

CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR MUSLIM WOMEN AND GIRLS

Co-created with the
HRM Public Safety Office



2023
Consultant Report
Rana Zaman

Background

In December 2021, Haneen Al Noman, a member of the Women’s Advisory Committee of Halifax, made a presentation to the Halifax Regional Council about the experiences of visibly Muslim women in Halifax and actions other municipalities are taking to support the safety of Muslim women.

In response to Haneen’s presentation, Regional Council made a motion directing municipal staff to look further into what the municipality can do to combat anti-Muslim hate and racism, particularly with respect to Muslim women.

At the same time, HRM’s Office of Diversity and Inclusion/African Nova Scotian Affairs Integration Office is leading a process, alongside community partners, to create a Women and Gender Equity Strategy for the municipality that will aim to reduce gender inequality for women, girls, gender diverse and non-binary residents.

The insights outlined in this “What We Heard” report came directly from the input of Muslim women and girls and are meant to inform both municipal initiatives. This report includes voices of Muslim women and girls from various backgrounds and areas in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM). It is the participants’ hope that their contributions will lead to very much-needed change to build a safer municipality.



Photo 1: Halifax Public Library session

The Consultant

Rana Zaman is an award-winning community advocate, a former delegate to the United Nations for Canada's Voice of Women for Peace, a TEDx presenter and a volunteer on several boards. She works at the grassroots level with marginalized communities including new immigrants/migrants, helping with various issues such as poverty, feminism, intersectionality, racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, human rights, justice and bullying. She has spoken at schools and colleges about Islam, racism, bullying and the challenges and opportunities facing immigrants.

The Project

In July 2022, I was hired as a consultant by staff in the Public Safety Office to lead the community engagement process that would inform this report. I have worked closely with Public Safety Office staff throughout this project to engage with various partners in Muslim communities in HRM, plan engagement sessions designed to meet the needs of Muslim women and girls and communicate what we heard from these sessions so these insights may be applied by the municipality to make tangible policy, program, and service changes.

My work as a consultant included:

- Making recommendations to HRM staff regarding the diverse organizations representing Muslim communities in HRM, contacting partners, and making connections to inform this project.
- Engaging members of the community through individual phone calls, during social events and prayer sessions. A lot of background communication was required to ensure all parties understood the purpose and intention of these sessions and why it was important for their voices and perspectives to be included.
- Worked closely with PSO staff to build trust with the various Muslim organizations, tailoring the community engagement sessions to meet the needs of each group involved.
- Planning and facilitating each community engagement session.
- Preparing this “what we heard” report to capture the key insights and takeaways shared by community members in both individual conversations and community engagement sessions.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the HRM staff who worked with me at every step for their professionalism and genuine efforts to make this endeavour successful.

Thank you also to the community partners, organizations and masjids that were instrumental in organizing, hosting, and supporting these efforts.

Most of all, I extend my deep gratitude to the women and girls who shared their stories, perspectives, and ideas for change. Your contributions and commitment to making Halifax safer for all pave the way for safer, more equitable and just communities.

Community Engagement Sessions

Overview

From October 2022 to January 2023, we engaged with around 100 Muslim women and girls living in Halifax.

Community engagement sessions were held at different locations throughout the municipality to encourage diverse voices from different backgrounds to participate. We are grateful to have had the support of the following organizations that co-hosted the sessions in their spaces. Without their support, the voices of these Muslim women and girls would not have been heard and thus, this report would not have been possible.

- Nova Scotia Islamic Community Centre (NSICC) (Kearney Lake Masjid)
 - Two sessions—one for youth and one for women
 - This session included mostly Arabic speakers



Photo 2: Kearney Lake Masjid session

- Islamic Association of Nova Scotia (IANS) (Dartmouth Masjid)
 - Many South Asian women were represented in this group



Photo 3: Dartmouth Masjid session

- Halifax Central Library, co-hosted by the Pakistani Canadian Association of Nova Scotia (PCANS)
 - This session included the most diverse Muslim women of various backgrounds
- Masjid Al-Barakah Islamic Centre
 - Many newcomer and refugee women were included in this session

The masjids and community partners who hosted these sessions were critical to the engagements. The various organizations hosted us in their spaces, created and distributed posters and information to their networks, ensured Muslim women and girls in their communities knew about the opportunity and helped us craft sessions that would meet the needs of each group.

