

# Bridging Identities: The Impact of Black Female Muslim Professors on Social Work Education

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## Abstract

This article explores the multifaceted contributions of these educators, emphasizing their impact on cultural competency, social justice, and the fight against systemic discrimination. Through their advocacy, mentorship, and innovative pedagogical approaches, Black Female Muslim Social Work Professors (BFMSWP) social work professors are not just teaching social work; they are transforming it, ensuring that future social workers are better equipped to serve an increasingly diverse and complex society.

**Keywords:** Equity in Education, Social Justice, Inclusive Teaching, Cultural Competency, Classroom Connectedness

## Introduction

Islamic teachings and the historical struggles of Black communities both emphasize the critical importance of social justice and equity, laying foundational principles that resonate across different contexts and eras. Islam, as a faith, underscores the necessity of justice (إدعِ العدل) as a cornerstone of a righteous society, advocating for the protection of the marginalized and the equitable distribution of resources. The Prophet Muhammad's teachings often highlighted the importance of supporting the oppressed and ensuring fair treatment for all, regardless of their social status or ethnicity.

## Islamic Faith and Social Work

Similar to the Islamic faith, social workers also strive to improve the lives of others through social justice and equity [1]. The field of social work is inherently dedicated to promoting justice, equity, and support for marginalized communities. The promotion of such ideas are critically important and impacts the practice, curriculum and outcomes [2]. According to a 2023 NCBI, Black women social workers (BWSWs) make up 22% of all social workers and play a vital role in the lives of vulnerable populations. New Report Provides Insights into New Social Workers' Demographics, Income, and Job Satisfaction > [www.socialworkers.org](http://www.socialworkers.org). Yet, unlike their white counterparts, black social workers are seeking the same justice and equity they attempt to promote in the community. The National Association of Social Workers (2015) held one of few panel discussions from black and Muslim social worker that shared "discuss the intersection of Islam and social work, mental health and social service concerns of the

Muslim community, and how racism and Islamophobia impacts their work and delivery of services. Free and open to all social workers, this forum will provide a space for Muslim social workers to discuss contemporary social issues they are facing in classrooms, practice, and policy. Audience participation, we will center and uplift the voices of Muslims as individuals and social workers by speaking their lived experiences." The Muslim Social Worker ([socialworkers.org](http://socialworkers.org)). To achieve moral imperatives such as justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion, it is crucial that the educators shaping future social workers embody and reflect the diversity of the populations they will serve.

Although a small minority within the larger social work community, Black Female Muslim Social Work Professors (BFMSWP) advocate for systemic change within social work education and practice [3]. Their dual heritage equips them to address a broad spectrum of social justice issues, from economic inequality to racial discrimination and religious intolerance. A cultural approach inspires BIPOC students to view social work as a tool for advocating change, encouraging them to challenge oppressive structures and policies [4]. By incorporating principles from both Islam and Black liberation movements, they provide a robust framework for understanding and addressing social injustices. This dual approach enhances the curriculum by integrating diverse philosophies and strategies for promoting equity [5].

Additionally, BFMSWP engage often and simultaneously in community-based research and activism, bridging the gap between academic theory and practical application, bringing a wealth of knowledge from grassroots movements, civil rights activism, and



faith-based initiatives [6]. This helps demonstrate how social work serve as a mechanism for societal transformation. Such efforts in local and global advocacy serve as a model for students, showing how academic knowledge can be applied to effect real-world change [6]. BFMSWP have unique lived experiences [7]. With that said, BFSWMP brings a unique intersectional perspective to social work education, combining insights from their racial, gender, and religious identities. Contrary to many white social workers, BFMSWP educators bring to the table a wealth of lived experiences and insights that inform their teaching and mentorship that bring an intercultural lens. Their intersectional identities allow for the healthy exploration and dismantling of concepts like systemic oppression, providing students. Additionally, comprehensive understanding of the cultural and social issues they will encounter in their professional lives [7]. Their personal and professional experiences with these forms of discrimination enable them to educate future social workers about the pervasive impact of such biases on mental health and well-being. This is particularly relevant in today's socio-political climate, where these issues are increasingly prominent.

