



# CANADIAN MUSLIM WOMEN AT THE CROSSROADS: FROM INTEGRATION TO SEGREGATION?

**CULTURAL RELATIVISM: THEORETICAL, POLITICAL &  
IDEOLOGICAL DEBATES**

**ISLAM & DECISION MAKING: THE EFFECTS OF RELIGION &  
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**A MULTITUDE OF SOLITUDES?: CANADIAN MUSLIM WOMEN &  
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*Equality*

*Equity*

*Empowerment*



Canadian Council of Muslim Women  
Conseil canadien des femmes musulmanes

# INTRODUCTION

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During the past several years, the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) has focused on civic engagement of Muslim women as a key to full integration into the social, economic and political life of the country. This focus comes from a concern that Muslim women's civic engagement is decreasing. It is becoming more acceptable for the public, the media and politicians to view them as the "other" or different from the rest of Canadian women, with very different and unique needs from everyone else.

In November 2006 CCMW held its annual conference in Ottawa to explore the phenomenon of real or perceived separation of Muslim women from mainstream society. Key to this exploration is a determination of how and why the separation may be occurring. What are the factors that may be causing it? Is it systemic or is it self-imposed? Has there been an evolution from Muslim women being integrated, participating members of Canadian society to being isolated, insular and apart from the mainstream society?

The conference theme, Canadian Muslim Women at the Crossroads: from Integration to Segregation?, was chosen to provoke discussion and address findings in the Council's report, *Engaging Muslim Women: Issues and Needs*. The report was based on a national needs assessment of Muslim women across Canada. It included results of an extensive survey and focus groups held with Muslim women in major cities across the country.

According to the report, Muslim women tend to be disengaged from the civic and political life of the country. They are also more likely to be absent from the labour market and tend to be more socially engaged within Muslim communities and less so in broader Canadian society.

Participants in the needs assessment were also concerned about a movement within Muslim communities to segregate women and the growing acceptance of such segregation within some segments of Muslim communities in Canada.

CCMW has also been concerned about the use of cultural relativism as a concept to accept cultural or religious practices that may be in conflict with Muslim women's equality rights. This became an issue during the debate regarding the use of religious arbitration to resolve family disputes in Ontario. CCMW's position against the use of legally binding religious arbitration in family law was criticized by some Muslims and non-Muslim activists and researchers. Critics felt that this position gave rise to anti-Muslim and Islamophobic sentiments and infantilized Muslim women. They insisted that Muslim women were able to make informed choices and decisions about the use of Muslim family law to resolve family disputes independent of their religious leaders, family or community pressures. The critics ignored CCMW's position on the influence of religious belief and family and community pressures on the ability of Muslim women to exercise their agency.

Further discussion and thinking on these issues prompted CCMW to commission three papers, "Cultural Relativism: Theoretical, Political & Ideological Debates"; "Islam & Decision Making: The Effects of Religion & Family in Muslim Women's Lives"; and "A Multitude of Solitudes?: Canadian Muslim Women & Rising Religiosity". The papers move us from a theoretical discussion to very practical issues of day-to-day lives facing Canadian Muslim women. All three papers touch on the issue of Muslim women's identity. Discussions on identity construction are poignant and significant in the first and last paper, and are essential for understanding how a particular view of Muslim women's identity is shaping public discourse and policy, as well as some Muslim women's own vision of what defines them. The second and third papers are based on interviews conducted with Muslim women of various ages

and backgrounds, as well as on secondary source material related to the issues addressed.

