



Manitoba Islamic Association

**FRIENDLY
MANITOBA**

Community Experiences with Islamophobia

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O you who have believed, seek help through patience and prayer. Indeed, Allah is with the patient. And do not say about those who are killed in the way of Allah, "They are dead." Rather, they are alive, but you perceive [it] not. And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient, Who, when disaster strikes them, say, "Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return." Those are the ones upon whom are blessings from their Lord and mercy. And it is those who are the [rightly] guided.

Quran 2:153-157

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a pilot project to examine the experiences of Muslims in Manitoba with Islamophobia. Data was collected through an online survey and through interviews with 9 Muslim community leaders.

The findings reveal that Islamophobia in Manitoba is experienced in a variety of forms and contexts, ranging from workplace discrimination, to bullying and prejudice in educational settings to physical or verbal abuse in public spaces. The report shows that Muslim women and youth disproportionately suffer from the impact of Islamophobia. The following priority areas emerged from the data collected, and are explored in this report, including:

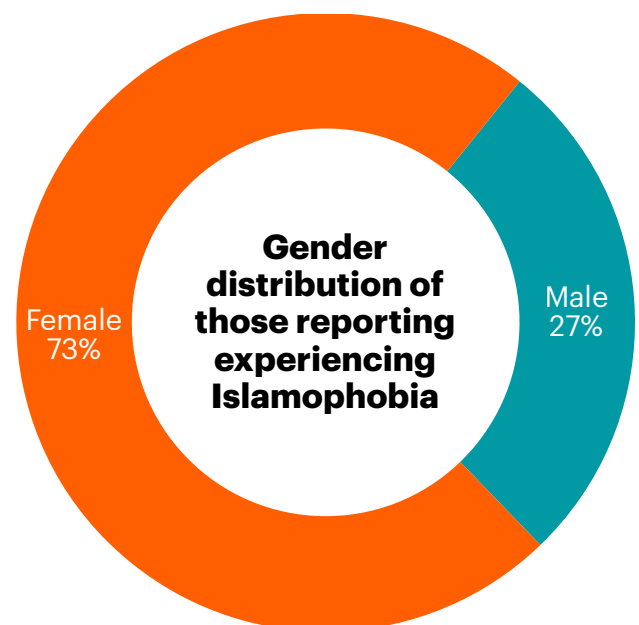
- Islamophobia in education.
- Workplace Islamophobia.
- Physical safety of individuals and institutions.
- Islamophobia as experienced by Black Muslims.
- The impact of Islamophobia on mental health, especially for youth.
- Gendered Islamophobia and the experiences of Muslim women.
- The role of government, politics and law enforcement in propagating or combating Islamophobia.

This study is a first step towards understanding the experiences of Muslims in Manitoba when it comes to Islamophobia. Its results clearly show that Islamophobia exists and poses a threat to Muslims in Manitoba, and that more research is needed to understand the full extent of this phenomenon. The themes emerging from this report identify priority areas that community, governments and civic society can work on together to address and remedy. The report concludes with recommendations for governments, civic society and community organizations.

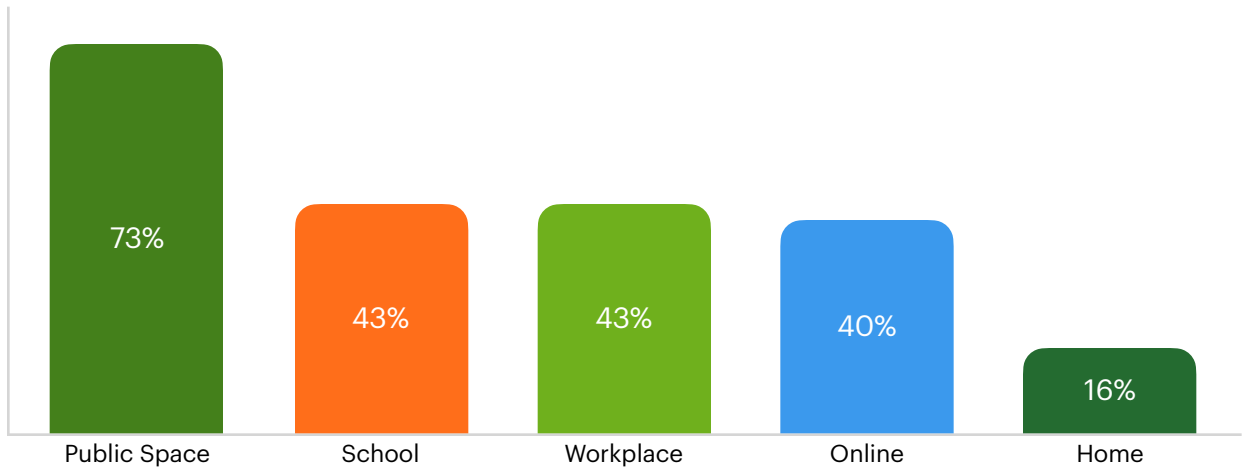
Key Findings

This report reflects the experiences of Manitoba Muslims, shared with report authors through a community survey and interviews with community leaders and influencers.

