This extension of male guardianship over women has become embodied in Muslim laws and is embedded in Muslim societies.

**History of Islamic Feminism**

**Feminisms are produced in particular places and are articulated in local terms.**

*Islamic feminism is a form of feminism concerned with the role of women in Islam. It aims for the full equality of all Muslims, regardless of sex or gender, in public and private life. Islamic feminists advocate women's rights, gender equality, and social justice grounded in an Islamic framework (Badran 2008).*

Although rooted in Islam, the movement's pioneers have also utilised secular and European or non-Muslim feminist discourses and recognise the role of Islamic feminism as part of an integrated global feminist movement. Advocates of the movement seek to highlight the deeply embedded teachings of equality in the Qur’an and encourage a questioning of the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teaching through the Qur’an, *hadith* and *shari’a* towards the creation of a more equal and just society. Muslim majority countries have produced more than seven female heads-of-state including Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Mame Madior Boye of Senegal, Tansu Çiller of Turkey, Kaqusha Jashari of Kosovo and Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia. Bangladesh was the first country in the world to have a female head-of-state followed by another, namely Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina (Badran 2008, p. 14).

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The term ‘Islamic feminism’ began to be visible in the early 1990s in various global locations. It was from the writings of Muslims that the term developed. Iranian scholars Afsaneh Najmabadi and Ziba Mir-Hosseini explained the rise and use of the term Islamic feminism in Iran by some women as well as men, writing in the Tehran women’s journal Zanan, which Shahla Sherkat founded in 1992 (Badran 2002). Saudi Arabian scholar Mai Yamani used the term in her 1996 book Feminism and Islam (Yamani and Allen 1996). Turkish scholars Yesim Arat and Nilufer Gole in the book The Forbidden Modern (translated into English in 1996) used the term Islamic feminism in the 1990s to describe a new feminist paradigm they detected emerging in Turkey (Gole 1997). South African activist Shamima Sheikh used the term Islamic feminism, as did her co-activists male and female. By mid 90s there was growing evidence of Islamic feminism as a term created and circulated by Muslims in far-flung corners of the Muslim World.

Some Muslim women, as seen from the foregoing remarks, describe the articulation and advocacy of a Qur’an mandated gender equality and social justice as Islamic feminism. Others, however, do not call this Islamic feminism, instead describing it as a woman centred rereading of the Qur’an and other religious texts by ‘scholar activists’ a term found in Windows of Faith, edited by Gisela Webb (Webb 2000).

**Contributions to Islamic Feminism**

The producers and users of Islamic feminist discourse include those who may not accept the Islamic feminist label or identity. They also include religious Muslims (by which is typically meant the religiously observant), secular Muslims (whose ways of being Muslim may be less publicly evident), and non-Muslims. It must be added that while most Muslims use the adjectives ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ to label themselves or others, there are Muslims who feel uneasy about these terms. It is important to historicise or contextualise the use of the terms religious and secular, as they mean different things in different times and places. Finally, it is useful to remember that these terms comprise porous rather than rigid categories.

Some who engage in the articulation and practice of Islamic feminism asserted an Islamic feminist identity from the start. These include contributors to the Iranian journal Zanan, South African exegetes and activists, and women belonging to the
group Sisters in Islam in Malaysia. Others, and these include many of the key producers of Islamic feminist discourse or new gender-sensitive Qur’anic interpretation, have been reluctant to identify themselves as Islamic feminists or even simply feminists. Fatima Mernissi author of *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Inquiry* (published originally as *Le Harem Politique* in 1978 and first in English in 1991), and who produced what was to become one of the core texts in Islamic feminism, is a secular feminist and would not call herself an Islamic feminist (Mernissi 1993).

Some of the religiously identified women producers of Islamic feminist texts have changed their positions in more recent years. In the past, Amina Wadud, the African-American Muslim theologian and author of the landmark 1991 book the *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s perspective*, adamantly objected to being labelled an Islamic feminist. She now shows less concern if identified as such - what is important to her is that people understand her work. However, Wadud does bristle when she is slammed as a ‘Western feminist’ decrying the pejorative use of both “Western” and “feminist” in the preface of her 1999 Oxford University Press edition. This devout Muslim woman asks “What’s wrong with being Western?” Let us not forget that there are large and growing numbers of Western Muslims or Muslims in the West of whom Wadud is one. As for discrediting feminism, she snaps back: “No reference is ever made to the definition of feminism as the radical notion that women are human beings” (Wadud 1999 p. xviii). Riffat Hassan, an American-based theologian of Pakistani origin has also come to accept the Islamic feminist designation – concerned most, like Wadud that her work be understood (Hassan 1995).

**Islamic Feminism and the World Today**

Islamic feminism is a global phenomenon. It is not a product of the East or the West. As already noted, Islamic feminism is being produced by Muslim women from both majority and minority communities in Africa or Asia as well as from immigrant and convert communities in the West. Islamic feminism is circulating with increasing frequency in cyberspace (Anderson 2003, p. 891).

Globally, English is the major language in which Islamic feminist discourse is articulated and circulated. At the same time, it is expressed in a large number of local
languages. In order to do Qur’anic interpretation and closely read other Islamic religious texts, mastery of Arabic is essential. With the spread of Islamic feminist interpretation Arabic loan words, such as *ijtihad* (independent investigation of religious sources), are entering English. Since English is the common language of Islamic feminism, the feminist terminology available in that language is also being accessed.

Islamic feminism transcends and eradicates old binaries. These include polarities between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ and between ‘East’ and ‘West’. I stress this because not infrequently there are those that see Islamic feminism as setting up or reconfirming dichotomies. Margot Badran, in her writing and public lectures, has argued that Islamic discourse does precisely the opposite: it closes gaps and reveals common concerns and goals, starting with the basic affirmation of gender equality and social justice (Badran 2006). Suggestions or allegations of a supposed “clash” between secular feminism and religious feminism may result from ignorance - or, more likely, from a politically motivated attempt to impede solidarities among women.

The pioneering secular feminisms in Egypt and other Arab countries have always had space for religion. The founding Egyptian feminist discourse was anchored simultaneously in the discourse of Islamic reform and secular nationalism. Secular feminism (often simply called feminism) offered Islamic arguments in demanding women’s rights to education, work and political participation - along with secular nationalist, humanitarian (later human) rights, and democratic arguments. When feminists pleaded for changes to the Muslim personal status code they advanced Islamic arguments.

Islamic feminism uses Islamic discourse as its paramount – although not necessarily its sole discourse, in arguing for women’s rights, gender equality, and social justice. Islamic feminist discourse in Iran draws upon secular discourses and methodologies to strengthen and extend its claims. Wadud, in her gender sensitive interpretation of the Qur’an, combines classical Islamic methodologies with new social science tools and secular discourses of rights and justice while retaining a firm and central grounding in Islamic thought.

Some of the specific activist goals of the Islamic feminists are the same as those articulated earlier by secular feminists, such as changes in various national
Muslim personal status codes. Often, when secular and Islamic feminists try to work together for common goals, they are inhibited by competing political forces. This happened in Yemen following the successful drive by a coalition of a wide spectrum of women to prevent a regressive personal status law from being enacted in 1997.

Islamic feminism argues that the Qur’an affirmation of the principle of equality between women and men (and other categories of people) has been impeded or subverted by patriarchal ideas (ideology) and practices. Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), consolidated in its classical form in the 9th century, was itself heavily saturated with the patriarchal thinking and behaviours of the day. It is this patriarchal inflected jurisprudence that has informed the various contemporary formulations of shar’ia. The hadith – the reported, but not always authentic, sayings and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed – have also been often used to shore up patriarchal ideas and practices. Sometimes hadith are of questionable provenance or reliability, and at times they are used out of context, with negative consequences for women. The priority of Islamic feminism is to go straight to Islam’s fundamental text, the Qur’an. However, while some women centre their attention on the interpretation of the Qur’an,8 others scrutinise formulations of shar’ia-backed laws (Al-Hibri 1982), while yet other’s re-examine the hadith (Mernissi 1993).

Reinterpreting the Qur’an

The basic methodologies of Islamic feminism are the classic Islamic methodologies of ijithad and tafsir (interpretation of the Qur’an). Used along with these methodologies are the tools of linguistics, literary criticism, sociology, and anthropology, and so on. In approaching the Qur’an, women bring their own experience and questions relating to them as women. They point out that classical, and also much post-classical, interpretation is based on men’s experiences, male-centric questions, and the overall influence of the patriarchal societies in which they lived.

The new gender-sensitive or feminist hermeneutics renders compelling confirmation of the principle of gender equality in the Qur’an that was lost as male interpreters constructed a corpus of tafsir promoting a doctrine of male superiority, reflecting the mindset of the prevailing patriarchal cultures. There are many verses (ayat) of the Qur’an that declare male-female equality. Aya 13 in Sura 49 (al-

8 See Amina Wadud, Rifat Hassan.
Hujurat): “Oh humankind. We have created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into tribes and nations that you may know each other [not that you may despise each other]. The most honoured of you is the sight of God is the most righteous of you [the one practising the most *taqwa*].” Ontologically, all human beings are equal. They are differentiated by the practice of *taqwa* or God consciousness (Wadud 2004).

**Feminist Approaches**

Feminist hermeneutics distinguishes between the universal and timeless, and the particular and contingent. Certain practices are controlled and condoned as a way to encourage people on the path to behaving with fuller justice and equality in their human interactions. Feminist hermeneutics has taken three approaches:

1. Revisiting verses of the Qur’an to correct false stories in common circulation, such as the accounts of creation and the events in the Garden of Eden that have shored up claims of male superiority;
2. Citing verses that unequivocally enunciate the equality of women and men; and
3. Deconstructing verses attentive to male and female differences that have been commonly interpreted in ways that justify male domination.

Islamic feminism serves people in their individual lives, and can be a potent force in improving state and society. Second-generation Muslim women in diaspora communities in the West are often caught between their ways of life and the cultural practices imported by their parents who immigrated from the Middle Eastern or South Asian countries, and imposed in the name of Islam. Islamic feminism helps such women to unravel patriarchal customs and religion. It gives them Islamic ways of understanding gender equality, societal opportunity, and their own potential. Meanwhile, Islamic feminist discourse is also relevant in predominantly Muslim countries in parts of Africa and Asia as people try to construct a new and more equalitarian understanding of their religion in order to change old mindsets and cultural practices that purport to be Islamic.

In re-examining the Qur’an along with the *hadith*, Islamic feminists, answering back to those who allege otherwise, are making cogent arguments that
Islam does not condone wanton violence against women; they underscore this point that violence against women is indeed un-Islamic. This alone will not put an end to violence, but it is one of several weapons against it. The Malaysian group Sisters in Islam is one among many and one of the earliest to be outspoken in print that have decried violence against women perpetrated in the name of Islam in a pamphlet called *Is Wife Beating Permissible in Islam?* which they widely distributed, texts.

Islamic feminism insists on full equality of women and men across the public-private spectrum. Secular feminists historically accepted the idea of equality in the public sphere and the notion of complementarianism in the private sphere. Islamic feminism argues that women may be heads of state, leaders of congregational prayers, judges and muftis. In some Muslim majority countries, Muslim women function as judges, some as prime ministers and heads of state. Islamic feminism has real world implications for Muslims of both sexes, as well as non-Muslims living side by side with Muslims everywhere.

**The Significance of Islamic Feminism**

The recent emergence of the Islamic feminist movement has made great progress in returning to the original Islamic texts and re-examining them in order to grant or restore women’s gender parity. The impact of various gender parity movements and academic discourses on women’s public sphere participation levels is an important point of investigation in my research. Little is known about the affects of such academic movements and discourses on the lives and public participation levels on Muslim women, especially in the West.

A trend is present in my research data in which participants described their rights and responsibilities as Muslim women in terms of the lifestyles of some of the first Muslim women, the Prophet Mohammed’s wives Aisha and Khadija. The Islamic feminist philosophy of returning to the original texts to correct false stories or interpretations seems to be a tactic employed by many Muslim women both in the West and within Islamic states. As will be explained in my thesis, returning to their sacred texts often assists in providing a legitimacy and support for their wish to be more active in their communities and within the public sphere in general.
The Public Sphere and Muslim Women

When undertaking a sociological study involving ideas of the public and private sphere, or public and private spaces, it is important to define what the public sphere means in a Muslim or Islamic context.

For well over a generation, the public sphere in Islam has been an arena of contest in which activists and militants brought forth challenges to traditional interpretative practices and authority to speak for Islam, especially to articulate its social interests and political agendas (Gole 2002, p. 180). The escalating emphasis on the private domain, and the central concern for protecting that which is private from public intruders, has at times gained unprecedented intensity. What demarcates the public from the private sphere undoubtedly depends upon a complex set of cultural, political and economic factors, and as a result of the interaction between such factors the line of demarcation inevitably has to shift. From among the cultural factors, religion stands out as one of the most decisive components in delimiting the two spheres.

Although the idea of the public is Western in its origins and its basic features are understood as universal access, individualism, equality and openness, it circulates and moves into contexts other than the West (Gole 2002, p.183). How does Islam, as one of the vibrant religions of the contemporary world, differentiate between the public and private? What is the extent of privacy in the Islamic point of view? What similarities and differences are there between the Islamic and the Western perceptions of privacy? Does the extent of the private sphere change or perhaps shrink in a society that is run according to Shari’a? What is the Islamic point of view on such concepts as the individual, family, society and government? Islam has acquired new forms of visibility over the last two decades as it has made its way to both Muslim and Western societies (Gole 2002, p. 184). The terms of public debate are being transformed by the eruption of religious issues; Islamic films and novels are becoming popular subjects of cultural criticism; new spaces, markets and media are opening up in response to the rising demands of recently formed Muslim middle classes. Islam carves out a public space of its own as new Islamic language styles, corporeal rituals, and spatial practices emerge and blend into public life.

The terms ‘public’ and private are not rooted in the heart of Islamic doctrine. The two terms occur neither in the Qur’an nor in the traditions conveyed from the prophet and the imams (Anderson 2003, p. 901). Three distinct yet related meanings
may be gleaned for what is ‘private’ from the available literature (Boruch 2001, p. 1267): first, that which is personal or exclusive to the individual; second, that which one would rather keep concealed and protected from others; third, that over which the individual exercise exclusive authority and control. In contrast, in the public sphere, nothing is kept secret from or rendered by the citizens: the management, improvement, and alteration of the public sphere are prerogative of the citizenry. The public sphere is the sphere of influence for governmental authority (Anderson 2003, p. 905). This domain is jointly owned by all citizens, and as a transparent container, its contents are in everyone’s plain view. Islamic jurisprudence, in accordance with the two criteria given here, fully acknowledges the sanctity of the private domain: there is ample admonition against prying into the affairs of others. All matters are assumed to belong to the private domain unless they are proved to belong to the public sphere. On this basis, selecting an occupation, spouse, name, form of living and clothing are the component of private life. Adhering to Islamic criteria, people are completely free in the private domain. But as soon as the individual enters the public domain, there are limitations that are imposed on him or her by the law, in any society. Individuals in the public domain are limited with regard to clothing, sexual behaviour, and certain forms of social conduct that may vary from one culture to another. These limitations, which can be grouped into such categories as clothing, sexual relationships, eating, and drinking, along with economic and even religious relationships, show the private sphere in Islamic culture to be smaller than the norm in the contemporary world, and accordingly show the Islamic public domain to be further stretched than that prevalent elsewhere in the world. Individual freedom in the public domain becomes limited by this necessity; therefore, we need to describe the scope of its effect and the sphere of its influence. In other words, the boundaries of the private sphere would most likely shrink to those of one’s private domicile: all individual matters visible to the public eye, even those of completely personal and private nature, would be considered as belonging to the public sphere. By taking into account these points, the public and private spheres in Islamic society will remain a balanced equilibrium. The articulations and tensions between two different cultural codes, modern and indigenous, intervene in distinguishing and defining public and private spheres, interior and exterior spaces.

Two bodies of theory are useful for thinking through these issues and how they play out in Muslim diaspora communities. One is Habermas’ theory of the public
sphere as a form, locus, and activity of communication relatively unfettered by demands of status and the ritual representation of the formal authority (Habermas 1991). He identified its practical emergence with the intermediate space of coffee houses and salons, where private citizens could assemble as a public, between the private space and personalised authority of kin and the public realm marked by the theatre or royal and religious ritual. This view has been roundly critiqued, mostly for narrowness as sexist, classist; Eurocentric and illiberal by modern standards (Calhoun, 1992, p. 124). These critiques pertain more to how Habermas tied this conception of a public sphere so tightly and specifically to modernisation, and that to rationality, than to the essential identification of the emergence of new public spheres around communications relatively freed from demands of ritual representation, particularly mystical authority.

Gilles Kepel (2002), a long-time observer of political Islam and a chronicler of its irruptions, which he designated ‘Islamism,’ more recently speaks of an increasingly ‘post-Islamist’ public sphere and Dale Eickelman (1998) of an ‘Islamic reformation’ in the combination of more voices, skills and experiences reshaping that public sphere. This could be no more than reclaiming religion from the public sphere of politics; if so, that is important. Here, for understanding the contemporary public sphere of Islam, it may be useful to distinguish self-consciousness as the tipping point of the public sphere, in order to free that notion from its political touchstones.

Religious signs and practices have been silenced as the ‘modern’ public sphere has set itself against the Muslim social imaginary and segregated social organisation; modern codes of conduct have entered public spaces ranging from parliament and educational institutions to the street and public transportation. According to Gole, in a Muslim context, women’s participation in public life, corporeal visibility and social mixing with men all count as modern (Gole 2002, p. 186). The modern gendered subject has been constituted through women role models and repetitive performances, including language styles, dress codes, modes of habitation and modes of address. Here we see the social imaginary of the public sphere at work. While it adheres to some of the basic universal principles of the Western public sphere, these principles are selectively highlighted, coupled and translated into social practices that are creatively altered as well. The central stakes of the modern subject are worked out in tension with the Muslim definitions of self; consequently the access of women to public life and gender equality acquires a more salient signification in the public
imagination of Muslim societies. The ways in which Islam emerges into the public sphere defy modernist aspirations for a civilised or Westernised and emancipated self yet follow a similar pattern in regard to the gender, body and space issues. In the West the *hijab* is deliberately appropriated not passively carried and handed down from generation to generation. It is claimed by a new generation of women who have had access to higher education and as such more access to the public sphere.

The social dispute generated by the public visibility of Islam is carried by corporeal performances and self-presentations rather than by textualised forms of subjectivities and discursive practices. The public sphere is not simply a pre-established arena; it is constituted and negotiated through performance (Gole 1997). In addition to constituting the public sphere, these micro-practices enact a way of being public. The Islamic dress code exemplifies this performative reflexivity. Through repetition, rehearsal and performance, the practice of veiling is reproduced again and again, acquiring legitimacy and authority and contributing to the making of a modest pious self. In a Muslim context, women’s visibility and the social mixing of men and women attest to the existence of the public sphere. For example, even in Turkey, women as public citizens and women’s rights are more salient than citizenship rights in the Turkish modern imaginary (Gole 2002 p. 56). Women’s participation in public life as citizens and as civil servants, their visibility in urban spaces and their socialisation with men all define their modern secular way of life and indicate a radical shift from the social organisation and gender roles framed by traditional Islam.

Women are symbols of the social whole: home and outside, interior and exterior, private and public. They stand in for the making of the modern individual, for the modern ways of being private and public (Gole 1997, p. 56). Women’s corporeal and civic visibility as well as the formation of heterosocial spaces underpins the stakes of modernity in a Muslim society. In that respect, some common spaces are transformed as they gain additional symbolic value and become public sites of visual modernity and gendered secular performances. In addition to schools and the workplace, spaces such as beaches, opera and concert halls, cafes, fashion shows, public gardens and public transportation all become sites of what Gole refers to as “modern self-presentations” (Gole 2002, p. 67). When Muslim women cross the boarders between inside and out, multiple senses – sight, smell, touch and hearing – feature in concerns over redefining borders, preserving decency and separating
genders. A public Islam needs to redefine and recreate the borders of the interior, intimate, illicit gendered space. The notion of modesty underpins the Muslim self and her relation to the private and public spaces (Gole 1997, p. 123).

