



## Reactions and response: Muslim students' experiences on New York city campuses post 9/11

Lori A. Peek

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## **Reactions and Response: Muslim Students' Experiences on New York City Campuses Post 9/11**

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**LORI A. PEEK**

### **Introduction**

The September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States resulted in a homeland catastrophe of unprecedented magnitude. Thousands of lives were lost, billions of dollars will be spent on disaster recovery, and the social and political consequences of the attacks have been extensive. The costs of this disaster—the loss of human life, the suffering of the injured, the mental and emotional trauma to survivors and witnesses, the loss of wealth and intellectual capital, the destruction of symbols of economic and military strength, and the loss of a national sense of security—are impossible to fully assess.

This disaster was distinct in that a group of individuals were held directly responsible for the destruction and loss of life. The disaster agent—an intentional, human-conceived attack—most certainly determined the response and backlash that followed the events.<sup>1</sup> In the days, weeks, and months following September 11, people from various ethnic and religious groups in the United States were targeted for the blame. Thousands of Arabs, Muslims, Sikhs, and individuals who appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent became the victims of discrimination, harassment, racial and religious profiling, and verbal and physical assault.<sup>2</sup>

### **Objectives of the Study**

The purpose of this research project was to explore the response of and reaction toward Muslim students on college and university campuses in the New York City area in the vicinity of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Given the unique nature and magnitude of the events of September 11, it was important to document and analyze what was happening to one of the primary groups being targeted for the blame. Because this study was preliminary and exploratory, the guiding research questions were intentionally broad and related to the individual and group experiences of Muslim students following the attacks. How did the colleges and universities deal with and respond to the Muslim students on campus? How did non-Muslims react towards the Muslim university students? How did the parents of the Muslim students respond to their children? How did the Muslim university students themselves respond individually and as a group? Where and to whom were the students turning for support?

### *Research Design*

Two descriptive fieldwork research methods were employed for this study. Focus group interviews were used as the primary means of data collection, and one-on-one in-depth

interviews supplemented the data collection. Focus group interviews proved an efficient and appropriate research technique during my initial trip to New York City. Conducting interviews in a focus group setting allowed me to speak with several students at a time, effectively using my limited time and resources to gather a breadth of perishable data.<sup>3</sup>

In total, 68 students from seven different colleges and universities in the New York City area were interviewed between 30 September and 5 October 2001. Four of the 68 students were interviewed individually, at their request. The individual interviews lasted an average of one to two hours. The other 64 students were interviewed in focus groups. I conducted 13 focus groups, which ranged in size from three to 15 participants. The focus groups lasted an average of an hour and a half to two and a half hours. All interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and coded for analysis.

### *Sample Selection*

Prior to departure, I conducted a website search of New York City colleges and universities and selected a purposive sample of educational institutions for study based on the following criteria: proximity to the World Trade Center, the site of the terrorist attacks, four-year accreditation, status as a public or private institution, size of the student population, diversity of the student population, and the existence of an on-campus Muslim students' organization. I interviewed students from seven academic institutions in the New York City area. Five of the colleges were public institutions and are a part of the City University of New York (CUNY) system—Baruch College, Brooklyn College, City College of New York (CCNY), Hunter College, and Queens College. Two private institutions were also included—Columbia University and New York University (NYU).

### *Collection of Data*

After selecting these educational institutions, a purposive sample of university students was selected for participation based on their membership in the Muslim Students Association (MSA) located on their campus. Prior to my departure, I developed a relationship, via numerous phone calls and e-mails, with at least one key contact person in the student groups at each of the universities. These contacts were usually with the leader of the MSA or a well-known student member. I relied heavily on my student contacts in each of the clubs, as they helped me to recruit other students to attend the focus group sessions. The contacts posted fliers advertising the focus group sessions and also sent e-mail messages to student group listservs, inviting members to attend the sessions. The student contacts were vital in the success of this research, as it would have been extremely difficult for me to have arranged the focus groups without their assistance and support. I had no prior acquaintances with Muslim students on New York City campuses and thus spent many hours speaking on the phone with these students articulating the purpose of this project and making logistical arrangements.

### *Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics*

As stated previously, I interviewed a total of 68 university students from seven different campuses for this study. Fifty students were female and 18 were male. Sixty-two were undergraduates and six were graduate students. The participants ranged in age from 18

to 31. Sixty students were single, six were married, and two were engaged. Fifty-two students were United States citizens, and the other 16 were in the US on student visas or were permanent residents.