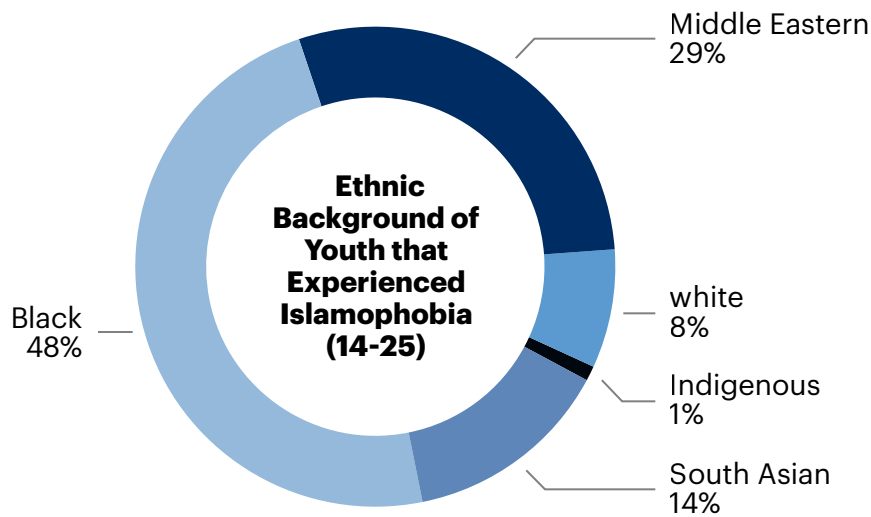
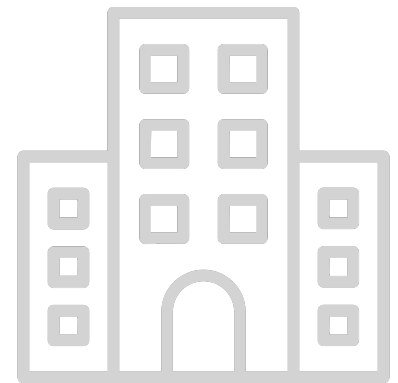
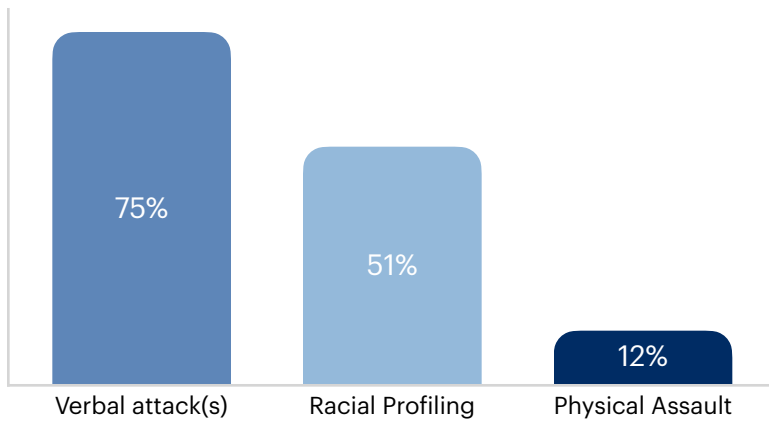
- Of the 190 survey participants, 62% reported experiencing Islamophobia.
- Of those who reported experiencing Islamophobia, 73% were women.
- Islamophobic experiences took place in a variety of spaces and contexts, including school, workplace and online. 73% reported experiencing Islamophobia in public spaces and 43% in schools.
- Only 18% reported feeling very safe wearing garments that identified them as Muslims in public. 29% reported that they did not feel safe while 52% felt somewhat safe.
- The majority reported that Islamophobia impacted their mental health. 16% reported that Islamophobia impacted their mental health very much, 46% reported that it somewhat impacted their mental, while 38% reported no impact at all.
- 41% of youth who reported experiencing Islamophobia also reported that it negatively impacted their mental health. 48% of youth who reported experiencing Islamophobia were Black.

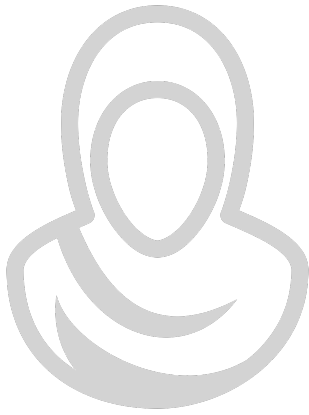


Where did you experience Islamophobia?

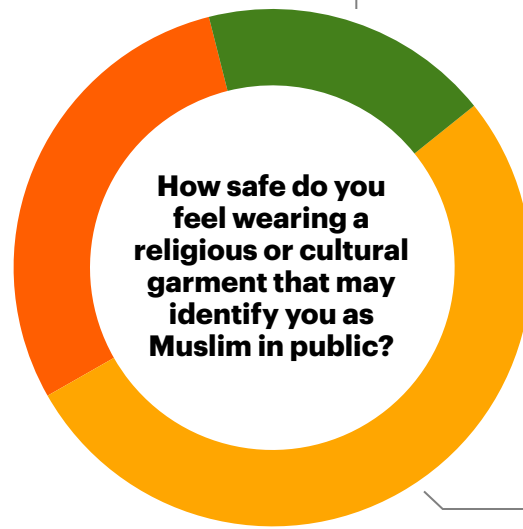


What forms of Islamophobia have you experienced?





