

## **Key Issue for Muslim Youth**

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**Gender**

## Gender

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In the CCMW report, “In My Own Skin,” gender is described as reflecting socially-learned behaviours and expectations.

“Gender is an identity acquired through culturally specific socialization whereby people learn how to be masculine and feminine and assume the roles of men and women..... While it may be inevitable that gender roles are assigned through cultural and societal practices, in many cases, the roles assigned to women have lesser prestige, power, and resources available to them than those assigned to men. Narrowness of gender roles can be very wasteful, since much female talent is lost to society...” (CCMW, In My Own Skin, 2001)

Muslim girls and women face a number of gender-specific challenges in Canadian society as compared to their male counterparts. For example, they may experience more negative visibility if they wear clothing that identifies them as Muslim, such as the hijab. They may experience difficulties in interacting in some school or community activities because of limitations on mixing between non-related males and females. Or there may be higher expectations to succeed placed on them as girls within their families.

### Results of the Project

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#### **Where do female youth feel comfortable?**

In the focus groups, girls and boys had different responses for several of the questions. A series of questions were asked about how comfortable the youth feel in different settings. Girls generally felt most comfortable going out with their friends, at the mosque and at school. They felt least comfortable when alone in public places or going on a date.

	<b>Most comfortable</b>	<b>Least comfortable</b>
Boys (Ridgemont)	Going to the mosque Going to school Going to the mall with friends Going on a date	Going to the mall without friends Riding on the bus Watching the news
Boys (Deslauriers)	Going to the mosque When Islam is raised in the classroom Going to a party Going to the mall with friends Going on a date Going to school	Going to the mall without friends Watching the news
Girls (Ridgemont)	Going to the mosque Going to the mall with friends Going to school When Islam is raised in the classroom Going to a party Riding on the bus	Going to the mall without friends Going on a date

Girls (Deslauriers)	Going to the mosque Going to school When Islam is raised in class Going to the mall with friends Going to a party	Going on a date Going to the mall without friends
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The girls talked about cultural and religious practices from a different perspective than the boys. Although both frequently mention the Q’uran and prayer, and a number of positive guidelines they receive from their faith, the girls sometimes had a list of “no’s” (e.g. no boys, no parties, no drinking, no tight clothes).

The girls were consistently described as leaders and responsible. Some girls feel disproportionate pressure to succeed in school: “If a boy fails a class, it’s not a big deal. If a girl does, wow!” The boys were often described as needing more support and help, and as more often being outside of the norms of Islam, for example, there was concerns raised about the disproportionate number of Somali boys in the Ottawa Detention Centre.

**Gender Interaction and Dating**

Socializing with other young people, particularly of the opposite sex, is a delicate issue because young Muslims, like other young people, sometimes have different views from their parents. This is particularly challenging for sons and daughters of immigrants, for whom the expectations of the traditional culture are very different from the expectations of the youth’s peers at school.

Social distance within the Islamic tradition is also gendered and situations of casual physical contact between males and females may violate Islamic moral codes

Both genders described how they sometimes did not completely share information with their parents about where they were, with whom and what they were doing. Some youth are comfortable with a strict interpretation of Islamic practices with respect to socializing, and others feel that, as long as they follow basic teachings (such as self-respect and respect for others), they are behaving appropriately.

**Wearing the Hijab**

Girls face particular discrimination if they wear the hijab because it makes their faith more visible, and makes them more vulnerable to racist comments, discrimination and even violence. For many Muslim girls, wearing the hijab is a choice they made as part of their expressions of Islamic identity.

Young Muslim women have been attacked in different ways, including insults and threats during their everyday lives, especially in public places and public transport. Other girls can be victims of physical assault.

## **Areas for Action**

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1. More education is needed within the broader community on the role of the hijab and other aspects of the Islamic dress code.
2. More education is needed for health care professionals, social service providers and school officials on the need for the range of approaches to social interactions of male and female youth.
3. More supports and activities are needed for girls, including mentoring, leadership development, sports and social activities. Some of these can be organized through the school system and others can be offered in the community.

