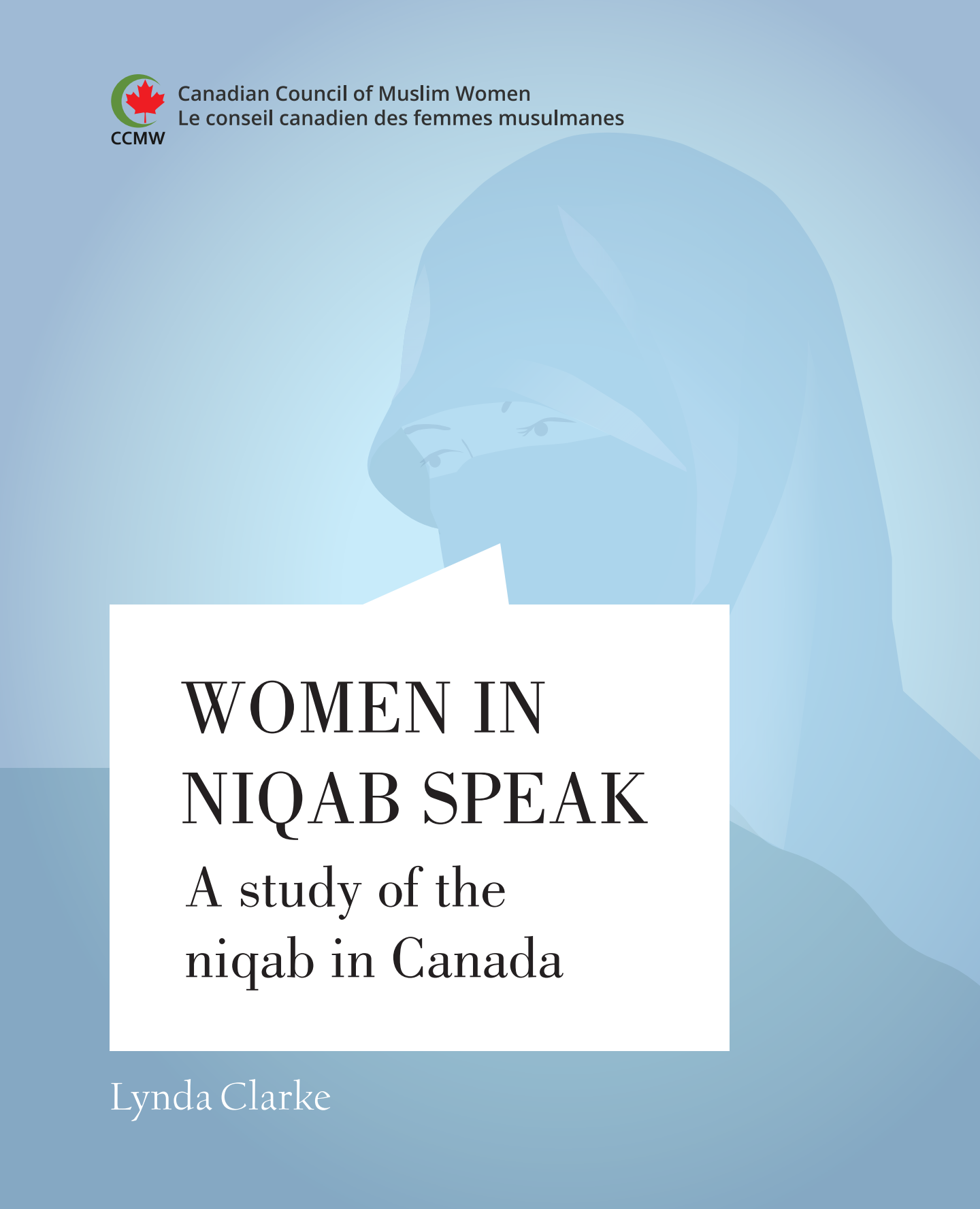
Canadian Council of Muslim Women
Le conseil canadien des femmes musulmanes
CCMW



WOMEN IN NIQAB SPEAK

A study of the niqab in Canada

Lynda Clarke

CCMW gratefully acknowledges the support of Ontario Trillium Foundation whose funds allowed us to turn our creative vision into a reality.

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Table of Contents

About CCMW

The Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) is a national non-profit organization whose overarching mission is to ensure the equality, equity and empowerment of Muslim women. Founded in 1982, the organization has drawn upon faith and social justice for the betterment of Canadian society. For over 30 years CCMW has proudly advocated on behalf of Muslim women and their families and developed projects that enrich the identity of Canadian-Muslims, encourage civic engagement, empower communities and lastly promote inter-cultural and inter-religious understanding. Past initiatives include the coalition for No Religious Arbitration, the Muslim Marriage Contract Kit, My Canada and the Common Ground Project. CCMW is composed of a National Board that works to further CCMW's objectives at a national level, and its 12 local Chapters and members, whose passion and hard work advances the vision of CCMW within local communities.

OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- We are guided by the Quranic message of God's mercy and justice, and of the equality of all persons, and that each person is directly answerable to God
- We value a pluralistic society, and foster the goal of strength and diversity within a unifying vision and the values of Canada. Our identity of being Muslim women and of diverse ethnicity and race is integral to being Canadian
- As Canadians, we abide by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the law of Canada
- We believe in the universality of human rights, which means equality and social justice, with no restrictions or discrimination based on gender or race
- We are vigilant in safeguarding and enhancing our identity and our rights to make informed choices amongst a variety
  of options
- We acknowledge that CCMW is one voice amongst many who speak on behalf of Muslim women, and that there are others who may represent differing perspectives
- We aim to be actively inclusive and accepting of diversity among ourselves, as Muslim women

Executive Summary

Very few pieces of faith-based clothing in Canada have ignited as much impassioned debates as the Muslim practice of the niqab. Covering the woman's body and hair and leaving only the eyes visible, the niqab has often been problematized as a symbol of Islamic extremism, women's oppression and lastly the failure of Muslims to integrate. The Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) is no stranger when it comes to addressing the very issues that affect Canadian Muslim communities, including debates concerning Muslim women and their choice of dress. Committed to the equality, equity, empowerment and diversity of Muslim women and their voices, for more than 30 years the national organization has delivered community based projects and advocated on behalf of Muslim women and their families. CCMW has previously issued position papers about the niqab and also presented our statements to government bodies. This has resulted in the media, policy officials, community organizations and other inquiring minds asking the Council to weigh in on the debate.

This study can be seen as a response to this growing national conversation and a reflection of CCMW's values and continued commitment to the plurality of Muslim communities. It represents an attempt to cast light on the existing agency of and provide space for Canadian Muslim women who wear the niqab to *speak for themselves*. This study is not intended to dwell upon the religious or theological basis of the practice itself, but rather it is first and foremost about the *lived experiences* of the women and the diverse narratives that they have shared in their responses. The niqab itself is a complex issue and raises many questions for Muslim communities and the wider Canadian population

itself. These questions do not yield simple answers, but they must be explored through open and honest discussion.

The findings of this report authored by Dr. Lynda Clarke of Concordia University paint a dynamic, engaging picture of Canadian women who wear the niqab and challenge many of the mainstream presumptions and stereotypes that are presented in the media, policy circles and the wider public. A total of approximately 81 women who wore the niqab participated in this study, 38 of whom responded to online surveys, 35 that participated in focus groups in Mississauga, Montreal, Ottawa and Waterloo and 8 who participated in in-depth individual interviews.

Keeping in mind the limitations of the sample, based on available data in the study the typical profile of woman in niqab is that of a married foreign-born citizen in her twenties to early thirties who adopted the practice after arriving in Canada. Most of the women possessed a high level of education, having attended university, graduate school, community college or some form of vocational education. The majority of the participants were homemakers, while others were self-employed or worked in a range of fields including Muslim communities, consulting, engineering and web design. Those that did not work expressed a desire to in their lifetime, but were concerned with the exclusion they would likely face in the workplace.

In terms of religious orientation, the majority of the respondents in the study adopted what can be viewed as a "conservative" approach to Islam. For instance, the majority of respondents did not agree with the practice of dating and did not believe that homosexuality was an acceptable practice. Yet the presence of a conservative religious outlook amongst participants did not translate into a uniformity of attitudes towards the niqab itself and whether it was a religiously mandatory practice. 44.7% of those surveyed established that it was necessary for a Muslim woman to wear it; while 47.4% indicated "Not necessary, but advisable" and 6.4% indicated that it was not, illustrating the variety of religious understandings concerning the article of dress amongst the participants themselves.

The reasons for why Canadian women wore the niqab, as the author notes were "highly personal and individual" with a mixture of responses and rationales. Yet, "religious obligation" including attaining a deeper stage in one's religious development and "expression of Muslim identity" featured prominently in participants' explanations, with sub-themes such as self-study/religious role models, appropriate gender-relations, confidence/self-esteem and freedom from the pressures of fashion also playing a determining factor. Present in only a minority of rationales for wearing the niqab were husbands and families as many of the participants came from families where they faced opposition for wearing it, often taking on the practice without consulting their families. While a small number of women cited spousal encouragement for why they wore the niqab, many women indicated facing spousal opposition and explained that their larger struggle was with soliciting spousal support for their decision.

In response to religious accommodation and access to government services, including social, legal and health, all of our participants indicated that there would be situations when it is necessary to uncover or show their face including airport security, ID cards, accessing hospital services or even driving. As one interviewee indicated, "It's part of our religion to cooperate with the government, so we have to." When asked if it was appropriate to show their face in accessing government services, most of the participants indicated "Sometimes." While many of the respondents indicated a preference for female service providers (physicians), some of the participants did not oppose receiving services from men. Interestingly, rather than describing their access to services as problematic, most of the women in the study expressed that their niqabs did not affect their access and relayed positive sentiments. Similar views were expressed when asked about access to education, where the majority of participants expressed comfort and acceptance in their educational programs.

This larger trend of tolerance and accommodation within Canada is reflected in the optimistic attitudes that the women in the study expressed towards Canadian society as a whole. While some participants relayed their negative experiences, which ranged from physical assault to verbal harassment, not a single participant in the study

described her overall experience in Canada as being negative. Participants described these harmful experiences as reflecting a minority of the Canadian population and instead relayed a strong affinity to Canada, praising its multiculturalism, its respect for human rights, its freedom and life changing opportunities.

The recently proposed Charter of Quebec Values has once again brought religious forms of dress and the question of religious accommodation to the forefront and CCMW's position on the matter has remained steadfast. While CCMW does not agree that the niqab is a religiously mandatory practice, the Council upholds the right of every woman to dress as she wishes as she has the freedom to interpret her religion, as she believes. We denounce any state action which limits the ability of peoples to wear religious clothing as it is not the role nor responsibility of governments to control women's and men's bodies and forms of dress. Moreover, CCMW agrees that the accommodation for Muslim women to wear the face veil must be within reasonable limits and that women should show their faces under certain circumstances for the purposes of safety and security, a sentiment that was shared by the overwhelming majority of women in this study.

CCMW would like to extend its gratitude to the Ontario Trillium Foundation whose generous funds allowed this project to become a reality. The Council is also grateful to its Chapters and volunteers who worked tirelessly to gather participants and organize focus groups. CCMW is also indebted to Dr. Lynda Clarke and her research team at Concordia University, whose hard word and resolve made this study possible. Lastly, we are eternally thankful to the Muslim women from across the country and the province of Ontario that shared their life experiences with us and to whom we dedicate this publication. Our hope is that the research presented here will help build a more inclusive Canada by developing a greater understanding amongst policy officials, the media and the public, by providing them with knowledge about Muslim women and the niqab that is rooted in the voices of Muslim women themselves. As the late Václav Havel reminds us:

> Different cultures . . . can share only what they perceive as genuine common ground, not something that some simply offer to or even force upon others. The rules of human coexistence . . . can work only if they grow out of the deepest experience of everyone, not just some.

01
Introduction

This project on *Muslim Women and the Niqab* is funded by a grant from the Trillium Foundation, an agency of the Government of Ontario committed to "building healthy and vibrant communities throughout Ontario through investments in community-based initiatives" (http://www.otf.ca/en/aboutUs/mission.asp). The grant was secured by the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW), a country-wide organization dedicated to "improving the status of women and empowering Muslim Women to remain true to their Islamic heritage and Canadian identity" (http://ccmw.com/about-ccmw). The study responds to mounting controversy in Western countries about the practice by some Muslim women of veiling their faces. The CCMW has previously engaged with the debate by issuing a position paper on niqab[1] as well as a "consultation brief" to the Assemblé nationale du Québec concerning Bill 94, legislation proposed in 2010 that would have required women seeking public services to show their faces when seeking public services.[2]

The current report is intended, in the words of the CCMW Board, to "make space" for women wearing face covering to "speak about their reasons, their choices and their life experiences." The Board notes that there has been a great deal of discussion in media, academia, and policy circles about the "rights, views, and perceived autonomy or oppression" of women wearing niqab, much of it, in their view, speculative in nature, but little effort to "give voice" to the women concerned and understand their perspective. The aim of the research, again in the words of the CCMW, is to "encourage Muslim women

1 http://archive.ccmw.com/documents/PositionPapers/ccmw_statement_face_covering_niqab.pdf

2 http://archive.ccmw.com/documents/PositionPapers/ccmw_bill94_brief_may_7_2010-2.pdf

to speak for themselves", develop knowledge for CCMW and other organizations, and "build understanding in the general public". CCMW believes that niqab, like religious attire in general, should be a personal, private matter, but has decided to issue a report in view of it having become a hotly debated public topic.

This report has been prepared by an independent scholar commissioned by CCMW and does not necessarily reflect the views of the organization, the membership of which itself has different attitudes toward niqab and other issues. It is nevertheless important for the reader to be apprised of the position of the CCMW as the Trillium grant applicant and participant (as outlined below) in field research. The position paper on niqab accessible through the link above gives a full statement; the CCMW Board responded to my request for a statement in relation to the present report with the following:

> CCMW has a position that it is modesty in demeanour and clothing for both men and women, which is stated in the Quran and that over the centuries, there has been no consensus as to how this modesty should be practiced. However, we believe that a woman has the right to dress as she believes is modest –whether with a hijab, niqab or with no head covering. Because we defend the right of a woman to dress as she deems is appropriate, we object to states such as Iran, Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan imposing a dress code for women. However, we also object to any attempt in Canada to dictate how Canadian Muslim women should dress. We do acknowledge that under certain circumstances, such as for security or identification, it is reasonable for covered women to show their faces.

