

Influences on Young Muslim Women in Winnipeg: Preliminary Report on Key Informant Interviews

By Karen Busby and Sara Mahboob

This preliminary report on the key informant interviews was prepared for circulation to key informants and others in order to receive feedback. This report should not be cited or referenced unless its preliminary nature is also noted.

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‘That typical stereotype’: Introduction

In our cultures we don't talk a lot of ourselves, we don't brag about ourselves. [One of the visions I have] is to maybe get a database of all these women from this background that they are very much proud of their identity as a Muslim, like myself, but yet we don't fit in that typical stereotype that people think about.

Key Informant

Purpose of this Research

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, Islam transitioned from obscurity to notoriety in the Canadian psyche. Muslim women came to be perceived as subjugated women in need of protection by the Canadian state. Legislation was introduced to prohibit headscarf wearing women from public employment or accessing public services; arranged marriages were more closely scrutinized by immigration officials; restrictions were placed on private ordering of family matters; and moral panics ensued about polygamist marriages and so-called honour killings. Most recently the federal government is poised to bring into force the *Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act* which is aimed at detecting and criminalizing marriages that are forced, polygamous or involve minors. The need for such legislation is questionable as such acts are already criminalized in Canada. Yet even as these perceptions ascended, it also became clear that there is little empirical research on the lives of young Muslim women living in Canada, including research about whether such marriage practices exist.

The community of Muslims who have immigrated to Winnipeg from South Asian countries (Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and Bangladesh) and their Canadian-born children is small but growing.¹ For this research we interviewed key informants to determine the influences on young Muslim women in this community when they make important life decisions related to post-secondary education, employment, religious identity and practises, marriage, having children, divorce, immigration and citizenship, and gendered violence. The preliminary results of this research are set out in this report. We are circulating this report to all key informants with an invitation to provide comment on it.

The key informant research is the first part of a larger project that aspires, among other things, to weave together the insights pulled from various research methodologies to create a richer tapestry of the lives of young Muslim women. This research focusses on the potential for discrimination at the axis of religion, gender, age-related vulnerability and race or ethnicity. Such research contributes to more self-awareness and broader community (Muslim and non-Muslim) awareness. It also provides information to social service providers to help them make better decisions and provide more appropriate services. It can also sensitize politicians, policy makers, judges and others involved in the administration of justice about whether they rely on stereotypes or discriminatory thinking when making laws or policies that touch on the lives of young Muslim women.

Purpose of the Preliminary Report on Key Informant Interviews

This preliminary report on the key informant interviews was prepared for circulation to key informants and others in order to debrief and to provide an opportunity for feedback. Please circulate it if you wish. We do not make recommendations in this report; that was not our preliminary research objective and, in any event, would be premature since informants must first have an opportunity to respond to this report. This report should not be cited or referenced unless its preliminary nature is also noted.

We welcome feedback from informants and others on this report. (The email to key informants inviting feedback is attached as an appendix to this report.) In particular, we welcome feedback on the following questions:

1. Is there anything in the report that strikes you as inaccurate?
2. Do you have any ideas on what we should do next with the report?
3. What areas, if any, do you think we should focus on in the next step of our research? At the end of some chapters we have posed some specific questions about potential areas of future research.

Feedback can be provided by email or telephone either to Karen_Busby@umanitoba.ca (204-474-6155) or sara.mahboob@mail.mcgill.ca

Methodology

We rely on four methodologies, subject to funding, to examine the lives of young Muslim women:

- **Key informant interviews:** We conducted 15 key informant interviews in the summer of 2014 focusing on their perceptions of family and community pressures placed on young women when making important life decisions. The preliminary results are the subject matter of this report; we are now seeking feedback on the results. Most of the key informants are willing to be interviewed again in more depth and more key informants have been identified. In the second round of interviews, we will focus on the areas where the initial results are most interesting.
- **Case law review:** We have started—but not yet completed-- an analysis of all Canadian case law (especially family, criminal, and immigration) where young Muslim women are key participants to determine judicial perceptions of whether and how these women experience family and community pressure. While racial, religious, and ethnic identity is often stripped out of formal judicial reasoning (for example, judges' reasons for decisions in sexual assault cases almost never refer to these identifiers when describing sexual assault complainants) we found more than 250 cases where a young woman's identity as a Muslim is mentioned. Therefore we limited the initial case law review to gendered violence cases only. We hope to expand the review to analyze family, other criminal, immigration and citizenship and other cases.

- **A literature review:** We have gathered and will synthesize other qualitative studies on Muslim women in Canada and socio-legal academic writing on laws that have a particular impact on this group.
- **Focus groups:** In our initial summer project, we decided not to do focus groups with young Muslim women because we had concerns about potential vulnerabilities. We now believe, based on our observations of the community and comments from key informants, that these vulnerabilities are not so serious as to preclude focus group research. Small focus group sessions with young Muslim women will explore how they experience family and community pressures when making important life decisions.

The key informant interviews involved 15 service providers, advocates, educators, criminal justice personnel and other community members who have reliable information about the experiences of young Muslim women pertaining to important life decisions. All but one of the interviewees are South Asian Muslims living in Winnipeg and most are women. In order to protect confidentiality, informants' names and other biographical information are not used in this report.

Expert sampling is particularly useful where there is a lack of empirical evidence in an area and high levels of uncertainty. As one key informant said during our interview, "these are very difficult questions because really there are no statistics available to really know what's going on in this community. Because for the most part it's all good but how do you actually get to the bottom of the truth actually. It's really difficult." The sample size is appropriate for qualitative research, where the goal is "understanding and illuminating important cases rather than... generalizing from a sample to population."² Small samples are appropriate as long as the data is sufficiently rich to achieve saturation; this is enhanced when research topics are clear, research questions are relatively narrow in scope and interview questions elicit enough information from the participants.³

The first-round of participants recruited were people who are high profile, well known or known to us professionally because of their work. We initially contacted them by email. The second round of participants included people the first-round participants suggested we interview. Key informants were asked to participate in a face-to-face, audio recorded, loosely guided interview with one of the authors of this study. Each interview was 60 to 90 minutes in length at a quiet place mutually chosen between the participant and the interviewer. The interviews were conducted in English. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of Manitoba Joint Ethics Review Board.

About the Authors

Karen Busby is a professor of law and the director of the Centre for Human Rights Research at the University of Manitoba. For more than 26 years, her research focus has included laws relating to sex discrimination.

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Acknowledgments

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Summary of Findings

The key informant research is the first part of a larger project that aspires to weave together the insights using various research methodologies to create a richer tapestry of the lives of young Muslim women. This information contributes to more self-awareness and broader community (Muslim and non-Muslim) awareness. It also provides information to social service providers, politicians, policy makers, judges and others involved in the administration of justice. This preliminary report on the key informant interviews was prepared for circulation to key informants and others in order to debrief and to provide an opportunity for feedback.

‘Education is power’: Post-Secondary Education

All of the informants in the study agreed that postsecondary education is encouraged and expected by most families and the broader community for young South Asian Muslim women living in Winnipeg. A few noted however that a small number of people in this community have gender-based reservations about education for young women. Preferred areas of study include the sciences and some professions. Young women are under pressure from their family and community to do very well at their studies. As well they are expected to begin their postsecondary education immediately following high school in order to ensure that they complete their studies while they are still “of good marrying age”. Barriers to education include cost, weak English language skills and substandard primary or secondary education in their home country, and the lack of recognition of non-Canadian qualifications.

‘Certain jobs and certain kinds of milieus’: Employment

Almost all respondents noted that families and communities expected and encouraged young women to have strong workforce attachments. However they also noted that some husbands are not so encouraging. Desirable work includes the sciences, engineering, medicine, teaching and social services or charitably related work. Religiously-based concerns raised by some include: unacceptably close contact with men; the creation of a public profile which may violate modesty norms; immodest dress requirements; or violation of norms around handling meat. Just a few informants perceived that gender was a barrier to employment; more informants observed that ethno-racial background was a more important determinant of economic well-being than gender. But most informants were of the view that such barriers were not significant.

Muslim Identity, Practices and Stereotypes

Key informants spoke of pride in being a Muslim, the push-pull desire to become “more Canadian” and how this phenomenon affects relationships between more-established Muslims and recent immigrants and places demands on teenage girls. Their responses to questions touching on religious beliefs and practices ranged over a wide variety of issues. Perhaps not surprisingly given the prominence of the issue in political debates in Canada, all key informants spoke, often at some length, about wearing the hijab and most spoke of the desire to dispel stereotypes about Islam and terrorism and the treatment of women.

‘You always married a Muslim’: Marriage

Young Muslim women are expected to marry a Muslim of the same sect and same ethno cultural background. Marriages proposed or arranged by parents are still the norm, although young adults do seek opportunities to meet members of the opposite sex in the hope of finding a suitable partner on their own. The practice of returning to one’s “home country” to find a spouse, while once common, is now discouraged especially if the children are Canadian-born because such relationship often fail or leave partners miserable. However such marriages still occur especially for the children of more recent immigrants. Informants acknowledged that polygamous and forced marriages did occur but that these were extremely rare and were unsanctioned by most members of the community.

‘It is not the best thing’: Divorce

When informants were asked about divorce, their answers ranged over a variety of topics. For some informants divorce was nearly always unacceptable, for others it was not often the right thing to do. Almost all informants spoke to how shame keeps marriages intact and that, no matter what the reason for the divorce – violence, adultery, or fundamental incompatibility – the wife will bear the blame for the marriage breakdown. Informants also spoke about how difficult it is for Muslim women to obtain advice during marriage breakdown and about the confusion surrounding the applicable law – Canadian law or Sharia law--on the breakdown of a marriage.

‘We said dreams, no wars, dream, wish’: Immigration and Citizenship

South Asian Muslim women and their families immigrated to Canada to avoid difficult situations in their home countries, to enhance personal freedom, and to seek better opportunities. Difficulties faced after arrival include separation from family, difficulties in the push-pull between maintaining identity and integration, the experience of discrimination based on status as an immigrant, ethnicity or religion, and feelings of guilt, especially towards family members who have remained in the country of origin. While

there is some evidence that some marriages have been arranged in the past for the primary purpose of facilitating entry into Canada rather than as the foundation to start a new family, this practice is now uncommon. Muslim women want to become Canadian citizens not only because it confers democratic rights, but also it is a matter of pride and gives them a sense of security and personal power.

‘That is really secret space’: Responding to Violence Against Girls and Women

Almost all of the informants acknowledged that some South Asian Muslim girls and women in Winnipeg suffer violence or abuse meted out by their husbands. Most women respond to domestic violence by remaining silent or telling only those closest to them and whom they deeply trust and, when they do seek help, it might not be useful. Since the *Shafia* case, people are beginning to talk about domestic violence. The community is attempting to counter violence against women by increasing awareness; ensuring the availability of culturally appropriate services; and supporting research to better understand the problem.

‘Education is power’: Post-Secondary Education

Summary: All of the informants in the study agreed that postsecondary education is encouraged and expected by most families and the broader community for young South Asian Muslim women living in Winnipeg. A few noted however that a small number of people in this community have gender-based reservations about education for young women. Preferred areas of study include the sciences and some professions. Young women are under pressure from their family and community to do very well at their studies. As well they are expected to begin their postsecondary education immediately following high school in order to ensure that they complete their studies while they are still “of good marrying age”. Barriers to education include cost, weak English language skills and substandard primary or secondary education in their home country, as well as the lack of recognition of non-Canadian qualifications.

Expectations

Most people interviewed agreed that postsecondary education for South Asian Muslim women in Winnipeg is encouraged or expected. This finding is consistent with other research which establishes that Muslim women are more likely to have post-secondary education than other women in Canada. Daood Hamdani’s analysis of census data from 2001 shows that one-half of the adult female Muslims (aged 25 years and over) have post-secondary education; nearly one in three have university education, as compared with a figure of one in five all Canadian females.⁴

While many acknowledged that women have a specific role in society and within families, they are still expected by their parents, friends, and communities (although not always their husbands) to get post-secondary education.

Education needs to be provided for everyone, you’re absolutely right.

I haven’t seen very much of young South Asian Muslim women being discouraged [from post-secondary education]. That’s actually, I would say, is an aberration.

My parents always taught... that education is power. Education is something that no one can take away from you regardless of if you decided not to do a career with it.

I think that with the South Asian community, when women enter their educational careers, they are encouraged quite a bit and it’s not only from their immediate family but also it’s from the extended family, community family and people external to the Muslim membership, if you will. There’s a great deal of equality promotion in Manitoba so I see that as being very positive.

First of all you have to build their confidence... Since she's been very young... You have discussions with her, That first of all, she should never settle for second best. She should never sell herself short. She should try to do the best she can do in anything she does....

One informant noted that families will send their daughters to Canada so that they can get an education; something that might be difficult at home. She stated that "in Muslim countries... we have to travel with our Mehram [Male guardian of girls or women, usually a father, husband, brother]... here that was not a problem. Maybe for some young ones it may be a problem. But some of our families in our country, they just trust their girls and their daughters to come here and get educated."

Three informants acknowledged that some members of the community have gender-based reservations about educating girls and young women:

So sometimes, it depends on which culture you come from, so the priority is being given to the boys. That certainly affects the girls and the women's education.

More girls are studying so the boys are not getting work. The girls are more educated and boys are not and that is another issue.

I was encouraged to be independent or be self-reliant... I have other friends... that I grew up with, where it was the exact opposite, where they were encouraged to be dependant.

Parents are the most significant influence on their daughters' decisions respecting postsecondary education. Parents want their daughters to be educated. As one informant stated, "what I know is a lot of Muslim families that I have come in contact with, they seem to be providing opportunities for women and this is their daughter the younger women to educate themselves." Another noted that, "What I've observed is there has been pressure and support. You're going to do this then you're going to be supported for your first degree to go do this. You're going to live at home be completely supported to do this and you're going to be encouraged to get an education."

Parents are not reluctant to express opinions on their daughters' choices but at some point, they recognize that she needs to make her own decisions. According to one informant "because the daughter wants to do something wrong it's the parents' job to say, "no that's the wrong thing to do. And that's what we are here to do". And until they hit a certain age at that time, the way I look at it, is when my daughter hits a certain age, at that time I have done my job to show her right from wrong and at some point I've got to allow her to get out there..." Another key informant noted that "The parents have certain dreams and expectations from their daughters and the family and if it's not going in accordance with the parents' views they may actually not, they may get some pressure from their parents. So is it happening? I'm sure it is. But is it happening just for Muslim women? No, I think happening across..."

Young women are under serious pressure to pursue postsecondary education immediately after high school graduation. Informants recognized that there are good and bad aspects of “being forced into making a decision early.” As one informant noted, “there is that very real expectation of getting into university getting a degree fast because marriage is also a very key component. (Laughs) I think, for us. We don’t have the time in life of taking a year off and then just go and do whatever. We are supposed to get our professional house in order quite quickly while we are still in our 20s so we are of good marrying age.” Another recognized that the right decision needed to be made soon after high school because “for young women it seems that this is your time, because there is no real guarantee that you will have the opportunity to go back and change your career after marriage.” One asked what could be done to combat this pressure.

Another pressure placed on young women by their families and communities is the pressure to succeed.

Pressure can have positive and negative aspects to it. So if you are encouraged to pursue post-secondary education, whatever you choose that’s beneficial. I’ve seen that and yet I’ve also seen the flipside of that as you must get As and A+s in post-secondary education. Because, if you fail, you are reflecting poorly on our family is what I’ve observed and heard.

I think in some respects... [pressure] is helpful, but I think it depends on how much or how significant the pressure is. I think a little bit of pressure is always a good thing to aspire or to encourage. That’s the thing, some of the pressures that I experienced, I would see as a positive reinforcement or positive encouragement and in other situations depending on where it was coming from, it could be seen as a little bit negative. If the pressure was higher, so I think [its] the level of pressure that makes a difference as to whether or not it was positive or negative. As far as the community goes, I would probably say the same for the community, as well, positive in some respects and negative in others. I also think it depends on what life experience the person has had. Some individuals are leaders. Some individuals are followers...

Most Muslims living in Winnipeg were either born in another country or their parents immigrated to Canada. There are very few second-generation adult Muslims in Winnipeg. Those who commented on this issue noted that, as immigrants, they are very conscious of the need for education for their children. One informant noted that “definitely there is some pressure, especially among immigrant families, for their kids to do well. And from well, I mean *really* well! It means high income earning professions. And there is a bias, I would say definitely towards the sciences and, of course, the medical profession.” In a similar vein, others said,

One of the things immigrants have in mind is to have education for the children. I know most of the community; their children are doing very well. Especially with women, I don’t think we have any issues in that regard.

If new immigrants] are educated, for sure, and it makes a huge difference, like how well educated you are makes a huge difference. Like more educated and particularly the women how well educated they are makes a difference in how they are integrating in between [established and new Muslim immigrants].

For a lot of newcomers often times they are the first person or could very well be the first person in their first generation or second generation of family structure that has the ability to attend an educational institution. So there are pressures. But I think it's similar to that of any group. I think there are a number of Stats Can research...that basically point to the fact that women and [the] general population entering post-secondary education is higher in first and second generation immigrants than it is for the population at broad. So I think we're doing some very good things with that.

The "Muslim community" also encourages postsecondary education, as these interview excerpts revealed:

In the Muslim community more recently there is a lot of focus on economic integration and so their jobs, they're trying to support the family. The connection to the Muslim community may be at the mosque and so everybody, the life happens at the mosque. Everybody knows about everyone. That's the thing you do, you talk about your children and so people hear what's going on. And every one of the children in the community are reflective of the community. So there is, it is a bit of a small community that knows everything that's going on. So there's pressure if you are a young person is what I've observed.