The Public Safety Office provided honorariums for engagement session participants to compensate them for their time and expertise. Funding was provided for babysitting and transportation in order to reduce barriers for participants.

Each session included a facilitator, active listener, note taker and in some cases, co-facilitator. HRM staff were present at each session. Great care was taken to ensure the spaces would be safe and active listeners were there to interject when and where needed in the conversations, especially when emotions due to trauma were coming to the surface.

Muslim Communities Are Not a Monolith

We strived to engage as many Muslim women and girls from diverse communities as possible with the time and financial resources available to us¹, however, it's important to make clear that the insights shared in these sessions are of those who attended and do not represent the perspectives of *all* Muslim women and girls in Halifax.

The broader Halifax Muslim community is made up of many diverse and vibrant communities, each with its own customs, practices, norms, and experiences. Some Muslim women and girls were born and raised in Halifax, with families who have called this place home for generations. Other Muslim women and girls moved to Halifax from other Canadian cities, and others from many different places around the world. The diverse Muslim communities in Halifax are from various countries, ethnicities, cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds.

There are approximately seven masjids in HRM and several organizations with many Muslim members, including the Pakistani Canadian Association of Nova Scotia (PCANS), Bangladesh Community Association of Nova Scotia (BDCANS) and others.

It was important that the engagement sessions did not focus on any one masjid or organization but rather, engaged Muslim women and girls from all over HRM by connecting with these various organizations to be as inclusive and to empower as many voices as possible.

Invitations were sent to various organizations and masjids to engage in the process. It's important to note that the diversity of women and girls in the sessions was based on the congregants of each masjid and organization that responded.

It was also important to host at least one session in a public space—one where Muslim women and girls who are not part of a masjid or formal organization could feel welcome to share.

Centering Care, Trust, and Safety

This initiative wouldn't have been possible if we didn't centre care, trust, and safety at each step.

Foremost, the engagements needed to reflect the diverse voices and experiences of women and girls in the Muslim community in order to have meaningful dialogue and input for the report. Dedicated time was required at the beginning of the initiative to build trust with organizations, groups and masjids that were interested in collaborating to bring this initiative to life.

¹ Based on the format of engagements, project budget and ensuring the necessary supports were in place for each session, we set the number of participants per session at 20.



Photo 4: Participants and consultants at Al Barakah Masjid

As a consultant on this initiative, I went to social events, made phone calls, and spoke with interested participants to share the importance and significance of the project for Muslim women. Because the Public Safety Office did not already have established relationships with these organizations, conversations to share this information and follow up was a critical step.

Many folks expressed wariness about being involved in the sessions—they had questions about the process, the input they would have in the engagement, the budget involved, details of the report and the intended outcomes of these conversations. Some expressed how past engagements with governments didn't amount to change in their eyes and they felt it would be a waste of their time. I stressed to them that this was a sincere attempt by HRM to hear the voices and experiences of Muslim women and girls and that the municipality was truly committed to responding to the insights shared through these engagements by implementing practices and policies to make public spaces safer for Muslim women and girls.

There were also steps taken to establish safety and care for participants in the sessions:

- Participants were asked to register for sessions. This allowed us to send the discussion questions ahead of time and include important information about logistics and plans for the sessions. We intentionally provided the questions ahead of time so participants could decide whether they

felt comfortable sharing those topics and allowed them time to prepare, minimizing any trauma that might arise when discussing very difficult topics.

- Participants were informed that notes would be taken and photos captured with permission, allowing participants to choose to stay anonymous if they wished.
- Each session started with an activity to set the “rules of engagement.” The participants brainstormed the group agreements they felt were needed to be in place to feel safe and comfortable to share their experiences. These agreements always included mutual respect and confidentiality.