Due to the public visibility of Muslim women especially those wearing the hijab, particularly within the West, it can be argued that the concept or the extent of their definition of the public sphere has been stretched far beyond what is considered to be public in the West. As such my participants considered many of their activities ‘public’ even volunteering within Muslim organisations and their children’s schools. Malikah acknowledged the performativity of their role while in public explaining that while at work or university they, “changed people’s perceptions by wearing their hijab and acting in a good manner”. Even education, as I will explore later, was seen as a public matter as it leads to labour force participation and possibly political activity.

**Chapter Summary**

One of the major thrusts of the Islamist movements is for Muslims to return to or hold onto an “original” Islam and an “authentic” indigenous culture. In a way these movements rely on the deliberate manipulation of Islamic scriptures for political reasons that continues to be one of the main problems with the definitions of woman’s position in Islam or rather in the name of Islam. Islamists have tended to respond to the challenge of the West by creating a division between an outer public male sphere – that of government, industry, and public life – and an inner private sphere. In the public sphere, traditional practices were seen as backward and obstructive while the inner and private sphere, that of the domestic life and the family, has become the appropriate place for the maintenance of a woman’s traditional role within the family. Women became symbols of either oppression or cultural survival.

Islamist women may be veiled or re-veiled, but they are no longer confined within the four walls of the house. They are encouraged towards higher education and take responsible public positions. This can be seen as an example of what Deniz Kandiyoti (1991) has referred to as the “patriarchal bargain”, in which women accept the structure of the dominant system but negotiate a more positive position and role in it. Women living in Muslim communities in the West are in a more complex situation than those living in Muslim societies, especially those who are born and educated in
them. Younger, Western-born or predominantly Western-educated women, particularly from working class and poorly educated families, are perhaps most likely to find themselves in conflict with their family and community over issues such as marriage, relations with men outside the community, travel without a family member and personal autonomy in general. Second-generation Muslim women in diaspora communities in the West are often caught between their ways of life and the cultural practices imported by their parents who immigrated from the Middle East or Southern Asian countries and imposed in the name of Islam. Islamic feminism helps such women to unravel patriarchal customs and religion. Muslim women in western societies are in the process of negotiating their presence between public and private spheres. The importance of a discussion in this arena can help establish what role Islamic feminism can have for such a negotiation as well as factors such as familial support.

According to Gole, in a Muslim context, women’s participation in public life, corporeal visibility and social mixing with men all count as modern (Gole 1997, p. 87). The modern gendered subject has been constituted through women role models and repetitive performances. Consequently the access of women to public life and gender equality acquires a more salient signification in the public imagination of Muslim societies and communities. The ways in which Islam emerges into the public sphere defy modernist aspirations for a civilised or Westernised and emancipated self yet follow a similar pattern in regard to the gender, body and space issues. Due to the public visibility of Muslim women especially those wearing the hijab, particularly in the West, it can be argued that the concept or the extent of their definition of the public sphere has been stretched far beyond what is considered to be public in the Western sense. As such my participants considered many of their activities ‘public’ and acknowledged the performativity of their role while in public

Chapter three will follow on from this chapter by outlining the research design of my project including sociological methods, sampling, interview questions, observations, background information on participants and data analysis.
Chapter Three
Methodology

This chapter continues on the approaches to my thesis by providing a background to my research through a literature review, project design and methodology. This chapter begins with the literature review then an outline on research design and sociological and Islamic methodologies. It then looks at my role as investigator, my sample, interview questions and data analysis techniques.

Literature Review
The study of Muslim women in Australia is still a largely uncovered area of sociological study. As such there are not many articles dealing strictly with Australian Muslim women’s public sphere activity. Overall there is a scarcity of research on Muslim women in Australia, however, with the growing number of Muslim women attending university and going on to higher degrees it is anticipated that in the very near future this situation will change. There are however, quite a few important articles that deal with Muslims in Australia as a whole.

The practice of Islam in Australia is addressed in texts such as those by Abdullah Saeed and Shahram Akbarzadeh (2001), and (2004). Islamic law, as it applies to women, is dealt with in Hussain’s work (2001) and (2004). The very first comprehensive empirical survey on the significance of mosques for the newly arrived Muslim migrants to Australia was conducted by Gary Bouma (1994), which was followed by Nahid Kabir’s historical narrative of Muslims and religious and racial stereotyping in Australia. (Kabir 2005)

Only a handful of publications have grappled with ‘the Muslim question’, most noteworthy are Michael Humphrey’s study of the Lebanese community in Sydney against a backdrop of socio-economic challenges they face as a minority group (Humphrey 2004), as well as Jock Collins’ work looking at the issue of racial and religious stereotyping of the Lebanese Muslim community in relation to criminal acts in Sydney’s south-western suburbs (Collins 2005).

In 2004, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission released the report Ismae’—Listen: National Consultations on Eliminating Prejudice against Arab
The report explored the rise in racial and religious vilification of Arabs and Muslims in Australia, particularly in light of global and local crisis events involving Muslims. As the above account of the existing literature demonstrates, there has not been a publication on the socio-economic experiences of Muslim Australians in relation to their social and political attitudes.

Kabir and Evans’ paper explores the historical trends of Muslims in the Australian labour market from 1980 to 2001 and there is some reference to the specific situation of Muslim women (Kabir and Evans 2002). Collins’ chapter on Arab entrepreneurs in Australia explores the role of the family, including women, in Arab small enterprises. The research identified, in a national survey of the ownership structure of small businesses in 1996 that 61.5 per cent of the survey sample were businesswomen from a Middle Eastern background. This percentage of ownership can be compared with 63.6 per cent of Australian women business owners from an English speaking background.

The positive benefits of volunteering in networking for work participation have also been identified in research undertaken by Volunteering Australia and the Australian Multicultural Foundation (AMF) in 2006. The research found that young Muslim women are more inclined to be involved in community and welfare based volunteering. The AMF research also found that ‘the idea that volunteering formed a significant part of being a good community member emerged as a common cultural norm among Muslim youth’.

In the last five years, publications discussing the situation of Muslims in Australia have grown exponentially and they include works by Samira Yasmeen, Kevin Dunn, Shahram Akbarzadeh and Janet Phillips. The end of 2009 saw two important research reports released by Monash University’s Centre for Muslim Minorities and Policy Studies. The first is entitled Mapping Employment and Education Among Muslim Australians and the second, Muslim Voices: Hopes and Aspirations of Muslim Australians (Akbarzadeh and Woodlock 2009). The recent publication, Challenging Identities: Muslim Women in Australia edited by Akbarzadeh demonstrates that the experiences of Muslim women in Australia cannot be used to typecast them as oppressed females (Akbarzadeh 2010). This volume questions the argument held by many that ‘Australian values’ and ‘Islamic values’ are...

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incompatible with each other and publishes valuable first-person accounts of Muslim women in Australia. Contributors wrote on topics such as Australian Muslim women in sport, women’s conversion to Islam, Australian Muslim women’s access to mosques, State law and Islamic family law, multiculturalism and its challenges for Australian Muslim women, and racism and Australian Muslim women.

Forrest and Dunn in *Constructing Racism in Sydney, Australia’s Largest Ethni City*, explain that contemporary Australia is in a contradictory situation as a nation where multiculturalism co-exists with various forms of what are collectively called racisms (Forrest and Dunn 2007). Based on a survey of Sydney residents, this study uses a social constructivist approach to investigate the nature and sociospatial context of racist attitudes in Sydney, Australia’s largest EthniCity. Results show a mix of compositional (aspatial) and contextual (spatial) associations with racisms. The former indicate a general but inconsistent relationship between socioeconomic status and tolerance, and also between cultural diversity and tolerance. The latter, however, reveal place-based cultures of tolerance and intolerance cutting across compositional relationships. A geography of racism in Sydney therefore adds a level of understanding that cannot be obtained from aspatial analysis alone. This helps to understand the complexity of local political cultures and can assist with the formulation of anti-racism interventions.

Dunn in his 2004 work, *Islam in Australia: Contesting the Discourse of Absence* outlines how non-recognition is one of the key modes of re-inscribing the ‘Other’ (Dunn 2004). In Sydney's anti-mosque politics this form of oppression was manifest as a discourse of absence. Sydney Muslims have been portrayed as non-existent within, or external to, localities where mosques have been proposed. In these circumstances claims to belonging and citizenship by Sydney Muslims have been fundamentally injured. Census data is used to challenge the historical and contemporary constructions of Islamic absence in Australia. Sydney Muslims are a culturally diverse and somewhat disparate faith group. They are increasingly present in areas outside of the initial zones of residential focus. This diversity and dynamism is a substantial challenge for Islamic community building in Sydney and presents rich foci for further research.

Though few specific studies have been undertaken into Muslim women’s employment and education within Australia, numerous studies have been undertaken
in the United States. Earlier studies conducted by Jen’nan Ghazal Read held that the level of religiosity closely impacted the level of Muslim women’s labour force participation. Other factors such as education and the wearing of the hijab also factored highly in their perceived influences on these women’s workforce participation levels. In her most recent article Read examines the connection between family, religion and work among Arab American women. She concludes that religious “constraints” on women’s employment operate through their family roles and responsibilities (Read 2004). It is hypothesised by Read that women who are married, and especially those who have children are less likely to work than those without these family ties. My research seeks to examine if this is also the case within my sample and it is expected that a qualitative approach would compliment Read’s larger quantitative sample.

Previous research into Muslim women and their career roles in the U.S. has established that family dynamics have a larger impact on women’s public sphere participation than level of religiosity (Read 2004 p. 72). Women with young children were found to be much less likely to be active participants in the labour force. Previously, it was hypothesised that religion exclusively restricted women’s labour force participation. This research seeks to extend on this, and to challenge it, by taking a broader perspective on women’s participation in the work force and the public sphere, including community work and volunteerism.

Read reports in her paper, Challenging Myths of Muslim Women: The influence of Islam on Arab American Women’s Labour Force Activity that images of ‘subjugation’ attached to Arab-American women are severely overstated and that images that the West produces of Muslim women are particularly flawed. She thus discredits many of the myths surrounding Muslim women, as her research sample contained women who maintained their religious and cultural identities as well as being generally well educated and above average in their participation in the paid labour force.

**Research Design**

Read’s work is particularly relevant to this research as it sets out findings that challenge the stereotypes attached to Muslim women in the West and in particular

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challenges misconceptions that Muslim women’s labour force participation rates are solely linked to their level of religiosity. This research seeks to test this claim within the Muslim communities of Sydney. Read’s findings have implications on this thesis and the interview questions have been structured to investigate family support for Muslim women’s education and employment in Sydney. It is then hypothesised that similar to the situation for Arab-American women, the labour participation levels of Muslim women in Sydney are also mainly contingent on family support and their attitudes to gender roles and further that levels of religiosity have no bearing on women’s labour force participation levels.

Much of the scholarship on Muslim women’s public sphere participation in the West is done via quantitative research methods. Read’s work (2004) and (2002) also utilizes a quantitative approach. It is hoped that my research can take a more in-depth look at the influence of family support on public sphere activity through a smaller number of in-depth interviews and observations. Quantitative research has made succeeded in teasing out group identities and labour force and educational patterns but qualitative research allows researchers to search deeper into the

This thesis is an exploratory study built around data collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews including open-ended research procedures. In addition, a richer understanding of women’s lives is gained through participant observation, which included spending time with Muslim women in their homes and at other social gatherings. Each method informed the others to create an iterative process that could produce an ethnographic understanding of women’s lives. Interviews were conducted in Sydney and are comprised equally of Muslim women who are active in the public sphere and also those who primarily take part in activities within the home. Interviews ascertained what type of employment, voluntary work, or family commitments these women have.

**Modern Sociological Approaches to Gender Research**

In modern sociological thought there are two main approaches to explaining influences on social development including gender relations and related issues. One school stresses cultural factors and the other stresses material factors. The cultural school gives primacy to tradition, values, belief-systems and habits, as they might have been transmitted down the generations, while the other underlines the primacy of
economic and technological factors in inducing corresponding changes at the level of social organisation and cultural attitudes. In studying gender in Muslim societies, the approaches deployed by scholars from different disciplines have reflected the varying emphases in the field depending on their sources, their training, and the research traditions to which they subscribe, or, more often their individual biases and ideological orientations. For my research I will employ a cultural qualitative approach.

Orientalism and Sociology
Orientalism has steadily become a common keyword in sociology since the 1990s, often loosely connected with more popular phrases such as ethnocentrism, Eurocentrism, and prejudicial stereotyping. Frequently, sociologists and other scholars have associated this keyword with cultural theorist Edward Said and his landmark study *Orientalism* (1978). Like many academic keywords, a precise meaning of the term orientalism is desirable; yet, there is no obvious consensus among many sociologists. The term often refers to a decidedly messy, faulty, and imprecise body of knowledge, in which its own practitioners have described themselves ‘orientalist’ and their collective endeavor ‘orientialism’. From the 1950s to the present, critics of orientalist scholarships such as Talal Asad in anthropology have seriously disputed the scholarships’ objectionable exoticisation and racialisation of the ‘Orient’ and the assertion of the cultural pre-eminence of First World ways of life to promote colonial rule and post-1945 dominance (Asad 2003).

One major influence on most studies pertaining to Muslim societies has come from orientalism. Orientalism has generally favoured a particular form/mode of cultural interpretation to the exclusion of everything else: In its interpretation of culture it has often opted for a rigid definition of culture - that sees it more archaic than arcane, as well as approaching culture in an abstract and reified manner. Its choice methods have been linguistic, literal, and textual. Drawing widely on stereotypes, which it has played a key role in instigating and perpetuating, it has generally tended to be ahistorical.

Said contends that British, and French, and US orientalisms have produced racialized discourses in the arts, media, politics, and social science knowledge that are erroneous abstractions, in particular, of people of Islamic faith and from the Middle
East. To legitimate and maintain western dominance since the late 1960s, US orientalism, for instance, had represented the Middle East as an Islamic place bursting with villains and terrorists and denies the historical, lived, and racially and religiously diverse realities of, for instance, dispossessed Palestinians.

Feminist scholars have criticized Said for the gender-blindness of *Orientalism*. This gender-blindness refers, to a certain extent, to how Said’s work ignores the centrality of sexuality and gender in orientalist discourse. In his *Orientalism*, Said asserts that orientalism is “an exclusively male province” (Said 1979). In contrast, Bernard Lewis successfully explores its gendered aspect by providing an interesting critical analysis of women’s autobiographies, writings, and interactions with their western counterparts (Lewis 2003).

**Convergence of Sociology and Islamic Studies**

In the case of the social sciences, perceptions have also been marked by a ‘modernising’, or a developmentalist bias, which has generally been taken to favour Western conceptions and models of social change and organisation. In the orientalist tradition, the cultural bias might have sometimes been more subtle, but it was just as insidious; it took for granted the superiority of the Western tradition - taken in its truncated form to mean the Graeco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Moreover, it discounted the viability, let alone the vitality, of any alternative traditions, particularly, the Islamic tradition.

These influences are deeply rooted in a protracted and uneven tradition of encounter with Islam on the one hand, and in the modern ambivalent political dimensions of the post-colonial situation between the Muslim world and the West. The area of gender in particular has provided a fertile ground for a complex political and ideological confrontation and, at least from a Muslim retrospective on the situation, it would seem that both Orientalism and social science tend to converge on gender as a strategic ground for waging battle on Islam.

**Frameworks for the Study of Muslim Women**

In order to avoid frameworks of inquiry which are motivated by political and power interests, it is important to remain vigilant about the ultimate purpose and objective in learning about gender in Muslim societies. This is one of the many ambivalent areas
of contemporary scholarship in general because of its tendency to be conflated and tainted with power-related considerations. Modern knowledge is rarely conceived of in terms of curiosity, wisdom or pure enlightenment: rather than an object of understanding being a legitimate end in itself, it is implicitly assumed that knowledge is an instrument of manipulation and control. Hence, studying gender in Muslim societies is frequently undertaken with the idea of changing the structures and cultures of these societies. Underlying this orientation is the implicit assumption that “ours” is the standard for viability and validity and the norm for civilized patterns of conduct and social organization. We therefore study Muslim societies to identify their pathologies and, whether out of self-interest or philanthropy, we seek to identify the most effective strategies to lead them out of their ways to ours.

There are other factors which constrain the current paradigm of inquiry into gender in Muslim societies and which make it objectionable from an Islamic point of view. It is a paradigm that assumes a positivistic conception of society. From an Islamic perspective, this is not only a reductionist conception, but it is a distorted view which makes it impossible to grapple with the effective dimensions of the community as it is ideally perceived and as it is developed historically in Muslim societies.

A sociological paradigm of inquiry offers us a conflictual model of socialising and social change and development. It is a polarized model that exacerbates differences and contradictions. From an Islamic perspective, it is not only distracting and delusory, but it is positively destructing and subversive. Muslim societies like all societies contain elements of cooperation and conflict, of division and divergence and of integration and convergence. Hence, Mernissi (1987), working in the dominant tradition can write eloquently on polarization between the fundamentalists and the feminists in Moroccan or other North African societies where she has done her empirical research. Yet, one should not overlook the fact that the moment she locates, or assumes this polarization for a reality, she is not necessarily drawing on her factual findings in the field as a sociologist, but she is interpreting the scene as an involved observer. She is then writing from an ideological perspective that places that research as well as whatever generalizations she might make into this area. At best she might tell us something about a sector of the field. At worst, it is about a shared obsession with power on the part of both the fundamentalists and the feminists. This is not the
same thing as telling us about the reality and aspirations, or the ideal interests and perceived stakes (even in power) that might motivate and shape behaviour in society in the area of gender relations and gender conceptions.

Another aspect about the dominant paradigm which makes it inadequate for discussing gender in Muslim societies is its inherent cynicism. This might accord with the temper of modernity in the West: but it hardly accords with the temper of change and struggle in Muslim societies. To the extent that modernity has affected attitudes in the latter, there might be room for elements from the dominant paradigm to describe if not to account for or remedy an existing chart of gender perceptions and gender relations. But, again by definition, what may be noteworthy about particular Muslim societies is an element of residual resilience and a pervasive optimism that defies such cynicism. We therefore need another paradigm that would be realistic without being cynical and that could thereby capture dimensions of Muslim reality more effectively and convincingly when it comes to assessing the forces of change and continuity. In this case it is important to look at conducting research not just from a Muslim perspective, but also from a feminist perspective.

**Conducting Research from a Feminist Perspective**

Feminist researchers find interviewing appealing for reasons over and above those usually cited by sociologists who defend qualitative methods against positivist criticism. For one thing, open-ended interviews offer researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words, rather than in the words of the researcher (Reinharz 1992, p 73). This asset is particularly important for the study of women because learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring their ideas altogether or having men speak for women (Reinharz 1992, p. 76). Interviewing is also consistent with many women’s interest in avoiding control over others and developing a sense of connectedness with people.

Some feminists who engage in intensive interviewing label their method phenomenological interviewing, an interviewee-guided investigation of a lived experience (Reinharz 1992, p. 75). This involves an unstructured or semi-structured interview with the purpose of letting the interviewees express themselves in the manner in which they choose. Practical details vary widely - where will the interview take place and who will decide? How will the information be recorded? By notes,
check marks, audiotape or videotape? Should the interview be face-to-face or over the telephone? Who should be present during the interview? How will the data be analysed? Should interviews be conducted in groups or individually? Is it appropriate for the interviewer and interviewee to know each other in advance?) feminists’ answers to these questions vary. In this instance I have decided to conduct the research interviews for this thesis in person, at the location of the participant’s choice in order to facilitate comfort and ease of discussion.