## Integrating Diverse Andrological Approaches

As reflective of the collective culture of both African Americans and Middle Eastern societies [7]. Islamic educational traditions often emphasize communal learning and moral development, while Afrocentric andragogy focus on collective empowerment and the importance of cultural heritage. Blending these approaches with standard social work education, BFSWMP fosters diversity, critical thinking, and moral integrity required for social workers. In conjunction with contemporary social work theories, provides an integrative approach [8]. BFSWMP emphasizes the importance of critical andragogy, which encourages students to critically examine power structures and question dominant narratives. By fostering a critical consciousness, they empower students to become agents of change who are committed to dismantling systemic oppression and promoting social justice. This andragogical approach aligns with the values of social work, which prioritize the well-being and empowerment of marginalized communities. With that in mind, BMFSWP utilizes experiential learning techniques such as service learning, community engagement, and participatory action research. These methods encourage students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings, fostering practical skills and a deeper understanding of community needs [9]. Through a community approach to learning many BMFSWPs provide collaborative projects and hands-on experiences, students learn to appreciate the value of diverse perspectives and develop a more comprehensive approach to social work practice. Also reflective of both Islamic and Black communal cultures, BFSWMP often incorporate storytelling and narrative methodologies into their teaching. Culturally relevant stories are often applied to humanize abstract concepts [10]. This cultural approach is especially meaningful and effective for students BIPOC students. Many researchers have suggested that this approach enhances students' understanding of complex social issues [10]. One such approach is the use of culturally relevant case studies and real-world examples that illustrate intersectional challenges. Illustrations include, differences, in language, representation, and culturally relevant norms. These narratives provide students with practical tools and frameworks for addressing issues such as cultural dissonance, identity conflicts, and systemic barriers [11]. For instance, they might discuss how cultural practices influence family dynamics, coping mechanisms, and access to social services, thereby equipping students to provide more tailored and effective support.

Additionally, BFMSWP engage often and simultaneously in community-based research and activism, while teaching. This dual roll provides a bridge between academic theory and practical application for social work majors. Much of this work is long standing and develops from community need or grassroots movements,

civil rights activism, and/or faith-based initiatives. Such efforts in advocacy serve as a model to demonstrate academic knowledge and its application in the field of social work. BFSWMP often engage in community-based participatory research, which involves collaboration with community members to address local issues. This approach not only empowers communities but also provides students with hands-on experience in applying intersectional frameworks in real-world settings. BFSWM has a powerful mechanism to bridge academic knowledge and practical application in the learning environment [10].

## Best Practices from the View of a Muslim Social Worker

### Incorporate Diverse Perspectives

Ensure the curriculum includes a variety of cultural and religious perspectives, including Islamic views on social justice, ethics, and community service. This helps students appreciate how social work principles are interpreted in different cultural contexts.

### Respect for Religious and Cultural Practices

Create a classroom environment that respects religious diversity, including scheduling assignments or exams in a way that is mindful of religious holidays like Ramadan and Eid.

### Fostering Open Dialogue

Encourage discussions around culture, faith, and identity by creating a safe space for students to share their own experiences. Promote understanding by allowing room for different perspectives, particularly on topics related to race, religion, and gender.

### Ethical Practice and Faith Integration

Teach students how to maintain ethical standards while integrating personal beliefs. As a Muslim social worker, you can model how to navigate faith and professional ethics by demonstrating respectful, compassionate interactions with clients and colleagues.

### Promote Critical Thinking

Encourage students to critically assess how their own values, biases, and backgrounds influence their approach to social work practice. Discuss how Muslim social workers, or those from any faith background, can uphold professional ethics while being true to personal beliefs.

### Tailor Teaching to Diverse Learning Styles

Recognize that students come from varied cultural, religious, and academic backgrounds. Use diverse teaching methods (lectures, discussions, case studies, group work) to engage different learners.

### Empathetic Engagement

Practice empathetic listening and engagement with students, particularly when discussing sensitive topics. Acknowledge students' feelings and experiences, fostering a learning environment that values empathy and emotional intelligence.

### Teach Cross-Cultural Competence

Guide students in developing the skills to work with clients from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Case studies that involve different religious and cultural communities, including Muslim communities, can help students practice cross-cultural competence in social work.

### Encourage Self-Reflection

Assign reflective exercises that help students explore their biases, stereotypes, and assumptions. Self-awareness is key for future social workers to provide equitable and non-judgmental care.



## Focus on Social Justice

Teach students how social work is a vehicle for addressing social justice issues. Explore topics like poverty, racism, discrimination, and gender inequality through the lens of social work, while incorporating Islamic teachings on justice and compassion.

