

# Research Report

## Diaspora of Islamic Cultures: Continuity and Change

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### **Abstract**

*This paper, drawing upon an ongoing research project funded by Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the Ford Foundation, introduces the main ideas and themes that inform the study of changing gender and family relations among four displaced communities of Islamic cultures (Iranian, Afghan, Palestinian, and Pakistani). For members of each group, three sets of "circumstances" are analyzed – an individual's experience in the home and host country, together with an examination of socio-economic conditions and policies in the host. In addition to these social and economic factors, in particular, it will focus on the ways in which social class, gender, and religious commitments affect an individual's experience when they move. It is argued that gender significantly impacts new migrants' experience and how they feel about their "home" country. One of our main hypotheses is that under pressures of a rapid, often difficult, social and cultural transformation, changing gender dynamics in the new country can lead to a new understanding among partners – or, alternatively, to heightened tension, with severely damaging effects, particularly for women and children. Culturally, when family understandings collapse, this process may be accompanied by an effort to find religious justification for gender inequality. Then, a connection can be seen between difficulties in the new country, the efforts of conservative men to reclaim the dominance they once enjoyed in their countries of origin, and give it a religious justification. Hence, the revival, in the diaspora, of conservative Islamic practice and belief.*

### **Résumé**

*Inspiré d'un projet de recherche toujours en cours – projet financé conjointement par le Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada, CRSH, et la Fondation Ford – cet article présente les thèmes majeurs et les idées principales sous-jacents à cette étude sur les changements qui s'opèrent dans les relations entre membres des deux sexes ainsi qu'au sein de la structure familiale pour quatre groupes de déplacés de culture islamique – les communautés iranienne, afghane, palestinienne et pakistanaise. Trois ensembles de « circonstances » sont analysés pour les membres de chaque communauté : l'expérience personnelle d'un individu dans son pays d'origine et dans le pays hôte, ainsi qu'une analyse des conditions socio-économiques et des politiques en cours dans le pays hôte. En plus de ces facteurs sociaux et économiques, seront aussi examinés de plus près les façons dont l'appartenance à une classe sociale, le fait d'être un homme ou une femme et le degré d'attachement à la religion influent sur l'expérience d'un individu lorsqu'il émigre. L'auteure soutient que l'appartenance à un genre ou à un autre – la sexospécificité – influe de façon notable sur l'expérience vécue par les nouveaux migrants et sur leur sentiment envers leur 'patrie'. L'une des principales hypothèses est que, sous la pression des transformations sociales et culturelles qui s'opèrent rapidement – et souvent difficilement – les changements dans la dynamique des relations entre les deux sexes dans le nouveau pays peuvent amener une nouvelle compréhension entre les partenaires – ou, au contraire, contribuer à des relations interpersonnelles plus tendues, avec des effets dommageables tout particulièrement pour les femmes et les enfants. Dans un con-*

*texte culturel, lorsque l'harmonie familiale se désintègre, ce processus peut s'accompagner d'efforts pour essayer de trouver des justifications religieuses à l'inégalité entre les genres. On peut donc établir un lien entre les difficultés vécues dans le nouveau pays et les efforts déployés par les hommes conservateurs pour essayer de retrouver leur position dominante qu'ils occupaient dans leur pays d'origine, tout en lui donnant une justification religieuse. Ceci explique la renaissance à l'intérieur de la diaspora, de pratiques et de croyances islamiques conservatrices.*

Displacement and migration are prevalent features of the present century. In October 2002, UNESCO's International and Multicultural Policies section declared that the number of migrants has more than doubled since 1975. According to UNESCO, currently 175 million people, that is, about 3 per cent of the world population, live in countries in which they were not born. The experience of diasporic communities in their adopted countries raises urgent questions of socio-cultural integration, human rights, and security for both migrant communities and the host societies.

