

Muslims in Canada: Gender

Open August 8 - September 6, 2016

When discussing Muslims in Canada, many politicians and commentators in the media bring up the issue of gender. Why is gender so central to discussions of Muslims in Canada? In terms of Mutual Accommodation, questions can be asked regarding whether Muslim women need to be mutually accommodated.

Subject Matter Experts

[Amira Elghawaby](#)

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[Do we know anything about what it means to be a Muslim woman in Canada?](#)

Discussion Overview

When discussing Muslims in Canada, many politicians and commentators in the media bring up the issue of gender. Why is gender so central to discussions of Muslims in Canada? In terms of Mutual Accommodation, questions can be asked regarding whether Muslim women need to be mutually accommodated as a separate group from Muslim men.

[Chris Dummitt](#) • June 28, 2016 at 01:20 pm

Thanks in advance to Amira and Yasmin for starting us off on this conversation. I'm looking forward to learning a lot.

[Hugh Helferty](#) • July 1, 2016 at 11:43 am

This is a much needed discussion to enable more Canadians, myself included, to move beyond a superficial understanding of the issues. Given Canada's growing Muslim population, a deeper appreciation of what it means to be a Muslim woman in Canada is essential to sustaining a harmonious society. I hope that the dialogue will include elements of the Muslim experience in other countries so we can learn from what has worked and failed elsewhere.

[Karen Everett](#) • July 13, 2016 at 02:46 pm

In response to the opening question, I don't think many people know what it means to be a Muslim woman in Canada. As the news item "Learning to Accept Muslim Women's Choices" (found in the resources and news article section) explains, this is not a 'monolithic group' and there are a lot of different experiences. Like Chris and Hugh stated above, I am looking forward to learning and having a deeper understanding.

[Sylvie Leduc](#) • July 14, 2016 at 12:36 pm

Agree that we as a society – men, women and trans-genders - need to have a much more profound understanding of what it means to be a Muslim woman in Canada. I support Hugh's suggestion about including elements of the Muslim experience in other countries with resulting lessons learned. Walking in someone's shoes is a mark of empathy and I will welcome with warmth and openness the experiences that will be shared by Muslim women on this platform and hope to impart what I have learned in my community in Montreal, Qc, where barriers are at times difficult to open I'm sorry to say.

• Post Awarded 5 DR

[ruth harper](#) • July 14, 2016 at 03:42 pm

I think the issue is larger than that of understanding Muslim women. It is an issue about women in general, be they Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish, etc. The barriers and difficulties for women in many cultures in Canada abound.

[Hugh Helferty](#) • July 17, 2016 at 12:40 pm

ruth harper wrote on July 14:

I think the issue is larger than that of understanding Muslim women. It is an issue about women in general, be they Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish, etc. The barriers and difficulties for women in many cultures in Canada abound.

Ruth: Perhaps the discussion of the third question mentioned in the overview, 'Is the experience of Muslim women different from women in other communities?', will enable expanding on the point you are raising. My assumption is that there are both similarities and differences in the experiences. It will be good to hear about what those similarities and differences are.

[ruth harper](#) • July 18, 2016 at 03:35 pm

The experience of Muslim women is different from women in other communities ONLY in the way that experience is always different from one person to the next. The obvious example in Canada of women who experience barriers and difficulties are aboriginal women. Another example is the high rate of aborted female fetuses in certain ethnic groups in Canada. The cultural norms among traditional cultural groups in Canada also exemplify the barriers and difficulties for women.

By helping all women be safe, have access to education, be treated as equals in employment and in the judicial process, by helping all women be independent full members of society, Muslim women are helped.

[William Innes](#) • July 27, 2016 at 10:59 am

Ruth you may be right, and I love your last Para. However, there are a lot of assumptions about the subject which seem to colour average Canadian views of the Muslim community. I hope that we will hear from Muslim women on this site about their views about their roles and the way they relate to the subjects in your last paragraph.

[Heather Nicol](#) • August 5, 2016 at 02:38 pm

True, Muslim women, as well as all women including those from aboriginal communities will certainly be helped by the removal of all barriers and by their treatment as equals. However this is not to say that the experience of Muslim women is different only in so far as individual experiences are different. Muslim women in some communities will undoubtedly face very serious problems as a result of gendered expectations and unequal treatment in ways that many not be obvious to those who are neither Muslim or women or Muslim women living in Canada. To consider this group in terms of 'accommodation' does not detract from the fact that other women may face equally serious obstacles. It does not mean that we cannot also consider the bigger picture and the commonalities of that experience.

[Amira Elghawaby](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • August 8, 2016 at 10:36 am

Good morning everyone, I enjoyed reading the comments made in the pre-discussion. The common thread being the question around whether or not Muslim women fare differently than women in other communities. As Mr. Hugh Helferty pointed out, we will indeed be exploring that issue later on in our discussions... Today, though, to launch our discussion, we start with this question: How do Muslim women view their place in Canada? A good place to start would be to look at the in-depth Environics Survey on Canadian Muslims, released last April (and for which I served as an unpaid study advisor). The national survey was conducted by telephone between last November and January, and included 600 individuals who identified as Muslim, over the age of 18. The survey was stratified to ensure representation by age, gender, and province, and weighted to represent the over country's overall Muslim population - standing at just over a million, according to Statistics Canada's 2011 National Household Survey. Many of the responses provide a fascinating and insightful glimpse at the experiences of Muslims, including the experiences of Muslim women. Sheema Khan summarized the results in an article for the Globe and Mail. Here are 6 key highlights of Ms. Khan's analysis:

1 - Fewer Muslim women share the optimism about Canada felt by their male counterparts. And while both groups believe that their Muslim and Canadian identities are very important, when asked to choose between the two, women choose their Muslim identity at a far higher rate. As a corollary, fewer women than men believe that immigrants should set aside their cultural backgrounds and try to blend into Canadian culture. Furthermore, more female immigrants have indicated that their attachment to Islam has increased since moving to Canada.