The students interviewed were from a range of ethnic backgrounds. The majority of participants, 37 students, were of South Asian or Asian descent. Sixteen students were Arab-American. The remaining interviewees were Latino, Caucasian, African-American or Black. However, these 'ethnic categories' do not truly depict the diversity of the sample population. The following are just some of the national and ethnic backgrounds reported by the interviewees: Afghanistan, Albania, Bangladesh, Canada, Great Britain, Greece, India, Indonesia, Japan, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Puerto Rico, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Trinidad, Turkey, the United States of America, and Yemen.

Finally, it is important to note that this sample population should be considered 'highly religious'. This characterization is based on my own observations, as well as the self-characterization of the majority of students. Most of the students reported praying at least five times a day (one of the five fundamental pillars of Islam), fasting during the holy month of Ramadan (another fundamental pillar of Islam), were active members of their on-campus religious organization, and the majority of the interviewees also chose to dress in an Islamic (modest) manner. The vast majority of women I interviewed (over 90%) wore the *hijab*,<sup>4</sup> and two of the women wore the *nikaab*.<sup>5</sup> The level of dedication to their religion and the manner of dress of the interviewees—the fact that they were visibly Muslim—most certainly affected their individual experiences following September 11, as is discussed in the following sections.

### **Preliminary Findings**

The findings reported below are descriptive and do not represent the experience of the entire Muslim university student population in the United States. However, there were consistent prominent themes throughout the interviews, which should be considered further.

#### *The University Response*

In the days immediately following the attacks of September 11, the students reported that the staff and administration at their colleges and universities were relatively quick to offer various resources or sources of support to the Muslim students on campus. The president and/or dean of students at several of the universities met with the Muslim students to address their concerns and to reassure the students that they would be safe on campus. This individual attention proved to be very important in increasing the sense of well-being for the students. Sadiyah,<sup>6</sup> an undergraduate at Brooklyn College, noted that she and some of her friends might have quit school for the semester, if an administrator on campus had not met with them:

The dean called the Muslims and tried to round us up to come. We came. They told us that everything was going to be okay. That was really good. Some of us were ready to drop school for the semester. It changed our minds about coming back to school.

The majority of students interviewed also reported that their university administration had assured them that there would be increased security on campus and at university-sponsored events. Furthermore, most of the universities offered security escorts or a

campus shuttle service so that the students would not have to walk alone or take public transportation. All of the universities sponsored interfaith vigils, teach-ins, and/or discussion groups so that the entire student body could grieve and discuss their feelings about the events and the aftermath of the attacks.

The students interviewed were generally pleased with the reactions of their college or university administrators, counselors, and professors following the attacks. They also appreciated messages that were sent to the entire campus, such as the posting of a 'no tolerance for hate' policy to their campus e-mail system. Some of the students remarked that they wished their universities would have been more forthcoming about providing general information and sponsoring educational events about Islam to avoid or curtail ethnic and religious backlash. Some students had a difficult time in class because they were often expected to defend their religion or explain why the events of September 11 happened—something they were obviously incapable of doing. Jasmin, a female undergraduate at Queens College, talked about how it was difficult to be placed in this situation:

In classes, when we had discussions, I would feel personally like I'm being attacked. That's part of my identity as a Muslim. We were discussing things and by the end of the day we would get a little emotional. I guess that's normal. Based on the situation right now, we would have to feel like that. I would like more support from the university.

Many of the students expressed appreciation for the individual support that they received from the university professors. Because many of the Muslim students missed several days, if not several weeks, of classes, they often had to ask for special provisions from the professors (extended deadlines, course notes, make-up exams, etc.). Tara, a female undergraduate at City College, said:

I stayed home for about two weeks after it happened because my parents were afraid of me leaving. They were afraid of backlash. I contacted my professors and told them I couldn't come in. They were totally understanding.

Some of the students reported that their professors actually told them to go home and not to come back to school for several days—at least until things settled down somewhat in the city.

#### *Community Reaction and the Student Response*

Overall, the students were generally satisfied with the reactions of the professors, counselors, administrators, and other students and student organizations on their college campuses. They were also pleased that they were invited to sponsor or participate in many of the campus-wide educational events discussing September 11 and the aftermath. Most of the students reported that they felt safe on their university campuses and that the climate was overwhelmingly supportive. The relatively quick response of the universities and the ensuing positive campus climate were likely interconnected.