**Key Issue for Muslim Youth**

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**Identity**

# Identity

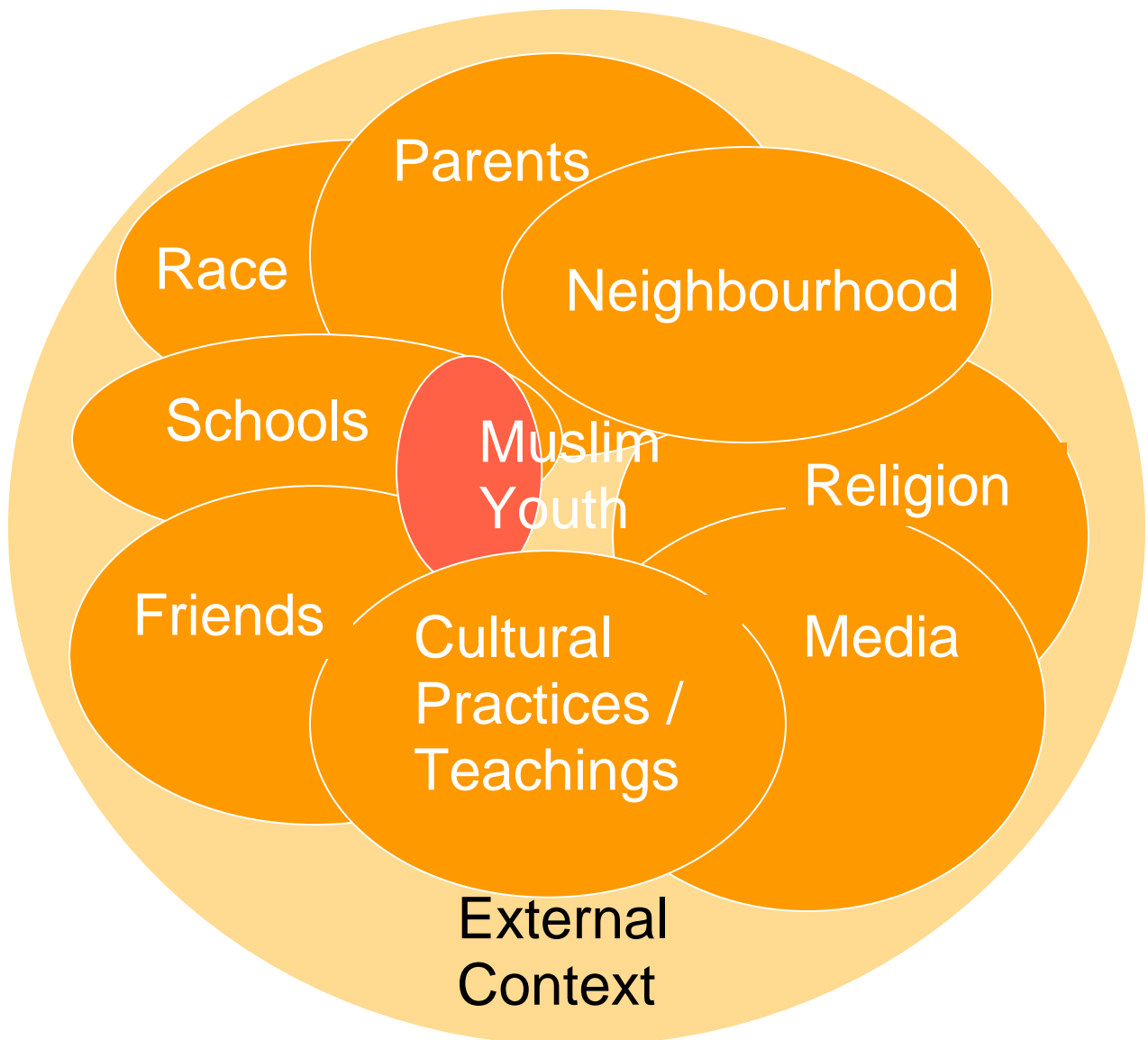
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## Identity Framework

Identity formation and the questions of “Who am I?” or “Who do I say I am?” is complex and is influenced by a multitude of factors. In our initial thinking, we sought to identify the different people and institutions that would be informing Muslim youth’s understanding of their identity.

At the same time, we wanted to acknowledge and respect the individual agency of each young person to determine what messages they were accepting and rejecting. The diagram below attempts to reflect the dialectic relationship that Muslim youth have to contend with.

**Diagram 1: Factors that impact on Muslim Youth Identity**



Muslim Youth are navigating many influences as they seek to define who they are and what their place is in society. Some of these influences are shown on the diagram and help inform how Muslim youth will see themselves and the world around them.

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## **Results of the Project**

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### **Multiple Identities**

Youth tend strongly to give equal weight to their multiple identities: Canadian, Muslim, and country of origin (or country where their roots are). Throughout the project, the youth, especially those who give equal weight to their different identities, say they manage these multiple identities with comfort and ease, and see no conflict between these various aspects of themselves. However, the same is not true in the way others perceive them. Several youth indicated that, although they were born in Canada, they are often seen as coming from somewhere else. “I just say I’m from Somalia, because it’s easier.” If they travel outside Canada, for example in Europe or to their family’s country of origin, they say they are Canadian and that definition is accepted elsewhere.

