

Islamophobia in Canada



For this fact sheet and more Islamophobia resources (with
embedded references):

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Islamophobia: Defined

The unfounded or irrational fear and/or hatred of Islam or Muslims, leading to violence and systemic discrimination.

Islamophobia by Numbers

Islamophobia (like all racisms) is not just overt, but largely normalized – meaning that Islamophobic attitudes/behaviours are more prevalent than we may realize. For example:

- 46% of Canadians have an unfavourable view of Islam – more than for any other religious tradition
- Fewer than half of Canadians would find it “acceptable” for one of their children to marry a Muslim – lower than for any other religious group
- 56% of Canadians believe that Islam suppresses women’s rights
- More than half of people living in Ontario feel mainstream Muslim doctrines promote violence
- 52% of Canadians feel that Muslims can only be trusted “a little” or “not at all”
- 42% of Canadians think discrimination against Muslims is “mainly their fault”
- 47% of Canadians support banning headscarves in public (compared with 30% of Americans)
- 51% support government surveillance of mosques (as compared to 46% of Americans)
- 31% of Canadians approve of American President Donald Trump’s restrictions on travellers from Muslim-majority countries.

This demonstrates how negative conceptualizations of Muslims exist even among those who would not intentionally or actively ‘discriminate’ – but who nonetheless find acceptable, unsurprising and/or legitimate the violence directed against Muslims.

About this resource

Islamophobia is sustained and justified by the myths we tell/are told about Muslims. This fact sheet addresses some of these narratives, assessing their legitimacy using statistics/facts:

- “Islam promotes violence and Muslims are violent” – pp. 1-2
- “Islam oppresses women and Muslims are misogynistic” – pp. 3-6
- “Islam is homophobic/transphobic, and Muslims are intolerant of queer/trans people” – pp. 7-9
- “Sharia law is a barbaric punitive system and we must safeguard against its imposition here” – pp. 10-11

MYTH: “Islam promotes violence and Muslims are violent”

FACT: Islam is not a uniquely or particularly violent religion

- Like the majority of ancient religious doctrines, Islam is capable of being interpreted to sanction/promote violence. However, according to a textual software analysis program (Odin Text) - the Muslim Holy Book (The Qur’an), has proportionally fewer violent references than does, for example, the New Testament or the Old Testament
- In recent history (i.e. the 20th century), Christians of European heritage have been responsible for over 98% of the global deaths from political violence. This is not intended to condemn Christians or Christianity but rather, to demonstrate the capacity for any ideology to be operationalized in ways that serve the socio-political agendas of its adherents

FACT: Muslims are responsible for a very small proportion of ‘terrorist’ violence in the West

- **Canada 1960-2015:** Muslims responsible for 1% of terrorist-described incidents; 0.41% of fatalities from terrorism (White supremacists - 4% of terrorist-described incidents; 2.4% of fatalities from terrorism)
- **USA post 9/11-2017:** Muslims responsible for 0.05% of violent deaths
- **Europe 2010-2015:** ‘Islamists’ were responsible for less than 2% of ‘terrorist’ attacks

FACT: Globally, Muslims are overwhelmingly ‘peaceful’

- 0.01% of the global Muslim population (approx. 100,000) are engaged in violent activities with militant groups
- According to a global Pew Research Center study in 2013, “Muslims around the world strongly reject violence in the name of Islam”.
- According to a Pew Research Center study in 2017, Muslim Americans are almost 20 percent more likely than the general population to say targeting and killing civilians in order to further a cause is never justifiable (76% of the Muslim-American population, versus 59% of the general population).

FACT: Muslims in Canada experience more hate/violence than they perpetrate

- **Canada 1960-2015:** 3x as many killed for being Muslim than by a Muslim; USA 2016: 6x as likely to be killed for being Muslim than by a Muslim

- In January 2017, Muslims were victimized in the most fatal act of politically/ideologically-motivated violence in Canada since 1989 (six killed in the shooting at Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec City)
- There are at least 100 active White Supremacist organizations in Canada - including the III%'ers, which is illegally lethally armed and 200-members strong but that the RCMP has expressed no interest in investigating
- Hate crimes against Muslims in Canada are increasing even as they are decreasing in general – there were 159 reported in 2015; over the last four years, they have increased by 253%
- In 2016, there were at least 21 attacks on Muslim institutions and/or property
- Anti-Muslim protests in Canada are commonplace, including outside of mosques and high schools

