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# Violence in the Lives of Muslim Girls and Women in Canada

## Symposium Discussion Paper

Written by Krista Melanie Riley  
Doctoral Student, Communication Studies, Concordia University



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*Violence in the Lives of Muslim Girls and Women in Canada:  
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## **Violence in the Lives of Muslim Girls and Women in Canada**

The kinds of violence that Muslim girls and women may face – whether in Canada or elsewhere – are often portrayed in Western media with images of honour killings, forced veiling, and other forms of violence committed by their male family and community members. Islam (usually mediated through images of aggressive Muslim men) comes to be seen as violent and oppressive, especially to girls, who face imminent risk of “death by culture,” whether because of domestic violence or even the supposed dangers of headscarves in sporting events (Zine, 2009b). Although religion can indeed be used to justify violence, the multiple other forms of violence that Muslim girls and women in Canada face indicate that to understand the violence in their lives in meaningful ways calls for an analysis that goes beyond only looking at Islam and at Muslims. In other words, given the violence that Muslim girls and women face based on racism, Islamophobia, poverty, and other factors, it would be both inaccurate and inadequate to confine an analysis of the sites and forms of this violence only to Islam or to Muslim cultures.

This paper represents an attempt to look at some of the sources of violence in the lives of Muslim girls and women in Canada, using an analysis of interlocking forms of oppression, and taking into account violence based on race, gender, religion, class, disability, sexual orientation, immigration status, and other issues. Based on a survey of relevant literature related to Muslim communities, and to racialised and immigrant communities that face similar forms of violence, this research attempts to identify some of the main sites of violence that Muslim girls and women face, including families, ethnocultural communities, the wider Canadian society, schools, the healthcare system, the immigration system, and the workforce. The paper will conclude with a look at some of the proposed responses to this violence, as well as possible directions for future research.

### **Background: Muslim Women in Canada**

The 2006 census showed that there were 842 200 Muslims living in Canada (Adams, 2007, p. 6). The majority of these live in Ontario; together, Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia, and Alberta are home to 98% of Canada’s Muslim population, with nearly all of this population located in and around urban centres, primarily in the Toronto and Montreal areas, but also in Vancouver, Ottawa, and Calgary (Hamdani, 2004, pp. 2-3). Muslims are present, in smaller numbers, in all other provinces of the country as well. The majority of Muslims in Canada

identify as South Asian, or as Middle Eastern, West Asian, or North African (Hamdani, 2004, p. 4). The countries of origin of Canada's Muslims varies significantly across regions: in Ontario, the main countries of birth of the Muslim population are Pakistan, Canada, Somalia and Bangladesh; in Quebec, they are Morocco, Algeria, and other African countries; and in western Canada, the Muslim populations come primarily from Iran, Canada, and Afghanistan (Adams, 2007, p. 8). A number of other countries of origin, from all areas of the world, are also represented among Canada's Muslims; according to one estimate, "Muslims in Canada originate from more than eighty-five nations and comprise dozens of ethno-racial and linguistic groups" (Moghissi, Rahnema & Goodman, 2009, p. 84). A survey conducted in 2007 found that the mean age of Muslims in Canada is 36.8 years (compared to 46.9 years for the general population), and that Canadian Muslims, both male and female, are more likely than the overall population to have completed one or more university degrees (Adams, 2007, pp. 11-12).

The statistics mentioned above give some sense of who Canada's Muslims are, where they are from, and where they live; even in this limited depiction of Canada's Muslim population, it is evident that there is a high degree of diversity among Muslims in Canada. It follows that to define the category of "Muslim girls and women" on which this paper is focused is not a straightforward task, and perhaps even less so in a diasporic context where Islam is often racialised, and functions as more than simply a religious identity. As Hojabri has remarked with regards to her own research, "It is crucial to note that for all these women, whether or not they consider themselves Muslims, practicing Muslims or not Muslims at all, Islamic identity came into play particularly, and sometimes solely, in connection and interaction with the larger society" (quoted in Dossa, 2009, p. 148). In other words, the diasporic contexts where many Muslims in Canada find themselves, along with the suspicion that is often directed at communities and individuals seen as Muslim, strongly affects their relationships with the category of "Muslim." Indeed, as Sherene Razack (2008) has described, forms of race thinking that inscribe particular ideas about inherent civilizational clashes between Muslims and the West can construct the idea of "Muslim" as a racialised or ethnic designation, with individual religious affiliation not necessarily having much relevance for who is seen as "Muslim" and who is not. In such a climate, some people might actively take on the label despite not having any religious connection to it, and others who disavow it might still be seen as such from the outside and thus face similar challenges to those who embrace their Muslim identities. On the other hand,

Muslims who are white or of ethnic backgrounds less commonly associated with Islam may relate less to some of the cultural and racial identities associated with Muslims, and possibly with some of the challenges described in this paper, despite their personal identification with Islam. Widely varying experiences of immigration, sexual orientation, disability, economic status, and other factors further complicate the meaning of what it is to be a Muslim girl or woman.

All of this is to say that any attempt to talk about violence in the lives of Muslim girls and women in Canada requires an acknowledgement of the complexity of determining which issues are considered “Muslim issues,” and which experiences are relevant. To focus too narrowly on only those forms of violence that can be directly traced to Islam or Muslim identity would erase the complexity of the forms of violence that Muslim women face. At the same time, a broad focus will necessarily exclude some people, and risks reinforcing certain stereotypes about who Muslims are, where they come from, and what their lives in Canada are like. This paper, therefore, will look not only at literature related to Muslims specifically, but also at literature related to, for example, experiences of immigration and racialisation, with an acknowledgement that none of this will capture fully the range of Muslim experiences in Canada. The intention here is to present a more nuanced picture of the multiple social locations of Muslims in Canada, and the diverse range of identities that, along with their Muslimness, have influence in their lives. Given this context, it should be emphasised that not all Muslim girls and women will see themselves reflected in all of the issues raised within this paper, and that there are many forms of violence that some Muslim girls and women may face that are not discussed here. With these considerations in mind, this paper presents an overview of some of the main forms and sites of violence that Muslim women and girls face, without collapsing the entire category of “Muslim girls and women” into one monolithic experience.

