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Political Parties and Participation: Canada

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“Family, Law and Politics”

By Katherine Bullock

The story of Muslim women and political parties and participation in Canada is one of beginnings: Muslim women are only just starting to become involved in formal politics in Canada. (This is true also of Muslim men.) As in most other polities, women in general are underrepresented in Canadian legislatures, ranking 35th out of 181 countries according to the Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Union (data from IPU December 2002).

In the last ten years, although there has been a remarkable increase in the number of minority women elected to the federal parliament, minority women remain underrepresented in elected bodies (Black 2003, 59). Muslims represent 2 percent of the Canadian population (2001 Census data) but there are no Muslim women elected to the federal parliament and only one (of whom I am aware) elected in a provincial legislature (Fatima Houada-Pepin in Quebec). One Ismā‘īlī woman (Mobin Jaffer) has been appointed to the federal senate, a non-elected body in Canada. Thus, in proportion to the population, Muslim women are clearly underrepresented in elected bodies in Canada at all levels of government – local, provincial, and federal. This is in keeping with Abu-Laban's description of the structure of formal political power in Canada being a “gendered vertical mosaic”: majority groups hold more power than minority groups, and within those groups, men hold more power than women (Abu-Laban 2002, 269).

This absence of women from the scene of formal politics raises a host of questions. Is Muslim women's absence due to external factors, such as discrimination, or internal barriers, such as pressures not to be involved in politics? Are there Muslim women who run for office, but who do not get elected? Are Muslim women active in party politics? Unfortunately, these questions cannot be addressed in this brief entry. Though there is a significant body of literature on women's participation in formal politics in Canada, little attention has been paid to the ethnoracial dimensions of women's participation beyond considering the two main groups in Canada, Anglophone and Francophone women (Black 2003, 59, Abu-Laban 2002, 270–5). There is no research on the political participation of Muslim women.

According to Muslim women activists, few Muslim women run for office in Canada. Lila Fahlman, who was born in Canada to a Lebanese father and an American Methodist mother, was the first, running for the Winnipeg nomination of the New Democratic Party (NDP) for the 1971 Federal election (Fahlman 1999, 64). She was not nominated. Natasha Fatah, who was born in Pakistan and moved to Canada when she was almost 10, has been heavily involved in party politics. She joined the Ontario NDP at age 13, and in 1999, at age of 20, was elected co-chair of the Ontario New Democratic Youth. Natasha says that while there are Muslims involved in politics at the youth level, they are not active at the political party level. She was the only Muslim youth (let alone woman) involved in the Ontario NDP.

Scholars have identified several factors that are barriers to women's participation in formal politics. Newman and White (forthcoming) group these barriers into three broad categories: ideational, social, and cultural; organizational; and institutional. Their work, however, deals only with women in general: how they might apply to Muslim women

in particular is not explored. It is safe to assume that in addition to facing the kinds of barriers that any woman would face, Muslim women face other barriers unique to them, internal and external. The most important internal barriers facing Muslim women are restrictive interpretations of Islam that say it compromises a Muslim women's modesty to be involved in politics, and that her proper sphere of activity is the home. These opinions are held widely, by both men and women, of all different kinds of ethnic groups.

Of less impact, but still relevant, is an opinion held by some Muslims that Muslims, men or women, should not participate in politics at all. The argument is that since the Canadian polity is not run according to Islamic law, Muslims should not be involved in the making of law, since that would involve them in un-Islamic practices. In the last ten years many Muslim leaders have rejected this view, and are actively encouraging Muslims to be involved in electoral politics in the belief that this is the only way for Muslims to affect positively the communities in which they live (Khan 2002).

The most important external hurdle for Muslim participation in electoral politics, and one that would apply equally to men and women, is the widespread negative perception by the general public of Islam and Muslims. Muslims are cast as "outsiders," often as barbaric "others" who do not hold or respect Canadian values. A Muslim who ran for office would face a challenge in reaching out to the general populace to overcome these negative views. Another important barrier is the systemic racism that applies to all visible minorities. Not all Muslims are from a visible minority, but many are: thus they would face racism as well as Islamophobia, should they run for office.

It is possible (although further empirical research would be necessary to affirm this) that even at the level of the political party, members hold the same, or similar, negative stereotypes of Muslims, thus impeding Muslim involvement at the party political level. Natasha Fatah faced this problem within the NDP. She found that because she was Muslim, she often had trouble getting her perspective on issues properly heard, especially those issues relating to Muslims, like Palestine. Instead of responding to the intellectual issue, people would dismiss her opinion with "you just feel that way because you're a Muslim." There was an assumption that she was inherently biased. The reactions she describes underscore a point made by Jerome Black in his study of ethnoracial minorities in Canadian parliaments: in recent years ethnoracial minorities have concluded that the only way to have their issues addressed at the level of public policy is to have group representation in elected bodies, and not to rely on interest-group based advocacy (Black 2002, 355–6). Group exclusion from the political realm sidelines group issues and concerns (*ibid.*, 369, Newman and White forthcoming). In spite of this, Natasha also believes strongly that none of the barriers were insurmountable to someone who was able to explain herself well, present a strong voice for justice, and was willing to work hard.

An absence in formal politics does not imply that Muslim women are not active in the Canadian polity in other ways. Indeed, as Abu-Laban and other scholars point out, to consider women's involvement in formal politics as the only expression of their political participation is to miss women's activism in informal politics, the arena in which most women activists operate (Abu-Laban 2002, 277). In Canada Muslim women have focused most of their political energies in the area of community activism. Muslim women are found in all kinds of community groups, from social service agencies to media watch groups. Some are activists in mainstream groups, others in Muslim groups with an Islamic focus. Two examples of the latter are directly relevant here. In 1997–8, the Afghan Women's Organization worked with the Federation of Muslim Women (FMW), the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW), and MediaWatch on a federally funded multi-phase project about Muslim women and the media. The project included focused group discussions with Muslim women about the representation of Muslim women in the Canadian media, with an aim of increasing media literacy and advocacy skills of Muslim women (Jafri and Bullock, 35–40). At their 2003 annual conference, CCMW organized a workshop with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities designed to raise awareness among Muslim women about the non-electoral aspects of municipalities. The extent of Muslim women's involvement in these kinds of informal politics emphasizes that Muslim women in Canada are not politically passive.

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