### **Second Generation Canadians**

The latest generation of Muslim Canadians is coming of age in a predominantly western culture; about half are now born in the West as distinct from their parents, who migrated here since the 1960s. Muslim youth must struggle to negotiate an identity within three often conflicting cultural frameworks, the dominant culture, their ethnic culture and Islam. These multiple identities also create distance from the dominant society by accentuating specific degrees of racial and religious difference.

Research has shown that, “unlike their immigrant parents who have previous identities to draw on – their identities from their home countries – second generation youth who develop in contexts of outsidership have never been anything other than immigrants or visible minorities.” These youth are neither part of their parent’s cultural landscapes nor are they completely part of the “Canadian” mainstream. They are at greater risk of developing a negative self-identity because they may come to believe that no matter how much they try to belong they will always be perceived as outsiders. (Myhili, Rajiva, Bridging the Generation Gap: Exploring the Difference Between Immigrant Parents and their Canadian Born Children, 2005)

Many of the youth involved in the project were born or raised in Canada, but even those who have arrived recently are caught between two cultures: that of their parents and that of the dominant majority. They are very conscious of their parents’ sacrifice and the obstacles that their parents face in Canada. As a result, the youth feel a strong responsibility to succeed, in order to make their family’s sacrifice worthwhile.

### **Faith and Culture**

One of the places where all of the participating youth feel at ease is at the mosque. This question received among the most positive reactions from all four groups of youth: boys and girls in both the English and French school. Youth also tended to link faith and culture, for example, referring to prayer under the discussion of cultural practices.

In the discussions, youth tended to identify many positive aspects of their faith and culture, e.g. “be the best you can be”, “respect others”, “gives me inner strength”.

They described how it is sometimes difficult to negotiate the continuity of their Islamic identity and practices in an environment that can present conflicting cultural values and practices. For example, they feel the stares of others when they step out of class to pray.

### **Peer Pressures**

There are peer pressures that often influence Muslim youth to move away from religious boundaries. Youth identified that growing up with non-Muslims, and the associated peer pressure and desire to be accepted, creates a struggle in maintaining their culture. Also, being religious is hard in Western society with the media and other pressures focused on material goods and external success.

This in many cases leads to the split-personality syndrome or “double-life syndrome” faced by Muslim youth who develop a double identity in order to contend with competing cultural demands of home and school. These youth are forced to develop an identity to deal with peer pressure at school and another to conform to conflicting cultural demands of the home and community; this situation ultimately leads to confusion and dissonance among these youths.

Peer pressure can also come from Muslim youth who are practicing their religious practices and are prepared to report to parents and religious leaders on the conduct of their fellow peers.

Peer pressure experienced by Muslim youth may also be positive. Positive peer pressure is derived from the social networks that youth are able to develop within the Muslim community. Muslim student associations in high schools constitute a form of positive peer pressure. They are organized to provide peer support and guidance to Muslim students in both social and religious matters. When youth are confronted with racism and peer pressure the ability to see themselves as part of a larger group from which they can draw support is an important coping strategy. Positive peer influence and support from fellow Muslims are a means of reinforcing Islamic values as well as developing friendship among other Muslims who are confronting similar challenges.

### **Being Muslim in a Non-Muslim School System**

Youth input suggests that they feel mostly positive about their school when there are a significant number of Muslim students and they have a general sense of being accepted. A prayer room and Friday prayers in the school was seen as a significant way of showing acceptance.

There have been particular concerns raised about the school system, when Islam is raised in the classroom. Overall, Islam is treated positively in the classroom, according

to the youth in the focus groups, but there were some negative experiences where teachers were not respectful or were ignorant of Islam. In some situations, teachers have lower expectations of Muslim students and do not provide the kind of encouragement that youth need to succeed. What was clear from the students is that they are able to analyze and discern which teachers are respectful of their being Muslim and which are not.

Parents concerns about the school system include the fact they have high expectations for their children and they do not understand the school's role vs. parents' role. They also feel that sometimes schools are not honest with parents about how their child is doing. Teachers acknowledge that they have also experienced some difficulties in engaging parents in the school but in cases where there is support like the Multicultural Liaison Officers the system responds much more effectively to meet everyone's needs.

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## **Areas for Action**

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### **Youth identified four overriding supports.**

1. **Positive guidance and influences:** advice for handling the pressures around them, knowledge and skills to make good decisions about their lives, and reminders about the importance of doing what is right.
2. **Acknowledgement and support:** to give them credit for things they have done well, to provide emotional support in difficult times, and to inspire them to be their best selves and to not give up. Sometimes, the form of support is more concrete, such as financial support to enable families to be able to meet their family needs.
3. **Opportunities to be involved** in constructive efforts in their own lives and in the community, and to be engaged in ways that are meaningful to them.
4. **A voice so that they can speak on their own behalf:** They want to be listened to and taken seriously.