2 - Only 33 per cent of Muslim women attend a mosque at least once a week for prayer, compared with 62 per cent of men. The lack of female attendance is not surprising, given that many mosques do little to encourage female participation. Interestingly, a core of about 20 per cent of women (and men) is unhappy with opportunities for women to play leadership roles in Muslim organizations.

3- When it comes to family life, a whopping 90 per cent of Muslim men and women believe the responsibility for caring for the home and children should be shared equally. However, more men believe that the father must be the master in the home, placing the Muslim level of support for family patriarchy roughly equal to that of Canadians in the 1980s. However, today's younger Muslim generation rejects patriarchy at roughly the same level as that of other Canadians.

4 - Muslim women are less optimistic about relations with non-Muslims than men are, the survey found. A greater number worry about the reaction of Canadians toward Muslims, believing that the next generation of Muslims will face more discrimination. They are also more concerned about media portrayal of Muslims, and stereotyping by colleagues and neighbours.

5- ... 42 per cent of Muslim women (compared with 27 per cent of men) say they have experienced some form of discrimination or ill-treatment during the past five years. Such incidents occurred mainly in public places – stores, restaurants, banks, public transit. Of women who experienced xenophobia, 60 per cent said they are identifiably Muslim. This ratio is reversed among the 25 per cent of Muslim women who experience difficulties at border crossings. As a result, women worry far more about discrimination, unemployment and Islamophobia than men.

6- The discrimination concerns are real, as illustrated by employment statistics from the 2011 National Household Survey, in which the unemployment rate of Muslims was 14 per cent, compared with the national average of 7.8 per cent, despite Muslims having high levels of education. The unemployment rate was highest in Quebec (17 per cent), which was double the provincial average. In comparison, the national unemployment rate of visible minorities hovered around 10 per cent. Even Canadian-born Muslims, who graduated from a Canadian institution, fared worse than the national average, with an unemployment rate of 9.5 per cent. One can only imagine the difficulties in finding employment for the 60,000 Muslim women who head a single-parent household.

Lots to think about in all of that. This would be a good place to stop and invite questions on these findings, or anything related. For those who are Muslim in this discussion - do these findings reflect your reality, or that of your family and friends? For those who are not Muslim but keen to explore issues of accommodation of Muslim women in Canadian society, do these findings raise questions for you? Are there other questions not explored in the study?

- Post Awarded 30 DR

[Sahar Zaidi](#) • August 8, 2016 at 02:25 pm

I agree that fewer Muslim women share the same optimism about Canada than their male counterparts because Muslim women have been the most common target of Islamophobia, discrimination and racism. This has been experienced by a large number of visible Muslim women in scary and threatening instances. Less visible Muslim women face discrimination/ racism in subtle situations such as employment, civic participation and education.

The lack of Muslim women in mosques and Islamic centres is by large due to the lack of space, segregation and/ or barriers to equal participation at these institutions.

The Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) released a report about Canadian Muslim women comparing the stats in 2001 to 2011 called "Canadian Muslim Women: A Decade of Change". Some of the results showed that more Muslim women are born in the country as compared to immigrating to Canada, they are highly educated and pursuing streams of education more traditionally thought to be "male professions", largest number of unemployment rates when compared to some of other faith/ ethnic groups and double the national organization percentage for all Canadian women, earn less than non-Muslim females, and a growing number are sole bread winners for their families.

I feel the results are in line with much of what was outlined in the survey about Canadian Muslim women.

[Trent Team \(Discussion Moderator\)](#) • August 8, 2016 at 03:24 pm

The "Survey of Muslims in Canada 2016" and the "Canadian Muslim Women: A Decade of Change" are now posted in the resource section.

- Post Awarded 5 DR

[Joanne Riley](#) • August 10, 2016 at 08:21 pm

Sahar Zaidi wrote on August 8:

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I feel the results are in line with much of what was outlined in the survey about Canadian Muslim women.

Sahar, what would you say needs to happen for the statistics to improve? From comments highlighted by you and Amira, Muslim women face challenges both within the Muslim community - such as a lack of opportunities for leadership - as well as with non-Muslims. Where do you start and how?