FACT: The majority of global violence is committed by the West, at the state level, and largely victimizes Muslims

- The 3,000 killed in the September 11, 2001 attack on the US Twin Towers has since justified a 'War on Terror' that has killed between 1.3 and 2 million
- In comparison, since 2000, there have been approximately 195,000 deaths from 'terrorism' (perpetrated by Muslims and non-Muslims) globally

MYTH: “Islam oppresses women and Muslims are misogynistic”

FACT: Islam is not an inherently patriarchal religion

- Like other ancient religions (including Judaism and Christianity) – Islamic texts contain verses that can be interpreted (and have been used) to support the dominance of men. Islamic scholars have challenged patriarchal readings of the Qur’an and sayings of the Prophet Muhammed, by placing them in historical and textual context:
 - [Dr. Amina Wadud](#) - “the Qur’an’s repeated emphasis of creation in pairs— ‘the male and the female’—indicates that both must be equal beneficiaries of the justice inherent in the laws and policies arising out of interpretations of the Qur’an, and both must be considered responsible for the formulation of these laws and policies”
 - [Dr. Annemarie Schimmel](#) – “compared to the pre-Islamic position of women, Islamic legislation meant an enormous progress; the woman has the right (at least according to the letter of the law) to administer the wealth she has brought into the family or has earned by her own work”
 - [Dr. William Montgomery Watt](#) – “At the time Islam began...[women]...had no right to own property, were supposed to be the property of the man, and if the man died everything went to his sons....[Prophet Muhammad, by]....instituting rights of property ownership, inheritance, education and divorce, gave women certain basic safeguards.”
- The very fact that there are Muslim feminist scholars of Islam (eg. [Dr. Amina Wadud](#), [Dr. Kecia Ali](#), [Dr. Laleh Bakhtiar](#) etc), scholars/practitioners of law (eg. [Judge Kholoud al-Faqih](#), [Azizah al-Hibri](#), [Rabia Chaudry](#) etc), and activists (eg. [Riffat Hassan](#), [Malala Yousafzai](#), [Linda Sarsour](#) etc) is demonstration that, at the very least, Islam is not *only* possibly read to legitimize/advance systems of patriarchy - while it has been used towards the *oppression* of women, it has also been used as a tool for the *liberation* of women.

FACT: Patriarchy is a *global* problem (including a Canadian one)

- A [2015 UN Human Rights report](#) raised concerns about “the persisting inequalities between women and men” in Canada
- Patriarchy in Canada manifests at numerous levels:
- Interpersonal:
 - [Half of all women in Canada have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16](#)
 - [Approximately every six days, a woman in Canada is killed by her intimate partner](#)

- Institutional:
 - 'Rape culture' – the normalization of sexual assault, the belief that victims are responsible for sexual assault, and the refusal to believe victims of sexual violence – informs the attitudes of the individuals/bodies responsible for enforcing security (i.e. the police). Eg 20% of all sexual assault allegations in Canada are dismissed as 'baseless' - despite the fact that only 2-8% are false (this dismissal rate is nearly twice as high as it is for physical assault)
 - Women earn 66.7 cents for every dollar earned by men. Women are overrepresented in poverty statistics – while 13.9% of people in Canada live in poverty, this is 21% for single mothers, 36% for Indigenous women, 35% for racialized women, 26% for women with disabilities, 14% for single senior women
 - Women make up over half of the Canadian population and yet account for only 25% of Canadian Members of Parliament (making us 50th in a recent international ranking of women in parliaments)
 - As a 2017 Ipsos study found, the Canadian educational system perpetuates the undermining of women as relevant actors in society - the majority of Canadians cannot name the achievements of notable women in Canadian history (and the percentage is higher for those asked about the contributions of Indigenous/racialized women)
- State:
 - In Canadian law, the 'provocation defense' mitigates the guilt of a criminal defendant who 'provoked' into committing a crime. This defense has been used disproportionately to justify/reduce the consequences for men who kill their intimate partner in a 'jealous rage'.

FACT: Muslims in Canada are not disproportionately responsible for misogynistic violence

- 'Honour-based violence' – the type of violence against women most typically associated with Muslims/other racialized communities - are rare.
- In 2014, then-Federal Minister for Status of Women, Kellie Leitch, said that honour crimes are "very infrequent in our country". According to the Government of Canada - between 1991-2013, there were 13 crimes labelled as 'honour killings', involving 17 victims.