This paper, drawing upon an ongoing research project funded by Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the Ford Foundation, introduces the main ideas and themes that inform the study of the effects of displacement on gender relations among four migrant and refugee communities from Islamic cultures. The time frame for the research would be five years (2000–05). Of the four diasporic communities that are the focus of this project, Iranians, Afghans, Pakistanis, and Palestinians, two are studied in developed societies (Iranians and Pakistanis in Canada and Britain). The other two communities, are being studied in Canada and, in addition, in developing Islamic states (Afghans in Iran, and Palestinians in Jordan and in the West Bank and Gaza under social and economic conditions arising from occupation). For members of each group, three sets of "circumstances" are analyzed – an individual's experience in the home and host country, together with an examination of socio-economic conditions and policies in the host. In addition to these social and economic factors, we seek to demonstrate how gender significantly impacts new migrants' experience and how they feel about their "home" country. That is, the challenge to traditional ideas may present itself as a positive experience for many (particularly younger) women, who find an opportunity to break from the extended family, and a relatively negative one for men, who may encounter difficulty in finding satisfying work in the new society, and whose au-

thority, dignity, and sense of self-worth may therefore be threatened.

In this study, we use the term "diaspora" in a rather self-explanatory fashion to refer to communities of immigrant, exiled, and self-exiled individuals who, despite cultural, economic, and political distinctions, share the experience of separation from home about which they have a collective memory. An awareness of or consciousness about this experience for the expatriate communities – what William Safran has called "intellectualization of an existential condition" – is central to this definitional choice. This definition includes characteristics such as a dispersal from an "original center" to "peripheral" places, maintaining a memory about the homeland and perhaps considering it a place of eventual return, and particularly having an underclass position in the "hostland" and a belief "that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host country."<sup>1</sup> These are characteristics that are shared by many diasporic communities.

Our study of changing gender relations and family dynamics within communities of Islamic cultures seeks to show that "diasporic consciousness" with its associated effects for communities of Islamic cultures results more from a gradually developed emotional, psychological, and inevitably cultural detachment from the "host-land" rather than a continued attachment to the "home-land;" and that this might be the inevitable result of declared and/or undeclared hostility and exclusionary practices that target diasporic communities of Islamic cultures in Western metropolises. Indeed, a central effect of diasporic experience is a lasting sense of not belonging felt by many individuals living away from their homeland. Not-belonging or feeling out of place can sometimes be intellectual and political. Many nonconformist intellectuals who do not share the cultural values, perceptions, and/or dominant ideologies in their home countries may feel this sense of not belonging, regardless of their nationality or place of residence. They feel culturally homeless within their home, so to speak. But generally, the sense of not belonging, or living on the margin of social and economic life, is more profound and has more immediate practical consequences for the groups of migrant, refugee, and displaced communities, particularly those coming from so-called Third World societies. This is partly related to the host country/country of residence (racism, xenophobia, and non-acceptance of difference) and partly the result of the diasporic individuals' and communities' sense of banishment or deprivation from a homeland. They feel they have lost their historical location and heritage and are separated from the comforting embrace of the familiar culture.

To be sure, displacement and migration involve enormous changes in the lives of displaced individuals. How these changes are processed and absorbed depend on many factors including one's social class, personal financial resources in exile, racial location, gender, rural and urban origin, and political views. Many studies in this area point to the fact that the sense of emptiness and of cultural loss and the need to construct a new framework for belonging increase over time, at least for certain migrants. The development of an "identity conflict" is particularly true of the second-generation migrants for whom, over time, "awareness of differences between themselves and dominant Anglo society may increase."<sup>2</sup> However, while the second generation migrants are often able to adopt a strategy to shift back and forth between their culture and the dominant culture of the host country, this role shift between public and private behaviour may not be as easy for the first generation. Hence, over time the desire to be or *to appear the same* may turn into a desire to *emphasize difference*. The sense of exclusion and cultural difference, that is, a feeling of not being accepted or at least tolerated by the host country, adds to the sense of isolation. Many refugees and immigrants feel that they are expected to work harder, to be on their most impeccable behaviour, to complain less, and always to be grateful in their adopted home. The feeling that they are being watched and have to prove themselves never quite leaves them.<sup>3</sup> One respondent in a study of Arab women in the United States stated, "For the first six years I tried very hard to assimilate and look and act and sound like everyone else." She continues that gradually she felt she had lost herself and instead of a sense of self she had become ashamed of herself.<sup>4</sup> It is not uncommon for some to try to make themselves "invisible" through changing their hair colour or name. In my own study of the Iranian community in Canada, I found that female respondents, in particular, very clearly differentiate between their perceptions of the host country, whose legal system and social services have provided them with support and assistance to "stay on their two feet," as one of them told me, and their feelings about the society (the very same society) which accepted them with cold politeness but "never opens itself" to them; thus she explains that she hesitates to be warm and does not expect warmth from anyone.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Diaspora of Islamic Cultures***

One important question that needs to be discussed at the outset is the ambiguity of the identity marker that is often used to refer to individuals we define as diasporas of Islamic cultures. Does Islam define their identity or the diasporic experience define their Islamic cultural identity?

