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# On Dominant Discourses about Canadian Muslim Women: The Need to Promote Peacebuilding

By: M. Anum Syed & N. Noor | February 2015

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## About the Authors

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Western discourse, the gaze on Muslim women has been a complicated mix of fascination, objectification and pity. Historical narratives, deeply entrenched in colonialism, have contributed to a problematic construction of Muslim women. As well, a current climate of increased war, surveillance, misinformation and political, cultural and religious clashes has and will continue to have a direct negative impact on the well-being of Muslim women in the East and the West. This paper focuses on this overall context and is inspired by some peacebuilding initiatives in North America. By relying on this concept of peacebuilding, we propose a framework that incorporates peacebuilding tools that can contribute to rectifying problematic discourses about Muslim women. Our recommendations focus on increasing Muslim women-led interfaith dialogue groups, knowledge networks and anti-Islamophobic campaigns as strategies that can highlight the accomplishments of Muslim women and promote a discourse which calls on society to advocate for their rights and social well-being in the West. This piece mentions each of these tools along with concrete examples as illustrations of gendered peacework being conducted in North America. It is our hope that our recommendations may inspire Muslim women leaders and their allies to continue to tie their community-based responses to peacebuilding work.

*“...Peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.”*

— *The Earth Charter*

As we were writing the final paragraphs of this piece, the Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS) Conference held in Toronto, Canada, 2014, announced a new and honourable initiative entitled "The Global Peace Initiative." The initiative calls for a summer period of no violence and bloodshed and is close to the spirit of Islamic tradition of promoting peace. Formally, the statement notes: "We ask everyone to join a unified call on behalf of all humanity, irrespective of their religious, ethnic or political affiliations..." (2014). Efforts such as this one serve as important steps to publicize the inherent relationship of the Islamic faith with the concept of "peace." Our piece is another contribution to this cause, as we propose a peace-based framework that incorporates Muslim women-led interfaith circles, knowledge networks and anti-Islamophobia campaigns as possible strategies to advocate for the well-being and rights of Muslim women in Canada.

Genuine peacebuilding in any society requires promoting peace and well-being for all communities equally. Canada's multicultural landscape has helped create this culture of peacebuilding by providing a safe haven for many immigrants escaping violence and persecution in their own countries. However, new global realities, such as a post 9/11 context, have led to instances of stigmatization, violence, xenophobia and surveillance towards the Muslim community. For example, there is a reported increase in anti-Muslim sentiments in some parts of Canada (Maclean's, 2013). Over the years, Muslim women in particular have been the subject of intense public scrutiny, media frenzy and political debate.

Several authors (Bullock and Jafri, 2000; Khan, 1995; Marcotte, 2010; Sharify-Funk, 2009; Watt, 2008) have scrutinized the media knowledge generated about Muslim women in general. For instance, Bullock and Jafri's work (2000) found that several media relied on identity and citizenship politics to frame Muslim women as "alien" and "scary" and outside of the mainstream discourse.

Thus, on one hand, this increased discussion about and fascination with Canadian Muslim women's identity, agency, rights and even their dressing preferences has contributed to their further marginalization and objectification. On the other hand, it arouses pity and sympathy for them. Yet, what is missing from the public discussion is the heterogeneity of Muslim women living in Canada, their own voices and perspectives about who they really are and what they actually want for themselves. Since Muslim women in North America face a unique and complex set of issues that are impacting their lives multi-dimensionally and the society they live in, these issues deserve a deeper and more inclusive understanding.

First, this article will highlight the ways in which a particular image of Muslim women has been constructed historically through colonial narratives and how these narratives influence our understanding of Muslim women and their issues in Canada today. Then, we will describe some recent incidents which have contributed to the current problematic discourses and violence against Muslim women in Canada. Finally we highlight some examples of Muslim women's involvement in interfaith and peacebuilding initiatives.