FACT: A Muslim woman's clothing (i.e. *hijab*, *niqab*) is not an indication of her oppression

- Our understanding of 'proper' behaviour/presentation is not universal but context-dependent. EG) a 2005 Gallup Poll found that women in Muslim-majority countries think that the way Western women dress indicate their inferiority in

Western society. This demonstrates how the same articles of clothing/dressing can carry different significances depending on place/time.

- Indeed, even within a Western context, clothing norms have changed. As Dr. Norman Finkelstein has noted: “when Europeans came to North America, the thing they said about the native Americans was that they were so barbaric, because they walked around naked. The European women were wearing three layers of clothes....and now, we walk around naked, and we say that the Muslims are backward because they wear so much clothes”. What *has* remained consistent is the classification of racial Others as ‘barbaric’ and ‘backward’ based on their standards of dress.
- Some argue that because the *hijab/niqab* is as an enforced dress code for women it is thus both a representation of, and a tool for, women’s ‘oppression’. However, more countries today have partially or fully banned the wearing of the headscarf/face veil (i.e 12) than enforce it (i.e. 2). Oppression of women is therefore not inherent to any clothing item – rather, clothing is one vehicle through which women’s presentations and behaviours are policed (i.e. through both the enforcement of, and prohibition against, particular items).
- Indeed, A 2013 Canadian Council of Muslim Women study that spoke to women who wear the *niqab* found that all women wore the *niqab* by choice – many against the wishes of the men in their families. A 2005 Gallup Poll surveying Muslim women around the world found that, when asked open-ended questions about what they resented most about their own societies, the *hijab/niqab* was never mentioned.

FACT: Gendered racism hurts Muslim women

- Canadian Muslim women are not only or even primarily victimized by their religions/cultures. Racism has material impacts on the freedom, safety and well-being of Muslim (and all racialized) women
 - EG) National Council of Canadian Muslims’ 2016 Hate Crime Report: “The most frequent targets of hate motivated attacks this year have been Muslim women and institutions”
 - EG) Recently-passed Bill 62 in Quebec restricts women wearing *niqab* from accessing many public services
 - EG) The 2014 ‘Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act’ imposes harsher penalties on ‘cultural’ misogynistic practices – like forced marriage, polygamy – in ways that limit women’s ability to report violence. As the South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario wrote in its critique of the bill: “Contrary to what the government has stated, the proposed legislative changes will not result in greater protection for women victims of domestic violence, but will have the opposite effect”

FACT: There is not one experience of being a ‘Muslim woman’

- There are 1.8 billion Muslims in the world – and the experience of being a ‘Muslim woman’ is dependent on many other factors than her religion (including: race, class, sexuality, gender expression, ability, religious sect, the country’s political/historical context etc.). This makes it impossible to create a universal picture for ‘Muslim woman’ – as it would be similarly impossible to create a portrait of a ‘Christian woman’ by referring to the experiences of women in USA, Russia, Chile, Ethiopia etc.:
- EG) Women in Saudi Arabia have only recently been permitted to drive; while 9 Muslim-majority countries have elected women heads of state
- EG) Women’s literacy in the Muslim majority-country of Guinea is 22.8%, but men’s literacy is also only 38.1% - suggesting that gender is only one factor contributing to levels of educational attainment
- EG) Female genital mutilation is practiced in Somalia (95% rate), a Muslim-majority country, but is also prevalent in the Christian-majority countries of Eritrea (83% rate) and Ethiopia (65% rate) – suggesting that this is a regional practice rather than an Islamic one (indeed, the practice pre-dates Islam)

FACT: Women everywhere resist their oppression in ways that are appropriate for them

- Like women in the West who participate in SlutWalks, Women’s Marches and other forms of activism, women around the world protest their oppression (whether we know about it or not).
- EG) Muslim women - Saudi women have successfully opposed driving bans (earning the right to drive in 2017); Iranian women have been removing their headscarves to protest the public dress code; Women’s legal groups in Pakistan have contested misogynistic laws in their country; Muslim women in Canada have organized to stop forced marriage and gender-based violence in their communities etc.