What is interesting there is that sometimes the community can put pressures on you not as an individual, as a Muslim woman but on your family... and sometime they don't even approach you. I think this is more common for women than men, at least in my own experience...where the family would be approached maybe by the members of the community...specific members of the community who might not be family members...so maybe there was a suggestion to maybe their daughter shouldn't consider going into such and such profession, maybe because that was inappropriate for women. So very very different views...parents would take in that information but it was in and out of the ear...but other families would face a huge obligation with the embarrassment element to the family...so very difficult.

The province has many programs that encourage both ethno-cultural organizations to do their own job fairs and their own post-secondary outreach workshops to encourage people from all levels to attend and basically get educated

If parents and community members are broadly supportive of postsecondary education, some informants noted that some husbands may be less supportive. In some cases this might influence parental attitudes towards education. "In some [but not all] families it is

difficult because parents might say ‘if you will be more educated it will be hard for you to get married because the men are not that educated. They want their wives not that much educated because if the woman gets more educated they think she will not be in their control.’” Others noted that “when a woman wants to go to school, she has to think about many issues, for example, if she has a child, she has to think about the child. If she has a husband, she has to think about the opinion of the husband. Agreement. He is agreed to my studies. That is a big issue.” And another noted “especially for my community, they feel pressure. One of my friends, she wanted to go for studies and job but her husband said ‘no this is our time to have another issue, another child’. So she couldn’t and she was very sad.”

Program Preferences

Most informants stated that Muslim girls are expected to go to university however a minority of respondents noted that it would be acceptable for girls to take training in the trades. One said, “I think it is something that is a positive pressure to encourage girls and women of South Asian Muslim descent to attend schooling no matter post-secondary, trades, etc. Although some of the barriers that may be put in place for women are similar to that of women in general entering the trades and what not.” A more typical response was along these lines: “Education is extremely important within the Muslim community so most young women have the expectation to be going on to university in particular. So it’s not even just technical college.”

Many informants noted that there is a strong preference for women to enter the sciences. These responses are typical explanations of this preference:

What I’ve observed in conversations with community members I think there’s this standard, the standard/stereotype of sciences. Women must go into sciences, anybody must go into sciences, and excel in it specifically medicine and pharmacy is what I’ve observed or other status oriented kind of education that’s the norm.

Certain professions are valued more than others and, like professional affiliations like being a doctor, engineer used to be typically two... Even now in many families that are more traditional and there is more value attached with that....

Only a few informants were of the view that women could choose whatever kind of work they wanted to do. One stated, “I have seen the girls from Winnipeg, they are Muslims, but they are going in every field. The women in Winnipeg who are Muslims, you also seeing them pursue different professions.”

Social status and income earning potential were top of mind for many informants on the issue of the kind of postsecondary education that was desirable, but other considerations also came into play. For some, it was inappropriate for women to have a public profile, but others saw this norm changing. For example, one informant stated, “In the culture where I come from, there is a lot of pressure to go into a specific profession, or to choose not to go

into certain professions... any profession that deals with being more outspoken.” Another said that, “People are seeing that you can be famous and well known without actually being discredited or having bad reputation. Ultimately it is the family name that should not be tainted in any way so any work... that is always discouraged and parents will not encourage that, because they also feel that... what kind of face will I show in the community. You know that is a very important consideration.” For these reasons, professions such as journalism, modeling or acting would be discouraged in some, perhaps many, families.

Barriers to Education

A number of barriers to education related to family or community support identified by informants included lack of money, poor language skills, weak primary and secondary education, difficulty in having non-Canadian credentials recognized and the pressure to succeed. We will consider each of these barriers in turn.

Only two key informants identified cost as a barrier to education. One observed that the barriers would “be very similar to those of any other group and that could be socioeconomic, poverty, how to make things work. If you’re a newcomer the pressures are going to be similar to other newcomers in terms of paying off transportation loans.” Another noted that there is a range in the community “socially economically speaking so what may be norms changed based on many variables.” Some informants noted that one aspect of strong family support is the expectation that families will provide the financial support necessary to ensure their daughters get an education.

A more serious problem is weak English language skills especially for someone who migrates as an adult. “Sometimes the language, if you come from a country, like if you come from Pakistan, you're Pakistani origin and you've been, English is part of your [primary curriculum]... So how do you come here and learn the language. It's very intimidating... So that would prevent women from going to school.” “They were doctors and they wanted to be a doctor here. But you know that language stopped them because you have to have the language to pass the tests.”

One noted that some women have weak primary and secondary education: “Over the years, war and conflict prevented [young women from getting an education]... But... in Canada [when people] come from war zone country... and their education had already impacted due to war and violence and conflict and lack of security.”

A few noted the difficulty in having non-Canadian credentials recognized. “If you’re a newcomer the pressures are going to be similar to other newcomers ...it could be qualifications recognition, any one of those things.” “There’s an issue with systemic policies and programming on qualifications recognition, perhaps there’s discriminatory practices in how the tests are done. So it couldn’t specifically be, it may not specifically be, because of ethnicity. Or women (laughter).” “Many of them are educated women. Come here, they would not acknowledge their [credentials].”

Further Research

What areas, if any, do you think we should focus on in the next step of our research on the issue of postsecondary education?

We would like to do a series of focus groups with young South Asian Muslim women. Questions for this group could include:

Do you feel undue pressure to complete your education early in order to get married?

Do you perceive this pressure to be a problem? If so, what can be done to combat this pressure?

Do you feel constrained in making decisions about program choices?

‘Certain jobs and certain kinds of milieus’: Employment

Summary: Almost all respondents noted that families and communities expected and encouraged young women to have strong workforce attachments. However they also noted that some husbands are not so encouraging. Desirable work includes the sciences, engineering, medicine, teaching and social services or charitably related work. Religiously-based concerns raised by some include: unacceptably close contact with men; the creation of a public profile which may violate modesty norms; immodest dress requirements; or violation of norms around handling meat. Just a few informants perceived that gender was a barrier to employment; more informants observed that ethno -racial background was a more important determinant of economic well-being than gender. But most informants were of the view that such barriers were not significant.

Expectations

In 2004, Daood Hamdani’s research showed that

...less than one-half of the eligible Muslim women participate in the labour market -- substantially lower than the national average of 60.5 per cent. Only the Hutterites had a lower participation rate. However, signs of change are slowly beginning to appear, partly as a result of changes in attitudes and partly because of changing demographics. The Canadian-born younger women or women who grew up in Canada are less encumbered by the social norms of their immigrant mothers, and tend more to join the labour force than their older counterparts. As the proportion of the native-born Muslim women continues to increase, Muslim female labour market participation rate will rise.⁵

Our study does not capture quantitative data the way Hamdani’s work does. However our data does support her observation that “signs of change are slowly beginning to appear.” According to our informants, most young South Asian Muslim women want to be employed and, for the most part, their families and community members expect and encourage them to have significant workforce attachments. As one of the informants noted, “A majority of Muslim women are going to either [English language] classes or they are eager to find a job... Yes they want to be proud of themselves and then they see role models in the community.” A number of the informants noted that the Prophet Mohammed was married to a businesswoman, Khadija.

One informant noted government support for workforce attachment stating that:

At the policy and programming level the province has many programs that encourage both ethno-cultural organizations to do their own job fairs and their own post-secondary outreach workshops to encourage people from all levels to attend and basically get educated. In terms of negative pressures, it would be very similar to those of any other group and that could be socioeconomic, poverty, how to make things work. If you’re a newcomer, the pressures are

going to be similar to other newcomers in terms of paying off transportation loans; it could be qualifications recognition, any one of those things.

We asked informants whether husbands have a role in determining whether a wife works and what kind of work she takes on. This question elicited a variety of responses; it is clear that this is not a matter on which there is any kind of community consensus but rather it is a decision that is made by a husband or between a husband and wife. One informant observed, that “I think majority of men don’t want women to work... actually but then the economic need compelled them to.” In contrast another stated that

So there are people who are going to be very traditional in their values and some people who are going to be more progressive. In Manitoba I would say the majority of people are fairly progressive or I shouldn’t say one over the other. There are people who are allowed or that space of women having children and having a career at the same time. Although I can say there are some pockets that we do have where after a woman has completed her educational studies, been in the career for a couple of years when she and her family chooses to have children that she takes on the primary responsibility.

Another woman received advice from a friend shortly before she married, noting that

This was before I got married, a friend would have conversations with me... he would say “make sure in your marital contract, that you include the provision to be able to work,” or “include a provision to do this and this”...(laughs) I remember thinking to myself... *What?!?* The fact that he was that conscious of this, I was like “Wow!” So you can see the incredible variance! Here is a man, who in my view wouldn’t have a problem with a woman working, we never had any conflict in any shape or form in respect to that. But I remember thinking to myself that was an incredibly interesting thing to say and being surprised by it! So clearly it is out there, maybe somebody would have restrictions on being able to work...I’ve never heard about this amongst my friends.

Yet others were not surprised, and in fact expected, that their husbands would have opinions about the kind of work they engaged in. “I think, regarding job, if a woman is married, she waits for the permission and opinion of her husband. She can’t independently choose or go for the job, that is my view. And usually the husbands are not too much choosy, but at least they wait for their opinion.”

Most respondents were aware of situations where a woman was not working because her husband wanted her to stay at home, especially after children are born, even if she would have preferred to work.

I have a friend. She wanted for job, for studies. But her husband said “we have one child. So if you go to school or to work that you can’t take of our child properly.” So she couldn’t and she just followed the advice or suggestion from her husband.

Some also noted that some women who may have been initially reluctant to stay at home but ultimately did not mind.

I don't know of that as a problem but would that happen probably... A lot of women from the South Asian background that I know are quite happy in not working especially if they have a husband who is quite successful monetarily. For example, a doctor's wife, although they are qualified, and educated women themselves. They are quite happy staying at home and living a luxurious lifestyle!

Although I have some friends who themselves chose not to [work]. I don't know if it was 100% their choice, it could be there was an influence there. Because I definitely have friends... who I was sure go in a specific direction in terms of professional career but then they got married and that was it! It ended completely. They didn't work. And they are *happy*! I did have one friend who did tell me though that they stopped working and they were happy with it and were content with this decision but it wasn't 100% their choice.

Part of the expectation is that you have gotten all of your education and you've had a career but now is the time of the life to put all that aside and do for the family. And the frustrations that have happened or women have experienced going through losing their identity, and that happens with again regardless of the multicultural background.

Finally, a few observed that some community members feel that women should not have a job that has more status than the job held by her husband.

Yes, there's pressure to take certain jobs and certain kind of milieu, like more limited. It feels like from the outside like there's more limited chance to move up in some of the positions. The husband maybe wanting them to use their skills but in a more, you know, where they'll stay kind of lateral in the organization rather than have the opportunity to progress. My feeling is, you do not go above where they, the husband, is.

Employment Preferences

There is a high degree of consensus on what kinds of employment are preferable or acceptable and which ones are marginally acceptable or unacceptable. One sentiment expressed by some participants is that employment choices are "more about a status [than honour]. That's what it is... there's a certain kind of service to your community that is okay... I think it's a South Asian thing more so than it is a Muslim thing." More than one respondent noted that employment choices must not bring a slur upon the family name.

Acceptable professions include the sciences, engineering, medicine, teaching and charitable work. Informants summed up acceptable work as follows:

There are these pressures to take very much defined, respectable professions. You can be a doctor or you can be an engineer or you can be a professor, you can even be a homemaker, you could be an artist but the art cannot be provocative. You cannot be a comedian and swear that much. But the physiotherapist is ok. Being an airline stewardess twenty years ago is very different now. People are now teachers...the community is generally accepting of almost every profession.

A lot of women are in the service. We've got in the legal system, you've got in the government, we've got in NGOs, we've got informal leader, we've got social workers, they're all coming from the same background. They are kind of a hidden because they don't want to you know but we've got to make a time to celebrate these women.

Subsequent to that, when her kids are still young, there have been women who say, 'okay, if I take a paying job it has to be in line with charity, foundations, things that go back into the public good' but I wouldn't necessarily say that's a religious... I mean charity has always been something and children and families have always been something that's prominent in ethno-cultural [community].

While professions are preferred over the trades, trade work is acceptable, although some informants said that peers will pressure women not to take jobs in the trades. Many informants spoke about concerns with women working in jobs that might raise safety issues-- such as working a night shift alone in a store-- or have poor working conditions. All who spoke to this issue recognize that these are issues for all women regardless of their background. One informant stated that women would be discouraged from work that involved a lot of travel. While the strong preference for the professions over the trades is about status, rather than religion, some of the work that is seen to be marginally acceptable or unacceptable falls into these categories because of religious constraints.

Religiously-based concerns raised by some include: unacceptably close contact with men; the creation of a public profile which may violate modesty norms; immodest dress requirements; or violation of norms around handling meat.

For some women, working in close contact with men is prohibited. One informant stated, for example, "I'm just thinking even in the medical profession; maybe you could do research so you could be in library with your books but not on the floor." The degree of acceptable contact with men varies depending on one's level of religiosity; as one informant stated: "it depends on the level of observance, put them in an area where they would be around more men than women or where the dress would be something that would be not consistent with modesty."

Others see a change in the acceptability of working with or in close proximity to men. As the following interview quotes illustrate, some see the separation as a way of keeping women in marginal jobs and others reject the premise for separating men and women or see it as a religious gloss on a status matter.

[It used to be that immigrant women] were not well educated and didn't have any skills to go out. They used to work in the sewing factory and one of the reasons was that 80% women work in machine factory so; they are comfortable in that way because they work with other women...But in last ten years I have seen... Muslim woman are working in mix [company].

While the male dominated environments that I'm thinking the phrase of the expressed to me how females around the modesty. Women have the minds and hearts of desire they're supposed to be covered up and in modesty. You never try to put yourself around men who are because this I think this particular thing goes to South Asian and Muslims, it's your responsibility to make sure you're not desirable to the man because the men can't control themselves. Which is such a fill-in-the-blanks-of-negative-expletives.

I don't think a lot of Muslim families would see a job as per se a mechanic or something [in the trades] as to be specifically harmful but you may be working around a lot of men. So in terms of modesty it may be something that's frowned upon but again I do think it's probably more about status.

While working with men seems to be less of a problem now than it was in the past or less of a problem in Canada than in other countries, the ability to act and dress modestly is still an issue. According to a few informants, work that creates too much of a public profile, such as journalism, might not be appropriate. "In the culture where I come from, there is a lot of pressure ... to choose not to go into certain profession...that deals with being more outspoken...". Another informant stated:

Yes, there would not be much support for like say a professional dancer...or something that puts you in a position where you...have to do behaviour that are not condoned in terms of being morally acceptable though. So if you were an actress and you had to do a topless scene or you have to kiss another man or woman or whatever. It is not something that is going to be received very well. ...you could be an artist but the art cannot be provocative. You cannot be a comedian and swear that much.

There was disagreement, for example, about whether young Muslim women could work as lifeguards. Here are excerpts from the interviews of two different informants:

In Manitoba I do see a lot more young Muslim women... who have ...have pursued jobs that haven't been in line with what you would expect them to. Everything from like the soccer coaches wearing a hijab and full leggings and everything, lifeguards. They may have challenges, cultural challenges, but it works with them.

If they want to be a lifeguard or swim coach or something like that, there's no option for them to do it. You know if a young Muslim woman wants to play on a youth hockey team here we have that option, we have a commitment to co-ed. Oh yes there's a woman cricket player...

It is interesting to note that in both passages, the informant is noting a rapidly shifting environment; women can engage in sport, but there are still questions about some sporting activities, especially water sports.

Similarly, most who commented on this question reported that restaurant work or work as a flight attendant is acceptable as long as the dress code is respectful of Muslim modesty requirements.

So you look at a lot of these chain restaurants where the dress code is for a female to wear tight-fitted, bust showing, body showing clothing that would be poo-pooed or discouraged.

It should be noted however that restaurant work, as a status matter but not as a religious matter, was perceived to be frowned upon by the community.

But then again talking about the type of restaurant jobs and things like that I don't know if that would be a type of job that Muslim women, any Muslim woman (laughter) South Asian woman, Caribbean woman would take.

Finally, it should be mentioned that other religious rules may impede work. One respondent noted that she knew of someone who'd refused factory work because it might have entailed working with animal skins. Recounting the story she said "Somebody asked me, 'why don't you work in the factory?' They have the animal skin like this so I just thought it is not good for me because I have to touch the animals... I didn't go there and I don't know about that work but when I heard that it is that kind of factory, so maybe I have to touch all these things. I didn't feel comfortable and I didn't accept that job." And another noted that, "I know of some women who do not have great education. hey the easiest job for them to find is to work at McDonald's . But at McDonald's sometimes you're asked to cook bacon...and she might not feel comfortable doing that if she's a Muslim."

Barriers

A minority of informants were of the view that Muslim women face barriers in obtaining employment because of their gender, religion or perceived race or ethnicity. Just a few informants perceived that gender was a barrier to employment; more informants observed that ethno-racial background was a more important determinant of economic well-being than gender. One observed that "If you're born here, you're less likely in the second generation to be as financially viable or productive as your parents were. Whether you're a boy or a girl doesn't matter about your economic opportunity. Your ethno-racial background will determine your success in Canada more than whether you are a male or a female."

More commonly, informants stated that ethno-racial barriers did not exist for Muslims. Observations included:

We're talking about the continuum of empowerment yes I would say South Asian Muslim women are probably more empowered than some other groups in Manitoba but they're pretty high up on the empowerment.

They have resources and protections here afforded by laws and all those things.

I haven't had to face a lot of the barriers which other person might have to face. Even in getting the employment that I have here, by being visibly ethnic Muslim woman, where you would think that might be a barrier, has in my view not been a barrier to me.