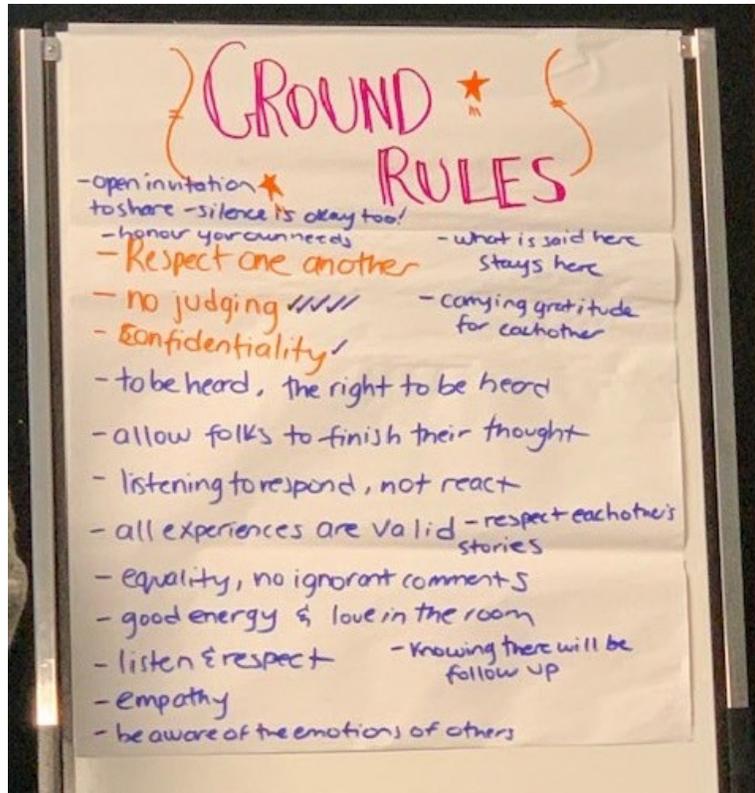


Photo 5: The rules participants brainstormed

Learnings and Important Considerations for Future Engagement

Despite the many countries, cultures, languages, and socio-economic experiences represented in these sessions, it became very clear that many of the women and girls we engaged with shared similar stories and insights.

During these sessions, it was evident there is trauma in the community and further resources need to be allocated to help process this trauma. The municipality should allocate more resources in the future to understand and respond to the struggles and barriers Muslim women and girls are facing.

The feedback from these engagements must be taken seriously by the municipality. HRM must make a genuine effort to implement changes in policies and increase resources to honour the efforts and relieved trauma the participants went through for this report.

Further, the participants and supporting organizations must be made aware of the importance of their input and any changes implemented based on their recommendations and suggestions. The women need to feel they are heard, seen and that they matter. In a patriarchal society, this type of care, respect, and nurturing is lacking for women.

The following are other key insights for future engagements:

- Due to a certain degree of difficulty in starting these sessions and in the spirit of inclusiveness, it's important for the municipality to recognize that there is no singular organization or masjid that can represent the diverse Muslim population in HRM in its entirety.
- Many participants noted that they had much more to share and the sessions were not long enough to address the level of Islamophobia, bigotry, racism, and hatred they have suffered. Many of the participants gave feedback that there should be more and longer sessions to allow for a greater number of participants and adequate time to discuss these issues.