### **CULTURAL RELATIVISM: THEORETICAL, POLITICAL & IDEOLOGICAL DEBATES**

The concept of cultural relativism emphasizes the particularity, uniqueness and localism of cultures, ethnicities, nations, religions, among social markers, as experienced and shaped identities of individuals and communities. The authors contend that this is particularly significant for Canadian Muslim women, because of the implications it has for reducing their identity to their faith, seeing them as different from other Canadian women, and therefore, outside the reach of criticism or even solidarity. According to the paper the main thesis of cultural relativism is “that no value judgments are objectively justifiable independent of specific cultures”, implying that there can be no universal, essential human or social characteristics. The paper takes a feminist, anti-racist dialectical approach, which recognizes not only the particularity and individuality of each and every woman, but also recognizes the commonalities between women throughout the world and across all spectrums. This approach sees this universality and particularity both as inseparable from one another and as in conflict with one another. It emphasizes that it cannot be an either/or scenario.

Cultural relativism’s application and its consequences are illustrated in the paper through specific examples of the Muslim family law debate in Ontario and Quebec and the ubiquitous issue of the veil. The debates around these issues have been all the more heated as a consequence of the events of September 11, 2001. The paper illustrates how well meaning academic and public officials’ responses that rely on cultural relativism as a policy tool can result in further marginalization of Muslim women through intentional or unintentional systemic and individual discrimination. This often occurs because Muslim women are viewed as one homogenous group and religious accommodation is made based on common denominators that assume that

all Muslim women will want the same thing. This approach completely ignores the complexities of the identities of women and more specifically Muslim women.

As the state and other civic institutions deal with the issue of accommodating needs of Muslim women, the focus remains on their particularity at the expense of universal notions of equality and social justice. Cultural relativist thinking prevents one from questioning or scrutinizing cultural or religious constructs that may discriminate against Muslim women, lest it be perceived as intolerant or racist.

What is becoming pervasive is a particular identity of a Muslim woman: a veiled, one dimensional person who is defined only by her faith. This image is, in part, being promoted by some members of Muslim communities themselves who espouse a very conservative and narrow interpretation of Islam which insists that there is only one identity marker for a practising Muslim woman: a prescribed head-scarf worn in only one specific way.

While there is nothing wrong with putting into practice the tenets of modesty required in Islam, there is no consensus among Muslims around the world that there is only one such prescription. The one-dimensional view ignores universal patriarchal power dynamics that women must contend with as well as the complexities associated with race, ethnicity and social class that are part of the reality of most Muslim women in Canada and around the world.

### **ISLAM & DECISION MAKING: THE EFFECTS OF RELIGION & FAMILY IN MUSLIM WOMEN'S LIVES.**

The second paper explores social factors that influence Muslim women's decisions in their lives. The paper is based on interviews conducted with Muslim women from diverse backgrounds and focuses on six areas in their lives: 1) dating; 2) marriage and inter-marriage; 3) decisions about education; 4) work/ financial decisions; 5) divorce;

6) legal decisions, specifically seeking legal advice in Canada. The issue of identity is addressed through questions related to what it means to be a “good Muslim”.

CCMW was compelled to commission this study because of critics’ claims that its position on the use of legally binding religious arbitration did not respect Muslim women’s ability to make informed choices and decisions. The paper discusses the concepts of informed consent and choice and illustrates how the respondents in the study apply these concepts in making decisions about key aspects of their lives.

According to the paper, in legal terms, informed consent refers to a person’s agreement to act or to allow an action to occur that is “based on full disclosure of facts needed to make the decision intelligently,” which includes knowledge of the consequences and risks involved, as well as alternative decision.

What is interesting from the study is that in various situations, the respondents moved out of their family’s and community’s imposed boundaries, for example, dating someone who is non-Muslim, and then decided it was best to marry a Muslim because of family and community expectations and pressures. In a number of cases the respondents discussed their fathers’ influence on their educational choices. One of the respondents, who did not have a post-secondary education herself indicated that education for girls is not necessary. In this instance, her husband disagreed with her and wanted their daughters to be educated while she would rather they got married.

The findings of the study illustrate that informed decisions, consent and choices of Muslim women interviewees in the research are affected by the ideas, beliefs and expectations of their families and communities in various degrees. These family and community influences are so intertwined with religious beliefs and practices that it is

almost impossible to point out the difference. Both are equally important in the decision-making processes of Muslim women.