And some even noted that they were surprised by the level of accommodation and understanding. One informant related that

Everyone [where I work]... knows that I'm a Muslim. When I started working here there weren't any Muslims that were working here before. So when we have certain events that take place at the office, they are very conscious to make sure to check with me that it doesn't land on Eid or any specific religious holiday, and I thought wow! And I remember one time by accident, they scheduled something and they realized they hadn't consulted with me in advance. I actually had the most senior person here take the time, to come see me in office and apologize, and I remember thinking *wow!*

I've been able to be openly Muslim, openly opinionated, openly vocal, not necessarily a quiet kind of person. I'm a very talkative person. I'm a very social person, I express my views and I'm a strong oriented person. I've been treated by the community and I just don't mean the Muslim community, all people [I connect with]..., as people just wanting to learn. "Tell me some reason behind it why you fast in this particular month", "tell me a little bit what Ramadan is about, tell me a little bit what Eid is about." I've been very blessed where people just wanted to be educated.

And another informant said:

Women in the South Asian community face a similar degree of pressure to that of other women in the ethno cultural community and that is because Manitoba does have this very unique ethno cultural community in that they are very integrated and tied towards each other. Not specifically speaking religiously although it could be through mosques and social observances of that nature but also just community in general. Because we have such a thriving ethno-cultural community here there's lots of means for integration as well....

Further Research

What areas, if any, do you think we should focus on in the next step of our research on the issue of employment?

We would like to do a series of focus groups with young South Asian Muslim women. What questions, if any, would you ask them about employment?

**‘Very close to their heart’:
Muslim Identity, Practices and Stereotypes**

Summary: Key informants spoke of pride in being a Muslim, the push-pull desire to become “more Canadian” and how this phenomenon affects relationships between more-established Muslims and recent immigrants and places demands on teenage girls. Their responses to questions touching on religious beliefs and practices ranged over a wide variety of issues. Perhaps not surprisingly given the prominence of the issue in political debates in Canada, all key informants spoke, often at some length, about wearing the hijab and most spoke of the desire to dispel stereotypes about Islam and terrorism and the treatment of women.

Pride in Muslim Identity

Repeatedly we heard informants say that they were proud to be Muslim. Moreover, they wanted to talk with both Muslims and non-Muslims about what their faith is about.

In our cultures we don't talk a lot of ourselves, we don't brag about ourselves. [One of the visions I have] is to maybe get a database of all these women from this background that they are very much proud of their identity as a Muslim, like myself, but yet we don't fit in that typical stereotype that people think about.

One of the identities that I'm very proud is being Muslim. Part of my identity because I see the world differently and this is why people outside that see me in my own community may say, ‘oh there's another worshipper of Islam.’ So we have actually conversation, we can have a debate and discuss and stuff.

Many informants saw what one informant described as “a gap between those people who are Muslims and south Asians who have been there for a while and those people who are newer in general. There seems to be not much socialization between those two groups.” Informants spoke about the fear that many Muslims, but especially recent immigrants have, of losing their religious or cultural identity and a push-pull tension about remaining true to their roots and becoming westernized. As one informant said, “People will never ask you in Pakistan or India whether you wear Hijab or whether you pray five times a day. But when they are here, people from back home particularly, will ask you “are you still Muslim?” Those kind of really shocking questions for some parents. So now they have this extreme pressure to maintain that identity.” Another informant expressed the tension this way:

And those few people, that are new, who kind of break into both the groups, those people are far more realistic about what it means to be in Canada and they don't put a sort of moral judgment. There are some people who come here, who are new, who have this idea that the people who have been here, have kind of

gone so far away from their cultural and religious roots that they are not worth meeting anymore and vice versa right. The people who are older here, are like well these people are new and they don't really know what it is like to be a Canadian. So there is that sort of tension and it is on from both sides and the people who can integrate in between often are able to wear both hats very comfortably. So, and they are educated, for sure, and it makes a huge difference, like how well educated you are makes a huge difference. Like more educated and particularly the women how well educated, they are make a difference in how they are integrating in between.

Note that this study was not designed to inquiry into the prevalence of various manifestations of Islam –from liberal to ultra-orthodox—in Winnipeg and none of the informants spontaneously spoke to this issue.

Religious Practices

Many of the informants spoke about the importance of a religious education.

You should speak Urdu and you know how to read the Qu'ran. You know the various religious important dates and stuff like that. You abide by them.

Because teaching of Islam is, usually, you rely on your parents... Usually you go to school. That you know Qu'ran. That's the expectation regardless if you know the meaning or the interpretation, but at least you recite it, right?

All the encouragement I was given, any information that was shared with me with respect to the religion and culture were things that I appreciated learning... So actually I can make more informed decisions because I understand where things are coming from... What is political, what is cultural and what is religious... The fact that I was educated on that... that I took the time myself researching, like reading the Qu'ran, and by reading of Hadith, helped me in my understanding of what I was told and what I wasn't told. Because the other thing too... sometime you will be given information that you think is correct, you never know until you read it for yourself.

A few respondents mentioned various interpretations of a Qu'ranic verse⁶ that could be read as supporting corporal punishment of wives and others spoke to the importance of knowing Islamic teachings. As one informant stated

“If she is very well educated and knowledgeable about the services available to her and I mean religiously educated too! I don't mean like western knowledge. Part of the problem is a lot of women are coming with very limited knowledge. Self-gained limited knowledge of what Islam's position is on many of these issues you know they hear things that it is ok. “He is the head of the family”

and “he can do XYZ and this is Islamic.” It is very is kind of... ‘God wants me to be in this position’”.

A few informants referred to Khadija, the Prophet’s first wife, noting that theirs was a love marriage (and moreover she proposed) and that she was a business-woman. Two informants observed that “paradise lies at the foot of the mother.” They also noted that the Prophet’s offspring to survive into adulthood were girls. One informant stated,

And also the belief that if we are strong believer “this is what Allah gave” [all girls]. But again you know if we use the haddis and what the Qu’ran says, what Prophet Mohammad says, Prophet Mohammad had all girls right... And from what I studied he loved his girls and when he became a prophet, he’s the one who actually gave a lot of respect and basically boost the woman's right because before that they put the girls' life to the old... [way that it should have been done].

Many informants spoke of the importance of going to the mosque and noted that failure to be seen at the mosque could result in “some indirect shaming for not conforming.” Perhaps surprisingly, they spoke of the mosque as a place for the community to gather to socialize rather than to pray; “the connection to the Muslim community may be at the mosque and so everybody, the life happens at the mosque.” One respondent noted that, “at home” (meaning the country where she was born) one prayed at the mosque “but in here so they go for socialization to the mosque. They are a lot of thing happening in my community and where is it, it's in the mosque. So that is something, that's a good thing, that's a positive thing.” In a similar vein, another respondent stated, “I don't go [to the mosque] for prayers, we can pray at anytime, anywhere we want. I think is so sure if you want to socialize, if you want to have it depends on the person's taste, right?” And one informant gave an especially interesting response stating that

When I came here many years ago a friend called me from United States and she said, “oh [name] you have to marry, you have to get ready and find somebody.” I didn't know why at the time she was pressuring me to have, she's you know a well-educated woman. She said, “you have to find somebody because after a year or two then you will have hard time to find the right, right man.” I was like... it was not priority for me to marry. I've got things to do. But she said “here you go, because that's what you do in the US, go to the mosque, find and meet the man there. I said “oh my god, mosque is to for praying not for dating but she said, “well that's how we find our husbands.”

Some spoke to minimizing contact between men and women, including at work (as discussed in the chapter on employment) and in other contexts. For example, few referenced a discussion which had occurred in the local mosque over partitioning of sexes, and one informant, who participated in this debate, stated that she “was also very conscious of not doing anything that would embarrass my parents...because that was important for me.” More commonly informants talked about male-female friendships. One noted that “young women “don't date because in Islam dating isn't a concept”. And another stated

that, “You don’t have male friends and socializing is kept quite minimal.” but she went on to make the surprising observation that practices in Winnipeg are stricter than practices in Pakistan.

Only a small number referenced the importance of prayers or fasting and no one spoke to social responsibilities such as hospitality or visiting the sick. Overwhelmingly, however, informants’ comments on religious obligations focused on the hijab and personal modesty.

Pressure to Religiously Conform

We asked informants whether young Muslim women face pressure from their family or community to conform to religious expectations. Some informants noted, as best expressed in this quote, that “in all Muslim cultures there is always pressure on women on how to live their lives.” Almost all respondents recognized that there is, at least, some pressure on all Muslims to conform to religious expectations; one said there was no such pressure. The forms such pressure takes range from self-imposed pressures to nonverbal signals to more overt expressions. Speaking to this range, informants noted, for example that:

Even if I’m less observant there is that society within, that family, cultural lens, the yardstick that I’ve been raised with. So even if I’m trying be Canadian and all that means, with all the rights and religion or rights and responsibilities that we have, everything, the freedoms, that we have there’s still that internal yardstick that people themselves use against themselves.

The written rules everybody know but then the unwritten rules you could just see it when you get into the community or families through their eyes or body language it’s been mostly communicated through non-verbal. If they don’t have the guts to tell you anything, but if they do then they are going to tell you that ‘oh, this is absolutely inappropriate.’

I know of people who have met more elder women in the community who kind of said, “why don’t we see you at the mosque more?” or done more of that kind of indirect shaming for not conforming.

... definitely, some of them I have had somebody told me that a woman came in to pick up her child... from the school studies inside the mosque and someone made a nasty remark at her.

It is worth noting that, in response to the specific question on religious conformity, no informant spoke of pressures such as public shaming or other forms of verbal abuse or the use of violence.

Those who spoke to the issue stated that pressure to conform religiously can be useful. One informant justified the pressures stating that, “it’s not shaming in that, “oh you bad person.” It’s a “you’re part of us and you’ve done something that has caused you to stray from us. Come back to us.” It’s part of the things that create a sense of belonging.”

Many recognized that the push-pull tension to retain their Muslim identity or to become more westernized is especially difficult for teenage girls. Said one informant, “I think there is lot of pressure in terms of being more moralistic you know like you are put under far more scrutiny if you are a Muslim girl versus a Muslim boy. I don’t mean, like, it’s not there for Muslim boys, ‘it is’. But there is lot more concern about young girls... particularly since 1990s I would say.” Informants noted that, regardless of the level of observance, “that ‘honour thy mother and father’ stuff is still there”. Families and communities expect girls to dress modestly, avoid interaction with young men, and to do well at school. This observation by one informant captures these expectations:

I've personally known of a lot of girls who were not covering their head back home but when they came here as immigrants their family pushed them to wear the head covering because of this fear inside the parents that the girl when she would go out and you know meet people from different communities and she might want to marry down the road a non-Muslim, this head covering would kind of remind her all the time that she's different.

One respondent made the interesting observation that Pakistan is more “western” than Canada:

Here, you don’t have male friends and socializing is kept quite minimal and the reality is in Pakistan it is not like that. Like I can speak to Pakistan, it is not like that it is totally different. They are far more western in this... sort of socializing and everything then the groups that are here. I have been told myself that when I went back recently that I noticed that there was so much free movements between male and female and people were openly talking about boyfriends and girlfriends and I said ‘oh my gosh this is not the culture.’ So it is different and I think there is that sort of pressure coming from both the community as well as internally, yes.

A reader of a draft version of this report, a young Muslim who came to Canada as a teenager, noted about this quote that “This is very true and I have seen in my own family and other immigrants around me where back home, we had much more freedom than we do here. Parents forbid lots of things they would not back home because of the fear that their kids will lose their culture.”

For teenage girls who just want to fit in with their peers, these parental expectations can be very problematic and some girls have a hard time meeting these expectations: “that’s a very stressful place for many, particularly young Muslim girls, to be in... like the way we force our young girls, forced in a sense that we have an expectation of them to be in a specific way, is very difficult.” One informant noted that teenagers cope with this pressure by dressing one way at home but having different clothes in a bag and changing once they were well out of their parents’ sight.

Personal modesty

Almost every key informant referenced the expectation, indeed the obligation, which Muslim women dress modestly all the time. While there was a very strong consensus that even while many women experience pressure to wear hijab, the final decision is, almost without exception, a matter of personal choice. It was also acknowledged that wearing hijab can be a political act as well as a religious one for some women and that for others, the decision to wear hijab was tied to context, for example, while in the mosque.

One respondent sums up the expectation to dress modestly this way: “I was given a lot of choice in the household that I grew up in, but I was also encouraged in specific directions as well...with respect to clothing, I was always encouraged to wear clothing that wasn’t revealing, to wear clothing that was professional, modest, you know covering your legs.” Another said:

In my experience... you’re talking about a wide spectrum... I’ve got all kind[s] of liberty in my family to do... what I like because freedom has been given to me by my family. So I make that decision with responsibility. So, even though I see myself as a progressive woman but when it comes to certain dresses I, I probably see myself um dressing conservatively because just the way it's me. So it's not a pressure from any body on me, it's just the way.”

And for one informant, the hijab could be seen both as a way to express pride in being Muslim and as a fashion statement: “Some of these Muslim girls that I see that are proud wearing the typical hijab and you know typical dress code. But dress code today that hijab is very different from the hijab that I was experienced years ago. There's so much diversity. Some of these hijabs are so beautiful.”

Hijab as a Personal and a Political Choice

Some informants noted that girls sometimes start wearing a headscarf when they are quite young because they want to imitate their mothers. “When I go to mosque sometimes I see women and children, tiny ones, with scarf on their heads. Once I asked someone, ‘why does she have a scarf on her head’. She said, ‘she wants to imitate her mom or her big sister.’ Okay, that's fine. As long as it's not compulsory.” Others expected Muslim teenagers-- like any other teenagers --to rebel against their parents by resisting their expectations.

Any young person, regardless of ethno racial background, they are trying to figure out who they are... People will say in every community they lose kids in the teenage years, twenties. Then as they become married and have children in their thirties, that’s when they come back to my culture, my religion and live that. So I think every culture has that. It’s specific in even around wearing hijab I have known and experienced people who are talking about they’ve been raised wearing hijab but they’re choosing to not. Like they’ve got the freedom to kind of go... I can choose to wear it.

Only one key informant was aware of the situation in Winnipeg where a woman was forced to wear hijab. This informant stated, “I’m not aware of any, actually just one... [of an] immigrant female in Canada when they are actually forced into doing certain things that otherwise they wouldn’t do such as in this case wearing the hijab...” All other informants who spoke to the issue said they were unaware of any situations where women were forced to wear the hijab by their parents or others. One woman said

There is more pressure here in Winnipeg [to wear the headscarf] than in other communities, amongst all the Muslim communities that I’ve lived in Canada, this is the place where the pressure is highest...maybe that’s just my experience...that’s just my impression...all the people that I know in this community...have all chosen to wear the headscarf by choice...almost all the people I associate with...in some cases it was after marriage that they made this decision, and in a lot of the cases that was the case actually, but it was always a conscious decision...sometimes it was the person that they hung out with that was encouraging...I don’t know of any situation where, they were forced to wear one...

Quite a few informants expressed concern over their perception that non-Muslims believed women were being forced to wear hijab. One stated

The flipside of that though that I think part of the conversations happening across the country is that there’s a perception that if you are wearing hijab you’ve been forced to conform versus that it’s been a choice. So I think it’s a double-edged sword this whole notion of pressures concerning religious conformity that the pressure sometimes is not just from within the person or from the community but from the broader non-religious community when passing judgment which actually can radicalize.

Almost half of the informants noted that some women do not wear hijab, even though it might be their preference to do so, because it makes their life more difficult particularly because non-Muslims will assume that they were forced to do so or they will make assumptions about political beliefs. These quotes note this tension:

Part of the conversations happening across the country is that there’s a perception that if you are wearing hijab you’ve been forced to conform versus that it’s been a choice.

My concern is that whatever judgments society has about these values are used to make assumptions about the woman. “She’s oppressed because she wears hijab.” “She must be controlled by her family because she doesn’t ‘fill in the blanks’, whatever we consider a norm, doesn’t go to the mall, doesn’t wear short skirts.”

My sense of it is that there perhaps may not be that much pressure because I think parents are also in the community accepting that you need to be part of you know, at least outwardly, part of the whole Canadian society. I think outwardly there is desire to be part of the larger community and not be singled

out. Especially in light of our times where, it's almost becoming sometimes, this whole 'Muslimness' being connected with terrorism, the Muslim community itself don't want to stand out. You also want to dissociate sometimes with very formal ways of being a Muslim.

One informant noted that the stigma attaching to headscarf wearing women might change if more Muslims immigrate to Canada: "they don't want to [wear hijab] because they want to fit in more with. But now as more and more Muslim women are coming, there are more and more that are choosing to wear the headscarf and then they feel that they are not totally unique and that I think strengthens them if they want to wear it. And they want to, want to wear it. Yeah." In the same vein, other informants said that

When I was growing up, my friends who went to the college started to wear the hijab, out of their own personal choice and they said that when they started wearing the hijab they got more attention that they had received previously...so I think that is interesting why someone else would influence someone to wear the hijab but all my friends who did it, did it consciously, and they got the exact opposite reaction to what they thought they would get!

In stark contrast to women who did not wear hijab because of the attention it attracted, the informants frequently noted that other women, even though they did not feel a religious obligation to wear hijab, chose to do so in order to make a political statement. As noted by one informant, for some women

it wouldn't be something they would normally choose to do but because non-Muslim communities have made such an issue out of what it means, Muslim means terrorist. Muslim means this. Muslim means that you have oppressed women and major political statements. 'Whoa, I'm choosing to express my faith and I have the choice to put on or take it off and it's not, it's not my reality.' Religious reality is not defined by what you're saying, even around the whole Charter thing. Recently there were people who were ordering head coverings out of the Quebec flag to wear locally to make a statement and they would normally never have worn any type of head covering. But because of the reaction, the kind of xenophobic reaction that seems to for some people. They are more attuned to it but in feeling rejected, feeling judged and wanting to push against that, almost kind of embracing that thing that you say 'makes me come across as being oppressed, no, no how could I be oppressed if I'm choosing to wear it.' So you know, that's what I mean about the political statement.