MYTH: “Islam is homophobic/transphobic, and Muslims are intolerant of queer/trans people”

FACT: Islam is not a uniquely, particularly, or essentially homophobic or transphobic religion

- Like the other Abrahamic religions (i.e. Judaism and Christianity) – Islamic texts contain verses that can be interpreted to prohibit ‘homosexuality’. Ancient Islamic scholarly tradition, however, did not. This is because, as [Khaled El-Rouayheb \(Professor of Islamic intellectual history, Harvard University\)](#) explains, “Arab-Islamic culture on the eve of modernity lacked the concept of ‘homosexuality’ ...and writings from the period do not evince the same attitude toward all aspects of what we might be inclined to call homosexuality today.” Indeed, many Muslim societies “reveal(ed) none of the (modern West’s) fixed, rigid boundaries distinguishing heterosexuality from homosexuality, and almost no sense of deviance from a compelling norm” ([Dror Ze’evi, historian of the Ottoman empire](#)).
- Legal scholar [Liaquat Ali Khan explains how](#) “the Prophet of Islam [Muhammad] treated [trans people] with respect [and] prohibited their ill-treatment...Believing that [trans people] are dearer to God, some Muslim rulers appointed them as intercessors in royal palaces, including those of the Ottoman and the Mughal.”
- While queer/trans Muslims today around the world are often subject to persecution, they exist – and they do not necessarily find an inherent incompatibility between their faith and their sexuality or gender identity/expression. They create space for themselves [to practice](#), and [to commune/organize](#); and represent/advocate for their place in Islam through [scholarship](#), [religious leadership](#), and [popular media](#).

FACT: Modern-day homophobia and transphobia globally are the legacies of Western colonialism (not a result of adherence to Islam)

- As [numerous historians have noted](#), modern-day homophobia and transphobia are the legacies of Western colonialism. Western colonizers justified their colonial rule by casting their subjects as gender/sexually perverse and thus in need of ‘civilizing’. Prior to colonialism, [gender and sexuality were organized diversely across different societies; non-heterosexuality and non-binary gender identity/expression were not necessarily punished or shamed](#).

- In many Muslim-majority countries today, punishment of non-heterosexual sexuality is on the basis of colonial laws (not Islamic law). For example, anti-sodomy laws in the Muslim-majority countries of Malaysia, Pakistan, Maldives, and Bangladesh are all found in Section 377 of their penal codes – having been instituted by British colonial authorities according to a common legal template used throughout their colonies; and anti-sodomy laws present today in the Muslim-majority countries of Brunei, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, and Gambia were modelled after Section 377 (Britain itself only decriminalized sodomy in 1967 – over 100 years after the Ottoman Empire did).
- 19 of the 51 Muslim-majority countries/territories in the world do not currently criminalize same-gender sexual activity:
 - The 7 in which there never criminal prohibitions – Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Indonesia, Mali, Mayotte, Niger, and Turkey – were never colonies of the British Empire.
 - Of the remaining 12 – 10 (Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cocos Islands, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon and Tajikistan) de-criminalized same-gender sexual activity through repealing British/Soviet Union *colonial* anti-sodomy laws
- Currently, 74 countries/territories around the world have laws that punish (or that are used to punish) same-gender sexual activity. Of these – 43% (32) are Muslim; while 92% (62) have histories of colonization.
- This analysis does not *excuse* the persecution and violence that queer/trans people around the world (including in many Muslim countries) are subject to. Rather, it helps us to better understand the history of the phenomenon, orienting the way that we engage with it in the present. Specifically we should:
 - Not rely on essentialist arguments about the inherent ‘backwardness’ of Muslim/racialized Others, as the homophobia/transphobia present in non-Western societies today are neither inevitable or historical.
 - Be mindful of the capacity for discourses of sexuality and gender to be operationalized in ways that serve destructive imperialist agendas. While in the past, colonialism was partially justified by the need to ‘civilize’ sexually and gender deviant racialized Others, today, a concern with the ‘human rights’ of queers (as well as women and other marginalized groups) has similarly justified foreign intervention. As academic/journalist Stephen Kinzer has commented: “Founded by idealists who wanted to make the world a better place, [Human Rights] has in recent years become the vanguard of a new form of imperialism.....Want to depose the government of a poor country with resources?Want to build support for American military interventions around the world?Use human rights as your excuse!.... In some cases, [Human Rights’ organizations’] work, far from saving lives, actually causes more death, more repression, more brutality and an absolute weakening of human rights.”