[Yasmin Jiwani](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • August 11, 2016 at 03:38 pm

Amira's outline of the survey findings is invaluable in terms of setting the stage as to what needs to be happen in order for the situation to change. Clearly, the discrimination that Muslim women face is itself a part of Islamophobia - what Professor Jazmin Zine has aptly termed "gendered Islamophobia." That Islamophobia focuses on the visible signs of Muslim identity - the clothes, names, places of birth, accents. Perhaps, the place to start is by making such discrimination untenable - that is by publicly condemning it, providing incentives to those businesses and enterprises that actively discourage it and mechanisms (social and institutionalized media) that make it taboo to discriminate against those who look, behave and are different from the 'norm.' Within Muslim communities, I think we need to remember that Muslims are not a monolithic community - there are diversities within and in some Muslim communities, women do take an active leadership role. Nonetheless, as the general statistical profile of Canadian society (as a whole) demonstrates, patriarchal power and tendencies are manifest everywhere - from the boardrooms to academia, down to the service sector. I think we need to look at how other movements seeking social justice have managed to advance their respective causes to figure out how we can change the current situation.

[Yasmin Jiwani](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • August 11, 2016 at 03:51 pm

ruth harper wrote on July 18:

The experience of Muslim women is different from women in other communities ONLY in the way that experience is always different from one person to the next. The obvious example in Canada of women who experience barriers and difficulties are aboriginal women. Another example is the high rate of aborted female fetuses in certain ethnic groups in Canada. The cultural norms among traditional cultural groups in Canada also exemplify the barriers and difficulties for women.

By helping all women be safe, have access to education, be treated as equals in employment and in the judicial process, by helping all women be independent full members of society, Muslim women are helped.

Ruth, what you are pointing to is a common issue - the dichotomy between personal and collective experience, but also the individualization of that experience. The survey results that Amira posted point to a collective issue, not just an individualized personal experience. But if we go back to the famous feminist adage, the personal is political, then any experience becomes political as it is rooted in structural factors. However, that does not mean that all women are same or that because they are women, they have the same experiences. Class, race, religion, social location, age, sexuality, ability/disability compound the situation and experiences cannot be universalized. This is where statistics become really useful in terms of pointing out collectively based differentials. The feminist struggles for equal pay really helped women (of particular class, race and ability) to advance (though they have yet to achieve parity), but these same struggles haven't helped all women. I am reminded here of bell hooks, the renowned black feminist, whose work points out how middle class white women were able to enter the workforce and be rewarded for their labours, while black women served as their domestic helpers making it possible for these women to go to work. Yes, this happened in the US and at a particular time in history but we need to see the parallels that are occurring here and now. In Quebec, and in Montreal, I see Muslim women increasingly used as cheap labour in the garderies (where young children are cared for), even though these women have credentials that are higher than their Quebecoise counterparts.

[Momin Rahman](#) • August 15, 2016 at 10:48 am

I hope this isn't too off topic but I was thinking about the point that we seem not to know enough about the experiences of Muslim women and also how they become the focus of wider concerns about Muslims in general. I think challenging the monolithic view is really central to this but also what strikes me is that dominant cultures seem to need some point of connection to do this and so often this is an individual 'narrative' rather than evidence based research (and of course that irritates me as an academic). This is going on in Britain right now with Nadiya Hussain, a Bangladeshi Brit (like me) who won a TV baking contest. I'm a bit conflicted as to how her story is being used to both critique Islamophobia and racism, but also to push forward a 'normality' of Britishness (we all love the Queen and cakes and are decent people). I'm not sure there are lessons for Canada here because my sense as an immigrant of only 9 years here is that the central Canadian identity 'norm' is more porous than the British one, which is profoundly defined by a colonial sense of superiority (hence its power in the Brexit discourse). Be interesting to see what you all think, here is one of the recent stories: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/aug/14/bake-off-winner-nadiya-hussain-racist-abuse-is-part-of-her-everyday-life>

- Post Awarded 5 DR

[sarah shafiq](#) • August 16, 2016 at 05:24 pm

I wanted to ask how to deal with pervasiveness of the "oppressed Muslim woman" narrative in the cultural industry (fiction, theater, movies etc). I'm from Kitchener and the region has chosen this book: <https://oboc.ca/>. The story is true but the issue is that the stories are written from a particular perspective and there is hegemony of these (true) voices. When natives write, it seems either they themselves are from the elites and represent the privileged perspective (focusing on liberal issues like women's rights, education, gender rights, environmental issues but not issues of poverty and economic hardships). Or their voices are snatched by PR companies and they become the voice of the influential thereby not really criticizing Western economic/political powers and speaking just against local customs/cultures etc. This creates the impression here in the West that all the fault lies at the Muslim cultural level. In addition, of course there is the problem of cultural practices being associated with Islam. Every news item involving Muslims is picked up by our news media however what Christians, Hindus, Buddhists do is not featured as a news item.

- Post Awarded 5 DR

[Amira Elghawaby](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • August 16, 2016 at 05:40 pm

Both Sarah and Momin raise excellent and related points - how to deal with the monolithic view of who Muslim women are, and what they "represent". There's a great website posting that highlights the three common ways that media portray Muslim women

(<http://muslima.globalfundforwomen.org/content/muslimwomeninthedia>)

1 - Appearance overload 2 - Always the victim (speaks to the types of books, films, we are often exposed to - as Sarah highlighted) 3 - All the same

However, I do want to acknowledge that there have been some very strong Muslim women role models in popular culture - particularly in Canada....Little Mosque on the Prairie, for example, had very strong female Muslim characters. There are others, including several diverse representations of young Muslim women in Degrassi: The Next Generation. Is it enough though?

We already know that diversity is all too often lacking in many spheres of our society, and the same is true of pop culture and the media. What are the solutions? How do we help to encourage more diverse stories - and more diverse narratives? How important is this, given general concerns about discrimination and Islamophobia?