Another noted that:

And I think you're right with that whole Quebec Charter of Values, we did see a number of people come out in protest almost... Prominent lawyers, doctors, people in public institution, public spaces, come out and put on the hijab, put on the turban and say "is my value decreased now that I've put this on?" So especially with Muslim women I think it's very important that they have that

choice there and there is that choice and I think it's an important statement that really speaks to multiculturalism as well.

Key informants did not use, for the most part, religious rights or other legally focused arguments to support their ability to wear or not to wear a head covering. Only a few comments-- including the two statements noted directly above-- came close to expressing a rights-based approach. One informant stated that "so especially with Muslim women I think it's very important that they have that choice there and there is that choice and I think it's an important statement that really speaks to multiculturalism as well." And another said,

There have been great debates in our household about whether or not you should cover your head... Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't. It's a matter of equality.... But my mother has always said, you know, it's the fact that we can even have this debate about the religion is something that's important and progressive in a Canadian context.

Pressure To Wear Hijab

While there is almost no evidence that Muslim women in Winnipeg are being forced to wear a headscarf, it must be acknowledged that some--but not most--informants observed that some girls and young women are pressured by their parents to do so. Interestingly, other than one reference to an observation that women may wear hijab after marriage, not one informant noted that husbands put pressure on their wives to don a headscarf.

In contrast, informants were more likely to note that women were pressured by their peers rather than their parents or husbands to adopt hijab. Here are some of the observations:

If I'm surrounded by Muslim community, in that case, I will feel pressurized that my other Muslim sister or neighbour, she is wearing Hijab but I'm not. And they may comment, sometime people ask me, even Muslims, 'so why are you not wearing the Hijab?'

You know, in my country, I don't wear Hijab. But I feel that I should do that here because when I was went to [XX] for the [language] workshops. I took classes over there. Some of the participants they are from other country but they were Muslim, the girls, the women. I tried to talk to them and when they know that I am also a Muslim but they said, 'you are not wearing Hijab' so, they just refused to talk to me, I felt very bad... They were Muslims so I was very excited to talk to them. First time I met someone from another country, she was Muslim but she refused to talk to me. She just turned her face. So I felt very bad because she said "you are not wearing Hijab" because I was wearing T-shirt and pant but at least I was all covered, I was not naked. But she wouldn't want to talk to me and I felt very bad.

A long time ago... a friend of mine decided to put a scarf on and then one day we were together... and she turned around to me and said, 'well why don't you cover up?' I said, 'I'm not interested in covering up'.

Wearing hijab in some contexts but not others

Many informants commented that it is not unusual for Muslim women to wear a headscarf in some places but not in others. Some informants asserted (or said that others asserted) that this inconsistency is problematic. As one stated:

So yes there is a pressure on them for example for some people to wear that. But I've seen girls um from diverse community that one day they are in scarf, one day they are not in scarf. When they are in school they are different. When I run into them in a shopping mall they are different and in the wedding set up its different... Yeah so I'm not sure [whether pressure comes from husbands]... I know between the peer pressure, you know you want to fit in, the cost of the fit in. But the rest I don't understand that if you want to dress a certain way I'm sure you've got certain belief there or certain values so why is not consistency there.

But respondents were just as likely to observe that such decisions were pragmatic and respectful.

I was never put in a situation where I was told that I had to cover my hair, but I made my own choice, in specific meetings, specific venues, I would make a choice to cover my hair, that was specifically at a Muslim events, I just felt more comfortable...so I wouldn't be standing out like a sore thumb...there was always a choice that I was given but obviously when it came to prayers or anything like that, I always did that.

One informant noted that a headscarf sometimes seemed beside the point because of how the young woman otherwise dressed:

the younger people, they're wearing this hijab that cover their head which I'm sure there might be some kind because if these girls had a choice they probably would not wear it but I'm not sure... But then they're wearing this tight pants... You know, you know under you know below the neck it's totally if you take a picture it could be a Canadian girl... Tight pants and jeans and stuff that you could actually see the body.

Dispelling Stereotypes

Informants were anxious to dispel two myths associated with Islam: the stereotypical beliefs that Islam encourages terrorism and oppresses women. Said one informant, "[Canadians have the stereotypic belief that] Osama is not even rejected by Muslims. He's

not, you know. There's no room for terrorism in Islam... So they can do it but the world now understand that 'Islam is beautiful' but people meet public like you [Sara Mahboob] and me and say 'oh my God, we're all just different.'

Others spoke of the need to educate themselves and then others, Muslim and non-Muslim, about the teachings of Islam. Islam is a religion of inquiry, said one informant: "I was raised like always double check and make sure it was accurate. I am *so* glad, I was able to identify what was really truthful and what was really religious... what was really in the Qu'ran and the Hadith and what wasn't... that isn't portrayed very accurately in the news... so I'm very blessed in that respect." Another informant stated that the "Muslim religion is very close to their heart and since 9/11... more people wanted more acquisition of Muslim religion... [But] more and more people want to know what is actually Islam." Others stated:

I've been able to be openly Muslim, openly opinionated, openly vocal, not necessarily a quiet kind of person. I'm a very talkative person. I'm a very social person, I express my views and I'm a strong oriented person. I've been treated by the community and I just don't mean the Muslim community, all people [I connect with]..., as people just wanting to learn. "Tell me some reason behind it why you fast in this particular month", "tell me a little bit what Ramadan is about, tell me a little bit what Eid is about." I've been very blessed where people just wanted to be educated.

One of the thing I did, I get a chance to talk about my identity, both about Islam and about [home country]. If I were in [home country] do you think I would have done that? Absolutely not. Get me a chance to learn more about my religion.

But for every vocal defender of peaceful Islam, there may be what could be called the quiet Muslim Canadian: "Especially in light of our times where, it's almost becoming sometimes, this whole 'Muslimness' being connected with terrorism, the Muslim community itself don't want to stand out. You also want to dissociate sometimes with very formal ways of being a Muslim."

And finally a few informants spoke to the fear that Islamophobia may have a radicalizing effect: "So I think it's a double-edged sword this whole notion of pressures concerning religious conformity that the pressure sometimes is not just from within the person or from the community but from the broader non-religious community when passing judgment which actually can radicalize."

The other myth that informants wanted to address is that Islam oppresses women. One informant told the story that "I used to go out and do presentations [regarding women's rights]... We talked with students we said, "You know what? There's women's rights in Islam." But they said, "what happened?" Many informants echoed this assertion, "I do think there's a lot of stereotypes about Muslim women in general." Another said, "that's something you people don't necessarily know in or Canadian law: that divorce is a concept of Sharia. You have the right to a divorce but I think having conversations with people, its

part of the whole cult of the ‘poor Muslim woman’.” And another observed, “Unfortunately sometimes the media plays certain, you know, unfair games when they report on certain things... To generalize things... “Am I sleeping every night thinking every... a [Muslim] family is going to be killing their kids at night?” No.... It’s that one-off.”

As we have seen elsewhere in this report, there is little evidence of religiously-justified discriminatory practices affecting Muslim women in Winnipeg such as forced marriage, being forced to wear hijab, religiously-sanctioned violence, or restrictions on movement and many, if not most, women are encouraged to pursue advanced education and remain attached to the workforce. One informant summarized it this way:

I see women, Muslim women and overall I see this empowerment in this country and in them. I mean we are much advanced. Women are driving which doesn't happen in most countries, that's empowerment... Even when there's scarf, or I haven't seen with niqab, but I've seen with the scarf they are driving, that's a positive thing... Because they are able to carry out their activities without relying on their husbands... on the men. So that's something that we are proud of it. And that's happened here and that's independence or the freedom or empowerment of women got here.

It is worth repeating that almost half of the informants noted that some Muslim women in Winnipeg do not wear hijab, even though it might be their preference to do so, because it makes their life more difficult particularly because non-Muslims will assume that they were forced to do so or they will make assumptions about political beliefs. As one respondent said, “Part of the conversations happening across the country is that there’s a perception that if you are wearing hijab you’ve been forced to conform versus that it’s been a choice.” But others donned the hijab not because of a feeling of religious obligation but rather to show solidarity.

Many respondents’ spoke to the need for broader Canadian society to respect the choices religious women made.

The thing is, it’s the ethnocentrism that comes by that people assume that because people assume that a woman is acting in ways that is consistent with a culture or tradition that’s not Western or Judeo-Christian in Western society that she must be pressured to be making certain decisions.

So this for me it’s ironic that this whole pro-female or pro-feminist approach actually isn’t being ethnocentric and removes a woman’s right to choose. She’s judged for the choices she makes because they’re not what a pro-feminist Western woman would make.

One respondent stated that a strength in the Manitoba Muslim community is that while it is small it is also diverse and therefore presents women with many different ways “to see how they can best express their ideals of what it is to be a Muslim.” This same informant went on to note that devout women often hold leadership roles: “So the majority of women I’ve come into contact with who are very proactive in community membership and sparking the

word of anti-racism and multiculturalism diversity, etc. have been people who have adopted to take on religious aspects like the hijab or observing prayers.”

On the other hand, sometimes discrimination against women and girls is minimized in order to defend religion or a country’s reputation. One woman spoke about trying to get her family to talk about what had happened to Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani schoolgirl who was shot in the head for being outspoken about the need to educate girls. Her family, she said, refused to engage, stating that “She’s exaggerating, Malala’s exaggerating”, “this does not happen,” “this, you know, she’s lying” and “she wrecks our name”. The informant was torn between the burden of

...hold[ing] the whole nation together, you’re not feeling secure. You say that all is good, good, good. Yet [discrimination against girls] needs attention. This is not acceptable. But not having that security, because you’re not in your home country maybe, because you’re carrying this burden, so a lot of silencing....that girls don’t get a proper education or they have difficulty. I don’t want my country to be known by this, you know. And so this is bad naming my country, so shut up....it is something that I see all the time.

Further Research

What areas, if any, do you think we should focus on in the next step of our research on the issue of Muslim identity and practices?

We would like to do a series of focus groups with young South Asian Muslim women. What questions would you ask them about Muslim identity and religious practices?

‘You always married a Muslim’: Marriage

Summary: Young Muslim women are expected to marry a Muslim of the same sect and same ethno cultural background. Marriages proposed or arranged by parents are still the norm, although young adults do seek opportunities to meet members of the opposite sex in the hope of finding a suitable partner on their own. The practice of returning to one’s “home country” to find a spouse, while once common, is now discouraged especially if the children are Canadian-born because such relationships often fail or leave partners miserable. However such marriages still occur especially for the children of more recent immigrants. Informants acknowledged that polygamous and forced marriages did occur but that these were extremely rare and were unsanctioned by most members of the community.

Who is a suitable partner?

It is clear that “the families have a lot to say in terms of who, who to marry and who not to marry, more so than in Canadian culture.” All informants stated that family and community members are clear that a suitable marriage partner must be Muslim, with a strong preference for someone of the same sect. Here are representative observations:

You always married a Muslim. You know that one of the things, whoever you talk to, any person they always want to keep their identity more deep as having Muslim. But again there are different areas, where you come from, the different sect you are coming from you are ‘Shia’ Muslim or ‘Ahmadi’. They are different and you have to be married in that sect where you are coming from. And also some people are strict on what caste they are.

He should be a Muslim, he should be a ‘Sunni’, and he should be a good practising with Islam.

I’ve personally known of a lot of girls who were not covering their head back home but when they came here as immigrants their family pushed them to wear the head covering because of this fear inside the parents that the girl when she would go out and you know meet people from different communities and she might want to marry down the road a non-Muslim, this head covering would kind of remind her all the time that she’s different.

As will be developed more later in this chapter, most marriages are arranged but love matches are tolerated by some families under certain conditions. Said one informant, “it is ok, if you find your own but they have to be Muslim that is the primary criteria that comes up. Then a will secondary criterion that comes up most often is of your own cultural background. You know parents are picking their own battles.” Only one informant mentioned a conversion to Islam in the event of a love match, stating that:

There is always this understanding that whoever they are marrying will convert to Islam and you know people have the ceremonies and everything else. I think that is there for both men and women but for women it is a little harder because, there are already, all these moral pressures she is grown up with and now she is even more focused on thinking this how their community will receive this. Will it be ok? And the only way often it is ok, is if the person she is marrying converts to Islam.

One informant stated that, upon parents' learning of an engagement to a non-Muslim, "I've seen people coming to violence too. They are very strict in the rules of girls when they find out that she is marrying outside." Another stated, "nobody has to even tell you. It's there... and they know that the price you are going to pay for crossing those lines, it's actually very difficult to pay." While some families will accept such marriages, the community may be reserved according to this informant:

There isn't this open armed acceptance [for marrying someone who is not in the Muslim community]. There is sort of very subtle ostracization that does go on. Part of this is that people don't know how to react to girl's spouse. When they get together, they tend to speak in, not in English, tend to talk about things that are made not sort of culturally well understood, religiously well understood. They don't want to impose this religion on this person as well. So there is that part of it, so like, the separation that this girl may face is more than just disapproval or that does exist. But there is this sort of well we don't know how to react with this person so we are not just going to kind of bother and that's tough.

The second set of criteria, which came up almost as often as religious identity, is a similar cultural and linguistic heritage. In fact, one informant was of the view that cultural similarity is more important than being Muslim, but, more commonly, this view was expressed: "My advice... [would be] for you to marry a Muslim woman... and this would be second, a [language] speaking woman.... Nothing would give me more pleasure first Muslim, second you know language."

A number of informants pointed to the desirability of a connection between the families; one informant said that "marriages used to about social contracts between families" and another observed that "traditionally, I don't know about in your part of the world but in, in the culture that [I] grew up [in] it's "you have to marry somebody that you know". Like not you, your family." Some mentioned that "at home", children may be pledged at birth, but that practise is not followed in Canada. However one informant expressed a different view, stating that

...in conversation people have talked about being arranged at birth and so the decision to marry is made for them. That's right here in Winnipeg and that's not, that's not just a South Asian Muslim, that's a lot of different communities...there are understandings about who you're going to marry regardless of your religion or who people would prefer you would marry based on family connections...."

A number of informants spoke to the practice of returning to one's "home country" to find a spouse and all were of the view that this method of finding a spouse, while once common, is now discouraged especially if the children are Canadian-born because such relationships often fail or leave partners miserable. While no informant espoused the desirability of such marriages, they acknowledged that they still occur especially among more recent immigrants. These informants sum up that situation:

It was expected ... that you would marry from back home. But from my time to now, it is going much the other way, because they know that they can't find what their child is looking for. They know their child needs somebody who was probably raised in North America.

All those girls who grow up in Canada... their parents marry them in [home country]. So boys who are growing in [home country] their outlook are totally different.... So the boys are coming here from [home country] what they expect of their wives is totally different you know – they want to know about where they are where, who you were talking on the phone with – so in a way they are very suspicious. It is not their fault. ... so that's a big problem with boys marrying girls from [home country] and there are lots of separations... So now the trend is... to get the people married in Canada or in Winnipeg.

[His mother wanted] him to marry from our [home country] so he went to... visit his him and aunt and he was introduced to several women. He lived all his life [in Canada]... I talked to her and I said "listen it may not work, you should have someone from here. Someone who has lived and experienced life here, you cannot transplant you know."

A young Muslim who read an early draft of this report observed that "what I see is a shift that is taking place right now in Muslim families where girls are speaking out against arranged marriages by refusing to go back home and marry there."

One respondent noted that marriages to someone from the home country are now more unlikely because "with immigration laws being a little more stringent than they used to, it's harder to make arranged marriages. You know the longer it takes a person to be united with their partner, there's a strain in things like that put on the relationship. So I think that is decreasing."

Only a few respondents mentioned class or income parity between the families. One informant was of the view that "you could be cut off if you marry, you know, below your class. You can marry another Muslim who's got all the professional degrees but if it's not the same class...[one woman was told] 'if you do this, you're financially out of the inheritance.'" Similarly another stated, "so much so, in some cases, that if that particular person wasn't, let's say, a doctor, or if that person wasn't a professional of some sort, they didn't even care for anything else."

Other characteristics that were mentioned by only one or two informants included good character and the importance of shared interests and compatible careers. Educational compatibility was mentioned by two respondents, as was the desirability of a partner with

“no history of going to girl friends.” Only one respondent noted the importance of getting to know someone with whom parents have suggested a match, at least a bit, before agreeing to marry. Said one informant: “[My advice is:] what matters is to don't rush, get to know the girl, make sure that this is the right choice for you. It has nothing to do with your parents; you're the one who's going to live with her.”

Are marriages arranged?

One informant succinctly summarized the view expressed by all respondents who answered the question posed above: “Arranged marriages are still very much the norm for south Asians boys and girls [in Winnipeg].” Another said, “if you are the first generation born here and have connections, your family has more connections to the old country, there is more of... a pressure or a preference for following the cultural ways from back home.”

According to our informants, families expect their children to enter marriages they have arranged or at least proposed. One informant noted that pressure comes “mostly from family” and that “it is helpful! But it is lots of issues, it goes to different points. So it makes her find a good person. I mean the perfect person!” According to another, “marriages have always been a... family affair. Parents make a decision. And there's a belief out there and some of our teaching we just get because it's their right. It's a belief that if your parents find you your future man or future woman you would be lucky for the rest of your life.”

The parents' expectation that they will arrange or propose a spouse sometimes leads to conflict and there is evidence that young women are resistant, and especially, refuse to marry someone from “back home.” Informants note that:

My sense is that there is lot of conflict within the young women themselves... So there are times when you really don't know who you are and where you are at in many of these decisions. You know you need to make and so sometimes that kind of direction from home, family and community... Nobody has to sometimes even have to tell you. It's there... and they know that the price you are going to pay for crossing those lines, it's actually very difficult to pay.