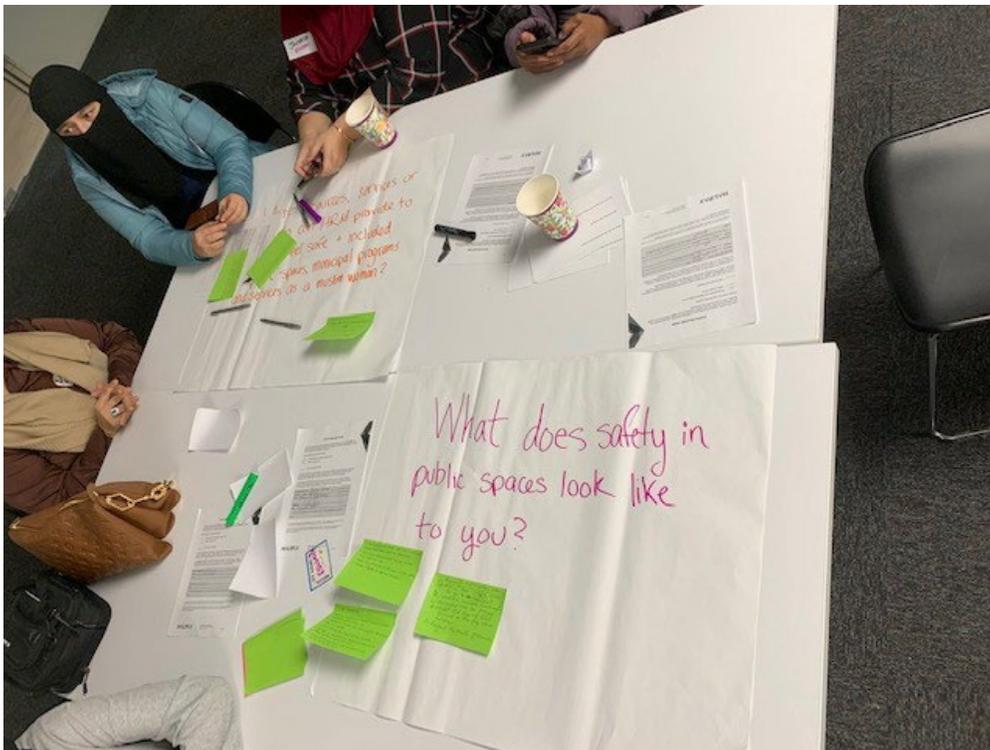


Photo 6: Participants brainstorm what safety in public spaces looks like to them

- All work contributed by Muslim women and girls should be treated with the same level of respect and importance as any other women's work. Historically, women of colour have been underpaid for the same work done by their counterparts. The municipality needs to be conscientious about acknowledging the work, time, insights and experiences of Muslim women and girls who contribute to engagements like this and any resulting projects in an equitable manner.
- HRM must prioritize continuing to build strong relationships and positive communication networks with Muslim women of diverse backgrounds and congregations, not just from organizations but from grassroots activism and those who show active leadership in their

communities. Muslim women's voices must continue to be heard on issues that significantly impact their lives, well-being, and communities.

- Having women organizing and leading these sessions went a long way to creating trusted and safe spaces. Future engagements must continue to be women-led. Most masjids and Muslim organizations in Halifax have a ladies' committee. It's important to involve members of these committees to organize sessions that involve the engagement of Muslim women. They are at the heart of their organizations and connected to the board members and congregants.
- It's important to continue providing resources to make sessions accessible including transportation, refreshments, and caregiving support. Also, participants were appreciative of the honorariums provided.
- All future sessions should take into consideration the timing of the sessions to allow a greater number of participants such as working mothers, those observing prayer times, student schedules, etc.



Photo 7: Participants at the Halifax Public Library

Recommendations for Action

These sessions, my personal experiences and interactions with Muslim women as a community advocate over the years affirm that Muslim women and girls often feel unsafe in public spaces in Halifax. Due to the rise of Islamophobia, there have been increased attacks nationally and locally on Muslim women and girls.

For Muslim women to feel safer, they need to feel that they are just as important and valued as other members of society and that they are welcomed in the environments they are in at any given time. There should be an overall sense of belonging and inclusiveness in all spaces.