However, almost all of the students said that they did not feel nearly as safe in the larger New York City area as they did on their college campuses. Their greatest concern was having to take public transportation (specifically, the subways and buses) immediately following the attacks. Halah, a Hunter College female undergraduate, said:

Hunter was very safe, and I felt very safe coming to Hunter. But the commute

was another thing. However you came, it was dangerous. There are a lot of ignorant people out there. Some of the sisters faced worse things than others. In one way or another, we all at the very least had to deal with looks. We all get the looks.

Selma, an undergraduate student at City College, missed three weeks of school following the attacks because of her fear of taking the subway:

This is my first day back on campus. I haven't been to school because I was afraid to take the train. Today my husband brought me to school.

Because the thought of walking or traveling alone was frightening to many of the participants, they often relied on one another to increase their personal safety. Rajah, a female undergraduate at New York University, discussed the system that the students established following the attacks:

We set up a buddy system. A lot of brothers and sisters were in need of help. They were scared of traveling alone. Either that or their parents wouldn't let them travel alone. I know one sister who didn't come into campus for a week because her parents wouldn't let her. She started classes a week after. We did try to set something up for her, brothers who were commuting from the same area met up with her and she traveled with them.

Habeeb, a male undergraduate student at Hunter College, talked about how his travel patterns have changed since September 11:

I used to go out with my friends. We stopped and said nobody can go out alone. We have to go out in the full group, six people. We can only go out in groups and come back in groups. That's it. No single person can go out.

The fear some of the students expressed was not unfounded. The negative responses that many of the interviewees experienced ranged from stares and 'nasty looks' to verbal harassment and even physical assault, as in the case of two students whom I interviewed. Whether the students reported feeling personally targeted or not, they still described feeling at least somewhat frightened simply knowing that family members, friends, or members of their community had been the victims of some form of backlash.

However, I also noticed that if the students would tell me about something bad that had happened to them (i.e. a man yelling at them on the subway) they were also quick to recount a story of someone being extra nice to them (i.e. a neighbor bringing cookies to their home or a stranger giving them a seat on the train). There was a great deal of positive outreach to individuals and the Muslim community generally following September 11, and the interviewees wanted to make sure that I was aware of these affirmative actions as well. Moreover, some of the students described how people were not only doing more nice things for them after September 11, sometimes complete strangers, non-Muslims, would go out of their way to stand up for the Muslim students. Rajah, a female undergraduate at NYU, related this story:

There are nice people out there. One of my friends traveled to Queens. She was on the subway reading a book. The guy sitting next to her goes, 'If that was a Qur'an, it would be burning'. Another person who was standing there said, 'I lost my apartment, you have no right to be saying that'. So there are people standing up for Muslims.

The students also wanted to make it clear that they did not think that their fellow

citizens were bad just because of the actions of some angry people. Talib, a male undergraduate at City College, expressed the following sentiment:

I think the American people, most of them are not ignorant. They know that if someone does one thing, it doesn't mean that everybody is bad. They don't go and stereotype people. Only ignorant people have been doing this. Luckily, in the university, people tend to become intellectual and educated, and they know what is going on.

#### *Response of Family Members*

Many of the interviewees talked at length about how their family members, particularly their parents, responded to the events of September 11. As one might expect, most of the parents were extremely worried for the safety of their children. Many students said that their parents asked them to stay out of school for several days, and a few parents even asked their children to quit school for the semester. Leena, a female undergraduate at Hunter College, said:

My parents told me to drop the semester. I said it would take a few weeks or so and it would calm down. Everybody's angry at first and they have to get their anger and frustration out. I knew it would calm down eventually. I stayed home a lot, though. It was really hard. I stayed home for a week and a half. That was so hard. I've never done that.

Most of the parents were asking the students to stay home from school or campus events because they were fearful for their children. Kamilah, a female undergraduate at City College, discussed how her mother did not want her to attend events associated with the Women in Islam club on campus:

My mom has always been supportive. They have always let me do whatever I want to do with my life. They've never butt in. Except for now. My mom won't let me go to food sales, fundraisers for Women in Islam. She's like, 'No. People would know. They'll follow you around'. She's not scared of me getting killed. I'm not scared of getting killed. But I'm scared of getting harassed.

