

**“Women’s Empowerment Through Yoga”:
A Reflection on How Muslim American Women Build Spaces of Healing**

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As we moved from downward dog into a lunge, my leg slipped out from under me. I wobbled, then landed on my knee. I steadied myself with both hands on the mat, eyes fixed on the pale lavender beneath me. My scarf loosened from its turban and fell to my shoulders. I was used to the quick flare of shame about my abilities and the rush of panic when my hijab shifted, especially during yoga. But the room grounded me. I looked up and saw the other practitioners – women, most, though not all, Muslim. Surrounded by them, I was able to gather myself and rise.

This personal essay reflects on an outdoor yoga session hosted by Raha Syracuse. Raha Syracuse was a Muslim youth-led collective focused on community outreach and meeting community needs that operated between 2020 to 2022. As a member of Raha, I explore my experiences as a community organizer during the pandemic and the importance of creating a space of healing by and for Muslim women, and how that intention took shape in our yoga event. I also revisit my past experiences with yoga in co-educational spaces, the tensions around modesty and fitness, and how those memories informed the design of this gathering.

To organize, attempting to meet urgent needs, during the beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic was to be filled with doubt and uncertainty; it was also my first experience leading organizing efforts in my community. I was navigating unfamiliar terrains that seemed to contradict each other: seclusion in quarantine and the cooperation necessary for effective organizing. Surprisingly, the isolation I experienced alongside the rest of the world revealed a principle of activism that still anchors me five years later: healing. As I participated in efforts that prioritized healing alongside traditional justice work, I found a new form of community-building: the collective care that emerges when women organize for one another.

Sheikh Yousef Wahb discusses *Fard Kifayah*, the Islamic principle that individuals share a communal obligation to care for one another (Wahb 2021). He emphasizes its importance for Muslim minorities in non-Muslim societies, urging us to care for our own religious community while fulfilling obligations to the broader public. For me, that principle has been the beating heart of my ambitions for as long as I can remember. Growing up as a Muslim American in the post-9/11 world, I have only ever known a landscape scarred by the War on Terror, its impacts visible at every scale, from national to intimate. The Muslim American experience can be one of constant surveillance: by the state through domestic War on Terror policies, by non-Muslim peers who observe with caution, and through layered perceptions from within the community itself.

I was born in 2002 to Moroccan immigrants in Central New York. The feeling of surveillance sharpened when I transferred to public school in 2008 for second grade. Until then I studied at a private Islamic school and lived largely within my own community. I immediately

felt like an outsider, a common experience for first-generation diaspora kids. Early on, this showed up in small ways: my lunch looked different, American pop culture references went over my head, and social circles were closed to anyone outside the white middle-class norm. At the time, it felt as though I was always being watched. Most of my friends were white girls simply because that was the overwhelming majority. I constantly felt pressure to compensate for my background and my Muslimness, as if peers were gatekeepers deciding whether I could fit in. Much of this was internalized, making my fear of perception larger than reality. As I got older, though, the surveillance grew more acute. Each school year brought more pressure to conceal an identity I once shared freely within my community.

In February 2016, at the height of my hiding at 13 years old, I began to wear the hijab. I still cannot fully explain the decision. I wanted to be invisible for so long, and this choice did the opposite. I knew it meant questions and stares. One morning, I simply decided. Instead of braiding my hair, I put it in a bun and draped an emerald scarf over my head. The stares began on the school bus steps and followed me for weeks.

My decision coincided with Donald Trump's rise to power. The negative perceptions I encountered after becoming visibly Muslim did not stop at dirty looks. As the 2016 election progressed, I faced overt Islamophobia. Some classmates purposefully alienated me. A few would sit next to me before class and repeat a rehearsed conversation about Islam's supposed dangers, cheering policies like the Muslim Ban. We made eye contact, making sure we both understood the real reason for their performance: ostracism. At one point, a boy addressed me mid-rant to say he didn't see me as "one of those radical Muslims," a feeble attempt to absolve himself and his friends. Islamophobia extended far beyond that incident. After the election, I was routinely subjected to comments rooted in racist beliefs about Muslims and Arabs, and even teachers suggested I style my hijab to be "less obviously Muslim."

Presenting outwardly as Muslim forced me, at a formative moment, to reckon with the realities of being Muslim in America. I returned to my community for solace. I immersed myself in justice-focused activities to make sense of what I faced at school and to connect to the broader experiences of Muslims nationally and globally. I read Muslim American activist-scholars, from Malcolm X to Su'ad Abdul Khabeer (Khabeer 2016). I attended local events and protests when I could. But it wasn't until 2020, during the pandemic, that I began to act as a builder of community and change.