- Post Awarded 25 DR

[Yasmin Jiwani](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • August 16, 2016 at 06:46 pm

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contest. I'm a bit conflicted as to how her story is being used to both critique Islamophobia and racism, but also to push forward a 'normality' of Britishness (we all love the Queen and cakes and are decent people). I'm not sure there are lessons for Canada here because my sense as an immigrant of only 9 years here is that the central Canadian identity 'norm' is more porous than the British one, which is profoundly defined by a colonial sense of superiority (hence its power in the Brexit discourse). Be interesting to see what you all think, here is one of the recent stories: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/aug/14/bake-off-winner-nadiya-hussain-racist-abuse-is-part-of-her-everyday-life>

The discourse of exceptionalism is always present where minorities are concerned. She is framed as being exceptional - transcending the horrors of everyday racism and victimization, so this fits in well with the hegemonic notion of being able to overcome all and be a "successful" immigrant. I am not sure if the Canadian "normative" identity is more porous - I think it is more implicit, you don't realize that you don't fit the norm when you transgress its boundaries.

[Yasmin Jiwani](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • August 16, 2016 at 06:49 pm

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So true! This has been an ongoing issue with a few singular voices selected as representatives of an entire culture and community, not to mention religion. The only way out of this quagmire is to ensure that there are as many voices and perspectives present on any given issue. Sadly, those who are in positions of power often prefer the same old recipes for economic rewards!

[William Innes](#) • August 17, 2016 at 09:40 pm

Thanks to both our hosts for some real insights into the views and circumstances of Muslim Women in Canada. I come away with a sense that many of the challenges which Muslim Women face are shared by women in general, and I was really impressed by the engagement of young Muslim women in higher education. However the unique discriminations which Muslim women face must in some way be related to their distinct characteristics as a group. The most obvious of these seems to be their appearance and their willingness to engage with other Canadians; although I imagine the latter is much less a factor with succeeding generations. For the most part I think Canadians are getting used to differing dress, but we need to recognize that face covering is very sensitive for many Canadians — seems not to be open/inclusive — facial expression is seen as key to understanding the reaction of others. It would be helpful if there was a better understanding of why some women chose to cover their faces, and why the practice is consistent with being part of an open and inclusive society. Since it only relates to a small

number of Muslim women, you have to wonder whether in the overall context of discrimination it is worth addressing the issue. Unfortunately it is emotive enough that unresolved it will continue to provide the excuse for much broader discrimination.

[Joanne Riley](#) • August 18, 2016 at 01:17 pm

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We already know that diversity is all too often lacking in many spheres of our society, and the same is true of pop culture and the media. What are the solutions? How do we help to encourage more diverse stories - and more diverse narratives? How important is this, given general concerns about discrimination and Islamophobia?

Amira, what really drives the change - media perception or at the individual level? Or is it a chicken and egg situation? Where would you say we need to enable "grassroots" interactions to happen - ones that will help bring better understanding between different cultures, a shift in perspectives and a collective voice to be heard and reported on by the media? What has been tried? What were the takeaways?

[Amira Elghawaby](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • August 20, 2016 at 07:02 am

William Innes wrote on August 17:

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Thanks for your reflections William. We all know how emotive the issue of the niqab can be. We only have to recall the last federal election to understand how divisive the issue is, even though very few women in Canada wear the face veil. As Carla Power writes in her recent book 'If the Oceans were ink; An Unlikely Friendship and Journey into the Heart of the Quran, "(f)ew garments, if any, have been freighted with more debate than the Muslim veil." As other governments have done, in the West and in the Muslim world, women's clothing became a symbol of liberation or oppression right here in Canada. When the previous Conservative government created a new policy - that proved to be illegal - to ban

face veils from citizenship oaths, it attempted to score cheap political points at the expense of both gender equality (both men and women should be able to choose how they dress) and religious freedoms. The challenge was for Canadians to overcome the definite unpopularity of the practice to recognize that our democracy is built on freedoms - for all, not just those we agree with. Ms Zunera Ishaq, who successfully challenged the government on its policy, simply wanted to practice her democratic rights as anyone else. Unfortunately, there is a long history of claiming to liberate Muslim women by imposing limits on their own agency - in the name of freedom. It's critical that women in niqab speak out. That happened in Canada and that provided a space for women themselves to assert their personhood. And while many Canadians purportedly opposed the practice of face veiling - according to the government's own problematic polling - once it was made clear that women who covered would in fact show their faces for security and identification purposes, many people I spoke to and who wrote to our organization said they didn't see it as a big deal so long as that was the case. I think that greater engagement among people of different backgrounds, world views, and ways of living, will often help dispel overarching myths and stereotypes that do sometimes lead to fear and discrimination.

[Amira Elghawaby](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • August 20, 2016 at 07:14 am

Joanne Riley wrote on August 18:

Amira, what really drives the change - media perception or at the individual level? Or is it a chicken and egg situation? Where would you say we need to enable "grassroots" interactions to happen - ones that will help bring better understanding between different cultures, a shift in perspectives and a collective voice to be heard and reported on by the media? What has been tried? What were the takeaways?