Through all these things, they are looking to achieve equality for themselves as Muslim youth, and for everyone in society.

### **What they would like to see in the community:**

**1. Youth Programs / Youth Centres:** Muslim youth need more locations in the community where they can gather and participate in programs that are designed for them. It is important that these programs meet the needs of both boys and girls. Specific program suggestions are provided below. More advertisement is important as many youth are not aware of the programs that do exist.

**2. Mentoring and Leadership Programs:** Youth need strong role models to guide and assist them as they move into adulthood in the wider society. Mentors could be drawn from the faith community (e.g. Imams), from community programs such as Big Sister/Big Brother, and from among young adults in the Muslim community or in the mainstream

community who support Muslim youth. Leadership programs can supplement the role of the mentors.

**3. Sports and Recreation:** More recreational opportunities are needed, including more sports clubs, events and leagues to provide ways for youth to enjoy themselves, learn important skills and stay out of trouble. Programs need to be affordable. Young Muslim women were particularly mentioned as requesting sports opportunities. The Boys and Girls Club is a good example to emulate.

**4. Arts and culture:** Programs to teach children and youth about their culture are important to maintaining a sense of identity. Art and culture are also ways for youth to express themselves, and art clubs or programs can be an important element of community programs.

**5. Social services:** More social resources are needed in a variety of areas, such as a hotline for Muslim youth, crisis support, counseling for Muslim youth and families. Whatever services are available need to be widely advertised. More funding is needed for Muslim organizations to provide needed supports, and also mainstream social services need to be sure they are meeting the needs of Muslim youth. Education and training about Islam and Muslims is needed for health care professionals, police officers, social workers, teachers and others in the community.

**6. Employment:** Youth face many barriers in finding employment and community programs which make this easier, such as youth job fairs, especially for new immigrants, would be helpful. Specific actions are also needed to reduce systemic barriers to access to jobs by Muslim youth.

**7. Advocacy:** Young people need a place where they can speak out and be listened to. More conferences and more activities organized by youth for youth can create spaces where youth advocate for their rights and develop actions they can take in the wider community.

**8. Family activities:** More community activities are needed for Muslim families, such as family picnics. These need to include Muslims from every ethnic group.

## **The Diversity of the Muslim Community**

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### **Demographics**

The number of Muslims living in Canada has doubled in recent years. In 1991 there were 253 000 Muslims living in Canada and the number has increased to nearly 580, 000 in 2001. Muslims now represent 2% of the total Canadian population and comprise a variety of immigrants from countries around the world representing various linguistic, national and racial backgrounds.

The Muslim population is also significantly younger, with a median age of 28 years compared to the median age of the total Canadian population, which is 37 years of age.

The Muslim population in Canada is made up of 37% South Asian descent, 21% Arab descent, 14% West Indian descent, and the remaining 28% is made up of many other ethnicities such as African, Chinese, etc. Half of Muslims in Canada speak a non-official language at home while just 0.32% speak both official languages at home.

This is a multi-dimensional population that is often lumped together to create a stereotype of who is Muslim.

## **Results of the Project**

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### **Recognizing the diversity of the Muslim community**

Any strategies developed need to account for the diversity of the Muslim community and the importance of multiple approaches and avenues of engagement. Significant strides have been made over the last 30 years in how Muslims are integrated into Canada. Several of the parents were able to reflect on a time when they were the only Muslims in their school or their neighbourhood. At the same time, much more action is needed.

### **What does integration mean?**

Achieving integration is the responsibility of both those in the minority community and those in the dominant society. Parents discussed the complexity of identity, and the interplay of religion, race and culture. Muslims experience racism in different ways. The complex interplay between racist discrimination, intolerance based on their faith and the negative response to having immigrants in the country can lead to an inaccurate analysis of the situation that their youth are facing. Parents can sometimes see a rejection of certain aspects of the culture (e.g. children who are ashamed to wear traditional clothing) as linked in some way to a rejection of the faith.

### **Retention of Religion**

The majority of Canadian Muslims (76%) rank religion as being important to them but how they practice their religion is very diverse. Some are very traditional in practice whereas others are creating their own distinctive sense of a Muslim identity. Muslim youth in Canada are able, if they choose, to maintain an Islamic life style. There are social networks within mosques and Islamic study centres that provide youth with

systems of effective support as well as being a traditional means for the study of Islamic knowledge.