The researcher is a professor of Religious Studies and Islam at Concordia University in Montréal, Québec. In the interests of full disclosure, I would like to state that I am also a long-standing, if somewhat inconstant, member of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women. I basically agree with the position articulated above; although I do not, as a scholar engaged in the social-scientific study of religion, view the Quran or other religious scriptures as having one clear and unambiguous meaning, but rather consider that Islam, like other religions, consists of a stream of interpretations varying

across place and time. To put it another way, since I take a scholarly perspective, I am interested not in establishing beliefs, but rather investigating debates and practices. It may be worth mentioning here that the Department of Religion in Concordia University has a long record in the study of women and religion and that I along with several of my colleagues write on the historical and contemporary meanings of women's clothing in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Finding women's voices is an important part of such studies. For the past, these tend to be hidden in historical texts, but in the present, we can find them by going out and talking to people.

The CCMW does agree with me that the report is not intended to establish religious or faith arguments. We hope that all readers will find the paper useful, including those who disagree with the CCMW's position on niqab.

02

Content and Gathering Data

The study relates and analyzes the content of a survey and interviews with Muslim women who wear or have worn the face-veil widely known as niqab (ni-kâb, with accent on the last syllable). The term niqab, like hijab, has become familiar to Western audiences because of the controversies surrounding it. Niqab is originally an Arabic term referring to the "aperture" in the face covering for the eyes. There are styles of niqab that cover the eye-opening with a screen or translucent material – most famously, as part of the burka worn by some women in Afghanistan – but these appear to be very rare in Canada, and the researchers did not come across any subjects wearing that style.

The report includes background material on Muslim texts and opinions about niqab in the classical and modern periods. Although the women we interviewed tended not to refer to Islamic texts or scholarly opinion, some of their sentiments seemed to reflect this background. It is also important for readers to know that the practice of covering the face has been subject to ongoing debate; grasping some of the material of that debate helps in understanding different Muslim perspectives. The existence of a debate does not, of course, affect the fact that wearing niqab has a long history in Islam and is a sincere belief and genuine practice of some Muslim women.

A short review of recent controversies about niqab in Canada is also included. The sometimes-strong reactions in Canada and elsewhere to the sight of a few Muslim women wearing face-veils are very interesting in themselves, but they are not the focus of this study and are introduced only for context.

Gathering of data began with an online survey created in July of 2012. The survey included seventy questions. We received thirty-eight responses from women

wearing niqab,[3] five resident in British Columbia and all the rest from the province of Ontario, with a large number from Mississauga, a city adjacent to Toronto, Ontario. The survey was also offered in French, but the French version received only one response, from a woman not wearing niqab also resident in Ontario. Participation was solicited by posting a notice on the CCMW site, sending out appeals to religious and community organizations, and ultimately by word of mouth.

Since our goal was to let women wearing niqab speak for themselves, meeting women and talking to them face-to-face was crucial. To this end, CCMW members organized focus groups in Toronto, Montréal, Ottawa, and the Kitchener-Waterloo area, as well as conducting eight extended individual interviews in various locations in Ontario. One of the gatherings was held in Montréal even though the study is concentrated on the province of Ontario, since niqab has been particularly controversial in the province of Québec. Approximately thirty-five women who either were wearing or had worn niqab participated in the focus groups, and seventeen of these filled up a short questionnaire.

Conversation in the focus groups as well as eight extended interviews was open-ended. We tried to let the participants speak for themselves, gently guiding the discussion while giving them freedom and time to express their own thoughts. Participants were guaranteed anonymity, and details that might serve to identify individuals have been left out or changed. This is standard ethics procedure for such a study, but it must be said that the participants seemed eager to talk, and some also responded to email requests for clarification and other follow-up.

All but a few participants in the group and individual interviews consented to sound recording. Our subjects' statements are cited directly and extensively in the report, and I consider this to be the heart of the work.

This report is the fruit of a team effort. Ms. Alia Hogben, Executive Director of the CCMW, along with the CCMW National Board recognized the need for such a study

3 The online survey, which was designed before I took over the project, solicited participation from wearers both of niqab and hijab and asked about both practices. I have used the data from wearers of niqab only, since there is already a very extensive literature on hijab in the West. Some questions – for instance, "How old were you when you starting wearing the niqab/hijab" (#15) – were rendered ambiguous by the fact that wearing hijab is usually a prelude to taking on the niqab; I have noted and tried to work around such ambiguities.

and secured the grant from the Trillium Foundation. We are grateful to the Foundation and ultimately the Government of the Province of Ontario for investing in Canadian Muslim communities and intercultural understanding. Ms. Tara Silver, doctoral student of Professor Shahrzad Mojab in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, was instrumental in designing the survey with input from CCMW. I depended on the membership of Ontario and Québec chapters of CCMW to organize and conduct the focus groups and individual interviews. The long experience and wide contacts of CCMW in the community were essential in reaching out to women, and the interviewers patiently applied the instructions given for interviewing and ethics procedures. Ms. Tahmina Tariq and Ms. Annum Khokhar, MA students in the Department of Religion of Concordia University, assisted with two focus groups, transcribed close to one hundred and fifty pages of interview material, and helped me to think about the material in our discussion meetings. Thanks are due to the Concordia Oral History Research Laboratory for providing training for the assistants in interview techniques.

We would like above all to express our gratitude to the Canadian Muslim women who contributed their valuable time to the project and trusted us to convey their thoughts and experiences. Their willingness to share details of their lives is surely also a vote of confidence in the good will of the people of Ontario and Canada, to whom this study is ultimately directed.

03

Demographics and Social Attitudes

We do not know how many women in Ontario, Québec or Canada wear niqab, although the fact that women with veiled faces are a rare sight in most areas suggests that they are not many. An interviewee in the Greater Toronto Area guessed there were "thousands" (whether she meant in Toronto or Ontario was not clear), while another in Montréal estimated there were "less than a hundred" in the province of Québec, most in Montréal.[4] Women wearing niqab are more commonly seen in Ontario than Québec, possibly because the Muslim population is much larger: 581,950 as against 243,430 according to the 2011 National Household Survey conducted by Statistics Canada.

Since we have little idea of the numbers of Ontarian or Canadian women wearing face-veils and also because our sample is small, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions from the statistics gathered in the study. Where I have quoted numbers, they should be understood to be tentative indications only, which might be built upon or altered by further research. The possibility of selection bias should also be taken into account; this potential factor is discussed in the last section.

Finally, any characteristics of women wearing niqab described in the report should be viewed in the context of the Canadian Muslim community in general. To take one example, thirty-nine of the fifty-five respondents to the online survey and short questionnaire described themselves as being of South Asian background, with the overwhelming majority hailing from Pakistan. (Seven were of Arab background, six of

4 In 2011, the Muslim Council of Montreal estimated about twenty-five in Québec; see "Federal government bans burqas from citizenship ceremonies", *CTV News* December 12, 2011 http://montreal.ctvnews.ca/federal-government-bans-burqas-from-citizenship-ceremonies-1.739041 accessed 25/06/2013. This might be a moderate under-estimate, since we managed to gather ten from Montréal for one focus group. "Thousands" in Toronto or Ontario seems, on the other hand, to be an over-estimate. The speaker wanted to make the point that there were too many women wearing niqab for them all to know each other, so her statement may have been rhetorical.

European descent and apparently converts, and the remaining three from the Caribbean area).[5] We might then conclude that face veiling in Canada is mostly a practice of women of South Asian and especially Pakistani origin. This does not, however, necessarily mean that South Asians in particular are attracted to niqab. Most of the data was gathered in Ontario, where South Asians appear to comprise the largest group of Muslims,[6] so that the high number in our study may be simply a reflection of the character of the Ontario Muslim population. On the other hand, if there are far fewer niqab-wearing women in Québec than Ontario, that might be explained in light of our study not only by the smaller Muslim population, but also the fact that the Québec Muslim population is more Arab[7] in character. As always, statistics can be interpreted in different ways, and should be considered carefully.

With these cautions in mind, the typical profile of a wearer of niqab indicated by the fifty-five women who answered the online survey or short questionnaire is that of a foreign-born,[8] married Canadian citizen[9] in her twenties to early thirties. Most of the women had post-secondary education, with the largest number of these having completed a university degree, although household income was comparatively poorer than the Canadian population of families, with 85% positioned below the 2010 median family income.[10] Most adopted niqab only after coming to Canada[11] and began doing

5 Some of the focus group participants who did not fill up the short questionnaire seem to have been of African origin, and this was also the case for two of the individual interviewees.

6 Although the 2011 Statistics Canada National Household Survey does not correlate religion and ethnicity and South Asian populations also include Hindu, Sikhs, and others, the number of Ontarians of South Asian origin counted in the Ontario Profile exceeds those from all other Muslim-majority countries combined to a degree that suggests that they are the largest group.

7 The count of Arabs as a "visible minority" in the Statistics Canada NHS Québec Profile will include a considerable number of Christians from Lebanon and other Arab countries; but this is balanced by the large number of Québecois hailing from North Africa, a region that is entirely Muslim.

8 Fourteen said they were born in Canada, and one in America. Most of these also had a South Asian background.

9 It is possible that pre-selection played some role here, as all members recruited for the focus groups and individual interviews save one were citizens or permanent residents, the aim being to capture a population settled in Canada. On the other hand, all respondents to the online survey, which was open, also identified themselves as citizens or permanent residents. Either women wearing niqab typically have Canadian status, or these were the individuals interested in having their voices heard in the country.

10 Taking into account 36 replies to the online survey only (2 not responding); income was not included in the short questionnaire. The Statistical Consultation Group, Social Survey Methods, of Statistics Canada kindly evaluated the aggregated income data and provided this comment, while emphasizing its tentative nature due to the very small sample and lack of information about household size.

11 Question #14 asked if respondents (who had immigrated) had worn niqab or hijab before coming to Canada. A bare majority answered no, and we also assume that most or at least many "yes" answers refer to hijab, since the age of immigration seems to be low and niqab, according to our survey and interviewees, is typically adopted after age 18 (probably in the twenties or later).

so at age eighteen and above – on the evidence of our interviews, probably in their twenties.[12] The online survey did not, unfortunately, ask how long women had been wearing niqab; this question was included in the short questionnaire, and the average of the seventeen replies there is 8.5 years.

The short questionnaire handed out at interviews also showed four persons who had once worn niqab and then taken it off. Although the count is low, this is a population we did not target and anecdotal evidence leads us to think that women not infrequently wear the face-veil only for some time. We encountered or heard of two women who were in the habit of wearing niqab at some times, apparently in more private settings or in religious functions, and hijab at others. One of these stated that she had become "more lax" after moving to a northern Ontario town in which there were few persons wearing even hijab, so that she did not wear a face-veil while attending classes at the local community college. This informant, who was studying to become a nutritionist or dietician, also reported that she did not wear a face-veil in the classroom of the public school where she was interning, since it was, she thought, "not required" in that situation and would be "better" for her to "show my face to my students."

The online survey (all numbers quoted from here on refer to this survey only) included questions about polygamy and divorce, in the expectation that responses would provide some indication of liberalism or conservatism in approaches toward Islam.

In answer to the question (#33), "According to your understanding of Islam, do you believe that polygamy is appropriate for Muslims in Canada," 11 agreed and 10 disagreed, with 14 checking "I am not sure" and 3 not responding. Despite the small sample, these replies seem to me to be a significant indicator of conservatism. If a question had been asked of a group of Canadian Muslims that included both females and males about the legitimacy of polygamy in Islam in general, having two-thirds of respondents agree or express uncertainty might not be very extraordinary. Apart from those who might genuinely approve of polygamy, there would be – in my experience – many who do

12 Thirteen said they began between the ages of 13 to 17, and two at 12 or under. Question #15 asks about age respondents began to wear niqab or hijab. It seems likely that the lower ages refer to putting on hijab.

not really approve, but are reluctant to condemn the practice because the Quran permits it (Q. 4:3). Muslims holding this view are likely to say that the permission given in the Quran applies only in very exceptional cases, such as many women being left without support after a war. In this case, however, we have a quarter of an all-female sample believing that polygamy is "appropriate in Canada", which implies, if not practice, at least a strong tendency to take the text literally. It would have been interesting to know if the fourteen who chose "I am not sure" were uncertain if polygamy was appropriate in Canada, or uncertain of polygamy altogether. They did not, in any case, decisively oppose it.

Getting a sense of other opinion in the Muslim community might help to place the views of our subjects. Many Muslims I encounter (who tend to be of the more liberal type) would say that the Quran disapproves of polygamy and recommends monogamy, since Q. 4:3 concludes: "[But] if you fear that you shall not be able to deal equally with them (i.e. potential wives), then take one only", while Q. 4:129 cautions: "You will never be able to deal equally between women, no matter how much you wish to do so." On the conservative side, one can find opinions on the web in English and French, which argue that there are good social reasons for polygamy to be an option, and that taking a second wife should be a religious right in the West. Some of these pro-polygamy opinions are circumspect,[13] while others are more explicit and direct.[14] Our online subjects appear to be on the conservative side of the spectrum.

We did not, however, receive any indication from our direct interviewees' descriptions of their lives that they were involved in anything but monogamous relationships. My collaborator Ms. Tahmina Tariq, who is of the same ethnic background and approximately the same generation as most of the interviewees, remarks that polygamy is actually irrelevant to the lives of the women we talked to and believes that the survey respondents who said it was "appropriate" were probably quickly

13 See for example the lengthy piece of Dr. Jamal Badawi, a popular Canadian lecturer and member of the "Fiqh (i.e. law) Council of North America" on his web site at http://jamalbadawi.org/. In another opinion (http://www.islamawareness.net/Polygamy/fatwa001.html), Badawi is more direct; although he does say in both that polygamy is exceptional and monogamy the ideal.

14 E.g. "Polygamy. Punishing Honesty and Rewarding Deception ?!?" at http://muslimcanada.org/polygamy.html. This pro-polygamy statement comes from The Canadian Society of Muslims, an organization that was at the forefront of the movement to admit Shariah law in arbitration in Ontario.

checking what they thought would be the doctrinally correct answer. The subject of polygamy came up only once in interviews, in a focus group. The gist of the conversation seems to be (the recording is not clear) that polygamy is allowed in Canada, i.e. not actively prosecuted if marriages are not registered, but also illegal. The conversation ends with one of the participants commenting: "You should follow the rules of the country you live in." This idea, which is based on provisions of traditional Islamic law, is often seen in fatwas answering questions posed by Muslims living in the West. For instance, Shaikh Ahmad Kutty, described on the popular site www.islam.ca as "resident scholar of the Islamic Institute of Toronto", speaks in his fatwa on polygamy of the "challenge" of doing justice even to one wife and family and concludes: "as Muslims, we are also bound to obey the laws of the land as long as they are not opposed to our religious requirements."[15]

Twenty-five of the 38 online respondents agreed that Muslim women "should have the right to divorce," with only 5 rejecting that statement (#34).[16] The question refers to the limited power given women in traditional Muslim law to initiate divorce. I would not, however, necessarily take this response to be a sign of willingness to question traditional law or norms, since many Muslims, in my experience, consider the various legal channels provided for women to divorce to constitute a "right", even though these are roundabout and mostly depend on the willingness of husbands.[17] Even when Muslims are not very sure what the legal channels for ending a marriage are, they are likely to consider divorce to be one of the 'rights given women by Islam', it being a widespread and passionately held belief that Islam improved the lot of women in its time. It would have been a better test of attitudes toward Muslim law to ask, "Do you believe that Muslim women should have a right to divorce the same as or similar to that of men," since men in traditional law may initiate divorce freely.

