

Muslim-Canadian women speak out! The Harper government, the “niqab ban,” and Muslim-Canadian women’s voices in communications media

VOICELESS?

On December 12, 2011, Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism Jason Kenney posted Operational Bulletin OB 359 to the Citizenship and Immigration Canada website. The bulletin stated that the niqab, or face veil, would be banned during citizenship ceremonies. This policy, Kenney announced, was a “matter of principle” and would ensure that “individuals whose faces are covered are actually reciting the oath” (Clarke, 2013, p. 16). Prime Minister Stephen Harper similarly maintained that the niqab was a misogynistic symbol “rooted in a culture that is anti-women” (as cited in Bryden, 2015).

During this period, many Muslim-Canadian women felt ignored and/or misrepresented by Canada’s highest federal powers.¹ These women were not, however, voiceless. My study examines the ways Muslim-Canadian women used social media to weigh in on the niqab ban debate. How did social media enable them to voice their concerns, or feel “heard” by Canadians? Did using these media impact these women’s feelings about the ban, or their sense of well-being during the two months leading up to the 2015 federal election? Through interviews with nine niqab- or hijab-wearing Muslim-Canadian women (referred to here as “participants”)—including Zunera Ishaq, the woman who challenged the Harper government over its proposed ban, and her lawyer, Naseem Mithoowani—and through an examination of these women’s ban-related communications, I proffer a “snapshot” of the ways social media allowed Muslim women to speak at a moment when they felt that their

BY NICOLETTE LITTLE

Nicolette Little is a PhD student in the Communication and Culture program at York University.

[S]ocial media allowed Muslim women to speak at a moment when they felt that their voices—and their rights—were being curtailed

voices—and their rights—were being curtailed.²

ATTEMPTS TO “LIFT THE VEIL” IN CANADA

OB 359 was not the first attempt to ban the niqab in Canada. Nor was it the first time that Muslim-Canadian women have felt more talked about than heard in governmental debates. During Quebec’s 2007 provincial elections, the province’s chief electoral officer attempted to modify the *Elections Act*, ordering that veils be lifted in order to prevent “unwanted acts” or “improper behaviour” by crowds at voting stations (Directeur général des élections du Québec, quoted in Clarke, 2013, p. 13). Furthermore, Bill 94 and Bill 60 were introduced in Quebec, in 2010 and 2013, respectively, requiring that those obtaining or providing government or public services “show their

face” for “security, communication or identification” (National Assembly, 2010, p. 2; National Assembly, 2013, p. 2). According to a February 2015 Angus Reid survey, Bill 94 was supported by 95 percent of Québécois and 75 percent of other Canadians (Patriquin & Gillis, 2010). As Fathima Cader notes, “policy battles over the rights and obligations of veil-wearing Muslim women . . . have proven especially relentless” as policy-makers in Canada have attempted to control acceptable dress and behaviour for women (2013, pp. 69, 71).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND MUSLIM WOMEN’S VOICES

Social media contributed to the participants’ sense of having a voice. For many, it provided an important means of “getting one’s opinion across to friends and relatives, and to the public too,” once their posts were shared (Participant B, personal communication, November 16, 2015). Some participants noted that social media allowed them to be politically active in a way they had not previously been: as Participant F, a hijab wearer, explained, “Canadian Muslims” were involved in “a lot of online political engagement encouraging people to go out and vote” against the Conservative party (personal communication, December 8, 2015). Social media allowed participants to stay up to date on niqab debate developments and empowered them to react publicly and in politicized fashion.

Interestingly, the interface of many social media platforms also fostered engagement from shyer participants in the niqab debate. The “liking” and

Muslim-Canadian women speak out!, page 14

Muslim-Canadian women speak out!

continued from page 13

“sharing” capacities of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allowed participants who described themselves as “reserved” to “find a voice in what others were saying,” lowering the barrier to speech sometimes presented by introversion (Participant A, personal communication, November 17, 2015). Participants who engaged heavily with social media felt supported in the pre-election period. Interviewees note that, as their Muslim acquaintances shared and liked their anti-ban videos, posts, and other content, they felt they were a part of a larger, closely knit community of Canadian Muslims. This sense of support also crossed international borders. Several participants recall imams and religious leaders from the United States and United Kingdom “liking” and commenting encouragingly on their posts, as Canada’s niqab ban debate drew broader attention (Participant A, personal communication, November 17, 2015; Participant E, personal communication, November 26, 2015).

Participants felt supported by non-Muslims as well. For example, Participant C, who typically avoids commenting politically on Facebook, reached a point

where she “couldn’t not speak out about the way the niqab was being used as a political ploy.” She posted a poem that critiqued Canada’s focus on a wedge issue while graver ills threatened national well-being, and was “very pleasantly surprised” at the encouragement she received from non-Muslims (personal communication, December 5, 2015). Participant D, a niqabi, noted that non-Muslims in her Facebook and Instagram feeds agreed that “banning the niqab is just as bad as forcing someone to wear it” (personal communication, November 27, 2015). Social media use fostered a widespread sense of encouragement from non-Muslims among participants. This is interesting, given that a Privy Council Office poll, shared widely in fall 2015, indicated that 82 percent of Canadians actually supported a citizenship ceremony face veil ban (Levitz, 2015). Although social media use led participants to feel largely encouraged, this sense of support may have been skewed. The fact that we tend to be friends on social media with people who agree with—rather than contradict—our world views may explain this seeming disconnect.