It is also important to acknowledge that, whatever the source of the violence that some Muslim girls and women may be facing, it should not be assumed that violence is the only reality for Muslim women. Although this paper seeks to expand the conventional stereotypes of Muslim women experiencing violence at the hands of Muslim men, the goal is not simply to replace one form of victimisation with another (or with multiple forms of victimisation instead of a single one), with the result of continuing to portray Muslim women only ever as people facing some form of violence, whether based on gender, race, or other factors. In other words, there is a risk here of overstating the predominance of violence in the Muslim experience and reifying the

monolithic image of Muslim women as victims; while the discussion here is indeed about violence in the lives of Muslim girls and women, it should not be assumed to be a comprehensive picture of any other aspects of these lives, and nor should it serve only to inspire new ways of thinking about how to save Muslim women. Moreover, it should not serve to paint Muslim women and girls as helpless in the face of the violence that they face; on the contrary, those facing violence often express agency and resistance in a number of ways.

### **Defining Violence**

It is important to clarify what is meant by “violence” in the context of this project. As Jiwani (2006) argues, common-sense definitions of violence often tend to ignore the structural and systemic forms of violence that operate in people’s lives. As she explains,

Dictionary definitions of violence embrace its physical, psychological, and discursive dimensions and underline the use of force and the abuse of power inherent in all forms of violence. What they fail to capture are the levels at which violence occurs and the differential treatment of various kinds of violence. Violence occurs within intimate relationships, between peers, at the societal level, within institutions, and within and between states. (Jiwani, 2006, p. 7)

Jiwani proposes instead a definition of violence that “encompasses the spectrum of coercive, physical, and institutional power – in other words, it subsumes the very character, instruments, and goals of domination” (p. 4). Following this lead, this paper will consider violence not only from within an interpersonal context, or as solely physical aggression, but rather as something that is also embedded in structures and institutions. Such a definition allows us to understand violence against Muslim women and girls in ways that reflect the complexity of such forms of violence, which may span from interpersonal acts of gendered or racial violence to institutional violence within the immigration systems and the structural violence of poverty and economic marginalisation.

In addition to this, it is essential to acknowledge that there are always multiple systems of power at play simultaneously, not simply adding to each other, but also reinforcing and sustaining each other. Although these multiple factors are often captured through language of intersectionality, which acknowledges the presence of multiple identities and forms of violence existing simultaneously, Razack’s (2005) use of the word “interlocking” instead puts the

emphasis on the ways that these systems do not simply cross paths but actually work together. She writes,

I use the word interlocking rather than intersecting to describe how the systems of oppression are connected. Intersecting remains a word that describes discrete systems whose paths cross. I suggest that the systems *are* each other and that they give content to each other. While one system (here it is white supremacy) provides the entry point for the discussion (language is after all successive), what is immediately evident as one pursues how white supremacy is embodied and enacted in the everyday is that individuals come to know themselves within masculinity and femininity... An interlocking approach requires that we keep several balls in the air at once, striving to overcome the successive process forced upon us by language and focusing on the ways in which bodies express social hierarchies of power. (p. 343)

In the context of this paper, “Muslim” as a category already contains multiple meanings, including religion, ethnicity, and race, and the focus on girls and women puts emphasis on the gendered dimensions of this identity. An interlocking analysis looks critically at the ways that these multiple facets of identity, along with others, come to exist together; more to the point, it looks at the ways that forms of oppression or violence based on race, gender, religion, and other factors work alongside and through each other, rather than simply happening to exist simultaneously but independently. The gendered nature of Islamophobia, in which Muslim women are commonly portrayed as oppressed because of their clothing, is one simple example of the ways that cultural racism and sexism build on one another. In this case, the two systems of oppression interlock, affecting Muslim women in ways that are distinct, both from the ways that Islamophobia affects men, and from the ways that sexism affects non-Muslim women, and therefore cannot simply be understood as additive, the sum of being a Muslim plus being a woman. Zine’s (2009a) research on homelessness provides another illustrative example of the ways that multiple forms of oppression can interlock:

The service providers interviewed for this study affirmed that all of the issues related to housing and homelessness were experienced in a more pronounced way by women, particularly women already marginalized by race, poverty, and language barriers. Sexual harassment and abuse sometimes involved landlords taking advantage of single women. Women in Latin American and Muslim communities must therefore contend

with the barriers associated with their gender as well as other forms of social difference, such as race and class that lead to multiple marginalities. Meanwhile, single mothers face multiple burdens as providers of shelter and support for families. (Zine, 2009a)

An interlocking framework also allows us to take into account other factors – for example, sexual orientation, disability, or immigration status – without needing to identify which of these is “more” responsible for the violence facing any individual woman, acknowledging instead the ways that they all work together.

What follows is a mapping of a number of sites in which Muslim women and girls may experience forms of violence based on gender, race, class, ability, immigration status, and other factors, at interpersonal and at wider systemic levels. While this examination cannot be said to be exhaustive, it identifies some of the ways that these forms of violence come together and enact themselves in the lives of Muslim women and girls.