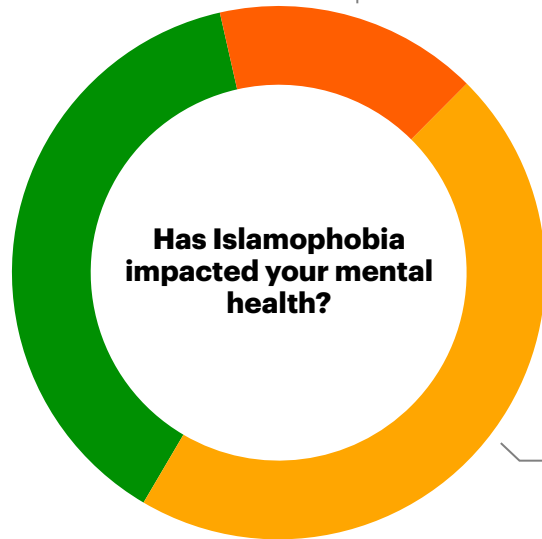
Not Safe
29%



Very Safe
18%

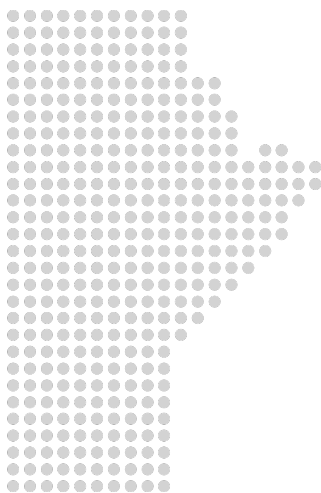
Somewhat Safe
53%

Not impacted at all
38%

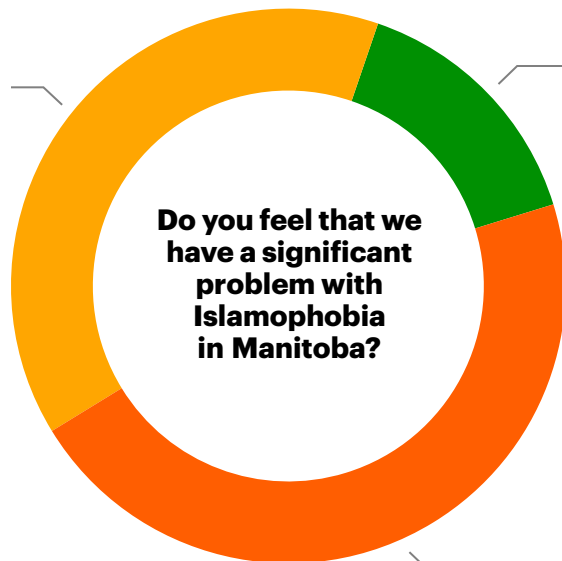


Very much impacted
16%

Somewhat impacted
46%



I do not know
39%



No
15%

Yes
46%

Introduction

The tragedy of the Afzal family (June 6, 2021) reverberated across the country and brought back to the forefront the issue of Islamophobia in Canada, where, despite an overall multicultural outlook in society, some of the most violent Islamophobic incidents in the West have taken place. In addition to the London terrorist attack, six worshippers were killed in an attack on the Islamic Cultural Centre in Quebec City on January 29, 2017, and a volunteer mosque caretaker was killed in International Muslim Organization's Mosque in Toronto on September 12, 2020. Nationally, Statistics Canada has reported a dramatic increase in hate crimes in recent years, against communities of colour and religious minorities, with a seven percent increase in hate crimes in 2019 alone.ⁱ

Following the London terrorist attack, the Manitoba Islamic Association (MIA) launched a pilot project aimed at better understanding and documenting the experiences of Muslims in Manitoba with Islamophobia and prejudice. The project consisted of two components: a) a general community survey and b) interviews with community leaders, influencers and professionals in diverse fields ranging from academia to health care.

Islamophobia in Manitoba

While the term Islamophobia has found common use in recent years, the phenomenon of prejudice against Muslims on account of their religious affiliation is not new. In Manitoba, there are documented accounts of incidents of prejudice going back decades. For example, in 1990, a conference was held at the University of Manitoba titled “Islamic terrorism in the 1990s and the threat to North Americaⁱⁱ.” The university refused to revise the title of the conference despite objections from the local Muslim community. On January 13, 2001, the Winnipeg Free Press published a letter entitled “Islam allows for no other faith” that described the religion as a “defecation of seventh century Arabian culture,” with the author associating Islam with idolatry.ⁱⁱⁱ

On February 22, 2001, the windows of Pioneer Mosque in St. Vital were broken, and hateful graffiti vandalized the exterior of the mosque. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, incidents of hatred and hostility towards Muslims increased.^{iv} On October 31, 2004, the mosque was targeted yet again, and its front windows were smashed.^v Further, many Muslims in Manitoba felt intimidated and harassed by the Canadian Security Intelligence Services (CSIS), which developed a practice of calling members of the Muslim community, showing up at their homes or places of work, and requesting to interview them. ^{vi}

