

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

**The Politics of Privacy: Perceptions of Domestic Violence Among Select Muslims in
Johannesburg**

By

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A research report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master
of Arts in Political Studies by Coursework and Research Report

in the

Department of Political Studies

Faculty of Humanities

March 2016

Declaration:

I declare that this is my own work. It is being submitted for the partial requirements of the Degree of Masters in Political Studies by Coursework and Research Report, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

Signature:

Date:

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In loving memory of Uncle Tahir Mitha

Acknowledgements:

In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

Writing is never an easy process, for me the journey was filled with tears, frustration and joy. I have learnt and grown a great deal and would not swop this experience for anything. First and foremost I am eternally grateful to my supervisor Professor Sheila Meintjes. Sheila, you are an incredible academic and your thirst for knowledge and new experiences is inspiring. Thank you for all that you have taught me, for loaning your extensive library to me and for allowing me the freedom to grow and this project to take its own shape. Our journey does not end here and in you I found not only a supervisor but a friend – someone whom I can lean on for academic support, knowledge and rigorous conversation. I was lucky to have you as a supervisor. This is the beginning of my academic career and I hope that one day I will be as great a supervisor as you have been to me.

There are a few academics who need to be thanked for the role played and continue to play in my life. To Dr. Julian Brown, you have been an ‘unofficial supervisor’ since Honours. I have never met anyone kinder, whose door is literally always open to all students. It amazes me how you always kept patient with me even when asking silly questions. I appreciate all of your guidance, feedback and support. To Prof. Shireen Hassim, thank you for always being honest, supportive and for all the references given to me. To Dr. Shahana Rasool, thank you for the endless conversations and the interest shown in this project. Your work on how to conceptualise the public and private in South Africa really shaped my thinking and understanding. Lastly, a special note of appreciation must go to Dr. Shireen Ally whose valued comments in my proposal made me critically think about my literature and what it means to create a discourse. Your on-going interest in my research, continued support and comments were highly cherished.

I believe the support from Sheila Meintjes, Julian Brown, Shahana Rasool and both Shireen Hassim and Ally gave me the confidence to produce a research report I am proud of. I am grateful to the rest of the Political Studies department and our former administrator Gillian Renshaw. The love, kindness and ‘friendship’ that brew in our corridors made me feel like there was no better place than here to produce this research report. I am blessed to be a part of this department and pray you grow from strength to strength.

A thank you must go to Aunty Najma Ansari, Uncle Nazir Talia, Moulana Suleman Ravat, Islamic Careline and friends for assisting me with finding respondents and for the

support. Finding people to talk to was difficult but you made it a little easier. To my respondents, without whom this project would not have been possible! Thank you all for opening up to me and sharing your thoughts. I have learnt from each of you. And thank you to the individuals who filled in and helped me out when other respondents cancelled. I will never forget your kindness. May Allah Ta'ala eternally bless you all.

To my PG friends, comrades and fellow rascals, the rigorous conversations and debates really shaped and altered my thinking. You have challenged me, helped me grow beyond belief and never judged my 'liberal bourgeois-ness'. Thank you for your on-going support and understanding; writing a research report is challenging but having you to share the experience with was memorable. Thanks for answering my 'silly' questions and for being my Google when I was too lazy to actually use Google. A very special thank you must go to Lucky and Shaeera for helping me transcribe and lessening my load. To Maaret thank you for saving me at the last minute and giving valued feedback on my abstract. To my friends, I value each of you and am blessed to have you in my life. Thank you for being a constant support. Lastly, to Thoko and Aayesha – I thank you abundantly for constantly reading my work and giving treasured feedback. Thoko, you have been my rock – thank you for always being there for me to lean on. I love you all!

To my 'twin' Nazia and brother-in-law (aka brother) Irfan – thank you for helping me transcribe and for all the encouragement. To my eldest sister, Shabista thanks for spoiling me by doing all my last minute admin, cleaning the table (a lot of the time) in silence and buying nice products for me. I know I need to take responsibility but while you're around it's quite hard. I love you guys! Finally, to my Dad – my walking-talking encyclopaedia and personal doctor. I know you don't always understand me and we don't see eye-to-eye all the time but this project is me on paper, I hope you enjoy it. Your knowledge and big heartedness is awe-inspiring and greatly valued. To my Mum – my rock, my best friend, my life! I don't know what I'd do without you. Thank you for all the encouragement, silent and not so silent support and for nagging me to do work. I don't think you realise your worth and if I can grow up to be half the woman you are I will have succeeded at life. This dissertation is for you and Daddy – without whom this would not have been possible. May Allah Ta'ala keep you both healthy and bless you with ample years ahead Insha'Allah. The words I love you and thank you do not adequately express how I feel.

