

# BLACK MUSLIM COVID COALITION

## COVID-19's DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON BLACK MUSLIMS

National Black Muslim COVID Coalition + Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU)

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*Minutes by: Harith Morgan, 2019 Deeply Rooted Fellow, Muslim Wellness Foundation*

### Speakers:

- Moderator: Dalia Mogahed
- Margari Hill
- Imam Tariq El-Amin
- Dr. Kameelah Mu'Min Rashad

### Introduction:

#### Dalia Mogahed:

- After racial data became available, it was clear that COVID was having a disproportionate effect on Black communities
- Black Muslims makeup between quarter and a third of American Muslims

#### Margari Hill (cofounder and Executive Director of Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative):

- Muslim ARC was founded to address interpersonal and systemic racism
- Health Disparities
  - Health disparities are one key aspect of systemic racism and COVID is exacerbating these disparities. "When America gets a cold, Black people get the Flu."
  - These health disparities have a history in this country and within our communities. After the Civil War, diseases such as cholera, smallpox, tuberculosis impacted black communities at greater rates.
  - Disparities manifest as inequities in healthcare system, lack of access, as well as bias that goes into doctors' diagnoses
- Other vulnerabilities in Black Communities
  - Other vulnerabilities of our community include: lack of access to food, and stress induced by living in a racist environment. Black communities show higher levels of hypertension, diabetes, etc. These are not just a consequence of genetics or lifestyle, there are also environmental factors. Another vulnerability we have to consider is that many black folks are [unfairly] incarcerated in the prison system
  - Many essential workers are of African American descent (example of Somali women who work in factories and not allowed to take off work during crisis).

This contributes to disproportionate rates of infection for Black people, and health impacts, and suffering

- There is also environmental racism, higher pollution rates in areas where African Americans tend to live, where neighborhoods of predominantly Black populations exist as a consequence of redlining policy, and greater levels of pollution are allowed in those areas.
- Harmful tropes against Black Americans
  - There is a blaming culture on systemic issues (ex. Blaming diet for greater systemic issue of that make Black Americans more prone to diabetes)
  - There is an idea that African American communities party more than other communities.

**Dr. Kameelah Rashad (Founder & President of Muslim Wellness Foundation, ISPU scholar):**

- COVID-19's Disproportionate Impact on Black Muslims is an important topic for all of our communities, not just Black Muslim Community
- Systemic issues
  - Quote from Bell hooks:  
"Within white supremacist capitalist culture, black people are not supposed to be well. This culture makes wellness a white luxury"
  - Within our society there are structural obstacles to wellness
  - Social toxicity: "Social toxicity refers to the extent to which the social environment in which families develop and operate is poisonous, in the sense that it contains serious threats to the development of identity, competence, moral reasoning, trust, hope, and the other features of personality and ideology that make for success in school, family, work, and the community. What are the social and cultural poisons that are psychologically equivalent to lead and smoke in the air, PCBs in the water, and pesticides in the food chain" - Dr. James Garbarino
  - This system was designed to maintain systems of oppression
- Black Muslim Intersectionality
  - \*image\* Within the African American community there is an assumption that majority are Christian and within America there is an assumption that the majority of Muslims are Arab or South Asian (anecdote: Dr. Kameelah Rashad posted statistics of Black people comprising 20-25% of Muslim American population and someone from the UK shared their utter surprise as this fact).
  - "Islamophobia will never be the new Black"
    - Dispelling the myth that Islamophobia is a distinct phenomenon which does not impact Black Muslims
  - perception of "Black" does not include Muslim, perception of "Muslim" does not include Black
  - Within food distribution programs in Black communities is there consideration for Muslims by providing non pork options?
  - Quotes:

- “When I walk in a room...people have expectations like, ”“Oh she’s the oppressed Muslim woman” or “she’s the dumb Black girl.” -Sakina, 19
- “I wish I could always go into a lot of spaces with an open mind about how I’ll be perceived, but I go into masjids, I go into stores, I go into a lot of encounters with Muslims...they about to just see me as this nigga young ‘bul’ ” - Jamal, 25
- Still there are some who feel this way: “Being Black and Muslim ...it means everything to me.” -Jamal, 25
- The despair from illness plus the racial trauma plus discrimination fueling things like the immigration ban plus the structural racism of centuries are the reasons why there is a need for specific attention to be paid to Black Muslim communities.