As is more or less known, in the West today, racism need not be linked to "race." Racialism no longer needs to be linked to biology or to be theorized through "scientific racism." Today, racism against Muslims takes the form of a focus on "the way of life," on "cultural difference" between the insiders (the white Europeans) and the outsiders (in this case, Muslims). What we are facing now, as Al-Azmeh would argue, is three displacements in the notion of race. "Race becomes ethnicity, then culture; the normative hierarchy and inequality gave way to representation in terms of difference."<sup>6</sup> Muslims are perhaps the best example of groups who are continuously targets of racism, without having an identifiable marker such as colour that works against blacks. Their religion, Islam, becomes a source of discrimination and exclusion.

Now in this context, the point is not whether we can identify a particular diasporic group or community as "Islamic" with distinct and easily identifiable characteristics. The point rather is that the Islamic diaspora in the West is often a product of anti-Muslim propaganda and racism. This is not to deny the resurgence of traditional practices, increased religiosity and even revitalization of tribal customs among certain groups of migrants of Islamic cultures. The point is that these are to a large extent the results of what has been identified as a "siege mentality." That is, often immigrants of Islamic cultural backgrounds are entirely conceptualized and their history, culture, and way of life are understood with reference to Islam and Islam alone. It seems Islam is the organizing force, shaping all aspects of the societies the immigrants come from as well as their existence in the West. Hence, the profound heterogeneity of peoples from Muslim societies within or without the Middle East is completely obscured. As I have said elsewhere, the notion of "difference" is used as a term to draw attention only to dissimilarities between the "Muslim" and "Western" ways and views. It is never found to be a useful term to note the contrast among the ways and views of people from "Muslim" societies.<sup>7</sup>

That is to say, ethnic, regional, and class divisions between and among diasporic communities from Islamic societies define the world views, the ways of life, the attachments to the cultural practices of the homeland, and most definitely the politics of individual migrants of Islamic cultures. For example, there are enormous differences between the ethnic makeup and class background of Muslim diasporic communities in Europe and their counterparts in Canada and the United States. Muslim communities in Britain, France, and Germany, for example, come predominantly from working-class and rural backgrounds and consist primarily of poor, unskilled or skilled migrants. The Muslim diasporic communities in the United States and

Canada, at least until very recently, tended to have urban, middle-class, and professional backgrounds. Baha Abu Leban's study of Muslims in Canada in the early 1980s, for example, showed that 43 per cent of Canadian Muslims are of Indo-Pakistani origin, over 7 per cent are of European, mostly of British background, and over 6 per cent of North and South American backgrounds. His study showed that the average income among Muslim males in Canada was substantially lower than the comparable income for non-Muslim males, and this was despite the fact that the level of their educational attainment exceeded the Canadian average. Nonetheless, Muslims in Canada, Abu-Leban noted, were "linguistically competent, relatively well placed in the occupational structure of Canada' and showed a high degree of integration and cultural preservation." Accordingly, gender equity between boys and girls in Muslim communities varies directly with socio-economic status (income, education, and occupation).<sup>8</sup> By contrast, as Al-Azmeh has argued, Muslims in Bradford, England, are of rural origin with hardly any social awareness of city life even in Pakistan itself.<sup>9</sup> Understandably, their rural origin explains their social conservatism on matters such as girls' education. Another study of Arab Canadians in the early 1990s points that 33 per cent of this population has a university degree compared to 11 per cent of the general population. Also, 25 per cent of women of the population of Arab-Canadians have attained university degrees and 32 per cent were reported as working outside the home.<sup>10</sup> Also according to Statistics Canada, 48 per cent of Iranians in Canada have a university degree and 17.5 per cent have attained a non-university diploma. Women constitute 38 per cent of this population. Only 18 per cent of Iranians were reported as unemployed in 1996, 15.9 per cent of men and 23.7 per cent of women.<sup>11</sup>

These differences point to one important fact: that Islam is not a meta-culture bounding all immigrants from Islamic societies together. That is why, for example, Arabs, Iranians, and Muslims did not act uniformly during the affair concerning Salman Rushdi's affair arising from Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa*. While a large group of Iranian intellectuals in exile signed a petition condemning the *fatwa*, others, including many Middle Eastern and Western scholars, coyly supported the *fatwa*, using "different cultural standards" as an excuse. Worse, there were several pro-*fatwa* rallies by the Muslim community of Indo-Pakistani origin in Bradford, England. However, the Western media that made extensive use of these rallies to reinforced hostile, racist perceptions about Muslims as the ultimate Other made no mention of the anti-*fatwa* protest.

