

Nadiyah Mohajir, MPH (she/her)

HEART Women & Girls



What brings you to work at your current organization? What are the passions, interests and experiences that led you to where you are now?

I am a romantic at heart (no pun intended) and am always day-dreaming. Despite this, I think the person who was most surprised about me being able to imagine HEART was me. I never imagined myself as a nonprofit executive, let alone in a position of leadership in Muslim communities. In fact, I resisted leading HEART for many years: my discomfort with positional power, my internalized racial oppression that I wasn't charismatic/smart/experienced/ambitious/Muslim enough to be in a leadership position were off-repeated inner dialogue that I had to learn to disrupt.



As a first-generation Pakistani American Muslim, I was raised in a community of contradictions: be bold enough to break through glass ceilings, but not at the expense of domestic responsibilities. Be ambitious, but not ambitious enough to challenge gender roles. Speak up, but only as long as it isn't too disruptive. Exercise free will and critical thinking when it comes to faith, but be careful not to question too hard, otherwise you're risking your Muslim-ness. Address harm, but not if it results in media attention.

The contradictions didn't stop there. Being one of the only brown Muslim kids in a mostly white upper-class middle school, belonging in white suburbia became even more critical for self-worth and self-esteem for me and my Muslim peers. Adding to this confusion, sex ed was presented in a secular, one-size-fits-all approach, leaving little room for different worldviews and approaches

to decision-making (Zakaria 2021). It presented abstinence as the preferred choice during adolescence, while media messaging reinforced the opposite: one is not liberated until they freely embrace their sexuality and have sex (Zakaria 2021). Consequently, I, along with my peers, felt the pressure to choose between our faith's values and fitting in, and the dominant messaging was that these two things were in conflict with each other.

Being raised in a fairly traditional South Asian Muslim household, Islam was typically presented as a formula, and if followed correctly, there would be reward both in this life and the next. It was grounded in fear and punishment, and was rarely presented as a source of empowerment. It wasn't until I was a young adult that my understanding of Islam became more nuanced.

Soon, I found myself as a holder of stories in both my personal and professional life. Some confided that they felt trapped in unhealthy, abusive relationships, not seeking help out of fear of exposing their own “sins” to their families. Others struggled to reconcile their sexual identity with the messaging they received from their faith spaces. The situation for married people was not much different: some shared stories of sexual pain and not knowing who to seek help from, while others navigated difficult reproductive health experiences such as infertility or pregnancy termination and experienced judgment by their communities.

On the other side of the world, there were Muslim women grappling with these same challenges: my dear colleagues-turned-sisters Sahar Pirzada in Singapore and Navila Rashid in New York, and my colleague Sameera Qureshi in Calgary. We began to collaborate on building support systems and accessible educational materials across time zones on Skype, well before Zoom made its appearance. Before we knew it, we had the scrappy infrastructure of organizational hubs in each of our local communities.



What, if anything, was the impact of having the Community of Practice as a container to share thoughts, experiences, and ideas? Did participating in the Community of Practice inspire any new thoughts, dreams, or visions for you?

To be in community with people who share a similar vision for liberatory workplaces is a gift and an invitation to dream big. Most of the time when I leave my HEART bubble, my ideas are received with condescension or being told it is not practical or too naive. It is lovely to be in community with other people who are like minded – it is affirming and gives you the comfort that you are not crazy lol.

How have the funds (\$10,000 stipend) received through the LL Community of Practice supported your work?

The funds were very helpful and came at a time when we wanted to prioritize organizational development and it allowed us to earmark money specifically for organizational development and spend time documenting our values.

Who are liberatory ancestors, teachers, guides, loved ones, and comrades that inspire your work and values?

Our gratitude first and foremost to God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Wise, who has allowed us to advance this important work and has blessed us with the sustenance to continue this work moving forward.

We are grateful to our beloved Prophet Muhammad, may God’s peace be upon him, and the brilliant women who were blessed to be his companions and from our Abrahamic traditions: Khadijah, Aisha, Fatima, may God be pleased with them all. Hajar, Maryam, Aasiya, may God be pleased with them. Our history of practicing reproductive justice goes back to the [beginning of time](#).



Women’s Forum (NAPAWF), Muslim Women’s League, Queer Crescent, @ VillageAuntie, Muslim Wellness Foundation, Advocates for Youth, Family and Youth Institute, Breaking Silence (film), Hijabi Monologues, Hurma Project, Muslim ARC, Dr. amina wadud, Dr. Shabana Mir, Dr. Alia Azmat, Dr. Kecia Ali, Dr. Laury Silvers, Dr. Zahra Ayubi, Dr. Asma Barlas, Dr. Debra Majeed, Dr. Saadia Yacoob, Dr. Shehnaz Haqqani, Dr. Ingrid Mattson, Dr. Sobia Ali-Faisal, Dr. Azizah al-Hibri, Dr. Kameelah Rashad, Mahdia Lynn, Kamilah Pickett, Dr. Olubunmi Basirat Oyewuwo, Aisha Rahman, Qudsia Raja, Nadya Ali, Dr. Laila al-Marayati, Muslim Women’s Organization, Dr. Sameena Rahman, Muslim Youth Leadership Project, Mariame Kaba, Loretta Ross, Shira Hassan, Urooj Arshad, Tarana Burke, Sarah Jawaid, Michelle Gislason, Nadia Khansa.