**Imam Tariq El-Amin(Director of Civic Engagement & Interfaith Services, Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago | Imam of Masjid Al-Taqwa):**

- In Chicago 70% of COVID deaths have been Black people even though they only make up just under 30% of the population. Also Black people comprise 52% of COVID cases in Chicago
- Black Muslims have a tradition of using our faith as bedrock motivating our social justice work. Black communities have a long history of stewardship. This often manifests in our working to fulfill needs of the moment. The challenge here is accepting that this may not be enough
- Current situation is illuminating the lack of intention of the present system to tend to Black needs
- Black Community is forced to realize that our current efforts, while well intended, are not enough.
- Black Community Masjids frequently need to operate with a fraction of the budget of counterpart institutions and they maintain the same responsibilities (ex. Many Black masjids have volunteer imams). How do you lean on an already burdened volunteer workforce in moments of crisis? How do we respond to the needs of the broader community (including nonMuslims in our neighborhood) as well as the needs of our internal community?
- **Question & Answer:**

**HOW CAN PRIMARILY ARAB AND DESI COMMUNITIES SUPPORT BLACK COMMUNITIES.....?**

**Imam Tariq El-Amin:** Whether financial, relational, or emotional support is being offered it is important to understand that leaders of a community are best positioned to tend to the needs of their community. You must take precautions against a power dynamic that resembles that of an overseer. Communication and trust are crucial in approaching this conversation

**Margari Hill:** There are four competencies to anti-racism. 1. Begin with self-assessment to identify your own knowledge, gaps, biases, etc. 2. Learning Engage in learning. Learn how to be

in solidarity. These are communities on the ground that have been dealing with discrimination and oppression for 400+ years. Learn how to be accountable. Respect the history of these communities\* 3. Accountability and shurah- seek partnership and 4. Institutionalization- put that knowledge into action. \*missing points here check transcript\*

It is Important to implement antiracist practices when we are doing solidarity acts.

**Dr. Kameelah Rashad:** Take a step back. Why was the first question [of ‘how can we help...?’] asked before asking “what is the problem?”, “what are the effects?”, “what do I need to understand?”, etc.? Questions such as the one posed center on non-Black people. Be more curious about the experience of Black Muslims to prepare to help. Consider the long history of movements in our communities and recognize the contributions to long standing structure change that many of our efforts have had.

**Margari Hill:** Looking at the history of our communities is beneficial for everyone. After the Civil War, when tuberculosis, cholera, and smallpox were sweeping through populations of emancipated slaves. At that time, the only form of healthcare was private doctors. The Freedmen's Bureau created a system for public health and today we all, Black and non-Black communities, benefit from that.

## **WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT STEPS TO REDUCE # OF COVID INFECTION CASES AMONG BLACK MUSLIMS?**

**Dr. Kameelah Rashad:** First let's understand the structural causes perpetuating the disproportionate amount of infections. We should think about what can we do on a local level. Philadelphia includes a community of 200,000 Muslims, predominantly African American. Think about what are the efforts that are already underway. Reflect on whether current efforts perpetuate a hegemony (ex. some efforts meant to support the Black community are connecting with churches and not masjid). Take the issue of Muslim funerals in this time that have attendance, because Muslims have to be buried within 3 days. In the settings of interreligious families, are we educating others on our practices?\*

**Imam Tariq El-Amin:** In duress our faith is a coping mechanism. It is also a mechanism for change. It is important to analyze the situations on multiple levels. Looking at situations where households are more susceptible to spread infection amongst members because of crowded living quarters, what structural or economic factors bring forth such situations? What are the specific reasons we see higher rates of infection in areas of lower socioeconomic status. Many people today are using remote ordering services like instacart. However, government support programs do not allow remote purchasing of groceries and such. The problems here are structural. In the example of the Freedmen's Bureau, they worked to establish great systems but under President Andrew Johnson they were robbed of their funding. We have to work not only to move the needle but to keep it [from moving back].

## **CAN YOU TALK ABOUT RAMADAN ISOLATION AND HOW IT WILL AFFECT THE BLACK MUSLIM COMMUNITY?**

### **ARE THERE ANY ANTIRACIST FRAMEWORK RESOURCES YOU CAN LINK TO?**

## DO WE KNOW NUMBERS OF LOSS WITH THE AMERICAN MUSLIM COMMUNITY AND THE BLACK MUSLIM COMMUNITY SPECIFICALLY?

**Dr. Kameelah Rashad:** I often recommend the book *The Psychology of Pandemics* by Steven Tyler. He shares the understanding that the psychological effects of pandemics are longer lasting and deeper than the immediate despair over infection. We recently launched the American Muslim COVID Loss survey [www.blackmuslimcoalition.com/loss](http://www.blackmuslimcoalition.com/loss), with support from

- [Institute for Social Policy and Understanding \(ISPU\)](#)
- [Islamic Society of North America \(ISNA\)](#)
- [Muslim Alliance of North America](#)
- [Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative](#)
- [Muslim Wellness Foundation \(MWF\)](#)
- Muslim Health Consortium
- [National Muslim COVID-19 TaskForce](#)
- [Stanford Muslim Mental Health Lab](#)
- [United Muslim Masjid of Philadelphia](#)

The purpose is to make sure we are capturing the losses within American Muslim and Black Muslim communities and through it we are seeking to provide immediate and long term grief resources and support. We are in a census year, and a Presidential election year. This pandemic will have impacts for decades.