### **Family and Religious and Cultural Communities**

In talking about a community that is already commonly stereotyped as violent, it can be difficult to talk about violence from within the community without reinforcing such stereotypes. And yet, families and religious communities do represent sites of violence for some Muslim women and girls; the need here is not to ignore this reality, but to talk about it in ways that complicate ideas of Muslim communities as inherently violent and oppressive, with no attention to other systemic factors or to the possibilities for change and diversity within Muslim families and communities. Three points are relevant here before continuing: the first is that, as will be discussed in more detail in later sections of the paper, the violence that Muslim women might face comes not only from their Muslim families and communities, and the second is that even the violence that occurs within these communities cannot necessarily be attributed only to their Muslimness or to their culture. Finally, although the focus here is on Muslim families because of the topic of this research, this should not be taken as an indication that Muslim families are uniquely violent, or more violent than other communities.

Haque (2010), for example, writes about how the murder of Aqsa Parvez, a teenager killed by her father in 2007, was overwhelmingly discussed in the media as “an outcome of her father’s Muslim culture and religious values” (p. 88). Haque writes that the strongest counter-narrative to this, expressed by some Muslim organisations and women’s shelters, was that this

was a case of domestic violence, an instance of gendered violence that is pervasive in any culture (pp. 88-89). Although she affirms the attractiveness of this counter-narrative (and, indeed, patriarchal violence *does* occur in all cultures), Haque complicates this further by drawing attention to the social location of Parvez's family in Canada, noting that it is essential not to allow the domestic violence paradigm to draw attention away from the racialised location of immigrant families in Canada, whose access to support services is limited and "deeply racialised," and who are experiencing additional stress based on economic constraints, as well as "language difficulty and the absence of extended family" (pp. 89-90). Similarly, Dossa (2009) argues that:

The popular view, perpetuated by the media, attributes domestic violence among immigrants to cultures brought from the 'uncivilized' world, but this is not the case... Immigrant women are especially at risk due to their social and economic vulnerability; they are at risk because of the lack of occupational opportunities, inaccessibility to health care and social services, and the prevalence of racism and sexism. (p. 108)

Dossa further explains that these factors are further compounded for women with disabilities, who may face increased isolation and lack of support from feminist and immigrant organisations. In a study conducted by Moghissi et al. (2009) with Muslims from four different ethnocultural communities in Canada, the researchers found that both women and men, in all four communities, "report increased tension [in their marital relationships] as compared with the tension they experienced in their countries of origin" (p. 67). Such familial tension, then, cannot only be a product of culture, but has to be considered in light of the family's other experiences. In other words, the violence that occurs in ways that are attributed to Islam or to "Muslim cultures," and the vulnerability of women and girls in Muslim families in Canada, needs to be understood alongside other racial and economic factors that affect families and make women more vulnerable.

The "Muslim Wheel of Domestic Violence," designed by Dr. Sharifa Alkhateeb (and accessible online at [http://www.lfcc.on.ca/muslim\\_wheel\\_of\\_domestic\\_violence.html](http://www.lfcc.on.ca/muslim_wheel_of_domestic_violence.html)), outlines some of the forms of violence and coercion that can happen in Muslim families. Based on a similar diagram developed for general cases of domestic violence, this wheel raises some of the specific ways that Islam may be used to justify domestic abuse. Among the forms of abuse it lists are manipulations of Qur'anic verses in order to justify physical violence against the wife or

a husband's control of his wife's every move through a claim to be her "guardian;" emotional abuse that calls into question her religious knowledge and piety; and claims that the husband has an Islamic "right" to abuse his wife and children, and that for the wife to report such abuse would be religiously unacceptable. The wheel also lists ways that women may be abused through denials of their religious rights, for example if their husbands take their earnings from them or violate their religious marriage contracts, demonstrating that what is at play in cases of religiously-motivated abuse is often a particularly selective and calculated interpretation of religious principles, and a denial of other religious rights (Alkhateeb).

Numerous scholars have taken up similar issues, perhaps most notably with relation to the Qur'anic verse 4:34, which is understood by many to attest to male superiority and to the right of husbands to beat their wives, although such interpretations are also fiercely contested (Barlas, 2002, pp. 186-189). Abou El Fadl (2001) points to the depiction of women by some religious leaders as "a walking, breathing bundle of *fitnah* [a source of chaos or temptation to evil]" (p. 235), to illustrate the ways that portrayals of women as posing particular sexual temptations and threats serve to bar women from public life. Rigid adherence to interpretations of Islamic sources that result in devaluing women and even sanctioning physical violence against them are compounded in a context where Muslim communities see themselves as weak or under threat, and may be thus less willing to look inwards at internal problems:

Views on the status of women symbolically reflect the strength of Islamic identity in various Muslim contexts. Where Muslim identity is strong over against externally set colonialist standards, there is greater flexibility toward women's development and greater public acknowledgement of women's valuable contributions inside and outside of the family. When Muslim identity is weak in the face of external pressures, women are more closely guarded not only from perceived and real external threats but also from internal flexibility and change. Changes in the role and status of women seem to occur more within the context of a stable group identity. (Wadud, 2000, p. 3)

There is, however, significant potential for Muslims who wish to engage with Islamic texts in order to challenge patriarchal and otherwise oppressive conclusions that others have drawn; the work of scholars such as Barlas (2002) and Abou El Fadl (2001), among many others, demonstrates that religious sources may be read in ways that liberate and in fact advocate for women's rights and autonomy.

Family conflicts within Muslim communities in Canada can also play out on the level of culture; Muslim youth in diasporic communities may face particular pressures from their families to adhere to certain norms of behaviour, which can be especially intense for girls. In their research with South Asian youth, Desai and Subramanian (2000) found that young South Asians in the Toronto area faced “significant pressure from their families to succeed academically and pursue professional careers, strict codes of behaviour around gender relationships and dating.” They also spoke of the “double standards” that many of the youth discussed, where women and girls face greater pressures than their male counterparts to maintain traditions and to uphold certain standards of morality. Zine (2008) also points to “the discourse of the ‘pious Muslim girl,’ which constructs specific boundaries for culturally acceptable behaviour” (p. 206). At the same time, Desai and Subramanian (2000) maintain that “patriarchal dynamics within immigrant families must be understood in relation to racism and cultural hegemony,” and that any positioning of South Asian culture as always and inherently oppressive towards women and girls, in opposition to a supposedly liberated “Canadian” culture, is unhelpful, and ignores the diversity within South Asian cultures and families, as well as the roles of “racism, classism and cultural imperialism.” Additionally, as will be discussed later, some of the pressures discussed here might be better understood through the lens of competing pressures that Muslims, especially Muslim girls and young women, face in trying to fit into both their religious communities and the non-Muslim society in which they live, rather than understanding cultural pressure as coming only from one direction.