The following are important areas of action that arose in all the engagement sessions:

- The municipality must support greater representation of Muslim women in all municipal staff positions. This must include leadership and decision-making positions, as well as various roles in public spaces (such as bus drivers, library staff, police officers, firefighters, and staff in community and recreation centres). When hiring Muslim women, the organizations and individuals that participated in these engagements, as well as other Muslim organizations, networks, and masjids, should be made aware of these positions.
- HRM employees should have training, tools, and strategies to intervene and diffuse situations of Islamophobia and racism, providing immediate support to the person impacted so they are not further harmed and do not feel alone in their experience. Participants shared countless examples of when they had experienced harm in public spaces and no one stepped in to support them. For example, a participant shared an experience of a young woman being attacked on a bus and her hijab was ripped off and no one assisted her, including the bus driver.
- Training should be established to support HRM employees to serve diverse populations they'll be engaging with and how to make them feel welcome and safe. This education should include information about counteracting negative and discriminatory stereotypes of Muslim people.
- Efforts must be made to educate the general population on the importance of respecting diverse faiths, cultures, and races.
- There should be a zero-tolerance policy for acts of discrimination, racism, and physical and verbal violence in municipal public spaces, or any other spaces for that matter. This policy must also be applied to municipal staff. Some participants shared experiences of municipal staff espousing Islamophobic and discriminatory views, and not knowing how to report these incidents to the municipality. There should be swift repercussions for perpetrators of violence and accountability from those in positions of power who can prevent these attacks from taking place.
- A non-police phone number/reporting system should be established for residents to report experiences of violence and Islamophobia. When reporting an instance of hate or discrimination perpetrated by municipal staff, this system should allow those reporting to send this information to the municipality for follow-up.
- Many participants shared that when they have reported instances of hate, sexism, and Islamophobia, they are not always taken seriously and feel often there isn't meaningful, trauma-informed follow-up to their reports. Reports of physical and verbal attacks against Muslim women and girls must always be taken seriously by police and other frontline responders and consequences enforced for the perpetrators of violence.

- Acts of Islamophobia must be taken seriously, alongside other forms of racism and discrimination such as antisemitism, anti-Black racism and anti-Indigenous racism. In some cases, participants shared experiences where they were the target of multiple forms of discrimination at once.

Throughout the engagements, participants shared many concrete recommendations for actions the municipality should take to make public spaces safer for Muslim women and girls. Specific recommendations can be found in the appendix of the main report to the council.



Photo 8: Participants socializing during break

Conclusion

In conclusion, the engagements outlined in this report are the first important step in the municipality's efforts to engage Muslim women and girls regarding their experiences, perspectives, insights, desires and needs for safer public spaces. The Muslim women and girls who engaged in this process have contributed a great deal of vulnerability, openness and hope in sharing their stories—it is critical that these experiences not be shared in vain and that impactful action result from this report.

Islamophobia, racism, hatred, and bigotry exist in all our systems, communities, and at all levels of government—even within the municipality. It's critical that HRM make a sincere commitment to eliminate these forms of discrimination and violence by listening to the many voices experiencing these issues and implementing the much-needed policies, changes and practices needed for creating safer public spaces for all.

HRM is growing at a phenomenal pace, diversity is increasing and with this, new challenges to safety and well-being will arise. It's critical that the municipality acts now to address current issues of safe spaces for Muslim women and girls and works closely with communities to address future challenges. HRM can be a leader and shining example of fostering public spaces and communities that are safe for all.

To learn more about Rana's work please like and follow:

<https://mobile.twitter.com/ranazamanns>

<https://www.instagram.com/ranazamanactivist>

<https://ca.linkedin.com/in/rana-zaman-aa2139181>

<https://www.facebook.com/RanaZamanNS>

Appendix 1: Facilitation Plan and Guide

These are the questions that were sent to participants after registration and before the sessions:

1. What does safety in public spaces mean to you? What can HRM do to help you feel safe and included in public spaces as a Muslim woman?
2. What can the municipality do to combat anti-Muslim hate and Islamophobia?
3. “When I imagine a municipality that has achieved fairness, well-being and equality for all women, I imagine...”
4. What barriers have you experienced to accessing municipal services and programs?
5. What resources, services, or supports can the Municipality provide to help make this vision a reality?

