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## What's so Special About Nisa Homes? A Case Study of Community-Based Shelters in Canada

### Research Article

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#### Abstract

While domestic violence occurs in all communities, and across all race and class lines, this study examines the barriers Muslim women face when accessing the mainstream Canadian shelter system and the ways in which Nisa Homes, a community-based shelter for Muslim women, facilitates access and impacts Muslim women's lives and wellbeing. This study utilizes key informant interviews and focus group discussion with Nisa Homes staff and current and past Nisa Homes residents to produce its findings. As an outcome of this data, this study explores the gaps in the Canadian shelter system and how barriers can be overcome by exploring the innovative ways in which Nisa Homes provides services to Muslim women.



## Introduction

Nisa Homes was founded in 2013 to refuge Muslim women facing domestic violence and poverty. It is a transitional home that houses women for three months to pick up the pieces of their lives and move on. The demand for Nisa Homes in the Muslim community is high. In a Toronto Star news article, Yasmine Youssef, National Manager of Nisa Homes, stated that for every woman they help, there are 400 they cannot because they are full on any given day.<sup>1</sup> Nisa Homes is the first and only transitional home for Muslim immigrant and refugee. The founders of Nisa Homes recognized the need to provide specialized care to Muslim women which was unmet by the Canadian shelter system. Muslim Women are situated within a highly politically charged environment that consistently distorts, alienates and marginalizes them.<sup>2,3</sup> Muslim women are continually portrayed as abused, victimized and oppressed by Muslim men. This is harmful to the Muslim community, and to Muslim women.<sup>2,3</sup> Consequently, the shelter was born out of the idea that in an environment where Muslim values are misunderstood or misinterpreted, Nisa Homes would be at the forefront of helping Muslim women, giving the Muslim community an opportunity to escape domestic violence.<sup>4</sup>

## Methods

This study is result of Student Placement with Punjabi Community Health Services (pchs4u.com) in Summer 2018. This research project followed a case study design and utilized qualitative data from key informant interviews and a focus group discussion with Nisa Homes staff, experts in the field, as well as current and past Nisa Homes residents. Four separate, individual interviews were conducted with Nisa Homes staff to understand the systematic barriers the staff face, when providing services to Muslim women. A focus group discussion was conducted with all (six) current residents at Nisa Homes and three individual interviews were conducted with past residents. All interviews were one hour in length, and were recorded, transcribed and coded for common themes. All the participants signed consent forms and residents were linked to mental health professionals for debriefing.

## Results

The findings from this research indicate that Muslim women experience various barriers to accessing shelters. The barriers Muslim women face include:

### **1. Lack of community awareness of resources**

According to the participants and staff, the lack of resourcefulness in the community is mainly because “people within the community are new to the country, and they’re not fully aware of what’s out there for them”. As a result, Muslim/immigrant women do not know where to go if they wished to leave domestic violence.

### **2. Family intervention and family honour**

Muslim women often have cultural values that entrust families with the responsibility of mediating situations of dispute, abuse or divorce. Consequently, it is often culturally inappropriate to seek help outside the family for such matters as it may jeopardize family honour. This deters many women from seeking external help.

### **3. Negative perceptions of shelters**

All women in the focus group responded that they believe other shelters “have people who are on drugs... are drunk all the time...[and] there is a lack of safety, and men and women are together and it’s not a good place for children”

### **4. Stereotype threat**

Nisa Homes staff expressed that western media portrays Muslim women as oppressed. This fact is reiterated in many research studies on Muslim women<sup>5</sup>. As a result, participants explained that, “a lot of Muslims feel that if I let them know that I am going through this, they are going to judge Islam more, they’re going to judge Muslims more, and they are going to perceive me in a certain way”.

### **5. A lack of basic religious accommodation**

Accessible prayer space, as well as halal food or vegetarian food options were cited by participants as essential for Muslim women, as well as “comfortability of praying anywhere, access to Quran, or access to counsellors that understand their religious view”.

### **6. A lack of multi-lingual staff and cultural competency**

Muslim women reported that they could not be “100% open to [caseworkers] because they are not from the same culture”. Women in the focus group reported, “we have to explain every little thing to them so they can understand” and “when we have to explain too much, it feels like they are looking down at our culture like it’s too restraining”.

### **7. Discrimination and islamophobia**

Incidents of islamophobia come from both fellow residents, as well as staff members in mainstream shelters. For example, during the focus group it



was revealed that a resident had urinated on a woman's prayer mat in a mainstream shelter.

Muslim women who access community-based shelters like Nisa Homes benefit from:

### **1. Home environment**

Nisa Homes is a regular house located in a quiet neighborhood. This helps Muslim women come to terms with living in a shelter, as staff and women in the focus group described it as "shared accommodation". This slight change of perspective helps the home become more socially acceptable.

### **2. Sense of community**

Staff observed that Nisa Homes gives Muslim women an opportunity to build a network and community. This is important for women who feel isolated and are at times unable to speak to friends and family

### **3. Cultural credibility and receptiveness**

Nisa Homes staff explained that by sharing the same value systems as the residents, they carry more legitimacy in the eyes of their residents and thus, the residents are more receptive. As a staff member explains, "it comes in handy to have someone of the faith, who understands these things, because it increases their credibility as well [and the client] will say, "Ok she knows what she is talking about". In this way, specialized counsellors are able to address trauma, and/or can provide family mediation in a culturally sensitive manner.

### **Discussion**

Community-based shelters like Nisa Homes are an effective solution for tackling domestic violence within minority communities. Community-based shelters are able to spread the word about their services effectively within the community's social and cultural gatherings. Furthermore, such shelters are able to engage with the community and increase awareness about domestic violence through a culturally sensitive approach. They also offer a guarantee that the women will be able to access services in their language, and that their culture and religion will not be judged or misunderstood. As a consequence, the community's perception of shelters is improved and they much more accepting and positive about this solution.

Moreover, Community-based shelters are able to accurately and effectively assess the needs of their community and tailor their services accordingly. Finally, community-based shelters, such as Nisa Homes are often the only option for women who fear going to mainstream shelters. This necessarily means that community-based

shelters are an essential service for women who cannot access mainstream services for whatever reason. In the absence of community-based shelters, such as Nisa Homes, many women find shelters inaccessible or unacceptable. Nisa Homes however, faces several challenges, most notably, a lack of funding. Despite this, Nisa Homes is able to thrive and serve the women in the Muslim community. Thus, community-based shelters are needed and able to effectively fill the gap in the mainstream shelter system and save the lives of women who cannot access the mainstream shelter system.

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