ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: Surviving Prejudice: A Feminist Ethnography of Muslim Women Living and Studying in Middle Town, Indiana, United States

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This study described a subculture of Muslim women who live and study in Middle Town, Indiana and who actively participate in the religious and social activities conducted by the Middle Town Islamic Center. Acting in response to negative stereotyping of this population, this study shines a light on the lives and learning of female Muslim adults in a small Midwestern city. The results of this particular study promoted understanding about female Muslim learners in the United States.

Ethnographic techniques of in-depth, semi-structured interviews and participant observation techniques were used to gather the data, and member checking was also performed to ensure consistency. Domani analysis, as described by Spradley (1979), was the technique used to analyze the data.

The data and analysis suggested some fundamental characteristics of this subculture, Middle Town Islamic Ladies. One major finding that could be inferred was the inconsistency between the experiences of the participants with negative stereotyping propagated by some U.S. media and some people in general. Women in this study tended to be very deliberate in defining their status as women and as learners by examining and referring to the most legitimate resources
of Islam: The Qur’an and Hadith. The participants also understood that many interpretations of the Qur’an and Hadith about women are influenced by a patriarchal mindset to preserve cultural beliefs that men are superior to women. Such beliefs are inconsistent with what the Qur’an and Hadith prescribe.

As most of the informants came from different countries, they reported that their cultural expectations influenced their learning styles and their lives in this city. This expectation generated some problems with their comfort in living and studying. However, their faith, their association with the Middle Town Islamic community, especially the Muslim women, family support (especially from their husbands), and harmonious relationships with professors facilitated smooth adjustments to the challenges.

Finally, the findings in this study also introduced teaching strategies and training styles in higher education that would accommodate and emphasize students’ cross-cultural differences.