Template Facilitation Guide for Community Conversations

Purpose	Activity	Speaking Notes
	Mingling	Have photo consent form on front table
Welcome and Introductions		<p>Welcome, thank you to partners and collaborators.</p> <p>Introductions—facilitators, note-takers, active listeners</p> <p>Shares about active listeners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We also want to introduce ____, who will be supporting as an active listener. We know conversations about safety and well-being can be difficult and sometimes bring up pain and trauma. ____ will listen intently and is prepared to support anyone who may need it. If you need to step out of the room or take a break, ____ will follow you to make sure you are doing okay.
<p>Group Agreement</p> <p>To set shared expectations for the group so people feel comfortable and able to share openly</p>	<p>Flip chart paper with some ideas already written down</p>	<p>What rules are we going to set for ourselves for this session so that folks can be comfortable to share openly?</p> <p>Potential agreements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Share the air—everyone has a chance to share their insights ● Respect ● Confidentiality

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Take care of yourself—only share what you feel comfortable sharing ● Your experience is important and valid and all voices are important in this conversation <p>Ask the group if they have anything to add, change</p>
Privacy	Powerpoint	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What you share today will not be attributed to you as an individual. The insights you provide will be compiled and included in the report, but your name won't be shared. If you would like to have a direct quote included in the report with your name attached, please approach us at the end of the conversation and we can make sure we record your quote to be included. ● Keeping people's information in a thoughtful way, our duty as a municipality to be mindful of this ● If you'd like your name attached to a quote, you are more than welcome—just let us know.
<p>Why are we here today? What will the insights I share influence?</p> <p>Explanation of municipal services and spaces</p>	Powerpoint	<p>We have heard from the community that we, as the municipality, must do more to ensure that municipal public spaces are safe for Muslim women.</p> <p>As a municipality, we have jurisdiction over parks, recreation centres, libraries, sidewalks, transit, police, fire services, and city hall and we are a big employer in this region (go through the PowerPoint).</p> <p>We know that Muslim women encounter sexism, racism, Islamophobia, exclusion, and other forms of discrimination in these public spaces. We also know that the municipality can implement programs, policies, and changes to affirm that Muslim women belong in these spaces and should feel welcome and free to use and experience municipal spaces and places without fear for their safety.</p> <p>What you share with us today will be included in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A Women and Gender Equity Strategy that the municipality is currently developing. This is a strategy that will determine what steps the municipality can take to make municipal services, programs, and spaces more equitable, accessible, and safe for women and gender-diverse folks. ● A report to Regional Council that looks at other municipalities' work around anti-Muslim hate and racism and, based on your feedback, recommends what HRM can do to combat

		anti-Muslim hate and racism, particularly with respect to women. (Brought forward by Haneen Al-Noman to the Women’s Advisory Committee)
Part 1: Safe municipal public spaces	Small group discussions at tables	<p>Questions posted on the wall on flip charts so people can refer to them.</p> <p>Participants at each table take notes on sticky notes so these ideas can be collected and included in the report.</p> <p>What does safety in public spaces look like to you? * Prompt: think about what safety means for you based on all the parts of your identity, and as a Muslim woman 15 mins</p> <p>What resources, services, or supports can HRM provide to help you feel safe and included in public spaces, municipal programs, and services as a Muslim woman? 15 mins</p>
Break		Snacks, bring back to table
	Report back	A representative from each small group reports back the top highlight from each question to the full group
Part 2: Actions municipalities can take to combat Islamophobia		<p>On the walls around the room, there will be pieces of paper with examples of what other municipalities are doing to combat Islamophobia and other examples of what concrete actions could look like.</p> <p>Participants were asked to take 10 minutes to go around the room and look at the examples, putting a 1, 2 and 3 on their top 3 priorities.</p> <p>There was extra paper for people to write ideas if they see it missing.</p>