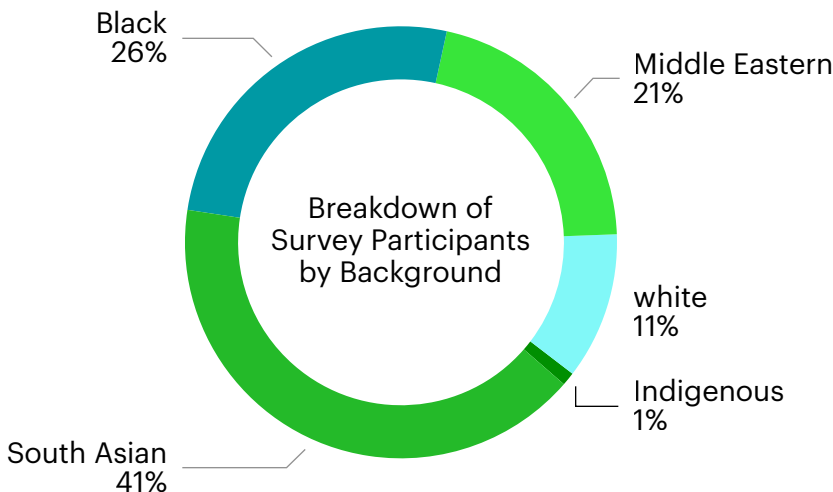
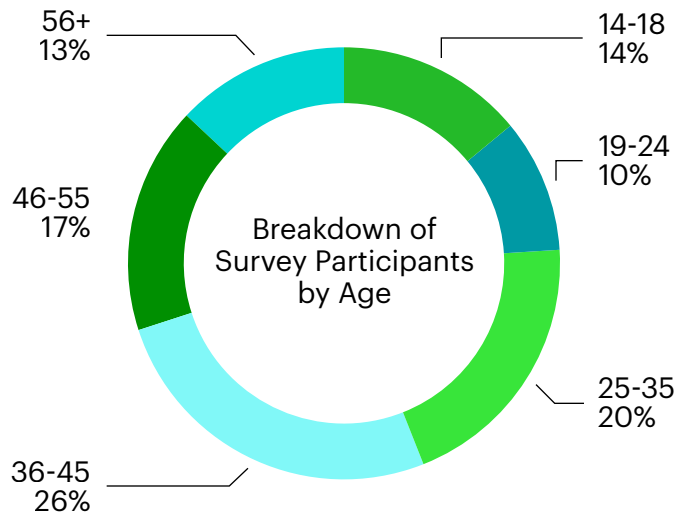
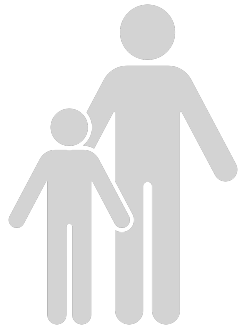
In 2015, Islamophobic remarks were publicly made against Assiniboine Credit Union’s potential merge with Access Credit Union. According to the editor of Winkler Times, who attended a meeting concerning the merging, an associate of Access Credit Union protested on the basis that Assiniboine Credit Union offers Islamic mortgages.^{vii}