I mean, if the kid doesn't believe in it, it is definitely harmful for the overall situation. I mean it is helpful, if the parents were guiding them in terms of who they are, what their background is, what religion they follow, it is helpful for them being in the same mould. If the kid agrees, that is fine. If the kid does not, that causes conflict. Depending on what extreme level the parents go, it could harmful. There have been times when kids have complained but later confirmed they are happy. So it all depends really...

Less commonly, the impetus to have parents find a spouse “sometimes comes from the woman herself from what I've heard. That, you know, she's decided that she's of a particular age, she's done her schooling, she has her career and she wants to get married. So then it's about “my parents know me, they know all my attributes” and all of a sudden what would be compatible.”

Some informants thought the process worked well as long as the proposed couple was given a chance to get to know each other and then make the final decision. "I'm not against introducing people to each other and you know talking about them and let them know each other."

It does go back to when people come into any type of marriage or any type of situation with a shared understanding of what this is going to be regardless of the cultural background. If those conversations happen then it shouldn't be a surprise that I'm going to have a career first and that this is about when we're going to choose and regardless of your ethnocultural background or religious background.

In Winnipeg and other cities they started now counseling prior to the marriage so what your role, responsibility is.

But this view was far from unanimous. Not all informants think the arrangement process is a good one or that the outcomes are successful. These informants stated that,

I have friends in the community that were basically told... and when it came time where when the whole proposal thing was coming into play...received extreme pressures..... That was, unfortunately I have to say, very common. We have talked about the pressures with the hijab and all other things but I think this is the area where it was the greatest! I would say as high as 80% of the people that I associate with, there were issues there.

I have had friends that respected their parents' choice and have lived very unhappy. I also have friends from the Muslim community who felt so much pressure that they ended up marrying someone they didn't want to marry. Those marriages didn't work out. I also know of situations where they married someone they didn't want to marry and the situation did work out

Are marriages forced?

Informants asserted that forced marriages are rare or unheard of in Winnipeg in South Asian Muslim families. Said one informant, "I'm not aware of any, actually just one." And another notes that

Forced marriage I know only of one! And it was forced in a sense that she didn't know anything what was going on right. But it did not turn out badly for her. It turned out quite well she was accepting of it as it occurred. And that one, there wasn't somebody else who was involved. It was not like that there was somebody else that ...this woman likes and in order to prevent that...It was just kind of an arranged marriage in a very very traditional sense. It was not really forced like that... She still said yes out of her own consent. She was just surprised that she was getting married!

As noted earlier, young women are expected to pursue post-secondary education immediately after high school because they were expected to be married in their 20s. We did not specifically ask our informants whether there was any pressure on girls to get married while in their teens. No one spoke spontaneously to this question although our framework was open-ended enough that if anyone thought early marriages were happening in the community, they could have spoken to the issue.

Finding your own partner

While this study is not designed to determine how many marriages are arranged or proposed by parents and how often spouses find each other, it does support the assertion that, at least sometimes, spouses find each other without family assistance. One informant, who had just moved to Winnipeg without her family was advised by a friend “to go, because that's what you do in the US, go to the mosque, find and meet the man there. I said, ‘oh my god, mosque is to for praying not for dating’ but she said ‘well that's how we find it’.” Another observed that “we have several people that we know through [religious] conferences who have ended up getting married, finding their spouse... Now the people are hoping that their children will find someone here. So now the focus is, it’s ok if they find here, like your own; before it was like we will find for them.” While finding your own spouse may be acceptable, informants stressed that Muslim couples “don’t date because in Islam dating isn’t a concept. They don’t officially date...” In contrast, an early draft of this paper was read by a young Muslim who recently came to Canada. This reader wished that “there was room for young boys and girls to meet and perhaps get married. Many young Muslims always complain about the separation in the mosques between men and women which does not allow the two sexes to meet and engage with each other.”

According to one informant, “I don’t know of many cases where parents have absolutely forbidden [a marriage].” Yet it is clear that if someone marries or wants to marry someone whom the parents do not think is suitable, he or she may face strong opposition.

[In one case] he wanted to marry a girl. The girl and the man both liked each other, but she couldn’t marry him. Because his parents are living in my country, they are not agreed. So he can’t go against his parents and they didn’t get married... [but in another case] It happened, one girl, she got married with the person. The family said, “no we don’t like this and you should not do this. You went against our opinion; you went against some social norms of my country.” So the parents and their daughter are not in a good relation.

We got the [wedding] invitation and the father’s name was not on the invitation. The father is not participating because the relations are strained....Another thing that disturbed me was that people chose to jump on that bandwagon and decided to not come because of one of the parent’s wishes... Of course, there is respect for your parents but there is a rational level of that, and an irrational level of that and that line is very hard to define. [same quote?]

In Manitoba we have seen girls run away from their homes but I think the majority are people who follow parents.

Polygamy

About one third of the informants spoke about polygamy; some spontaneously and some because they were asked. These respondents all noted that they are aware of some polygamous marriages in Winnipeg but that the practise is very uncommon.

[Polygamy] is not that common. I only know of one incident [in the South Asian community] that I am aware. From my broad knowledge of the community, it is happening and it is not isolated and particularly you know people from very polygamous societies; like northern Africa is quite polygamous.

[Interviewer: Are there many situations in Manitoba where a man has two wives?] No, I don't think many but I know a few.

Winnipeg not so much, Ontario and Alberta... yes definitely.

One informant noted that, "in our culture, women accept two wives." All other informants shared the view that polygamy should not be practiced in Canada even if Islam permits it. Comments included, "I think in polygamy there is a problem" and

I heard about a situation. And that I went on my high horses about it and I told everybody about it.... I found that extremely unpleasant. I went around and I told everybody about it and I chastised [the husband] and I chastised the imam who did it.

Men sometimes divorce their wives under Canadian law and then marry a second woman. Unless he also obtains a religious divorce, he remains married to her from a religious perspective. Another observed that sometimes women agree to their husbands taking a second wife; other times they are surprised:

It was also happening in other ways. Wives coming here and finding out he has a girlfriend here.

[The wife]...said, 'Ok I want to stay with you as a wife but you can marry a second wife because that's what happens in [home country] quite often.' So she actually went to [home country] and chose a girl for the husband and they got married. [The second wife] came as a refugee...

Further Research

After we completed our interviews, the federal government introduced the *Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Practices Act*. Do you have any additional comments on early or forced or

polygamous marriages in Canada? Do you think more research on the prevalence, characteristics, etc of forced, early or polygamous marriages should be pursued?

What areas, if any, do you think we should focus on in the next step of our research on the issue of marriage?

‘Paradise lies at the foot of the mother’: Having Children

Summary: Both family and community put at least some pressure on South Asian Muslim women to have children shortly after marrying and there is the gendered expectation that women will look after children. Many informants agreed that there is, at least to some extent, a preference for male offspring. All who spoke to the issue of sex selection believed that the practice was uncommon in Winnipeg and asserted that the religious/ ethno-cultural community was opposed, as were health-care providers.

Pressure to have children

One informant said that, “children, in a way, are expected but not in the same way as traditionally they were back home. It is not, like, that if you don’t have children in first two years, something was going on. People don’t ask here.” But everyone else who spoke to this issue asserted that both family and community put at least some pressure on South Asian Muslim women to have children shortly after marrying.

When I got married people were immediately (snapping fingers) ‘when are you going to have the baby, when are you gonna have the baby?’ And I wasn't like ‘okay I got married; the next day I should have a baby.’ I was like ‘okay let's get to know each other’ and you know...

I was talking to some young women and they said definitely they do [face pressures]... why don't you have a baby? Why don't you?... this would be happening all across [different communities] I think. Why, oh you haven't had a baby?

One informant noted that “pressure [to have a child right away] is more common in arranged marriages, more common in marriages of east and west variances.” Echoing this thought, a few informants stressed the importance of having a shared understanding with their potential spouse before marriage about when they would have children.

It does go back to when people come into any type of marriage ...with a shared understanding of what this is going to be regardless of the cultural background. If those conversations happen then it shouldn’t be a surprise that I’m going to have a career first and that this is about when we’re going to choose and regardless of your ethno cultural background or religious background.

I also agree if discussions had been had, if they have been had with their partner around what the division of labour is going to be, that should make the outcome easier.

Ethnocultural women in particular I think have a pressure in terms of what it means to be wealthy, what it means to be prosperous and usually that is derived from the family so having children that's your idea of wealth. And which is great.

Two informants noted that the pressure to have children is more cultural than religious:

But this, this thinking maybe, there's again there's a belief there that it's part of our culture nothing to do with the religion per se. It's part of a culture that the more kids you have the more strong you are and in fact...back home in my country...the mortality rate, the child mortality rate is very [high]...

Ethnocultural women in particular I think have a pressure in terms of what it means to be wealthy, what it means to be prosperous and usually that is derived from the family so having children that's your idea of wealth. And which is great.

And, not surprisingly, finances do play a role in the decision of when and how many children to have:

I think it depends again because partly the more children you have the more money you have to make to provide for those kids (laughter). Economics or the lack thereof can play a role in the pressures to have children.

Child bearing would often become easier if there is family support because people tend to find that both husband and wife need to work. That's the majority of the families in North America. Most people need to have two incomes.

Gender and Child Care

As noted earlier in the section on employment, we asked informants whether husbands have a role in determining whether a wife works and what kind of work she takes on. This question elicited a variety of responses; it is clear that this is not a matter on which there is any kind of community consensus but rather it is a decision that is made by a husband or between a husband and wife. One of the primary reasons why women leave the workforce is the gendered expectation that they will care for their children. According to our informants, this expectation also arises for Muslim women.

So there are people who are going to be very traditional in their values and some people who are going to be more progressive. In Manitoba I would say the majority of people are fairly progressive or I shouldn't say one over the other. There are people who are allowed or that space of women having children and having a career at the same time. Although I can say there are

some pockets that we do have where after a woman has completed her educational studies, been in the career for a couple of years when she and her family chooses to have children that she takes on the primary responsibility.

I think any collectivistic culture (and ethno cultural community cultures are more stereotypically known as being collectivistic) and there are genderized roles in ethno cultural communities or collectivistic cultures. Unless you come from a feminist kind of background, which, there isn't a lot of that pro feminist, pro choice. There are very few men that you will see as the primary caregivers. Again, that is community-wide and even if those newcomer or those more ethno cultural communities that ascribe to that practice that value there have been those struggles to say that you should have that identity of you as an individual is gone. Now it's time to raise your children.

Only one informant mentioned a religious obligation imposed on Muslim mothers, stating that

Part of the expectation is that your to have gotten all of your education and you've had a career but now is the time of the life to put all that aside and do for the family. And the frustrations that have happened or women have experienced going through losing their identity, and that happens with again regardless of the multicultural background. There is that stress when you put it on the connections to the community and the cultural expectations whether it is cultural, family culture or religious cultural, paradise lies at the foot of the mother and you must. Which means your mother has to be there to be the one shaping your world perspective.

Preference for male offspring

Many informants talked about whether there is a preference for male offspring and all who spoke to this issue agreed that it existed at least to some extent. One noted that the Prophet had girls whom he loved and therefore such a preference should not exist:

And also the belief that if we are strong believer "this is what Allah gave" [all girls]. But again you know if we use the haddis and what the Qu'ran says, what Prophet Mohammad says, Prophet Mohammad had all girls right... And from what I studied he loved his girls and when he became a prophet, he's the one who actually gave a lot of respect and basically boost the woman's right because before that they put the girls' life to the old... [way that it should have been done]. But the culture favoured the boys right. So there's a pressure if you have, if you bring girls, girls, girls there's always, there's a tendency to... [prefer] boys... Well preference is always there.And also the belief that if we are strong believer this is what Allah gave you but again you know if we use the addis and what the Qu'ran says, Prophet Mohammad had all girls right.

A few informants were clear that the preference exists and that women will have children until they produce a son.

And so in that informality there's the public face and then all the dirty underbelly stuff comes up. I have been in conversation with people where pressures around childbearing do relate to male and female children. That girl children are not favoured. People will keep going, they'll keep going until you get the boy child and so is that a pressure on childbearing? Yeah, I think so because you're going to continue to have the child until we get the favoured son. People know this in the community.

One suggested that a common reason to take a second wife was to increase the likelihood of producing a son, but it was not clear if she was referring to the Winnipeg situation or the situation in the country from which she immigrated.

Others suggested that the preference for boys was waning now that Canadian-born children have started to have children:

I wouldn't say prevalent. I would have people have conversations. It's the it's part of the pressure that even the woman may take on herself because it's part of the cultural thing, not just in South Asian cultures. I was talking to someone recently who said, "my father-in-law was saying that when I was pregnant, before we knew the sex, that 'if you really love your husband you will give him a boy the first child out. That's how we will know how much you really love our son.'" And it was said in joke and jest, yet there was an undercurrent.

I find that younger generations don't subscribe to that philosophy as much that having a boy child is you've birthed a king. (laughs) But the older generations they definitely do have that kind of stigma attached.

There's a sense of equality and I mean I understand when the older generation talks about that, where that comes from, that you know boys are the breadwinners and that's your meal ticket sort of thing. But living in a Canadian context is a little bit different because you have more equality.

Sex selection

One informant notes the "Abortion is a private issue, you know sensitive, so we don't know much about that. But the thing is abortion is not accepted, you know is not very accepted."

Three informants spoke about sex-selective abortion. All asserted that the practice was not common in Winnipeg, although one conceded that given the extremely private nature of the decision, this conclusion was not well-grounded in specific knowledge. The religious/ethno-cultural community was opposed to the practice, as were health-care providers:

When thinking about self sex selection [and terminating pregnancy] I know that was an issue in Vancouver and that it's not legal. Yet I want to say there was a doctor in Winnipeg at one point that people knew he would provide that type of sex selection so people could choose to know or there was a backlash against that where people didn't want to tell people of certain salvation, Hindu and Muslim backgrounds, what the sex was because there was this fear that they were going to terminate if it was a female child because external to the community, society was perceiving practices. So even if the family was not about that at all there was a reaction that was kind of controlling their choices.

That phenomenon which happened, yes in Canada, most of the criticism actually came from the South Asian community saying this is a practice which was detrimental in our home country we don't want to bring that practice here. And so while there are private clinics that you can go to that will tell, show you the ultrasound of the baby and tell you the sex, etc. they often do it after the point of your ability to terminate... One of the responses from the South Asian community was like no this shouldn't be a practice we should have a policy kind of follow suit based on the community response... So that's one of the wonderful things I think about the response from the South Asian community... And the ability for the South Asian community to mobilize.

Newcomers less than a year old, and most often because they view Canada, Manitoba as a land of opportunity they start their families right away... There are several hospitals in Winnipeg that don't disclose gender and, at first they say "well that's ridiculous, it's our right to know what it is," etc. but once they're informed about the opportunities and why we don't do this there doesn't seem to be a lot of pushback. It seems to be something that you know a baby girl and a baby boy will have equally the same amount of opportunity if they choose to access it.

It is worth noting here a study published in 2011 considering the results of a questionnaire completed by 53 Muslim women who were about to have an abortion at a clinic in an unidentified Canadian city.⁷ The study showed that all but one woman believed that Islam permitted abortions at least in some situations although their range of beliefs was very diverse. While respondents were asked about acceptable reasons to obtain an abortion, sex selection was not one of the options. Half of the women seeking an abortion were married.

Infertility

A few informants spoke about infertility. However the number of responses was too small and not clear enough to make any observations about the results.

Further Research

What areas, if any, do you think we should focus on in the next step of our research on the issue of having children?

We would like to do a series of focus groups with young South Asian Muslim women. What topics should we raise with them on the issue of having children?

‘It is not the best thing’: Divorce

Summary: When informants were asked about divorce, their answers ranged over a variety of topics. For some informants divorce was nearly always unacceptable, for others it was not often the right thing to do. Almost all informants spoke to how shame keeps marriages intact and that, no matter what the reason for the divorce – violence, adultery, or fundamental incompatibility – the wife will bear the blame for the marriage breakdown. Informants also spoke about how difficult it is for Muslim women to obtain advice during marriage breakdown and about the confusion surrounding the applicable law-Canadian law or Sharia law-on the breakdown of a marriage.

Acceptability of Divorce

Almost without exception, all informants were of the view that “when you divorce you have failed.” Only one informant acknowledged that one of the Prophet’s wives was a divorced woman. In a separate study relying on data from the 2001 census, Daood Hamdani observed that among Muslims, “separations were just as common as divorces. Compared to all females, Muslim women’s divorce incidence was less than one-half the national average, but the incidence of separation was almost the same at close to 7 per one hundred married females.”⁸

Some informants were of the view that divorce was next to impossible for South Asian Muslims. Here are some of the ways that view was expressed:

And it's also the belief that you go to, you marry that person and you stay with that person till all your dead body will come out of the house. So that kind of a notion, it's also a human thing, I don't think this is just with a Muslim.

South Asian Muslim women, in particular, feel more pressure to try and make things work [even if their husband is abusive]. Divorce is looked upon as very much a stigma and problematic for future relations concerns and how the family would feel about it.

Well, in my community, divorce is like a very dangerous term. It is a very forbidden term, so the women of my country are used to tolerate it as much as possible. They don’t think about divorce. So obviously they feel pressure. They can’t independently think about divorce.

Other informants were less sanguine, but they were still of the view that divorce was not the right thing to do:

There is always a pressure on a family that divorce is not a good thing in Islamic law. It is not the best thing. So always pressure there, you stay united with family unit. Divorce is not looked upon as a right thing to do.

But if there is, sometimes happens, and the family cannot live together then the divorce is ultimate. You know the aspects of the life that happens.

But if the woman is very confident and very up to date, she can [divorce]!
But still I think today women are embarrassed, they are shy, they are not confident enough to take this major decision.