Great questions Joanne. Polling does show that those with favourable views of Islam and Muslims are those who have had some personal contact with someone who is Muslim. So certainly, there does need to be a constant effort to bring people together, to engage and support community building. That often happens - across Canada, many local Canadian Muslim organizations and groups are deeply engaged in their communities - whether helping at food banks, volunteering, raising money for local and national charities, giving blood, etc. The good news stories, as you know, don't always make it into the 24 hour media cycle that is built around conflict and controversy. So grassroots interaction are deeply valuable, but the impact of the media is clear in shaping attitudes and impressions. A recent story in the Halifax Chronicle for example ran a story about Syrian refugee children attacking other children. The story proved to be false, but it had repercussions. One VICE News reporter attended a larger-than-anticipated meeting of right-wing neo-Nazi extremists gathering to oppose immigration, who he reports were spurned on by the article. So there has to be a two-fold approach - linking the grassroots to both: 1/ Canadian Muslim communities must continue to engage locally in their communities and must create relationships with local media so that these stories are shared 2/ When media outlets make mistakes, or frame issues unfairly, Canadians should speak out and request corrections, or request the opportunity to rebut false claims and arguments. We need to increase civic engagement, as well as media engagement, to better reflect the positive impacts Canadian Muslims have in their communities.

[William Innes](#) • August 20, 2016 at 12:21 pm

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Amira — Thanks again for your very thoughtful responses on this subject. You are undoubtedly right that every opportunity needs to be taken to reflect the positive impacts Canadian Muslims are having on their communities; and particularly their impact beyond the Muslim community. Recently the CBC ran stories about a Syrian ice-cream maker and the impact of a Muslim community in the north on a local food bank. These were powerful because they showed the involvement/impact beyond the Muslim community. Regarding the Niquab, I agree that this will become less of an issue as we all become more accustomed to differing cultures; but it could take a while, and in the interim provides the visible excuse for discrimination. Do you think that it is possible for organizations like your own to play a role in creating understanding about the personal choice which some women make and showing that this does not prevent them from playing a positive role as members of the broader Canadian community?

[Gloria Stewart](#) • August 20, 2016 at 12:44 pm

For myself, living in a community with few minorities, I believe that each of us can help change the Islamic women's narrative. I no longer feel that non-Muslims in Canada expect us to explain or condemn the actions of the 0.001% of the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world who terrorize, just as I wouldn't blame Christians for the actions of the KKK. I now feel free to discuss and educate those around me about my faith. Through my words and actions I believe that I can help change opinions, one person at a time. Our religion is one of peace, dignity and individual choice. I am not oppressed in any way, rather Islam grants me my God given rights. Engaging in respectful dialogue, remaining active in my community and demonstrating positive beliefs and values is the way that I can affect change.

[Amira Elghawaby](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • August 24, 2016 at 08:50 am

William Innes wrote on August 20:

Do you think that it is possible for organizations like your own to play a role in creating understanding about the personal choice which some women make and showing that this does not prevent them from playing a positive role as members of the broader Canadian community?

Absolutely William. Part of NCCM's role as a human rights and civil liberties organization, on behalf of Canadian Muslims - and therefore, on behalf of all Canadians - is to educate and inform our fellow neighbours, friends, colleagues, community members about the true realities of Canadian Muslims. Through workshops, webinars, articles, and collaborations with other orgs, we do our best to put

spotlight the contributions of Canadian Muslims. A critical way we do this is through our media engagement training - we have run dozens of media trainings and have trained hundreds of people across Canada to be able to connect with local media in order to share their stories. Media engagement is crucial. So, while NCCM presents a national perspective, we know it's critical that local communities share their local stories. We do our best to nurture storytelling. Through the arts, in fact, we have a greater chance of changing attitudes than almost anywhere else. I wrote about this in the Globe & Mail a few years ago, actually. "This is how outsiders become insiders: by retelling their history, reminding other citizens of their shared experiences and offering their own perspectives," I wrote back then. Recently, the author and commentator Reza Aslan said in a talk here in Canada that "pop culture has the greatest chance of challenging Islamophobia". So we need to see the stories and experiences of Canadian Muslims - including Canadian Muslim women in all their glorious diversity - represented and reflected in our media landscape.

[Olivier Fraysse](#) • August 24, 2016 at 06:57 pm

Seriously, I don't have a damn idea of what it means to be a Muslim woman in Canada. My main fear is that we repeat the same mistakes towards Muslim women than it happens now in Europe, mainly in France, where people want to force the change without understanding the difference. The Muslim women I can meet in my daily life does not seem different from any other women, except the faith. And even there, not sure the difference is so big. I can be wrong.

[Amira Elghawaby](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • September 1, 2016 at 11:27 am

Olivier Fraysse wrote on August 24:

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Hi Oliver! Thanks for your candid reflections! You're right, often the difference is not so big. For example, I'm a Muslim woman who grew up in Canada - but I think of myself as so much more than that one identity. I'm a mom, I'm a professional, I'm a book lover, I'm a runner, I'm a wannabe comedian, etc., etc. I have lots of friends of all faiths and backgrounds, and what makes us friends is our personality traits (and whether or not they laugh at my jokes!). It's interesting that while the world had gotten smaller, the global village, so to speak, that labels seem to have gained more importance for some. Labels are just labels, and while the various aspects of our identities will matter given the situation, I think it's true that at the end of the day, we're all just human.