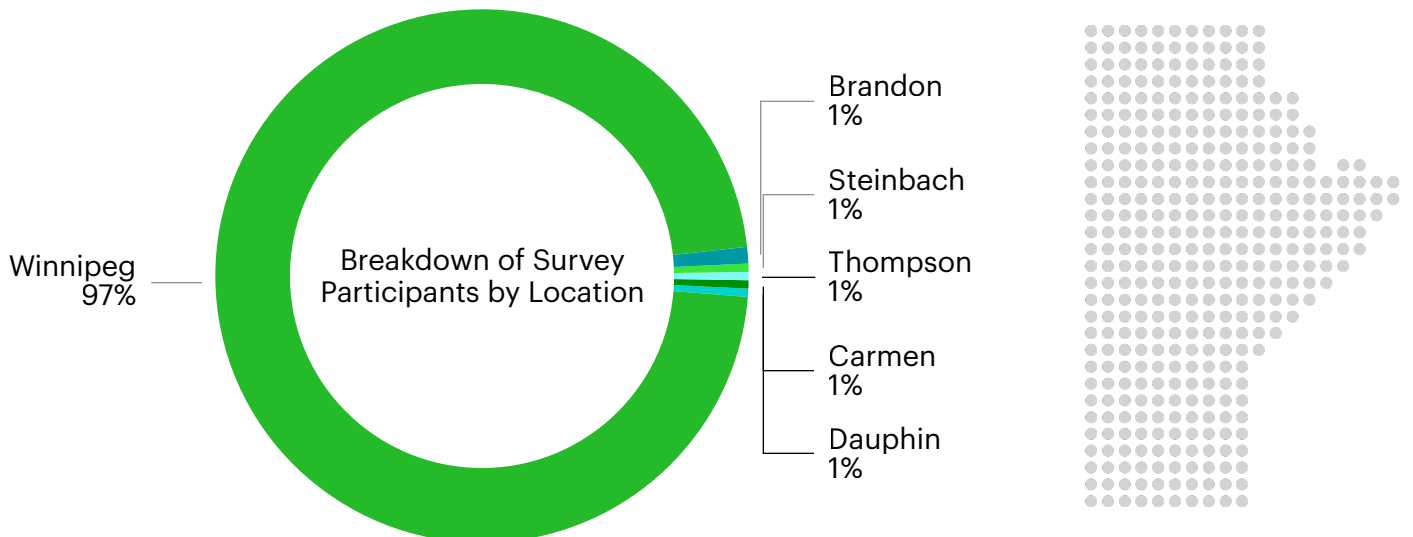
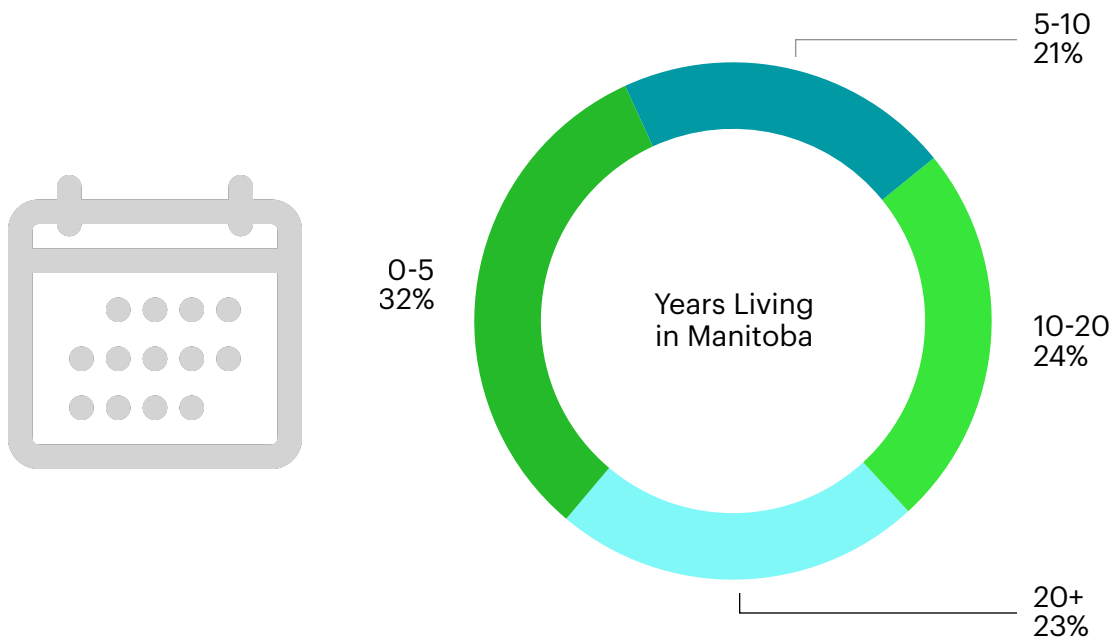
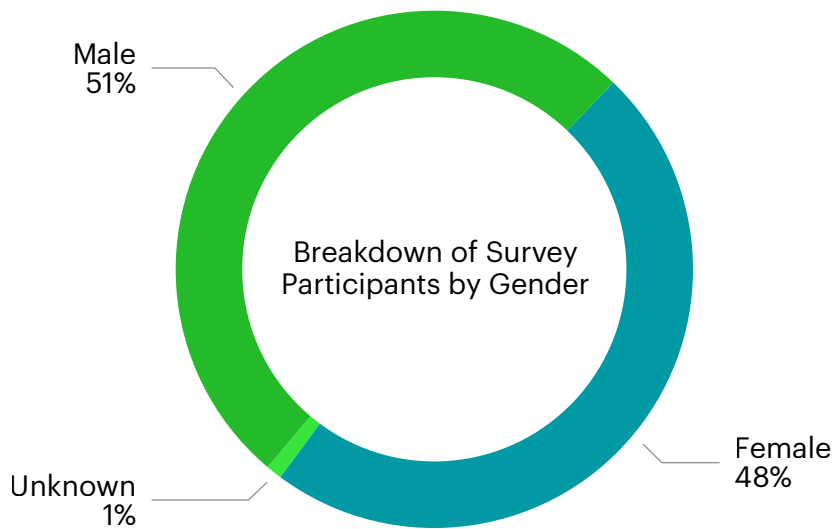
Moreover, in 2016, bacon¹ was mailed to the Manitoba Islamic Association and community members also reported having bacon left on their windshields.^{viii} In 2017, there was online opposition towards building a mosque in Winkler^{ix}, while in the same year, the Soldiers of Odin Canada, an anti-immigrant group, held a public protest in Winnipeg against motion M-103, which condemned Islamophobia and other forms of prejudice and hate .^x

¹ Swine flesh is considered ritually impure in Islam and is not consumed by Muslims.

Participants Demographics

Nine Muslim community leaders and influencers were interviewed. They consisted of community leaders, mental health and healthcare professionals, and university professors. Four were male, and five were female, and all resided in Manitoba. The common denominator among all of them was that they were all involved in the Muslim community and intimately familiar with community life. Additionally, 190 individuals participated in a community survey. Of those, 51% were female, 48% were male, and 1% did not identify their gender. Participants' age distribution ranged from teens to seniors, with the 36-45 age group being the largest. Survey participants came from various ethnic backgrounds; 97% of survey respondents were from Winnipeg, 1% came from Brandon and the other 2% from Carmen, Dauphin, Thompson and Steinbach.