15 http://askthescholar.com/question-details.aspx?qstID=2016

16 Four were "not sure", and 4 did not respond.

17 The channels are: Seeking a divorce from a judge - in the West, perhaps a local imam or council - on specified grounds; getting the husband to agree to divorce on the basis of a negotiated settlement; having the husband delegate to the wife the power to divorce herself at will on his behalf; and the husband agreeing to conditions in a marriage contract, violation of which would trigger a right of divorce.

Nearly all respondents (32, with 2 expressing uncertainty and the rest not responding) did not think that "dating" was acceptable for Muslims (#35). To exclude connotations of party-going, pre-marital sex, and so on, the question explained dating as "men and women socializing before marriage". Thirty-five respondents believed that homosexuality (#36) is "not acceptable" for Muslims and two did not respond, leaving one woman in the interesting position of both wearing a face-veil and accepting homosexuality. Although the attitudes of our subjects overall toward the religious and social issues selected in the survey are strongly conservative, this lone respondent alerts us to the possibility of different views.

04

Issues and Accommodations

In this section, I briefly review issues brought up in Ontario and Canada in relation to women wearing niqab using government services, as well as accommodations being made for and by such women. I also relate the views of the women themselves.

The first legal issue reviewed here emerged in the days leading up to the Québec provincial elections of March 2007, when controversy erupted after media and popular agitation focused on the prospect of women arriving at the polls wearing niqab. The province's chief electoral officer was compelled to rule only a few days before the elections were to take place that women would have to show their faces to vote. The measure was taken not because the electoral officer thought that there would be a problem with veiled women, but out of fear of "improper behaviour" and "unwanted acts" by agitators at voting places.[18] Elections Canada, the federal elections agency, subsequently confirmed that women appearing with niqab at polls in Québec for federal by-elections the following September would be allowed to vote without lifting their veils, provided they properly identified themselves using one of the allowed methods of identification not requiring a photo ID and took the prescribed oath.[19] In the course of the controversy, statements by Muslim organizations appeared in the press saying that the community had not asked for any accommodation and asserting that if any women were to arrive with face-veils at voting

18 See the officer's statement at http://www.electionsquebec.qc.ca/english/news-detail.php?id=2233

19 The statement of the chief electoral officer is available at http://www.elections.ca/content.as px?section=med&document=sep1007 &dir=spe&lang=e. A representative of Elections Canada contacted in August of 2013 confirmed that this policy was still in place.

locations, they would show their faces, if required, for identification.[20] It is not clear if any woman in Québec had actually tried to vote with a face-veil or without showing her face in this or previous elections.

A court case originating in 2008 in Ontario, known as the case of "N.S." after the initials of the appellant, involved a woman who wished to wear her niqab while testifying against two relatives in a case of historical sexual abuse. By 2012, the N.S. case had gone all the way to the Supreme Court. Without going into the arguments made in the various proceedings,[21] the basic competing contentions were, on the one side, that asking a woman to remove her niqab violated religious freedom, and on the other, that a trial could not be fair to the accused or fully public unless the face was seen. The issue was not establishing the niqab wearer's identity, but whether or not the face-veil impairs communication or prevents, as it was put in the Supreme Court, "full interaction". The Supreme Court ruled that the permissibility of wearing niqab while giving testimony should be decided on a "case-by-case" basis, by balancing freedom of religion and trial fairness according to a series of criteria laid down in its decision.[22] The case was thus turned back to the Ontario court, which finally decided in April 2013 that N.S. could not testify with her face covered. Full interaction during testimony while wearing niqab has also been an issue in other court cases both in Canada[23] and the United States, and there is now a considerable literature on the subject.[24]

In 2009, CEGEP St. Laurent, a post-secondary educational institution in a heavily immigrant-populated area of Montréal, expelled a student wearing a face-veil to classes in which she was learning French. The student was reported

20 For instance, Mohamed Elmasry of the Ontario-headquartered Canadian Islamic Congress stated that his organization had not asked for women to be exempt from being identified and believed that they should show their faces to female elections officials in order to maintain the "integrity" of the election process. Elmasry estimated the total number of women wearing niqab in Québec at that time to be about seven (E. Thompson, "No veils at the polls, feds urge," *The Gazette* (Montreal), September 8, 2007, http://www.canada.com/montrealgazette/story.html?id=4a1a8fe7-60f0-4dff-9f05-9686c31cbb2e

21 For the proceedings at different levels, search CanLII, an online database of Canadian cases. See also Emir Crowne, Fiorina Santelli, and Varoujan Arman, "The Niqab and Witness Testimony: Balancing the Interests", *Advocates' Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 1, June 2012. Available at SSRN: http://ssrn.com/abstract=1979210 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1979210

22 R. v. N.S., 2012 SCC 72 (CanLII), http://canlii.ca/t/fvbrr

23 E.g. D'Amico v. Wiemken, 2010 ABQB 785 (CanLII), http://canlii.ca/t/2f5tv . N.S. was cited in the case.

24 For example, Aaron J Williams, "The Veiled Truth: Can the Credibility of Testimony Given by a Niqab-Wearing Witness be Judged without the Assistance of Facial Expressions," *U. Det. Mercy L. Rev.* 85 (2007): 273.

to be of Egyptian origin, the mother of three, and a pharmacist by training, and the expulsion took place amidst conflicting accounts of the dynamics of the classroom and efforts of each side to practice accommodation.[25] The Québec government supported the expulsion, and the province's Minister of Immigration subsequently intervened to have the same woman removed from yet another French course, citing both violation of Québec values and the need for clearly visible and audible communication to properly learn the language.[26]

This controversy was a prelude in Québec to the introduction of Bill 94, "An Act to establish guidelines governing accommodation requests within the Administration and certain institutions." The bill invoked "gender equality and the principle of religious neutrality of the State" along with "security, communication or identification" as reasons for its proposed ruling that persons receiving government services as well as those delivering them be required to appear with "the face uncovered" (*aient le visage découvert*).[27] Gender equality and religious neutrality or *laïcisme* are important ideals in Québec; that they are strongly promoted along with proficiency in French as part of a set of "common values" to which prospective immigrants must subscribe in order to achieve "integration"[28] suggests that they are also seen as bulwarks against a feared cultural invasion of francophone society. Bill 94 would seem to be in suspension, as the last action in relation to it noted on the site of the Assemblé nationale is a committee discussion in September of 2011. Potential for challenges under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and Québec's own *Charte des droits et libertés de la personne* as well as criticism that the bill was constructed too broadly and vaguely may have contributed to the interruption.

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25 The aspiring student claimed that she had cooperated with the teacher and had very good relations with her classmates, while college and government officials said that she was inflexible and had disrupted the class. For examples of different accounts, see "Quebec to address niqab issue. Egyptian immigrant expelled from language class for wearing niqab," CBC News, March 3, 2010. (http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/story/2010/03/03/montreal-woman-with-niqab-feels-treated-unfairly.html accessed 25/06/2013) and B. Kay, "Why Quebec is banning the burka", National Post, undated (http://www.nationalpost.com/opinion/columnists/story.html?id=41edc7cc-fd53-4180-9d6e-a79e256ef4c1).

26 "Niqab-wearer blocked again from class," CBC News, March 9, 2010, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/story/2010/03/09/mtl-niqab-quebec-intervenes-again.html

27 English text at http://www.assnat.qc.ca/en/travaux-parlementaires/projets-loi/projet-loi-94-39-1.html

28 See http://www.immigration-quebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/choose-quebec/common-values/index.html

Nevertheless, the text of a very controversial proposed *Charte des valeurs québécoises* released on September 10th, 2013 on the initiative of the Parti Québecois (the present governing party of the province) includes as the fourth of five measures designed to secure "fundamental Québec values, including, especially, equality between men and women and religious neutrality of the state" a requirement to have the "face uncovered" in order to be eligible to "deliver or receive a [Québec] government service".[29] The sponsors of the Charter have been careful to specify that what they call "conspicuous religious symbols", which would also include hijab, Sikh turbans, large crucifixes and so on, should be excluded only in places where government services are delivered, and not in private or other public space.

Most recently, the Conservative government of Canada has banned face covering during immigration oath ceremonies. Instructions on "How to Become a Canadian Citizen" posted on the site of Elections Canada[30] now include the following information, in bold type:

> All citizenship candidates 14 years and older are required to show their faces when they take the oath of citizenship to demonstrate that they are speaking aloud the words of the oath." The ban was announced in December of 2011 by Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism Jason Kenney, who cited "complaints from members of Parliament, citizens, and judges of the citizenship court that it is hard to ensure that individuals whose faces are covered are actually reciting the oath." The Minister added that requiring faces to be uncovered was not just a practical measure, but a "matter of deep principle" involving respect for the oath as well as "openness and equality.[31]

In a December 12th interview on the CBC television show "Power and Politics" hosted by Evan Solomon, the Minister characterized face covering as a "tribal cultural practice where women are treated like property and not like human beings",

29 http://communiques.gouv.qc.ca/gouvqc/communiques/GPQF/Septembre2013/10/c5723.html

30 http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/howto.asp

31 "Jason Kenney on banning niqabs, burkas during citizenship oath," *The National Post*, December 12, 2011, http://news.nationalpost.com/2011/12/12/jason-kenney-on-banning-niqabs-burkas-during-citizenship-oath/

while also rejecting the "French approach" (referring to the 2010 ban in France on covering the face in public) that "dictates what people wear" in their private lives.[32]

I enquired for this study about practices of accommodation particularly in Ontario, since the report is focused on that province and it is also probably where most women wearing face-veils live. I would like to thank the Ontario agencies who kindly supplied me with the information below.

In an email on June 25th of 2013, Deputy Chief Electoral Officer Loren Wells of Elections Ontario confirmed that "electors who attend at the polls are not required to remove religious/cultural apparel to show their faces in order to vote." Ontario's *Election Act*, Wells notes, "does not require electors to show their faces or to show photo ID to an election official," either to obtain a ballot or be placed on the voter's list. Ontario, the DCEO added, is "a demographically diverse province" so that the elections personnel "assume and have heard anecdotally that some electors wearing religious/cultural apparel covering their faces have voted," but have "no reason to compile statistics as to when or where this takes place."

In an email on June 26th of 2013, the Licensing Administration and Support Office of the Ministry of Transportation of Ontario explained that, with the introduction in February 14, 2008 of International Civil Aviation Organization standards, the faces of all drivers "must be clearly visible for positive identification" so that "head coverings (hats, toques, and so on) and eyeglasses much be removed before the photograph is taken." Thus in order to accommodate "female applicants who traditionally wear a veil or niqab", they are asked to "unveil in privacy and are photographed by a female operator". Concerning head scarves, "the only exemption" to the requirement to remove head coverings for the photograph is for those that are "required for religious and medical reasons".

All our niqab-wearing subjects who responded to questions concerning accommodation in the online survey or talked about it in interviews believed that there

32 Laura Payton, "Face veils banned for citizenship oath", CBC News, December 12, 2011. http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2011/12/12/pol-kenney-citizenship-rules.html

were instances in which they should show their faces for identification. They placed a great deal of emphasis on this and seemed very concerned that it be understood.

There was an extended conversation on the subject in our Montréal focus group. Asked about instances in which the veil should be lifted for identification, a participant mentioned "aeroport security" as an "obvious" example.[33] She recalled being asked to show her face in an aeroport before boarding in a city in one of the Maritimes (a group of small provinces on the Canadian Atlantic coast):

> The lady was asking, "Is it OK if you show your face over here, or do you want to go into a separate room?" There was just a window behind, so I said, "It's OK over here"; so I just lifted my niqab, and she said, "OK, thank you", and she let me go.

The interviewee had found Canadian aeroport personnel to be "usually very accommodating," as well as "very nice, especially in the small cities". She contrasted this with her experience in a major European hub aeroport:

> The plane was being cleaned, so we had to stay there in the waiting room. And the man just took my passport and said, "Lift your thing," and I said, "Is there any woman?" He said, "You do this, or… "; he wouldn't talk. So I said, "Do I have a choice of going back into the plane? Give me my passport, and I'm going back on the plane if you are going to be mean." And he said, "You don't have to stay here", and so I said, "Then I don't want to stay, and I'm not coming back to this country."
>
> This prompted a third woman to comment:
>
> We are not scared to show our face. It's just, we are here. We are citizens of Canada and we want to live here, this is our country. I lived for two decades in Pakistan and the rest of my life here. This is home to me and I don't mind showing my face when it's necessary, for instance if I go to the hospital or if - God forbid - they take me to the police station. Just be respectful about it.

33 A Mississauga woman interviewed for this study said: "When I cross the border, they always ask me if a lady should check me and I say sure. So thankfully, I never have any problems." An engineer living in Montréal who wore the niqab stated that she had habitually taken it off for identification not only to vote, but also when crossing the border and checking through the aeroport, adding: "We can accommodate the needs of society while practicing our religion" ("Quebec politicians, Muslims slam new election rules on veils," *CBC News*, September 7, 2007 http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/story/2007/09/06/qc-niqab0906.html).

"All my cards", another added, "such as driving license and Medicare have my face on it",[34] while her neighbour agreed: "It's a part of religion to cooperate with the government, so we have to."

In the same vein, an informant in Ontario described how she habitually lowered her niqab "a little bit" to confirm her identity when doing her banking, "because I don't want to create a fuss," and would also carry photo ID in case a guard wanted her to identify herself and there was no female available.

One focus group participant also thought it legitimate to show the face while testifying in court:

> My personal belief is that in court, you are supposed to take off your veil. When you're giving testimony, you are required to take it off, according to whatever I've learned. My father is actually a scholar and I have discussed it with him in detail, I'm talking about in Islamic law. When you're giving your testimony, it is like when you go to the police or something like that when you need to verify your identity; although obviously, everyone has different understandings.

The Islamic legal opinion referred to requires female witnesses to show their faces in court in order to identify themselves (and apparently not during the whole time of the testimony, although this appears to be the understanding of the speaker); the opinion goes back to the classical sources and enjoys scholarly consensus. Other members of this informant's group seemed to disagree, pointing out that a court would be "full of men" and imagining the discomfort of the woman involved in the case of N.S., which had occasioned the discussion. A woman in another focus group approved of the middle road taken by the Supreme Court:

> I think I agree with the Supreme Court because, as you know, there are many sexual abuse cases going on with South Asians and they are scared to speak up about it. If we make it a requirement for her to take off her niqab, it kind of discourages others from speaking up. So it really depends on the case, and why the person is doing it.