The stereotypes of immigrant and Muslim communities as inherently violent may in fact have the effect of dissuading women from seeking help for the violence they experience, not wanting to betray their loyalty to the group or to reinforce negative stereotypes about their communities (Jiwani, 2006, p. 21). In a context where Muslim women may be facing racism and other forms of exclusion from the dominant non-Muslim society, for a woman to speak out about violence within her family or religious community may have the effect of severing her relationship with the only community in which she feels a sense of belonging, meaning that “the social cost of going public is high” (Jiwani, 2006, p. 153). This silencing effect of racism leaves women particularly dependent on their families and religious communities, unwilling to jeopardise either their own sense of belonging or their communities’ reputations.

For Muslim women and girls experiencing domestic violence who do choose to seek outside help, they may find that the existing services do not meet their needs. Many immigrant women may find that language barriers prevent them from properly communicating their situation; bringing along someone from the same community to translate often means not being able to speak as freely. As immigrant women are particularly vulnerable to exploitative work situations, they may have difficulty getting time off to see a doctor or counsellor; access to transportation may present another challenge (Jiwani, 2006, p. 152). Even women of colour who do speak English might face “barriers to services based on the stereotypes that health care providers [have] of their particular cultural groups” (Jiwani, 2006, p. 153), or service providers only willing to help a woman if she “can be rescued” from her cultural community (Jiwani, 2006, p. 159).

Furthermore, there is a significant concern that the existing services will not understand the cultural or religious values of the person seeking help, and that the proposed strategies to address the problem will be therefore unrealistic. In their discussions with South Asian parents and children regarding conflicts within families, Desai and Subramanian (2000) noticed that both the parents and youth believed that their culture will be automatically deemed as problematic rather than locating the difficulties within the context of the complex ‘immigrant’ experience... Several youth expressed that often the suggested solution to their problems was to leave home which was seen as an entrenched authoritarian environment beyond change. This according to many youth and their parents was untenable and totally unacceptable.

A woman that Khan (2002) interviewed, who worked at a women’s shelter that had several residents of Muslim background, expressed that the shelter did not accommodate Islamic dietary requirements, and that shelter workers “disapproved of Islam” and were initially not supportive of women who were fasting for Ramadan; they also ridiculed one woman who wanted to involve family members in the mediation process with her violent husband, for her reluctance to call the police (p. 88). With inadequate social services to support Muslim women facing domestic violence, and a lack of awareness of how to develop solutions that are realistic and culturally sensitive, abuse that occurs at the family level may be less likely to be reported.

### **Racism Directed at Muslim Women**

It is not only from within Muslim communities that Muslim women's bodies are policed. In contexts including official legislation, national media, and everyday interactions, Muslim women – particularly those whose clothing makes them visible as such – can often encounter heated debates and judgements from the non-Muslim society in which they live. Just as Muslim women's bodies, within Muslim communities, may be seen as symbols of morality, chastity, and preservation of culture, they represent, within a wider Canadian context, “the battlegrounds which clearly demarcate the line between the civilized secular modern nation and premodern religious fundamentalisms” (Haque, 2010, p. 80). Religious clothing – in particular, the hijab (headscarf) and niqab (face-covering) – is often the most visible symbol of such battles, and has been at the centre of numerous media stories and legislative battles.

The Bouchard-Taylor report (2007), which looks at questions of “religious accommodation” in Quebec, describes situations where girls wearing headscarves were not permitted to wear their headscarves at school (p. 51) or in competitions for soccer (p. 71) or taekwon do (p. 73). More recently, a Montreal-area teenager was banned from refereeing soccer games because of the headscarf that she wears (Blatchford, 2011). Such cases point to a desire to save Muslim women from cultures seen as dangerous, on both physical and cultural levels (Zine, 2009b, p. 156), and express a paternal claim to control women's bodies based on an external definition of what this clothing signifies.

In another situation, a large outcry arose in response to the Quebec provincial election commissioner's statement that women in niqab would not have to uncover their faces to vote; the commissioner was called on to amend election rules in order to force all voters to show their faces, despite the fact that photo identification is not a requirement for voting in Canada, making the visibility of the face significantly less relevant (Bakht, 2008, p. 109). Subsequent attempts (which were ultimately abandoned) to amend federal election regulations in order to address this question continued to focus on the need for niqab-wearing women to show their faces, without ever introducing any corresponding changes that would require photographic identification to be shown (CBC News, 2009), indicating that the issue has less to do with fears of voter fraud than it does with fears of Muslims and certain forms of dress. Stories such as this one, which was widely reported in the media, serve to demonise Muslim women and position them as threats to the Canadian nation.

In March 2010, the Quebec government introduced Bill 94, the “Loi établissant les balises encadrant les demandes d’accommodements dans l’Administration gouvernementale et dans certains établissements [Law establishing the guidelines for requests for accommodation in governmental administration and in certain establishments].” The bill’s preamble establishes it as an attempt to set guidelines for when religious accommodations should take place, and the bill deals specifically with the covering of the face (understood as synonymous with the wearing of niqab) in spaces of government-provided services, whether the wearer is an employee or a community member accessing the services. After defining the public services in question as including, among others, government ministries, educational institutions, health and social service agencies and daycares, the bill moves on to state that people working at and accessing public services should have their faces uncovered, and that requests for accommodation should be denied if there are concerns about communication, identity, or security (Assemblée Nationale du Québec, 2010). Several feminist groups and scholars responded to this with critical questions about how the bill might limit access to services for women who wear niqab (No Bill 94 Coalition, 2010). Although the bill has yet to be formally voted into law, and although it is currently limited to the province of Quebec, it received support from a number of national party leaders when it was first introduced, and thus reflects a more widespread national statement about the desire to regulate Muslim women’s access to services because of their clothing.