## Empower Students to Advocate for Change

Encourage students to become advocates for marginalized populations. Show how they can use their social work skills to challenge oppressive systems and work towards a more just society. Highlight examples of Muslim social workers who have led advocacy efforts.

## Promote a Respectful Classroom Atmosphere

Set clear expectations for respect and inclusivity in class discussions. Ensure that all voices, especially those from minority groups, are heard and valued.

## Handle Sensitive Topics with Care

When teaching about race, religion, gender, or social inequality, facilitate discussions in a way that encourages open dialogue but avoids marginalizing or alienating students from specific backgrounds.

## Integrate Faith with Teaching Philosophy

Share your faith-based motivations for pursuing social work and teaching, but always balance personal beliefs with professional ethics. This can demonstrate to students how to integrate personal values with professional standards.

## Respect for Diverse Beliefs

While sharing Islamic perspectives on social work, ensure that students understand that they should respect all cultural and religious backgrounds. Encourage discussions that explore multiple faith traditions and worldviews.

## Teach the Application of Theory to Practice

Use real-world examples and case studies to help students understand how to apply social work theories in practice. Include examples of work with Muslim communities or faith-based social work to highlight cultural competence in action.

## Encourage Lifelong Learning

Instill in students the value of continual learning and self-improvement in their social work practice. Show them how to critically assess their own work and seek ongoing professional development, particularly in working with diverse populations.

## Best Practices for Building a “Family” of Trust and Service

### Acceptance as a Foundation

Ensure that every student feels accepted and valued, regardless of their background, beliefs, or experiences. This involves actively listening to students' concerns, validating their experiences, and addressing any issues of bias or exclusion in the classroom.

### Prioritize Classroom Relationships

Create opportunities for students to connect with each other through group work, discussions, and collaborative projects. Encourage open dialogue and mutual support, emphasizing that everyone in the classroom is part of a learning community.

### Seamless Departmental Transitions

Be intentional in how students are transitioned between departments

or services. Provide clear communication, offer support during the transition, and ensure that students understand the resources available to them. Walking with them and talking with them. Establish a network of support that follows students through these transitions, making sure they feel connected and cared for as they navigate their educational journey.

## Create a Culture of Kind Honesty

Encourage transparency and honesty in all classroom interactions. Model this behavior by being open with students about course expectations, feedback, and any challenges that arise.

## Provide New Educational Experiences

Move beyond traditional teaching methods by introducing innovative approaches that engage students in meaningful, real-world applications of their learning. This could include service-learning projects, community-based research, or experiential learning opportunities.

## Avoid the Pipeline to Prison Teaching Practices to Avoid past Educational Trauma

Be conscious of the potential impact of educational practices on marginalized students. Actively work to dismantle systems and practices that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, such as zero-tolerance policies, by promoting restorative justice and inclusive disciplinary practices.

## Never Dismiss the Unique Experiences of Students

Recognize that each student brings a unique set of experiences, especially those from backgrounds that may have faced systemic challenges. Avoid dismissing or minimizing these experiences, and instead, use them as a foundation for deeper learning and understanding within the classroom.

## Culturally Responsive Teaching

Understand the relationship between culture and cognition and the role it plays in the learning process [7]. Be flexible and responsive to the needs of students, particularly those who may require additional support due to personal or systemic challenges. Tailor your teaching approach to accommodate these needs, ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed.

## Conclusion

Although a smaller minority within the larger social work profession, Black Female Muslim Social Worker Professors (BFMSWP) advocate for systemic change within social work education and practice. Most andragogy in use was created through a Eurocentric lens. The unique perspectives of BFSWMP are invaluable to the field of education and more specifically social work education. BFSWMP's legacy is one of resilience, empowerment, and unwavering commitment to social justice. As the social work profession continues to evolve, the voices and contributions of BFSWMP will continue to amplify the voices of those being served by social workers particularly, in vulnerable communities. Such an application will propel future social worker students towards a more inclusive and equitable world. The contributions of BFSWMP are felt in the community, the classroom, and beyond and can act as a catalyst for broader societal change. The presence of BFSWMP in academia enriches the learning experiences of their students while at the same time, influences academic culture and policy. BFSWMP's perspectives are crucial for the ongoing development of the social work profession and underscore the importance of cultural considerations in social work education. BFSWMP legacy is one of resilience, empowerment, and unwavering commitment to social justice.



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