FACT: Homophobia and transphobia are *global* problems (including in Canada)

- In many Western societies, systemic homophobia and transphobia do not primarily manifest in individual attitudes of ‘intolerance’, but less overtly, in ways that result in fewer opportunities and worse outcomes for LGBTQ+ people.
- In Canada, for example, a [2013 Pew Research Center study found that 80% of Canadians say that society should accept homosexuality](#); and a [2016 Angus Reid Poll found that 84% of Canadians support the rights of trans people to be free from discrimination](#). Yet this ‘acceptance’ co-exists alongside realities for queer/trans people in Canada that include disproportionate experiences of:
 - **interpersonal violence** - which includes [hate crimes](#) and [bullying](#), but also other forms of dehumanization, such as [intentional misgendering of trans people](#);
 - [poverty and homelessness](#);
 - [mental ‘illness’, addiction, and suicide](#);
 - **insufficient/inappropriate health care** - which includes [ignorance and hate from health care professionals](#), but also the [inaccessibility of gender confirmation surgery](#)
 - **institutional discrimination and pathologization** – eg) [‘blood bans’](#); [the classification of trans identities as ‘mental illnesses’](#); [delayed police response in investigating a serial killer targeting Toronto queer men](#) etc.;
 - [lack of political representation](#);
 - [state-level sanction of discrimination](#); and
 - **normalized homophobia/transphobia** - for example, the fact that the majority of public restrooms are gendered makes them unsafe and uncomfortable for many trans people who may not visibly conform to one of the two options.
- Queer Muslims in the West therefore do not only or even primarily experience violence from their religious/ethnic communities – they are also victimized by the interpersonal, institutional, and state-level transphobia and homophobia present in society at large.

MYTH: “Sharia law is a barbaric punitive system and we must safeguard against its imposition here”

FACT: There is no single reference for ‘Sharia Law’

- Sharia is ‘divine guidance’, as communicated through scripture and the prophetic example. The human effort to derive legal rules from this guidance – known as *fiqh* (jurisprudence) – has always included many co-existing schools of thought.
- The application of ‘sharia law’ today reflects this diversity in ‘sharia’ interpretation. Countries with ‘sharia’ legal systems differ based on:
 - **The area of law covered by ‘sharia’:** eg) Djibouti only uses ‘sharia’ principles in family law, whereas the entire Somali legal system claims compliance with ‘sharia’
 - **The regions in which ‘sharia’ is applied:** eg) in Indonesia, the province of Aceh applies ‘sharia’ to all areas of law, while in most other areas of the country, ‘sharia’ is only applied to family law
 - **Who is subject to ‘sharia law’:** eg) in Bahrain, ‘sharia’ informs its ‘personal status law’, but these only apply to the country’s Sunni Muslim population
 - **Interpretation about the prescriptions of ‘sharia’:** eg) Iran and Saudi Arabia both claim to have complete ‘sharia’ legal systems but the two countries diverge in many areas of law/practice, including in the rights and freedoms accorded to women. For example, while women in Saudi were only allowed to drive as recently as 2017, Iranian women have been driving since 1969.

FACT: ‘Sharia Law’ is not primarily stoning and hand-chopping

- Muslims understand ‘sharia’ as the principles for a ‘righteous life’ – which include guidelines for eating, praying, engaging with others interpersonally etc.
- Like in Western systems, harsh criminal punishments have historically been a part of ‘sharia law’ but required a high burden of proof and functioned primarily as deterrents. Enthusiasm for capital punishment in countries claiming application of ‘sharia’ (i.e. Iran/Saudi Arabia) represent departures from historical limits

FACT: Canadian Muslims do not seek to displace Canadian law with ‘Sharia Law’ (the two are compatible)

- A well-established principle of the Islamic legal tradition is that Muslims should obey the laws of the land in which they live
- Muslims in Canada who live by ‘sharia’ do so in their personal lives

FACT: Accommodating Muslim religious practice in schools/elsewhere, and limiting Islamophobic speech/behaviour is Canadian law, not 'Sharia Law'

- The [right to religious accommodation is a Canadian principle](#) that recognizes that our societies primarily accommodate only certain religious practices (i.e. Christian ones, around which our work week and holidays are structured). Religious accommodation makes possible the full economic, social and political participation of all who live (and pay taxes) here.
- The [limit on the right to free speech](#) is a Canadian principle that recognizes that hateful speech can expose people to violence (some more than others). Towards the goal of a peaceful, thriving and free society for *all*, 'free speech' is therefore considered alongside 'freedom from hate'.
- These principles are enshrined in the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#), [The Canadian Criminal Code](#), the [Canada Human Rights Act](#), and the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#).