[Amira Elghawaby](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • September 1, 2016 at 11:39 am

Gloria Stewart wrote on August 20:

For myself, living in a community with few minorities, I believe that each of us can help change the Islamic women's narrative. I no longer feel that non-Muslims in Canada expect us to explain or condemn the actions of the 0.001% of the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world who terrorize, just as I wouldn't blame Christians for the actions of the KKK. I now feel free to discuss and educate those around me about my faith. Through my words and actions I believe that I can help change opinions, one person at a time. Our religion is one of peace, dignity and individual choice. I am not oppressed in any way, rather Islam grants

me my God given rights. Engaging in respectful dialogue, remaining active in my community and demonstrating positive beliefs and values is the way that I can affect change.

Absolutely Gloria! I encourage you to do just that — surveys have shown that people's impressions of Islam and Muslims is much more positive if they know any Muslims in their own life. Our interactions play a critical part in how people perceive our communities....keep it up!

[Yasmin Jiwani](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • September 2, 2016 at 03:05 pm

I echo Amira's comments - that we are all more than one-dimensional beings. However, in coursing through this post and in the very opening of this discussion, the root question is "why" - why are things like Islam, the Niqab or the Hijab so charged? Why is difference construed as threatening when in fact, we need difference to survive. Clearly Islamophobia antedates 9/11 but in recent times, it has become easier for anything Muslim or Islamic or affiliated with cultures who share that faith to assume a heightened charge. ISIS is no excuse for this given that they have killed more Muslims than non-Muslims. In closing, we need to defuse the charge around Islam and recognize it for what it is - an incredibly diverse faith which houses a myriad of interpretations as do all religions of the Book.

How do Muslim women view their place in Canada?

Discussion Overview

Much of the time, when Canadians speak about gender and Muslim Canadians and Islam, the conversation is initiated and dominated by non-Muslims, and often not non-Muslim women. It is not clear if the issues that are central to Muslim women's lives are the same as those discussed in the news media.

[Amira Elghawaby](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • August 8, 2016 at 04:41 pm

Good afternoon!

A special thanks to the whole Canadian Difference team at Trent University and the distinguished Advisory Team for facilitating important conversations about who we are as Canadians as we approach our 150th anniversary! It's an honour for me to take part in this online discussion and offer some insights and reflections, alongside respected academic and activist Yasmin Jiwani, whose work I have long admired.

Today, to launch our discussion, we start with this question: How do Muslim women view their place in Canada? A good place to start would be to look at the in-depth Environics Survey on Canadian Muslims, released last April (and for which I served as an unpaid study advisor). The national survey was conducted by telephone between last November and January, and included 600 individuals who identified as Muslim, over the age of 18. The survey was stratified to ensure representation by age, gender, and province, and weighted to represent the over country's overall Muslim population - standing at just over a million, according to Statistics Canada's 2011 National Household Survey. Many of the responses provide a fascinating and insightful glimpse at the experiences of Muslims, including the experiences of Muslim women. Sheema Khan (also an unpaid consultant on the study) summarized the results in an article for the Globe and Mail. Here are 6 key highlights of Ms. Khan's analysis that can help situate our discussion:

1 - Fewer Muslim women share the optimism about Canada felt by their male counterparts. And while both groups believe that their Muslim and Canadian identities are very important, when asked to choose between the two, women choose their Muslim identity at a far higher rate. As a corollary, fewer women than men believe that immigrants should set aside their cultural backgrounds and try to blend into Canadian culture. Furthermore, more female immigrants have indicated that their attachment to Islam has increased since moving to Canada.

2 - Only 33 per cent of Muslim women attend a mosque at least once a week for prayer, compared with 62 per cent of men. The lack of female attendance is not surprising, given that many mosques do little to encourage female participation. Interestingly, a core of about 20 per cent of women (and men) is unhappy with opportunities for women to play leadership roles in Muslim organizations.

3- When it comes to family life, a whopping 90 per cent of Muslim men and women believe the responsibility for caring for the home and children should be shared equally. However, more men believe that the father must be the master in the home, placing the Muslim level of support for family patriarchy roughly equal to that of Canadians in the 1980s. However, today's younger Muslim generation rejects patriarchy at roughly the same level as that of other Canadians.

4 - Muslim women are less optimistic about relations with non-Muslims than men are, the survey found. A greater number worry about the reaction of Canadians toward Muslims, believing that the next generation of Muslims will face more discrimination. They are also more concerned about media portrayal of Muslims, and stereotyping by colleagues and neighbours.

5- . . . 42 per cent of Muslim women (compared with 27 per cent of men) say they have experienced some form of discrimination or ill-treatment during the past five years. Such incidents occurred mainly in public places – stores, restaurants, banks, public transit. Of women who experienced xenophobia, 60 per cent said they are identifiably Muslim. This ratio is reversed among the 25 per cent of Muslim women who experience difficulties at border crossings. As a result, women worry far more about discrimination, unemployment and Islamophobia than men.

6- The discrimination concerns are real, as illustrated by employment statistics from the 2011 National Household Survey, in which the unemployment rate of Muslims was 14 per cent, compared with the national average of 7.8 per cent, despite Muslims having high levels of education. The unemployment rate was highest in Quebec (17 per cent), which was double the provincial average. In comparison, the national unemployment rate of visible minorities hovered around 10 per cent. Even Canadian-born Muslims, who graduated from a Canadian institution, fared worse than the national average, with an unemployment rate of 9.5 per cent. One can only imagine the difficulties in finding employment for the 60,000 Muslim women who head a single-parent household.

