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# RESEARCHER SPOTLIGHT

## CONNECTIONS, CONVERSATIONS, AND COMMUNITY: AISHA KHAN'S RESEARCH JOURNEY

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### AISHA'S AREAS OF EXPERTISE

**Health Policy**

- Barriers to accessing primary healthcare and other essential services.
- How policies and systems can contribute to health inequities.

**Gender-Based Violence**

- Gender-based violence and its impacts.

**Digital and Health Humanities**

- Relationship between digital technologies, health, safety, and accessibility.

**Postcolonialism**

- Postcolonial perspectives to questions of health, inequality, and social systems.

**Refugee/Migrant Studies**

- Systemic barriers affecting migrant and refugee communities.

**Religion Studies**

- Relationship between religion, culture, identity, and social experiences.

For Aisha Khan, research is about making connections; between health and society, policy and lived experience, and research and the people it is intended to serve. As a Research Associate with the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Health Equity and Community Wellbeing (CERC HECW), Khan brings together interests spanning health sciences, health policy and leadership, and the humanities. At the centre of her work is an interest in systems thinking and understanding how

broader social and structural conditions shape people's health and wellbeing.

That perspective began taking shape during her undergraduate degree in Health Sciences at Western University, where a course on the social determinants of health encouraged her to think beyond biomedical approaches to health. Alongside her health sciences courses, Khan explored subjects including women's studies, history, philosophy, and religion studies, reflecting her interest in understanding complex issues from different perspectives.

Despite that curiosity, Khan did not initially see herself pursuing research. Her undergraduate research experiences left her questioning whether it was the right path for her. However, encouragement from a former professor helped her reconsider what an academic career could look like and eventually led her toward graduate studies.

Mentorship has remained important throughout Khan's journey. Teachers, professors, and colleagues have helped her recognize opportunities she did not always see for herself. She eventually pursued two master's degrees: one focused on English Literature at Toronto Metropolitan University and the other on Health Policy and Leadership at Western University. This allowed her to strengthen her understanding of health systems, policy, and leadership and also develop



her writing and explore her interests in the humanities.

Khan joined the CERC HECW in 2024 after receiving a job posting through her master's program. She was hired as a Research Assistant to work on "At What Cost?," a project examining Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) and its potential expansion to people whose sole underlying medical condition is mental illness. Since then, her role has progressed to Research Associate. Working alongside CERC HECW researchers and community partners has allowed her to develop experience in qualitative research, project management, partner engagement, research implementation, and knowledge mobilization.

Today, Khan works across several CERC HECW projects involving different populations and research methods. Her work spans pathways for young people, the experiences of baby boomer women with disabilities transitioning into retirement, and digital risk narratives surrounding artificial intelligence and youth safety.

The variety of this work is one of the aspects she enjoys most about her role. One project may involve interviewing older adults about their experiences, while another involves coordinating partners and planning programming for youth. She also values working with and supervising students, particularly because mentorship has played such an important role in her own academic and professional development. Supporting students as they gain research experience and move toward their goals gives her an opportunity to provide the kind of guidance she benefited from earlier in her journey.

Khan is particularly motivated by research that can have an impact beyond academia. CERC HECW's emphasis on knowledge mobilization

allows research findings to reach broader audiences through community events, public-facing resources, podcasts, plain-language summaries, and engagement with people with lived experiences.

For Khan, producing research is only one part of the process. She is equally interested in what happens after knowledge is generated: whether findings reach decision-makers, recommendations are implemented, and research ultimately contributes to meaningful change. Even when systems are slow to change, she sees value in creating spaces where experiences that have often been overlooked can be discussed and recognized. This commitment to meaningful and actionable research has also influenced the kind of career Khan hopes to build.

When reflecting on her time at the CERC HECW, some of Khan's most meaningful experiences are not necessarily major milestones, but the everyday conversations that take place in the CERC HECW Methodologies Lab. Seeing sparks fly as conversations and ideas take form and the passions she, and her fellow colleagues share are amongst what she finds most valuable at the CERC. Discussions with colleagues about research findings, new ideas, current events, and their different perspectives remind her of academic seminars that fostered her intellectual curiosity.



These conversations also reflect what she values about the CERC HECW: working alongside people who care

deeply about the issues they research and are committed to improving health equity and community wellbeing. While addressing systemic inequities can be challenging and progress can be slow, Khan sees research as an opportunity to continue asking important questions, learning from others, and contributing to a more equitable future.

For Khan, her journey into research has ultimately shown that her varied interests do not need to exist separately. Instead, her background in health sciences, policy, literature, and research allows her to approach complex issues from multiple perspectives and explore how those connections can contribute to meaningful change.