Many types of feminist interviewing call for intimacy and self-disclosure. This type of interviewing also calls for belief in the interviewee, which creates a more egalitarian relationship between the interviewer and interviewee and is in stark contrast to the scientific ethic of detachment and role differentiation between interviewer and interviewee (Hesse-Biber 1999). This feminist type of interviewing calls for a commitment on behalf of the researcher to form a relationship, and on the part of the respondent to participate with sincerity. “Believing the interviewee” is a controversial idea as social interaction often involves a certain amount of deception and because science relies on scepticism. Some feminist researchers reinterpret the notion of believing the interviewee as a utilitarian and decidedly feminist approach. Specifically a believed interviewee is likely to trust the interviewer and likely to disclose “the truth”.

**Investigator**

In an edited volume from 2004 entitled *Identity and the Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Religion*, editor and contributor Jose Ignacio Cabezon insists that while personal, religious and political identities obviously play roles in the shaping of research agendas, a fact that is hardly subject to academic debate anymore, particular religious identities should not be the determining factor for the qualification of a scholar to study a particular religion. In other words, religious or other self-identification does not privilege or authorise scholarship. To translate his argument into our specific context, Muslim women are not *per se* more qualified to do research on women and gender issues in Islam. First, the study of Islam in our day and age may be more politicised than the study of any other religion, and, hence adds not only heightened public scrutiny but also an increased urgency to the insider/outsider
debate. This in combination with a focus on women and gender issues puts scholars at the centre of multiple methodological debates and disciplines.

What Gisela Webb, on the other hand, writes in the introduction to *Windows of Faith*, aptly titled “May Muslim women speak for themselves, please?” could be taken as a response and simultaneous challenge this perspective (Webb 2000). Webb writes: “These women’s writings can be seen as the product of the gradual but steady emergence of a movement among many Muslim women who insist that their religious self-identity not be dismissed” (Webb 2000, p. xi). She does not really explain why it should not be dismissed, however. The women scholars at the centre of Webb’s inquiry discuss their identities as confessional scholars (or theologians of sorts) and the implications for their scholarly authority in a variety of ways. Research on women in Islam has been predominantly carried out by ‘outsiders’. Accordingly, much of the literature comes from a differing perspective and therefore may not be truly reflective of the extent of Islam’s effect on women. It is necessary to consider that cultural specificities exist within nations that subscribe to the same religion (Roald 2001).

As the investigator, being a woman and a Muslim, I believe I was able to gain superior access to women as participants for research. I was able to establish a sense of trust and affinity with the informants. I also had understanding of the social norms and could identify with some of the stereotypical behaviour of Muslim women to assist access. On the other hand, I still retained an ‘outsider’ status due to being from an Anglo-Saxon background. This allowed some participants to comment on certain elements of Muslim culture without fear of judgment. Many participants identified a fear of being judged or gossiped about by a community member and since I was from an Anglo-Saxon background I was not considered to be a community member. The existence of an insider/outsider viewpoint from participants became more noticeable when the language features used during the interviews was analysed. Many participants would use the word ‘us’ when talking about Islam or their culture of origin but would say ‘your’ or ‘you’ when referring to Christianity, Australia or the West in general.

**Sample**

For practical and cost reasons, it is often impossible to collect information about the entire population of people or things in which social researchers are interested. In
In these cases, a sample of the total is selected for study. Most studies are based on samples and not on complete enumerations of all the relevant data. Interviewees were recruited using the snowball sampling technique, first starting off with two personal acquaintances and then finding additional participants through respondents introducing me to potential interviewees. Fifteen participants took part in semi-structured interviews in Sydney. Interviews were ceased at fifteen participants as saturation point had been reached. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found through their study that involved 60 interviews that theme saturation was achieved after 12 interviews. Due to this I have decided that due to practicability and feasibility issues my sample would be capped at a smaller number.

Within these groups it was expected that eight women would be interviewed who were active in the labour market and eight that were active only within the family or private sphere. After a few interviews were completed the difficulty of only considering women ‘active’ is they were in paid employment was brought to light. Many women who were active only in a voluntary capacity were in some instances, even more active in the community than those in paid employment. More than one participant was volunteering at their children’s school, at the local mosque and also in other religious or cultural organisations. They were also very active within their family circle, either helping out other women in the family with their children or working in the family business.

A broad demographic spread was sought, in terms of migrant status, ancestry, socio-economic status, employment status, housing-ownership status, level of education, and age. This was achieved, however the study was not designed to be statistically representative. The interview questions were asked in English, although respondents were given the choice of using a language other than English for their responses.

**Background on Participants**

Participant’s names have been changed to ensure anonymity. Khadija is a twenty-eight-year-old mother of two of Pakistani origin. At the moment she is not working outside the home but is dedicating her time to raising her children. She used to work as a primary school teacher in an Islamic school and holds a
Bachelor of Arts and a Diploma in Education. She also volunteers within the Shadhili Tariqa and the Tablighi Jamaat running mothers groups.

Aamirah is a forty-year-old mother of two from a Malaysian background. She is not in paid employment but considers herself to be very active in the community. She volunteers for an Islamic women’s organisation and runs the playgroup. She has a Diploma in Fashion Manufacturing and used to work for Collette Dinnigan cutting and assembling their designs before she had her children.

Jessica is a 23-year-old convert from an Anglo-Celtic background. She holds a Bachelor of Education, is high schoolteacher and a spiritual student of the Shadhili Tariqa. She used to be involved in volunteer work through a Muslim health organisation but had to stop because of work commitments.

Amal is a twenty-three-year-old single web designer from a Palestinian background. She holds a Bachelor of Computer Science. She used to volunteer with a university Muslim student association, an association for recently converted Muslims and now helps out within a Muslim youth association. In this role she maintains their website and helps out whenever they have events.

Batinah is a 44-year-old mother of one from Malaysia. She has TAFE certificates in computers and business administration. She used to work as a dental technician before she married and now stays at home with her child. She used to volunteer at a nursing home but is now a member of an Islamic women’s association but says she is just a sleeping member and just pays fees.

Zahra is a thirty-four-year-old mother of two from a Turkish background. She studied finance at TAFE and before she had children, she used to work at a bank call centre. She also undertook additional professional training in the area of insurance. She says she is not undertaking volunteer work at the moment due to the demands of being a full-time mother and homeschooling her two children.
Lamis is a twenty-two-year-old business development officer from a Lebanese background. She has a Bachelor of Arts and a Masters in Education. She volunteers in a number of organisations including a Muslim phone helpline and a Muslim health organization and teaches Arabic and scripture to children. She also volunteers with cancer patients and is involved with interfaith dialogue. She also used to work with a Muslim student association and on a higher level with the Muslim Students Association governing body.

Ibtisam is a forty-five-year-old mother of four from a Palestinian background. Before she married, she worked as a child care worker and a secretary overseas. When she arrived in Australia she undertook several TAFE courses including English, first aid, child studies, hairdressing and flower arranging. She is very active with voluntary work and teaches over four hundred children Islamic scripture every week. She also volunteers at a Muslim youth association helping to organize events for women, including religious classes. She used to be on the school council at her children’s school and was involved in fundraising for the Cancer Council.

Aaliyah is a twenty-four-year-old medical student from Singapore. She holds a Bachelor of Arts. She also works part-time tutoring English to HSC students. She volunteers as a chaplain at a hospital and visits Muslim patients and is working with an association that helps new converts to Islam.

Maimouna is a forty-year-old mother of three from a Malaysian background. At the moment she is not in paid employment but before she married, used to be a singer and would tour and perform all over Malaysia. She completed high school and some college level education in Malaysia. She volunteers for a Muslim community organization and also helps out with events at several Muslim women’s organisations.

Medina is a twenty-two-year-old single health promotional officer from a Lebanese background. She has a Bachelor of Social Science and Bachelor of Health Science. She undertakes a great deal of volunteer work including working with a sports club, a surf club and a Muslim health organisation. During the summer she patrols Sydney’s beaches as a lifesaver and is the first Muslim woman wearing a hijab to undertake this
role. Medina has become a spokesperson for the Muslim community and as such has received quite a bit of media coverage.

Fatima is a twenty-two-year-old Masters student from a Lebanese background studying naturopathy. She holds a Bachelor of Medical Science. She also works part-time in retail. Due to her busy schedule she doesn’t volunteer at this present time but used to be involved at a Muslim students association.

Inas is a twenty-eight-year-old mother of one from Somalia. She is currently undertaking a Bachelor of Arts in ceramics. She also works a couple of part-time jobs in an Islamic bookstore and at a migrant resource centre. She volunteers at several Muslim organisations. She helps with event coordinating and organising. She also used to volunteer at an African community radio station and various refugee and mainstream community organisations.

Malikah is a thirty-five-year-old mother of three born in the United Arab Emirates and from a Palestinian background. She is a lending assistant to the relationship manager of a large bank. She says she doesn’t volunteer because she doesn’t feel that the community organisations are run in the proper way. She has TAFE diplomas in business and accounting and also a diploma in interpreting.

Nura is a 51-year-old mother of six from Singapore. She is not in paid employment but volunteers at a Muslim women’s organisation doing administration work. She has a TAFE certificate in MYOB (an accounting software package) and has done a small business course.

Interviews and Questionnaires

In order to challenge Western perceptions of Muslim women as non-active, dependent, and mostly involved in domestic roles the interviews determined the factors that motivate their activity. Participants were also questioned on gender roles and divisions in the community. Through this survey of active Australian Muslim women in Sydney, this thesis aims to show the types of work that Muslim women engage in, the level of their activity and their input in the decision making in the
private and public arenas, as well as their attitudes towards gender roles and Islamic feminism. It is hoped that this study will fill a gap in scholarship on Muslim women’s activity and citizenship in Australia.

A pilot interview was completed to test interviewees’ general comprehension and understanding of the questions, gauge the length and ease of response and the clarity and specificity of the research questions. A list of appropriate Muslim organisations was drawn up, and letters, emails or phone calls made, inviting participation. Representatives from organisations were invited to advertise the plain statement to their networks.

Interviews were conducted in venues of the participants’ choice. This ensured that subjects were comfortable, making them more likely to express themselves clearly and freely. Venues included their workplaces, although frequently women preferred the investigator to visit their homes. Some students preferred to meet on campus. Women were very hospitable and welcoming and keen to participate in the study. Anonymity was assured and the names of women in this thesis have therefore been changed.

Interview questions were designed in such a way so as to avoid mentioning certain terms or words that may cause offence or uneasiness for participants. For example, even though I was seeking to find out about the participants views on gender roles, division of labour in the home and gender parity in the workforce I did not include the word ‘feminism’ in any of my questions. Instead I asked specific questions to determine the participant’s attitudes, such as, “How do you feel about the division of domestic labour in your home?” This allowed participants to share their opinions without feeling they were being labeled.

**Observations**

Observations were undertaken and recorded in a notebook both at the participants homes and at other social gatherings which I was invited to by them such as Ramadan dinners, weddings, birthday celebrations and Eid festivities. These observations allowed a further incite into participants’ lives and their social circles and interactions that cannot by obtained even through lengthy interviews. These observations will be arranged into case studies that will provide a basis for many of the results chapters.

The rationale behind the use of observation in sociological research is that the
sociologist should become party to a set of social actions sufficiently able to assess directly the social relationship involved. The degree of involvement may vary considerably, it ranges from being a mere observer on the sidelines to being deeply involved as a social actor in the scenario. The former type of observation techniques are called non-participant while the latter is called participant observation. Sometimes one-way observations screen have been used to watch groups in actions that they are unaware that they are being watched and the observer cannot affect their actions by his or her presence. The sociologist is visibly present and is a part of the situation either as a sociologist or under another guise. Where the sociologist is merely an observer it is usually assumed that he or she knows enough about what the actors are doing to be able to understand their behaviour.

Any sociological observer has then to some extent be a participant observer he or she must at least share sufficient cultural religious or social background with the actors to be able to construe their behavior meaningfully but the degree of participation and of sharing of meaning may vary considerably.

Data analysis
The data from the interviews was coded using different themes. A list of basic frequencies was generated and blocks of textual responses were subjected to thematic analysis. More complex queries were then developed, cross-checking the data to develop themes, from which a report was drafted. Where textual responses from participants are included in the results they are coded in the following manner: age the participant turned in 2009/place of birth. So, a thirty-year old female born in Turkey who lives in Bankstown would be coded as: 30y/Turkey.

The journal in which I recorded my observations was also subjected to thematic analysis. The text was coded for certain words and themes and then cross-tabulated to discover emerging intersecting themes and issues that could point to undiscovered points of discussion. Where text from my journal is included in the text it will be footnoted with the date and persons present at said observation.

Limitations
The most significant limitation of the study was that Muslim women are not
accustomed to being asked for their opinion. This occurs because women are seldom asked about their individual experiences and beliefs and often they do not attempt to question elements of their community structure, which may inhibit them. Furthermore, they are possibly not accustomed to being probed for answers in an interview situation. Many participants agreed to take part in an interview only after they were assured the interview would not be tape-recorded. This added a further limitation, as interviews could not all be documented in their entirety. The issue of subjectivity was also an issue as many women gave limited responses only responding in a manner they believed would please the interviewer. This is exemplified by comments from respondents; for example one asked before the commencement of the interview, “How do you want me to answer? Do you want the truth? Or the best answer?”

The present study is limited to researching the opinions and attitudes of Muslim women present in greater metropolitan Sydney at the time of data collection. One possible bias is that of self-selection. Namely, only individuals interested enough to participate were included in this study.

It is also important to avoid portraying the ideas explored in the study as definitive or the participants and their lives as homogenous representatives. A thesis is a snapshot: an exploration of ideas, opinions and analysis from the people involved. As a piece of qualitative research it conveys possibilities through its representation of the diversity of different concepts and lives rather than claiming to be a pan-feminist, pan-Islamic representation.

Chapter Summary
In order to avoid frameworks of inquiry which are motivated by political and power interests, it is important to remain vigilant about the ultimate purpose and objective in learning about gender in Muslim societies or diaspora communities. From an Islamic perspective it is not only distracting and delusory, but it is positively destructing and subversive. Muslim societies like all societies contain elements of cooperation and conflict, of division and divergence and of integration and convergence.

In order to challenge Western perceptions of Muslim women as non-active, dependent and mostly involved in domestic roles, my interviews set out to determine the factors that motivate their activity. My research is built around data collected
through fifteen semi-structured face-to-face interviews and observations undertaken in social settings. It is hoped that by combining in-depth interviews with social observation that a richer understanding could be gained about participants’ lives. Each method informs the other to create an iterative process that has the potential to produce an ethnographic understanding of participants’ lives.

The present study is limited to researching the opinions and attitudes of Muslim women present in greater metropolitan Sydney at the time of data collection. One possible bias is that of self-selection. Namely only individuals interested enough to respond to invitations to participate were included in this study. To compensate for this a broad demographic spread was sought in terms of migrant status, ancestry, socio-economic status, employment status, level of education and age. This was achieved, however my study was not designed to be statistically representative.

This chapter has provided information on methodological issues including orientalist standpoints, conducting research from a feminist perspective and Islam and frameworks for the study of Muslim women. My research is based around semi-structured interviews and social observations, the results of which will be set out in the next four chapters.
Chapter Four
Gender Roles and Family

A woman’s world is mainly centred on the family, which is more fundamental for her than a man. What the individual woman experiences in relation to her family is the dominating factor in any assessment of her situation in life and most women’s self-image (Stang Dahl 1997).

Chapter four takes the various approaches and research methodologies outlined in the previous two chapters and applies them to the first topic of discussion from my research data. This chapter begins with a case study in order to illustrate the passing down of idealised gender roles within families and the role families play in shaping the attitudes of women to employment, education and community involvement. It continues by examining gender roles in Muslim societies and how these women’s roles translate in the West. This chapter then looks at the family unit in Islam and the importance of family support for Sydney Muslim women’s activity in the public sphere.

The chapter discovers that family influence is one of the most important factors in Muslim women’s public sphere activity. Jen’nan Read reports that having children in the home greatly reduces women’s labour participation rates but conversely, having older children can create more work opportunities for women by assisting them with domestic responsibilities (Read 2002 p. 25). Hence my thesis begins by looking at family and gender influences on public sphere activity of the women in my sample and will afterwards branch out to examine education, volunteerism, political activity and employment respectively.

Case Study Amal and Ibtisam: Gender Roles in Muslim Families
Following Dorothy Smith’s argument that the individual ‘case’ is also a point of entry into larger social and economic processes (Smith 1987). This work begins the focus on Muslim women’s activity with the stories of Ibtisam and Amal, a mother and daughter living in South Western Sydney. I refer to Ibtisam and Amal’s stories to provide part of a larger study, which explores the levels of activity of Muslim women
in Sydney. These women’s stories provide access to the larger social organisation of which each woman is a part. However, I make no claim to explain their lives, instead from my interviews and observations I draw specific examples of how family support and structure mean everything to Muslim women’s participation levels. By elaborating on what it means to be a Muslim female in Australia, this discussion has the potential to destabilise monolithic assumptions about Muslim women in the West.

Contemporary social theorists Trinh Minh-Ha (1989), Paul Gilroy (1992), Gayatri Spivak (1993), Homi Bhabha (1994) and Stuart Hall (1992, 1996) have argued for the understanding and expressions of ethnicity that move away from the notions of authentic and original culture and identity only being present in their countries of origin (Bhabha 2004, p. 62). Rather they claim that individuals’ daily interactions constitute their cultural expression. In particular, Bhabha’s notion of hybridized subjectivity in the third space helps to explain how individuals negotiate the contradictory demands and polarities of their lives (Bhabha 2004). Third space theory, like hybridity theory, reconceptualises the first and second spaces of human interaction (Moje 2004, 32). First and second spaces are binary, often competing, categories where people interact physically and socially. Binaries in literacy are the first and second spaces of everyday versus academic knowledges. Third spaces are the in-between, or hybrid, spaces where the seemingly oppositional first and second spaces work together to generate new third space knowledges, discourses, and literacy forms.

Drawing from postcolonial discourse, third space challenges the fixed notions of certain signs and symbols which represent the dominant views of culture and language. Third space generates new interpretations of both everyday and academic knowledges as it is “produced in and through language as people come together” (Moje, Peek-Brown et al. 2004). The struggle to integrate competing knowledges and discourses can be fruitful if the people are not defined according to the dominant discourse.

Amal is a twenty-four year old woman of Palestinian decent who was born in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon and now lives in south-western Sydney. She has a Bachelor of Computer Science and is currently working as a web designer. She told me she thought it was extremely important for Muslim women to be present in the workforce and to challenge the stereotypes surrounding Muslim women. She said
that she is not only earning a living and securing a future for herself but that she is also changing people’s perceptions of Muslim women. She says that women’s public sphere activity doesn’t affect Islam, but there are boundaries. She explains a lot of activism or activities can be done within Islamic boundaries. In her eyes women’s public sphere activity doesn’t contradict Islamic values or laws. Amal believes that Islam encourages women to work and study and that education is important especially in today’s society.

Amal has also been undertaking volunteer work in the Muslim community. She has helped out with an association for Muslim converts, a Muslim students association and also a Muslim youth association. As part of the Muslim student association she was in charge of the newsletter and its distribution. She was a moderator on the online forum and also organised many fundraising events. She was very firm that family always comes first. Her family are very supportive of her involvement in community initiatives and interact with the community more than she does. Her dad established the local youth association. Her mother Ibtisam is also a part of it and looks after the women’s classes. Both of her parents attend many community events and her father gives lots of lectures in the community, both about religion and Palestine. He also raises money for the community and for the Palestinian cause.