### **Recognizing the Significance of 9/11**

Saadiq Malik, President of the Somali Student Association at Ryerson University was the keynote speaker at the Muslim Youth Conference and described in his speech the complexity of what youth deal with.

Islam is a religion of peace and our war is against Islamic terrorists.. What?... Come again?... Islam is a religion of peace but we apparently are fighting Islamic terrorists. That is impossible. I mean the absurdity in that statement is so clear it would have been humorous if it weren't for its serious implications. Terrorists are by definition violent, non-peaceful, and so you can not have an individual who is both peaceful and violent. He can only be one so pick one. He is either a Muslim, which you confess is peaceful, or a terrorist, which by definition makes him violent. One. He can't be both. Oh he can because he is a terrorist who claims to represent Islam. Okay then why do we not refer to the IRA as the Irish terrorists?...or as the Catholic terrorists?...The KKK as the American terrorists?...They were violent...They claimed to represent others who did not share their views. These are not just words. People may be quick to dismiss this...but it is not mere misfortune that sent Maher Arar to Syria to be tortured for over a year. It is not coincidence that religious profiling by our security officers against Muslims has dramatically increased in the last few years. It is not coincidence that many of my friends are afraid to admit to US border officials the fact that they are engineering students. We, those of us born and/or raised in this country and thus have the fortune of understanding the system, are aware of the harmful implications of statements like "The War against Islamic terrorists".

Time and again, we are negotiating and trying to reconcile issues that are often way beyond our years and with very little assistance. We have to reconcile ideals that are conveyed through our studies and by our leaders, with a reality that is often the exact opposite.

His comments resonated so profoundly with the youth that the drama skit put on by the boys and some of the poems referred to this theme,

### **Supports that Youth need**

The peers and friends of youth make an enormous difference in their self-esteem. This is why it is so important for non-Muslim children to have a basic understanding of Islam. One father described how his son's best friend helped him feel comfortable because the friend is Christian Lebanese and thus, although he is Christian, comes from a country with many Muslims and so is knowledgeable about Islam. This made the friendship easier to develop as theirs was a mutual understanding of the reality of the different religions in their lives.

Prayer rooms or Friday prayers in the schools are also a way to help students feel included and welcome, and quite a number of area high schools have them. However, parents stressed that the person who leads the prayers should be carefully chosen. In

some schools, they are required to submit to the principal an outline of what they will say, which seemed reasonable to the parents.

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## Areas for Action

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**1. Increase support for parents to integrate.** Some parents, particularly those who are new immigrants, face enormous economic pressures – the number of single mothers was commented on, partly related to fathers who must leave to find work elsewhere. New immigrants need specific supports including mastering the language, more ESL support and other settlement services.

Parents do not know how to get involved in their children's schools, and this could be made more accessible. For example, imams could be asked to encourage parents to go to parent-teacher interviews, join the school council, and participate in parent activities at the school.

Parents do not always know how to talk with their children in this new culture, where it is clear that their children are learning new habits and practices, some of which the parents may not approve of. It was suggested that settlement agencies might prepare a "suggestion sheet" or "tools for parents" to assist newcomer parents as part of the settlement process, and help them keep the communication channels open as their children find their way in a new environment.

**2. The need for dialogue within the Muslim community.** There are many diverse views and approaches to Islam, and some elements of the community can be judgmental of those who hold other views. It is important for the community to take the initiative and provide more opportunities for dialogue and exchange, to create more openness about what constitutes being a "good Muslim". This will help create an environment that strengthens children growing up here in Canada and enable them to appreciate the breadth of the Muslim community.

There is a need for more unity in the Muslim community, to bridge the different ethnicities and reduce conflicts and misunderstandings amongst the diverse parts of the community. A wider representation from groups in the Muslim community is needed in order for a healthy dialogue to take place. It is important to ensure grass roots involvement in Muslim organizations and accountability from the leadership. In addition, Muslim communities are sometimes segregating themselves and steps are needed to encourage integration within the larger Canadian society.

**3. Engagement in the wider community:** Muslims need to play a greater role in our community, in schools, as social workers, police officers, etc. both to ensure these services are aware of the reality of Muslims and also to provide role models for Muslim youth. Muslim leaders also need to take steps to be more visible in the general community and build bridges between Muslims and the rest of the community. Similarly, leaders in the broader community need to be accountable for ensuring they take into account the needs of all members of the community, including Muslims.

To counteract the negative and distorted media coverage, Muslims need to educate non-Muslims in the community about Islam and about the Muslims living here. Activities for

non-Muslims to observe our culture, or programs and clubs where Muslims and non-Muslims participate together, may help build better understanding and break down prejudices. Muslim youth need to be an integral part of this, and need to get involved and become role models and positive examples for the general public.