34 In accord with the same International Civil Aviation Authority standards applied in Ontario, faces in Québec must be entirely visible on the driving license photo (which is also used for the provincial Health Insurance Card), although religious head coverings worn by both females and males are permitted. See http://www.saaq.gouv.qc.ca/en/driver_licence/photospecifications/index.php

Concerning the citizenship oath, a member of the Toronto-based Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children wrote in an email on June 26th, 2013 that she "personally" knew of one woman wearing niqab who left her face uncovered while taking her citizenship oath in order to avoid complications.

In a follow-up email communication, an Ontario focus group participant summed up her understanding of "flexibility", as she called it, in regard to covering the face:

> I personally know of no woman (and I know quite a few) who would not cooperate in lifting her veil momentarily when needed and necessary. Some women may ask for female personnel, others would insist on it, but most would not inconvenience themselves or others and would show their face to male officers or agents to meet necessary requirements. In fact even in Muslim lands, they do check veiled women, but the difference is that they provide female workers to check. I also heard of places where they do not have female workers, so we would have to show our face if necessary. Now lastly, necessity is often defined and determined through scholarly work, and we do consult our scholars as to what is necessary and what is not. But also there is a general Islamic principle that hardship should be reduced as much as possible, although we also recognize that hardship is relative from one person to another person.

"Necessity" (Arabic *darurah*) refers to a principle of Islamic law that allows rules to be relaxed in situations in which adhering strictly to them would not really be possible or involve too much "hardship" (Arabic *haraj*). The spirit of the principle, similar to Jewish Halakhah, is that the Law is meant to facilitate and enhance life, and not to obstruct it and become a burden. An interviewee living in the Niagara Peninsula stated it more informally: "It's not a problem taking off the niqab whenever it is required, because I can understand the Canadian law and I can also understand that Islam is not very restricted and makes everything easy for us."

The online subjects as well as direct interviewees who brought up the subject were also somewhat open to removing or lifting their veils when receiving government services. Table 1 shows the replies of 34 online survey respondents[35] to the

35 Four did not respond.

question (#39): "Is it appropriate for you to remove your niqab when accessing any of these services?"[36]

Table 1

	Yes, all the time	Sometimes	Never	I am not sure
Social services i.e. social assistance, job counselling	3	16	10	5
Legal services i.e. legal aid	3	21	7	3
Medical/health services i.e. doctor's visits, specialist's referrals	4	26	3	1

Removal of niqab was no doubt understood as taking place in the presence of men. It is possible that because the question talks about "removing" niqab, respondents took that to mean actually taking the veil off, rather than momentarily lifting it for purposes of identification. This might (or might not) explain the 17 in the first two categories who answered "never". It is not clear under which circumstances women who checked "sometimes" in the category of health services were open to removing their niqab; this could range from "only to check parts of the face or head" to "if the doctor feels that talking face-to-face would help in his assessment."

36 The driving test was also mentioned as a potential issue by two subjects in the Montréal focus group. In January of 2009, Québec's 'Commission des droits de la personne' suggested some refinements to and thus effectively approved accommodations practiced by the Société de l'assurance automobile du Québec (SAAQ) in response to requests by Orthodox Jews and Muslim women for male and female examiners; see the Commission's report: Daniel Carpentier, *Commentaires sur la politique d'accommodement appliqué par la Société de l'assurance automobile du Québec* http://www.cdpdj.qc.ca/publications/accommodements_politique_SAAQ_commentaires_Commission.pdf. Controversy followed, including a challenge by the Québec Civil Service Union (Robert Dutrisac, "Le SFPQ contestera en cour les accommodements raisonnables", *Le Devoir*, October 9, 2009 http://www.ledevoir.com/politique/quebec/270853/le-sfpq-contestera-en-cour-les-accommodements-raisonnables). Nevertheless, a representative of the SAAQ contacted on August 21, 2013 confirmed that the procedures discussed in the Commission's report were still in place. A customer service representative from the Ontario Ministry of Transportation stated in an email dated July 19, 2013 that while efforts were always made to meet requests for female driving examiners, accommodation depended on availability. The Ontario and Québec policies seem to be essentially the same.

Table 2 below tabulating the answers of 35[37] online respondents to the question (#37), "Has your access to basic government services been affected by wearing the niqab" suggests a generally positive experience in using government services:

Table 2

	Positively affected	Negatively affected	Both positively & negatively affected	Not affected	I am not sure	I have not used these services
Social services i.e. social assistance, job counseling	2	1	1	12	1	18
Legal services i.e. legal aid	1	2	0	9	1	22
Medical/health services i.e. doctor's visits, specialist's referrals	4	1	5	22	1	2

Our direct interviewees confirmed the impression of an overall positive experience, as in the following account of a woman preferring a female physician:

> Mostly, they are very cooperative. Sometimes I don't even need to say I need a female doctor; someone will say, "OK, you wearing the abaya, you prefer a female? Yeah, of course." Once there was only one female doctor and she was not in that department. The nurse went over there, she searched for that doctor, and she came. And she said, "OK, now you can feel easy."

In answer to an additional survey question (#40), "When you are visiting the doctor for your own health concerns, do you prefer a female physician?", 29 respondents to the online survey answered "always", and 7 chose "I prefer a woman, but it is not

37 Three did not respond.

necessary." Since the question was phrased in terms of preference, it is unclear if any of the respondents answering "always" would have insisted on a female if initially told one was not available. Two of our direct interviewees did address this when speaking about experiences with medical services, the following in a situation involving obstetrics:

> I always prefer to go with a lady doctor, like when I was pregnant with my kid. But my gynecologist was a man, and so I said OK, and my husband was totally fine with it as well. A doctor is a doctor; he helps you get cured. If you have a lady doctor, you should go with that, but I had a certain problem and he was a specialist. I was comfortable with him and he was a very nice guy. But for my actual delivery, I don't know whether I prayed a lot, because in both my deliveries I had a lady doctor.

As the other interviewee put it: "You always ask if there's a lady available, and if it's feasible, that's great; but I don't think you should ask way too much either and might have to take whatever's available." On the other hand, an informant who was interviewed individually said that she would accept a male doctor "for a private examination" - apparently meaning gynecology, although that was not entirely clear - only if it was a matter of life or death.

Our subjects did object to what they perceived to be rudeness and disrespect. One women living in Québec remembered having to sign papers while she was in the midst of an emergency procedure acknowledging that she would have to accept any physician available, while another, also in Québec, talked about several signs posted in a hospital warning of the same policy. It should be noted that both procedures involved here would have required an obstetrician- gynecologist, which are in very short supply in Québec. It was not, in any case, the fact of having to give their assent that bothered these women, but the inappropriate way - according to their accounts - the situation was handled, for instance telling the patient, though she had not objected, "This is not Saudi Arabia; this is Canada".

The interviewer conducting the Québec focus group asked the members what they would do if the face-veil were to be banned, as in France. The subject did not come up spontaneously and the group did not seem to think it likely that such a law would

be passed, but the remarks of two of our interviewees are interesting because they show the depth of attachment to covering the face. Both thought they would move (apparently meaning to another place in Canada) rather than, as the younger woman put it, "stay at home and not go out at all." "If I have to pull off my niqab", said the other, "every day I will face a psychological stress from inside me, a conflict. My life is going to end up in stress, and who would like to live a stressed life? We have a lot of stress other than that."

05

Is the Face-Veil Obligatory?

There is a long-standing debate among Muslim scholars about whether women should cover their faces or not. The controversy goes back to at least the ninth century, where it can be seen in the classical works written that formative period.

To determine divine commands about covering the body, the scholars turned to the Quran, believed to be the literal word of God sent down to His Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel. There is no mention in the Quran about women covering their faces. The controversy thus finally revolved around a phrase of Verse 31 of Chapter 24 of the Quran, which reads: "Tell the believing women not to show their adornment, except what appears." The questions the interpreters asked were, what is "adornment" (*zinah*), and what does "what appears" (*ma zahara*) mean? Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923), a very famous interpreter of the Quran whose multi-volume work is foundational in the field, is an example of a scholar who interpreted the passage to mean that the face and hands should be uncovered. Tabari reasons that "adornment" includes, among other things, earring, rings, and kohl on the eyes, and since this is what conventionally "appears" in a woman's dress, it can remain uncovered. What Tabari is apparently saying is that women possess charms of various kinds, and these should be hidden, except for those that would normally not be covered even when decently dressed. Tabari also points out that women do not cover the hands and face when praying; thus, he says, these cannot be considered strictly private parts of the body that have to be concealed. Although Tabari was noted for holding some unusual positions – he asserted, for instance, that women could be judges in all areas of religious law – the other scholarly authorities he cites for the opinion and his claim that it enjoys the status of a Consensus

(*ijma*, one of the sources of the Law) show that it was not a novel view and probably well established in his time.

Tabari also refers to a story about the Prophet in which he is supposed to have said that a mature woman (meaning one who had begun to menstruate) should only show her face and the width of a hand above her palm - apparently referring to keeping the arms covered. Stories about what the Prophet and early community said and did are known as hadiths or "anecdotes", and they are used along with the Quran to determine laws and ethical norms. Another anecdote suggesting that women should uncover their face and hands is found in the hadith collection of Abu Dawud (d. 899), one of the six canonical collections of the Sunnis. The hadith says that when the Prophet came into a room where Asma, the daughter of his close Companion Abu Bakr, was uncovered, he turned away from her, saying, "If a woman has reached the age of menstruation, it is not fit that anything be seen of her but this and this" – and here he pointed to his face and hands. Abu Dawud places the hadith under the heading, "That of a woman's adornments which may appear", a reference to Quran 24:31.

Other interpreters of the Quran assert that "what appears" means that which is normally visible in the way of clothing, so that a woman's outer garments are the only things that can "appear", i.e. be seen. Ibn Kathir, a fourteenth-century scholar who is esteemed today especially by more conservative Muslims, held this position. Hadiths are also cited in favour of the pro-niqab position. For instance, in the same collection of Abu Dawud cited above, there is a hadith in which Aishah, a wife of the Prophet, states that she and others of the wives used to "lower our cloaks down from our heads over our faces" when "riders passed by", uncovering again only when they had gone. The anecdote specifies that the Prophet was with his wives when this happened; this is important because the Prophet's presence indicates his assent or approval of what he saw, even when he is not reported to have made an explicit statement.

It may be that the opposing sides – those who held that women should cover their faces and hands, and those who said they should not – had different ideas about social norms and the position of women. If this is so, it is difficult to know what those

ideas were, since the arguments are phrased not in terms of social rationality or women's autonomy but rather faithfulness to God's command and the norms laid down by the Prophet and his community. Social arguments are, however, habitually made in modern times, and they are often the leading ones.

Before moving to modern opinions, it will be useful to speak briefly about the functioning of Muslim scholarly opinion and Law. Some readers may be surprised to learn that there is no clear text in the Quran about niqab and that opinions depend on fine interpretation of short passages, along with hadiths and opinions issued in the past. The fact is that scriptural arguments not only about niqab but also hijab[38] sometimes rest on interpretation of a single Arabic word; this happens because the Arabic of the Quran and hadiths as well as material culture of the time is different from that of the present, so that it is not clear what various names for pieces of clothing actually mean. The hadiths are also generally quite vague on the subject of women's clothing, the two I have cited above being among the few that are more specific. When scholars make arguments in modern times either for or against niqab, the hadiths they adduce often do not seem very relevant, although they try to make them so through interpretation. I mention all this because it is often imagined that the Quran or Islam has clear instructions about this or that; but this is not the way Islam or indeed religions in general work. Rather, religious beliefs and practices are based on interpretations, which can vary widely between persons and across time.

On the issue of niqab, we have, for instance, two very different interpretations from prominent scholars associated with one of the most influential Islamic institutions in the world, Egypt's al-Azhar University. Like Tabari, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, who served as Grand Mufti of Egypt and then Shaykh of al-Azhar up to his death in 2010, interprets Quran 24:31 to mean that everything should be covered except the face and hands.[39] The Shaykh's conviction that God did not ask women to cover their faces led him

38 For hijab, there are passages that at least mention some kind of covering. The argument is then about what kind of covering is meant. Although neither the hair nor head are specifically mentioned, it seems that classical scholars assumed that they should be covered. The opinion that Quranic references to women's clothing merely indicate modesty and not any specific kind of covering is, as far as I am aware, an exclusively modern one.

39 The Arabic title of his work of Quranic interpretation is *Al-Wasit fi tafsir al-Qur'an al-karim*.

near the end of his life to campaign against niqab and ban it from al-Azhar schools. This action should be viewed in the context of efforts at the time by traditional Muslim clerics and their allies in the Egyptian government to counter the influence of Islamists.

The Egyptian cleric and preacher Muhammad Mutawallí al-Sha'rawi (d. 1998) favours the opposing classical interpretation.[40] According to Sha'rawi, "what appears" refers only to "necessary" things, so that "since a woman walking on the street needs to have her eyes exposed, and there may be, for instance, kohl on them, and if her hand is showing there may a ring or henna, there is no bar to her showing necessary 'adornments' such as those." The permission to expose the eyes and hands, Sha'rawi says, is "God's kind indulgence (*rahmah*) toward women". He cautions that the adornments that may be exposed do not include earrings, anklets, bracelets (and so on), meaning that the parts of the body on which these are worn must be covered.

There is no need to go into the many other arguments based on Quran and hadith for and against niqab, as my purpose here is only to show that there are different interpretations and give a sense of how these are phrased. Many modern opinions, whether pro or con, actually do not focus on interpretation of the phrase "what appears" in Quran 24:31, probably because it is too fine a point to make an impact on a popular audience. Arguments in favour of niqab instead often cite Q. 24:31 in a general way, along with two other verses that are widely known: Q. 33:53, which tells believers to speak to the Prophet's wives only "from behind a curtain", and Q. 33:59, which says that women should "lower over themselves a part of their garments". Although none of these verses say anything about concealing the face, they are read, sometimes with the support of hadiths, as meaning that. Quran 33:59 is also read in the opposite way - as not saying that the face should be covered - by those who feel that niqab is not obligatory.

Of our 38 online survey respondents, 17 answered "yes" to the question (#10), "According to your understanding of Islam, is it necessary for Muslim women to wear the niqab," 18 answered "not necessary, but advisable", and 3 checked "not at all".