Love and Du'aas

Abstract:

Domestic violence is both a local and global phenomenon. Much research has been conducted on its incidence in South Africa, but there is a dearth of research on how it affects Muslim communities. Thus, this research report contributes to the literature in providing a case study of how a select middle class cohort of Muslims in Johannesburg, by gender and generation, discursively construct their perspectives on domestic violence in their community. The research investigates how members of Muslim congregations understand and define gendered violence, particularly violence against women.

The research report addresses two key themes through the research. The first, involves a textual analysis of the interpretations of Chapter 4 Verse 34 in the Qur'an. The interpretations and understandings of this verse and of Islam form the basis for how the respondents defined, understood and perceived gendered violence in their community and in wider society, especially violence against women. The main focus of the empirical research, addresses how a diverse group of respondents relate to the issue of violence against women in Islam and in the Muslim community. This research report adopts a case study approach and thus does not have general applicability. However, through an analysis of focus groups and individual interviews, which form the basis of the research, the report presents the perspective on domestic violence as discussed by select Muslims in Johannesburg. It interrogates the notion of the public and private, of honour and shame versus security, and investigates the avenues of escape available to women.

The respondents argue that while intimate family violence is a general social problem, it occurs in Muslim homes to a lesser extent. They refer to the writings of the Prophet Muhammad, his life and personal conduct, in order to show that domestic violence is not allowed in Islam. However, the older men and women respondents both directly and indirectly blame women for the abuse they endure. This victim-blaming resides within a strongly patriarchal bias that creates the idea that men are the protectors and representatives of the family in the public realm and inevitably justifies domestic violence. The younger cohort provided a somewhat less rigid set of perspectives that were less judgemental in nature.

The distinction made between the public and private realms proved to be an important one in defining the status and roles of women and men, and in shaping what could be disclosed in public and what should remain private. Honour proved to be a central precept in the significance of privacy. In Islamic culture, the private sphere is associated with honour and if what is meant to be private is made public, this idea of honour is breached and the family suffers humiliation. But the women bear the brunt of the blame. Thus, the debate about honour in Muslim culture and Islamic precepts of what is right and wrong is critical in bringing the issue of domestic violence to the fore as a violation of women's rights on the one hand, and Islamic dogma on the other. The resolution of this conflict is important in determining the role of the Jamiat and Muslim congregations in offering mechanisms of support for abused women and avenues of escape from the abuse. However, these mechanisms and avenues will only work if what is meant to be 'a private matter' is no longer made an issue of honour in Muslim communities

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Glossary:

- *Al-Furqaan* – The book which distinguishes between right and wrong, truth and falsehood.
- *Aayat* – Verse in the Qur'an
- *Du'aa* – To Pray (verb) / Prayer (noun)
- *Fitna* – Sin
- *Hadeeth* – A collection of traditions containing sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. It accounts of his daily practice (the *Sunnah*) and constitutes the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Qur'an.
- *Haraam* – Forbidden
- *Imaam* – Leader of a congregation
- *Jumuah* – Friday afternoon prayers that must be read in congregation
- *Madressa* – Islamic school
- *Miswaak* – A stick/twig with a softened bristle used to clean teeth
- *Moulana* – A Muslim man or woman who is revered to for his/her knowledge
- *Nikah* – An Islamic marriage ceremony
- *Niqab* – Veil/covering
- *Qabr* – Grave
- *Qur'an* – The central religious text of Islam
- *Sabr* – Patience
- *Salaah* – The prescribed 5 times a day prayer oriented towards Makah
- *Shariah* – Islamic Law
- *Sunnah* – The recorded life of the Prophet Muhammad. It refers to the spoken words, the actions and the likes of the Prophet Muhammad.
- *Tafsir* – Commentary on verses in the Qur'an
- *Taqdeer* – Fate