With two friends, Shewa and Sahria, I co-founded Raha Syracuse, a grassroots collective centered on meeting material needs across Syracuse. In our first five months, we worked nonstop to fill gaps in our local Muslim community and beyond. Between April and September 2020, our small team organized Ramadan food drives, coordinated Eid gift drives, and joined local efforts against anti-Black police violence as members of the Syracuse Police Accountability and Reform Coalition (now the Syracuse Police Abolition and Radical Revisioning Coalition, SPAARC).

The pace, grief, and uncertainty of that summer were relentless. Each of us carried a distinct exhaustion: the sustained emotional labor of community organizing, the mental toll of constant public-facing advocacy, and the loneliness that came from having only each other to rely on as only we knew the depth of our fatigue. We wanted Raha to outlast quarantine, but first we had to reckon with burnout and imagine practices of healing that could sustain our politics (hooks 1994; hooks 2000).

Toward the end of the summer, healing became a priority. Our turning point was an outdoor yoga session we attended, almost on a whim, to enjoy the last warmth before the Central New York cold set in. The event – led by K, a Syracuse-based yoga instructor and member of the

Syracuse Yoga Collective, who organized Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) yoga sessions during the pandemic – eventually compelled us to organize our own (Ternikar 2021).



Figure 1 – Raha Syracuse organizers from left to right: Shewa Shwani-Ilkhanipour, Sarhia Rahim, and AyeH Hajjari; outside of the The Sweet Praxis – a bakery in downtown Syracuse – where they organized distributions of sweets to the Muslim community in Central New York during the pandemic (Photo Credit: The Sweet Praxis Staff).

I had never experienced yoga this way. Most of my previous encounters were in high school gym class – where our yoga instructor was just our gym teacher – or the occasional YouTube video in my childhood bedroom. Gym class was a sore spot: body expectations, alienation as a hijabi covered head to toe, and the judgment of not being “fit” enough. Every pose I couldn’t hold felt like a public failure.

What felt especially devastating in my first experiences with yoga was how much I loved the movements themselves. Yoga was unlike any fitness I’d known, and the idealized version we were promised – gentle, accommodating – appealed to me. Our gym teacher’s opening reminders not to over-exert ourselves and that it was okay to skip a pose sounded like the antithesis to everything I dreaded about gym class and fitness in general. But reality set in quickly: the yoga segments rarely lasted ten minutes and were tacked onto punishing workouts suited only to the already-athletic. The barrier to entry never shifted. There were no accommodations if you struggled, only constant surveillance. I was often told, “you should be able to do this,” with no guidance on how. I remember her hovering by the treadmill during the biannual mile, inching up the speed without my consent, ignoring my continuous pleas that I could not keep up with the pace until I eventually had to clutch the handrails to avoid flying off. I couldn’t separate those drilled-in expectations from the yoga at the end of class. Despite the flowery preambles, we were told exactly what we should be capable of with little instruction on how to get there if we weren’t.

Attending the outdoor yoga session with my co-organizers felt radically different from my previous experiences. Practicing beneath the open sky loosened the surveillance I often felt in the studio-like setting of my high school’s fitness room where my peers and I were

uncomfortably crowded together. Sun and wind replaced the intensity of frequent glances – the ones that make sure you know you don’t belong – a feeling that can be inescapable for Muslim women. Crucially, it also revealed how many mainstream yoga spaces reproduce “universalist paradigms” that claim to fit everyone while erasing cultural, racial, and gendered differences (Blu Wakpa 2018). Those paradigms shaped my early experiences with yoga as punitive and exclusionary whereas the space Raha began to cultivate was particular, community-rooted, and oriented toward care.

On September 13, 2020, we hosted a women-only rooftop yoga session in downtown Syracuse, collaborating with K, our instructor who first introduced us to outdoor practice. We advertised it as “Women’s Empowerment Through Yoga,” naming the impact our first session had on us and inviting our community into a similar experience. The intention was simple: create a space where Muslim women could move, breathe, and be together without apology. In doing so, we joined a broader push to platform Black and women of color instructors and to reimagine who yoga is for as part of fostering social change (Hassan 2020; Panton and Evans 2017).



Figure 2 – Social Media Flyer for ‘Women’s Empowerment Through Yoga’ Event (Photo Credit: AyeH Hajjari).

