

Islam, Autism/Disabilities & Library Systems

Theory | Organizations | Inclusionary Practices

Dilshad D. Ali

Editor | Haute Hijab

dilshad@hautehijab.com

nodakota@hotmail.com

Three areas of focus:

- Islam/Muslims/Theology/Disability
- Practices/Resources/Disability/
Autism-focused Organizations
- Muslims, Autism and Libraries -
Navigating the Trifecta

600,000

Estimated number of Muslims living with disabilities in the U.S. - according to a 2014 survey by Enabled Muslim; No known statistics on how many Muslims with autism. One-third of all U.S. families have a family member living with a disability - American Muslim families are no exception.

Islam and Muslims -

The 411 on Islam, Muslims and how
Disability/Autism is perceived in
theology

Islam and Muslims

- Islam is the name of the religion
 - Islam is a set of beliefs, values and practices
 - Islam is not a culture, but accommodates different cultures
- A Muslim is a person who believes in Islam
- Approx 1.5 billion Muslims in the world
 - Only 15% are Arabs
- Estimated 3.3 million Muslims (or more) in the USA
 - Racially diverse, including many Black, White and Latino American converts
 - Many of the African slaves brought to America were Muslim

Disability in the Quran

- Prophet Moses : a prominent figure who was disabled :
 - “[Pharaoh said]: Or am I [not] better than this one who is insignificant and hardly makes himself clear?” Quran 43:52
 - “[Moses] said, "My Lord, expand for me my breast [with assurance]. And ease for me my task. And untie the knot from my tongue, That they may understand my speech.” Quran, 20:25
 - “My chest is tight, and my tongue is not fluent, so send for Aaron.” Quran, 26:13
- No blame on the disabled
 - “No blame is there upon the blind nor any blame upon the lame nor any blame upon the sick” Quran, 24:61

Disability in Islamic Theology

- God is fair
 - Everyone is born with a clean slate, and accountable only for their own beliefs & actions
 - Disability is not a curse; not an indicator of God's anger or punishment
- God is good, and in charge
 - What we see as 'bad' contains good / wisdom in the bigger scheme of things
 - Suffering can be a means for spiritual growth
 - "Seek me among your weak....for you are granted sustenance on account of the weak among you." – Prophet Muhammad

Practical Implications of these Beliefs

- Responsibility for what one has been blessed with
 - “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.” Luke 12:48
 - **GRATITUDE** and its theological centrality in Islam
 - See (not necessarily with the eye!) and understand God’s signs!
 - Part of gratitude is to use one’s limbs & abilities to help others
- Patience in the face of misfortune or suffering
 - Bearing blindness patiently leads to Paradise [Hadith]
 - Many weak and inconspicuous people in Heaven [Hadith]
- Respect and love for others, especially the less fortunate
 - ““O you who have believed, let not a people ridicule [another] people; perhaps they may be better than them And do not insult one another and do not call each other by [offensive] nicknames.” (Quran, 49:11)

Moral Obligations Toward those w/ Special Needs

- Time
 - A mentally-disabled woman asked to speak with the Prophet....
- Assistance
 - “Seek me among your weak...for you are granted sustenance on account of the weak among you.” – Prophet Muhammad
 - Precedents from Jurist Abu Hanifa (d. 767), Caliph Ma'mun (d. 833)
- Accessibility & Integration
 - “None of you has faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” (Hadith)
 - “Whoever is leading the [congregational] prayer should make it light, for verily, among them are the ill, the weak and those with special circumstances.” (Hadith)
 - “Two people should not converse to the exclusion of a third.” (Hadith)

PRACTICE & RESOURCES

Disability/Autism Awareness and
Accommodation in the
American Muslim Community - Active
Groups/Organizations

Muslim Organizations And Networks Working on Disability/Autism Issues

Over the years several organizations have developed focusing on a variety of areas and serving different audiences: Muslims with disabilities and anyone with a disability

Focus on disability in general and mental health,

Some focused on specific disabilities or in specific geographic areas



Disability/Autism organizations primarily focused on American Muslim communities

MUHSEN (Muslims Understanding and Helping Special Education Needs; muhsen.org)

A non-profit striving to promote awareness, acceptance and inclusion in Muslim communities and mosques

1. Mosque certification programs
2. Muhsen Umrah
3. Sunday School curriculum
4. SEEMA - mental health initiative
5. Partnership w/ Half Our Deen (marriage services)

6. Respite programs
7. Workshops and volunteer trainings
8. Team walk with Autism Speaks in Chicago
9. Fundraising events
10. Provision of braille Qurans and closed captioning devices

Disability organizations primarily focused on American Muslim communities

Global Deaf Muslim (globaldeafmuslim.org)

Non-profit that advocates for the rights and needs of deaf Muslims worldwide, and particularly strives to improve accessible Islamic education and programming for those who are hearing impaired.