Islamophobia in Education

The survey revealed that 43% of incidents reported by community members occurred in educational environments. Survey participants and interviewees shared several examples. For instance, Tasneem Vali, the vice-chair of the Manitoba Islamic Association, described how one school in the Pembina Trails School Division cancelled a visit by an author of a children's book about Ramadan on the very day that the visit was scheduled, citing parental concerns about religious agenda at school, although the book's content was cultural, not religious. Follow-up with the school revealed that only one parent expressed concern, and their concern overrode representation for over 60% of the school population. A local mental health provider described how "...young girls [who wear hijab] receive a lot of bullying and teasing [at school] because of their identity as Muslim, [and have their] hijabs pulled off... In most cases, the school does not do anything about it."

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He asked her and her friend (both wearing hijab) what would happen if he pulled their hijabs off. He proceeded to harass them during the day, tugging on their hijabs. He eventually pushed the friend as she was leaving for gym class, and her head nearly hit the wall. He also pulled my daughter's hair as he walked by her desk. No charges were filed as the girls were young, and I was a bit discouraged by the police because they said my daughter would have to testify in court.

Young Muslim girls do not only encounter Islamophobia from their peers but educators as well. One disturbing example was provided by a parent about the treatment of his ten-year-old daughter and her friend in school. The parent stated that a substitute teacher harassed his daughter when she was in grade five. "He asked her and her friend (both wearing hijab) what would happen if he pulled their hijabs off. He proceeded to harass them during the day, tugging on their hijabs. He eventually

pushed the friend as she was leaving for gym class, and her head nearly hit the wall. He also pulled my daughter's hair as he walked by her desk. No charges were filed as the girls were young, and I was a bit discouraged by the police because they said my daughter would have to testify in court. I reported the teacher to the school division." Similarly, a Muslim professor at the University of Manitoba pointed out that several of his Muslim students have encountered Islamophobia and xenophobia.

Workplace Islamophobia

43% of those that have encountered Islamophobia reported experiencing Islamophobia at work or professionally. Yasmin Ali, president of the Canadian Muslim Women's Institute, drew attention to the fact that "the first question immigrants and refugees ask is how do I get a job? Visible Muslims and primarily females are among the most targeted individuals of all forms of Islamophobia." There are several incidents of employment discrimination due to the hijab.^{xi}

"she cannot be hired because of her hijab."

Survey respondents and interviewees reported on the challenge of finding employment when visibly Muslims. This disproportionately affects Muslim women wearing the hijab. For example, one Muslim woman reports unsuccessfully trying to find work for two years until she removed her hijab and got employed within three weeks. Another survey participant shared that after applying for employment to a supermarket chain in Winnipeg, she was turned down by the interviewer and told that "she cannot be hired because of her hijab."^{xii} There are also experiences with Islamophobia in the workplace. For example, one woman reported that her colleague shared an email to other employees arguing that Muslims have been "taken to task" after the killing of Osama Bin Laden.

Physical Safety

The majority (6% not safe, 54% somewhat safe) of survey participants did not feel completely safe visiting the mosque or attending community gatherings. This must be taken in the context of the role that mosques and community gatherings play in the lives of community members. For many, the mosque fulfills a role beyond the religious. It is a centre for community life where community members socialize, access services, establish important connections and where community for many becomes a substitute for the extended family. Further, 18% reported feeling safe while visibly Muslim due to their manner of dress. 29% did not feel safe, and 52% felt somewhat safe.

The daughter was subject to Islamophobic abuse on account of her hijab while the son was targeted in relation to his sister and described as a potential rapist, with the perpetrator making comments such as “when [you] grow up, [you] are going to rape little girls.”

Several survey participants shared detailed accounts of verbal abuse and sometimes physical assault. One woman revealed that her mother had been physically assaulted due to her Islamic identity and ended up losing two lower incisors. A mother described an incident where her teenage children were harassed while at an ice cream shop. The daughter was subject to Islamophobic abuse on account of her hijab while the son was targeted in relation to his sister and described as a potential rapist, with the perpetrator making comments such as “when [you] grow up, [you] are going to rape little girls.” There are incidents involving complete families, such as the case of a family in their car when the male occupant of another vehicle shouted “*Shar’iah law*”² at them and pointed down with his thumb.

² While Shari’ah refers to the spiritual path that Muslims undertake, “Shari’ah law” is a discriminatory epithet that refers to the idea that there is a conspiracy to impose Islamic law on society.

Islamophobia and Black Muslims

Out of the survey participants, 26% identified themselves as Black. Of those, 60% reported experiencing Islamophobia. Out of the youth segment that responded to the survey and reported experiencing Islamophobia, nearly half (48%) were Black.

Being Muslim and Black is to live at the intersection of discrimination due to race, religion and, for women, gender. Abdikheir Ahmed, a Somali leader, described one of the numerous instances where he and his family were mistreated in public spaces. “Women in my community dress up with distinct outfits that foretell their identity. Black Muslims get followed around in the stores, people are avoided in the park, and the services we receive are not equal to others. Even the facial expressions that we get are not inviting. [For example], I was at [a grocery store] with my family a few years ago, and when my children asked when the sampled food would be made available, the employee responded that it would take over an hour, yet we noticed that shortly after, she gave out samples to other costumers. We have also been referred to [by racial slurs]. The fact that that we are Black [and] Muslims impacts the services and interactions we receive.”

Impact on Mental Health

16% reported that Islamophobia impacted their mental health significantly, and 46% reported that Islamophobia impacted them somewhat.