40 His work of Quranic interpretation is known in Arabic as *Tafsir al-Sha'rawi* or *Khawatir al-Sha'rawi*.

Since it makes no sense that someone wearing a face-veil would think that it was not necessary or advisable to any degree,[41] I would think that the last answer was understood by the three who selected it as emphasizing choice more than the second answer, i.e. niqab is "not necessary *at all*" for Muslim sisters who choose not to wear it. However, the online respondents who thought that niqab was not completely necessary or only advisable did not extend that choice to wearing no head covering, since all but one – an intriguing exception who checked "not necessary, but advisable" – agreed that "it is necessary for Muslim women to wear the hijab" (#11). An interviewee living in southern Ontario explained her acceptance of hijab as a legitimate practice in an interesting way:

> Once school of thought says no, niqab is not necessary, while the other one says it is; but to me, even if you are wearing the headscarf, you are Muslim. Christian people, they wear their cross, Jewish people wear something too, so there should be something for Muslims as well. Whether niqab and hijab is their own choice, but this is your identity.

Why do women wear face-veils if they think it is not absolutely required (the position of over half our online respondents)? It appears that the face-veil is thought of as a higher or special kind of dedication to Islam, as seen in this account:

> [I don't think niqab is related to identity] in the sense that if I'm not wearing it at all, I feel like I'm not Muslim anymore. I think my identity is beyond that. As a Muslim, I definitely think the hijab for sure [is necessary for Muslims or for her personally]; I wouldn't even imagine being able to walk outside without it. But having worn the niqab and the hijab both at various times, I don't think my identity felt different as a Muslim. I mean, I have strength in my faith, that didn't really change.... So I don't think it changes my identity as a Muslim so much, but that's just me, it's my opinion.

The idea of niqab as part of a dedicated life fits well with other themes of our direct interviews, those of veiling the face as a personal choice – as a stage in one's personal religious development – and face-veiling as a challenging commitment and test of faith. It also corresponds with a legal opinion that covering the face, although not obligatory for every person, is "highly recommended" (*mustahabb,* literally "liked").

41 Unless they were coerced, which, although not impossible, is not supported by our other data.

Since Islamic law includes ethics, it speaks not only of "obligatory" and "forbidden" acts, but also acts that are "liked" and "disliked". Acts that are "liked" are ones that are not absolutely obligatory, but which it is better to do and for which one can receive extra reward.[42] The respondents who replied, "not necessary, but advisable" might have had this ethical scale in mind, especially since "advisable" could be taken to mean *mustahabb*. One woman writing in a follow-up email described how regarding niqab as advisable rather than obligatory affected her practice:

> Some women who hold the opinion that wearing a face veil is a must - what is called in Arabic wajib - would not remove it except in extremely necessary situations such as identification purposes, passport and security checks, if stopped by police on the road to verify a licence, or for medical treatment on the face or head area. Just to drive every day, I do not expect they take it off, because they are able to drive while the face is veiled. For me and I expect other sisters who wear it as an optional act, meaning seeking extra rewards and not out of belief that it is mandatory, we are more flexible. So personally, I do take it off when I drive sometimes in the evenings, as I do not expect people can see me, or when I take walks in the evening with my family and the park is empty.

Use of legal categories and terminology, it should be said, was exceptional among our interviewees. The tendency instead was to look at things from a personal and practical point of view.

Some Muslim authorities say that it is wrong for women living in the West to wear niqab, or at least better not to do so. Reasons given are that it results in harassment rather than keeping away unwanted attention; that it causes people who don't understand it to dislike Islam; and that it is a barrier to the integration of Muslims that is necessary for them to establish themselves in their new homes.[43] In Canada, niqab has been vigorously opposed by the Muslim Canadian Congress, an organization declaring itself to be in favour of "separation of religion and state in all matters of public

42 Acts that are "disliked" are those that it would be better not to do, but for which one is punished neither in this world nor the next.

43 Opinions of this kind can be found in many places on the web; see http://spa.qibla.com/issue_view.asp?HD=3&ID=7123&CATE=368 for the view of a female scholar.

policy."[44] In 2009, the MCC called for legislation banning "the wearing of masks, niqabs and the burka in all public dealings", on the grounds of security and niqab being a "symbol of Saudi inspired Islamic extremism" and "disingenuous" use of religious freedom to promote a "political ideology".[45] Some go so far as to say that hijab also should be removed in the West in order to present a more positive image and achieve integration. For instance, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, the Egyptian Shaykh and Mufti quoted above, issued a fatwa in 2003 that allowed Muslim girls living in France to take off their headscarves in order to pursue their education after the French government had banned hijab from public schools. The fatwa acknowledged the right of the French government to make its own laws and permitted the removal of head covering on the grounds that the girls were constrained by "necessity".[46]

Few Muslims would think of recommending removal of headscarves, but many, including imams and community leaders in Canada and other Western countries, are not happy with women wearing niqab because they find it to be an extreme and uncalled-for practice that attracts negative attention to the community. Even individuals and organisations that defend the right of women to wear face-veils as a religious and personal freedom usually do not have a positive view of the practice itself. Women in Canada wearing niqab ultimately constitute a very small sub-culture, sustained, as the remainder of the study suggests, by determined individuals.

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44 From the mission statement of the organisation at http://www.muslimcanadiancongress.org.

45 October 8, 2009, "Muslim Canadian Congress wants Canada to Ban the Burka", http://www.muslimcanadiancongress.org/20091008.html . Farzana Hassan, a member of the Board of the MCC who writes on Muslim affairs, develops the theme of the face veil as a political statement in her *Unveiled : a Canadian Muslim woman's struggle against misogyny, Sharia and Jihad* (St. Catharines, ON : Freedom Press, 2012). Hassan considers niqab to be a "political tool" to "subjugate women" and ensure that they remain socially marginalized and "subservient" to men, making a legislated ban necessary in order to "protect the rights of women who are forced into wearing the niqab" (Chapter "The Burka Debate").

46 The Tantawi-headscarf controversy is discussed in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, edited by Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 123-7. The French-Moroccan imam and community leader Tarek Oubrou holds a similar but more unambiguously integrationist view on hijab and other distinctive dress in the West; see "Les musulmans doivent s'adapter à la société française" (interview with Claire Chartier), November 9, 2012 http://w"ww.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/religion/les-musulmans-doivent-s-adapter-a-la-societe-francaise_1184813.html?xtmc=oubrou_niqab&xtcr=3

06

Reasons for Wearing Niqab

Our subjects gave various and multiple reasons for adopting the face-veil. Asked (#16) what factors had led them to wear niqab[47] and invited to check as many listed reasons as applicable, 26 online respondents chose "religious obligation", 0 "family encouragement", 4 "spouse's encouragement", 5 "encouragement from peers/ friends", 4 "setting an example for my children", and 20 "expression of Muslim identity". Respondents were invited to also list their own reasons; 1 wrote "lecture", 2 "confidence" and "comfort", 1 "inspired", 1 "hajj", and 1 "to please God". Religious reasons, not surprisingly, predominated; religious persons might acknowledge other reasons for their practices, but these are bound to be conceived of as subordinate and supplementary to spiritual, transcendent motivations.

The number of respondents who chose "Muslim identity" is also significant. Sociologists acknowledge that clothing, including religious garb, functions as both a marker and fashioner of identity, and the importance of hijab for Muslim women in the West as an identity-sign has been discussed in numerous studies. Niqab, it appears, plays a similar role, and since identity markers focus on difference, it may do the job of proclaiming and forming identity more completely than hijab. Our direct interviewees did not often mention identity explicitly,[48] but the idea was certainly latent in their conversation. The very low number

47 The question says "niqab/hijab", but I believe that the answers would have logically pertained to niqab for those wearing that style.

48 They used the word identity only when the interviewers brought it up. This was the case for the statements about identity included in the previous section, as well as the following remark: "Wearing hijab is a must for my identity as a Muslim woman, as Allah the Glorified and Exalted commanded it and He knows what is best for me; while wearing the niqab, I would say, is an extra act of obedience but also defines me as Muslim."

of responses acknowledging encouragement from families, spouses, and friends is discussed in the next section.

In order to communicate the essence of our interviewees' talk about their motivations for wearing niqab, I have singled out the most prominent themes and treated them separately. It should be made clear, however, that this is not the way the women gave their reasons. Rather, these were embedded in their accounts of their daily lives and religious and personal development. The whole description was highly personal and individual; I did not detect any uniform dogma or "line" about face-veils. As one woman expressed it, "It is all different, and everybody has their own experience." The interviewees also tended to speak about not one but several motivations, as in this list contributed in written form by a Somali-Canadian in her mid-thirties living in southern Ontario:

> [By wearing niqab] I am fulfilling the command of my Creator, and that is rewarding and satisfying; it makes me worry less about my hereafter, knowing that I am doing my best to comply with the instructions of my Gracious Maker who knows what is best for me; it reminds me of my values, principles and goals in life so that I am always conscious of my actions and behaviour so that it keeps me on track in a sense; it motivates me to be a better Muslim who should have the best character possible, especially since I am clearly and visibly Muslim, and I find that helpful in changing myself in both my inner and outer character. Niqab is a way to invite people to Islam, since they may inquire about why I wear it and then I can explain Islam to them. Also, I am on the safe side in case the correct opinion in the debate about niqab is actually to wear it - and many other reasons besides.

Although our subjects rarely cited scriptures, let alone scholarly arguments involving hadith and law, a few did refer to Quran 24:31 as well as Q. 33:53 and 33:59 (not offering interpretations but having assumed that these referred to covering the face). The last two verses are particularly important because they mention the wives of the Prophet, whom several of the women cited as role models:

> In Surat al-Ahzab [Chapter 33 of the Quran] God says to the Prophet, tell your wives and daughters, tell the wives of the Muslims, that

> when you go outside, you should cover yourself and lower your gaze. And in the verse further on it says that whenever you are speaking to the wives of the Prophet, you should always go behind purdah and not directly into their homes; there should be hijab[49] between the man and the woman. So if it is for them, then why not for us?

Subjects who referred to the Quran talked about their own study of the scriptures and sometimes other sources, through which, they said, they had been motivated to put on the face-veil:

> I did a lot of research myself, as much as I could, not just about the verses but the meanings of the words and different schools of thought; and although this is not to convince others obviously whether it should be done or not, my [conclusion] was that if it was done in the time of the Prophet, peace be upon him, then it needs to be done [today].

Both elements, self-study and attachment to a role-model, are combined in this account with an emphasis, which the reader will now recognize as typical, on independent thought:

> I've been wearing niqab for twenty years now. When I came from South Asia, I didn't even wear the hijab. Niqab was my own personal decision after a long time of thinking whether I should or not. Even now I don't consider the niqab is compulsory, but my main reason for wearing it is that the wives of the Messenger of God, may God's prayers and peace be upon him, and Sahabiyat (eminent women living in the Prophet's time) used to wear it, and for me it's important that I follow them. If I wear it, there is no compulsion from anybody. Even my daughter, when she grew up she saw me wearing it and she didn't start until after a little while and by herself. We didn't force her, and I don't believe we should do anything because someone told us. We should do it because we want to please God.

Although only one online respondent mentioned going on the hajj pilgrimage as a motivation for adopting niqab, this came up quite a few times in our interviews. Making the pilgrimage to Mecca, a ritual usually performed only once in a lifetime, is often a turning-point toward increased religiosity. A number of women also talked

49 The word hijab used in the verse probably indicates a screen or barrier, and the word Purdah, which Western readers will recognize, is Urdu for hijab and refers in South Asia to veiling or seclusion of women.

about the influence of having lived in Saudi Arabia, as in this story from a woman originally from South Asia:

> I wasn't wearing niqab before my marriage. But after, when I started reading and researching all about my faith, then I thought that this is a good thing to do because all the wives of Prophet, the prayers of God and peace be upon him, they did that. And if I'm really a Muslim, then why don't I do it. And then I started. When I went to Saudi Arabia, I went on my first umrah (lesser pilgrimage to Mecca) and that time I made my decision that I had to wear it at any cost, because if I am a Muslim I have to see what is really important for me. Before leaving Saudi Arabia, I went for my last umrah and I really prayed there to God that only you can help me, because I heard a lot that Canada is a very different country and I don't know how much I have strength to carry my religion to full practice.

Preventing inappropriate interactions with males did not, surprisingly, come up very often as a motivation. Whether that was because it was not felt to be a primary reason or simply because it was assumed is not clear; the choice probably should have been included in the online survey. Two women spoke in terms of "protection" – e.g. "we are protected for our fathers, brothers, and husbands" - and used the image of "precious things" being "wrapped" and kept clean like sweets. One also thought that niqab helped to ensure the smooth functioning of society by regulating male-female relations. Another informant who had adopted niqab after her hajj talked about how it had helped with her own feelings about interaction with men:

> Even before going to hajj, I started wearing hijab. But I always felt that I am very open when I talk to male figures, I don't differentiate between male and females. I have a very open personality and very frank way of speaking. So I talked to both of them the same way, laughing, chatting, whatever, and so I felt uncomfortable doing that. So due to my understanding more about Islamic issues, I wanted to bring some barrier, so I thought, this is the best way and I think this is the more pious way.

This group of motivations, along with the conviction that covering the face is recommended or made obligatory in the Quran, comes closest to the indications for niqab given by male religious authorities. Other motivations involve what I would

call "women's reasons", that is reasons given by women relating to their self-views and functioning in their daily lives. These included "confidence", "comfort", "security"[50] and "not worrying about what you are wearing inside the burka [and] how you are looking". An interviewee in Ottawa thought of the niqab as a way to avoid being a sexual object:

> I did my research when I was in my teenage years and I started hijab on my own. My mom, who did not wear hijab, was OK with it, but she wasn't so OK with the niqab [nervous laugh]. And the reason I started the niqab is that I am seeing in society that there is an over-sexualisation of women and women's bodies. And when I was in my university years, I was approached many times, even wearing the hijab, in an indecent way, you know, by both Muslims and non-Muslims. And once I started niqab, I felt more comfortable, and it was a sort of barrier to stop the advances and it definitely did help.

Freedom was a prominent "women's reason". A convert also living in Ottawa who had come to Islam in middle age and worn the face-veil only for a year or so before reverting to hijab characterized niqab as "extreme freedom", in the sense that it freed her from "wasted hours" making her hair and face "look perfect" out of "low self-esteem" and care for "what other people think". Two or three women added to the idea of freedom from fashion, liberty to enjoy dressing up behind their veils and at home:

> It's not that we are always wearing niqab at home. We are as free as you are, we are just like you guys, same emotions. When we go outside, we look in the mirror, we put makeup on, and I love to wear high heels and everything. This code is just for outside, it's not for inside the home.

The speaker here was recounting how she answered a woman who had come up to her in a mall and asked how she could meet men and get married with her face veiled. She explained to the woman that she did not wear niqab the whole day, and that in her particular South Asian culture, a man wanting to meet a girl would ask through the family if she was interested in exchanging pictures, and then if they then both agreed, they would "meet in the presence of their elders". A rule of Islamic law, in fact, allows a woman meeting a man who intends to propose to uncover her face. One of our subjects,

50 For example: "I feel secure and I feel comfort, like nobody looking at my face, because I am wearing niqab. So even if I do make-up and everything, it's only for me and my husband and my relatives; it's not for everyone, and this makes me feel comfortable."

interestingly, said that her husband had told her family that he only needed to talk to her before the wedding day and not see her face, which was intended and taken as a sign that he valued her person and piety more than her appearance. Here again we see niqab regarded as a bar to objectification.