How do you hold yourself accountable to your values?

I have a process that involves:

- 1) self-reflection,
- 2) seeking input from values-aligned trusted colleagues,
- 3) not giving into a sense of urgency. By doing this process, it reminds me of what my non-negotiables are and what the impact of my decision-making can be.

How do you sustain yourself as you engage in your work? What are the resources, practices, and spaces that support your well-being?

In some ways, being a mom of three has incorporated some daily practices that have created natural pauses and breaks in the day. For example, lunch has been built into my schedule since the beginning because I had to feed the kids, I fed myself too lol. *Releasing myself of ways I “should” be working - especially early on - many people tried to dictate how to do things differently - if I put my kids in full-time day care then I would be*

Our movement family and brilliant Muslim women scholars: those who came before us and those who work alongside us. Women—particularly Black, Indigenous, brown, Muslim, queer, and trans women and femmes—have been at the forefront of this work for centuries. We are indebted to so many of our sisters in the movement for laying the groundwork for us to do what we do. While there are too many to name, we want to extend our sincere gratitude to some of our organizational partners and teachers who have been particularly critical in our learning as we deepened our analysis of the reproductive justice and anti-sexual violence movements.

These amazing thought leaders, many of whom are Muslim—as well as many more not mentioned here— have laid the groundwork for us to do what we do, and for that we will forever be grateful.

Move to End Violence, Muslims for Just Futures (formerly Justice for Muslims Collective), Peaceful Families Project, FACE, KARAMAH, Black Women for Reproductive Justice, Sistersong, Sisterlove, National Asian Pacific American

able to grow my org at a faster rate, etc. I did not give in to those pressures and instead listened to my gut and took my time to be intentional with the way I wanted/needed to do it. There were many days when it felt frustrating, but looking back it is exactly the journey I needed.

Can you share examples of how your organization practices and embodies liberatory leadership?

HEART was co-founded in 2009 in Chicago by Nadiah Mohajir and Ayesha Akhtar, after launching a day-long workshop for Muslim mothers and daughters to learn about puberty, sex, and healthy relationships. More people than they ever imagined signed up for the event, which brought together many diverse women and girls with their incredible stories. Many left this space asking for when the next workshop would be and Nadiah began planting the seeds for what ultimately became HEART.

HEART is a national non-profit with a team of 8 staff located in cities such as: Chicago, Los Angeles, the DMV, Atlanta, NYC, Houston, and more! Below are core concepts that HEART strategically incorporates into our daily work – from our health education to training to research and advocacy initiatives, we strive to actualize these concepts to move towards prevention, intervention, and narrative- and culture-shifting.

We do so by continuously grounding ourselves as Muslims and most impacted people, holding that:

- there is no one way of being Muslim;
- people who are most impacted are the experts and at the center of our work; and
- we must invest in communities of care to both end gendered violence (including but not limited to sexual violence) and advance reproductive justice (which integrates gender justice, racial justice, and economic justice).

We approach this work with humility and acknowledge the limits of our own knowledge and power before God.

We are grounded in the niyyah (intention) that this work is our amanah (divinely entrusted responsibility).

We build upon the work of those who came before us - our beloved Prophets, Companions, and Black, Indigenous, and brown women - who have been at the forefront of this work for centuries and laid the foundation for us to do what we do. We take seriously this divine calling from God to build communities and workplaces that advance reproductive justice and end gendered violence for all. We renew our intention to use the following principles to guide our work:

We are grounded in niyyah (intention) that this work is our amanah (divinely entrusted responsibility). We do this by:

We cultivate ummah (community of belonging &

solidarity)

We lead with *adalah* (justice & equity)

We provide *inaya* (care)

We respond with *rahma* (compassion)

We seek *'ilm* (knowledge) continuously

We promote *ridha* (culture of consent)

We approach our work with *adab* (humility & integrity)

The values document [in this link](#) will go into detail of how we apply these values and are in practice of them.

Are there any challenges that you have experienced as a result of embodying liberatory leadership in a non-profit organization?

So many. I think the language of liberatory leadership is becoming more common to use – it’s “sexy” to say you’re leaning into that. And if you don’t do your own deep inner work, in understanding how your own biases and internalized white supremacy and sexism is showing up in your own leadership, you’ll end up merely weaponizing the language but not actually embodying it.

We’ve had a few painful transitions from our organization for this very reason. These transitions are not easy, and in fact, people are harmed in the process and we’ve had to rebuild with the team every time.

Another challenge is finding the right funders and supporters and board members who are aligned with this type of leadership and approach to work, and approach to disrupting white supremacy and dominant culture that shows up in workplaces.

What gives you hope? What keeps you motivated?

My kids. My team. Sahar and Navila have been my lifeline. The Palestinian resistance and their faith in God. Liberatory stories from Islamic tradition.

What seeds of wisdom would you give to someone who is interested in liberatory leadership but does not know where to start?

To start by knowing yourself and learning about yourself. It sounds cheesy and it has been transformational to my own development as a leader. To find the right teachers. To read, read and read. To take your time. To disrupt the idea that there is only one way.

If you were to lean into your most radical imagination, what does your idea of liberation look and feel like? What is the future that you are building towards?

A world where all people, including Muslims, are safe and exercise self-determination over their reproductive lives in the communities they live, work, and pray in.