Mainstream media sources also often depict Muslim women either as oppressed victims, or as enemies and threats (Jiwani, 2010). Such images cast Canadian Muslim women as outsiders to Canadian society; favourable images of Muslim women are often limited either to those Muslim women who require (and welcome) the help of benevolent outsiders to save them (Jiwani, 2010, p. 73), or who can serve as the “good Muslim,” confirming stereotypes of the majority of Muslims as backwards and fanatical (Riley, 2009). Although some forms of media serve to challenge these representations – the sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* being perhaps the best-known example – the majority of images of Muslims in Canadian media are ones that most Canadian Muslim women and girls will not identify with, and have the effect of reinforcing stereotypes and judgements about their lives.

Aside from the high-profile media cases involving religious clothing, Muslim women and girls who wear hijab or niqab face everyday acts of Islamophobia in response to their clothing. Zine’s (2008) discussion with a group of Muslim female high school students revealed, for

example, that the students regularly experience discrimination on public transit, where they hear derogatory comments about their clothing from both drivers and passengers, and where bus drivers have refused to stop for girls wearing hijab (p. 164). Muslim women and girls who wear hijab thus become marked as foreign and perpetually outside of Canadian society. Muslim women looking for housing have also found that, especially since 9/11, “some landlords are openly refusing to rent to Muslims” (Zine, 2009a), one of many direct and tangible outcomes of a culture in which racism against Muslims often goes unchecked.

### **Social Belonging and Exclusion**

This question of exclusion from the national community points to related issues of social belonging among peers, a particularly important theme for girls and young women. Although perhaps less visible and less easily observed or quantified than some of the other forms of violence and discrimination discussed later in this paper, notions of belonging – understood as “a culmination of mediating influences of exclusion and inclusion on spatial, symbolic, and social relationships” (Caxaj and Berman, 2010, p. E17) – play a prominent role in the lives of many girls in Canada, with particularly high stakes for girls who are immigrants, racialised, or from religious minorities. As Caxaj and Berman (2010) note, “Research with newcomers has noted an important relationship between feelings of safety, participation, public spaces, and experiences of belonging,” and the cost of not belonging is reflected in “heightened insecurity, fear for their safety, and social isolation” for newcomer families (p. E22). Jiwani (2006) reminds us that questions of social belonging are not neutral or innocent:

The notion of fitting in demands further scrutiny. It raises the question, fitting into what? Clearly, the dominant social values and normative expectations are part of what girls and young women feel they need to comply with as part of their way of fitting in. While these normative standards are based on an ideology of consumption, they are, more importantly, grounded in an ideology of Whiteness, heterosexuality, and ableism. (p. 120)

Jiwani’s question here – “fitting into what?” – is key. This is not simply an issue of wanting to be cool, popular, or accepted by one’s peers, in the sense that such a paradigm would assume that everyone has equal access to such status. Instead, Jiwani draws attention to the specifically classed, raced, and heteronormative nature of the social structures into which racialised

immigrant girls are attempting to insert themselves, finding themselves in a context where, in order to fit in, they must have the right clothes and conform to certain norms of popular culture, options that may not be available to them because of racial or economic factors.

Zine (2008) makes a similar observation related to her research with Muslim high school students:

The emotional instability associated with the traditional rite of passage from youth to adulthood is compounded for youth from racially minoritized communities, who have to contend with the added pressures of race and social difference alongside typical teenage angst and social awkwardness. Muslim girls in the geopolitical climate of the new millennium are also forced to contend with being labelled ‘terrorists’ as the result of global events they had no part in making – events that nevertheless have been inscribed on their identity. (p. 168)

Coming at an age when young women may be already sensitive to the need to fit in, the added vulnerability to social exclusion that comes from their location as Muslim women of colour can be particularly harmful. Furthermore, Desai and Subramanian (2000) found that, for young people of South Asian origin, “Some of the females who spent a longer time in Canada expressed that they had strived so hard to ‘fit in’ and be ‘accepted’ that they feared that any attempt on their part to support the newcomers might lead to exclusion from the group that they have strived so hard to fit into and be accepted by.” In this situation, the violence of exclusion is perpetuated, as girls who have achieved some precarious sense of belonging are wary of risking it by reaching out too obviously to other girls who find themselves farther out on the margins.

An additional component of this struggle for belonging is the “double culture syndrome,” in which Muslim students “develop a double persona in their efforts to resolve the cultural contradictions between home and school... In the end they develop a double personality, with one side tailored to the social/cultural demands of home and family, the other to the demands of the outside world” (Zine, 2008, p. 4). In one study, Somali girls found an “intensification of religious beliefs” in diasporic communities in the West when compared to back home in Somalia, while experiencing very overt expressions of racism at school. Their particular location as diasporic Somalis and as members of racialised and religious minorities exacerbates the polarisation between the two worlds in which these young women are trying to belong. Among South Asian youth in Canada,

Girls from Muslim families seem to face the maximum parental pressure, though there are significant differences from one family to the next. The girls felt tremendous pressure since they have to fit into a certain mould to be accepted among their peers and at the same time, adopt a completely opposite set of behaviours for their parents. One of the coping mechanisms that girls seem to develop to survive this schizophrenic kind of existence is to start leading dual lives... There has been no documentation of what effects this has on the mental health of the girls but participants in the study did indicate that 'feeling stressed out' or depressed was not unusual as stated by several female youth. (Desai and Subramanian, 2000)

These issues of belonging may seem subtle, but the impact on mental health appears significant, to say the least. Muslim women who identify as queer may face additional pressure to compartmentalise their lives. Abraham's (2009) research with queer Muslims in Australia illustrates a double closeting, in which many expressed a need not only to hide their sexuality within their religious communities but also to hide their religion within their gay communities. As a lesbian Muslim in her early 30s expressed, "Everywhere you turn you have to jump into a different closet" (Abraham, 2009, p. 86).