A young Pakistani-Canadian thought of freedom in a different way, as a free commitment to and unobstructed relation with God:

> I used to hear from the ladies who do niqab that it liberates you, and I said, it doesn't make any sense, you are just wrapping yourself in something, how can you say that you're liberated? But it does, it really does. You are not worried about anything. You just submit yourself to Allah and you are really content inside. I think I am a strong believer and I am doing something just for Allah, to please Him, and my intention is nothing else.

Freedom was understood by the interviewee mentioned earlier who wore a face-veil only part of the time to mean choice for Canadian women in what they wear, whether niqab or other styles:

> Even though I may not do it all the time, I respect other women's right to do it all the time. And I think it's a personal decision, what they feel comfortable with. Just like if someone wants to wear a bikini, that's their choice. We [women who veil] are not saying anything about that. Just like that, I think if a woman wants to wear niqab, she should be allowed to do it. Most of them are not actually asking for anything more, and if they were asked, they would show their face for identification purposes. I think I support their choice to wear it, and I think it is an individual choice. To take that away from them, to take away public services, is isolating them and it is a form of injustice. That's my personal opinion.

A number of other women also reasoned that wearing a face-veil should be part of a right of women in Canada to wear what they pleased; in the stories our subjects told about how they answered to people who had been rude to them in public (see below), this was a point they often said they had made.

The association of niqab with freedom is interesting. It appears that, having found that the idea of freedom fit well with their individualism and situation as unusual persons in Canadian society, our subjects used it to explain their practice to

themselves and others in an ideal way. This, it seems to me, is an instance of integration of a "Canadian value".

These are some of the ways the women we met explained and valorized their face-veiling. An interviewee in her late twenties, one of the few we met who had stopped wearing niqab, had very different ideas, which are worth relating at length because they suggest challenges and limitations our other subjects had managed to negotiate or to transcend through religious energy and idealism.[51] Having "taken everyone aback" by adopting niqab - a decision arrived at in Canada, where she had grown up after emigrating at the age of nine from Eritrea – the young woman found herself struggling with her family, who "presumed I was being indoctrinated with extreme ideas". Although there were "a few welcoming and understanding non-Muslims" whom she "got to know in person", she was also faced in public with stares, rude remarks, and swearing:

> The best way to describe my experience is, it was a challenge. However, I had expected that, and was optimistic about the practice getting easier. To my dismay, it didn't. It was very difficult to eat in public. I very rarely went out to restaurants. When being invited to people's homes, I could never sit to eat among any men and often felt like a burden putting people out of their way to accommodate me. For that reason, I tried by best to avoid accepting dinner invitations except to all-girl functions. I could never get used to eating under my niqab, as some sisters had learned to do. The slightest sickness or cold would make it very difficult to go out and it was tough to engage with people, your neighbours, society, and so on, because people can't see you. Playing sports and exercising outside was nearly impossible, a women-only gym was your best bet. You miss out on fresh air and the real experience of nature. And truly, in nature is where you find God.

Having worn a face-veil for close to a decade before reverting to hijab, our interviewee concluded that there were "no advantages" to it, "at least not here in Canada", or "if there are, it is very minute compared to the many disadvantages." Asked about identity, she declared that wearing niqab was "not at all important" to her identity as a Muslim and that she had found it "more a burden and hindrance upon

51 A few other brief statements by women who had ceased to wear niqab are included in: Faegheh Shirazi and Smeeta Mishra, "Young Muslim women on the face veil (niqab) A tool of resistance in Europe but rejected in the United States." *International journal of cultural studies* 13, no. 1 (2010): 43-62. Shirazi and Mishra talked only to women who were not in favour of veiling the face.

my faith than a means of drawing nearer to God." She also justified her decision on the basis of the Quran, noting that the face-veil was "only an obligation for the wives of the Prophet, peace be upon him and his progeny", since the Quran says that they are exceptional persons.[52]

Like the other women, this interviewee emphasized that she had put on the face-veil independently: "My goal for wearing the niqab was to please God, based on my very limited and at first, misconstrued understanding." She had taken it off, she said, in the same spirit, and not because of "pressure from society" or opposition from her parents, siblings, and extended family, as she had found their reasons for "never ceasing to pressure me to remove it" to be "always about pleasing people."

It must be said that, in contrast to this strong statement, the few other subjects who had ceased wearing niqab or wore it only part-time were quite apologetic about it, with one citing medical reasons (a rash) and another saying that she would wear it again when she found herself in better circumstances. These persons - with the exception of the part-timer, who was interviewed individually - were, of course, sitting in the company of faced-veiled women, unlike the informant quoted above. We met one woman who had been used to covering her face before her recent immigration, had been told by her husband or family to take it off, possibly because they believed it was not allowed in Canada, and appeared as a result to be upset and dejected.

52 The interviewee here cited a phrase of Q 33:53 in which God says that no one is to marry Muhammad's wives after him; she may also have had in mind Q 33: 32: "O wives of the Prophet, you are not like any other women".

07

Opposition and Support from Family and Friends

Our subjects frequently highlighted the attitudes of family members. The decision to wear niqab is typically part of a narrative in which a woman forms a religious commitment that is different from or exceeds that of her family. The opposition or support of relatives then serves to underline the challenge of wearing a face-veil and taking on of niqab as a personal, independent choice. As has often been observed in studies of Muslim women in the West wearing hijab, the decision to veil can be part of a process of establishing a separate identity. This seems to be the explanation for the very low number of online respondents, as noted in the previous section, who said they had been encouraged by their families, spouses and friends to adopt niqab.

The experience of a young woman who took on the niqab in Pakistan while studying for her first degree in biochemistry illustrates the theme well. "Nobody", she said, "wore the niqab" in her family, and her father "was totally against it… so it was a really, really difficult thing" to the extent that she "hid it" from her father, "not that he was abusive, but he would be really mad, and I was young, and I used to leave my house [wearing niqab] when he's not watching". Her mother, however, unwittingly inspired her to stand her ground by being "very much into that if anything is what Allah has said, we have to do it". Fathers are significant figures in stories of familial opposition to niqab. A woman from East Africa talked about resistance from her father in particular, not heeded by herself or her two sisters, all of whom put on niqab against his wishes.

In the stories of many of our subjects, the opposition of relatives is transformed into acceptance and even support by the niqab wearer's steadfast commitment. The

following statement from a woman in her early thirties living in a suburb of Toronto is a good example:

> My Mom did not wear hijab. So I'm from a family that [is not very religious or conservative]. She was not supportive in the beginning. She did not think it was important or safe [to be wearing a face-veil in a Western setting, especially after 9/11]. My mom did not accept me at first, but over time she came to accept me. She says, "It's your decision". Even when I was getting married, she said, "You know my daughter wears niqab and she wants to wear it, so it has to be someone who accepts", and she was very vocal about it. Because at the end of the day, she said it's your decision and you are your own person if this is what you want to do.

The impression of autonomy is strengthened by the proportion - slightly less than one-half - of online respondents who said they had discussed their "decision" (as question #17 puts it) to veil with their families. This seems to be a rather low occurrence given the significant and visually evident change in life-style involved in taking on niqab. Surely this would have occasioned some kind of conversation with the family. It seems likely that the number was lowered because some respondents felt that discussing a "decision" means heeding family input.

We came across only a handful of direct interviewees who said they were influenced by their families to wear niqab. A long-standing immigrant of Pakistani background recalled that although the women of her family were not in the habit of wearing a face-veil "because we were raised in the city", they did put it on "when went to our grandparent's homes or places over there" [apparently meaning more rural or conservative areas], "so I already had that idea of niqab [although] my parents never forced me to wear the niqab, it was my choice". We became aware that two members of one of our focus groups were part of a small group of niqab-wearing women related to each other as mother and sisters. The confidence and articulateness of the two interviewees made them stand out even among our generally self-assured subjects. They seemed to have formed a family support network and a kind of solidarity around their distinctive dress and life-style.

The idea that women are forced by their husbands to wear niqab irritated our subjects considerably. As one woman put it:

> There's a lot of myths that's going on about us, that we women are oppressed and we are forced to wear niqab; and I must say that it's the other way around, because you have to do a lot of work to actually convince other people.

Interviewees who mentioned their husbands were very careful to make it clear that they had not dictated their choice and praised them for their support: "It was very hard with the closest family, but I had my husband's support, so I went for it."

Some of the women who remarked on their husbands' support for their niqab also took care to specify that they were left free by their husbands to remove it, as in the following story told by an Afro-Canadian woman who began to cover her face after going to Mecca:

> I was not married when I wore niqab, and my husband knew me from work when I was wearing hijab only. He was surprised that I wore niqab when he proposed, and we had a discussion about how he feels about it and he supports it or not. His opinion was that it was not necessary or mandatory, but he will be supportive either way. If I wish to keep it or even want to remove it in future, then he is fine with it; but he definitely believed hijab is a must, and so do I, and he would not accept if I ever wanted to remove my hijab.

A common narrative involves a husband who becomes supportive of his wife's niqab only after she manages to convince him. For instance, a woman who had worn the niqab "for over two decades" recalls how she decided after she and her husband had gone on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca that he should grow a beard and she should put on niqab. He did grow the beard, but "didn't like" her niqab. Her husband, she said, was finally "OK" with the niqab, if not necessarily comfortable, because of her children, who "support their mother". Another woman recalled how her husband was "worried for me; he was, like, you're going to go out and people will give you a hard time." She persevered, although she had to "go through a lot of stuff to convince him."

Two interviewees reported having to contend with a continued lack of enthusiasm from their spouses. A young woman who had been wearing niqab for some

months after attending one of the all-female religious study circles (*halaqah*) which are flourishing in Canada said of her husband, "He doesn't say anything, but sometimes he says, why are you wearing all these layers?"

Several questions in the online survey were aimed at throwing light on the influence of mothers on the veiling practice of their daughters. The data gathered is of limited significance, since the online respondents as well as our direct interviewees were generally young, while niqab, our study suggests, is typically taken on in the twenties or later, an age most of the daughters would not have reached. One would have to wait some years – ideally, a generation, if the mode for face-veiling continues that long – to see if there is transference. With that important limitation in mind, we are able to report what seems to be an absence of transference, or absence of intent to transfer. Twenty-three face-veiled individuals who filled up the online survey, that is about two-thirds of all respondents, did report (#13) that other women in their families wore niqab or hijab. This question does not, however, tell us much about mutual influence of females in the family on face-veiling, since it includes hijab and "family" may also have been understood to mean extended family. On the other hand, only 9 of the 22 individuals who had daughters said that they also wore niqab or hijab (#19), and only 8 said they had "encouraged" them to veil (#21). Seven of those 9 stated (#20) that their daughters had begun veiling between eight and twelve years old – I would guess that the rule that a female should start veiling at the onset of puberty plays a role here – 1 "under seven years", and 1 "between thirteen and seventeen". Again, the survey did not, unfortunately, ask specifically if the daughters had adopted niqab or hijab; the low age of adoption certainly suggests the latter.

The individualism of wearers of niqab seen throughout this study is evident in these numbers. Looking at question #13 from a different angle than in the previous paragraph, we notice that fully one-third of respondents wearing a face-veil came from families in which no style of veiling was practiced. This fits with the numerous stories we heard of "pioneer" veiling and opposition from family. Only four respondents to question #16 cited "setting an example for my children" as a reason for wearing niqab.

The strikingly low number seems to indicate a feeling, again supported by many statements in direct interviews, that face-veiling should be a personal choice. It may also reflect a sentiment of the respondents that they are veiling for themselves and God, and not for others. The remark of a daughter who came along with her mother to one of the focus groups attests to the individualism of both: "When she began wearing it", the daughter said, "I found it very weird, but now I'm OK with it. It's her choice and I support her decision."

The low number (five) of online respondents who acknowledged "encouragement from peers/friends" is reflected in our direct interviews, in which the influence of friends or role models was rarely acknowledged. The following narrative is one of the exceptions:

> My Quran instructor used to cover [with niqab], so I was a new immigrant from Pakistan and I thought that is not the way to go. But then I was taken by her because of her personality. I just loved her, and I asked her if you have any problems, and she said no. She was very confident.

She was "still scared", the interviewee said, to put on niqab, but then she came to Toronto where there were more faced-veiled women than in the East-coast American city she used to live in, with the result that she "bumped into" a few and finally talked to two she saw in a mosque who assured her they were not being harassed. "So I honestly thought," she concluded, "that Canadian society is more friendly than even American society, because when it came to the veil, my first perception was that no society is more welcoming; and I just started covering because I got encouraged with all these people and it has been a smooth journey so far." Another woman interviewed in Toronto gave "most of the credit" to her friend who had spent, she said, years convincing her that she could carry through what she already believed was written in the Quran. Although initially "not so confident" at the thought of having to deal with all her relatives and other people who had known her without a veil, she finally had "quite a good experience, *alhamdulillah*" (praise be to God).

Two or three women were also started on a path toward religiosity that eventually led to adopting niqab by joining Muslim student organizations (one had done this in Pakistan). A young mother living in Montréal who described her upbringing as "seldom religious" began practicing after joining a student organization in the first year of her post-secondary education, finally taking on niqab after marriage.

Why did we not hear more from our interviewees about the influence of friends and peers? It seems reasonable to suppose that face-veiling would spread through friendship or community networks, especially in the face of opposition from the family. Perhaps the women wished to emphasize the independence of their decisions; as seen in the previous section, adoption of niqab is always and without exception represented as a momentous choice made on the basis of personal conscience. A remark made by a woman from the Greater Toronto Area highlights the concern that niqab be recognized as an individual religious commitment rather than a received custom or trend. The woman took care to point out that the five or six persons she knew among the fifteen participating with her in a focus group had all begun to veil on their own initiative and that they had become friends "not because we wear niqab", but only after joining a certain country-wide Islamic association. She went on to draw a contrast between her circle and other women in the city who, she said, veiled their faces only because of "their families" and "tradition."

More evidence is needed about mutual support and networking. One supposes that women would at least need each other's support and knowledge to buy or sew the necessary clothing and exchange tips about wearing it.[53] One of the research assistants for the project believed that most of the women in the Montréal focus group knew each other and that some had connected through the all-female Islamic study circles (*halaqah*s) operating in the city, although she could not tell whether they had met there before or after having adopted niqab. Two other interviewees also mentioned *halaqah*s. All but 9 online respondents (with 3 not answering) said they were involved in an "Islamic community or local mosque" (#60), and it seems likely that women also

53 Some of this could be done through the internet; although only a single online respondent said she used the internet for shopping.

influence and meet up with each other through such associations, as related by the woman who came to Toronto after living in the U.S.A. Husbands and the nuclear family seem to be important sources of support; the woman quoted above who spoke at length about her reasons for discontinuing niqab was not married.