POLITICAL RE-ENGAGEMENT

In addition to allowing participants to feel heard and supported, social media use also improved their health. Participants indicated that access to social media during the pre-election period increased their sense of well-being and hope. Accessing others’ thoughts and tracking the debate through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram feeds “re-engaged” several participants in Canadian politics (Participant A, personal communication, November 17, 2015). In a pre-election period characterized by rampant rhetoric about Muslims, participants found it “healthful to see all the outrage expressed” and felt that this period would have been “more isolating, more difficult to go through, with less support or access to voices offering support”—that is, without social media (Participant A, personal communication, November 17, 2015). A core theory of psychology is that expressing our feelings, notably anger, promotes health and mental well-being (Sood, 2013, p. 253). Social media, which served as an outlet for anger, frustration, fear, and mistrust of the government, became a

Muslim-Canadian women speak out!, page 26

TRANSGRESSING THE NATION-STATE: CONSTRUCTS OF CANADIAN IDENTITY

ROBARTS CENTRE GRADUATE CONFERENCE



April 20th and 21st, 2017 at York University

<http://yorkrobertsgraduateconference.org>

Muslim-Canadian women speak out!

continued from page 14

breeding ground for hope, support, civic engagement, and reassurance. This allowed for healthful release during the niqab debate.

While social media was a sustaining force for most participants, there was one interviewee who had an opposite experience. Early in her trial against the Harper government, Zunera Ishaq opted to avoid Facebook and Twitter altogether. This is because she was trolled, and found it a place where people said “nasty things” (personal communication, November 7, 2015). Apparently, being at the centre of the niqab debate as she was, she became a visible, sought-after target for online attacks. Those in the limelight, it seems, can be particularly vulnerable to outside attack. Social media use for Zunera, during her trial, became a channel for diminishment and threats rather than support. Since the federal election passed, however, she has enjoyed using social media again, and speaks excitedly about receiving a personal friend request from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (personal communication, November 7, 2015). 🍁

NOTES

1. Zunera Ishaq, the woman who challenged the Harper government over its niqab ban and became a focal point for national discussion on the matter, noted in her *Toronto Star* op-ed (2015), while “Mr. Harper is so busy speaking about me in public, I am looking for him to include me in the discussion.”
2. Dr. Lynda Clarke similarly interviews Muslim-Canadian women about the niqab’s place in Canada. Her interesting work, however, focuses on Canadian niqabis’ views of the niqab, while I explore means by which Muslim-

Canadian women articulated their concerns about the Harper government’s niqab ban through social media. Similar research methods are used to different ends.

REFERENCES

- Bryden, Joan. (2015, March 11). Stephen Harper doubles down on niqab debate: “Rooted in a culture that is anti-women.” *National Post*. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/stephen-harper-doubles-down-on-niqab-debate-rooted-in-a-culture-that-is-anti-women>
- Cader, Fathima. (2013). Made you look: Niqabs, the Muslim Canadian Congress, and R v NS. *Windsor Yearbook of Access to Justice*, 31(1), 67-93. <http://ojs.uwindsor.ca/ojs/leddy/index.php/WYAJ/article/view/4311>
- Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. (1982). Part I of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, RSC 1985, app. II, no. 44. Retrieved from <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/const/page-15.html>
- Clarke, Lynda. (2013). *Women in niqab speak: A study of the niqab in Canada*. Gananoque, ON: Canadian Council of Muslim Women.
- Ishaq, Zunera. (2015, March 16). Why I intend to wear a niqab at my citizenship ceremony. *Toronto Star*. Retrieved from <http://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2015/03/16/why-i-intend-to-wear-a-niqab-at-my-citizenship-ceremony.html>
- Levitz, Stephanie. (2015, September 24). Majority of Canadians agree with Conservatives over niqab ban, poll finds. *National Post*. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/majority-of-canadians-support-conservatives-niqab-ban-poll-finds>
- National Assembly. (2010). Bill 94: An act to establish guidelines governing accommodation requests within the administration and certain institutions. Québec City: Québec Official Publisher.
- National Assembly. (2013). Bill 60: Charter affirming the values of state secularism and religious neutrality and of equality between women and men, and providing a framework for accommodation requests. Québec City: Québec Official Publisher.
- Niqabs: The election’s weapon of mass distraction. (2015, September 27). [Editorial]. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/editorials/niqabs-the-elections-weapon-of-mass-distraction/article26551328/>
- Patriquin, Martin, & Gillis, Charlie. (2010, April 7). About face: A bill banning the niqab—supported by a majority of Canadians—How did our multicultural, tolerant nation get here? *Maclean’s*. (April 7, 2010). <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/about-face/>
- Sood, Amit. (2013). *The Mayo Clinic guide to stress-free living*. Boston, MA: Da Capo.
- Thomas, Jasmine. (2015). Only if she shows her face: Canadian media portrayals of the niqab ban during citizenship ceremonies. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 47(2), 187-201.



Learn more about **CanadaWatch** and The Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies at <http://robarts.info.yorku.ca>