Informants were asked whether pressure not to divorce came more from family or from community. Most informants were of the view that pressure came mainly from families but a significant number acknowledge that it came both from families and community. As one informant stated: “because of shame, possible shame to the family and the community, they tend to be pressured to actually keep the marriage together and move on and just live like that.” On the issue of family pressure, informants stated that:

They don't have that sense of power, empowerment and then to have the family back home who know say, “don't. You've got to try again, you've got to try again.” Or, “don't fight for your rights.”

[And where does this pressure come from?]. . . Mostly it's her parents, her family.

The family would not, would discourage [divorce]. . . and it's a very big decision for them because it implies lots of things. It implies raising the kids alone. It implies being, you know, but I'm pretty sure. I know several women that have divorced.

I don't think [pressure around divorce]. . . is much from community but mostly it is from the family. . . I mean it is like wider. . . it starts with the family and then it gets wider. . . for some families it would be ‘what would others say’.”

On the issue of community pressure, informants stated that:

I think there is more pressure from the community than the family.

Sociocultural, cultural pressure is there for sure and again I think it is across communities. There is this sense when I look at when people have talked about the role of a woman or a Muslim woman in family, in community of being the glue. When you divorce you have failed.

So I think that the support is there in the community. If not community, the government support is there, there are lots of local organizations that help you to divorce. There is support in the community from the legal aspect and also from the moral aspect.

I mean people are shunned less now than they have been. Shunned from their family or their community when the marriage fails.

The most common reason offered for why women seek divorce is to escape violence and abuse. But as these excerpts from the informants' interviews suggest, unless a woman has experienced violence, she cannot expect much support if she decides to leave the marriage:

[Q: Do Muslim women face pressure when considering whether to divorce?]

A: My sense is that there would be pressure, if there is intense violence that would mitigate that pressure but otherwise they will try very hard that the couple stay together...

Sometimes it is better to divorce than to live in an abusive life. So I think that the support is there in the community. If not community, the government support is there, there are lots of local organizations that help you to divorce. There is support in the community from the legal aspect and also from the moral aspect.

Only one informant mentioned a husband's cheating as a ground for divorce, but even in those circumstances, the wife can expect to be faulted for the marriage breakdown: "It's never the man's fault, it's always the woman's fault whether it actually is. If he's cheating, well, it must be something that you didn't do."

One informant mentioned arranged marriages where the parties grew up in different countries, one in Canada and one elsewhere where shared understandings were not mutual as the reason for the divorce. This informant observed that "there was this tension that some families did not want to move to Canada once the girl had married [in an arranged marriage] but now she doesn't want to leave Canada so there is this tension and so in those cases those marriages have ended up in divorce. She came back to Canada and that was that."

Responses were quite varied on the reputation of a woman following a divorce. For one informant, a divorced woman would carry a disgraceful label for the rest of her life: Sure that label is going to stay with you from all cultures you know. In Canada, if you're divorced, divorce moves on. But in our cultures, that woman for the rest of her life they label them. Remember that person is divorced, or even if it's not her fault, in terms of what happened in the family she gets the blame because that's just the way culture is" Two others were not as categorical:

It is not as individualistic as here, like as in non-Muslim community but it is not as personally demonizing as may be thought of. Many women get divorced, many women get remarried and divorce is acceptable. It is just not very common.

I mean people are shunned less now than they have been.

Getting legal advice on breakdown

If a woman is contemplating divorce, she may have trouble accessing legal advice about her rights on the breakdown. This occurs for a number of reasons. Sometimes they are discouraged from pursuing any rights on separation, perhaps because such action would bring more shame:

They don't have that sense of power, empowerment and then to have the family back home say ... 'don't fight for your rights.' Or, 'okay get the divorce but don't demand some payment, some kind of money or equality.' In one case she put him through university... she's fully qualified in her home country. She made all the money to put him and then now she has to get re-certified and needs some money... I was pushing for demand at least for your studies and then let him off the hook if you want. Because then you see those kind of pressures that reaches back there. It's all so complicated back home when families know each other and, then you know, 'she's the bad woman and she's the bad woman.' And in the end, it's very hard to sustain that.

A few respondents pointed to the fact that women “don't know where to go. Some of them are, like, where do you go and where do you, yeah, they don't know the court system. They don't know the lawyers, they don't know their rights.” The lack of information about where to go is compounded when women do not have access to money and therefore cannot make arrangements to move out or to hire a lawyer.

Even if they're making money, they are not allowed to have it. So then you're taking not necessarily a second class lawyer but they don't have that power of being able to pay for the service.

And finally, there is real confusion about what law applies on the breakdown of a marriage. Some women are only familiar with Islamic teachings on such laws; others are confused or know little about the law; and some have a rudimentary understanding of Canadian law. This confusion persists in spite of advocacy groups' efforts to educate the community.

Applicable law on marriage breakdown

Most informants recognized that Canadian law would apply to determine matters such as custody and access, property division, child and spousal support, and issuance of the divorce decree if the parties go to court. And a majority of informants were of the view that Canadian law *should* apply. But no one explicitly acknowledged that in Manitoba parties were free to come to an agreement on all issues (other than issuance of the civil divorce decree, which must come from a court) and such an agreement, unless unfair or unequal, would be respected by courts. Thus, if the parties both agree, they could settle all issues, except the final issuance of the civil divorce decree, using principles of Sharia law.⁹ In Manitoba, they can ask a mutually agreed-upon arbitrator, such as an Imam, to resolve their

differences and, again, unless the arbitral decision is unfair or unequal it will bind the parties.

Some informants expressly recognized that a formal Islamic divorce is different from a formal civil divorce; and because the two forms of divorce serve different purposes, most divorcing couples would obtain both an Islamic divorce and a civil divorce. While Muslims might not feel properly divorced unless they have been divorced according to Islamic principles, under Canadian law they are not considered divorced unless a divorce decree has been obtained from the courts. Some confusion may arise when parties believe that a formal Islamic divorce also has the same legal effect as a civil divorce decree. But as some informants noted some people take advantage of this difference in the law and divorce their wife under Canadian law but not under Islamic law—so they remain married under religious law. The civil divorce frees them to marry a second wife under Canadian law.

Different people in the community would have different levels of knowledge about what the laws are and which laws would apply. But, in general, a majority of informants expressed the opinion that most people understood, at least at a basic level, that Canadian law would apply. As one informant stated, “in relation to what laws they think about when they are thinking about divorce I believe, by the time they are, if they are contemplating divorce, I believe they know the Canadian laws.” Others noted that:

Yes, for the most part they do [know that Canadian law applies] because I’ve actually had Muslim women coming to talk to me about divorce and about knowing that you know if they get a divorce their husband has to look after them, they can get half the equity... So they do know for the most part but again I also qualify that these women have lived here for a few years.

I think that when they come here because a lot of people that they do know when they come to Canada it is different rules here.

If it is in Canada, the Canadian law will work there... If she is divorced, in many cases the husband is obliged to give some amount from what we call the ‘dowry’ or the ‘mehr.’ She is supposed to get some money from the previous husband but in some cases she might not get money. She might not have enough financial support from her family or herself.

It’s been my understanding that the Muslim women here are much more empowered both again at the Canadian policy level and at the local community level women are supporting Canadian law and exercising their rights as Canadians to get a divorce.

But in Manitoba and Winnipeg the population is such that there they know Canadian law applies...if a Muslim woman wants to get a divorce and she’s looking for information that Sharia law is ever brought up, Islamic law is ever brought up. Some people may say “how does that intersect” or “which law trumps”. But overwhelmingly, no matter who she asks, it’s going to be Canadian law. These are the options that are available to you, you know

splitting the finance, the assets 50/50, you have equal access to the kids or that kind of thing.

Some informants were critical or even expressly resistant to the application of Sharia law in Canada.

Very few times have I ever heard that they're seeking somebody from the Sharia law community, the Islamic law community although we do have one or two people in the community. They're not used because they're not seen as being very progressive and in line with a Canadian context

It is notable that a significant minority of informants thought that Sharia law did or should apply or were sympathetic to its application in some circumstances. One informant stated that "they have to follow the Islamic because if they are Muslim and they have done the Nikkah [marriage contract] and they have not done it in an English way or Canadian way. They've done it in an Islamic way so they have to do it in Islamic way." Other informants said:

My take on this is, if you are living in Canada that the Canadian law should apply. In a situation where both parties weren't agreeable to Sharia law applying, then I think there is a question mark as to whether or not it should apply. I don't think it should be that simple.... I do think that Canadian law should apply in every situation but that Sharia law should be considered as a factor because it is a relevant factor in that particular scenario. I also think that if both couples agree, that should also be respected.

I struggle with this question because I realize there's the politically appropriate answer that makes everybody feel comfortable and then there's the reality that people will struggle with, it's even around the Canadian law obviously. This can be over, Canadian law applies. Yet for people who may have been raised with more of the religious, cultural identity and may not be fully practicing Sharia because if you've not been raised anywhere other than Canada. You don't know about what's been transmitted right. You get this idea of even in Canada you are entitled to alimony or what not but you may not choose to take on any of those things that would come with Canadian law because of the sense of... It's again the yardstick, the cultural yardstick you've used to measure yourself against. "I'm gonna choose to walk away and not have that shame, shameful yoke around your neck," if you choose to do that. And so I have engaged in conversations with people, South Asian Muslim women, around this issue because the Canadian law applies. It's some of the principles behind divorce that go with the cultural, religious ways.

Other informants were confused about what law applies or acknowledged that others were confused.

Absolutely, people don't know... They will show up at the mosque, thinking they are following Sharia law, and this is their only recourse. That was whole of

our CCMW, whole Sharia law and Canadian law was created a few years ago to create that awareness in the community... I have heard people, there are people who turn to religious authorities, but does everyone do that, I don't know... I don't know how that works... I've heard people do that...go to Imams ...”

I think they may want to go with Islamic laws but they know it would not be recognized so they must go with the state law. So whether or not you do anything by Islamic laws personally, like you know sometimes you sit down and you divorce in one sitting and for them this is Islamic law. Well, it doesn't work in state law! So they have to conform to that whether they like it or not. Yeah, but there are people who find ways around this.

A few informants acknowledged that sometimes the choice of law question is not about religious or cultural obligations but rather is about obtaining a perceived strategic advantage:

I think it should include factors of Sharia law...because it shouldn't be just that, Ok this person... Canadian law favours this person better and Sharia law favours this person better, so we're going to pick this one over the other one, that I don't think is necessarily equitable. So...how can you tell if this person is picking Sharia law for that reason, that's where things get complicated? I do think that Canadian law should apply in every situation but that Sharia law should be considered as a factor because it is a relevant factor in that particular scenario. I also think that if both couples agree, that should also be respected

If you were asking that they think they have an obligation to use the state law? Then yes they think it's an obligation to use the state law...If you ask if they had a choice, then the answer would be different...because, then it might be whatever is in your interest. Whatever goes with your ideology! So the woman might want the Canadian the state law and the man might want the Islamic. Because its depends on what works to your advantage. But the good thing is that you do not have that choice that's good...the moment you have the Sharia law, all kinds of issues get implicated there.

Further Research

Do you have any ideas about how Muslim women could become better informed about Canadian or Sharia laws on separation and divorce?

What areas, if any, do you think we should focus on in the next step of our research on the issue of divorce?

What areas, if any, do you think we should focus on in the next step of our research on the issue of choice of law and the use of arbitration in Winnipeg?

‘We said dreams, no wars, dream, wish’: Immigration and Citizenship

Summary: South Asian Muslim women and their families immigrated to Canada to avoid difficult situations in their home countries, to enhance personal freedom, and to seek better opportunities. Difficulties faced after arrival include separation from family, difficulties in the push-pull between maintaining identity and integration, the experience of discrimination based on status as an immigrant, ethnicity or religion, and feelings of guilt, especially towards family members who have remained in the country of origin. While there is some evidence that some marriages have been arranged in the past for the primary purpose of facilitating entry into Canada rather than as the foundation to start a new family, this practice is now uncommon. Muslim women want to become Canadian citizens not only because it confers democratic rights, but also it is a matter of pride and gives them a sense of security and personal power.

Coming to Canada

South Asian Muslim women and their families immigrated to Canada primarily for three reasons: to avoid difficult situations in their home countries, to enhance personal freedom, and to seek greater economic and social opportunities.

On the issue of difficult situations in their home countries, key informants stated that:

They would face some pressure from their family [who]... miss[es] them. They would feel kind of letting them down... [One] woman I talked to... said... my parents were saying “Stay away. You are in danger where we are. You know [name country] and the problem there. This time I'm glad you're safe, I'm glad your children are safe, you're far away. We miss you but we want you away. You have a chance. Make your life so.

Because I know a lot of women who have come to Canada, received their citizenship so that they can go back and visit their family in their home countries more safely, more securely, knowing that they're not going to be detained anywhere. They have Canadian embassies abroad, they have the rights and responsibilities of a Canadian, that kind of thing, but it's also safety.

And so it's the look at the role models, they are connected to the Internet and the world, the social media. There's that ongoing struggle to do better for themselves even if they come from a war affected country. So I've see a lot of things that I have seen here with women that could not have happened in their own countries.

On the issue of personal freedom, key informants stated that:

In Muslim countries... we have to travel with our Mehram¹⁰... So for now here that was not a problem. Maybe for some young ones it may be a problem. But some of our families in our country, they just trust their girls and their daughters to come here and get educated. So it depends.

But generally speaking regarding the view that we have within diversity with Islam. I see women, Muslim women and overall I see this empowerment in this country and in them. I mean we are much advanced. Women are driving which doesn't happen in most countries, that's empowerment... Even when there's scarf, or I haven't seen with niqab, but I've seen with the scarf they are driving, that's a positive thing... Because they are able to carry out their activities without relying on their husbands... on the men. So that's something that we are proud of it. And that's happened here and that's independence or the freedom or empowerment of women got here.

One informant, however, cautioned against stereotyping countries of origin, observing that:

The reality is in Pakistan it is not like that. I can speak to Pakistan. It is not like there it is totally different. They are far more western in this... sort of socializing and everything than the groups that are here. ..When I went back recently that I noticed that there was so much free movements between male and female and people were openly talking about boyfriends and girlfriends and I said 'oh my gosh, this is not the culture.'

The third reason offered for coming to Canada is, of course, to provide better opportunities for themselves and their children. On this point key informants noted that:

Sometimes [they want to]... come to Canada for better opportunity for themselves and for their children. So despite the fact that things aren't going well between that person and their spouse, they choose to just hide all of that from immigration so that they can just still come. Things might change when they get here. That unfortunately is common. I shouldn't say its common... its happening. ...Because if they separate there is no question that that door would be closed.

Yeah and when new immigrants come to Canada they're coming with a sense of pride, accomplishment and joy because this is what they want. This is a new way for themselves to get themselves, their families, their children and make a life for themselves... So that's why they come here. With that there's also a feeling of fear, anxiety and uncertainty. How am I going to make it here? Which kind of they have happy thoughts but then there's also fears. But but my message to them has always been that the things that in Pakistan, Iran, India we talked about and we said dreams, no wars, dream, wish, could easily be translated into goals and objectives in Canada. So if you make things, make your dreams into objectives, set a path to achieve them, you will get them.

Coming to Canada however was not without its difficulties, including separation from family, difficulties in the push-pull between maintaining identity and integration, the

experience of discrimination based on status as an immigrant, ethnicity or religion, and feelings of guilt, especially towards family members who have remained in the country of origin.

One respondent noted that separation from family can be particularly difficult for women whose husbands are abusive:

She was thinking that her family will come here and they will be support her [against her abusive husband]. But the man he did that, he didn't allow his in-laws to come here and he manipulated the situation in such a way that "he separated the woman from her family so they could not come here." [translation].... And he did it very smartly and now she is alone by herself and she will have to follow him now.

On the issue of difficulties in relation to integration, key informants stated:

I believe that for the newcomers they do. When they're new into the coming to the country they have limited knowledge of the language maybe, skills to actually be able to get out there and make it on their own. If in contacts, the new environment, they haven't quite had the chance to integrate themselves and know what it is. As I was explaining before when newcomers come into the country and especially if you lack the language skills and the other skills to integrate more into the community... What they tend to do is, they tend to keep within their own community and family, they're not out there exploring, doing things and seeing what this country is all about. They tend to hide...

Human beings we are conditioned to look at something. If you're more comfortable in this environment then you're going to stay there and if that happens to be within your own family culture that is what you got. There are people like me and I'm always looking at adventures, stretching myself out, but then you can't expect that from everyone.

As discussed elsewhere in this paper, newcomers to Canada face various forms of discrimination. Here we would note this observation from one of the key informants:

... having conversations with people who've chosen to go back home because they say, "I can't take it anymore." I wrote down the quote..., "I can't take it anymore, I don't feel like I fit anywhere and no one is helping. I get the walls up. Get pulled over by the police." Granted it was a male so maybe we wouldn't see the same things happen with females.

And some expressed guilt about having left family members behind.

Some of the women themselves would. They came and they said well when they faced all kinds of barriers and guilt saying we shouldn't have come. We should have stayed back home then as they live and they adjust they're happy to be here.

They would face some pressure from their family [who]... miss[es] them. They would feel kind of letting them down...

Dynamics of Spousal Sponsorship

While there is some evidence that some marriages have been arranged in the past for the primary purpose of facilitating entry into Canada rather than as the foundation to start a new family, this practice is uncommon. As one informant noted:

Particularly twenty years ago... were getting married. There was this idea that, because there were very limited Muslim young South Asian men to choose from. We still had arranged marriages quite prevalent. You would have to go and sponsor.