A number of interviewees who had lived in places where there were very few or no other women with their faces veiled had reduced or discontinued their practice because they felt isolated and unsafe. Another woman, however, persevered without the support of a network, possibly not an unusual experience since there are so few face-veiled women altogether:

> I started wearing my niqab in 1990, and for a long time in our area I was the only one. I was going to the shopping center and having people look at me and stuff, but that was OK. But our own friends, people we know really well, see you in the shopping center and they would want to go away from you. Then there was another lady, she wore a niqab too. But it was hard in the beginning, lonely, like a loner going around with a niqab, for a long time, seven or eight years.

08

Positive and Negative Experiences in Canadian Society

Our interviewees told many stories about experiences with the Canadian public while wearing a face-veil. If niqab was universally viewed as a challenge, going out in public seemed to be the most difficult part. The commitment to wear the Jewish yarmulke, Sikh turban and, of course, various styles of hijab all involve bearing the burden of conspicuous difference and potential curiosity or hostility. A face-veil, however, is more likely than any of these to attract negative attention, partly due to its rarity and because covering the face can be taken as a sign of refusing social interaction, but above all because it evokes negative images of Islam.

The women we interviewed talked about both positive and negative interactions, but positive experiences or optimistic assessments always predominated. A description of a bad incident was invariably balanced with something good, as if the story needed a resolution. We did not, to my surprise, find a single interviewee who did not see her experience in Canadian society as positive overall, and many went on to praise the country – their country, in fact – and its people. In this section, I will let the women speak for themselves by reproducing parts of these typical narratives.

A participant in the Mississauga focus group attributed negative experiences in the two weeks before she was interviewed near the end of January 2013 to "the bad publicity that we get in the newspaper and the media, like a random report about Afghan women". This affected her when she went out to do her grocery shopping; "The next day, everybody will tell you how disgusting and gross you look." She believed a solution could be found in education:

> You know, I see a lot of people who have a whole lot of body piercings. I may not like it, but I never comment on them or am blunt about it in public places. So I think that when they teach people KCC in public schools - you know, Kindness, Courtesy and Common Sense - they should add something about it just like they talk about Sikh Punjabi people wearing the turban and everything. There should be some material regarding Muslim women and their face covering.

"I do also," the interviewee added, "have a very good experience that I want to share":

> When I first came here [to Canada or Ontario], the first thing I did is go to Niagara Falls. I had to see it. So there was a family there and a young girl kept asking, "Mommy, why is that woman wearing that?" Her mother was a very decent woman; she said, "Sweetie, that's just her dress." And I thought that was a great answer. So if they could just teach that in schools, maybe the new generation in Canada would be more polite and more kind to people like us, because we love Canada just like them.

In a number of stories, the women portray themselves as responding to remarks made to them in public. These are never angry retorts, but appeals or wise lessons, as in this woman's reply to a man who told her - something apparently heard quite often – "you are in Canada":

> Once I was in the line [at the grocery store] and an old couple said, "Now you are here in Canada." My husband was with me, but the man said, "You're in Canada now, you don't have to do it, haven't you learned something?" And I said, "No, it's about time that you did; I'm here, ask me questions, I want to teach you something." He didn't answer, of course, and I said it very respectfully. He was an old man, so I didn't want to disrespect him or be rude. But I said, "I know that I'm in Canada, please learn something from me."

Answering or imagining an answer is the response of a more seasoned and confident woman, in contrast to the new South Asian immigrant who reacted to a "hurtful" remark made to her when she landed in the aeroport from Saudi Arabia by crying. Our subjects talked about patience and forbearance. A Montréal woman admitted that she found people "yelling" at her – in the shopping mall, the usual setting, it seems, for such incidents – to be very difficult to bear, but would "normally ignore them until they really push me". In the following story as in the one above, the

rude person is older, and also female, which is most commonly the case judging from what was told us by our interviewees:

> I was doing my grocery shopping and I thought the lady was picking something from the racks, but she pulled my niqab. So I pulled it back on and I very kindly told her, "Excuse me, you are not allowed to do that." I told the lady, "If you have any questions, you can ask me nicely and I can answer you." She says to me, "How can you breathe? And I said, "Come on, I can breathe, which is why I am walking here freely, I can see you, my hands are free, my eyes can see, I can hear everything." The woman was very rude. I could have called somebody from the store and complained that she pulled my niqab and I could have gone to court, because I know what my rights are. But she was an old lady, and in our religion, it says that you have to respect elders no matter what, so I said no and prayed for her.

An interviewee living in one of the satellite towns of Toronto placed harassment of veiled women in the context of harassment of women in general, an interesting "woman's reason" for patience:

> I know that some niqabi women are harassed. However, aren't other women in Canada bullied and harassed as well because of their appearance or being fat or whatever? All of us do get harassed at some point in time in our lives, it's not just the niqab, it's people. We don't have to be so touchy about our niqab, we should be very confident. If people are ignorant, that's their fault, not ours.

A number of interviewees did say that they were sometimes afraid of being harassed or attacked – a feeling described by one woman as "fear in our hearts" – and an interviewee in the province of Québec who had worn her face-veil for eight years remembered incidents much more serious than stares and remarks. She had been pushed, a woman had attempted to pull off her niqab in the middle of a large department store, someone had tried to "crash" her with his car in front of a pharmacy, and she had heard "the F-word", as she put it, several times. On one occasion as she was taking her son to the doctor, a middle-aged man "giving very dirty signals" had walked directly toward them until she was forced to cry out and fall to the pavement to avoid him "grabbing" her.

This informant also balanced her account with positive comments, phrased quite openly as an appeal: "Canadian people are nice, but of course, every place is a combination of good and bad people. I went to the States with niqab, and I think in Québec it's more hard, but we love Québec and we want Québec to love us too." Asked if she had non-Muslim friends, she said that she often talked with such friends over the phone about home schooling. The non-Muslims she met were initially very curious, but "afterwards, after some speaking and dealing, we become friends, and we do have to be nice to them, just to show them how we are, because this is our religion."

Some women, like the interviewee just quoted, attributed negative experiences to what they imagined to be a small and exceptional minority. "Only two or three percent", a woman living in Southern Ontario thought, "have narrow thinking." An immigrant who had been in the country for a considerable time still remembered the "very good" treatment she had met with when she first arrived at the aeroport, with "everyone respecting my privacy and religion." Although she discovered after a while that "people are different [so that some] are nasty on you, like if you are shopping at a grocery store, they come and say, 'Stupid'," these, she thought, represented not more than "two percent".

Our interviewees appealed to principles of human rights and multiculturalism to make their case for tolerance. Reference to these values always included appreciation of the country, as in the following example:

> I like Canada because it is a multicultural society and everyone who comes is easily accepted by the Canadian society. They don't discriminate, and I hope they will not in the future, because I see that in France [and other European countries] there are different incidents and they are making laws against niqab. I don't think that Canada is going to do something like that, because they respect human rights, and that's why I like Canada and why I want my children to be raised here, for this reason that we are respected as human beings and we have rights like other people.

Statements about Canadian values and the "good-heartedness", as one person put it, of Canadians finally had a patriotic ring:

> We chose this country purposely. This country is the best place to live, better than where we belong to, that's why we came here. As far as the community, there are some good things and some bad things, every country and every culture has that. The thing is, Canadians from my experience are not nosy. They are not looking at you or where you are going. Sometimes small kids look at people who wear the niqab and parents teach them not to stare. Me personally, when I see something like that, I go to them and say hi so they feel confident and comfortable.

The frequency and emotion with which interviewees praised their country was striking. Canada was described as "one of the best societies in the world today, which I am very blessed to be a part of," a place where "I feel very much at liberty to practise my religion and be who I want to be", and a nation in which "the possibilities and potential for an individual are endless." A woman from Ottawa declared that she was "grateful to Allah" for living in Canada, where her "commitment to faith, conviction, and level of practice" was "much better than it was in [a certain Muslim country]." She credited her success in life to Canada only after God, calling Canadians "amazing people", much better, she thought, than "in the States and Europe".

A 2010 Angus Reid poll asking Canadians if they agreed with the requirement of Québec's proposed Bill 94 that individuals should be obliged to show their faces in order to access government services suggests attitudes less positive than those perceived by our interviewees. Fully eighty percent agreed, with the highest approval among Québecois and respondents over the age of fifty-five.[54] I am also mindful of the observation of my collaborator Ms. Tahmina Tariq that women who wear only hijab often do not have experiences and feelings as positive as those reported by many of the face-veiled individuals we met.

The apparent gap might be partly accounted for by the context of the interviews. Our interviewees were very much aware that they were speaking through us to the Canadian public, and they wanted, I believe, to communicate to their fellow citizens what they had not had the opportunity to say. This, I think, is the meaning of the narratives in which women answer to their tormentors in shopping malls and so on with advice about being civilized and polite, while emphasizing their own good

54 Search "niqab" on www.angus-reid.com.

will and restraint. The balancing out of negative with positive experiences, statements of patriotism and sometimes enthusiastically positive assessments of Canadians' behaviour are also, I perceive, somewhat aspirational. They tell us about how the speakers would like to be treated and that they would like to belong. The 19 comments returned for question #70 in the online survey asking about experiences in Canadian society are somewhat more mixed, possibly because filling up a survey feels less like talking to real people.

This is not to say that our direct interviewees were not sincere. Although women who contributed comments online reported shouts from passing cars and being laughed at, they also wrote that they had been treated with "respect"- a word that came up often also in interviews - and "loved" being Canadian. The variety of their experiences in Canadian society is finally bewildering; an interviewee in a mid-sized city in Western Canada recalled that someone had tried to push her near the top of a flight of stairs – something that particularly astonished her as she had grown up in that same city with "the friendliest people in the world" – while an online respondent in a similar Western city said that she had "never felt threatened" and had even received "words of encouragement" from "older non-Muslim men and women". It may be that, despite episodes of "niqab rage" in which people lose their normal restraint, such as the incident prosecuted in Mississauga in 2011,[55] there is enough of a habit of social decorum among Canadians that they usually do not openly demonstrate negative feelings.

Unfavourable comparisons of Québec with Ontario or the rest of Canada were made by interviewees both inside and outside the province. The Bill 94 episode may have played a role here. The negative feelings of some of our Québec interviewees were heightened by the experience of being subjected to apparently rude remarks or "yelled at" in French, a language several of them did not understand (although one member of the group actually worked as a French tutor). Attempts by my research assistants to contact francophone face-veiled women in order to check what might have been a skewed Anglophone perception were unsuccessful, and it is unclear to us how much of such a population exists.

55 Karen Allen, "Attacker sentenced for pulling off woman's niqab", *The Toronto Star*, November 25, 2011 http://www.thestar.com/news/crime/2011/11/25/attacker_sentenced_for_pulling_off_womans_niqab.html

09

Education, Work and Integration

The educational level of our subjects was generally high. Of 38 online respondents, 17 held a bachelor's or graduate diploma and 9 had some other post-secondary education such as community college or a partially completed university degree. Fourteen reported having attended formal educational or training programmes in Canada (#43) at the university or college level (#42); since many of the women were immigrants in their twenties who had been in the country long enough to become citizens, it is not surprising that a good number had received education in Canada. Our direct interviewees also seemed to be generally well educated. The interviews suggest a preference for the hard sciences, reputed to be typical choice of South Asians, who made up most of our sample. Education (teaching) was also a popular choice.

As was the case for government services, most online respondents did not feel that their access to educational programmes had been negatively affected by wearing niqab (#44). By far the largest number said their access was "not affected".[56] Only one reported a negative effect – on access to college courses in particular – while two or three each at the college, university, and vocational levels said that their access had been affected both positively and negatively. One each at the college and university level actually reported a positive effect, an interesting response that can also be seen in Table 2 above concerning government services. The distribution was very similar for the effect of niqab on interactions with other students and educational personnel (#45), although here 3 saw a positive effect on their interactions

56 The numbers here were larger than for the total of those who said they had participated in formal educational training in Canada (#42). Some respondents may have attended more than one level, or they may have meant that they felt they could attend if they wanted to, even though the choice "I have not attended any programs" was also available.

with instructors in particular. Almost all respondents described themselves as either somewhat or very "comfortable and accepted" in Canadian educational programs (#48), with only three saying that they had not felt comfortable.

Only a few of our direct interviewees talked about experiences with post-secondary institutions, and these tended to be positive. The one exception we heard of was a chemical engineering student being spit on by someone from a group of other female students. A mother was worried about her daughters beginning their freshman year with their faces veiled, especially since her Muslim friends were "scared" and thought the girls could not last "many days"; but her prayers were answered when one of them came home with an ID card bearing her picture with niqab. Both daughters eventually graduated.

The majority of our subjects – 28 out of 55 respondents to both the online survey and short questionnaire – were employed as full-time homemakers, two while also attending school (#8). Seven described themselves as primarily students. Sixteen reported that they were employed outside homemaking, half in full or part-time work and half through self-employment.[57] It appears that most of these were engaged in work with Muslim communities.[58] We did, however, hear of a few instances of steady employment outside the community, including engineering consulting, customer service, web design, and an online enterprise set up by one of the women retailing fancy linens.[59] The interviewee employed in web design worked primarily over the phone, and she quipped that she had "very interesting stories" about customers who met with her and realized that they had been speaking to someone with niqab.

A good number of our interviewees wanted to work, at least at some time in their lives. Wearing a face-veil, it seems, is not necessarily a sign of total domesticity, as one woman said: "When we came here, we didn't come with the mind that we were going to stick ourselves inside of our houses." Nor did online respondents think that mothers

57 The others described themselves either as retired or on maternity leave.

58 Nineteen persons said that they worked "for an organization that serves primarily the Muslim community" (#30). This is more than the number of persons who said they were employed; it may be that respondents had more than one job or volunteers also checked yes. The types of employment most frequently selected for question #29, "charitable organizations", "education" and "social work", suggest work with the community.