Again, it should be emphasised that literature related to the "double culture syndrome" highlights not only the pressures that girls face at home but also the competing pressures that they face at school and among their peers, where they may be marginalised for not having the "right" looks or clothing. In other words, this is not simply an intergenerational conflict or a product of the girls' immigrant cultures or Muslim backgrounds alone, as the pressures also come from the popular culture and social norms among the girls' non-Muslim peers at school and in other social settings. The tension comes from trying to live two different lives that are experienced as mutually incompatible, and not only from one set of pressures or the other.

## **Schools**

Experiences of social exclusion can be a major part of the school experience for many Muslim youth. In Zine's (2008) research on students at Islamic schools, many of the students she interviewed expressed that previous experiences in public schools had made them feel like outsiders, and that there were particular challenges in dealing with perceived conflicts between Islamic norms around issues like dating and drinking with the pressures of the public school

environment (p. 97). Of course, not all Muslim youth choose to conform with the traditional religious principles on things like dating and alcohol, but the point here is that, for students who do follow these principles as part of their religious practice, the high school environment might become a particularly isolating space. Similarly, students in public schools might encounter difficulties with finding accommodation for their religious holidays, or finding time and space to pray. Young people of Muslim or other racialised backgrounds living in rural areas are often at a particular disadvantage, given the lack of other students of their background, and the lack of resources at the school, such as English as a Second Language classes for newcomer youth (Jiwani, 2006, p. 138).

Muslim students in Canadian schools have also found “that public schools [focus] on teaching Anglo-Canadian [and/or, presumably, French-Canadian] traditions and history to the point of excluding learning about other culture” (Zine, 2008, p. 112), and a marginalisation of Muslim histories from the mainstream curriculum (p. 238). Racialised students interviewed by Jiwani (2006) about their school experiences related not only that “their histories and cultures were being erased in the context of the classroom,” but also that their attempts to correct or challenge the absences or misrepresentations of their cultures were not taken seriously by teachers (p. 139). The violence of the colonial histories that many Muslim communities have experienced is extended through the erasure of these communities’ experiences throughout this history, and the denial of the importance of knowing histories other than those of Europeans and white settlers.

Racism, or at best an inattention to race issues on the part of teachers and principals, manifests itself at schools in other ways as well. Some South Asian students reported being placed in English as a Second Language programs regardless of their English level, and being directed towards less-academic and lower-paying future professions, even despite good academic records (Desai and Subramanian, 2000). Many of these students interviewed by Jiwani (2006) also talked about racism and discrimination on the part of their teachers, which would often go unaddressed by school administrators, who refused to acknowledge the presence of racism within their schools, and would thus dismiss the students concerns (p. 138). This refusal to even see the presence of racism, of course, does nothing to address the problem, and likely further contributes to the marginalisation of many Muslim students and racialised students of colour.

For some families, private Islamic schools provide an option in which students' religious beliefs are affirmed, instead of being marginalised as in the public system, and where students can find a community in which they feel comfortable. Zine's (2008) extensive research on Islamic schools in the Toronto area points to several additional benefits of Islamic schools, such as the small class sizes and the high expectations set for both female and male students (p. 264). Nonetheless, she also found that the schools she studied were not equipped to support students with disabilities (p. 263), and that many faced a lack of resources and proper facilities (p. 266). Many families are, of course, unable to afford to send their children to an Islamic school, despite the low tuition fees at many of these institutions; others may be unable to find a school that fits with their religious perspectives. Islamic schools are certainly not a perfect solution; however, for some Muslim youth feeling alienated within the public school system, these schools might present an attractive alternative.

Within the mainstream public school system, Desai and Subramanian (2000) propose several changes to improve the school environment for racialised students. These include changes to the curriculum, including more content related to non-European and non-white cultures and histories, as well as a broader offering of language classes, and a greater emphasis on a wider range of sports, such as soccer or cricket. They also advocate increased access to anti-racist counselling services, and an end to the streaming of racialised students into less-academic streams. Moreover, Desai and Subramanian argue that parents should "become aware of how the educational system really works," allowing them to better advocate for their children.

## **Health Care**

Jiwani argues that "the health care system as a hierarchical structure not only mirrors the dominant structures of violence inherent in the wider society but also perpetuates them in particular ways" (Jiwani, 2006, p. 146). In their research on immigrant Muslim women accessing maternity health services in St. John's, Newfoundland, Reitmanova and Gustafson (2008) found that numerous factors, including language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and care providers insensitive to their needs, negatively impacted the women's experiences with the maternity health care system. Possible sources of violence that Muslim women may encounter in the health care system are not, however, limited to inadequate language services or religious accommodations; there is also the risk that the assumptions that health care providers make about

their patients based on their religious and cultural background will influence the care that they receive. Women in the same study expressed that nurses has made assumptions about them and what they needed based on what they assumed about the patients' cultural background (p. 107). Other research has found that "physicians tended to stereotype patients according to which cultural group they come from," and that this affects, among other things, the diagnoses that get made, and the patients' access to further referrals (Jiwani, 2006, p. 157). Muslims in the mental health care system can encounter similar assumptions and judgements, with some religious practices being "pathologized and seen as evidence of mental illness" (Zine, 2009a).