A question we ask ourselves in writing this piece is how a current culture that ranges from fear, scrutiny and objectification of the diasporic Muslim community and specifically Muslim women can be remedied? What tools can be used to create a space where Muslim women's well-being flourishes? We suggest the inclusion of a framework based on peacebuilding as a driver to create such a space. While there are a number a number of definitions of doing peacebuilding work, in general, it can be thought of as "...nonmilitary functions intended to restore or enhance peace within a given country or region (de la Rey and McKay, 2006)."

First and foremost, a peacebuilding-focused endeavour is well-aligned with the inherent principles of Islam which make it a religion of peace, as evidenced by the teachings of the Quran and the Hadith (Abu-Nimer, 2000; Osman, 2004). Second, while most peacebuilding work has a global and international connotation and focuses on post-conflict/war areas, there is value in promoting it at the local or community-based level by attending to individuals, families, neighbourhoods and communities. Furthermore, perspectives within peacebuilding such as "Human Ecology," with its focus on fostering

the sacredness of relationships between people and their environments, and dialogue (Goodman, 2012), open up the possibility of activities such as interfaith dialogues, anti-Islamophobia campaigns and humans rights/women's rights advocacy. Such activities, led by Muslim women, can be an important way to communicate to a wider Canadian audience about the lived experiences of Muslim women who are impacted by problematic discourses and misconceptions about them.

Finally, the growth and popularity of knowledge networks within peacebuilding work that bring together representatives from multiple sectors such as academia, government and the social sector (Verkoren, 2006) can be another possible way formally to assemble Muslim women leaders and their allies to discuss strategies for promoting the well-being of Muslim women in Canada. We return to these peacebuilding strategies after the proceeding discussion on tracing historical constructions of Muslim women and an overview of recent issues directly impacting Canadian Muslim women.

## Tracing Narratives of Muslim Women through Colonial History

Zine (2002) argues that the problematic constructions about the practice of veiling by Muslim women are not without a history. Rather, the preoccupation with objectifying the Muslim woman is deeply entrenched in a colonial history, and tracing this history reveals why there is a perpetual moral panic today about Muslim women's religious and personal identity symbols. To see this process at work, Zine (2002) traces historical European poems from the Crusades era that caricatured the Muslim woman character as a "noble-woman" who was "quarrelsome, overbearing...bold with a forward personality." This imagery is a stark contrast to the subjugated characterization of Muslim women we often see today.

Interestingly, in the travel diaries, literature, art, and photography of other men and women colonialists, we find a presumptuous and exoticized account of local Muslim women of that time who are described as peculiar, pitiful, subjugated and caged in harems (Ahmed, 1982; Bullock, 1999; Melman, 1992; Woldesemeit, 2013). These

characterizations were also an effort to contrast the European culture as superior and representing freedom (Alloula, 1986). One of the main purposes of perpetuating these ideologies was to entrench further the colonial presence in the Middle East and South Asia. Said's (1978) monumental work, *Orientalism*, helps explain the ideologies behind this process. Said (1977) refers to *Orientalism* as the "...Western attention to the Near East, an attention that includes academic study, imaginative literature, commerce, and attempts at geo-political domination." Furthermore, he defines the "Orient" as the "...stage on which the whole East is confined and on which the "Oriental" is backward and inferior (1978). As Zine (2002) argues, this narrative helped justify colonization as a pseudo-saviour of the "Oriental Muslim women" who needed to be "liberated" through de-veiling. miriam cooke's (2010) work highlights the implications of this narrative that emerged in the late 19th and 20th century, when many Middle Eastern countries called for Muslim women to "de-veil" in an effort to embrace Western culture.

## Recent debates impacting Muslim women

Issues related to Canadian Muslim women have often been politicized and sensationalized in the media. For example, in 2003, media coverage and an arguably chaotic and disorganized discussion around the possible inclusion of Islamic Shariah law in family dispute resolutions in the province of Ontario ignited a heated debate and huge outcry from feminist as well as non-feminist groups about how this would change and affect the rights and interests of Muslim women in the province.