59 Most of these jobs were held by women in the family group described earlier as having formed a "support network".

with children should not work; 14 agreed or strongly agreed (#32) that a working mother could have as good a relationship with her children as a mother who stayed at home, 16 agreed "somewhat", and only 6 were inclined to "strongly disagree". This seems to me to be a strong indicator of non-domesticity, in light of the fact that the impact of working on motherhood is a universally controversial issue. Women who mentioned finding employment were certainly aware that wearing niqab would be a serious obstacle,[60] but they did not exclude it; a very optimistic interviewee thought that getting hired would finally depend on "you and how hard-working you are." One talked about the possiblity of working behind the scenes at a Pakistani restaurant as a cook. Two studying education hoped to work with children. Another who had attended medical school abroad worried about how she would complete her credentials in Canada and then find work while wearing a face-veil; she was still raising her children and thought that she would cross that bridge when she came to it. In one discussion, it was agreed that Muslim women wearing not only niqab but also hijab faced exclusion from the workforce, and a discussant believed that a woman with niqab would also face difficulty-finding employment in a Muslim school. Nevertheless, only 6 online respondents (#50) said they would consider removing the niqab for a job interview.[61]

The three indicators of integration chosen for the online survey were a mother's dealings with the school system, association and social activity with Muslims and non-Muslims, and civic participation. Each indicator requires a progressively wider and more elective engagement. Integration is also two-sided, as wider engagement requires openness and encouragement from society.

The children of 8 individuals who answered question #23 attended Islamic school, while 6 were home-schooled.[62] Only 6 mothers indicated that they had placed their children in public school. Half of the public school mothers said they volunteered in their children's school (#24), exactly the same proportion as in Islamic schools. Only one public school mother attended parent council meetings (#25),

60 Twelve online respondents said that access to employment in Canada (#49) had been affected by their niqab. Seven said they were not affected; it may be that this pertains to employment in the community.

61 Five not responding; it could be that the 6 who considered removing their veils imagined a female interviewer.

62 One checked "private", which may or may not indicate an Islamic school.

compared to half of those in Islamic schools. However, all public school mothers and all but one Islamic school mother attended parent-teacher meetings (#26). It is interesting that all the mothers with children in public school felt comfortable wearing niqab in their children's school, whereas some did not feel comfortable in the Islamic schools. That four of the public school women went to school meetings and events alone, about the same proportion as Islamic school mothers, also suggests a good level of comfort. These results, though based on extremely small numbers, point to good relations between public schools and mothers wearing niqab. A few comments made in our direct interviews also suggested openness and acceptance.

Concerning association and social activity, about two-thirds of those who responded to question #64 said that they lived in a neighbourhood in which there were many Muslims and persons of the same ethnic origin as themselves, while over 80% of those responding to #65 said that they "got together" with such persons at least once a month. This is probably not an unusual situation for Canadian Muslims in large urban centers, where most of our participants live. Those who replied to #66 said that they also "got together" quite frequently with other kinds of people, but the question does not, unfortunately, tell us about association with non-Muslims, since it asks about them and "individuals who are not from your country of origin", who may actually be Muslims, together. Most direct interviewees did not seem to be close to any non-Muslims, although the few that did mention friendly relations spoke about them in a very positive way, as if making friends with non-Muslims was an ideal thing. An interviewee living in in a small town in southern Ontario, said that she saw her non-Muslim friends "almost every day, or on weekends" and was in the habit of sending them food, although they tended to meet and chat in her house and not theirs because she was afraid of their dogs.

About half of eligible voters[63] responding to question #56 said that they had voted in federal, provincial, and municipal elections. This is a low rate of participation, although it is worth noting that it is not too far from the sixty-one percent turnout in

63 Five said they did not vote in the last federal election because they were not eligible (#57), and thus this number is subtracted from the non-voters in Q#56.

the 2011 federal election[64] and about the same as the forty-nine percent of eligible voters who participated in the Ontario election of the same year (both of which were, however, among the lowest in Canadian history). Attitudes toward voting (#58) were mixed. While 9 respondents considered voting to be a "religious and civic duty" and 9 deemed it a "civic duty", 13 thought that voting was a "choice" rather than a duty.[65] More troubling is the five respondents (#57) who did not cast a vote because they believed voting in a Canadian election to be "un-Islamic". This may be a reflection of an extremist belief that loyalty to nations or national symbols is a species of polytheism. Whatever the motivation, it is a very odd response in light of the integrationism generally displayed by our online respondents and interviewees. Few online respondents said they consistently celebrated the holidays listed in question #67, except for Canada Day, to which 13 answered "yes" and 4 answered "sometimes".

64 http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=ele&dir=turn&document=index&lang=e

65 Seven did not respond.

10

Reflections and Avenues for Further Research

There is virtually no literature on women wearing niqab in North America, and also almost nothing on Europe, with the significant exception of a 2011 study conducted in France, discussed below.[66] This might be due to the rarity of the face-veil and its quite recent appearance. Difficulty in gathering subjects may also be a factor.

There are, in contrast, scores of academic studies treating the lives, motivations and sentiments of women wearing hijab in Western countries, including in Canada and the U.S.A.[67] These writings are of interest for the present study, as the two groups, judging from our sample, share some similar features.[68] In both cases, the women emphasize that they chose to veil themselves as part of a meditated decision, and both groups look upon their veiling practice as a personal commitment and challenge rather than a way to conform.[69] Both styles of veiling in the Canadian, American and other Western contexts seem to be the outcome of women's movements, with reasons given

66 Anna Piela discusses the lack of research in a recent article: "I am just doing my bit to promote modesty: Niqabis' self-portraits on photo sharing websites", *Feminist Media Studies* , Vol. 13, no. 5 (2013) (no page numbers; consulted in an online draft at http://www.academia.edu/4128873/I_am_just_doing_my_bit_to_promote_modesty_Niqabis_self-portraits_on_photo_sharing_websites).

67 A Google Scholar search of "hijab" and "Canada" (or the names of other countries) will give an idea of the amplitude of the literature. The same search with "niqab" and associated words such as burka/bourka/burqa turns up items dealing with bans and accommodations, rather than the lives and views of the wearers.

68 A few recent items treating women wearing hijab in Canada in particular are: Alvi, Hoodfar and McDonough, eds., *The Muslim veil in North America: issues and debates* (Toronto : Women's Press, 2003) [various essays in the book]; Tabassum F. Ruby, "Listening to the voice of hijab", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Volume 29, Issue 1 (January–February 2006): 54–66; Katherine Bullock, "Hijab and belonging: Canadian Muslim women", in *Islam and the veil: theoretical and regional contexts*, ed. Theodore Gabriel and Rabiha Hannan (London: Continuum, 2011), 161-180; and Jasmine Zine, "Unveiled Sentiments: Gendered Islamophobia and Experiences of Veiling among Muslim Girls in a Canadian Islamic School" in *Islam in the hinterlands: exploring Muslim cultural politics in Canada*, ed. J. Zine (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012), 208-236. French-language literature from Québec tends to focus on cultural and legal issues associated with veiling, rather than the situation and statements of the women themselves.

69 Leila Ahmed, a noted scholar of Egyptian origin of women and Islam, believes that the theme of women veiling as a result of personal conviction first emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, "probably in Egypt", and was then transferred to North America (*A Quiet Revolution* [New Haven and London: Yale U. Press, 2011], pp. 125 & 93ff). Ahmed observes that promotion of hijab and niqab has been a central part of the strategy of Islamists; it is not clear, however, if she believes that it plays a similar role in North America.

for veiling pointing to personal concerns. Hijab has come to mean merely covering, rather than staying strictly at home as in the view of the classical tradition, and this was also how niqab was understood by our subjects. The two movements are essentially local rather than foreign; in the case of the face-veil, we saw that women wearing niqab typically had Canadian status and had taken up their veiling practice in Canada. Women wearing niqab, like those wearing hijab, try to relate their veiling to the Western – in this case, particularly Canadian – environment, for instance by referring to freedom and multiculturalism.

The tone and statements of the women we interviewed were not oppositional, but profoundly integrationist, a characteristic I have found to be very typical of Canadian Muslims in general. I was amused to hear in the talk of some interviewees the usual Canadian preoccupation with Canada being "better" than its powerful southern neighbour and jokes about the winter weather - including, inevitably, the burka being ideal for keeping out the cold.

The Canadian 'niqab movement', if it can be called that, appears to be very diffuse, as if it is made up of individuals who are not well connected. It is striking that our interviewees did not refer to any common authority, institution or written source, apart from the Quran and hadith, as inspiring or supporting their veiling practice. The survey and direct interviewers did not, unfortunately, ask if women were encouraged to veil their faces through the internet, where there is much material available in English and French preaching niqab, or if they relied on any of the available woman-run niqab support sites (see the list at http://www.muhajabah.com/niqabiclubs.htm). Although most online respondents said they used social media and had accessed "Islamic websites for educational purposes" (#69), the few direct interviewees who mentioned the internet characterized it as potentially unreliable and emphasized the importance of consulting trusted scholars (never named) or, in a couple of cases, knowledgeable family members.

I did not find, as I had somewhat expected, that the women were doctrinaire, missionary-minded, or outright religious eccentrics – though there is room enough,

I expect, in Canada for religious and other eccentricities. The leniency of our direct interviewees was underlined for me by their idea that veiling the face was not absolutely obligatory but a higher calling, and they seemed to relate naturally and well to the Muslim women both with and without hijab who also attended or helped to conduct the focus groups. Pronouncements about veiling were often qualified by adding something like "that is just my opinion", as can be seen in many statements quoted in the report. Perhaps we would have seen other personality types if we had met subjects who believed that veiling the face was obligatory, as nearly half our online respondents believed. This difference between the two groups is difficult to explain.

This brings us to potential problems with our sample. As already noted, the sample is small, although it should be said that the research team had to work very hard to contact as many respondents and interviewees as they did, and we believe that this is something that has not been accomplished before. The study may also suffer from sampling bias. An online survey, to begin, will miss women who understand neither English nor French or do not have access to the internet. These might include recent immigrants and persons with less education. We aimed to correct this bias by making the focus groups accessible through offering a small honorarium to cover transportation and other expenses, providing childcare, and setting up Urdu and Arabic translation. Interviewers were also willing to go to women's homes for individual interviews.

Ideological filtering could have caused us to miss women with radical views and less desire to integrate than those we encountered, as these types, supposing they exist, might have had little interest in talking to researchers. None of our interviewees mentioned Dr. Farhat Hashmi, a controversial[70] South Asian scholar and preacher who considers the face-veil to be obligatory rather than only recommended,[71] even though she does have links in Mississauga. Testimony on Hashmi's web site by a convert who

70 Nicholas Kohler, "Good morning Mrs. Hashmi. A Muslim scholar is here illegally -- teaching an extreme brand of Islam", *Maclean's* (magazine), July 17, 2006 http://www.macleans.ca/canada/national/article.jsp?content=20060724_130714_130714; Zunara Naeem, "Local Students of Farhat Hashmi Defend Movement Against Accusations", *The Muslim Link* August 19, 2010 http://www.muslim-linkpaper.com/index.php/community-news/community-news/2281-local-students-of-farhat-hashmi-defend-movement-against-accusations.html

71 http://www.farhathashmi.com/articles-section/women-and-family/hidden-pearls/

adopted the niqab reveals an outlook that is similar in some ways to that of our subjects – the writer emphasizes, for instance, that she chose herself to veil – but is at the same time much more strident and defensive.[72] Although the niqab is often linked with Islamism, the women who we saw were not interested in talking about politics, and one took care to disassociate herself from it:

> We do not do it for political reasons. I cannot be bothered to single out myself every day in a society that is predominately non-Muslim so I can make a political statement! That's really not going to motivate me for too long; it is for sure for a higher and greater purpose.

We also considered the possibility that we might miss women who were wearing niqab unwillingly and would thus be unlikely to come out for interviews. Our premise was not that the veil is necessarily oppressive or Muslim women particularly liable to subjugation, but rather that vulnerability to abuse is part of the universal feminine condition. Enquiries to community workers and social service agencies in Ontario did not turn up any leads about cases of this kind. In the course of my research into literature about women wearing niqab in the West in general, I did come across a narrative of a woman in France being forced by her abusive husband and in-laws to wear niqab. The story of Zeina (a pseudonym), as "told to" the journalist Djénane Kareh Tager, was published in 2010 under the title *Sous mon niqab*.[73]

Despite these possible faults, we believe that our sample is representative of at least a large segment and probably the majority of women in Canada wearing niqab. I am aware that the portrait presented here is different from that imagined by many and that there might be a tendency to insist that there is an undiscovered population that would confirm whatever images people have. Further research is always welcome, but I suggest that it is better to base discussion and policy on what is presently known, rather than on assumptions and projections.

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72 Khadijah Natalie Arbee, "A Voice Behind a Veil" http://www.farhathashmi.com/articles-section/women-and-family/a-voice-behind-a-veil/. Arbee also focuses on male sexuality as a reason to wear the niqab (a man who sees an uncovered female naturally cannot control himself, like "a hungry lion… thrown a juicy piece of steak"). This theme, which is typical of conservative male discourse, was not taken up by our interviewees. The author is an Australian, apparently residing in South Africa.

73 [Paris]: Plona.

It is interesting that many findings of the French report mentioned above[74] are similar to ours. The majority of the thirty-two women interviewed for the study carried out in France were citizens under the age of thirty who had decided themselves to veil without being influenced by religious authorities or friends. Many had adopted niqab against the wishes of their families and sometimes also despite the misgivings of their husbands. The interviewees were mobile and socially active, wished to work, and had a fairly high level of education; although the French ban on head covering in schools had caused a considerable number to leave school early. The French wearers of face veils, like the Canadians, reported suffering verbal abuse, with older females being the usual offenders in both cases. All subjects in both groups were very willing to lift their veils for identification, with the French interviewees also generally not minding if this was done by a male. Public reproaches and strong language coming from other Muslims seem to be distinctive features of the experience of French wearers of niqab, and the French interviewees, unlike the Canadians, expressed resentment toward the Muslim establishment for failing to support them. If different views on niqab among Canadian Muslims have not resulted in such conflict, that may be because the issue has, up to this point, attracted less negative attention. Negative attention and the ban on the bourka had actually inspired some of the French interviewees to put on a face-veil, a motivation that was never mentioned by any of the Canadians. The greatest difference between Canadian and French women wearing niqab was surely in their attitudes toward their countries. Many French interviewees felt alienated from society, with some having the sense that they were not really French. The Canadian women, on the other hand, felt very much at home in Canada, were always inclined to think the best of Canadians, and were strongly patriotic.

74 http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/unveiling-truth-why-32-muslim-women-wear-full-face-veil-france

About the Contributor

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Lynda Clarke is Professor of Religion and Islam in the Department of Religion at Concordia University in Montreal. She focuses in her research and teaching on Shiism, gender, and law, and has also written on Islam in the West and Canada. Her most recent publication in the latter field is "Asking Questions about Shariah: Lessons from Ontario", a chapter in the volume *Debating Shariah: Islam, Gender Politics and Family Law Arbitration*, published by the University of Toronto Press in 2012. Professor Clarke is a longstanding ally of CCMW, having collaborated in several other projects, including the *Muslim Marriage Contract Kit* designed to provide a basis for Muslim couples to construct a more equal marriage using Muslim law.