The point is that the notions of "cultural difference, formulate and frame 'the discursive boundary' of SELF and

OTHER, civilized and uncivilized....[a] French woman with a scarf is chic, but a Muslim woman with a scarf is a threat to civilization. The very 'noise and smell' of Muslims, as Jacques Chirac once declared, drives decent and civilized French people understandably crazy."<sup>12</sup> With respect to diasporic Muslim communities in the West, we suggest that, in many cases, the identifiable cultural characteristics often take shape in response to the recurrent Islamophobia of media and governments in the West and the construction of shameless racist imagery about Islam, about Muslim women, and about the Muslim way of life which target specifically diasporic communities.

What we seek to examine in our study is, how does the "siege mentality" affect the relationship between the diasporic communities and the host society and, consequently, the gender relations and family dynamics among the communities of Islamic culture? These research questions are based on a premise that, in diasporic communities that are the targets of racism, gradually a consciousness develops which is expressed in several ways: a resentment against the dominant culture and its thought of as aggressively, but indirectly, pushing its values on all those considered as *Other*; a return to cultural practices with a claim of authenticity; often associated with diasporic experience is a sense of self-righteousness which turns into "moral bookkeeping," to use David Stannard's term, and leads to "guilt-tripping" others. Also, depending on race, class, and gender, it often leads to a retreat into a particular lifestyle and a closure and inability to move beyond self/community-centred concerns and commitments. That is, politics becomes auto-referential, primarily or even solely focusing on personal and experiential existence. Related to this personalized politics is hostility and non-acceptance of views, attitudes, and practices which fall beyond the frontiers of the indigenous culture, which are considered as belonging to the "outside" world. In the case of Muslim communities, for example, one may observe the gradual development of unwarranted loyalties and uncritical acceptance of male-defined cultural norms and values, and even the emergence of a loyalty to the same home government whose policies drove this population out of the homeland. One of the unfortunate consequences of this psychological detachment from the host society is that the individual migrants, instead of joining social struggles in the host country to establish a more humane society, turn on themselves and wrestle, obsessively, with challenges to their culture and collective identity. In this way, cultural resistance may suppress individuality, the right to choice, and critical thinking for individual community members. They insist "that they are Muslim, their children are Muslim, without making an attempt to define what that means in the Western environ-

ment where they are in minority and they refuse to accept, or relate to, issues facing their communities... such as child sexual abuse and spousal abuse.”<sup>13</sup>

In this context, racism and social and cultural pressures from the host country can create among ethno-racial minorities of Islamic cultures grounds for a solidarity and bonding that would not necessarily exist in the home country. The construction of a specific ineluctable cultural identity can limit understanding and the ability to act in a self-empowering way and can make it difficult for a people to recognize, pursue, or appreciate alternative moral and social goals. That is to say, there is a close link between the formation of identity and the sorts of moral and social responsibility that individuals take within their family and their communities.

The point of departure in the study of changing gender relations and family dynamics among diasporic communities of Islamic cultures is that relations within the family are affected by a complex web of class, ethnic, gender, religious, and regional factors and not simply by pre-existing cultural values imported from originating countries. Hence, the vision of the homeland, which affects individuals' readiness to adapt to a new country and defines the attachment to cultural and religious values (including values that are hostile to gender justice and equality within the family), is compatible with and differentiated by variables which are external to the diasporic communities themselves. The feeling that they are being watched and have to prove themselves never quite leaves them.