Amal points out that it is easier to voice one’s opinion within one’s own family than in the wider community. She explains that if one says something within one’s family it stays within the family. She says she is not afraid to speak her mind with her family:

Our voices (girls) are heard within this family, I have a say, but in the end it’s up to my father. Oh the community though, it’s harder to speak out, people are very judgmental, especially if you have other ideas to others you could be shunned. If things are said outside of the boundaries it makes it hard. Women are heard now more than they were before. Women’s opinions are considered now.

Ibtisam is a 45-year-old mother of four of Palestinian heritage. She is currently not working outside of the home but when she was single and lived in Lebanon, she worked as a secretary and a childcare worker. She has been quite active in a volunteer capacity and explains she used to teach Islamic scripture in Muslim youth
associations and in schools to over 400 children a week. She also takes part in reading groups at the local primary school and has also been involved in Cancer Council events. She views volunteering as a good experience; she says that through teaching she gains confidence and also makes new friends. Her family is very supportive of this. For her, Muslim ladies are usually active in the community and when they are not, it’s usually because they have small children to look after. She believes Muslim women have equal rights in the workforce but that as a mother, whatever their religion, women can’t do all jobs and children become a priority.

Ibtisam studied for TAFE certificates in flower arranging, childcare and hairdressing. She studied part-time so that she could fit study around her family commitments. She believes education is important for a Muslim woman as it provides her with security for herself and her children. She would like to study more but the responsibility of her children prevents her from doing so. She points at that she can still go back to work when her children are older.

In their home women undertake most of the domestic roles. Ibtisam prepares most of the main meals and her daughters assist her and take care of the clean up afterwards. The girls share the household chores. Amal’s father and brother take no part in the domestic chores and only contribute to the gardening and maintenance of the house. While attending a meal at Amal’s home I noticed the men did not get up and help with serving the meal, nor did they get up if they needed extra drinks or condiments from the fridge. A fight even breaks out between Amal and her brother because he wanted her to get the tomato sauce from the fridge even though she had already began eating.

Amal generally holds the same beliefs about women’s roles as her mother but goes a little further saying that she thinks it’s unfair sometimes and that household labour should be divided more equally between the sexes. She wants to leave work after marriage/having children to focus on caring for her family. Amal’s outlook is very familiar to her mother.

Muslim Australian women, from my sample, are generally strongly supported by families as well as by the broader Muslim community to undertake further education. Participants were asked who influenced their decision to study for a higher degree. All but one answered in the positive.
Certainly not my husband (laughs). It’s not a direct thing, you get the feeling you need more and more skills in the workplace. It’s becoming a necessity to have a degree. I try to observe what’s happening in the market, I do what I can. (35y/UAE).

The overwhelming response from the research participants was that both their families and the communities were very proud that they were attending university and TAFE. However, some families felt concerns about other issues of female attendance at university, including mixing with men and the social life on campus.

There is also, for a minority of families, the issue that Muslim women should marry early and concentrate on having children and establishing a family life.

Not very important, maybe TAFE would at least benefit that woman if she likes to enter the workforce. It’s a back up. I tell my daughter to finish uni before she marries (35y/UAE).

The family in Islam is the basis for creating a stable community and underpins the values of the participants on matters such as gender roles, education, employment, volunteer activities and social life, which will be explored in the next chapter. For the rest of this chapter I am now taking a more in-depth look at some of the themes that have emerged from the above case study including gender roles in Muslim communities, family roles and structure, family influence on public sphere activity.

**Gender Roles**

In Muslim societies, women and men are expected to behave in line with social, cultural and religious codes. These gender roles are learned within a particular social and cultural context and are affected by education and economics. In practice, gender roles often affect women adversely impeding their self-determination in areas like their socio-economic status, rank within the family, health, independence, freedom and rights.

Although the Qur'an views women and men to be equal in human dignity and spirituality, this spiritual or ethical equality has not been reflected in some Muslim laws and customs. For example, some women do not have equal rights to make independent decisions about choice of marriage partner, getting a divorce and custody of their children. Reformists and feminists have challenged women’s shortage of
rights and lack of control over their own lives in Muslim laws and traditions through various techniques.

Central to this challenge has been the reinterpretation of Qur'anic verses, which seemingly privilege men over women and reinforce gender roles. Qur'an verse 4.34,\(^\text{11}\) which refers to men as guardians (qawamun) over women as already explained above, has been used to justify gender roles and male privilege over women.\(^\text{12}\) Reformist and feminist scholars have argued that this concept of guardianship has formed the basis of particular gendered roles in Muslim societies. Women are often expected to be obedient wives and mothers staying within the family environment, while men are projected to be protectors and caretakers of the family.

Scholars have explored how verse 4.34 has been interpreted and implemented to limit women’s autonomy, freedom of movement and access to economic opportunities and independence (Mernissi 1987; Barlas 2002). They believe that the concept of guardianship only meant to make sure that a woman who is bearing and nurturing children, is provided for by her husband whilst undertaking this task. Feminist scholars believe that this economic safeguard has been extended through the concept of guardianship to create a rigid division of gender roles and social control of men over women (Wadud 1999). This extension of male ‘guardianship’ over women has become embodied in Muslim laws and is embedded in Muslim societies, even in diaspora (Foroutan 2009, p. 302).

Feminist scholars have also pointed out that interpretations of the Qur'an and formulation of shar’ia have been carried out typically by men, and therefore reflect a male understanding of Islam based on a male experience of life. This has led to the existence of gender bias in Muslim laws and to patriarchal practices in Muslim societies (Mernissi 1987; Wadud 1999). This gender bias towards men to the detriment of women is reflected in commentaries of the Qur'an, which, feminists argue, have become more and more restrictive of women’s rights over time (Stowasser 1994, p.6).

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\(^{11}\) 4:34: Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Al•lah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High, Exalted, Great. (Trans: Pickthal).

\(^{12}\) For details of this and other verses see Amina Wadud (1999) and Fatima Mernissi (1987).
The formulation of Muslim laws that enforce male superiority over women has been particularly influenced by the spread and use of hadith that talk about women negatively. However, the reliability of hadith, particularly, hadith talking about gender roles and sexuality, has been questioned by a number of scholars (Mernissi 1993). Muslims individually and collectively have different opinions on which hadith can be relied on and which cannot. The Qur'an is the only text that is agreed upon by Muslims as a trustworthy source.¹³

Reformists and feminist scholars argue that more progressive interpretations of the Qur'an on topics about gender and sexuality become possible, once sharia is put in its socio-political and historical context.¹⁴ This means acknowledging sharia as a product of human (largely male) interpretations, particularly when questioning the reliability of hadith on gender roles and sexuality. They therefore believe that, Muslims are not bound to one set of historical and exclusive interpretations of the Qur'an. In this way Muslims can themselves take part in the development of frameworks for progressive Islam.

Despite the above somewhat positive picture for Muslim women in Australia (as far as educational, employment and personal opportunities, in particular, are concerned), as elsewhere in the world, much needs to be done to address the issue of equal rights among certain sections of women in the Australian Muslim community. Many Muslim women are going back to the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Mohammed to find out exactly what Islam says about women and women’s rights. They are finding out that these two sources provide a strong foundation for freeing women from local cultural norms that attempt to limit women’s freedom and equality. They do not necessarily view Western models of emancipation as sole solutions or methods for achieving their rights. Some Muslim women rebel against both religious and cultural norms, and follow Western models and ideas of equality. Other Muslim women argue that this type of feminist emphasis is alien to Islam and therefore should be avoided; they follow their cultural practices, which they see as being Islamic (Ahmed 1993).

As part of the broader issue of women's rights under Islam (particularly in light of the misogynistic statements by Australian Islamic leaders) the perceived or real gender inequality in Islam has often been the focal point of criticism in Australia.

Muslim women face hurdles both from within the Muslim community and from the wider Australian community. Within the Muslim community there is pressure to preserve, retain or reclaim their Islamic cultural identity, yet within the mainstream Australian community they are expected to integrate and embrace the Australian way of life (Kabir 2004).

The scope exists here for the kind of distinction made by Leila Ahmed herself, between an “establishment Islam” identified with the structures of male power and a “lay Islam,” which could be much more favourable for women’s interests (Ahmed 1993). While a previous generation of Arab feminists, such as Nawal El Saadawi, had come out in opposition to the Islam of the establishment, a younger generation, whether from personal conviction or for tactical reasons, chose to assert their adherence to a “lay Islam” within which women might have a positive and creative role. For them, the Qur’an and Islam are the source of an ethical teaching that affirms and supports rather than undermine the position of women.

As reflected in my sample there is a small but vocal group of two Australian Muslim women who argue that the role of women should be envisaged in classical Islamic law. For them, women’s role should be more narrowly restricted to the home and their primary task is looking after their children and husband.

It depends on what’s being promoted. A lot of it [activity outside the home] has a lot value, but to the detriment of women. I feel somehow it has been taken too far, the family should come first (34y/Australia).

They argue for maintaining segregation, and wear hijab to cover their hair and neck, and at times their face as well. They avoid places where men and women mix, and believe that women who argue for other than the Traditionalist position are not sufficiently religious. They are highly critical of women who do not wear the hijab. Some converts to Islam from European backgrounds also adopt this view.

There are Australian Muslim women who reject this Traditionalist view as antiquarian and irrelevant. For them, much of the Muslims’ discourse of the past on women has become irrelevant for Muslim women of today. Compromises and interpretations to adapt classical Islamic texts to contemporary problems related to women’s issues are not needed. What is needed they believe, is a fresh look to be taken at the position of Women in Muslim societies, the fight for full equality and the rejection of all symbols of patriarchal domination of women. For them, the hijab is a
symbol of oppression and an unnecessary relic from the past and should be rejected. Islam, for them, is not in need of such superficial symbols. They may or may not be practising Muslims. As one practising woman put it,

I pray five times a day at home. I don’t go to the mosque because of the separation between men and women in prayer, which for me is a sign of domination of women by men. I hate that (24y/Singapore).

The Muslim Family
A traditional Muslim household is a three-generational unit that comprises grandparents; parents; married sons, their wives and children; unmarried sons and daughters; and sometimes an unmarried, widowed or divorced uncle or aunt (Anwar, 1992). However, such large joint families are very rarely found amongst Muslims in the West, mainly due to the housing structure in Australia. Still, sons and daughters almost invariably live with their parents until they are married and elderly parents spend their old age in the homes of their children enjoying their grandchildren. This is the case in my sample with all unmarried women still living with at least one of their parents. The notion of children leaving home at 18 or elderly parents going into care is almost inconceivable. Marriage is the usual way in which young Muslims establish their freedom from parental authority. Nevertheless, the point that is so often missed in the literature is that Islamic teaching obligates Muslims to show such courteous regard to their parents even after they are married and throughout their lives (Ahmad 1981). Muslim parents are often amenable to their daughters’ desire to work if they are able to attain a good education and go into a career perceived as safe and respectable: one which does not jeopardise the safety and reputation of these young women (Basit, 1996, p.110). Two of my participants spoke of maintaining a ‘good reputation’ through their daughter’s education and entrance into a ‘respected profession’ such as medicine, teaching or nursing.

Discussions of shari’a family law reflect these concerns, as Qur’anic family law defines relations between men and women through legislation on marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, and polygamy. Islamic family law currently operates in most Islamic countries, with the exception of Turkey and Tunisia. In the 1980s a number of countries moved to stiffen the application of shari’a family law, including Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Algeria, and Nigeria. In the 1990s this
occurred in Afghanistan and Malaysia. In both periods it reflected the growing political and cultural influence of Islamist movements, which see the family as the rock on which indigenous religious socialisation and culture stand. They argue for greater family cohesion in what is perceived as a rapidly changing, unpredictable, and hostile world, where families are being stretched, fragmented, and broken.

Since the mid-1980s, women’s groups have emerged in the Muslim world to call for changes in the status of women in the family and the society (Badran 2008, p.29). They challenge the legitimacy of family laws that place women in a subordinate position vis-à-vis husbands or male kin; they call for greater rights in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, and seek an end to male guardianship and control over women’s mobility; they call for the right of mothers to pass on their nationality to the children (if the children are born of foreign fathers); and they aspire to greater economic and political participation. The 2003–2004 reform of the very patriarchal Mudawana, Morocco's family law is an example of a successful campaign that was framed in terms of national development imperatives, children's well being, women's rights, and an alternative vision of the family. Women in my sample are also calling for a change in their status in a different way, both within their families and in society. Living in the West they do not need to call for legal change but are instead trying to change community perceptions at a family level. For three participants this was about trying to share household duties more equally with their husbands, fathers, brothers or sons.

To some observers, such developments suggest the disintegration of the Muslim family. To others, the Muslim family is adjusting or reorganising in response to contemporary needs. Modern states have taken over some functions of the family, through programs and policies of social provisioning. Public schooling, health care, childcare, government employment, family allowances, pensions, bank loans, and unemployment insurance are among the social services and social policies available to citizens. Nonetheless, especially in parts of the Muslim world devoid of a welfare or development state, the family is an essential focus of solidarity and support for its members, and affective ties remain strong.

Two of my participants were from family units that had been dispersed by war, natural disaster and economic need and as such the values and functions of the family have resurfaced in different forms. More than one family will often band
together on the basis of ethnicity, old family ties or religion. Women with husbands who are working abroad often make close ties with neighbours and women in the workforce continue to rely on family ties for support. Through its adaptations and evolution, the family unit in the Muslim world and in diaspora communities, has proven to be an interdependent and flexible social institution. For many, it remains the best way to provide for individual needs as well as group survival.

Family as Seen in the West
Western family life is perceived by some Muslim families to be highly insecure and threatening. Four of my participants stereotyped Western families to have remote relationships with little concept of family solidarity. They believe that elders appear to command little love or respect and are sent into homes instead of being looked after by the younger generation. One participant commented, “family is the most important thing for us, not like with the Australians.” Sexual license is thought to be rife and there is hardly any regard for the institution of marriage. Parents seemingly divorce and remarry without any consideration for their offspring, who may have to go into care. This kind of behaviour is viewed as outrageous by Muslim standards, a culture not worthy of emulation (Ballard, 1994, p. 27).

The literature shows that families with a Muslim background are mainly close-knit, cohesive units and family loyalties are very strong (Ahmad 1981). Relationships within a Muslim family are affectionate, but hierarchical. Great emphasis is placed on respect for elders, on restraint in relations between the sexes, and on maintaining the honour of the family. This is exemplified in my interview data:

If my family hadn’t supported me I wouldn’t be where I am today. It’s hard culturally for women to be out in the community mixing with men. It’s a big ask for them to understand (22y/Lebanon).

My husband is very supportive of anything I want to do. He used to look after my daughter while I taught, I rely on my husband a lot (28y/Pakistan).

The interests of the group take precedence over those of the individual members. Within the group, roles are clearly defined, goals are shared and no great emphasis is placed on the development of an exclusive personal identity (Sharpe, 1976, p. 68).
Yeah I can voice my opinion and influence in my family if I go the right way about it. I feel I can say what I want in my family. In the society I feel I have been raising my voice since I started working. I’m learning to assert myself more. Somali culture is against this but we were not brought up like that (28y/Somalia).

Thus, as opposed to Western ideology, the honour and welfare of the family, which could include the extended family, are considered to be more important than the feelings or interests of an individual (Afshar, 1994, p. 52). Twelve of my participants also agreed with this statement. Some commented on their family dynamics insisting that all decisions should be made in consultation with the entire family. Further, each individual member is accountable to the group because her/his actions impinge on the entire family. Ballard notes that not to maintain a sense of honour is to ignore an essential aspect of human dignity, while to ignore the emotional and material reciprocities due within the extended family is to neglect one’s most fundamental obligations (Ballard, 1994, p. 27). This, at any rate, is the usual ideal as perceived by families of Muslim origin, wherever they live.

Although most of the women in this research lived in nuclear families, several had relatives living in the same street or within walking distance from their homes. Whilst the families had their privacy due to personal preference or smaller housing, they still had the support of the extended family nearby, if needed. This indicated the presence of a quasi-joint family, whereby the families did not share accommodation with relatives, but saw them frequently. Further, one family had the paternal grandmother living with them, whereas two had a married son, his wife and young child living in the same house. This pattern, which is quite common in their countries of origin, was being perpetuated in Australia as a distinct aspect of Australian Muslim subculture. The parents of some participants were divorced and the girls and their siblings lived with their mothers who, despite the lack of any form of assistance from their former husbands, appeared to be totally self-reliant as they had the tacit support of their extended family.

The majority of families were from a seemingly working-class background or middleclass. However, in spite of blue-collar jobs, sometimes only one wage and large families, all these families appeared to be living comfortably, though frugally.

Upon entering Amal and Ibtisam’s house I was ushered into a small sitting room. The room contained two weathered two-seater couches and a small
coffee table. Ibtisam brought out tea, coffee and trays of fruits nuts and biscuits. Every effort was made to show me great hospitality as their guest.\textsuperscript{15} They seemed to have a simple taste in diet, dress, housing, furnishing, recreation and other such matters.

Both Amal and Ibtisam were dressed comfortably with long dress like garments over their pajama pants. Neither of them wore their hijabs since they were inside their own homes. Ibtisam did wear a loose headband that covered most of her hair.\textsuperscript{16}

Some of them had their older sons and daughters working and contributing to the family income, another discernible feature of the Western Muslim identity. A sense of optimism was manifest throughout the interviews.

First and foremost I’ve been an agent of change for myself and others. I’ve participated in women’s only projects so that more can be held in the future. Helped with Mission of Hope Fatiha project and for many years I’ve been visiting the sick in hospital, all through the grace of God \textit{alhumdulilah} (24y/Singapore).

The women sounded optimistic about their future and the parents interviewed appeared to have faith in their daughters’ ability and their subsequent bright future. This, undoubtedly, was an indication of the strong and confident relationships within the families.

\textbf{Women’s Position and Status Within the Family}

Thirteen participants said they were more comfortable expressing their opinions within their own family unit than within wider society. Ten felt that the escaped the judgment of the Muslim community by only voicing their concerns or personal feelings within a supportive or ‘safe’ family atmosphere. Women are very aware of social boundaries and social taboos. Participants said they were careful about discussing progressive religious views, gender roles and politics. Many commented that things are changing and that women are now heard more than women in previous generations.

First let me point out it’s easier to voice your opinion within your own family. If you say something within your family it stays within your family. Within

\textsuperscript{15} Taken from my observational diary written in June 2008.
\textsuperscript{16} Taken from my observational diary written in June 2008.
my family I speak my mind, if I think something is wrong I say so. Our voices (girls) are heard within this family, I have a say, but in the end it’s up to my father. Oh the community though, It’s harder to speak out, people are very judgmental, especially if you have other ideas to others you could be shunned. If things are said outside of the boundaries it makes it hard. Women are heard now more than they were before. Women’s opinions are considered now (23y/Palestine).

A lot of say yes, it matters within my family. In the outer society they listen but in the family my voice is heard more (51y/Singapore).

A few participants commented that they felt they had been able to become leaders within their families. Some were introducing new ideas on religious issues and others giving their input on the education of younger siblings. Women did not feel that their status as a female should diminish their ability to give advice or lead within the family.

In our family I feel I have pushed the boundaries, I wear the hijab and a lot of my family don’t agree. My father was very against hijab. I think I’ve introduced Islam into our family. I feel that Muslim women should move from a position of defense. Women always cry victim (22/Australia).

It’s interesting to note that many participants comment about the way Muslim women situate or position themselves in Australian society. Many noted that Muslim women in Australia seem to be coming from a position of defense or that they possess a victim mentality. Most participants agree that in order for Muslim women to be viewed in a more positive light in Australia that they need to participate more in wider society and change their attitudes towards themselves and towards citizenship in Australia.