One of the pressures that the participants most often reported receiving from their parents and family members was to change their appearance. The men talked about their family members asking them to trim or shave their beards so they would appear less 'Arab' or 'Muslim'. The women discussed their parents wanting them to either start wearing their *hijab* in a less 'Muslim' way (i.e. instead of letting the headscarf drape around their shoulders and bosom, tying the headscarf back around their heads) or to quit wearing the *hijab* entirely. Being asked to remove their headscarves was hurtful to many of the young women; they reported how important it was to them to visibly display their Muslim identity and their faith in God. Leila, a female undergraduate at City College, talked about the reaction of her family members after the attacks:

With me, my parents, when the whole thing happened, after two hours I'm getting phone calls from my relatives saying that I should take off my headscarf, from New York saying, 'No way in hell. You shouldn't even go out. Take off your headscarf. You're going to get yourself killed'. I'm like, 'What are you talking about?' They're giving lectures to my parents telling them,

‘You should stop your daughter from wearing a headscarf’. I’m the only child living with my mom and dad right now. They’re like, ‘No way. No headscarf’.

Leila did eventually quit wearing her headscarf to appease her parents. However, she was distressed by not being able to express herself or display her identity as a Muslim. When I interviewed her in October, she was wearing the headscarf, unbeknownst to her parents. She said, ‘I go to school, I put it on, and then I take it off when I leave’. This was certainly not an ideal solution, however, as she felt extremely guilty about doing something against her parents’ will and without their knowledge.

Many of the interviewees also talked about how their parents were checking up on them constantly, because of their fears for their children. Iffat, an undergraduate at Queens College, described the lengths her parents had gone to following September 11:

My parents got me a cell phone. Yesterday I went to the library to study in school. I checked my voicemail and there were nine messages from my parents at two minute intervals! I turned it off after a while. [... laughter and agreement from the rest of the women in the focus group]

### *Reactions of the Students*

When asked about their initial reactions to the events of September 11, many of the participants said they initially thought it was an accident. As soon as the students realized that the disaster was not an accident, they reported feeling complete shock and sadness. Most of the students also said that they almost immediately thought, ‘Please God, don’t let it be a Muslim’ because they feared what would happen to their community.

Because it was soon reported that the attacks had indeed been perpetrated by ‘Muslim’ men, many students became concerned for their safety, often because parents, administrators, and professors were quick to contact the students to tell them to ‘get home’ or to ‘stay out of the streets’, only increasing their level of fear. Najah, a female undergraduate at City College, said:

When it happened, I didn’t even look out my windows for three days. I was really scared that people could see me from the outside. I’m the only person in my neighborhood that wears a scarf. People really know us. My father has a big beard. It was very scary the first day I went out. Even now when I’m on the street, sometimes I feel like crying. People just keep staring at me. They stop a block away, groups of men, and they just look at me. I have to hold it together because if I cry they’re going to see that I’m weak. I just get home and I have a lot of headaches every day. It’s really frustrating.

The participants often said that they turned to God after the attacks—began praying more for the victims of the attacks, the families of the victims, and for their fellow Muslims. The students also quickly mobilized, using their Muslim Students Associations as vehicles to educate the public. The students on the various campuses reported undertaking a variety of projects soon after the attacks, including writing statements condemning the attacks and posting the statements around campus, online, and in the school newspapers. Muslim students also participated in on-campus interfaith vigils, memorials to the victims, and educational panels. Some of the students set up information tables on their campuses and distributed educational literature about Islam. In addition to the organized group efforts, several individuals recounted trying to speak up more in their college classrooms, as well as trying to visit churches,



synagogues, and elementary and high schools in the area to discuss Islam with the general public.

Somewhat as a result of the additional efforts by the student groups, several participants described a coming together of Muslims on campus and an increased sense of community within the group. Henna, a female graduate student at Columbia University, remarked:

I think definitely there was a coming together. After being so shocked at what did happen, we started hearing about Muslims being harassed. I think that did bring a lot of Muslim people together. We had several meetings for people to discuss how they were feeling. It brought a lot of people together.