Enabled Muslim (enabledmuslim.org, formerly a project of American Muslim Health Professionals (amhp.us))

An online network providing spiritual, faith-based and practical support for Muslims impacted by disabilities, both intellectual and physical, including autism |

Disability organizations founded and led by Muslims, serving needs of all people

Equally Able Foundation (equallyable.org)

Non-profit seeking to empower and include people with disabilities worldwide by helping provide education, employment, medical equipment, innovative technology, grants, outreach to promote inclusion and religious community supports

ETI - Empowerment Through Integration (etivision.org)

Non-profit that propels disadvantaged blind and sight-impaired youth to explore and achieve their career goals, with programs in the U.S., Lebanon and more.

Organizations Serving Mental Health Needs of American Muslim Communities

Muslim Wellness Foundation (muslimwellness.com)

Working to reduce stigma associated w/ mental illness, addiction and trauma; instituted one of the first ever imam mental health training programs

Naseeha Muslim Helpline (naseeha.net)

1-866-NASEEHA; confidential youth helpline to give immediate, anonymous and confidential support over the phone

Stones to Bridges (stonestobridges.org)

Dedicated to empowering and supporting the needs of Muslims & other youth in North America, as a means to promote emotion, social and mental well-being.

The Family & Youth Institute (thefyi.org)

Non-profit research and education institute helping young people & their families realize fullest potential through development of mind, body and spirit. (Suicide prevention, etc.)

Muslim disability organizations in Canada and the U.K.

SMILE (smilecan.org)

Dedicated to providing support and developing awareness of the challenges faced by children living with disabilities in Muslim communities.

Canadian Association for Muslims with Disabilities (camd.ca)

Focused on community-based approaches to meet the needs of Canadians with disabilities and their families.

Disabled Muslim Network, UK

(www.facebook.com/disabledmuslimsnetwork)

Working to support and assist Muslims who have a disability and Muslim parents of children with disabilities.

Muslims, Autism and Libraries - Navigating the Trifecta

How do Muslims, Autism and Libraries intersect?



Classic misconceptions about Libraries and about Muslims

- Classic misconceptions that cross all demographic groups:
 - Libraries are for reading and quiet research - emphasis on QUIET
 - Libraries don't have much to offer beyond a vast variety of fiction/non fiction and resource materials
 - Library programs are only geared towards young children
 - Library activities are geared towards children and teens
- Classic misconceptions people may have about Muslims:
 - Mainly immigrant communities (rather than a vast range of first- and second-generation Muslim Americans)
 - Muslims are mainly from the Middle East
 - Muslims are identifiable by their headscarves, clothing or perhaps beards on men (not true! All types of Muslims!)
 - Language barriers

Issues facing the intersection of Muslims and Muslims with Autism in Public Spaces

Autism-related challenges:

- Behavior challenges in social settings
- Sensory issues - where one must be quiet in certain situations or be able to navigate situations with people or crowds
- Reading social cues
- Challenges with waiting, engaging, interacting with others
- How behaviors are perceived in a public setting
- Fear/pride of asking for help across cultures (Arab, Desi, Black Muslims)

Challenges Muslims face:

- Suspicions (whether legitimate or perceived) due to visibility (Hijab or beard, other clothing)
- Micro-aggressions and other forms of minor or major Islamophobic actions
- Snap judgement (perpetuated by media stereotypes), whether legitimate or perceived
- Fear of asking questions/asking for help
- Fear of Law enforcement and figures of authority (this could include librarians)

How can libraries and library systems become more welcoming/inclusive to Muslims w/autism and their families?

Make your services known!

- Like anyone living w/ autism, Muslim autism families are overwhelmed and may not know of the services libraries have to offer.
- Put up fliers or offer to put together an autism discussion at local mosques - a great way to reach the population
- Reach out to Muslim autism families and individuals via social media with targeted messaging during key times - like Ramadan! (Ramadan greetings)

Within libraries:

- Have a dedicated section with information about Muslim-disability organizations as well as autism organizations and resources in general.
- Partner with schools to encourage library usage, using targeted messaging that welcomes folks from all religions and cultures.

How can libraries and library systems become more welcoming/inclusive to Muslims w/autism and their families?

Important to understand:

- Autism and other disabilities are still stigmatized within various Muslim communities
- As few as eight years ago I was one of the only Muslims to openly and actively discuss autism and share our family's autism living online - focusing on that intersection of faith and autism

Important to understand

- If Muslims with autism and Muslim autism families still struggle to some degree with engaging with the public and public institutions, this inately feeds into them possibly avoiding coming to the library.
- Common library misconceptions may bar Muslim autism families like any autism family

Questions?

Thanks!

Contact:

Dilshad D. Ali

@DilshadDAli;

dilshad@hautehijab.com;

nodakota@hotmail.com;

dali.editor@gmail.com