Given the stigma attached to divorce, the expectation that partners will work it out, the community's realization that arranged marriages between someone who grew up in Canada and someone who grew up in another country are often not successful, and the potentially high cost of satisfying on-going support obligations under sponsorship agreements, "immigration" marriages are now less likely. One informant acknowledged that it has happened that:

[After marriage, she finds out] he only wanted to marry her because of her immigration and that's another blow. Right, so those types of cases have had happened within Winnipeg and they are not pleasant and they don't end well. In which case, the party usually gets divorced and it's doesn't happen nicely.

Q: [Do Muslim husbands and wives make important financial decisions together?]. . . A: It is varied. One couple yes they have, she's very strong and so is he, she was here first. . . She brought him here. . . So there's a little bit of more equality. . . He's a bit more the newcomer. Whereas in another situation, no she would not be involved in finance even if she is highly educated, strong sense of personhood outside of the relationship but in the relationship it feels and, I might be wrong, but she's a little girl; she's not this competent, equal or above, somebody I would go to for advice when I see her outside. . . . So that's the sad part.

When they first come into the country. . . Especially in a certain program that they have to actually stay with their husband for so long despite what treatment they are getting. They tend to not even think of divorce. . . Q: Because they know they would their citizenship, their status here. . . A: So that that's where they may not come.

Is Canadian citizenship important?

The informants who spoke to this issue were clear that Muslim women want to become Canadian citizens. As the quotes below reveal, not only does citizenship grant the right to vote, it also is a matter of pride, it gives them a sense of security and personal power. The informants said:

They're encouraged [to get citizenship] you know by their circles, by their social. It's becoming in the communities, becoming a positive competition. I have my citizen you know I'm a citizen, I can go and vote. Right now I'm working with group of women in my community and one of the concerns they raised they all want to become citizen and they are doing everything they can to learn the language and as you know it's becoming difficult for them to become citizens now.

I've not ever heard of anybody being discouraged from getting their citizenship. If anything the couple of women I am familiar with that have just not gotten around to getting their citizenship not only receive pressure from their families but also from the community. "Why aren't you getting your Canadian, this is the thing that we're in Winnipeg you should get your citizenship. You should go to a citizenship court ceremony..." And most of the Muslim women have said immediately upon entering Canada, they worked towards getting their citizenship... and it's a great sense of pride for newcomers. I find that it's more of a sense of pride receiving your citizenship versus born and bred Canadians.

You could have that family situation where when you're playing power politics and gender politics and power, you may not want someone to have citizenship cause citizenship is just another form of personal power in Canada especially.

Why do some people choose to return to country of birth?

Having conversations with people who've chosen to go back home because they say, "I can't take it anymore." I wrote down the quote..., "I can't take it anymore, I don't feel like I fit anywhere and no one is helping. I get the walls up. Get pulled over by the police." Granted it was a male so maybe we wouldn't see the same things happen with females.

Women have had to go back home to take care of parents or take care of people cause it is not the men who are going to go to do that. It's the women who are going to be sent to do that. That affects their residency, which affects their citizenship, because in order to get your citizenship you have to have demonstrated you have a certain number of days here within a four year period or it's been moved to a six year period.

Further Research

What areas, if any, do you think we should focus on in the next step of our research on the issue of immigration?

The federal government is about to pass the *Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act* which among other things will make it more difficult to marry someone from another country because of concerns that such marriages quite be forced, involve underage girls, or polygamous. In light of this legislation, are there other issues related to citizenship and immigration you would like to see researched?

‘That is really secret space’: Violence Against Girls and Women

Summary: Almost all of the informants acknowledged that some South Asian Muslim girls and women in Winnipeg suffer violence or abuse meted out by their husbands. Most women respond to domestic violence by remaining silent or telling only those closest to them and whom they deeply trust and, when they do seek help, it might not be useful. Since the *Shafia* case, people are beginning to talk about domestic violence. The community is attempting to counter violence against women by increasing awareness; ensuring the availability of culturally appropriate services; and supporting research to better understand the problem.

Scope of the Problem

Almost all of the informants acknowledged that some South Asian Muslim girls and women in Winnipeg suffer violence and abuse meted out by their husbands. We say “almost all” because one informant said, “violence is one of that area in my experience that hasn’t been discussed or hasn’t been openly at least. Maybe in the legal system there might be a lot of cases of domestic violence. I don’t know.” No one ventured a guess on the magnitude of the problem. This kind of quantitative measure is not something that a key informants study can, in any event, extract with much accuracy. Most respondents answered the question on violence against women as being about wife abuse. Other than one informant who talked about a friend abused by her father and another who spoke of a forced marriage, no one talked specifically about other forms of gendered violence such as abuse and control of aging mothers, unmarried sisters, or non-conforming daughters except through passing references, for example, to “father, husband or brother”.

Most of the respondents were referring not only to physical violence but also to other kinds of gendered abuse. They identified the following forms of abuse:

Verbal abuse: So you’re seeing a lot more women, just its moved from physical violence, not accepting physical violence, to now not accepting verbal abuse as well. And abuse can come in many forms.

Financial control:

Even if they're making money, they are not allowed to have it

But I think that's, well they don't even know how to transport, like some of them they're not even given a cell phone. The family will keep... well yeah, like they keep the control, whatever's going to leave the access. Here's one ticket or two bus tickets, one to get there, one to get back. In our culture too it's still silence for all women.

If it’s somebody telling a woman in their family, ‘you can’t pursue educational opportunities or career opportunities’, there are places that she can go either for

criminal processes or it could just be counselling to educate the family which is a non-conflict.

Separation from family: She was thinking that her family will come here and they will be support her [against her abusive husband]. But the man he did that, he didn't allow his in-laws to come here and he manipulated the situation in such a way that "he separated the woman from her family so they could not come here." [translation].... And he did it very smartly and now she is alone by herself and she will have to follow him now.

Jealousy: She got married and her husband he say, 'don't go to that shop because the man they are staring at you and I don't like it.'

Psychological or emotional abuse: In violence you have to understand, I'm not strictly looking at physical violence. It's emotional abuse too... and it is a very "desi" thing...like you have new young daughter in law coming into the family, now the mother in law might have gone through the same situation so now they are back to square one...and they start behaving like their mother in laws...

Interference with status, such as citizenship application: You could have that family situation where when you're playing power politics and gender politics and power, you may not want someone to have citizenship cause citizenship is just another form of personal power in Canada especially

Threat of divorce or of a polygamous marriage: So that psychological ...especially if someone is new in Canada, they go back home and bring new people into their families.

Threats against someone else:

It might even be risk from her own family for her telling on her husband... Because you don't do that.

We are doing risk assessment. So the risk is obviously from her husband for sure but then there's also risk associated from her husband's family who are not happy that their son is being charged for a woman telling on him...

Religious right or religious shaming:

Their husbands are saying that it is their religious right.

At times I've heard that [abused] women been shy of going to a mosque thinking that she...would not be welcome to that mosque any more.

Its very kind of, 'God wants me in this position'.

Blaming: But sure that label [as an abused woman] is going to stay with you from all cultures you know. In Canada, if you're divorced, divorce moves on. But in our cultures, that woman for the rest of her life they label them. Remember that person is

divorced, or even if it's not her fault, in terms of what happened in the family she gets the blame because that's just the way culture is.

It is worth noting that only one respondent mentioned that a precipitating factor in violence in some cases might be an addiction, stating, “other things beyond violence, for example, it is addiction and sometimes it is the addiction which is causing the violence and there are other issues that come with that.” Given Islamic prohibitions on alcohol consumption, perhaps it is not surprising that alcohol consumption was not more widely identified as a factor that fuels domestic violence in this community.

Starting Conversations, Challenging Norms

More than one respondent acknowledged that before the *Shafia* case “there is very little conversation about these things in general”. But since that case “of course things are changing...people are beginning to talk about domestic violence specifically within Muslim community. But even then it is still in its infancy. It is not at the point where people would feel comfortable though.” However, they noted resistance to organizing the community to discuss and take action to address violence against women. Resistance from others in the community takes three forms: fear that just having the discussions shames the community, denial or minimization, and, perhaps most important, cultural and religious justifications for violence.

As noted in the chapter on Muslim identity and practices, many informants were anxious to dispel two myths associated with Islam: the stereotypical beliefs that Islam encourages terrorism and oppresses women. A focus on violence against Muslim women combines these two myths and, in the eyes of some, brings compounded shame to the family and community.

And again I've kind of alluded to that before because it is a fear of bringing shame to their culture, to their family, to their religion and also they might be at times the family is trying to help them but the only way they try to help is to keep the marriage intact at all costs which doesn't really serve the woman any good but it saves the face of the community and religion.

When I started working on these [family violence] sessions, I had an email from a religious leader, so called religious leader, in the community, who is considered to be the face of Islam in Winnipeg community, saying that I'm putting down my religion in front of other people!

[In] my experience, when you come from another culture you somehow feel the pressure that you bear the responsibility for all [Muslim] women. So if you go out and get drunk it's not 'Sara' getting drunk, it's you're bringing down... the whole nation, never mind family, it's the nation. I experience that in general and for sure the family is really, the people that I've met, the family is really important. So not to say that there is violence, that they feel that this has to be

hidden, they keep it hidden for a long, long time. Because you shame the family, you shame... the community.

None of the informants—even though they recognized the shame exposure of domestic violence could bring to the community—attempted to minimize violence by suggesting that it does not occur or that it was not that serious and perhaps surprising, identified that not many others used these techniques. The only minimizing technique used by some informants was to offer that violence against women exists in many cultures.

You know that's what it says; in Islam it's bad to divorce. If you say this kind of a thing then obviously the woman would stay with that kind of an abusive situation. But, as I said, violence happens in all the cultures. There might be stats with, I don't know with the legal system, with the police system because sometime I'm in a conversation with people in the legal system or in the police force, you know with being part of the committees and stuff, that have been I said, "I don't think there's anything in that nature in my community" and they say "No, no you don't know but there are, we do have cases of domestic violence and stuff. So yeah."

So there are many, many things that actually make people not say anything about this so, and again is it going on? I'm sure it is but I can't be certain to think can you?But I can even be a little more general with you too because you're talking about Muslim women so it's Muslim women, Asian, South Asian Muslim women in Winnipeg but when we look at women across the country who are victimized because women from all different backgrounds and religions and ways of life are victimized every day.

Many other respondents recognized that some people in the community would rely on religious or cultural norms to justify abuse of women. One informant observed, for example, that community members may assert that "if men want power and control, if they feel, "you're losing" and the only way to get it, is to hide behind something to do this act they might hide behind religion." Others stated:

Fighting happens, yeah, just let it go, you're the woman in Islam it seems like and sometimes we put that religion component to control as well.

Absolutely, I have heard that [some religious leaders tolerate family violence]! ...I have heard where Imams have said, "so go home and work it out" ...or "that is his right" ...stuff like that... Talking to social services agencies, they get lots of women coming in saying, their husbands are saying that is their religious right.. That is part of the culture...

When we had our family violence sessions... [a woman] went to put up a poster in an Indian grocery store...the guys there are like, 'Oh, that is part of our culture. It is OK by the religious establishment, the elders, a large part of them.' I'm not saying everyone agrees with that but definitely I have had emails.

However all informants who spoke to the issue repudiated the religion and culture justifications for violence against women:

When you do the research, the Qu’ran and the Hadith, and there is this one section in the Qu’ran, which people will misinterpret, that is absolutely haram. What is really frustrating and you hear this all the time, and when you are dealing with political stuff as well, people will hide behind religion when it is really a cultural or a personal choice. That irritates me more than anything else in our community, *number one!* Now hiding behind religion is now creating a misunderstanding of what our religion is all about to the public. I think that is just horrible!

Friends, no matter how much they tried to help, they were not able to or probably they don’t know what to do. You can only say “don’t do it.” That is the extent then: “There are other ways, don’t do it.” “The Prophet never hit anybody.” Those types of things that people say.

Anyone who would try to use religion and culture to justify those despicable acts is basically is absolutely wrong. In the end, these are all offences in Canada and people are going to be held accountable for it. The justification only for the person who’s doing the act, just in their mind, they can justify why they are doing it.No prophet has ever come and saying, ‘Go do this and that and you’ll be rewarded.’”

To the extent that other people within the community support such justifications, every informant asserted that support should not translate into any socially or legally sanctioned forms of violence. One informant expressed this widely-held sentiment this way:

I think Muslim South Asian women can take support and direction from the response that the federal government and courts have had in the Ontario court case with the women who were, the young women who were drowned. When they [government and courts] came out and said, ‘No, these people, the perpetrators, are all going to get life sentences. This is not a culturally appropriate practice. We cannot support this in Canada.

How Abused Women Respond

All respondents agreed that most women respond to domestic violence by remaining silent or telling only those closest to them and whom they deeply trust. There are various reasons for this silence including, the desire not to bring shame on themselves, their family and community; the need to protect their marriage; fear that their children will be apprehended; belief they can make things better or, paradoxically, the belief that a complaint will make things worse or the belief that violence is acceptable. As one informant noted “...lot of factors that shouldn’t come into play in making these big decisions come into play...” Even if a woman wanted to break the silence, she may lack confidence and knowledge about where to go or not be well served by helping professions.

The desire not to bring shame on themselves, their families, their communities and, even, their nations is, by far, the most common reason why abused women do not seek any help to end the abuse. Respondents stated that:

Abuse is shaming, like you feel like you're ashamed that you're even having to take this and then, then if you've got a culture that says keep quiet. "I have a right to it" doesn't help.

But with the violence because we come from a culture that face-saving is very important so like I have met women in my day-to-day life. None of them tells me that I experienced this. They always give an excuse...

And then there's this silencing and, I don't know if that's because she's a new immigrant, partly I think it's that, partly I think it's family, partly culture. I don't know where that fits in but it is something that I see all the time... She didn't want to talk about it, she just wanted the conversation and that was okay. She needed her space in that so I didn't want to make her feel insecure in that.

Now even a cultural thing that they don't want to bring shame to their culture...

[In] my experience, when you come from another culture you somehow feel the pressure that you bear the responsibility for all [Muslim] women. So if you go out and get drunk it's not "Sara" getting drunk, it's, 'you're bringing down... the whole nation.' Never mind family, it's the nation. I experience that in general and for sure the family is really, the people that I've met, the family is really important. So not to say that there is violence, that they feel that this has to be hidden, they keep it hidden for a long, long time. Because you shame the family, you shame... the community.

The second most commonly expressed reason for women to remain silent about domestic abuse is the belief that marriages must be saved at all costs.

It is a fear of bringing shame to their culture, to their family, to their religion and also they might be at times the family is trying to help them but the only way they try to help is to keep the marriage intact at all costs which doesn't really serve the woman any good but it saves the face of the community and religion. That's the bigger problem so sometime the family's not really helping. They are making things more complicated because it's keeping at all costs you have to say we are husband. Divorce is not a good word in certain cultures.

One of things that Muslim families don't want is this break up unless there is no way going back. But they don't want that, but what they do want is assistance in helping the situation to get fixed so you know if they know people who are...and there are so many professional people in the community. You know a good psychiatrist or a good lawyer.

I would definitely say there is so much secrecy around these issues. Most of the time it would be really really hard to actually stick to your neck out and go even

to the community because nobody will support you...It will be hard for anybody to support you and for you to feel comfortable in reaching out...It is a very big problem area because the community is growing.

In cases of extreme violence, one respondent noted that, "My sense is that there would be pressure, if there is intense violence that would mitigate that pressure, but otherwise they will try very hard that the couple stay together..."

Connected to marriage preservation is the fear that husbands will be arrested or that they will suffer the loss of social prestige if the women speak out in any way.

I think to large extent it remains that there is great fear that people blow violence out of proportion. Like when you come to Canada, one of the first things you learn is how parents can't smack a child. People are so afraid that if they say something, 'Oh my God, if I do anything they will take my spouse away or they will take my father away to jail and they would much rather suffer the abuse then be the one to put their loved one in this situation'...

If something happens the cops come and they take the husband away or rather take the family away from him and they put them in shelter. It is right in that way they protect the wife and children from the abuse of husband. But problem is that even if it happens once or twice the women stay in the abusive relationship and doesn't want to complain, thinking it will split the family.

Yeah sure, they would not even have to say very much and I think 60% of the pressure would come from herself and her own dilemmas... can she even do this...can she even go as far as to say anything... bring it out in the open. She would be too scared of the consequence whether it's towards father or the husband or the brother... That is really secret space.... That's the hardest one!

Difficult for families' to report violence when the abuser is well-respected within the broader community. If they are an esteemed person representing the culture, helping other people and abuse is going on within their own family, it is difficult to report regardless of whether Muslim or not.

Only a few respondents noted that calling attention to domestic abuse is impractical because they are financially dependent on their husbands, a separation may affect their ability to come or stay in Canada, or the stigma they would face in their home country would be even worse than the stigma they would be facing Canada.

The main issue is why women don't come forward is usually...financial dependency on the husband.

So despite the fact that things aren't going well between that person and their spouse, they choose to just hide all of that from immigration so that they can just still come. ... I just see that sometimes people are so desperate to leave their homelands, for whatever reason or for better opportunity for themselves

and their family. They are willing *genuinely* to try and make a marriage... Because if they separate there is no question that that door would be closed.

Especially in a certain program that they have to actually stay with their husband for so long despite what treatment they are getting they tend to not even think of divorce because...

She said, 'Go back home after [a divorce]? My profession is finished; I'm no longer able to practice because I've divorced.' All her studies, all her expertise, huge. She say... she wouldn't have a career there.

Others noted that women "feel that they need that male figure in their life" and one noted, "Love, they love too. Just they don't want to leave that."

Two respondents expressed fears about children being apprehended should a criminal complaint be made and then cared for in culturally inappropriate ways.

People are afraid that their children will be given to foster parents who are not Muslims so they have heard horror stories that baby will eat pork first day.

We have... children taken away by from the family services because of the abuse in the family. There was no place at the time to put the children with Muslim families because what the problem was that they got the information. They were taken away from the family and placed with Canadian white family. Where the first thing they are worried about is the diet as there was pork and about their social environment in the houses. So the closest they thought was they put them in the Jewish family.