Baobaid and Hamed (2010) explain the risks faced by racialised groups within health care and other service settings in a framework of cultural safety:

Cultural safety reinforces the idea that each person's knowledge and reality is valid and valuable. Care may be deemed unsafe if the patient is humiliated, alienated, or directly or indirectly dissuaded from accessing necessary care. Cultural safety insists that mainstream service providers recognize themselves as the bearer of their own culture and attitudes that either consciously or unconsciously exercises power over patients. (p. 35)

This notion may help service providers to keep in mind that health care is not always beneficial, or even benign, if the patients are feeling marginalised or unsafe. However, as Reitmanova and Gustafson point out, it is not only changes in personal actions on the part of individual service providers that are needed, since "individuals must practice in a setting that is responsive to religious diversity;" they call for a "diversity responsive healthcare setting" that includes the creation of institutional procedures that are sensitive to the needs of patients from a variety of backgrounds, and that provide (and make visible and accessible) appropriate facilities and services, such as prayer facilities and food that fits with religious requirements (p. 109).

Reitmanova and Gustafson also recommend "creating a formal mechanism that links health care providers with immigrant women who can offer them information, help and support," treating immigrant women as experts who can take an active role in building a diversity responsive health system (p. 109).

## **Migration**

Although not all Muslim women in Canada are immigrants, experiences of migration have had a profound impact on the lives of many Muslim women and girls now living in Canada.

Members of the diasporic communities interviewed by Moghissi et al. (2009) gave a wide range of reasons for having left their home country; for some, war, political persecution, and occupation were major factors, as were religious and gender persecution, to a lesser degree. Many also talked about economic and educational opportunities as primary reasons for leaving their homes (p. 44).

The contexts that prompted leaving their homelands, the process of migration and resettlement, and the legal constraints associated with being an immigrant in Canada are all processes that can entail significant violence and threats to health. Immigrants of colour and women are both groups that are at risk of severe health impacts from the stress of migration (Jiwani, 2006, pp. 149-151). For women who come to Canada as refugees, for example, pre-migration violence can include torture, rape, living in refugee camps, and other forms of trauma (Berman, Irías Girón, & Ponce Marroquín, 2006, p. 36). The resettlement process brings with it issues of racism, culture shock, and language barriers; the language difficulties can be further exacerbated by memory problems linked to trauma (Berman, Irías Girón, & Ponce Marroquín, 2006, p. 38), or by “limited social opportunities” to practice language skills (Reitmanova and Gustafson, 2008, p. 102). Along with the mental health impact, refugees may also experience physical problems related to menstruation and fertility, as well as “weight loss, malnutrition, and loss of hair and teeth” (Berman, Irías Girón, & Ponce Marroquín, 2006, p. 42). These experiences of past violence will continue to impact many Muslim women and girls for many years.

There are also specific challenges related to immigrating into Canada. Muslim women are often seen as undesirable migrants, and factors of age, disability, and lack of English proficiency can add to this. A widespread “demonization of Islam” has resulted in less interest among Western countries in immigrants from countries with large Muslim populations (Dossa, 2009, p. 104). Disabled immigrants are seen as particular burdens on the system, and not as potential employees or citizens who have something to contribute to Canada, and might find it particularly difficult to be accepted within Canada’s immigration system (Dossa, 2009, p. 114).

In addition to this, official Canadian immigration policy can add to the stress and violence of the migration process, particularly if they are experiencing violence within the family. Sponsorship laws stipulate that “should a sponsored family member access social services, the sponsor becomes financially liable. This places an added strain for those girls and

young women who want to leave an abusive environment but are afraid to do so because of the financial impact and loss of face for their families” (Jiwani, 2006, p. 113). Women may also be afraid to leave a violent family situation for fear of deportation, poverty, or losing their children (Jiwani, 2006, p. 149). The long financial commitment demanded by family sponsorship legislation can have the result of locking girls and women into abusive situations for several years before they are able to risk leaving.

A striking conclusion to this discussion of migration is that some research shows that the health impact of immigration actually gets worse as time goes on, and continues to affect subsequent generations. A study conducted by Bhugra attributed this possibly to “environmental stress caused by living in societies where individual or institutional racism may well play a role in creating social, economic and political disadvantages” (Bhugra, quoted in Jiwani, 2006, p. 157); Haque (2010) also discusses economic and racial inequalities, and writes that “the perception of discrimination grows for immigrants the longer they are in Canada,” and is worse for the second generation (p. 90). Although the particular challenges related to legal immigration or citizenship status or language may diminish with time, it appears that other forms of violence remain or even become stronger. Given the large proportion of Muslims in Canada who are either immigrants or children of immigrants, this is an important issue to consider; we cannot simply assume that future generations will have fewer problems than their immigrant forbearers.

## **Workplace**

Muslim women are one of the most highly educated groups when compared to other faith communities in Canada; it may be surprising, therefore, that they also experience the highest rates of unemployment (Hamdani, 2006, p. 14). In fact, “proportionately, twice as many Muslim women compared to all other Canadian women have post-graduate degrees, but more than twice as many Muslim women than all women looking for a job cannot find one” (Hamdani, 2006, p. 13).

Haque (2010) writes that the experience of “being a visible minority in Canada means a lower return on education and persistent underemployment” (p. 90). This disparity is a striking example of the structures of power that, for many reasons, make it difficult for Muslim women to

find suitable and stable employment, adding to the vulnerability and dependence they face in some of the other areas discussed earlier in this paper.

