# DISCRIMINATION EXPERIENCED BY MUSLIMS IN ONTARIO

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## ABSTRACT

Although Muslims have been living for decades in Canada, they became highly visible in the public eye after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Over the past decade, they have experienced increased scrutiny, negative stereotyping and discrimination as a result of pre-existing perceptions of Muslims as "different" from the rest of Canadian society, along with negative associations of their communities with violence and terrorism. Based on preliminary analysis of the data from a community research study, this paper discusses Islamophobia in Ontario society as part of the everyday experiences of Muslims living in Toronto and the GTA.

## INTRODUCTION

Muslims have become highly visible in the public eye since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The fear evoked by the attacks re-ignited existing perceptions of Muslims as "different" and reinforced their perceived connection to violence and terrorism (Razack, 2008). Instead of dying down over the past decade, the questioning of their belonging and position as members of society and as citizens has continued, reinforced by concerns about "homegrown terrorism" stemming from the Toronto 18 case. It is demonstrated through the heightened scrutiny, negative stereotyping and experiences of discrimination reported by many Muslim and Arab Canadians. These experiences are socially-situated and contextualized. Although they may not be the basis of legal action, they represent an important element of the social context within which we live and how we think about the equality of human rights for all Canadians. This paper aims to make a contribution by reflecting critically on the discrimination experienced by Muslims in Ontario as part of a discussion on human rights and the future of Canadian society.

## WHO ARE THE MUSLIMS IN CANADA?

According to 2010 data, there are 940,000 Muslims in Canada, accounting for 2.8% of the total population (Pew, 2011). The Muslim population in Canada has increased exponentially in the last 20 years, driven primarily by immigration. It is expected to increase to 2.7 million by 2030, or a projected 6.6% of the total population (Pew, 2011). According to an Environics survey on Canadian Muslims in 2006, about 60% of all Muslims in Canada live in Ontario (Adams, 2007). Although census data from Statistics Canada is based on the 2001 census, it gives us some idea of the general characteristics of the Canadian Muslim population and the changes over time. In 2001, the Canadian Muslim population was 579,645. Most of it (352,525) was concentrated in Ontario and almost half (254,110) lived in Toronto (Statistics Canada 2003). About 85% of the Muslim population in 2001 considered themselves a visible minority (Selby).

## COMMUNITY RESEARCH STUDY

This paper draws on interviews conducted as part of an ongoing qualitative, community-based research study with Muslims. The study focuses on Muslim adults from various racial, ethnic and class backgrounds and currently living in different neighborhoods and areas in Toronto and the GTA. Participants included both people who were born and raised in Canada, as well as immigrants who had come to Canada as spouses or to work or study. This study looks at their experiences as Muslims living globally in the post 9/11, war on terror socio-political context, but locally as members of their communities and neighborhoods in Toronto/GTA, Ontario and in Canada. This paper is based on a preliminary analysis of the data. Given the diversity of Muslims who live in Ontario, the views of these study participants should not be generalized to the entire population.

## ISLAMOPHOBIA

In contemporary usage, the term "Islamophobia" dates from the 1990s. The British Runnymede Report of 1997, titled *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, defined Islamophobia as "the dread, hatred, hostility towards Islam and Muslims perpetrated by a series of closed views that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims" (Kalin, 2011, p. 8). After 9/11, the term was used in a 2002 report published by the European Monitoring Centre on Xenophobia and Racism (EUMC), documenting incidents of violence and discrimination against Muslims in Europe (Cesari, 2011, p. 21). Although contested, the word has come to refer to both anti-Muslim (group of people) and anti-Islam (the religion) sentiments. These may overlap with racism, xenophobia, anti-religious and anti-immigrant views as well (Cesari, 2011, p. 24). Islamophobia does not stem only from the events of 9/11, but is part of the pre-existing ways in which Muslims are perceived as "different" from the larger society.