**Imam Tariq El-Amin:** To move the needle we need to assess our current situation, which is why filling out the census is important. Chicago has a lower than national average of reporting at 44%. Furthermore in Black communities it can reach as low as 16%. Everyone in attendance should fill out a census and encourage others to fill out. It's of grave importance for the effects it will have in the years to come.

**Margari Hill:** To the question of providing resources for anti-racist frameworks MuslimARC has resources as does BlackMuslimCOVIDCoalition. Systemic change is complex and requires a multi-pronged approach. We have to gather and think through rebuilding systems in the face of systems that were designed to exploit, harm, or eradicate specific communities.

Statistics show Black Muslims to be 20%-25% of American Muslim population. That figure might be an underrepresentation itself because of many instances of underreporting within the community. Half of black muslims are converts. That can lead to ruptures[in family, in homes, etc]. It is important to take consideration of that context when determining how to offer support. Converts face an added challenge of access to support through ruptures in the family. The Muslim community is having more advanced conversations about race than other communities in America.

Discussion of vulnerability

There is a story from Archer Flemmings, of when the city council wanted to reach elders who needed food and in doing so discovered significant number of these elders were homeless.

**Imam Tariq El-Amin:** I'm the Director of Civic Engagement & Interfaith Services at the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago. Such organizations can lead and facilitate these

difficult conversations. Our umbrella organizations have an important role in facilitating the conversations that we often don't want to have. Looking at community level health: "If one of us is not healthy we all are not healthy"

**Dalia Mogahed:** Can you talk more about Ramadan?

**Imam Tariq El-Amin:** This timing is a mercy. It allows for detachment and spiritual, emotional, and mental refocus that in itself offers some good in this moment. Allow this to be an opportunity to recognize Allah's mercy. Allow Ramadan to be a comfort during this difficult time.

**Dr. Kameelah:** Specifically to Black Muslims, let's tap into radical healing by acknowledging the oppression we experience while we acknowledge how crisis has allowed many generative opportunities in our communities. While talking with Kenny Gamble, Brother Luqman Abdul-Haqq, he shared that this is a moment to rejoice because we have been through some much already and we learned so much that we need to apply now. We have strength, intellect, and wisdom that we have gained from our experience. This pandemic has offered our communities an opportunity to lead our community in a way that is thoughtful and intentional. We can be the custodians for that future that we are fighting for.

- **Closing remarks:**

**Margari Hill:** This is a moment of Black Muslim leadership and Black Muslim vision. This is a moment for those who seek solidarity (who also draw on our legacies) to respect this leadership, and join us as partners. Our work brings together local, regional, national groups and that gives us a lot of power? This moment is a struggle, a beautiful struggle to be a part of and an honor to be witness to the solutions our communities are generating.

**Dr. Kameelah Rashad:** We have not fully been able to process what this moment and this crisis will mean for us. To Black Muslims specifically, sit down and capture the stories of the elders and the children. How can we be attentive parents? How can we call back to our faith and leverage all that we have learned in this moment in a way that can inspire? Be encouraged. Be patient and self compassionate. The moments now are the only moments we have. Take this time to foster connection.

**Imam Tariq El-Amin:** The quality of our life is determined by the quality of the questions we ask. What is my faith inspiring me to do? Think about ways that we can see Allah's mercy. Our worth and value is shown in moments of duress. Thank Allah for giving us the opportunity to show what we are made of. What is our collective capacity?

The nutrition is in the marrow of the bone, that is to say it is deep inside. We've been given a difficult situation, there may be an outcome that we can be proud of that shows the best of who we are as stewards. It's been an honor, I pray we go into Ramadan looking for that strength and the mercy.

**Dalia Mogahed:** Thank you for sharing your wisdom and experience. Ramadan Kareem!  
You can learn more by going to [www.blackmuslimcoalition.com](http://www.blackmuslimcoalition.com) and [ISPU.org](http://ISPU.org).