Our experiences as Black, Arab, and Kurdish hijabi Muslim women shaped the gathering as both healing and community-building. They helped us interrogate how Muslim women of color navigate contradictions around modesty, respectability, race, and class in fitness spaces. In the US, yoga is often coded as a practice for thin, affluent white women with high membership costs and unspoken social scripts that alienate those who do not fit that mold (Hassan 2020). For hijabi and non-hijabi Muslim women alike, questions of access are compounded by inconsistent modesty norms and limited athleisure options that seldom meet our standards. Within our own community, understandings of modesty – especially in relation to fitness – vary widely: some are comfortable with mixed-gender classes, others are not; some prioritize looser, non-revealing attire, others frame modesty primarily as a moral virtue rather than a dress code. These differences are real, layered, and deeply personal. I too have had a complex relationship with the hijab and modesty.

Since first wearing the hijab in 2016, I’ve worn many styles from full-coverage scarves that cover hair and neck to turbans that expose the neck and parts of the hairline. Now I move along that spectrum depending on context. For physical exercise, I prefer styles that are low-maintenance and non-restrictive; turbans, often secured with a baseball cap, feel most practical. The same goals shape my attire: leggings with a loose-fitting long-sleeve top. These preferences are not universal; they change over time and vary by person.



Figure 3 – Ayeh Hajjari at Clark’s Reservation in Jamesville, NY on the Cliff Trail. This is her typical attire for fitness activities – leggings, a loose-fitting top, and hijab (Photo Credit: Chloe Erwin).

While my outfit for the women’s-only session did not stray much from typical fitness wear, the nature of the gathering let me enjoy yoga in a more relaxed way. The class began at 9 a.m. on the rooftop of Merchant Commons. As organizers, Raha and K arrived first. Within minutes, the empty rooftop filled with participants, bright yoga mats, and light chatter riding the morning breeze. The session echoed the freedom of my first outdoor practice, this time against downtown Syracuse’s modest skyline. As we moved, I felt myself exhale into the space. Not being in the presence of men allowed me to feel fully free in the practice. At one point, when my scarf began to unravel, I simply removed it, something that would have forced me to step out and recompose in another setting. Many overlapping restraints that had long kept me from feeling comfortable in fitness began to fall away, a refreshing shift that helped me prioritize movement.

Designing a women-only, community-rooted, low-cost session helped us reconcile contradictions with care. We addressed financial barriers by lowering fees, charging only \$5 to cover our instructor’s labor. We addressed social barriers by centering Muslim women’s comfort and belonging from the outset. We addressed modesty by creating a private, women-only space and communicating clear expectations so attendees could show up as they are and dress as they wished. The event affirmed that fitness spaces can be sites of political possibility: places where we process grief, restore capacity, and insist that Muslim women’s emotional, mental, and physical health are public concerns worth organizing around. This aligns with community-based models that create alternative yoga spaces outside exclusionary, studio-centric norms (Ternikar 2021) and with critiques of the “yoga industrial complex,” which argue that the practice remains malleable and can be reclaimed as a tool for mobility, freedom, and justice (Hassan 2020).

Five years later, the urgency of making space for healing is even clearer. My organizing has continued and evolved. Raha's mutual-aid work continued until 2022, when we parted ways and deepened our involvement in other organizations. I became active in on-campus organizing at Le Moyne College through Peace Action New York State, focusing on political education with film screenings, zine workshops, and teach-ins on nuclear weapons, Palestine, and movement histories. I worked extensively with the Syracuse Peace Council on anti-war activism, particularly on nuclear non-proliferation and justice in Palestine. Currently, most of my energy focuses on dialogue work and community-facing projects centering Muslim women's experiences. As my work matured, the need for rest followed me. Without the avenue we built at Raha through our yoga event, I felt myself drowning in responsibility, my mental health bearing the cost. No matter how I tried to brush off rest, exhaustion eventually found me. Over the past year, I have re-prioritized healing as a practice inseparable from organizing. I want to return to the ethos of Raha's yoga event, even if I must go about it alone for now. The lesson is unmistakable: spaces for healing are not a luxury in our movements; they are a necessity.

This reflection is an invitation and a call to action. If existing fitness spaces exclude us – through cost, culture, or policy – we can build our own. Organizing women-centered, culturally responsive, and financially accessible movement spaces is not supplementary to justice work; it is part of it. In moments of crisis and beyond, we must continue creating environments that prioritize self-care through physical practice while honoring the diverse experiences of Muslim women. Our rooftop yoga session was one small experiment in collective healing. Its lesson endures: sustainable movements require spaces where our bodies are safe, our differences are respected, and our wellness is treated as essential rather than optional (Blu Wakpa 2018; Hassan 2020; Ternikar 2021).

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