## ISLAMOPHOBIA IN CANADA

Community surveys, focus groups and polls indicate that many Muslims feel there is discrimination against them in Canada after 9/11 (Helly, 2004; CAIR-CAN, 2002; Adams, 2007). Within the larger population, a recent poll by Ipsos Reid found that 60% of people surveyed felt there was increased discrimination against Muslims, in comparison to ten years ago (Chung, 2011). In another study conducted by the Association of Canadian Studies in 2011, less than half, 43 percent of the 2,345 people polled, expressed "very positive" or "somewhat positive" perceptions of Muslims (Boswell, 2011). Incidents such as the Kadri case, where a niqabi Muslim woman was attacked at a Mississauga mall (CBC News, 2011) only serve to highlight the hostility that is directed towards Muslims in Canadian society. While the media often covers the most prominent cases, Islamophobia can take much more subtle forms expressed in the ways that people relate to Muslims in their workplaces and in society. Without minimizing the severity of the cases that do make into the media, this paper focuses on the latter as a way to broaden and contextualize how Islamophobia is present in Ontario society.

## RESULTS

As Canadian Muslims living in Ontario, most respondents expressed positive views about their rights and freedoms to practice their religious beliefs. They viewed it as an important element of being Canadian. While some mentioned specifically the provisions of the Canadian *Charter* or the Ontario *Human Rights Code* that protected their religious rights, most people spoke generally about it. With regard to school policies on religious accommodation for Muslim students involving religious holidays, fasting or prayers, people also had positive views about the current provisions. Some of the respondents had been involved for the last 10 or 15 years with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) as schoolteachers, educators or administrators and had worked towards the creation and implementation of these policies.

Despite these positive views of the application of laws and policies, respondents felt there were widespread negative social attitudes and perceptions about Islam and Muslims in Canadian society. Many spoke about the predominance of negative perceptions of Muslims and their association with violence and terrorism. They believed that people's ignorance and these negative views fed the perception that the entire Muslim community was the same. "Unfortunately it tends to be, everybody gets tarred with the same brush as the old saying goes. Right?" said a Muslim woman in her 60s who lives in Toronto. Furthermore, Muslims felt they were deemed collectively responsible for explaining or justifying the differences between them and terrorists/violence if they were going to challenge these assumptions. It involves a balancing act, as one Muslim woman in her 30s from Mississauga, said. "So to kind of have to explain their behaviors or their choices is – I won't say its not fair, it is what it is. But…you almost have to explain to people that you're different."

Being "different" was experienced more concretely by Muslim women who wore the hijab. While most women who wore the hijab had not had any negative experiences, a few were targets of negative comments in public spaces. In one example, a young Muslim woman in her 30s asked for directions on the GO train of fellow passengers, a middle-aged, white man and his wife. His wife started yelling at her and making negative comments about Muslims. Although her husband seemed apologetic, he didn't say anything to stop her. In another instance, an elderly, white woman at a shopping mall told a Muslim woman (in her 40s) to "go back where you came from."

Respondents also felt "different" as a result of living with a sense of collective scrutiny which engendered a feeling of self-consciousness. The study participants were aware of how their actions and words as individuals would be seen by others who already held negative views about their communities. This can have a disturbing, silencing effect. A Muslim woman in her 30s who works in a public high school in Mississauga gave an example of being in a staff meeting where some of her colleagues were joking about a Muslim student in their class, saying, "I wonder if he's a terrorist." She wanted to say something, but also felt uncomfortable challenging them. "It was like this double-edged sword thing where its like I want to speak up because

I want to tell them they're wrong. But its actually quite challenging changing their perceptions." She also worried that if she spoke up, they would associate her with terrorism too. "I feel uncomfortable because its like are you supporting that then, if you're defending it? Do you support terrorism, you know?" Another respondent, a Muslim man of Pakistani origin who works for the provincial government, put it much more succinctly. "A white person may say one thing. But if a brown person or a Muslim says the same thing, it will be taken in a different context."