If women are silent because they do not want to bring shame and want to preserve their marriage at all costs, they persuade themselves they can make things better or others encourage them in this belief.

They think lots about family, about community. So finally they take decision, I should not go. I should absorb, gradually it will be fine.

And he'll get better. It's always; you know that he won't do it again.

Things might change when they get [to Canada].

[Sometimes] when you are concerned about how your parents are feeling about it, but in most of these cases... that was one where the family didn't care about what the community thought about it. I find there is more pressure, I don't know, maybe I'm ignorant to this, but there is pressure to just trying to make it work beyond what is normal... But people would keep that stuff secretive.

Parents sometimes say, especially if they are not in Canada and do not see the abuse, encourage her to try again.

Some women are afraid that if they do speak out about violence, they risk being disbelieved and having an escalation of abuse.

I think there are multiple issues that come to their minds. That maybe, how my husband will take it. How my family will take it. How my community and relatives will take it? Even my parents living in their home countries, how they will take it?... So they think too much about how others will take it and they suffer themselves.

This is partly because of what I said previously: the fear of what will happen next is so great that [women] think they can somehow save the situation by just saying to everybody “take it easy” or just forgive. It is a tough reality and even their friends will say that... so they are really in a very tough spot.

Yes, and the community is a lot farther away I would say. The pressure is still within the family. It is in the end, ‘what would the others say?’ will always be the question that exists but it is the family the foremost...

Fear is another thing that women experience...

It might even be risk from her own family for her telling on her husband... Because you don't do that.

So the risk is obviously from her husband for sure but then there's also risk associated from her husband's family who are not happy that their son is being charged for a woman telling on him.

One informant noted that some women are raised in the expectation that violence is acceptable. This informant stated that, “half the time, it is not that anybody is... giving you a direction, it's you're complicit. The woman is complicit because that's how she has been raised or realized those are the values. Half the time when she is getting abused she doesn't even know she's getting abused!

Barriers to Help

Women who do decide they want to seek help face many barriers. First are personal barriers; as respondents noted, “they are shy or they are inhibited” or “not strong mentally enough to go to a counsellor to seek or help or to say out loudly that I'm a victim so I need help. They've lost that confidence. Then there are practical barriers such as inability to make a telephone call or to take a bus: “they don't even know how to transport, like some of them they're not even given a cell phone. The family will keep... well yeah, like they keep the control.” Additionally, they may not have any family or friends in Canada with whom they can talk.

If you were back at home then at least you would have your own circle of friends, your own circle of relatives... Even to just pick up the phone and talk to somebody or go to somebody's house you just go anywhere and you can take some shelter... Yeah those problems are there here...

If they were in the same country... If they were seeing the blackeye... But they don't see that, the parents, so they're exercising pressure.

They phoned close friends and then those close friends went and tried to help the situation. But it was still seen, as within maintaining a lot of privacy because they did not feel that they could approach anyone outside. Now the reality of that is that close friends are not equipped to deal with this.

In her situation specifically she had a close group of friends, some were Muslims, some were not and she spoke to us about it.

If they muster the confidence to seek help, they might have trouble finding out about available resources.

But here I feel the girls, from my community especially those who are married, mostly they don't go to different places to say against violence.

They don't know where to go. Some of them are, like, where do you go and where do you, yeah, they don't know the court system. They don't know the lawyers, they don't know their rights. So they're really, really locked unless they get connected. We've got some good resources like Nor'West Counselling is really good, Immigrant Women's Association, who get to know them a little bit and then give them that little bit of safety. They will put them to, you know, to know their rights.

So there is this fear that what the legal system really is, there is this fear of what social services actually does right. So, people don't want to talk about this until things get so far to a point that you have no choice left. And even then it is really hard.

If they do manage to connect to assistance, they might not find this assistance of much value. One informant noted that women are afraid that there will be "quibbling on whether or not this was appropriate or not appropriate. So I think if Muslim women are asking, 'am I going to be supported by the outside world if I want go out and voice my concerns?'" As the excerpts below demonstrate, physicians, religious leaders and child welfare agencies might create more problems than they solve:

On physicians:

Physicians are not the best in this. While some physicians are far more accepting and also knowledgeable where to send. But a lot of times the physicians don't play that role. I think too often they step back because they know these people socially. It is hard for them to make this call... It may affect them professionally and I am not sure that our physicians are as good a resource on this.

On religious leaders:

Q: Do you think some religious leaders tolerate family violence further frustrating a woman's ability to exit an abusive marriage'...A: Yes, I do! I think that they will say, 'Oh sister he is a nice man, he was just angry'... It is not a good situation when they feel like...the women feel like abandoned by the religious sort of senior figure. This is quite disturbing and it does happen, it does happen in this community. And it is very sad. There are pressures on her to remain mum and tolerate.

Sometimes people don't want to go to their... religious leader because they get intimidated, they get, even if they're nice people, they might encourage you know what it works, it works, so. My experience you know that some people do not look to go back to the in terms of a serious situation, go to their communities or to the religious leader, they would rather go to the Canadian institutions or services to get that...Because there's less biases there.

Imans have said, 'so go home and work it out'... Or 'that is his right'."

Absolutely, I have heard that [some religious leaders tolerate family violence]! Now I can't confirm to that, I have heard where Imams have said, "so go home and work it out"...or "that is his right"...stuff like that... Talking to social services agencies, they get lots of women coming in saying, their husbands are saying that is their religious right. That is part of the culture...

On child welfare agencies:

[Interviewer advised informants that if child abuse was disclosed during the interview, a report would have to be made]. That is probably one of the reasons it's not being disclosed to so-called informal leaders like myself or others. Because they know it's got a legal consequence, like if you come and tell me that this is happening in my life and I immediately think of your children. What do I do? Just say, 'excuse me?' And I always see people when I go out in the community, I see and if I see anything that I see legally it has to be that I'm going to... So that's how we teach them. [They fear] like, 'oh, you're a spy.'

Maybe the community puts also pressure but I think it is from the family itself. I know a family where they had issues and a woman was battered...A friend of mine brought this to my attention, I talked to the social services about it and they... called the woman. She and the friend who told me about this situation talked to some influential member of the related family, who put the pressure on the spouse and elder in-laws to behave themselves. But after Social Services contacted them, the wife decided that no, no she denied everything. She said nothing happened, nothing. They got mad at the person who talked. She said, "I didn't do anything"... But you know, still it does happen in the greater community too.

What is going on in the community to counter violence?

According to the informants, the community is attempting to counter violence against women in four ways. Various groups are trying to increase awareness of the problem; ensuring that funding bodies and social services providers recognize that women and their supporters must have culturally appropriate services available; doing what it can to counter Islamophobia, whilst at the same time not feeding into the stereotype of the terrorist Muslim who beats his wife; and supporting research to better understand the problem of violence against women.

Increasing awareness of the problem

Community organizations, such as the Islamic Social Services Association, the Canadian Council for Muslim Women, the Canadian Muslim Leadership Association (which is oriented to young adults) have organized workshops on various aspects of gender inequality, including violence both for the community at large and for specific groups, such as social services providers or potential peer supporters of abused women. Informants noted for example:

The RCMP, the Winnipeg Police, Islamic Social Services, also the Canadian Muslim Leadership Institute and Canadian Council of Muslim Women, they've done workshops they support each other in the workshops such as Muslim Women and the Niqab – Common Ground, Youth Project and No Religious Arbitration. They have worked very collectively and across grounds to ensure that women know their rights...

[Community groups] try to inform and synthesize... [These groups] tried to do several workshops... and counselling, marriage counselling and stuff like that too.

Yes, there are shelters, social service agencies... to teach them about Islamic perspective on family violence... [there are] lots of workshops with social service agencies... within the Winnipeg community... there is the Islamic Social Services Association... in terms of their services... like counselling and all.

Well Islamic Social Services Agency... they've been doing lots of work for a long-time. They were also provided to the police, to people who any social service who many come into contact with the family to understand what the cultural context for it, how to support that particular religious context, being respectful of faith yet also helping empower people within that.

I think both of the major Islamic organizations, Islamic women organizations they have done that to really help people support one another in knowing how to prevent, how to respond, and how to support one another in responding.

The Muslim community in Manitoba have done a significant job in combatting violence and educating both newcomer women and also women who live here.

This is very different from the practices in their homeland but as women get more educated and have more and more options they can respond to violence. They know who to turn to.

One informant noted that men are standing behind the women who are doing this organizational work:

Just here the climate the in the city, because of some strong Muslim leaders who are really, really solidly open, broad-minded, good people. They're creating an environment that is beginning to be safe for women... Men are helping them. I went to the Women's Muslim Dinner, I don't know what it was called but it was nice. Lots of men, lots of women, strong women standing up, men supporting them. These are well respected in the large community and in the Muslim community.

This informant went on to note that this work is fraught with pitfalls:

I know they walk a fine line being able to hold, because they know if they cross too fast or too suddenly they'll lose this. You need to maintain that momentum for the sake of those who will come after. You can't alienate. So it's a long process but I think there's really good hope in that.

Given all of the barriers that abused Muslim women face, it is important that their peers-- friends and siblings—also have an understanding of the dynamics of violence and knowledge about available resources.

So abused women... have support. But they have to seek it. Because when I called the family services... about it, the counsellor said "I can't do anything about it until she comes and asks. I cannot just interfere. She has to decide that she wants support."

The only thing we can do which is happening right now is there are more and more women groups in Canada starting to actually speak out about these things... Provide information to all the women in the community and all the men in the community.

Now there's this sense that because the information [on gendered violence] is reaching them that this is not okay. And coming from the women in the community. Each one is reaching one, and each one is teaching one that this is not okay and you have options to respond and prevent violence.

Ensuring culturally appropriate services

Counseling services

Given the small size of the Islamic community in Winnipeg, Muslims can find culturally specific counseling services.

I would also like to mention Islamic Social Services that agency that has the supports in Manitoba is seen as an international model so they've been called upon to do many discussions worldwide on what their approach is. How they specifically come from a standpoint of community and family healing rather than this adverse kind of victim versus perpetrator feeling...

We have in Winnipeg now the Islamic Social Services Association. One of the things they are specifically gearing towards filling in that gap of cultural difference, that people in the Muslim community face, not just for women but also men as well. Organizations like that have made a difference. I don't know how many people are aware of those organizations, but you can have those private conversations and they have facilities with various professionals in whole variety of areas, all of who are Muslims. They understand the things that are different culturally and as a result are able to help at the level that that person can understand. Because I think that the thing is the area that was lacking before was that they would speak to a counsellor, and the counsellor just didn't understand anything about the pressures. And to tell you about that, it's hard if you haven't really experienced it, it's hard to tell. To speak to people who have been through that is a totally different service that can provide some healing.

But some are of the view that there are not enough services available or that cultural awareness in mainstream services could be improved:

I feel sometimes the resources are not appropriate and not enough here in Winnipeg. And I think this is not sufficient... there are resources but I would not say that they are all accessible and in the way that they are they all are need appropriate... So there is a lot that can be done in that regard but there are no funding, that's always a problem. Also the people don't even know where to go so. I know there are some hidden resources.

Islamic Social Services Agency... probably fifteen years ago maybe, funded pamphlets to explain to people when they were at the mosque. They were also provided to the police, to people who any social service who many come into contact with the family to understand what the cultural context for it, how to support that particular religious context, being respectful of faith yet also helping empower people within that. ...Because not everybody necessarily wants to go to the religious cleric or somebody who they think may support one perspective or another.

Family services

A concern expressed by more than one informant is the perception that most counselling services were interested in aiding the break-up of the family rather than focusing on family healing or safety. Others were concerned that apprehended children would be placed in inappropriate homes.

One of the things is social services providers weren't ... till we started working with them, we found out like they are not interested in breaking up a family what they are interested in is the safety of woman and the child. So, how you want to position that and how you want to say that. You will definitely find people, and there is lot more cultural awareness now as well and services providers are becoming more aware.

We have... children taken away by from the family services because of the abuse in the family. There was no place at the time to put the children with Muslim families because what the problem was that they got the information. They were taken away from the family and placed with Canadian white family. Where the first thing they are worried about is the diet as there was pork and about their social environment in the houses. So the closest they thought was they put them in the Jewish family.

There is this fear of what social services actually does right. So, people don't want to talk about this until things get so far to a point that you have no choice left. And even then it is really hard. People are afraid that their children will be given to foster parents who are not Muslims so they have heard horror stories that baby will eat pork first day and stuff like that. People have real fear of these things like that sometimes extend beyond the abuse they are suffering. They feel like they are going out of frying pan into the fire so they keep it mum right.

Police Responses

Our current Winnipeg Police Chief and RCMP District Operations Manager are very, are at the forefront of encouraging women from Muslim and diverse communities to come forward and get assistance in a culturally responsive and appropriate way. This is one of the keys right there, because a Muslim woman can want to respond to the violence but her access in order to that is also something that needs to be addressed in what the approach is.

Well Islamic Social Services Agency...they've been doing lots of work for a long-time.They were also provided to the police, to people who any social service who many come into contact with the family to understand what the cultural context for it, how to support that particular religious context, being respectful of faith yet also helping empower people within that.

The policing community is working on a very, very basic sort of training for police officers on the concept of forced marriage, honour-based violence. What it is, what they should do, what they shouldn't do, some cultural things to be to remind them of when they are dealing with different victims... So when they go they have a little more tools in their toolbox to be able to serve our diverse communities better.... But the key is the police, when they are there, it's already an offence has happened

The easy part is getting information and lay the charges and close the file... But what will happen to this woman right now? How is she going to be actually supported by her family, community and the public at large? That's the key here. A lot of times when these things are underreported it comes from the fact that they're thinking that they live that everyday they are right in the middle of it. So it's fairly hard for them to make that decision should I go forward or not. So there is a gap there. How can we address the gap?

Combating Islamophobia

Well Islamic Social Services Agency...they've been doing lots of work for a long-time. Some of the programs... probably fifteen years ago maybe, funded pamphlets to explain to people when they were at the mosque.

The Manitoba Muslim Campaign which was a number of billboards. Pamphlets and informational workshops, etc. to make the public at large understand that domestic violence is not something that's specific to the South Asian Muslim community, that it happens everywhere and that the response should be similar.

Doing Research

The Canadian Council of Muslim Women and there's the Sikh ah Women Committee in Canada, that they're actually doing conferences, they're doing research... Increasing the awareness within their own communities. Women and men need to know that this behaviour is not tolerated. This behaviour should not be tolerated or rewarded. Here's a helping hand for you. The research you are doing is going to bring up a lot of those things,

Further Research

What areas, if any, do you think we should focus on in the next step of our research on the issue of violence against women and girls?

The federal government is about to pass the *Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act* which among other things will make it more difficult to marry someone from another country because of concerns that such marriages quite be forced, involve underage girls, or polygamous. In light of this legislation, are there other issues related to violence against women that you would like to see researched?

Appendix: Email sent to key informants in December 2014

Hello,

Last summer, you agreed to be interviewed as part of a research project on the influences on young South Asian Muslim women living in Winnipeg. You may remember that we promised to share our preliminary report analyzing all of the responses from informants with you before finalizing it.

Please find attached our preliminary report. You are free to share it with others if you wish. Note that this report does not make recommendations. Its limited purpose is to allow informants to review the information collected during the interviews and to suggest additional areas of inquiry or next steps in this research project.

We welcome feedback on this report. In particular, we welcome feedback on the following questions:

1. Is there anything in the report that strikes you as inaccurate?
2. Do you have any ideas on what we should do next with the report? We have suggested some areas for future research? Would you add anything to this list?
3. What areas, if any, do you think we should focus on in the next step of our research? At the end of some chapters we have asked some specific questions about future research.

If you would like to provide feedback, you can either do so by email (Karen_Busby@umanitoba.ca) or by contacting me at 204-474-6155. Please note that Sara Mahboob has decided to pursue her doctorate at McGill University in Montréal. Because she has a heavy workload, Professor Busby will collect any feedback on this report and finalize it.

Yours truly,

¹ In 2011, 6065 women who identified as Muslim lived in Manitoba and 5225 of these women lived in Winnipeg. Between 2001 and 2011 the Muslim population in Manitoba increased by 143%. Statistics Canada, 2013 (Code 01) (table). National Household Survey (NHS) Profile. 2011 NHS. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-004-XWE. Ottawa. Released September 11, 2013

² M.Q. Patton, "enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis" (1999) 34 Health Services Research 1189 at 1197.

³ J. Morris, Determining sample size. (2000) 10 Qualitative Health Research 3.

⁴ Daood Hamdani, Muslim Women: Beyond the Perceptions. A Demographic Profile of Muslim Women in Canada Canadian Council of Muslim Women 2004 p.10. Accessed August 15, 2014: http://ccmw.com/wp-content/uploads/2004/11/muslim_women_beyond_perceptions.pdf

⁵ Supra note 4 at p. 12.

⁶ Verse 4:34 Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them. Surely God is most high.

⁷ Wiebe, Ellen, Roya Najafi, Naghma Soheil, Alya Kamani, "Muslim Women Having Abortions in Canada: Attitudes, Beliefs and Experiences", 2011 Canadian Family Physician vol. 57 pp134 – 138.

⁸ Hamdani supra note 4 at p.7

⁹ Sharia or Islamic law is not monolithic or uniform. Pascal Fournier considers, for example, how *mahr* is often seen as a widely-understood and uniform practice whereas, after reviewing authorities from different countries and schools of thought, she concluded that the practice is far from unitary. See, Pascale Fournier, "The Roots of *Mahr* and the Hybrid Transplant: Introducing *Mahr* as an Islamic Legal Conception and a Fragmented Legal Concept" in Muslim Marriage in Western Courts: Lost in Transplantation.