**Key Issue for Muslim Youth**

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**Racism and Discrimination**

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Statistics show that in Canada, among Muslims who are fifteen years of age or older, almost six in ten (56%) have some level of post-secondary education. This number is in contrast to 44% of the total Canadian population.

Despite higher levels of education, both the mean and median individual income for Muslims aged fifteen or older is approximately \$8,000 less than the total population. The unemployment rate in 2001 for those that identified themselves as Muslim was almost twice as high as for the general Canadian population. Numerous studies on wage-gap differentials between visible minorities and the total Canadian population have found that discrimination may be at the core of these disparities.

### **Institutionalized Racism and Education**

Institutional racism consists of those established laws, customs and practices that systematically reflect and produce inequalities regardless of whether the individuals maintaining these practices have racist intentions. In a society where there is institutionalized racism there is little prospect for social and economic advancement of minority groups.

Despite Canada's commitment to multiculturalism, institutionalized racism persists. Integrating into a society where people are identified by racial and religious categories is problematic especially when discrimination based on these categories permeates every aspect of their lives. Of particular relevance to Muslim youth is the extent to which it is practiced and/or reinforced at various levels within the educational system.

## **Results of the Project**

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Youth felt the presence of racism and discrimination, in part through exclusion in various ways, including name calling and being left out. Youth feel they need to fight for rights which have already been given to them, but which are not being respected. Flowing from this misunderstanding and discrimination, there is a lack of trust between youth and the mainstream society in some instances. As some youth said, "We need to close the gap."

Youth commented on how challenging it is to get a job in Canada, how minorities get blamed for crime and other problems. When a Muslim commits a crime, their religion is emphasized, while that is not true for people of other faiths.

### **Finding a Job**

Youth in the focus groups reported mixed experiences when looking for employment, some positive and some negative. There were specific examples of discrimination on the basis of race and religion. The youth talked about how the jobs evaporated when they showed up to drop off their resume, or how the employer's tone changed when they gave their name. Some girls prefer telemarketing jobs because the customer cannot see their hijab or skin colour. They joked about how they used false names sometimes,

like Cynthia or Heather, because of the adverse reactions from customers when they gave their real names.

### **Stereotypes**

Stereotypes are not just an issue in employment. Negative attitudes confront youth in many settings. A young woman born in Canada is asked, in exaggeratedly slow tones, about whether she likes this country. While some people discriminate, the youth said, others try so hard not to discriminate that it's almost painful. In the view of the youth, these distortions are fuelled largely by the news media.

### **The Role of the Media**

Watching the news was one of the negative experiences identified by many youth, especially the young men. The media often portrays Islam in a very negative light and links all Muslims with terrorism, which distorts the truth and feeds the misunderstanding and prejudice which surrounds Muslim youth. People are presumed to be guilty because of their religion.

The youth viewed the media as one of the main contributors to stereotypes about Muslims. The coverage of terrorism emphasizes Islam as something to fear, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan highlight Muslims as the enemy. One young woman noted that when a soldier dies in Afghanistan "the world stops", but when civilians die in that country from the war, there is not even a mention of it. Many of the youth said they do not believe all that they see on Canadian media, and seek out other sources of information, including BBC and domestic news networks in their country or region of origin.

### **School System**

There were particular concerns raised about the school system, in which youth feel there is often a lack of sensitivity or understanding of Islam.

Three particular forms of discriminatory practice were identified in the literature review.

#### **Colour Coded Streaming**

The practice of colour coded streaming in schools is when a disproportionate number of racially and ethnically marginalized youth are channeled into lower, non-academic streams. The channeling of students from specific racial and ethnic groups into lower non-collegiate streams reproduces social inequality by constructing a framework that systematically differentiates, divides and distributes individuals into positions of advantage and disadvantage based on race and class divisions.

#### **Low Teacher Expectations**

Lack of encouragement and low teacher expectations are seen not only as compounding the effects of streaming, but also adding to already negative stereotypes of racialized youth. Low teacher expectations of racial and ethnic minority youth can lead to negative evaluation and bias in assessment as well as underachievement. These low expectations are informed by negative racialized

stereotypes and negative assumptions about Islam such as the notion that Islam doesn't value education for girls.

### **Hidden Curriculum**

Hidden curriculum in schooling is a process through which attitudes and behaviors of teachers and other school agents convey specific negative messages to students. These messages are often conveyed through a climate of preconceptions, which are fuelled by racial stereotypes. For example, teachers may convey misinformation or distorted views of Islam, based more on their own stereotypes than on accurate scholarship.