Lots to think about in all of that. This would be a good place to stop and invite questions on these findings, or anything related. For those who are Muslim in this discussion - do these findings reflect your reality, or that of your family and friends? For those who are not Muslim but keen to explore issues of accommodation of Muslim women in Canadian society, do these findings raise questions for you? Are there other questions not explored in the Environics study you would have wanted to ask? Let your comments and questions begin!

[Heather Nicol](#) • August 10, 2016 at 09:47 am

Thank you Amira for starting this discussion and posting these survey results. I am particularly disturbed by the way in which Muslim women face discrimination in employment. As you have stated, this disadvantage in conjunction with the fact that 60,000 Muslim women head single-parent households creates a very difficult situation, on top of everything else. And yet we have seem to be more concerned in Canada with the problems that Muslim women face within a patriarchal Muslim society rather than the ways in which Canadian society itself contributes to the problem. As I non-Muslim woman and an educator I see the need for all of us to work on this issue through terms of education and proactive policies - but first, as you have demonstrated so well in your post, we need to see the problem for what it is.

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[Amira Elghawaby](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • August 11, 2016 at 12:07 pm

Thanks Heather. Absolutely. I find it interesting that you mention that sometimes we in Canada may be more concerned with "patriarchal Muslim society" rather than with the ways in which our own society may contribute to female disenfranchisement. Ironically, within many Muslim families in Canada, young women are encouraged to pursue post-secondary, graduate, and even post-graduate studies and enter the workforce. From the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) report, "Canadian Muslim Women: A Decade of Change 2001-2011" . Here are some interesting findings in the report, regarding education:

"In 2011, there were 369,060 Muslim girls and women 15 years of age and older. Some 56.7 per cent possessed postsecondary diplomas and degrees. Nearly a quarter (24.2 per cent) had completed a high school diploma. Of the 19 per cent that had not completed a certificate, many were still in high school and others were admitted into the country under sponsorship program.

At the postsecondary level, Muslim females choose one of three pathways. Trade and apprenticeship is the least popular. Only 8 per cent with postsecondary education had an apprenticeship or trade certificate. More than a fifth (22.3 per cent) graduated from a community college, a CEGEP or similar institution. A majority, however, aspire to university education. Two in five Muslim females had attained a bachelor's degree. Over 12 per cent had completed a master's degree and 1.7 per cent (3,640) held earned doctorate degrees. There were 6,245 (3 per cent) medical degree holders, including graduates in medicine, dentistry, optometry and veterinary medicine.

Rejecting the patriarchal notion of female education that put limits on what many of their immigrant mothers and grandmothers could study, more and more young Muslim women are 'trespassing into male spheres' of education and opting for specializations that are sought after in the Canadian labour market though they may be frowned upon in some conservative Muslim communities."

So Muslim women are working very hard to contribute positively to our communities, the question then becomes - how can we remove any potential barriers to their participation in the workforce?

[Yasmin Jiwani](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • August 16, 2016 at 06:54 pm

Thank you Amira for your introduction to the issue. For me, the issue is more a matter of why the situation persists. We already know so much more and Muslim women have not been silent - they have been articulating these issues on a variety of platforms using different media to that end. For me, the

central issue is who stands to benefit from this inequality? In other words, how does the representation of the oppressed Muslim woman gain currency in ideological terms to legitimize particular kinds of intervention? This question also intersects with the other discussion thread in significant ways.

Why are women so symbolically central to Islamophobia?

Discussion Overview

Recent examples of Islamophobia in Canadian politics have focused on issues of barbaric cultural practices and the right to wear the niqab. In both cases, the larger context of these discussions position women as victims of their religion (and men) and not as victims of a crime or as someone asserting their right to dress how they want.

[Amira Elghawaby](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • August 24, 2016 at 08:56 am

I'm happy to get this new thread rolling. And I'll do it in one word: burkini. Yes, I'll go there. Just last night I came across a story in the Guardian newspaper which depicted police men standing over a woman on a beach and forcing her to remove her long blouse. The image highlights why women are so symbolically central to Islamophobia. Women who cover in some way are visibly Muslim - therefore fears, rational or irrational, about violent extremism or political Islam - are often superimposed on the image of the veiled Muslim woman. To undress her, to assault her, to harrass her, is perceived as an attack on all that is considered wrong about the faith. Whereas the woman's own agency, her own freedom of choice, freedom of expression, is completely erased. Done so in the name of progress, secularism, even democracy. How can we challenge such direct attacks on women? How can we separate legitimate questions and critiques about women's rights, or violent extremism, from state sponsored infringements on human rights and civil liberties?

[William Innes](#) • August 27, 2016 at 11:53 am

Amira Elghawaby wrote on August 24:

I'm happy to get this new thread rolling. And I'll do it in one word: burkini. Yes, I'll go there. Just last night I came across a story in the Guardian newspaper which depicted police men standing over a woman on a beach and forcing her to remove her long blouse. The image highlights why women are so symbolically central to Islamophobia. Women who cover in some way are visibly Muslim - therefore fears, rational or irrational, about violent extremism or political Islam - are often superimposed on the image of the veiled Muslim woman. To undress her, to assault her, to harrass her, is perceived as an attack on all that is considered wrong about the faith. Whereas the woman's own agency, her own freedom of choice, freedom of expression, is completely erased. Done so in the name of progress, secularism, even democracy. How can we challenge such direct attacks on women? How can we separate legitimate questions and critiques about women's rights, or violent extremism, from state sponsored infringements on human rights and civil liberties?