It’s important yeah some of them don’t know Islam, we have to talk to them and tell them about Islam. We need to show them from the inside what we are like (40y/Malaysia).

Participants were also asked how they felt about the division of domestic labour in their homes. Many commented that they didn’t mind their circumstances but would like the male members of their families to help out more.
Right now it’s good. Sometimes the men do jobs for me as well. The girls work sometimes so they help me out a bit. I ask my son to help; I would like him to do more (45y/Palestine).

**Chapter Summary**

Muslim societies, even in diaspora, require women and men to behave in accordance with social, religious and cultural codes. These gender roles are learned within a particular social and cultural context and are affected by class, education and socio-economic status. Family remained the most important aspect of life for most Australian-Muslim women. This was demonstrated through my participants attributing their participation in educational and work activities to the support of their families. Within many Muslim families, roles are clearly defined, goals are shared and no great emphasis is placed on the development of an exclusive personal identity. Notably, women put their responsibilities as a mother above their careers, and for many they need a flexible career to allow them to balance their work and home duties. Contemporary Islamist literature often represents women’s primary role as that of motherhood and a wife (Sherif 1987, p. 159). As indicated in my sample some Islamists are not against women receiving an equal education up to the highest level, but some view working outside the home as eradicating a woman’s fundamental Islamic ‘right’ to stay with her children (Sherif 1987, p. 160).

Women’s behaviour and actions require regulation allowing for a good family reputation, which can often be different from their individual aspirations. Ultimately many women, had more family oriented aspirations rather than career-oriented or personal goals, including wanting a higher education, or to help their children later on, rather than to become more employable.

Since family influence and characteristics do not explain why Muslim women work less than their non-Muslim counterparts the next chapter will examine the impact of education on my participants’ public sphere activity. Jen’nan Read reports that respondents with college educations have stronger attachment to the labour force than women without these credentials and that link is even stronger for women with postgraduate qualifications (Read 2002, p. 23). The next chapter builds on the information outlined in this chapter and takes a more in-depth look at Sydney Muslim women’s attitudes to education and the way in which family support and attitudes
shape their educational attainment patterns and higher educational experiences.
Chapter Five
Education

Throughout the centuries, Muslim students have been known to travel great distances to gain knowledge from renowned scholars. One scholar whom students used to seek out, often undertaking long journeys to do so, was Aisha bint al-Hadi (723-816), a female scholar considered to be one of the most knowledgeable of her time about *ahadith*. One of her students was Ibn Hajar, famous for his book on *hadith*, *Fath al-Bari*. In fact Ibn Hajar records having had fifty-three women teachers (Bullock 2005).

Continuing on from the previous chapter on gender roles and family this chapter focuses on education and sets out to discover the factors that influence Sydney Muslim women’s educational levels and attitudes to education. Education was seen by my participants as a tool to allow them more access to other areas of the public sphere. Jen’nan Read’s work finds that women in “liberal” Muslim families are more likely to be participating in the labour force and typically enjoy greater household decision making power but that women with higher levels of education have higher work rates, levels of income and independence (Read 2002 p. 34). Educational attainment is said to lessen women’s support for separate male and female spheres (Read 2002, p. 24). Education has traditionally been a key resource used by women to challenge patriarchal gender relations and gain economic independence from men (Blumberg 1984 cited in Read 2008, p. 297). This chapter begins with a case study examining the educational attitudes of Inas. It continues with a brief look at education in early Islam and then examines Muslim education in the West. Subsequent sections include Muslim education in primary and secondary schools and tertiary education and Muslim women.

Case Study: Inas on Education
Inas was selected as a case study on education due to her interesting educational and family history. She is a twenty-eight-year-old university student from Somalia. She attended a government high school in Australia but stopped at year eleven. She said
she lost her confidence and did not want to continue. She revealed, “I went back for my daughter. I found myself again”. She attended TAFE\textsuperscript{17} and studied interpreting after this and said she really liked studying there, she wished she could have studied more there.

After finishing TAFE, she was encouraged by her teachers and began a Bachelor of Arts in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Sydney. She cited her daughter as her main reason for pursuing higher education. Inas wanted to encourage her daughter to undertake university studies and wanted to lead by example. She said,

Now I think I want more. It was good though, I found it great, I could do anything. It was more about education not employment.

She enjoyed getting back to study after such a long absence and said the first two weeks were hard and she was falling asleep all the time. As a wearer of hijab she did not feel very comfortable on the university campus.

I felt alone, the campus was huge and there were so many people. I met a couple of [Muslim] sisters there, that was nice. As a Muslim I felt very out of place there. I felt I didn’t belong there. Even getting there was hard but it wasn’t horrible.

Inas did not experience any opposition to her wish to study for a higher degree. She said she felt encouraged by all, especially her family.

They are very supportive as long as I’m not neglecting my daughter. As long as my responsibilities are covered, they don’t mind what I do with my time.

She explained that education was important for all Muslim women.

I think very, definitely. It only enhances and opens up opportunities. I wish I had done it younger. It’s such a precious thing. On the whole it’s only good.

Higher education allowed Inas access to the public sphere, an opportunity to be part of the workforce. She added that she also had some additional professional training in facilitating workshops, how to apply for government funding, how to liaise with other community organisations.

In the case of Inas we can see that encouragement from former teachers and also wanting to be educated for her daughter, so that she could be a good role model

\textsuperscript{17} TAFE (Technical and Further Education) institutions provide a wide range of predominantly vocational tertiary education courses. Fields covered include hospitality, tourism, construction, engineering, secretarial skills, visual arts, information technology and community work.
for her, were the most important factors in her gaining a higher degree. She saw education as a precious opportunity for Muslim women.

**Women and Education in Early Islam**

According to the Sunni scholar Ibn Asakir, there were various opportunities for female education in the medieval Islamic world (Lindsay 2005, p. 8). He writes that women could study, earn *ijazat* (academic degrees or licences), and qualify as scholars and teachers. This was especially the case for learned and scholarly families, who wanted to ensure the highest possible education for both their sons and daughters (Lindsay 2005, p.10). Ibn Asakir had himself studied under 80 different female teachers in his time (Lindsay 2005). Female education in the Islamic world was inspired by Muhammad's wives: Khadija, a successful businesswoman, and Aisha, a renowned *hadith* scholar and military leader. The education allowed, was often restricted to religious instruction.

While it was uncommon for women to enrol as students in formal classes, it was common for women to attend informal lectures and study sessions at mosques, *madrasas* and other public places. For example, the attendance of women at the Fatimid sessions of wisdom (*majalis al-ḥikma*) was noted by various historians including Ibn al-Tuwayr and al-Muṣabbīḥi (Virani 2007, p. 86). Similarly, although unusual in 15th-century Iran, both women and men were in attendance at the intellectual gatherings of the Ismailis where women were addressed directly by the Imam (Virani 2007, p. 87). While women accounted for no more than one percent of Islamic scholars in Arabia prior to the 12th century, there was a large increase of female scholars after this. In the 15th century, Al-Sakhawi devotes an entire volume of his 12-volume biographical dictionary *Daw al-lami* to female scholars, giving information on 1,075 of them (Virani 2007, p. 87).

Rabia Basri is one of the most well known female Islamic saints, and had a profound impact on Sufism, a mystic branch of Islam. She was born in seventh-century Iraq, and there is little direct knowledge of her life beyond that. Legend has it that Hassan Basri, who was one of the premier Islamic spiritual masters of the period, thought so highly of her that he would often refuse to teach when she was not present. Word of her devotion and spiritual power began to spread, and she became a teacher in her own right, with people travelling for miles to study with her. To her dying day
she lived the same austere desert life, never seeking fame, but achieving great renown through the grace she transmitted.

**Muslim Women’s Education in Australia**

More women than men are now educated at secondary schools and universities, and more women than men graduate from university with bachelor degrees. In 2006, women accounted for 54.8 per cent of all tertiary education students and 47.5 per cent of all students enrolled in vocational education and training courses. The majority were enrolled in management and commerce, society and culture, and food, hospitality and personal services courses. Women were not well represented in engineering and related technologies or architecture and building courses (4.6 per cent of all women enrolled) (DFAT 2011).

According to Mehran, the role of education in Islam is now seen as a vehicle to empower women through familiarising them with “their rights” and encouraging them to “use their capabilities” to enhance their position in society. This is a major shift away from education being an agent that promotes religion only (Mehran 2003, p. 36). Change is still happening hence some women are confident of a successful outcome in the future. Although women in Muslim societies have been encouraged to become educated, Fahmy (1998) argues that throughout history they have often found “themselves strongly enmeshed in a hierarchical system in which they occupied the lowest positions”.

In *Mapping Employment & Education among Muslim Australians* (2009), the majority of the respondents indicated they are well educated with 66.9 per cent possessing a Bachelor degree or higher: 41 per cent of the participants have obtained a Bachelor degree; 21.4 per cent have obtained a Masters degree; and 4.5 per cent have gained Doctorates (Akbarzadeh, Bouma et al. 2009, p. 44). My data shows that ten out of fifteen respondents held bachelors degrees or higher.

A higher percentage of Muslim women have post-school qualifications in the areas of business and administration, health, education, society and culture, than do Muslim men (Akbarzadeh, Bouma et al. 2009, p. 46). Even in other areas which, in the broader Australian society are dominated by males, Muslim women’s participation is significant: they are represented in the natural and physical sciences, as well as engineering, architecture and building, agriculture and related fields.
Australian Muslim women are nearly equal to the wider Australian population of women in the educational stakes. In relation to higher education, data from the 2006 ABS Census indicates that significant numbers of Muslim women are undertaking and participating in tertiary education successfully. Some 17.5 per cent of Muslim women in the 18 plus age bracket have a bachelors degree or higher. This compares extremely favourably with the 18 per cent of total Australian women in the same age range and with the same qualifications (Akbarzadeh, Bouma et al. 2009, p. 48). The 2006 ABS Census shows that 17.5 per cent of the Muslim Australian female population in the 18 plus age range has a qualification of bachelor’s degree or higher indicating this strong commitment.

The majority of Muslim women involved in this study attended, or are wishing to attend, tertiary level TAFE or university courses. All those attending report a most positive experience overall.

At times you love it. At times it’s stressful. Overall it’s an enjoyable experience. I don’t socialize with other Muslims simply because there are none in the course (22y/Lebanon).

With some ethnic exceptions, in some areas, women are generally strongly supported by families to undertake further education where evidence is that they are high achievers.

My parents always encouraged me to go to uni and become a professional, they didn’t mind what I did, as long as I did it well (22y/Lebanon).

[High achievement is] very important, they [Muslim women] can be in the professions and make lots of money, they can help the society. They can be financially independent. They can show that Muslim ladies are good and smart (51y/Singapore).

This study also demonstrates that there are significant motivators to Muslim women’s education including personal desire and support from families and communities as well as reported religiously supportive university campus environments. Barriers do however exist for some women and these include family opposition and religious conservatism as well as difficulties in dealing with the prevailing social culture on university campuses.
The overall sentiment from all research participants attending higher education was that it was an enjoyable experience and these findings concur with those of Asmar (2004:78). They do not report feeling discriminated against on the basis of their religion or dress and there were no reports of discrimination by university lecturers or support staff, as also reported by Asmar. One participant commented:

Better than what I thought it would be. I was part of the Muslim students association but still had uni friends who were not Muslim, I interacted with everyone. It wasn’t much of a culture shock. The fact I went to public school helped because I was more prepared socially. No one treated me differently because I was Muslim or wore the scarf (23y/Palestine).

Additionally, eight out of fifteen respondents indicated that they were currently enrolled part-time or full-time in some educational capacity. This largely positive picture, one of ‘aspirational’ views generating a satisfactory view of prospects for Muslim Australians and their integration into society is tempered by other elements related to education and issues as well as broader concerns. In terms of mitigating factors relating to education, two items were apparent from the participants’ responses. First, the issue of skills recognition. This was not an overwhelming concern, as only a small number of participants indicated that they possessed non-Australian qualifications and within this, slightly less than half of these pointed to this being a barrier in advancing their careers (Akbarzadeh, Bouma et al. 2009, p. 72).

Participants were asked how important they think it is for women to get a higher education. 13 out of 15 respondents replied in the positive. Education was very important due to social status, economic status and personal security before and after marriage.

Very important, they [Muslim women] can be in the professions and make lots of money, they can help the society. They can be financially independent. They can show that Muslim ladies are good and smart. (51y/Singapore).

Conversely others said:

Not very important, maybe TAFE would at least benefit that woman if she likes to enter the workforce. It’s a back up. I tell my daughter to finish uni before she marries. (35y/UAE).

This view is not typical but adherence to more traditional cultures sometimes call for
the woman to dedicate all her time to her family and community.

**State Based Education Versus Religious Education**

The research participants reported that they supported state based education for a number of reasons, among these being cost and a desire to participate in the broader society.

Can I just say I don’t agree with Islamic schools? We (Muslims) need to mix with the wider Australian communities. I would be so different if I didn’t go to a public school. I learnt to mix in the mainstream community. Children that attend Islamic schools often don’t have any respect for other cultures (23y/Palestine).

The commitment to state based education was overall about the opportunities to learn about other cultures and to inform their fellow students about Islam so as to normalise Muslims within the broader Australian society. There was also a very strong feeling of friendship with non-Muslims that was possible in such settings. Participants were asked about the importance of cooperating, communicating and interacting with the surrounding non-Muslim communities.

It’s very important, like we all live in Australia there’s no point excluding yourself. The ability to interact with people that are familiar with us is hard enough but with those you don’t it’s harder still. It’s important to have respect and a peaceful society. It’s an important personal thing. It opens the gate wider if there’s prejudice (22y/Lebanon).

The majority of research participants were very supportive of state based education and there was some criticism of Islamic based education but not all shared these views. Some participants felt that Islamic schools helped develop their Muslim Australian identity and helped them develop their interfaith networks, which in turn has facilitated their non-Muslim community participation.

Most women who supported state based co-education reported a generally high level of satisfaction, but some reported bullying and verbal harassment after September 11, which they report is continuing but the incidences are diminishing. However, the overwhelming majority of all participants in the research felt, however, that participation in non-Muslim state based education helped considerably with
Muslim women’s integration into and participation in Australian non-Muslim society. For them this was a further step in joining in public sphere activities and an avenue for them to challenge mainstream perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Some participants felt that although they had experienced some discrimination, that it wasn’t because of their Muslim identity.

Well, yes my old boss discriminated against me on the basis that I was young and didn’t know much about the workforce, not because I was Muslim (22y/Lebanon).

Parents’ Commitment to Academic Excellence
Among participants there was a strong commitment to providing their children with educational opportunities that offered academic excellence. Those that could afford it would send their children to either private, independent or a faith based school of academic excellence. The majority however, sent their children to state schools but even among these some would, if they could, ensure that their children attended a state school with a reputation for academic excellence. Concerns again were expressed about the standard of academic excellence in some Islamic schools.

A number of research participants indicated that they were actively involved in their local schools and many had very positive stories of success in this regard.

I used to be on the school council, I used to take part in reading groups at school. I now teach scripture. I also take part in extra school activities from time to time. I also helped with a Cancer Council event for ladies (45y/Palestine).

A majority of participants that had children indicated that they were presently or had previously participated in their children’s school activities, such as sports days, fundraising, other children’s events, library, clothes stores etc. Several also helped with reading programs for children with special needs, several also gave talks to schools on Islam and two mentioned their husbands’ close involvement with the schools’ activities. Two women had also served on school parent committees.

In general the overall response from participants in this research was that they had had positive experiences at school but nonetheless barriers do exist for some female Muslim students. Among these barriers are discrimination on the basis of dress, teacher prejudice and the prevailing non-Muslim youth culture. Some of these
can be attributed to leadership within the school, as the previous positive experiences indicate, but they could also be attributed to adherence to guidelines or protocols at the state educational level on issues of multiculturalism and religious tolerance.

There are a number of barriers to Muslim parent involvement in school-based activities, including lack of acceptance by other parents, family commitments, and, for newly arrived and some other women, language difficulties. For three of my participants, barriers include the lack of acceptance by non-Muslim parents as well as the nature of socializing at parent nights or parent activities with the dominant social culture’s use of alcohol. The sense of not sharing common ground socially was also quite strong for some women. One participant felt that she had little in common with the non-Muslim parents. Family commitments can also be an issue and while this is a problem also for some members of the non-Muslim community, both religious expectations to care for one’s parents, as well as cultural understandings, impact on some middle-aged Muslim women. Often because of marrying young, by middle age many will have grandchildren as well as parents to care for. Even so, most of my participants still made an effort to involve themselves in the public sphere sometimes through religious or community organizations.

**Tertiary Education and Muslim Women**

The majority of Muslim women involved in this research attended, or are wishing to attend, tertiary level TAFE or university courses. All those attending report a positive experience overall. With some ethnic exceptions, in some areas, women are generally strongly supported by families to undertake further education where evidence is that they are high achievers. Some undertook study part-time to balance work and family life.

> Actually yes [I could study], because it was part-time. Because of my kids I couldn’t study full-time. I like to educate myself. I was thinking to work. I can still work in this area anytime I like. I did many courses overseas too, I used to work as a secretary and a childcare [assistant] overseas (45y/Palestine).

For some women the wearing the hijab at university or TAFE provides them with greater access to the public sphere and also allows Muslim women from conservative families the freedom to participate more fully in university life without parental pressure. Gole argues that instead of assimilating to the secular regime of women’s
emancipation, some Muslim women press for “their embodied difference and their public visibility” (Gole 2002, p. 180). Participants from my sample were asked if they felt that they had been discriminated against. Many said they hadn’t been but those that did experience discrimination linked it with the wearing of the hijab.

Yes because of my scarf, that’s the flag that tells I am a Muslim. Many people swear at me in the street. It depends on how the media talks about Muslims (45y/Palestine).

Of course, I wear a hijab, people swear at me all the time. One man flashed me. I was thinking man, it’s raining why are you doing this for? I don’t want to see your balls! (44y/Singapore).

There have been few academic studies of Muslim women’s university experience but published work by Christine Asmar has contributed to our understanding of the specific problems faced by Muslim Australian women on university campuses (Asmar 2001). Nayeefa Chowdhury’s more recent paper on the role of Australian-based Muslim student associations also provides insight into Muslim campus experiences, exploring both da’wah (spreading the work of Islam) and interfaith dialogue (Chowdhury 2006).

**Support from Families and Communities**

Muslim Australian women, with some ethnic exceptions, are generally strongly supported by families as well as by the broader Muslim community to undertake further education, where evidence is that they are high achievers, as the above statistics indicate. Education was a gateway for many women to the public sphere and to personal and financial independence. Many participants commented on the prevalence of Muslim women seeking an education and the community encouragement to do so.

My mum was a huge influence on the family. She stressed that it was so important to be independent and work for yourself and get your own money and as a woman to be able to, even when you get married with your own children you should still be working and earning your own money. As a community overall I think we are very encouraged to study and to work and people are very proud of you in the community, they are like, wow, good on
University Multicultural Environment

The overall sentiment from all research participants attending higher education was that it was an enjoyable experience and these findings concur with those of Asmar (Asmar 2001). They do not report feeling discriminated against on the basis of their religion or dress and there were no reports of discrimination by university lecturers or support staff, as also reported by Asmar. One of our participants commented:

Most of the time higher education faculties are very diverse and multicultural anyway. You have the heads who are academics and doctors and they are usually very educated, people who know how to get along with people from all walks of life. So maybe higher education is maybe more sheltered from the real world. University environment is fine (22y/Australia).

There is a strong driver for Muslim women to participate in tertiary education but there are none the less some significant barriers for some women. A number of women had not been helped by school teachers and in fact actively discouraged to go on to further education. Some women expressed concern over some aspects of the university campus culture and some women also faced family opposition. For a very small minority of women, religious conservatism on the part of some religious leaders was also a barrier. There are also some religiously conservative groups within the community that do not encourage women to undertake further education and for women associated with these groups this conservatism can also be a barrier.