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## **Areas for Action**

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### **1. Curriculum and educational content**

Curricula should include information about all major religions. As part of this, students would be educated about Islam (core beliefs and teachings, artifacts, mosques, arts, poetry, culture, etc.) and about its contributions over the centuries. School libraries could contain more enriched sections covering different aspects of Islamic beliefs and culture. Parents could be asked to suggest or contribute books, and embassies of Muslim countries may also have contributions. Classes should educate students about other cultures, and language studies courses should be available to learn more languages.

School assemblies can be used to build common ground between students, to include Muslim students, and to educate students about each other's backgrounds.

Muslim students in each school could be encouraged to raise awareness by making presentations to their classmates to explain the lifestyle of a Muslim, and dispel certain myths, e.g. Haram; that girls don't sleep with the hijab and are not bald; that Islam does not endorse the oppression of women.

### **2. Clubs and programs for Muslim youth in schools**

After-school activities (sports, arts, photography, etc.) can be an excellent way to strengthen the sense of inclusion and pride of Muslim students. Sports activities for girls were specifically mentioned. A Muslim club can provide support to Muslims, and also be a way to involve non-Muslim students in better understanding Islam and Islamic cultures.

Homework clubs are a good way to support Muslim students to do well. This is especially important in difficult neighbourhoods. Community home helpers need to be recruited to assist the youth with their school work in these clubs.

### **3. Teachers**

Teachers must have more complete and accurate knowledge about the Islamic religion and culture, both in order to better understand their Muslim students and also to be able to teach other students about Islam and create an atmosphere free of prejudice in the classroom. This would include both religious understanding and cultural awareness.

Principals, teachers and all staff in schools need to speak on behalf of inclusion and acceptance of all faiths and all cultures. In addition, it is important to have Muslims in

positions of authority and as role models, including female role models, such as more teachers and principals who are Muslim.

#### **4. Supports for parents**

Parents need a supportive school system, including honest and frank feedback about how their children are doing, and suggestions on how parents can help their children succeed at school and cope with the pressures and work there. It is also important that the schools be free of bias and prejudice, both in their dealings with parents and especially in how students are treated.

More social workers and resource people are needed at schools; there have been many cutbacks to these essential supports for parents and students. There is a pastoral support group which is unique to Ottawa and has been helpful to many parents.

**5. Improve the overall education system.** There must be identifiable practices that make a school more inclusive, based on the schools where Muslim students report feeling accepted and supported (such as the schools involved in this project). Some of these beneficial practices have already been identified by students and teachers in these schools, and others can be pinpointed. Then these need to be shared throughout the school system.

The views of parents are also important in identifying positive practices. Three key supports that the parents listed from their own experience:

- a supportive principal,
- accurate information in the classroom about Islam, and
- openness to other cultures generally.

## **Relationships and Family Dynamics**

**Key Issue for Muslim Youth**

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“Family dynamics and relationships for Muslims living in Canada are complex issues because people of various races and ethnicities practice Islam. Naturally, with such cultural diversity, one can expect varied challenges that reflect the heterogeneous nature of Islam in Canada.” (CCMW, In Our Own Skin, 2001)

One of the areas of focus in this project was parenting and how that relationship affects youth's identity.

### **Parenting**

The most startling change and integration challenge to which parents have had to accommodate themselves is that their Muslim identities and those of their children can no longer be taken for granted. They now live in a world of competing religions, which translates into competing value systems. The value system of the secular west appears to be frighteningly at variance with their beliefs and traditions. The fear and concern of parents is whether it is possible to instill Muslim values and traditions in their children in a multi-religious secular world.

As the children more readily learn and adapt to the values of the dominant Canadian culture, it may lead to increased conflict between them and their parents. These intergenerational conflicts and misunderstandings often center on practices not common in Islam. Minorities in Canada may find that their traditional cultural and religious practices are interpreted differently, most often negatively by the majority society. The power dynamics may shift towards the children as they often have better command of English, are more aware of the social services available to families and often act as interpreters for their parents. In response to the new culture and multiple challenges, parents try to hold on to their religion and values. Many parents assume that their teenage children are lost because they see them experiment with styles of socialization, clothing and bring home habits and vocabulary of their new environment.<sup>63</sup>

Some Muslim immigrants to Canada find themselves deprived of the social structures, which encourage the practice of Islam and help them maintain their Islamic identity. Instead they find a culture where religion constitutes only a fraction of people's lives further complicating their transition. For some of these new immigrants the process of being a good Muslim in the West involves building walls around their community and finding relative isolation from the mainstream society. For others however, the process involves a gradual accommodation of traditional customs in society without losing what they consider to be essential to themselves as Muslims.