The mental health providers interviewed for this study pointed out that Islamophobia contributes to an identity crisis among Muslim youth, leading some of them to conceal their Muslim identity in school or other public spaces. One mental health provider shared that young female clients who wear the hijab felt unsafe and unprotected in school, and often felt helpless towards the abuse they suffered. This led to social anxiety and overall dislike for the academic environment and could prevent them from pursuing further education. Some youth went as far as severing their ties with the Muslim community and attempting to simply “fit in.” The mental health provider further stated that “usually, my clients are at least

18 or close to 18 and above. They have been sharing their childhood experiences concerning Islamophobia. I have had clients telling me about teachers who have been bullying them, making fun of the religion, the girls' hijabs, while also identifying Islam with terrorism. Some of the girls have shared how their teachers have pulled their hijabs, which peers imitate. [My clients report that when the] administration was made aware, nothing was usually done. ...Another big issue that I see is that Muslim children

and youth feel the pressure to fit in while receiving the message that their religion is wrong/problematic, and so is their community. Because of Islamophobia at school, some students are at increased risk for wanting to drop out of school.”

Some of the interviewed leaders also spoke of this idea that Muslims cannot be fully themselves and fully participate in some aspects of society and its detrimental effect on mental health. For example, Tasneem Vali describes how Muslims sometimes second guess themselves although they are engaged in a completely

Because of Islamophobia at school, some students are at increased risk for wanting to drop out of school.

Some of the girls have shared how their teachers have pulled their hijabs, which peers imitate.

legal and legitimate activity, such as her family's love of hunting. She described how she "received many messages from friends and family to take the picture [of her family target practicing] down [as they] could be used against me. [However] if I were a white woman, this [would] not be an issue."

Gendered Islamophobia

In our survey, a staggering 73% of those who reported experiencing Islamophobia were women. The experiences of Muslim women, especially if they wore the hijab, occurred in workplaces, schools and in public spaces. They ranged from discrimination in employment to verbal and physical assault.

Rachel Wiebe-Skouta, a Muslim convert who wore the hijab for six months while living in Portage La Prairie, reported that she encountered a significant amount of hardship during that time. "During that time, every person I met needed to discuss the hijab before we could discuss the reason for our interaction. It felt they asked in a way that they needed to know I was still a safe person for them, as they knew me before hijab. I also noticed second looks and stares from everyone while I would walk through a store or mall. Often those stares would be directed at me, then my husband. There were very rude comments that were directed at me by people I didn't know. There were also judgements placed on me and the assumption that I was not originally from Canada and that I either could not speak English or that English was not my first language. When I took off the hijab, I regained my white privilege status. No longer were there second looks or any extra attention. I was not pressured to speak of my faith in every interaction with others, nor did I have to leave my home always prepared to defend my faith. My close friends, family and colleagues know my faith, and I find that those with more education tend to be more accepting, inquisitive, and less judgmental. I also have many family members that will no longer speak to me based solely on the fact that I converted to Islam."

Women suffer from verbal and physical harm. One participant reported that a truck driver veered his vehicle towards her near the St. Vital mall. Many women reported that they were yelled at with racial epithets, and profanities and some even spat on. There are several recent media reports of Muslim women being abused in public. ^{xiii}

Government, Politics and Law Enforcement

A large portion of survey participants (35% to 42%) were very dissatisfied with the response of the various levels of government to Islamophobia. In addition, the interviewed leaders universally pointed out that government must do more. Their suggestions included funding programs, partnerships with the Muslim community, legislation, and improved representation of Muslims at all levels of government. Many also wanted the different levels of government to take clear positions on legislation that targets religious minority groups, such as Bill 21 in Quebec. Governments also have a role in creating resources to educate citizens, public servants and especially young citizens attending schools. The interviewees also pointed out to the harm done by politicians who engage in rhetoric and politics that throw Muslims (or other groups) “under the bus”. Many lamented the unwillingness of the Federal Government to intervene against Bill 21.

The interviewees almost unanimously concluded that ignorance, negative media representation, misinformation, lack of educational opportunities regarding Islam, and some reluctance from the Muslims to get involved within broader communities, lead to the sustaining of an environment where Islamophobia thrives. Many of the leaders interviewed alluded to the complex relationship Muslims have with law enforcement and intelligence agencies. Several of the interviewees touched on certain practices of CSIS, which were considered by Canadian Muslims to be forms of harassment and unjustified singling out otherwise innocent individuals. There were also concerns about how law enforcement responds to Islamophobia. For example, to Abdikheir Ahmed, law enforcement “sustains Islamophobia” by not reacting the same way to Islamophobia as they do to other forms of hate. He also expressed concern that officers may harbour Islamophobic prejudice. Another challenge is that law enforcement does not reflect the diversity in the community. On the other hand, some interviewees reported positive experiences in which police took their Islamophobic incidents seriously. The Winnipeg Police Service does not routinely make public information about hate crimes. When information was sought under a freedom of information request, the WPS provided a listing of the number of incidents categorized as hate crimes each year from 2007 to 2021 (a total of 14 incidents). However, generally, it is believed that hate crimes are underreported.^{xiv}

Several interviewees also alluded to the inherent contradiction of living in a democratic society while also struggling with manifestations of Islamophobia. For example, Sophia Ali alluded to the harm done by “people who feel that they have [unlimited] freedom of speech...where there is freedom, there needs to be a responsibility.”