For some people, being a visible minority as Muslim women on campus can be challenging. Muslim women try to establish good relations with fellow students, colleagues and staff but nonetheless there is the recognition that there are major differences in how they live their social lives on and off campus.

I wouldn’t go out with my friends late at night because I know they would be drinking or going out to clubs. And for them that’s really normal and that’s how they spend their weekends and that’s how they get to know people better. But for me doing that is highly abnormal and something that I would never do, so there's that striking difference (22y/Lebanon).

For some women, especially those who have been to single sex schools or for religious or cultural reasons have generally not had the social opportunities afforded
their friends from co-education schools, interacting with males in academic and social settings can be quite challenging.

Coming from a private girls’ school it was a little bit like that, going to uni as well. It’s just that environment where it is all girls and it’s a whole other little world and we grew up in a family where it was just all girls and we didn’t have any contact with boys until I hit uni and it was, oh my god. What the hell do you do? (24y/Singapore).

**Family Opposition to Education**

The overwhelming response from the research participants was that both their families and the communities were very proud that they were attending university. However, some families felt concerns about other issues of female attendance at university, including mixing with men and the social life on campus. There is also, for a minority of families, the issue that Muslim women should marry early and concentrate on having children and establishing a family life, but this is interpreted as a cultural, not a religious response. Some newly arrived Arab and Somali families were identified as holding these cultural views with regards to women’s education.

I have arguments with my husband. He sometimes tells me not to study more, not to work. But I strike a balance (35y/UAE).

On the whole, most women said their families supported their decisions as long as family responsibilities were not neglected.

[My family are] supportive as far as [I’m] not neglecting my daughter. As long as my responsibilities are covered, they don’t mind what I do with my time (28y/Somalia).

Again, while the majority of the community including the majority of religious leaders fully support higher education for Muslim women, there are some conservative elements within the community who encourage women to early marriage. Also some parents are concerned that a more highly educated girl will have problems finding a suitable husband. According to one participant:

I think that there is a growing tendency towards early marriage and there is a growing conservative agenda in the Muslim community towards women. I’ve heard repeatedly that it’s not appropriate for a Muslim woman to be highly educated because it severely restricts their marriage options. The men won’t
marry you if you are more educated than they are (23y/Palestine).

**Discrimination on the Basis of Religious Dress**

Young Muslim women discussed the growing use of *hijab* at universities and identified the desire to express both their religiosity and their Muslim Australian identity as the principal reasons for its use. However, some women also indicated that wearing the *hijab* acts as a barrier or a shield to the strong peer pressure that exists in youth culture in and out of universities. Anecdotal reports by research participants indicates that, over the past five years even though more Muslim girls are wearing *hijab* the numbers of Muslim girls experiencing discrimination at university is diminishing.

However, there were also barriers to that participation and, while diminishing, discrimination on the basis of religious dress code remains ongoing. Reported incidents of teacher prejudice are also of concern. While the prevailing youth culture was a barrier to full participation in youth social life, the majority of young Muslim women participants felt that they were able to deal with the prevailing youth culture with considerable maturity. Participation barriers exist for some parents in areas of social acceptance and, for some, discomfort in social settings where alcohol is served.

**Chapter Summary**

Muslim Women in my research are for the most part highly educated and value educational opportunities for their families. This could be due to my sampling technique or a variety of other factors. Women experienced some barriers to getting a higher education including stereotypes, attitudes to religious dress, religious conservatism and youth cultural expectations in social activities. In general, participants saw education as a means to freedom, security and as a way of raising their social status. At the least education was seen to have benefits for families and in particular children. Among participants there was a strong commitment to providing their children with educational opportunities that offered academic excellence. For a minority of families, the issue that Muslim women should marry early and concentrate on having children and establishing a family life, but this is interpreted as a cultural, not a religious response. Some newly arrived Arab and Somali families were identified as holding these cultural views with regards to women’s education.
Mostly, participants said their families supported their educational decisions as long as their family responsibilities were met and Islamic boundaries or social codes were kept in place.

Family influence and characteristics and educational attainment alone do not sufficiently explain variations in participants public sphere activity. As such the next chapter will build on the ideas presented in the last two chapters on gender and family and education and will evaluate the factors impacting this group of Sydney Muslim women’s rate of volunteerism and political activity. Volunteerism appears to be a gateway for women in my sample to enter into or gain greater access to other public sphere activities like paid employment.
Chapter Six
Volunteerism, Social Involvement and Political Participation

Activism is a way of life, a way that is in tune with Islam, a religion that calls for justice, moderation, and compassion. While I am currently settled into a routine here, busy at home raising my young son, only God knows what the future will hold, and where the need for activist responses will arise (Bullock 2005).

Following on from the last chapter on education this chapter investigates volunteerism, social involvement and political participation within a group of Sydney Muslim women. Higher levels of education also have a strong link to the levels of community involvement in my research. This chapter begins with a case study then sections on volunteer work, contributing to the community, political participation and social involvement. Through detailing participant’s attitudes to political, social and volunteer activities we are better able to gauge the level and importance of community activities and involvement that may otherwise go unnoticed in many types of sociological research on Muslim women.

Case Study: Medina’s Community Involvement
Medina’s story was selected as a case study due to the high level of her volunteer involvement both in the Muslim and mainstream communities in Sydney. She is a 22-year-old Sydney Muslim woman of Lebanese decent. Her daily activities include house duties, working, playing sport and socialising. She works full time as a health promotion officer.

I work for an area health service under the umbrella of NSW health. The main focus of my job is with schools. Through an obesity plan we work with schools to combat certain problems. We work with parents and teachers. She also undertakes volunteer work as the assistant secretary with a sports club. She is also on its executive committee. Last summer Medina was patrolling beaches as a volunteer lifesaver. In the past she has been involved with several surf clubs and a Muslim community health organisation.
She explains that the sports club is more than just a club. It’s a space for the community to gather.

People in the club are really driven. They have goals. They aim to have Lakemba seen in a better light. They have a vision, they're trying to break barriers. In my role year, but I’ve been part of the club for a few years. The thing is Lakemba Sports club is like a platform for everything else. Like life saving came under that. I did a lot of promotional work for Et.com, it was an opportunity, I was doing ambassador work. They do events management. I took part in Sydney leadership and National Students leadership program. She tells me Lakemba Sports is looking at becoming a women’s only club. Her friend Fatima runs coaching courses at Lakemba because she knows women from the area will come, it’s a comfortable place for them. They also have functions for women.

When asked how she has contributed to the community she explains that she tries to speak out in a positive manner on behalf of the Muslim community and that she has appeared in newspapers and other types of media. She also commented that she could not have done all this without the support of her family, especially her mum.

I don’t think I’m different from any other Muslim girl but I think because I’ve taken these opportunities I can spread the message that the religion is not a barrier. It’s a message that if I can do it, others can do it too. I had a lot of encouragement Fatima, my mum and Ahida (a Muslim business woman) supported me a lot.

She says it’s so important for Muslim women to be active in the community, there’s so much bad media about Muslims that it needs to be countered. “We need to get out of this victim mentality. The whole poor me sitting on the fence is doing nothing”. She commented on how integral it is that Muslims mix with non-Muslims in their communities.

We all live in Australia, there’s no point in excluding yourself. The ability to interact with people that are familiar with us is hard enough but with those you don’t it’s harder still. It’s important to have respect and a peaceful society. It’s an important personal thing. It opens the gate wider if there’s prejudice.
Medina said that she had some sort of input with her family. As the oldest of five she is used to having a say. She commented that she didn’t view herself as pushy but if she felt strongly about something that she would voice her opinion.

Medina is eligible to vote. She said that it’s important to vote especially living in today’s society where you hope your opinion can be heard and that it counts. She commented, “I don’t really have much faith in politicians”. She said her experiences at parliament house impacted on her political opinions. She also gained some of her knowledge from the media.

When I met Bronwyn Bishop she didn’t want to shake my hand. She has no idea. Bruce Baird (member for Cronulla) sponsored me and believed in me in ways Muslims couldn’t.

Medina explained that Muslim women should vote and if they united together they could have a strong voice and that for women that usually don’t vote that it could be quite liberating if they had that opportunity. She said she believed that Australian Muslim women were not very active on the political stage:

I think they should, whether realistically they get up there is the thing. The hard thing would be getting people to believe they are not just there for Islamic things like to get mosques built etc.

Volunteer work

Katherine Bullock notes that after September 11 in the State of the Union address, George Bush asked Americans to devote themselves to volunteerism. The unfortunate thing was that the wider American society was unaware of the high levels of volunteerism within the Muslim community, which seem to be unnoticed by ordinary Americans. Muslims continued to be maligned as suspect, as people committed to “un-American” or “un-Canadian” or “un-Australian values (Bullock 2005, p. 6).

Muslim women in Australia are from a wide variety of different backgrounds and their experience varies in terms of age, class, ethnicity, religious background and beliefs, profession, education and family relationships. They are active in a number of different ways, in anti-poverty programs, in anti-war and anti-racist movements, union movements and in welfare, school and community organisations.

Firstly, despite views of Muslim communities as ‘insular’ and conservative’, Muslim women have high levels of involvement in political movements and community welfare organisations (Read and Bartkowski 2000, p. 1049). Secondly, the women in my
sample are articulating an Australian-diasporic identity that is based on their actual experience and challenges notions of ‘white Australia’ from which they are excluded (Ho 2007, p. 67). Thirdly, their public sphere activity is being made much harder by the level of racism and Islamophobia that is directed to them and by the resurgence of the politics of assimilation in Australia (Kabir 2004).

My research found that the extent of family support is a critical factor in influencing decisions to volunteer among Muslim youth. Ten participants stated that they would not undertake or continue volunteering or community work if they did not have the approval and support of their parents and/or spouse. Eight participants even say their families are both very supportive and also strongly involved in community work.

[My family are] very supportive, my kids help out too. When there is an event they are there. When we need to move big things for an event. We use the van and all help out (51y/Singapore).

Twelve participants indicated that families are often supportive of volunteering but this can vary. Three participants reported some sort of objection from a family member about their volunteerism. Their participation in volunteering may be mediated according to the following preferences:

- For women to work during the day for safety reasons and to facilitate family time;
- That they should steer away from activities that could be interpreted as politically inappropriate or dangerous; and
- That voluntary work should not interfere with study or potential to seek paid work

Islam is also an important influence toward volunteering, emphasising as it does work in the community, especially during significant periods of religious importance. My participants drew most of their awareness of volunteering opportunities from Muslim community sources and their community’s media. They were less aware of volunteering opportunities outside their community. They were also unlikely to be aware of volunteering activities available at the local level. Discussions showed that community leaders play a critical role in promoting volunteering among Muslims and that the families of these women would be highly likely to support their involvement – due to the trust and respect that the leaders had in the community. Volunteering involvements also followed from self initiated contact stemming from the above channels, through friends and family and in response to direct requests from not for profit organisations.
Motivating factors drawn from my interview data:
• The personal benefits of volunteering (for example personal development or exploring possible career paths);
• The social benefits of volunteering (meeting new people or enhancing social life); a
• The benefits to Muslim communities (making a contribution to the community, creating a positive awareness of Muslim cultures within Australian society).

Some of the barriers to becoming involved in volunteering experienced or perceived by my participants include:
• Limited time to spare due to other commitments;
• Having to face potentially difficult situations in some volunteering activities;
• Lack of information about volunteering opportunities;
• Fear of isolation/exposure to unfamiliar surroundings, issues and people;
• Having to deal with bureaucratic or political issues arising within an organisation.

In addition to these barriers, participants identified the fear of being isolated, harassed or discriminated against as a major barrier to participating in volunteering activities arranged by non-Muslim organizations. My participants indicated that they would be more likely to volunteer with non-Muslim organisations that demonstrated a strong commitment to including volunteers from a diverse range of backgrounds than those who did not, as they did not want to be singled out as a special group. Many participants also commented that they wanted to help when seeing people in need in the community.

Probably I would say helping with the migrants, it’s my way of giving back. I remember how hard it was when I came here, I spoke English and it was still hard. I feel bad when I see people being bullied in Centrelink, I feel bad to see people being isolated. I like to advocate for them and try to stop these problems. (28y/Somalia).

Of the three participants that said they did not currently take part in some form of volunteer activity all said they had done so in the past. All of these participants stated that they would like to volunteer but because of other commitments it was impossible at this time. Two participants explained that their inactivity was due to the presence of young children in the home. The remaining participant was already very busy with work and study commitments:
No but I’ve contemplated it. I haven’t had time because of full-time work and uni. I’m a member of the Muslim students association. I’m not active because they never do anything, they do nothing. They don’t do anything to help Muslim women, they just hold barbeques (22y/Australia).

Nine participants volunteered specifically for Muslim women’s organisations (MWOs) in order to help other Muslim women with, for example, provision of social services, settlement services to newly arrived Muslim women, community welfare services including domestic violence support, early intervention and family support services, playgroups, and working with Muslim carers, including social work and psychological services. In addition, they provide housing and accommodation support, information referral and social welfare and emergency relief.

**Helping the Muslim Community**

Islam places great importance on acts of charity, both monetary and otherwise. Being a minority, many Australian Muslims are even more aware of the value of helping and building their communities. This may take the form of volunteerism in community organisations, scripture teaching, leading religious classes, visiting the elderly or sick in nursing homes and hospitals; and helping in soup kitchens. Although this sort of activity may not be considered to be located within more traditional definitions of the public sphere, the expanding nature of the definition of ‘public’ in Muslim contexts makes voluntary work a first step into the public space. Most participants said helping the Muslim community was essential.

Oh, it’s very important, I consider them my family. You help those closest to you first and then you branch out. It’s very important. I feel responsible if I don’t help out (28y/Somalia).

It’s very important especially for women, because sometimes there are ladies that don’t know their rights. We have to tell them their rights, advise them to seek legal aid (52y/Singapore).

Some participants pointed out that they did not dislike the idea of volunteering but due to the nature of some organisations chose not to take part. Some said that the running of the associations were disorganised, some disliked the politics of the religious messages that were being propagated.
I don’t but I’d like to. If there is a proper organization [to take part in]. Some are not consistent with the way they run things. There are problems with Granville Youth Association. I don’t agree with some of it. (35y/UAE).

Some even commented that people from specific ethic backgrounds were only accepted at certain community functions, events and organisations. Two non-Arab participants said they preferred to volunteer with the Islamic Women’s Welfare Association (IWWA) as it was “less Arab-centric” than other community organisations.

**Interacting and Volunteering with Non-Muslims**

Participants agreed that it was very imperative to communicate and cooperate with surrounding non-Muslim communities.

> It’s very important, we live here we have to assimilate. If we come here we have to learn to interact. You can’t live without interacting with non-Muslims. There’s doctors, schools, banks to deal with and that’s just the start.

(35y/UAE).

Four participants said that they also volunteered with associations or groups in the wider community including The Cancer Council, The Royal Life Saving Society of Australia, Wanda Surf Club, Lakemba Sports Club, reading programs in local primary schools like The Premier’s Reading Challenge, Bankstown Cadets and The National Students Leadership Program. Some participants were even acting as ambassadors for the Australian Muslim community.

> I did a lot of promotional work for ET.com, it was an opportunity, I was doing ambassador work. They do events management. Took part in Sydney leadership, The National Students Leadership Program and also Bankstown Cadets (22y/Lebanon).

It’s very important, like we all live in Australia there’s no point excluding yourself. The ability to interact with people that are familiar with us is hard enough but with those you don’t it’s harder still. It’s important to have respect and a peaceful society. It’s an important personal thing. It opens the gate wider if there’s prejudice (22y/Lebanon).
Contribution to the Community

Participants were asked how they contributed to the community. Of the three participants who were not active volunteers all said that the most vital contribution was looking after their families. One reason that some Muslim women do not spend part of their spare time to help the Muslim community, is the idea held in various religious circles with varying degrees of intensity, that women should concern themselves exclusively with work at home and that the community work is the responsibility of men only. Naturally this attitude either completely discourages Muslim women from any social participation or it leads them to find social participation in circles where Islamic values are not represented.

Being at home raising my children. That’s my primary focus, will be for quite a while inshAllah (God willing) (34y/Australia).

Raising four children on my own. I have no family here. Raising them all on my own, inshAllah there will be five soon. InshAllah they will make Australia proud in the future and be good Muslims inshAllah (40y/Malaysia).

However, most participants commented that they felt volunteering their time in the community was a rewarding experience. All those that volunteered said that they felt proud of their efforts.

I think it’s worth it [volunteering]. It’s a good job [scripture teaching], the school appreciates it. It’s good to help, it helps others a lot. It makes a big difference. If people don’t help there is less activities for people (sic). I used to teach 400 students a week, without me imagine the place they would have to fill if I’m not there (45y/Palestine).

Yes, I think everyone’s participation makes a difference, you feel like you’re part of something, you’re helping people less fortunate than yourself. In terms of community, they benefit from it. On a personal level it makes me feel like part of the community. I’m helping to create a community with others. I have a feeling of belonging and self-fulfilment (23y/Palestine).

Other participants stated that they could contribute to the community in a more informal way by being visible in their hijab and giving Muslim women and Islam in general a good name through education.
I do the best I can to give Muslim women a good reputation and a voice. I do my best to educate non-Muslims about Islam, to clear up any misconceptions (22y/Lebanon).

Social Involvement

In terms of these friendships and social life, Muslim women’s personal and socially perceived identity is the key to their participation in Australian social life. The majority of women in this research identified themselves strongly as ‘Australian Muslims’. Further research is needed on that concept and no attempt is made here to delineate exactly what that term might mean. This ‘Australian Muslim’ identity is shared by women who are wearing the hijab, and those who are not. About three quarters of the women in this research were wearing the hijab and acknowledged that those who did not would have had different social experiences.

Muslim women’s friendships, as part of their social life, are not an area that has been researched in Australia. However, in the literary field, Hanifa Deen’s book Caravanserai: Journey Among Australian Muslims, provides insight into the social life of some Muslim communities (Deen 2003) and Randa Abdel-Fattah’s works provide a popular cultural insight into young Muslim women’s lives (Abdel-Fattah 2007). In relation to friendships with non-Muslim women, this research indicates that among the participants fourteen out of fifteen participants had friends who were non-Muslim. However, none of the participant said that either of their two best friends were non-Muslim.

Muslim women also engage in a range of social activities with their non-Muslim friends, going to dinner and the movies, talking on the phone, having coffee, shopping, ‘hanging out’ and, for older women, participating in children’s activities such as playgroups or sporting events. They also participate in each other’s festivals. Many Muslim women also belonged to a wide variety of non-Muslim professional, social or charitable organisations.

Sydney Muslim women who participated in my research were involved in a wide variety of social activities at varying time intervals, contradicting the notion that Muslims—particularly pious Muslims—are removed from Australian society and avoid social engagements. In particular, they were asked to indicate how often (at least daily, weekly, monthly, yearly or never) they undertook the following activities:
attending social meetings (citizens’ groups); playing sports; eating out (at cafés or restaurants); going to the movies; reading; shopping; spending time at the mosque; spending time outdoors (e.g. on picnics); surfing the internet; visiting (family or friends); and watching TV, videos or DVDs. In the main, participants were undertaking the variety of activities at relatively frequent time intervals. For example, more than half of participants ate out at least weekly; eight out of fifteen participants went to the movies at least once a month; and ten our of fifteen women surfed the internet daily.

Other barriers to friendships with non-Muslims include stereotyping and lack of sensitivity to Islamic religious practices, as well as, for new arrivals, their language skills and lack of understanding of Australian culture. Some Muslim women also feel marginalised and under threat in some social environments. However, most report that, while extremely negative statements from political leaders about Muslim women’s language skills, citizenship and women’s dress fuel racist and defamatory media attacks, overall there has been some improvement in the level of verbal and physical harassment Muslim women are experiencing. The exception to this is the anecdotal reporting of racism being experienced by some Muslim African women in some communities.