In addition, there have also been attempts by governments and institutions to regulate religious symbols worn by many Muslim women such as the head covering commonly known as the hijab and the half-face-covering commonly known as niqab (CBC, 2012). For example, in 2011, the Federal Government of Canada prohibited the wearing of the niqab in Canadian citizenship ceremonies (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2011). And for several years, the province of Quebec has also revisited political debates questioning the legality of religious symbols (including the hijab and the niqab) in public spaces and whether or not Muslim women can wear them while accessing government services (CBC, 2012).

Given the continued political and legal controversies surrounding the hijab and the niqab specifically, a further discussion about these concepts is necessary here. While there is a growing preoccupation with the terms hijab and the niqab in public conversation, serious misconceptions continue to fester about these symbols. Part of what drives these misconceptions is a lack of clear understanding about these symbols, their complexities and significance in the lives of many Muslim women. Indeed, historically, there are multiple terms and definitions that are used interchangeably to describe the general practice of covering by many Muslim women. These terms include (but are not limited to) the abaya, jilbab and more generally, veil or veiling (Bullock, 2002; Haddad, 2007; Read, 2007; Ruby, 2006). Canadian women scholars such as Hoodfar (1997) and Atasoy (2006) note that Muslim women's act of covering part of their body such as the head or face is constantly subjected to the scrutiny of the male and the western feminist gaze.

In this regard, it is either understood as a backward practice of women's subordination in eastern cultures and religions or a clear example of Muslim men forcing their women to adopt a particular dress code as a way to control and oppress them. What is left out and ignored in these sensationalized accounts is the investigation about what these symbols might actually mean for a Muslim woman herself such as whether or not covering herself represents her own agency, emancipation, identity, or the freedom to practice her faith as she wills. It is important to remember that wearing the hijab or niqab may not be an automatic representation of a Muslim woman's subordination or oppression.

The culminating impact of superficial public perceptions about Muslim women's religious practices have been devastating as it has led to a growing trend of violence inflicted on Muslim women in some parts of Canada. In light of recent political controversies such as the debate regarding the visibility of religious symbols in Quebec's public spaces, there has been a sharp rise in reported incidents of hate crimes against Muslim women wearing hijabs including racist and religious insults, verbal and physical assault and harassment by strangers in public (The Globe and Mail, 2013; CBC, 2013). These circumstances indicate that there is an urgent need to explore how to create a social environment for Muslim women, their families, communities and neighbourhoods that follow the principles of healing and a systemic culture of peace.



## Implications for peacebuilding

What does the preceding discussion mean for academics, educators, researchers, and community organizers in our society today? Clearly, given the historical context and emergence of troubling incidents that are directly impacting Canadian Muslim women, there is a critical need for these and other groups to engage in some form of advocacy with and on behalf of Muslim women in Canada. As mentioned in the introduction, peacebuilding tools such as interfaith dialogues, human/women's rights advocacy and knowledge networks—led by, and in partnership with, Muslim women in Canada—are possible ways to generate knowledge about how to build a peaceful culture and environment for Muslim women within the Canadian Muslim community and also in the larger Canadian society.

The following discussion proposes possible actions that may be explored to achieve this goal. For instance, interfaith dialogues can be defined as "...an engagement between people of different faith traditions communicating about faith and issues of common concern" (Neufeldt, 2011, p.344). Neufeldt (2011) notes that this strategy can promote peace because it focuses on changing negative stereotypes about those who are from other religious backgrounds and broadens the number of perspectives who may be involved in the peacebuilding process.

In North America, many interfaith communities or circles (large and small) exist<sup>1</sup>. Some examples include the North American Interfaith Network, United Religious Initiative, Intercultural Dialogue Institute, Interfaith Calgary and the Toronto Area Interfaith Council. A scan of the websites of these and other interfaith groups indicate that they carry out a range of important and meaningful activities including providing resources that describe the commonalities in Abrahamic religions, exploring the role of peace in these religions, organizing dialogue circles, conflict resolution and readings of various religious scriptures. However, there still appears to be room for more interfaith initiatives in which a gendered perspective (i.e. a perspective which would allow Canadian Muslim women to lead and

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<sup>1</sup> **Disclaimer:** The authors are not affiliated with and do not endorse any groups and organizations referenced throughout this paper. Any examples referenced are strictly for illustration purposes.

participate in a discussion of faith and religious scriptures from a female perspective) is actively pursued.

