

**Summary of the  
Preliminary Report on Key Informant Interviews:  
Influences on Young Muslim Women in Winnipeg**

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**Why do 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. 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. 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. We are circulating this preliminary 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.

## **Summary of Findings**

### **‘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 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.

#### **‘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.

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