**Political Participation**

The only hadith relating to female political leadership in Islam is in Sahih al-Bukhari, 5:59:709, in which Mohammad is recorded as saying that people with a female ruler will never be successful. The al-Bukhari collection is generally regarded as authentic, though Fatima Mernissi has questioned the reliability of the recorder of this particular hadith (Roald 2001). However, many classical Islamic scholars, such as al-Tabari, supported female leadership (Roald 2001, p. 21). In early Islamic history, women including Aisha, Ume Warqa, and Samra Binte Wahaib took part in political activities (Ghamidi 2005).

In the past several decades, many countries in which Muslims are a majority, including Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Turkey, and Kyrgyzstan have been

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18 Narrated Abu Bakra: During the days (of the battle) of Al-Jamal, Allah benefited me with a word I had heard from Allah's Apostle after I had been about to join the Companions of Al-Jamal (i.e. the camel) and fight along with them. When Allah's Apostle was informed that the Persians had crowned the daughter of Khosrau as their ruler, he said, “Such people as ruled by a lady will never be successful.”
led by women (MacDonald and Schoenberger 2007). Nearly one-third of the Parliament of Egypt also consists of women (Shaheen 2003). Until recently most Muslim nations were non-democratic, but most today allow their citizens to have some level of voting and control over their government. The disparate times at which women’s suffrage was granted in Muslim-majority countries is indicative of the varied traditions and values present within the Muslim world. Azerbaijan has had women's suffrage since 1918 but some took much longer with women in Oman gaining suffrage in 2003, Kuwait in 2008 and UAE 2006 (BBC, 2005).

Fatima Mernissi has put forward a very interesting view on Muslim women’s political leadership. She explains that the core of the problem is in fact one of space (Mernissi 1990, p. 25). Women active in the public sphere are seen by some to be present in men’s space. In her book The Forgotten Queens of Islam she writes,

Women are disturbing when they appear where they are not expected. And no one expects to see us where decisions are made. She wonders how Muslim female leaders of the past succeeded in gaining power without frightening the men, what strategies they use to tame them or manipulate them and if they kept their positions by accepting lesser titles by not calling themselves imams or caliphs.

**Women in Australian Politics**

In the Australian federal parliament in 2008, 30 per cent of members and senators were women. In the Senate there were 27 women, out of a total of 76 senators, and in the House of Representatives there were 40 women, out of a total of 150 members.¹⁹ The position of Prime Minister is now held by Julia Gillard, this is the first time in parliamentary history a woman has held this office. Professor Marie Bashir, the first woman to be appointed Governor of NSW, took up her office on 1 March 2001. Quentin Alice Louise Bryce, AC, (born 23 December 1942) is the 25th and current Governor-General of Australia (the first woman to hold the position) and a former Governor of Queensland. She attended the University of Queensland, where she completed a Bachelor of Arts and a degree in Law, becoming one of the first women accepted to the Queensland bar.

Women in the wider Australian community are making great progress within the area of political participation and leadership, but can the same be said to be true for Australian Muslim women? Many Muslim organisations and certain individuals have contested the legitimacy of voting in Islam. This rejection stems from a belief that voting in some way or another contradicts the sovereignty of Allah. Some conservative Muslims also say that voting in a non-Islamic Western system is forbidden because it does not take certain elements of *shari’ah* into consideration. The majority of participants felt that voting was an important part of being an Australian citizen and that women should always be allowed the right to vote.

Well, I mean my opinion is that women should undeniably be able to vote like everyone else. They should have freedom of speech. It’s sad that we have to fight for these rights (24y/Singapore).

Some participants were very passionate when pointing out women’s rights to suffrage and felt that gender differences should not come in the way of women being able to have their say both in family matters and those of public importance.

It’s about time women have the right vote, women have equal rights to men. People have considered me a feminist in the past because I stand up for women’s rights. It annoys me that some men look down on women as weak just because we are female. Just because we are not men doesn’t mean our voices and our opinions can’t be heard (23y/Palestine).

Others pointed out that the fact that if women who are charged with raising the next generation of children are not allowed to vote and have their opinion heard then society as a whole has a problem with the way it sets out and defines its gender roles.

Women have a right to vote, let them vote, if they have a rights to speak let them speak. I’d be pretty upset if we didn’t have these rights. If people that are raising the children don’t have these rights it’s pretty disturbing (22y/Australia).

Out of the fifteen participants, nine women said that they voted, two were not eligible to vote and four did not vote. They said that this was not because of religious reasons but due to their lack of trust in the political system or personal apathy towards political issues.

Participants were asked if they thought Muslim women were active in Australian politics. Most participants answered in the negative or said they were
unsure if this was the case. There are a few Muslim women active in local politics in Sydney including Silma Ihram and Malikeh Michaels but for the most part it is agreed that it is too difficult for Muslim women to undertake this role while looking after their families. This may also point to a space issue where Muslim women are still prescribed to certain spaces and are not expected to appear in the political arena.

There aren’t many Muslim women who are active in politics, but I think there should be more. I’m not sure how, I don’t know much about politics. Being a Muslim woman and being responsible for your family makes it hard for Muslim women to take part in politics. Politics is something that takes a lot of time so maybe that’s why we don’t see Muslim women out there (23y/Palestine).

Chapter Summary
Community support is important within the Islamic community and helping those less fortunate is seen as vital. The importance of Muslim women’s organizations and the services and support they offer women cannot be underestimated, particularly for women with poor English language skills or lack of educational opportunities. Participants have recognised the need for their involvement in community organisations and initiatives in order to build a stronger community and also to help those less fortunate than themselves in a religiously supportive environment. Women report that taking part in volunteer activities gave them a sense of belonging and person satisfaction. Those undertaking voluntary work outside of the Muslim community also felt that they were doing their part to raise the status of Islam in the eyes of non-Muslim Australians.

Social involvement is a good indicator of community links and also of those ties with the wider Australian community. Muslim women in my sample were very active socially reporting that they socialised three times a week or more. Participants said they enjoyed playing sports; eating out at cafés or restaurants; going to the movies; reading; shopping; spending time at the mosque; spending time outdoors (eg. on picnics); surfing the internet; visiting (family or friends); and watching TV, videos or DVDs. Friendships were not limited to the participant’s cultural or religious background although most participants did say their closest friends usually shared their belief in Islam.
Political participation is an indicator of women’s independence and agency. The majority of participants recognised how integral this right is to women gaining gender parity. Most participant that could vote said they did so with only four opting not to vote. This itself is not significant as non-Muslims in Australia also opt not to register to vote due to apathy or dissatisfaction with the political process. Muslim women in Australia are not very active on the political scene, but the majority of participants thought they could be. If the opposite was true this was only because of the importance placed on family based roles for Muslim women.

The participation of Sydney Muslim women in community, social and political matters points to a much higher level of public sphere participation than can be understood from looking at labour force participation alone. The Muslim women in my sample are all very active within their communities, at times their activity does not include paid employment due to family commitments although volunteer work was usually included in the busiest of family schedules. This may point to the possibility that Muslim women may be active in the public sphere in an entirely different way from women in the mainstream Australian community.

Following on from this chapter’s account of non-paid community involvement, political participation and citizenship the subsequent results chapter will outline participant’s level of paid employment. The chapter on employment will also outline participant’s attitudes to paid work and investigate workplace discrimination.
Chapter Seven
Employment

Why, as doctors, lawyers, judges, and academics in high positions, are we daily forced back into our position of inferiority when in conflict with men in the domestic sphere? (Mernissi 1987)

Following on from our examination of volunteerism, political participation and social factors this chapter outlines factors affecting Sydney Muslim women’s paid employment including family support and discrimination. Since family support, educational attainment and volunteer activity alone do not explain labour force participation rates in my sample this chapter explores paid employment. This chapter begins with a case study on employment and then continues with a section on Islamic view of women’s employment. It then continues with Muslim women’s views on employment in Australia and a section on research findings including equal opportunities and discrimination in the workplace. This chapter sets out to add to the aim of my thesis by building on the argument that Sydney Muslim women are in fact active in the public sphere, especially when they have family support.

Case Study: Aaliyah at Work.
Aaliyah was chosen as a case study on employment due to her strong views on gender and religious equality in the workplace. Her examples are indicative of other participant’s responses. She is a 24-year-old Muslim woman residing in Lakemba. She was born in Singapore but moved to Australia when she was nine years old. She works part-time tutoring high school English while she finishes her medical degree at Sydney University. Before this she had worked at Myer. On the concept of equality in the workplaces she was very positive; she didn’t believe that wearing the hijab had lessened her chances of securing employment.

It’s a nice concept you know but I think people are inevitably swayed by their own biases and first impressions. I wear hijab, but so far this hasn’t been a problem.
She also commented that her colleagues were mostly female and as such her family was not as worried about the chances of improper interactions with the opposite gender at work.

Aaliyah was not concerned if her career prospects would be affected by her gender or her religious dress. When asked if she thought being a woman has affected her career advancement she said,

Umm, well I mean not really. I’ve always been in fields that are women friendly. I think in medicine there’s always been a demand for Muslim women.

She has found it easier to stay within women friendly fields such as medicine, retail and teaching and as such she has found that she hasn’t really faced any barriers to finding employment. Her current job is in a company owned by Muslims so this has made elements like the wearing of religious dress, prayer times and other religious requirements a non-issue. Aaliyah did point out that she has also been employed by a large non-Muslim company and did not have any problems in that role.

She said she thought it was important for Muslim women to be visibly participating in the workforce. She is of the opinion that Muslims in Australia should participate in public life as much as possible in order to breakdown false stereotypes surrounding Muslims, particularly Muslim women.

Women should participate and uphold Muslim values. It allows the Australian community to know we are human just like them. We are nothing to be feared.

Aaliyah felt that the key to a better relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia was interaction and initiative on the behalf of Muslims to participate more in the wider Australian community.

On the issue of workplace discrimination Aaliyah said that she does find people to be hesitant initially but that when they get to know her and realise that she is “more than just a hijab” that people are quite friendly towards her. She said she has experienced racist comments and stares from random people on the street calling her “towel head” and telling her to go back to her country, but never from a manager or colleague in a work environment.
**Islamic Views on Employment**

Contrary to popular stereotypes, women are permitted to work within traditional Islamic law. This is conditional on the basis that her employment does not cause her to neglect the important role of a mother and wife (Ahmad 1981). It has been claimed that it is the responsibility of the Muslim community to organise work for women, so that she can do so in a Muslim cultural atmosphere, where her rights (as set out in the Qur’an) are respected.

- The work should not require the man or the woman to violate Islamic law (e.g., serving alcohol), and be mindful of the woman's safety.
- If the work requires the woman to leave her home, she must maintain her modesty (Esposito 2001, p. 49).

Traditional Islamic law insists that women are not preoccupied by economic concerns so that they can devote all their time and energy to nurturing, educating and bringing up their children and to raise responsible members of the Muslim community. Although most Muslim jurists agree that Muslim women have the right to work outside the home and run their own business, they are not required to contribute towards the family income and maintenance.

**Muslim Women and Employment in Australia**

Muslim women are considered the cornerstone of the family, their primary responsibility being their children. Their values and duties include modesty, premarital virginity, childbearing, and childrearing. The family’s honour is generally contingent on whether or not they fulfil these obligations (Read 2002, p. 20). The influence of these cultural values on Muslim women’s status in Islamic countries is highly contentious. To many, Muslim women’s lower economic activity is indicative of their lower social positions. For example in 1990, only 13 per cent of the workforce in Arab countries was made up of women compared with an economic activity rate of 43 per cent for East-Asian women and 44 per cent of American women (Read 2002, p. 20). It is also important to mention that the employment participation rate of Australian Muslim women varies substantially in terms of country of origin (Foroutan 2009, p. 310). Yaghoob Foroutan documents the relatively lower gender outcomes measured by indicators such as education, fertility, marriage pattern, maternal mortality and reproductive health. It is worthwhile noting that the lower employment
level of Muslim women accords with a wide range of prior research (Foroutan 2009, p. 311).

In the *Mapping Employment & Education among Muslim Australians* (2009) report when asked whether they felt secure in their employment, 69 per cent of respondents stated they did (Akbarzadeh, Bouma et al. 2009, p. 87). However, a sizeable 31 per cent stated that they did not feel secure in their employment (Akbarzadeh, Bouma et al. 2009, p. 88). Why this is so, may well have more to do with wider trends towards casualisation in the workforce, as opposed to any Muslim-specific factors. In addition, 58 per cent of working respondents indicated they felt happy in their employment. While 62.5 per cent agreed they are adequately paid, only 54.6 per cent affirmed they have enough income for their family, with 24 per cent of respondents neutral on the question, and 21.4 per cent disagreeing. The generally positive responses for both job security and satisfaction are sound indicators for the healthy participation of Muslims who are in the workforce, regardless of their field of employment (Akbarzadeh, Bouma et al. 2009, p. 89).

However, a more troubling picture emerges in response to questions over experiences of difficulties in finding work. Here, 46 per cent of respondents experience difficulties when looking for work (Akbarzadeh, Bouma et al. 2009, p. 90). In more detailed responses to the question, a key theme was one of cultural apprehensions they believed played a part in these difficulties. Of my fifteen participants, eleven indicated they held some sort of employment. There was a mixture of employment status among participants with seven indicating full-time employment and four casual, or part-time employment. My participants reported working as teachers, academics, administration officers, fashion designers, singers, sales assistants, health liaison officers and web designers.

Over the past decade, scholars have increasingly focused on the importance of women’s labour force participation as an indication of the economic adaptation of recent migrants. One of the most consistent findings in the research is that women’s labour force activity varies by birthplace within and across U.S. ethnic populations (Greenlees and Saenz 1999). Although data on Muslim American Women are largely missing in studies of labour force, participation a limited number include information on Middle Eastern migrant women that, when examined more closely contradict traditional findings (Read 2004 p. 54). Similar to Read’s study (2004), this research
has uncovered an element of social mobility within the sample that sees considerably more participants employed in professional occupations than their parents. Numerous studies in both the U.S. and the U.K. that examine religious influences on women’s labour force participation have raised interesting questions about the effects of family obligations on women’s economic achievements.20

Gary Bouma et al. (2003) investigated how Islamic doctrine perceives the workplace by outlining human resource issues that concern Muslims in Australia (Bouma, Haidar et al. 2003). Bouma et al. outline areas in which employers should be sensitive towards Muslim employees including the wearing of the hijab and the need for provision for prayer during work hours. They point out that although Muslim women in the Middle East usually do not work outside the home unless economic circumstances leave them no choice, that work itself is seen as an act of faith in Islam and that Muslim women, “must weigh up their needs for self-actualisation, financial stability and pious religious commitment” (Bouma, Haidar et al. 2003). Not surprisingly women come to “divergent” conclusions as to what this means for them as individuals and members of a community. This divergence is present within my sample, with some participants choosing to stay home after their children are born and others trying to continue their careers through whatever means possible.

Research in this area has until recently focused on specific ethnic communities, the majority of whom are Muslim. For instance, Michael Humphrey carried out extensive research work in the 1980’s and 1990’s on the Lebanese community in Sydney, examining this community’s settlement and employment patterns (Humphrey 1984). Betts’ and Healy’s (2006) more recent publication on the social disadvantage of Lebanese Muslims in Australia also explores employment and other social issues (Betts and Healy 2006). Some recent studies have included Muslim women in their broader analysis, including the HREOC Isma-Listen Report of 2004 that highlighted racial and religious discrimination as key barriers to Muslim workforce participation and also identified Muslim women’s dress as a significant barrier as well (Ismae Report, 2003). Kabir and Evans’ paper explores the historical trends of Muslims in the Australian labour market from 1980 to 2001 and provides some reference to the specific situation of Muslim women (Kabir and Evans 2002). The data that is available from the ABS shows the national percentage of Muslim

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women participating in the labour market as 26.3 per cent in 1991 up to 30 per cent in 2001 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001: E01, E17). The figure for 2006 is 31 per cent and 85 per cent of that workforce are employees. In terms of income, overall the Muslim population in Australia is in the lower socio-economic bracket with over two thirds of the population earning less than $600 per week and only 1.6 per cent earning $2,000 or more per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001: E01, E17).

In the mainstream Australian community almost 4.8 million women were in some form of paid employment in January 2008, with a labour force participation rate of 58 per cent, while the unemployment rate was 4.6 per cent (compared with an overall rate of 4.3 per cent for the same month). More than 30 per cent of Australia’s small business operators are women. Women make up more than half of the Australian public service workforce (57 per cent) and hold around 36 per cent of senior executive positions. In the private sector, however, women hold only around 12 per cent of management jobs. Women hold 34 per cent of all seats on federal government-controlled boards and around 23 per cent of chair or deputy chair positions. However, women hold only 9 per cent of private board directorships (DFAT 2011).

**Employment in my Data**

This research has not attempted to undertake a detailed study of Muslim women’s workforce participation but rather it provides an overview of the drivers and barriers to that participation experienced by a sample of Sydney Muslim women. As would be expected, Muslim women involved in this research are working across all sectors of the Australian workforce. They work in the private and public sectors as professionals and service providers. They work in all sections of the public service including in health, education and academia, social services, community development, policing and justice sectors. Overall Sydney Muslim women in my sample are participating in most areas of the workforce, determined by education, training and socio-economic status.

When interviewed about their participation in the workforce and their choice of employment, the research participants identified a number of factors that influence their work choices. Among these are personal sense of achievement, improved self-
Esteem and personal confidence, a desire to integrate into the broader Australian community as well as income and life style.

Employment is extremely, extremely, extremely important. It’s important to challenge the stereotypes. I’m not only working and earning a living, but I’m changing people’s perceptions. They see that I’m confident, that changes their minds, they think Muslim women are just housewives. It changes their perceptions. Not only are we securing our futures we are changing people’s perceptions of us (25y/Palestine).

A number also identified wanting to serve the Muslim community as well as meeting their own personal and religious values. Some did so by undertaking paid or voluntary work with Muslim women’s organisation.

Other drivers for my participants’ labour force activity include a desire to participate in the non-Muslim community, positive Muslim identity and self esteem, in some instances a more racially and religiously accommodating and respectful workplace, some accommodation of Muslim women’s dress in the workplace, and respect and support from teachers for career and workforce choices. Barriers for participants’ workforce participation include lack of self-esteem and confidence, dress (especially in some industries) and, for some Muslim women, the fact that the workplace culture includes the widespread use of alcohol in work related social activities in some industries.

The issue of personal confidence emerged as a major factor in gaining employment. Three participants noted that the leadership training programs undertaken with various Muslim women’s organisations had helped them gain this confidence, especially those wearing the hijab. First and second generation Muslim women with schooling in Australia and good English language skills were extremely confident about workforce participation. Those with poorer language skills, and especially new arrivals, were naturally less confident.

**How Important is Participation in the Workforce?**

Participants were asked about how important they feel it is for Muslim women to be seen to be active in the Australian labour force. All agreed that it was important but for a number of reasons. Some said it was important for the women themselves to gain the experience, confidence, independence and agency that having financial
freedom would provide them. Others said it was vital to be seen in the labour force in order to combat some of the common stereotypes that surround Muslim women.

Umm I think it is important, it gives confidence for other Muslim women to go out there. It also helps to break misconceptions about Muslim women. We have always been very active in the workforce. I feel proud when I see other women out there. (28y/Somalia).

**Equal opportunities**

On average in Australia, women working full time earn 17.5 per cent less than men working full time (DFAT 2011). Female graduates on entering the workforce earn $3,000 p/a less than male graduates (DFAT 2011). Women in the general Australian population are finding it hard to secure complete parity with their male counterparts in the workforce. Some Muslim women are finding it even harder to get ahead in the workforce due to religious dress requirements and religious discrimination in general, especially in the area of social events at work.