Promisingly, a cursory search for such initiatives did result in some examples. One such example was a two-day seminar, entitled "Women's Interfaith Initiatives After 9/11", held at Harvard University in 2007<sup>2</sup>. This event aimed specifically to discuss the rise of women-led interfaith initiatives after September 11th 2001 and included participation from several female Muslim academics and community leaders. Such types of gatherings can be one way to demonstrate to other faith communities and the larger Canadian society about how Muslim women in Canada interpret their faith and how they utilize it to promote peace.

Furthermore, given that there is ample historical and contemporary evidence of Muslim women who already act as peacebuilders, agents of change and global and community leaders (Kadayifci-Orellana and Sharify-Funk, 2010), there appears to be a great need for stakeholders such as academics, researchers, activists, community developers, practitioners and policymakers to collaborate to create more streamlined ways to elevate and widely disseminate the existing voices of Canadian Muslim women. Thus, combining the characteristics of interfaith dialogues with knowledge networks opens up the possibility of bringing together multiple stakeholders who may participate in knowledge production and dissemination related to the faith experiences of Muslim women in Canada. Such groups, spearheaded and composed of Canadian Muslim women from a multitude of fields such as education, the social sector, government, religion and media can be another way to achieve what Zine (2002) calls more "authentic" modes of representation that serve as counternarratives to troubling historical and contemporary representations about Muslim women.

There are examples of such groups forming (either one-time or ongoing) which have explored the intersections between religion/faith, women and peacebuilding. Some of these initiatives have taken the format of a conference such as the "Women, Islam and Peacebuilding" Conference hosted by the Centre for the Study of Religion and Conflict,

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<sup>2</sup> More information available at: <http://www.pluralism.org/events/view/59>

Arizona State University in 2010<sup>3</sup>, which aimed to explore many issues including the role of peace in Islam and Muslim women's roles and agency in peacebuilding. Other formats have been formal gatherings such as the "Women in Religious Peacebuilding" symposium which was hosted by the United States Institute of Peace, the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), and Georgetown University's Berkley Centre for Religion, Peace and World Affairs in 2010 and included practitioners, academics, and policymakers exploring how women with ties to religiosity fostered peace-based work<sup>4</sup>. Another is a panel discussion entitled "Muslim Women Peacebuilders"<sup>5</sup> which was held at the American University in 2009 and included Muslim women peacebuilder panelists who discussed Muslim women's contributions to local and global peace.

In terms of participants, while most knowledge networks (or any other initiatives that bring together individuals from different fields) tend to include representatives from academia, government and the social sector, it may be worthwhile to ensure that the viewpoints of male and female religious leaders are included in such gatherings. An active approach to consider both genders' perspectives may help overcome the common misconception of the supposed oppression of Muslim women in their communities by male figures.

Finally, and perhaps the most important element of such interfaith and knowledge generating groups, it is important to compile and disseminate the results/findings or conclusions of such conferences/seminars. It may also be worthwhile to create anti Islamophobia advocacy and media campaigns which publicize the findings of these discussions in concise sound-bites. This may be especially vital, given that Zine (2002) acknowledges that mainstream understandings of Muslim women today are fuelled by representational politics which re-colonize knowledge production about those whose voices are silenced. In these circumstances, utilizing the media through strategies such as public service announcements (PSAs) may be one way for feminists and anti-colonial

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<sup>3</sup> More information available at: <https://csrc.asu.edu/index.php?q=programs/conference/women-islam-andpeacebuilding>

<sup>4</sup> More information available at: <http://www.usip.org/publications/women-in-religious-peacebuilding>

<sup>5</sup> More information available at: <http://www.american.edu/sis/islamicpeacechair/Muslim-WomenPeacebuilders.cfm>

scholars of Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds to create a space for Muslim women to speak for themselves. This also ties well with Linda Smith's (1999) reminder to adopt a decolonising approach in research, practice and governance in which the voices of those who have been oppressed and silenced are prioritized over privileged representations which may be encoded as the "truth."

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