Hafeez, a male undergraduate student at New York University, thought that it was only natural that something like the aftermath of September 11 would foster group cohesion. He remarked that if a person is being identified in a particular way, he or she will probably associate more closely with that group:

It's like, if you're Muslim you're feeling the heat. When people have pressure put on them, they identify with what that pressure is directed towards. So if a lot of kids are getting crap because they're Muslim, they have a tendency to identify themselves more strongly with that.

The participants also discussed how they tried to react to others, if they did encounter an uncomfortable situation. Many of the young women and men said that even if someone made them really angry or upset, perhaps because of a negative comment directed towards them on the subway, a dirty look, or some other such action, they tried very hard not to react at all, as they did not want to reinforce negative stereotypes about Muslims. Sara, an undergraduate student at Hunter College, discussed how she attempted to deal with a 'stare down' from a police officer:

This is a time when the patience of Muslims is being tested. We're not supposed to react how we want to. I got stared down by a cop; I've never been stared down. I don't mean to say racism or anything, maybe he's from a place where he didn't grow up with any minority people or with an ethnic background. I took that into account. He looked at me a couple of times. People had to look back to see who he's looking at. I was very scared, embarrassed, ashamed. I thought, 'Why are these people looking at me?' I looked at him and said, 'Hi, everything's okay?' He got caught by the moment that I asked him, he thought I wouldn't ask him. He said, 'Hi, how are you doing?' I said, 'Fine'. I would have shown him my ID and said, 'Please don't look at us like this. We don't want to be in a situation where we're going to be stared down and an entire block is looking at me. Look at my ID. I'm an American, just like you'.

### *Changes in Daily Routines*

When asked about changes to their daily routine, most of the interviewees reported that they were more cautious than usual. They tried to be more aware of their surroundings, to travel in groups rather than alone, and to travel out of the house only when necessary. Most of the students also said they were calling their parents more often, simply to check in and let them know that they were safe. Some students talked about doing things to make sure that they did not stand out in a crowd, as they did not want

to draw unnecessary attention to themselves. Alisha, an undergraduate student at Hunter College, talked about how she and her brother had altered their behavior:

On the train, while my brother and I are speaking to each other, we'll use half Arabic and half American and make our own little language. But lately it's been, stay on the American. If I notice people looking, we'll talk American. English. New Yorker.

On the other hand, some of the participants discussed how they refused to change after September 11, because it would feel like they were admitting defeat or even guilt. Thus, they were consciously attempting not to alter anything about their day-to-day activities. Fatima, a female undergraduate at Hunter College, said:

It's like proving them right. If somebody did try to say something to me, I would try to speak with them, educate them.

One major change in their daily lives reported by some of the men and women was that they actually altered their physical appearance to appear 'more Muslim' so that they could stand in solidarity with their fellow Muslims who were being targeted for blame. Shaheen, an undergraduate student at Hunter College, talked about her sister who began wearing the headscarf after September 11:

I have two sisters. The older one is 20. I'm 18. She doesn't wear the scarf. When this happened she said, 'You know, I'm going to start wearing a scarf now'. I was like, 'Of all the times, you're going to start now?!' She says, 'I'm not Muslim enough. I can't support Muslims because I don't seem like them to other people'. Regardless of what the consequences of that were, she was like, 'I want to start now, just for this reason'.

Another change the students discussed was the increased amount of time they were spending learning about the Islamic faith. Because Islam was suddenly under intense scrutiny and they were receiving so many more inquiries about their faith from friends and strangers, many of the students said that they decided to dedicate time to learning the true meaning of controversial words and subjects oftentimes misused by the media.

### *Emotional Responses*

When asked to describe how they had felt since September 11, the interviewees discussed a breadth of emotions, from fear to strength, concern to anger, frustration to hope. Salena, an undergraduate student at Queens College, described the wide range of emotions that she had been experiencing since the attacks:

Frustration. I was very depressed for a whole week. I couldn't step out the door. Because I pray five times a day, even when I pray I'm not concentrating. Depressed that this kind of thing happened. Not really fear, but anger, depression, frustration. When you're so angry, you look at the news, you want to know what's going on, and then you get more angry and depressed. You feel like you're so locked up.

Many of the students expressed an overwhelming sense of sadness, for the victims of the attacks as well as for the people of New York City. Some of the participants also articulated their fears about their futures as United States citizens. Shakira, a female undergraduate at City College, remarked:

I was thinking I was not going to be able to be what I want to be, do what I

want to do. I have large expectations. I want to teach. I want to go out in the world. People think of me the way I am, a sweet person, harmless. But since that happened, it's going to be hard getting jobs. I feel insecure, nervous.