Bravo Amira! The Burkini affair had taken the question of dress to the level of the absurd; were not so frightening. If we were back in 1900 the Burkini would be the only acceptable form of bathing dress! There is however a difficult reality that it is too easy to associate the way women dress as visible symbols of a violent minority of Muslims; particularly if the dress seems to express separation from the rest of society. Somehow we need to create an alternative public perception of the positive role which Muslim women who chose to cover play in broader Canadian society. We need more of your articulate

advocacy for the contributions of Muslim women — and more voices from the Muslim community asserting the positive impact of the Muslim community as a whole. Also I wonder whether non-Muslim organization are or could be enlisted to express supportive views?

[Amira Elghawaby](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • September 1, 2016 at 10:11 am

William Innes wrote on August 27:

Somehow we need to create an alternative public perception of the positive role which Muslim women who chose to cover play in broader Canadian society. We need more of your articulate advocacy for the contributions of Muslim women — and more voices from the Muslim community asserting the positive impact of the Muslim community as a whole. Also I wonder whether non-Muslim organization are or could be enlisted to express supportive views?

Thanks so much William. Your suggestion about creating an alternative public perception of the positive roles of Muslim women is a common theme in these discussions. Clearly we need to do more to encourage storytelling, and encourage ourselves to spotlight, the contributions of Muslim women. Because we don't have to look very far - whether at the recent RIO Olympics, or in the federal government (where there are numerous Canadian Muslim female MPs and the first ever Canadian Muslim Cabinet Minister), to see that Muslim women around the world and in Canada are shaping, contributing, to our communities in a positive way. And of course, there is role to play for all organizations, and fellow Canadians, in speaking up and standing in solidarity with Canadian Muslim women. At NCCM, for example, we conduct storytelling workshops, to help encourage community members to share their experiences with the wider public. There are many such other initiatives around the country - and we would hope that educators as well would be working to encourage students of all backgrounds to confidently express themselves. We hope this will help change negative attitudes, and influence greater understanding!

[Yasmin Jiwani](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • September 2, 2016 at 03:12 pm

The Burkini affair also gestures to a long historical pattern. When colonial powers invaded many countries which were governed by Muslims, they instituted Western dress as a way of "developing" the colonized. Access to women was central in this process - both to the male rulers and in the ideological sense of making them resemble the colonizers. France's own history reveals numerous examples of this - the colonization of Algeria being one example that many have written about. Sadly, much of that history tends to be absent in existing accounts.

[Is the experience of Muslim women different from women in other communities?](#)

Discussion Overview

When discussing the treatment of women in the context of immigration, it seems the media and politicians single out Muslims more so than other immigrant groups. Why? Do other immigrant communities have gender inequalities? If so, why are they not discussed in the same way? What are some of the similarities and differences between these groups? Why does it matter?

[Heather Nicol](#) • August 25, 2016 at 03:30 pm

Hi Yasmin and Amira- Thank you for starting us on this discussion. I agree that the media and politicians do single out Muslim women more so than other immigrant groups. The case of the 'burkini' in France is

one perfect example. One can appreciate the sensitivities in a European country that has a recent encounter with violent extremism, but nonetheless to impose a general anxiety about extremism upon women who chose to wear a bathing costume which conforms to their Muslim values makes little sense. So it is important to begin a conversation about these difficult but important questions - for example where are Muslim women celebrated and successful? How does this challenge the stereotypes?

[Amira Elghawaby](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • September 1, 2016 at 10:03 am

Heather Nicol wrote on August 25:

Hi Yasmin and Amira- Thank you for starting us on this discussion. I agree that the media and politicians do single out Muslim women more so than other immigrant groups. The case of the 'burkini' in France is one perfect example. One can appreciate the sensitivities in a European country that has a recent encounter with violent extremism, but nonetheless to impose a general anxiety about extremism upon women who chose to wear a bathing costume which conforms to their Muslim values makes little sense. So it is important to begin a conversation about these difficult but important questions - for example where are Muslim women celebrated and successful? How does this challenge the stereotypes?

Thanks Heather for your comment and question. I think there are many example of Muslim women in Canada and elsewhere who are successful - but perhaps not celebrated! I agree that celebrating our heroines would help to shatter the stereotypes. Interestingly, in England, and which was brought up by another participant, a Muslim woman named Nadiya Hussain who had the Great British Bake-Off helped to just that! There are also other Muslim women - recently seen at the RIO Olympics, in hijab and not in hijab, who nonetheless helped to highlight the amazing achievements that are evident in our communities. It comes down to storytelling and storysharing and this is what I try to encourage Canadian Muslims to do. I wrote about that in a Globe and Mail piece years ago, titled "Searching for Muslims to tell their stories". The good news, is that our youth are doing far better in embracing new and emerging tools to engage with each other and with wider audiences to share their experiences. This will go a long way in piercing the Islamophobia bubble. I hope.