### **A MULTITUDE OF SOLITUDES?: CANADIAN MUSLIM WOMEN & RISING RELIGIOSITY**

The third and final paper explores the rise of a more conservative “puritan” Islam—a literalist, non-contextualised, text-centred interpretation of the faith—among Canadian Muslim women. It illustrates how this particular view of Islam contributes to a narrowing of Muslim and Canadian identity, and in turn promotes a disengagement of some Muslims from the broader Canadian society. In such situations, the relationship between the Muslim woman and mainstream society is purely functional i.e. they readily exercise the freedom of religion afforded by Canada, without fulfilling any corresponding obligations of citizenship. Ironically, those espousing “puritan” perspectives demonstrate intolerant and discriminatory attitudes towards other equality seeking groups—including Muslims who are different from them—yet they expect others to be tolerant and accommodating of them.

Through interviews conducted with Muslim women across generations, the paper traces the evolution of Muslim women from being a part of Canadian society in the 1960s and earlier, to being disinterested and disengaged from mainstream society by 2007. While there is variation in the opinions of respondents on issues such as polygamy, abortion, male/female segregation, it is clear that women of earlier generations had a more open and inclusive understanding of religion as opposed to their younger counterparts, or those who arrived in Canada in the 1990s and later. The paper argues, that this change is linked to the rise of Wahabi Islam, post 9/11 politics, the dynamics of Diaspora communities and globalization, and the pervasive “Us vs. Them” thinking found in Muslim communities and the larger society.

The paper also demonstrates how proponents of the Wahabi ideology have successfully positioned Wahabism as the ‘true Islam’, and have

thus discounted and delegitimized all non-Wahabi/Saudi expressions of the faith. In the course of three decades, the aggressive promotion of Wahabi Islam has led to a complete denial of the diversity amongst Muslims based on ethnicity, culture, local customs, language, life experiences, including urban/rural differences. Consequently, the emerging Muslim identity is rooted in a Wahabi view of Islam, at the expense of the socio-cultural diversity inherent to Islam. Through the examples of dress and language, it illustrates how the increasing acceptance of Wahabi beliefs is resulting in Muslims developing an exclusive, narrow Arabized view of their religion and their religious identity. This narrow identity has been constructed by the infusion of billions of dollars, by the Saudis, into global and North American Islamic and mainstream institutions.

Many of the respondents in the study accept practices, such as veiling as an irrefutable requirement of their faith. With the rise of a puritan interpretation of Islam, a movement is afoot towards insularity and rejection of all things “Western”, such as celebrating local holidays, participating in non-Muslim children’s birthday parties, participating in school concerts and theatrical productions.

This deliberate “opting out” or separation can only lead to distrust and further alienation of Muslim women and children from the rest, which in turn propagates stereotypes and misunderstandings and exacerbates the view of Muslims as the “other”. It increases the potential for racism and discrimination because it breeds ignorance and mistrust. It becomes a vicious cycle and the gulf widens. This is where the theory of cultural relativism may come into play where there is an acceptance that these differences are part of an individual’s religion and one must not question these behaviours and practices but must accommodate them regardless of how they may contradict other universal rights and freedoms.

The three papers provide much food for thought for policy makers, academics, individuals, and more specifically for Muslim women in the

context of current debates on the Canadian multiculturalism policy and increasing anti-Muslim and Islamophobic responses in public discourse and the media. Each paper affirms CCMW's concerns and provides direction for further work and action for the organization and others to address the challenges identified.

They highlight the urgency to address the issue of Muslim women's further alienation and marginalization which is occurring both at a systemic level through the application of cultural relativism and the influences of a monolithic, narrow interpretation of Islam at the individual and community levels. The gulf between Muslims and the broader Canadian society is increasing and is being filled with fear, fanning the flames of anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia. At this critical time we need to reach out to one another, not build walls around ourselves.