Kamilah, also a female undergraduate at City College, agreed with Shakira and added:

They're looking at you. Before this happened, I felt like this is my country. I belong here. Now going outside, I feel like, I'm sorry, I shouldn't be here. It's a problem I'm here. I really feel like I should go somewhere else. I was walking down the street and people started laughing at me, saying stuff.

Conversely, many of the interviewees said that 'it was not nearly as bad as I thought it would be' on campus or in the city. These students often tried to focus on positive responses following September 11 and would talk about how they were trying to view this as an opportunity for the Muslims to come together with the rest of the US community—to increase awareness about their religion and to show the Americans 'the real Islam'. Siraj, a male undergraduate at New York University, discussed this aspect of the aftermath of September 11:

I feel that in some way this has given us a chance to really educate people about our religion, whatever that entails. At this point in time people are very interested in hearing what we have to say, which is why we should take every opportunity to go to these events and represent ourselves.

### **The Role of the Media**

Perhaps the most heated topic of discussion during the focus group sessions and the interviews was the media. The participants were extremely disgruntled with the media coverage of Muslims, Arabs, and Islam. In fact, some of the students were unwilling to blame individual people, but rather blamed the media, 100%, for any discrimination or backlash that occurred post September 11. Ibrahim, a male undergraduate student at Hunter College, said:

All the discrimination that is happening right now is because of the media. False feelings toward us because of the media.

Indeed, the media shapes public opinion and thus frames social reality, and because so many Americans were unfamiliar with Muslims and the Islamic faith, they turned to their usual media sources for a better understanding. However, most of the students agreed that all that resulted from this was more misunderstanding of Muslims and misrepresentation of their faith. The interviewees cited several specific reasons for their disdain for the US media. For example, the continual misuse of the term *jihad* (almost every group of interviewees explained that the literal translation is 'to struggle, strive, and exert effort' not 'holy war') frustrated the students. Also, the students questioned the legitimacy of the infamous 'Palestinian tape' which showed several Palestinian children celebrating, allegedly after hearing about the news of the attacks on the World Trade Center towers (most of the students contended that the footage was several years old and that the news channels only ran the tape to incite anger). The students were also frustrated that news anchors would refer to Allah as 'their God', as if Allah is some strange being ('Allah' is simply the Arabic word for 'God'). Further, the students were critical of the lack of depth of coverage, historical context, cultural understanding, and political insights that the US media had to offer. Omar, a male graduate student at Columbia University, remarked:

What the media has done in showing these pictures and all this stuff, it's like inciting fear in people. It's taking advantage of the fact that people are scared. Now they're more scared. Anybody who looks anything like any of these people or who has a name like any of these people ... I don't know. The media has a huge amount of power. It's scary what they can do with it.

When asked how media coverage could be improved, some students remarked that they were pleased with a few of the educational programs on Islam that the major television networks had been televising since September 11. They also said that in addition, they wished that the media would show that Muslims are 'normal Americans' too. Other participants replied that they would like for the media to be more objective in their representation of the religion of Islam and more educated about the basic tenets of their faith. Furthermore, they felt that the acts of a few were being used to represent the entire Muslim community. The females were perhaps the most adamant about wanting to change the representation of Muslim women in the media. Ayesha, an undergraduate at City College, who spoke at length about her personal choice to wear the headscarf, said the following:

Female misrepresentation in the media is particularly annoying. They portray us as uneducated. Or they find a few women who don't like to cover, and use them as examples. They make us objects of pity when we're really not. I feel so incredibly liberated dressing this way.

Similarly, Halima, an undergraduate at City College, expressed her frustration with the media portrayal of Muslim women:

When a woman is uncovered, people look at her like, Wow, she's so brave. But when a Muslim woman covers, she's oppressed. When an American woman stays home and takes care of her kids, she's choosing the life she wants. When we stay home and take care of our kids, we're oppressed. I have a 15-month-old daughter and I'm six months pregnant and I'm taking 18 credits and I'm graduating. American women who aren't Muslim look at me as being oppressed. They don't feel what I'm doing with my life, they don't understand it. All they see is, I'm wearing this headscarf, so I must be oppressed by their standards. But that's not it. You can't make a generalization about something you don't know. People see me on the street and think, 'Oh, you stay at home and you have kids and you can't go out and your husband abuses you'. The media is playing on this.