Parents want to be a positive role model for their children, and often find this hard in their circumstances. Parents are concerned about having enough time with their children and being there for them after school, while juggling work demands and financial pressures. This is exacerbated by the economic exclusion of new immigrants and their poor job prospects.

The lack of support systems in the community for parents in general and new immigrants in particular mean that parents often do not know what resources are out there or how to access them. Language barriers add to this difficulty.

Muslim youth see that their parents know youth are facing struggles and frustrations and try to help, but sometimes they recognize that their parents “don’t get it”, or are confused and not always sure how to support youth. Youth also acknowledged that they do not always accept the help offered.

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### **Areas for Action**

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Throughout this project, youth and parents identified the family as central to be able to develop a strong sense of identity. Key supports that are needed in the family were:

1. Communication is fundamental, and parents need to do what they can to create an open dialogue with their children. Trust is built through two-way conversations, and youth need to do their share in the communication by expressing their feelings and trying to understand their parents’ point of view. Specific suggestions are:
  - Greater support for parents to ensure that they have the ability and vehicles to maintain good communication links with their children at home and in the school.
  - Training in communication skills for parents and youth to build trust and understand each other’s point of view.
2. Both youth and parents need to be patient with one another, and have reasonable expectations. Family meetings help strengthen the bonds, and doing various activities together also builds the relationship.
3. Youth said it was important for them to help out at home and take their family responsibilities seriously.
4. Parents need to lead by example, as youth are very conscious of any hypocrisy or double standards. Youth indicated that the parents help them by providing guidance about how to live their lives, and by exposing them to important teachings, such as bringing them to Islamic lectures.
5. Specific supports for parents, such as a hotline for parents, or a resource centre for parents to get help and learn more parenting skills.

## **Key Issue for Muslim Youth**

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## **Violence**

## Violence

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Violence was one of the original themes of the project. Surprisingly, it was a topic that was rarely raised in the focus groups or at the conference. During the time of the project two significant events occurred that could have allowed for a further discussion on violence, yet the youth in particular did not use the opportunity to talk about it.

### **The two Issues:**

*The lock downs at the English school because of bomb scares:* The school chosen to do the English youth focus groups experienced a series of bomb threats in the first month of the school year. The result was negative media coverage about the composition of the school and the large Muslim population in the school.

*Aqua Parvez:* 16 year old Aqua Parvez died from strangulation in Toronto in December, 2007. Her father, Muhammad Parvez was charged with second-degree murder after police responded to a call from a man claiming to have killed his daughter. Initial reports indicated that Muhammad Parvez allegedly killed his daughter over arguments surrounding her refusal to wear a headscarf, or hijab. But others in the community, stressed that it was not just this issue that led to the killing but a more complex set of issues involving a clash of Canadian, Pakistani, and Muslim cultures that led to her death.

### **Hate Crimes**

Statistics Canada reports that of the 220 religious based hate crimes reported to police in 2006, offences against Jews were the most common, accounting for 63%. Crimes against Muslims accounted for 21%, while crimes against Catholics accounted for 6%. Some in the Muslim community, including Mohamed Elmasry, President of the Canadian Islamic Congress, feel that hate crimes against Muslims go unreported to police. It is also difficult to ask someone about their religion, thus skewing the numbers. "A Somali family who reports a hate crime, they might put it under black when it's supposed to be under Muslim," said Elmasry. "That Somali family should be under Muslim and not under black, because the motivation is really because the woman is wearing a hijab. It is easier for the hate crime unit to put the report under black because it's a visible minority." (Calgary Herald)

The Statistics Canada study also showed that hate crimes are most likely to involve young people, both as victims and accused persons. The rates of victims of police-reported violent hate crimes were highest among those aged 12 to 17 and 18 to 24 years. The rate of accused persons was highest among youth 12 to 17 years.

### **Violence Against Women**

Research by the Canadian Council of Muslim Women has found that almost one in three (30%) of Muslim women reported having experienced one or more episodes of discrimination or unfair treatment. This is most prevalent in the workplace where 64% of visible minorities reported encountering discrimination, 40% who experienced discrimination in a public place and 17% who reported discrimination when dealing with the justice system.

## **Areas for Action**

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1. Have safe forums in the Muslim community to discuss the violence directed to Muslim youth.
2. Document the violence in order to inform and educate service providers, police, schools and the general public.

Jasmine Zine, a well known female Muslim researcher and public commentator offers the following recommendations:

3. Introduce specific anti-Islamophobia initiatives into the school system.
4. Introduce a train-the-trainers program for Muslim and non-Muslim youth in anti-racism and anti-Islamophobia to develop their own youth-friendly workshops which they present to other youth in schools and community centres.