Some of this disparity can be attributed to hiring discrimination against Muslim women, particularly Muslim women who wear hijab (Zine, 2008, p. 156), or come up against stereotypes about their capabilities (Jiwani, 2006, p. 150). However, the immigration process, in which new immigrants' credentials and experience are often not recognised, also plays a large role in this issue. In some cases, job and language training programs are not made available to immigrant women, on the assumption that it is their husbands who will be the ones working (Jiwani, 2006, p. 150). For other women, such as the Bosnian women interviewed for a study on refugees, the de-skilling of their husbands was a factor, prompting the women to "[accept] low-paying, low-skill jobs so as not to 'upstage their husbands'" (Berman, Irías Girón, & Ponce Marroquín, 2006, p. 39). These lower-paying, frequently part-time or seasonal jobs often come with unsafe working conditions and are less likely to be unionised, creating the potential for an exploitative situation (Jiwani, 2006, p. 150).

Dossa (2009) describes the intricately interconnected forms of violence affecting one of the women she interviewed, a Muslim woman originally from Iran, who uses a wheelchair, and who had been employed when she lived in Iran:

Her vulnerability can be explained by the fact that she is legally dependent on a husband who has also been rendered helpless [because of his own location as an immigrant and as a disabled person]. Her perceived dependency has led social services providers to dismiss her as insignificant. Her desire to work has been ignored due to the deeply rooted assumption that people who have disabilities cannot undertake waged work, at least not on the same scale as others. The relatively few disabled people who are in the labour force are there as a result of advocacy work by disability groups that do not necessarily accommodate immigrant women. (p. 108)

As a disabled immigrant woman, she is ignored by immigrant-focused social services and by disability-focused advocates, neither of which imagines her to be among the people they are trying to support.

As with the issue of immigrant health discussed in the previous section, Canadian-born Muslim women are not doing better economically than their immigrant parents (Hamdani, 2006,

p. 17). In other words, “income disparities continue into second generation as does an increased perception of discrimination and sense of alienation from national belonging” (Haque, 2010, p. 90). Hamdani (2006) proposes that some of the reasons for this may include discrimination or Muslim women seeking work in fields that are not in high demand, as well as the possibility that Canadian-born Muslim women may be less qualified (p. 17), perhaps having had less access to education because of their parents’ economic situation once in Canada, or because of having been marginalised within the education system. This is one area that is certainly calling for more research.

### **Next Steps**

The existing literature on Muslim women and girls in Canada, and on other immigrant and racialised women, paints a picture of multiple sites of violence that Muslim women and girls may face, based on their gender, race, religion, immigration status and experiences, economic class, sexuality, disability, and many other factors. Many of these issues are in need of additional research; there are particular gaps in the literature when it comes to issues of sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability as faced by Muslim women and girls; research on Muslim women and girls in rural communities; and studies that examine the experiences of Muslim women and girls who do not wear hijab. Additionally, as mentioned above, the fact that the impact of migration on both health and economic status actually worsens over time is deserving of more investigation.

Berman and Jiwani’s (2008) research with newcomer girls provides a list of “strategies that girls have identified as most helpful to them,” relevant here as a starting point for thinking about ways of addressing the forms of violence that Muslim women and girls encounter. The list includes:

- developing strategies to confront systemic racism and sexism
- developing anti-racist curricula relevant to girls and young women
- creating meaningful cultural programs
- creating safe spaces for girls to talk about racism and violence
- encouraging strategies of resistance
- encouraging others to see equality as a societal necessity. (Berman & Jiwani, 2008, p. 149)

For those working in family services, education, healthcare, or immigration services, many of the problems referenced in this paper point to the need for these services to be more accessible and culturally relevant. This might include providing more extensive translation services for women who don't speak English, as well as more training for staff on anti-racist practices and on particular cultural and religious issues that might arise. It also includes working to develop culturally- and religiously-appropriate solutions that Muslim women facing violence will feel comfortable with, instead of feeling that they have to choose between their religion or culture and their safety. For teachers and school principals, it means working actively to disrupt Eurocentric curricula, and acknowledging and addressing racism within schools. Essential to all of these changes is the need to "train service providers so that they are able to provide more holistic assessments of clients' housing needs based on an integrated anti-racism, anti-Islamophobia and anti-oppression framework, and culturally accessible service delivery" (Zine, 2009a). A training manual on "Addressing Domestic Violence in Canadian Muslim Communities" is available through the Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration (MCRSSI), and provides extensive information and recommendations for service providers working with Muslim communities.

One possible means of addressing this problem may lie in creating or supporting more organisations that are visibly Muslim-run or at least Muslim-friendly; women who know that their specific religious and cultural concerns will be taken seriously may be more likely to seek help from such services, and to find assistance that is appropriate and responsive to their needs. Organisations like the Islamic Social Services Association in Winnipeg, the Amal Women's Centre in Montreal, and the Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration in London, Ontario all provide some form of support services for Muslims experiencing violence or poverty, from a perspective that explicitly acknowledges Muslim identities. They also provide training, both for Muslim organisations and for non-Muslim social service agencies, about Islam and Muslims, and about how to respond to violence and other social problems facing Muslim communities. Other groups like the Toronto-based Council of Agencies Serving South Asians, while not explicitly Muslim-oriented, provide sensitive anti-racist services and advocacy. Although it is not necessarily desirable or feasible for Muslim women to access services only at specifically religiously- or culturally-oriented agencies, these groups can provide key services for

many women and girls, and can also serve vital roles in providing training and materials for non-Muslim organisations regarding how to best support Muslim women.

Any effective strategies to address violence in the lives of Muslim girls and women in Canada must continue to operate within an interlocking framework that understands the multiple forms of violence that Muslim women and girls face, instead of limiting the scope simply to religion and gender. Such strategies must also continue to look at the many forms and levels of violence at play, whether interpersonal, institutional, or structural. Finally, it is also important to emphasise that there are many Muslim women and girls in Canada – including several who are active with the organisations mentioned above – who are themselves working against violence and advocating for their communities. Muslim girls and women need to be acknowledged not only as victims of violence, but also as a vital part of the solution to these problems, and as active agents within these issues.

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