Moving Forward Together

The results of this pilot study clearly point out that Manitoba is not immune to the impact of Islamophobia, and Manitoba Muslims are acutely living this reality. This report outlines priority areas that need to be addressed through collaboration between governments, communities, and civic society. In moving forward, we must be cognizant of the intersectionality of Islamophobia with other factors, especially anti-black racism and discrimination against women, both of which were highlighted in this report.

This report identifies several areas of concern such as Islamophobia in education and the workplace, the physical safety of community members and spaces, the mental health impacts of Islamophobia and the disproportionate effect of Islamophobia on Muslim women. All of these areas require action and collaboration, involving governments, civic society and the Muslim community. Despite its limited resources, the Muslim community in Manitoba and its organizations have spearheaded several important initiatives that should be strengthened, supported, and better funded, such as mental health counselling, newcomer support, training for service providers and outreach efforts into the larger community. There is evidence to suggest that when services that are culturally and religiously sensitive are not available, those in need shy away from getting help altogether. ^{xv}

This work was motivated in part by the lack of data on Islamophobia in Manitoba. Due to pandemic restrictions and resource limitations, the sample size in the survey was small and the survey responses were geographically concentrated in Winnipeg. There is clearly a need for more research in this area, documenting experiences in different sectors and regions and learning more about the sources and causes of prejudice against Muslims.

Recommendations

K-12 Education

- Develop toolkits and curriculum resources for teachers on Islam, Muslims, and Islamophobia and incorporate Muslim history in Canada, Muslim civilization, and cultures in school curricula.
- Provide reasonable religious accommodations for Muslim students (such as performing daily prayers in a safe space).
- Mark Muslim holidays such as Ramadan and provide students with reasonable accommodations.
- Equip school libraries with a wide selection of resources on Islam and Muslims appropriate for K-12 age range.

Strengthening Communities

- All levels of government should provide funding for personal safety and the security of facilities that could be at risk such as mosques.
- Create new and enhance existing funding programs to support the work of the Muslim community organizations in building bridges, supporting equity work, and combating prejudice.
- Fund culturally sensitive mental health programs offered within the Muslim community to enable it to address the mental health challenges that Islamophobia compounds on top of other sources of mental distress.

Celebrating Together

- In all levels of government, universities, schools, and other important sectors, celebrate and highlight the contributions of Muslims in Canada and Manitoba, Muslim cultures, and holidays. Fund public advertising campaigns to highlight the contribution of Muslims to the broader community.^{xvi}

Law Enforcement

- Provide enhanced mechanisms for reporting of hate crimes.
- Develop alternatives to subjecting victims to intimidating legal proceedings.

Employment

- Support employment programs, especially those aimed at Muslim women and those aimed at educating employers about offering safe and supportive employment opportunities.
- Provide incentives to employers that demonstrate a commitment to a diverse and inclusive workforce and workplace. A positive recent example is an employer who offered alternative statutory holidays.^{xvii}

The Manitoba Islamic Association has developed recommendations addressing the needs of the Muslim community of Manitoba. Since the London Family murder in the summer of 2021, multiple Islamic organizations, such as the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM), and Islamic Relief Canada (IRC), have proposed recommendations and actions to dismantle Islamophobia in Canada.

Our recommendations complementary and supportive of those provided by other organizations.

Appendix

INTERVIEWEES

Abdikheir Ahmed – Director at Aurora Family Therapy Centre

Mian Hameed – Retiree and Chair of Muslim Seniors Association

Rachel Wiebe-Skouta – Community Volunteer

Sophia Ali – Social Worker

Tasneem Vali – Vice Chair of Manitoba Islamic Association

Yasmin Ali – President of Canadian Muslim Women Institute

A mental health provider and two university professors chose to remain anonymous.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would you define Islamophobia?
2. In your role in the community, are you aware or have you encountered different forms of Islamophobia? And if so, could you elaborate?
3. What are the three causes of Islamophobia in Canada?
4. How does Islamophobia impact Canada and as an extension Canadian Muslims?
5. How does Islamophobia affect democracy?
6. How does Islamophobia affect our community holistically?
7. How do you think Islamophobia affects the development of Muslim youth?
8. What do you think is the role of law enforcement play in sustaining or reducing Islamophobia?
9. Do you think the different levels of government are doing enough to counter Islamophobia? If not, what change would you like to see?
10. How do you think we could counter Islamophobia?

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- ^{xiii} Andrew Wildes, "Fearing 'second-hand victimization,' some newcomers may not reach out to women's shelters: advocate," *CBC News*, January 15, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/newcomer-immigrant-women-shelters-domestic-violence-1.6309621>.

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^{xv} Arti Patel, “As a person of colour, it’s a struggle to find therapist who look like you,” Global News, December 1, 2018, <https://globalnews.ca/news/4712491/finding-a-therapist-of-colour/>

^{xvi} For more information see the example set by Edmonton Public Schools’ initiative, and Education Canada Group (ECG).

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^{xvii} CBC News,. “Celebrating a holiday and ‘true inclusion.’” Accessed January 03, 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/celebrating-a-holiday-and-true-inclusion-wfp-cbc-wfp-1.6302597>