I think they [workplaces] should have more things for women, most workplaces don’t really provide family friendly work places. It’s sad they are losing great workers. It’s all about work, work, work. There’s a long way to go.  

(28y/Somalia).

Some participants felt that equal opportunities were not really an issue in today’s labour force. One participant commented that the only thing that stops women from achieving the same way men do is that women have the responsibility of their family to consider. “Women are equal to men and have the same opportunity as men to work their way up” (23y/Palestine).

In addition to pre-employment and workplace discrimination for some Muslim women others have had to face a lack of religious understanding with regard to specific religious practices. In the following, the issue of hand shaking was a barrier to respectful and understanding religious practice. However, not all Muslim women will identify hand shaking as a workplace barrier.

Women don’t really shake hands and we don’t like to be put in a room with a man alone. He’d come in and I’d feel like OK you're just too close to me now. That’s just what I think they do need to be educated about. That’s probably why women are too scared. That’s personally my fear of going out there because the men won’t understand where my barriers are (22y/Lebanon).
…if there's an employer who might be prejudiced against Muslims, once any of us here open our mouths we completely blow their stereotypes. Straight away it shocks them and they think oh wow she's normal. In a way it’s probably a strength, really because people might approach you with one perception but when you exceed that even a little bit they get really happy. It’s almost like merely by speaking you impress them. (Laughs). In English and really clearly (44y/Singapore).

Chapter Summary

Workforce participation is a key area of social and economic participation in Australian life. My research shows that Muslim women are actively participating in that arena. The drivers to that participation include a strong desire to participate actively in the non-Muslim community and to be able to express their Muslim Australian identity freely and without discrimination. Additional drivers were reported as being improved personal self-confidence, improved workplace culture with regard to being respectful and accommodating towards religious dress, practices and rituals, and, in some instances, support from teachers in pre-work career encouragement. Overall Muslim women are participating in most areas of the workforce, determined by education, training and socio-economic status.

Again, family support and environment arose as one of the main factors supporting these Sydney Muslim women in paid employment. As we have seen in previous chapters family support has been integral to my participant’s public sphere activity, whether it be through education, volunteer work or paid employment. When asked who influenced their decisions to study or to undertake a career, participants overwhelmingly answered their family.

Nonetheless significant barriers to workforce participation remain for some Muslim women, in particular new arrivals. These include, for some women, language, skills recognition, overt racial and religious discrimination, stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of dress, and sometimes the social culture of the workplace, including the use of alcohol. Other participants explained that their labour force participation was made difficult due to family responsibilities.
This chapter concludes the results section of my thesis. Following this chapter will be the conclusion section which will draw all the results together.
Chapter Eight
Conclusion

Thesis Summary
The status of women in Islam has long been a subject of debate and Muslim women are frequently seen as victims of oppressive patriarchal cultures. My thesis examined a group of Sydney Muslim women’s attitudes to education, employment, and volunteerism and their experiences with discrimination and gender roles. By exploring the levels of public sphere participation and attitudes to gender roles my research helps us gain an understanding of the factors that support Sydney Muslim women’s public sphere activity. Through the changeability of their multiple roles my participants exemplified their reconceptualization of the public sphere and its varied function in Muslim communities. My research strives to develop a better understanding about the lives of women in a diaspora community that is very much unknown to the West. My data indicated that my participants are predominantly under the influence of their families, although exceptions do exist. As found in Read’s work family support was shown to be the most important factor in determining Sydney Muslim women’s activity types and levels. Most significantly it was found that many participants lack awareness of their citizenship rights and this combined with a more traditional view on gender roles inhibits them from tapping into the breadth of possibilities open to them. This chapter outlines the key conclusions of my study, and explores the wider implications of these conclusions for Muslim women’s lives in the West. It also assesses how different the findings were from available literature on the subject.

Muslim women in Australia have been invisible in many ways, as generally their activities are confined to the private domains of their homes. This has clearly changed over the past three decades as women have become increasingly recognised and included in the workforce and in higher education. Australian Muslim women are not completely powerless, yet further equality arguably depends on greater access to higher education and also to childcare to enable a more proportionate representation of women in the workforce. To further bridge the gap between the gender roles prescribed in conservative Islam and those held by Islamic feminists, a stronger
commitment from women their families and communities is necessary. This thesis has shown that my participants are not ‘oppressed’ which further legitimizes Fernea’s claim that “the place of a woman is not set in stone within Islamic societies, but responds to each society’s perceived needs and histories” (Fernea and Bezirgan 1977, p. 24).

In the West the hijab is deliberately appropriated not passively carried and handed down from generation to generation. It is claimed by a new generation of women who have had access to higher education and as such more access to the public sphere. The idea and definition of what constitutes the public sphere changes within Muslim societies. For women in my sample the public sphere was much broader than what is considered to be part of the public in Western society.

**Family Roles**

Family remained the most important aspect of life for many of my participants. Cook’s study in Egypt found that most young Muslims ”mirror parental attitudes” (Cook 2001, p. 88). This remains true for my participants to a certain degree; but the family oriented nature of Muslim society suggests that women may have felt obliged to say that their families were their main priorities. Pleasing their families first, before pleasing themselves, enabled women to feel more comfortable and accepted. Many women felt that they needed to convince their families to agree with their intentions before pursuing them. There were many strong beliefs such as, “you can’t have both career and family”, emphasising that the family is still in control. It was seen as better not to challenge family boundaries if it meant defying them. Reputations were a high priority, pressuring women not to go against the norm. Muslim culture, even in Sydney, was and is far from individualistic. People act together and individual achievements were seen as a collective family accomplishment hence, challenging society is impossible without considerable support.

Notably, participants put their responsibilities as a mother above their careers, and for many they need a flexible career to allow them to balance their work and home duties. Contemporary Islamist literature often represents women’s primary role as that of motherhood and a wife (Sherif 1987, p. 155). While some Islamists are not against women receiving an equal education up to the highest level, some view working outside the home as eradicating a woman’s fundamental Islamic ‘right’ to
stay with her children and educate them in the home (Sherif 1987, p. 159).

Women’s behaviour and actions require regulation allowing for a good family reputation, which can often be different from their individual aspirations. Ultimately many participants, had more family oriented aspirations rather than career-oriented or personal goals, including wanting a higher education, or to help their children later on, rather than to become more employable. This emphasises that employment and education trends have not changed much in the last three decades.

**Gender Stereotypes**

Gender stereotyping has a definite effect on the behaviour of women as it determines their acceptance in certain fields. Gender norms in the Australian Muslim communities are deeply embedded through socialisation, impacting upon all areas of women’s lives and directing their behaviour. Many of the barriers women face are silent and invisible, viewed in the West as ‘glass ceilings’, as assumptions often lead to stereotyping. Jayaweera argued that what is “gender appropriate” is of great significance in patriarchal societies and communities (Jayaweera 1997, p. 67). On the whole, this remains true in the case of my sample. However there are exceptions like one participant who had the support of her parents and her husband to continue her education, even though she married at a young age. She said,

My parents and my husband [encouraged me]. I was married when I started university. I got pregnant in the first year. My parents helped a lot; they would look after my son (40/Malaysia).

**Education**

Education was seen as an instrument that prompted women to “question the existing gender inequalities, understand the causes of injustice and act to ameliorate the prevailing conditions” (Mehran 2003, p. 284). This was obvious especially in the case of women who had immigrated from overseas. However, most participants seemed to accept more or less unconditionally that they would become solely wives and mothers.

According to Mehran, the role of education in Islam is now seen as a vehicle to empower women through familiarising them with “their rights” and encouraging them to “use their capabilities” to enhance their position in society. This is a major
shift away from education being an agent that promotes religion only (Mehran 2003, p. 284). Change is still happening hence some women are confident of a successful outcome in the future. Although women in Muslim societies have been encouraged to become educated, Fahmy argues that throughout history they have often found “themselves strongly enmeshed in a hierarchical system in which they occupied the lowest positions” (Fahmy 1998, p. 63).

Female graduates who are involved in family life face barriers to achieving greater financial independence. This tends to perpetuate the patriarchal notions of women being subject to men and families. This suggests that it is necessary for women to be able to access ‘tangible outcomes’ from their education to enable financial independence (Evans 2004). Their participation in the study, however, indicated that they had challenged society’s chains and become independent to a certain extent. Education was seen as an instrument that prompted women to “question the existing gender inequalities, understand the causes of injustice and act to improve the prevailing conditions” (Mehran 2003, p. 271).

The hijab is commonly associated with personal freedom by its wearers, and often seen as a symbol of women’s backwardness by outsiders (El Guindi 1999, p. 143), but most women felt more freedom with the hijab than without. Those who did not conform and dressed differently according to the situation were seen as women who were confused about how to express themselves by other Muslims, but they themselves felt strong by not succumbing to pressure. The extent of pressure on women to cover up highlights the powerful influence of families and community on women to do the accepted thing and how interpretations of wearing the hijab can be complex. Whilst there is little empirical evidence to support the theory that women who veil are disadvantaged and discriminated within a work or educational context, women participating in this study expressed deep emotional concern believing women wearing the hijab were often victims of gender stereotyping and discrimination. Participants reported some discrimination from strangers while wearing the hijab, but not necessarily while in an educational setting.

Volunteerism
Community support is important within the Islamic community and helping those less fortunate is seen as vital. The significance of Muslim women’s organizations and the
services and support they offer women cannot be underestimated, particularly for women with poor English language skills, lack of educational opportunities, or financial freedom. Participants have recognised the need for their involvement in community organisations and initiatives in order to build a stronger community and also to help those less fortunate than themselves in a religiously supportive environment. Women reported that taking part in volunteer activities gave them a sense of belonging and person satisfaction. Those undertaking voluntary work outside of the Muslim community also felt that they were doing their part to raise the status of Islam in the eyes of non-Muslim Australians.

Political Participation
Political participation is an indicator of women’s independence and agency. The majority of participants recognised how integral this right is to women in gaining gender parity. The majority of participants said they voted, with only four participants either being ineligible or opting not to register to vote. This itself is not significant as non-Muslims in Australia also opt not to register to vote due to apathy or dissatisfaction with the political process in general. Muslim women in Australia are not very active on the political scene, but the majority of participants thought they could be. If they truly are not active this is only because of the importance placed on family based roles for Muslim women.

Social Involvement
Socially, it was found that my participants were reserved in fear of violating societal perceptions of social norms. However, many are unaware of their rights as women in an Islamic community, for example their right to equality within employment and educational opportunities, and therefore usually do not take advantage of them. The majority of informants in this study found it difficult to respond to questioning, as they were not used to being questioned and tended not to be so thoughtful about what social and community structures reinforce their way of life. This was obvious in responses like “I haven’t thought about it before…nobody has ever asked me… I don’t know.” This again emphasises the considerable strength of conformity, as women are scarcely encouraged to think individualistically about their lives.

Social involvement is a good indicator of community links and also of those
ties with the wider Australian community. Muslim women in my sample were very active socially reporting that they socialised three times a week or more. Participants said they enjoyed playing sports; eating out at cafés or restaurants; going to the movies; reading; shopping; spending time at the mosque; spending time outdoors (eg. on picnics); surfing the internet; visiting (family or friends); and watching TV, videos or DVDs. Friendships were not limited to the participants cultural or religious background although most participants did say their closest friends usually shared their belief in Islam.

**Employment**

Muslim women are considered the cornerstone of the family and community and are sometimes prescribed accordingly to their homes, with primary responsibility for socialising the children. Their values and duties include modesty, premarital virginity, childbearing, and childrearing. The family’s honour is generally contingent on whether or not they fulfil these obligations. The influence of these cultural values on Muslim women’s status in Islamic countries is highly contentious.

The data that is available from the ABS shows the national percentage of Muslim women participating in the labour market moved from 26.3 per cent in 1991, to 30 per cent in 2001. The figure for 2006 is 31 per cent and 85 per cent of that workforce are full-time employees (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001: E01, E17). In terms of income, overall the Muslim population in Australia is in the lower socio-economic bracket with over two thirds of the population earning less than $600 per week and only 1.6 per cent earning $2,000 or more per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001: E01, E17).

My research has not attempted to undertake a detailed study of Muslim women’s workforce participation but rather, it provides an overview of the drivers and barriers to that participation experienced by some Sydney Muslim women. As would be expected, Muslim women involved in my research are working across all sectors of the workforce. Participants work in the private and public sectors as professionals and service providers. Muslim women involved in my research work in the media, and health educators, fashion designers, sports trainers, auditors and engineers. Many also work in family or self owned commercial enterprises such as food shops or hairdressing, while others have their own legal, accounting or medical
practices. Overall Muslim women are participating in most areas of the workforce, determined by education, training and socio-economic status.

When interviewed about their participation in the workforce and their choice of employment, the research participants identified a number of factors that influence their work choices. Among these are personal sense of achievement, improved self-esteem and personal confidence, a desire to integrate into the broader Australian community as well as income and life style. Some also listed barriers including discrimination due to religious dress, language, skills recognition, overt racial and religious discrimination and sometimes the social culture of the workplace.

**Final Conclusions**

Women all over the world who are career oriented have to play conflicting dual roles. Mehran argues that Muslim women are subjected to dual pressures of simultaneously fulfilling a ‘traditional’ role within the home, as well as pursuing a ‘modern’ professional career (Mehran, 2003, p. 224). This correlates very closely to the findings of my thesis, as many participants felt that it was only possible to have successful careers and a family if they were married to flexible men or had open-minded parents. Participants reported that social obligations were still highly important to them even when they had a high level of public sphere participation. Some highly educated, career driven women were not married, emphasising the point that success might only come by avoiding perceived social obligations. Therefore, the cost of success might in many ways be prohibitive, as the lifestyle it demands does not always correlate with the expectations of families and society.

My thesis has managed to add to ideas advanced in preexisting literature by gaining a sample of fifteen Muslim women in Sydney and analysing the factors supporting their public sphere activity. My research has also provided some data on a group of Sydney Muslim women and their volunteerism, education and employment within Australia, which prior to this study was only existent in a very limited form, if available at all. Furthermore, my thesis confirms that the women in my sample are very similar to their counterparts in the U.S., in the fact that family support is the highest contributor to their labour force participation.

My research has successfully concluded that similar to Read’s findings (2002) and (2004) in the U.S., that family support is the primary factors supporting Muslim
women in their public sphere activities in Sydney. All respondents cited their families as their main support and encouragement to pursue a career or volunteer and some also stated cultural expectations as a large factor in their decisions to undertake further study and to engage in employment. Conversely, my participants that were unable to undertake some public sphere activities would also mention their family responsibilities as a barrier to their participation.
Appendix A

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I, .................................................. give consent to my participation in the research project

TITLE: Australian Muslim Women at Work

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s.

3. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher(s) or the university now or in the future.

4. I understand that my involvement is strictly confidential and no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.

Signed: ........................................................................................................................................

Name: ........................................................................................................................................

Date: ........................................................................................................................................
Appendix B

Participant Information Statement

Project title: Australian Muslim Women at Work.

What is the study about?
This study aims to investigate the range of activities of Muslim women living in Australia (with focus on Sydney and Melbourne). It seeks to examine this in the context of the family, the Muslim community and the wider Australian community, including the participation of Muslim women in education and employment. This research seeks to explore the factors influencing the activities and extent of participation of Muslim women in Australian society, both in the private and in the public arena. It is hoped that this study will fill a gap in scholarship on Muslim women in Australia.

Who is carrying out the study?
The study is being conducted by Lisa Worthington, a Masters of Philosophy candidate, and will form part of the research for the degree of Masters of Philosophy at the University of Sydney under the supervision of Doctor Nijmeh Hajjar and Assoc/Professor Ahmad Shboul, in the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies.

What does the study involve?
Should you agree to participate, you would be asked to contribute through a one-hour face-to-face interview.

Will anyone else know the results?
All aspects of the study including results will be strictly confidential and comply with the provisions of the Privacy Act (1988). Only researchers will have access to information on participants except as required by law. A report of the study may be submitted for scholarly publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

Can I withdraw from this study?
Please be advised that your participation in this study is purely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data you have supplied, you are free to do so without concern.

Will the study benefit me?
Possible benefits of participation in this study are that it may provide participants with an opportunity to reflect on the value of their involvement in activities both inside and outside the home. There may also be an opportunity for the challenging of negative stereotypes.

Can I tell other people about this study?
Yes, you may tell other people about this study. If they would like further information about the study they can contact Lisa whose details are shown below.

**Where can I get further information?**
When you have read this information Lisa Worthington will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage please feel free to contact Lisa lwor9672@usyd.edu.au or phone 0437404150

Any person with a complaint of any concerns about the conduct of this research study can contact the Senior Ethics Officer, Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on (02) 9351 4811 (telephone); 9351 6706 (facsimile) or gбриody@usyd.edu.au (email).
Appendix C

Sample Interview Questions

Australian Muslim Women at Work

What kind of activities do you engage in on a day to day basis? (Domestic and family duties/ family business/ paid employment/ voluntary work).

Do you work outside the home? If yes what is your role?

Do you undertake volunteer work? If yes what sort?

Do you belong to any community/religious associations/organizations?

What is your role?

What is the primary function of this Association?

How long have you worked in this association?

How did you find out about this organization?

Have you worked for any others in the past?

Does the association you belong to aim to help women in the community?

If yes, how? What initiatives have been taken to give aid to the women?

How have you contributed to the community?

How important do you think it is to help the Muslim community?

How important do you think it is to cooperate, communicate and interact with the surrounding non-Muslim communities?

Do you feel that your participation in community groups makes a difference?

What benefits do you assume you can get out of your participation?

How supportive is your family (parents, husband and children) of your participation?

Describe what input you have in voicing your points of view within your family and in society?

Do you think women’s activism contradicts Islamic values or laws?
Education

What’s your highest level of education? Primary ☐; Secondary ☐; Tertiary ☐

What type of secondary education did you have? High School ☐; TAFE ☐

What kind of school did you attend? (Government ☐, independent private ☐, religious private ☐).

Did you have any additional professional training? In what area?

Where did you obtain your highest qualification? In Australia ☐; Overseas ☐

If you have tertiary qualifications, in what field? Humanities ☐; Sciences ☐

What factors lead you to choose that qualification?

Who influenced your decision to study for a higher degree?

How important do you think it is for women to get a higher education?

Did you experience any opposition to your wish to study or work, if so from whom?

Describe your experience at university.

Were you encouraged to pursue tertiary education? Please give details.

Political

Are you eligible to vote? Yes ☐; No ☐

Do you vote?

If yes, how important do you feel it is for you to vote?

How do you form your opinion on which candidate(s) to vote for?

What are your opinions on women’s rights to vote and freedom of speech?

Do you think women could have an active role in politics? How?

Do you think Muslim women play an active role in Australian politics?

Do you think Muslim women should be more active on the political stage?
Employment

Do you work outside the home? If yes, full-time or part-time?

If no, did you work outside the home before? Where?

What kind of job do you have? What kind of job have you had in the past?

What are your opinions on equal opportunities in the work force?

Do you think being a woman has affected your career advancement?

Are your colleagues mostly males or females?

Have you felt you have been discriminated against? On what basis?

How important do you think it is for Muslim women to be visibly participating in the workforce?

Were there any barriers to you finding employment?

How do you feel about the division of domestic labour in your home?

Would you like to have more or less say in the household decisions?

Social Factors

Who are your two best friends? What do they do?

How often do you socialize with other Muslim women?

Statistical Questions

How old are you?

What suburb do you live in?

What education/occupations have your siblings pursued?

Were you born in Australia/overseas?

Level of Father’s education and occupation
Level of mother’s education and occupation

Marital Status?

If married what is your husband’s education level and occupation?
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