His comment highlights another theme that emerged from participants' interviews. Anti-Muslim views were sometimes mixed together with anti-immigrant and/or racial and ethnic-based prejudice and bias. One respondent, a Muslim schoolteacher in Toronto, wore a shalwar kameez to school one day as part of a class project on India. Another teacher made a negative comment, comparing her to South Asian immigrant women. "Uh! You look just like them! Like nice suit and crappy runners [sneakers]. That's how they go shopping, you know." In recounting the incident to the interviewer, the respondent said, "I think she [the teacher] meant anybody in shalwar kameez. And runners. So it could have been them Muslims, but I think it was probably them immigrants. And I said to her, well I am Muslim. And I wear shalwar kameez a lot." In fact, the respondent was a white Muslim woman married to a South Asian man. The teacher's comment illustrates the overlapping of categories of religion, race, gender and ethnicity into a singular negative perception of a Muslim.

One of the implications of being seen as "different" was a feeling of not belonging. While some study participants who were immigrants to Canada felt that they would always be perceived as not quite belonging in Canadian society, other participants who were born and raised here also felt the same way, based on the perceptions of the society around them. "Its unfortunate people don't see us as being Canadians. Because we're a visible minority," said a 32-year old Muslim woman of South Asian origin from Mississauga. Another study participant, a young Muslim woman in her late 20s who was born and raised in Canada and currently lived in Markham, worried about how her young daughter would cope with the comments and criticisms about Muslims in society when she was older. She worried that her daughter would still be perceived negatively as "not belonging", despite being a second-generation Canadian Muslim. Her concern raises questions about inter-generational effects of the current social context for Muslims.

As a response to the Islamophobia in Canadian society, many people spoke of the importance of portraying themselves and their communities as Canadians and as Muslims in positive ways in their everyday social interactions. They stressed being involved and engaged with other groups and communities, taking the opportunity to speak up and to dispel stereotypes through their actions as individuals. Most of them were highly involved in their local communities currently, some in interfaith work, some with local volunteer groups, and others through their professional roles as educators. As one Muslim woman put it, "That's why you have to go out and you have to speak and you have to talk. And those people who can write need to write. And say, just because I'm Muslim doesn't make me a terrorist. Just because I'm a woman doesn't make me a Muslim who can't speak."

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

These preliminary results of this community research study show us that Islamophobic social attitudes and views are present in Ontario society in many ways which do not always make into the media spotlight. The social implications of these results are disturbing because they can contribute to silencing, marginalization or exclusion of Canadian Muslims if they are seen as not quite belonging or if they always have to justify and explain themselves in ways which other Canadians are not expected to do so. Furthermore, while the conflation of categories of Muslim with racialized minority and/or immigrants may reflect socio-demographic changes in Canadian society, it also reflects the ways in which different kinds of discrimination may overlap. This reinforces negative views of Canadian Muslims, leading to social divisions which are detrimental to social cohesion.

Based on these preliminary results, there are several suggestions for countering anti-Muslim discrimination in Ontario society. First, the government should continue to support the protection of religious rights and freedoms of Canadian Muslims under the law. Second, in the realm of education, it is important for schools and for the Ontario government to continue to support diversity and equity education, including hiring Muslim teachers and educators who reflect the increasing number of Canadian Muslim schoolchildren. This may also help address negative effects on future generations. Lastly, in order to counter negative perceptions of Canadian Muslims as a distinct minority group, it important to support inter-community initiatives which foster better social relations among *all* Canadians and which build social cohesion.

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**A BIT OF HISTORY...**

*Professor urges legal action*

"This prejudice, like all others, will break down only when the two groups take part in interaction. What is needed is a change in relationship, and to attain that, the laws can and must be used."

Source: Professor Everett W. Bovard, University of Toronto, as quoted in the Globe and Mail, November 1, 1954