The commonality of the experience which allow us the use of the term “diaspora of Islamic cultures,” and which has inspired this project, may lie in the fact that pressures of displacement and the increasing, and often openly hostile, stereotypes about migrants of Islamic cultures pushes a substantial number of individuals in each community to barricade themselves behind an ancestral cultural heritage which reinforces gender inequalities. Indeed, racism and the sharp decline in class position that many migrants experience may have a direct impact on gender relations. That is, they may reinforce sexist values and patriarchal power relations within a diasporic community. The pain and the anger caused by anti-Muslim and anti-Islam racism encourage members of the diaspora family to take refuge in their own culture, indeed to value the culture in its totality and to suppress critical positions and “disharmony” in its different forms, including challenges to cultural traditions coming from youth and women. In this context, sustaining the native culture and identity manifests itself in maintaining beliefs and practices pertaining to men-women relationships within the family and to culturally acceptable masculine-feminine values and roles.

Our goal in this study is not to make apologies and to excuse the manipulation of culture, tradition, and religion by conservative men who are determined to maintain the structures and relations of male dominance. Rather, we hope to identify the forces from which conservatives in the diaspora draw strength. We suggest that a chilling reception by the host country encourages the diasporic communities to cling to a folkloric and reified “Islamic” identity, walling themselves off from the dominant culture. Instead of seeking a positive reckoning of where they are and what they might do, they may refrain from interacting with the host community and from making a positive contribution to its betterment. That is to say, structural racism of the host society and indigenous patriarchy merge to create a need for cultural belonging, an ethnic identity which is masculine and which struggles to regenerate the traditional status quo. Sexism and moralistic attitudes are given cultural force and are camouflaged, suppressing expressions of individuality and individual choice.<sup>14</sup> This leads to an idealization of “Muslim family” in a desperate attempt to keep age and gender hierarchies intact.

To conduct this research, we have chosen a multiple method combining two major methodological perspectives, the comparative and the systemic. A comparative method is needed to examine the similarities and differences in gender and family relations among several immigrant and refugee communities in different host countries. At the same time, the study adopts a systemic method which provides a comprehensive framework within which different parameters affecting the behaviour of individuals and communities can be studied in a uniform and balanced manner. The migrant communities examined in this research are each considered as a *system*. These systems constitute a relatively integrated whole with some degree of cohesion. They consist of a set of interrelated *sub-systems* (individuals, families and institutions) and operate within a larger environment, the *supra-system*. The *sub-systems* for each community include families and individuals, as well as institutions such as religious organizations, workplaces, community media, and schools. Within these sub-systems and in the community as a whole, individuals are differentiated on the basis of factors such as gender, age, class, education, and occupation or profession. These factors are considered both in the country of origin before exit and in host societies. Finally, at a higher level, the *supra-system* consists of factors including the culture and social norms of the host society, the economic situation, and government policies. Open in structure, each system interacts with its sub-systems and supra-systems, is affected by them, and influences them. Thus, taken together, the study considers factors influencing the behaviour of individuals and com-

munities at three levels (system, sub-system, and supra-system) and relates these factors in a dynamic manner. We believe that only by using this methodology can we compare diverse communities in different countries. Hence, each diaspora community (the sub-total of the sampled individuals forming the statistical "population" of that community in a particular host country) will be correlated with different "circumstances" that may affect different (or similar) behaviour.

We have categorized these circumstances under three groups. The "situation of individual at origin" involves variables such as social background/family status, urban/rural origin, level of education, type of occupation, and income in the home country. These are in turn correlated with two variables of gender and age. The "situation of individual in host" involves variables such as type of occupation, education, and income in the host country, again correlated with gender and age. The "conditions/policies at host" consists of mostly independent variables such as social, cultural, political, and economic conditions of the host, and government policies, particularly in relation to immigration and refugees. The research instruments we are using this study include oral interviews with immigrants and refugees as well as with social workers and experts and informants in the community: questionnaires, administered in the communities; content analysis of community publications; and census data analysis.

By identifying forces which prevent or hinder change in gender roles, this research can suggest interventions that may reduce the incidence of conflict and tensions within families. In particular, it tries to show how the cultural inheritance of displaced populations intersects with larger political and economic forces, as discrimination, racist attitudes, and social and cultural pressures create grounds for solidarity and bonding among ethno-racial groups that might not otherwise exist. These findings should be of value in considering the role and mission of government and non-governmental agencies which work in sustained contact with immigrants and refugees.

#### Notes

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9. Al-Azmeh, 7.
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13. *Ibid.*, 11.
14. Haideh Moghissi, "Away from Home: Iranian Female Diaspora in Canada," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 30, no. 2 (1999).

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