Even though the students were angry with the media, they were also careful to take some personal responsibility for educating the public. Many admitted that they felt that the Muslim community had not done a good job of making themselves known to the American people. Hafeez, a male undergraduate at NYU, remarked:

Partially, I think it's our fault. As Muslims, we should do more to educate people. It is our responsibility if we want people to report objectively on us, or more objectively, we have to make our perspective known.

### **The American Community**

When asked whether they had felt the need to prove that they were 'American' following September 11, some of the interviewees responded with a quick and resounding, 'Yes!', although others said that they were more apt to feel the need to prove that

they weren't 'un-American' by removing symbols that could be interpreted as negative in any manner. Malika, a female undergraduate student at Brooklyn College, said:

My father had this poster I bought for him. It had Arabic writing from the Qur'an. He took it down. He said, 'I don't want my window to be bashed'. So then he put two American flags on his car.

Indeed, several of the students reported that they or their family members had displayed the US flag in their cars, outside their homes, or in the family business so that their windows would not be 'smashed'.

The students I interviewed often spoke about how frustrating it was to be perceived by some people as 'the enemy', when they were grieving much the same as others around the world. Tariq, a male undergraduate at Hunter College, talked about how he felt:

We were victims of what happened. We had loved ones stuck in the World Trade Center. We couldn't get contact to our loved ones. And on top of that, we were accused. So we were double traumatized. When they say, 'America Unites', they did not mean us. They did not mean Muslims. At every moment when they said, 'America must unite', they did not mean us.

Regardless of these fears, Hafez, a male undergraduate at New York University, clearly articulated the dilemma that many Muslim students found themselves in following September 11:

They felt that as Arabs or Muslims they weren't allowed to say what they felt because they'd be thought unpatriotic or their fears weren't justified. And you do feel bad. Six thousand people died, and you're worried about whether you're going to be harassed in the subway? Obviously you're going to feel bad about that. Where are my priorities? Why am I complaining? It was a good lesson for the community on the whole. People learned how to rely on themselves and how strong they really are.

## **Conclusion**

The attacks on September 11 not only caused the destruction of lives and property, they also resulted in a loss of sense of security for many US citizens. This loss of security manifested itself in many forms, including feelings of sadness, fear, victimization, anger, and sometimes blame. Unfortunately, Muslims in the United States were one of the primary groups who became targets of blame following the attacks. Disasters can differ greatly in the range of impacts on 'victims' of various categories.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, as we attempt to determine the impacts of the events of September 11, we must examine the effect on various populations in the United States, specifically those who were targeted for the blame.

This report provides the findings from a limited survey of the reactions toward and responses of Muslim university students in the New York City area in the weeks following the events of September 11. Further research is necessary to understand more fully the long-term consequences of these attacks for the entire Muslim population in the United States. Indeed, a longitudinal and more geographically and demographically representative study of Muslims is necessary. However, this research is a first step towards understanding the Muslim experience in the US and towards informing community, organizational, and government response and recovery efforts. Further

in-depth research regarding the effects of September 11 on the American-Muslim community could result in policy recommendations that would improve the safety and well-being of all Americans.

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### NOTES

1. See S. W. A. Gunn, 'On Man-Conceived Disasters', *Journal of Humanitarian Medicine*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2001, pp. 7–8; and Kenneth Hewitt, *Regions of Risk: A Geographical Introduction to Disasters*, Boston: Addison, Wesley, Longman, 1997.
2. See American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, 2002, available online at: [h\(ttp://www.adc.org\)](http://www.adc.org) and Council of American Islamic Relations, 2002, available online at: [h\(ttp://www.cair-net.org\)](http://www.cair-net.org).
3. See Richard A. Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1998; and David L. Morgan, *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997.
4. The word *hijab* comes from the Arabic word for hiding or concealing, and for women, also denotes covering the body completely with loose clothing. The head covering typically drapes around the neck and covers the bosom as well.
5. The *niquaab* is a face veil that covers the hair, neck, and face, leaving only the eyes visible.
6. For the purpose of anonymity, all interviewee names have been changed throughout the report.
7. A. J. W. Taylor, 'Hidden Victims and the Human Side of Disasters', *UNDRO News*, March/April 1983, pp. 6–9, 12.

