



# **PCERII Funded Research**

## **Progress Report**

### **Processes of Maturation and Development Among Alberta Muslims**

Earle Waugh

*University of Alberta*

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### 1. Research Problem

Muslims are one of the oldest immigrant groups in Alberta, with important leaders reaching back into the last century. The Muslims in Alberta project was developed to give us solid indicators of how the community has established itself in the province, especially in institutional construction and cultural resource development. Moreover, given the problematic situation of Muslim around the world, the project wanted to amass hard evidence for how they were integrated into the Alberta environment. It was expected that some of the data could be utilized by the community for planning and review of goals; some hoped it would provide solid for cases that deal with personal rights.

### 2. Research Methodology

The project is measuring the growth and development of the Muslim community in Alberta by looking at three major areas: the development of educational resources and capital (including private schools), the expansion of permanent religious leaders and their roles and Muslim women and their changing roles. A team of researchers has been established for each area:

- Youssef Badr, independent scholar, partime researcher for entire project, Edmonton
- Jenny Wannas, Ph.D. Candidate Educational Psych. Partime Women's Roles, Edmonton
- Amreen Jamal, M.A., Independent scholar, partime, Women's Roles, Calgary
- Amal Ghazal, Ph.D. Candidate, History, partime, Women's Roles, Edmonton
- Nawaz Ali Jiwa, Religious Studies honors student, partime, Ismaili leadership & Education
- Eman ElKhadiri, M.A. U. of Calgary, Sociology, partime, Women's Roles, Calgary
- Iman Mersal, M.A. Independent Scholar, partime, Education, Edmonton

### 3. Research progress to date

#### *Development of Educational Resources - Summary of activity to date:*

1. Literature Review on Curriculum in Progress
2. All Muslim schools in Edmonton and Calgary have been contacted with requests for information
3. Contact has been made with all school's executives concerning new school plans, etc.
4. Brief history of each school in place.
5. Literature Review on Education in Islam Completed.

#### *Permanent Religious Leaders' Roles and Development - Summary of activity to date:*

1. Literature Review Completed
2. Two council meetings attended with information filed
3. Breakdown of various groups leadership differentials established
4. Information on Unique Alberta group in Red Deer is firmly in place.
5. Meetings scheduled with various Mosque Councils for spring
6. Data gathered by the Provincial Museum has been evaluated for project
7. Survey of developments across Canada in process.

#### *Women's Roles - Summary of activity to date:*

1. Four questionnaires have been developed: One each for Single Women, Divorced Mothers, Married Women, Converts, approx. 20 pages each.

2. All have been tested on small sample of women in Edmonton and revised
3. Professional assistance from Dr. Abu-Laban, Youssef Badr, and others
4. Permission has been sought from both Edmonton and Calgary groups
5. Ismaili head office in Toronto has been contacted and permission received
6. Central Mosque committee in Edmonton has approved distribution, in progress
7. Local Ismaili community will distribute and collect survey, in progress
8. Calgary Ismaili community being served by Amreen Jamal, data collection in progress
9. Jenny Wannas has distributed survey to unmarried Muslim women
10. Feedback on sensitive questions has resulted in revised questionnaires
11. Lac La Biche and Grand Prairie communities are currently distributing questionnaire
12. Interviews being scheduled for spring.
13. Literature Review completed.

As might be expected, both the length and some of the problems identified by earlier studies on Muslim women have constituted issues that must be dealt with. Two strategies have been used: One to stress the use of the data for Muslims themselves and Two to address the issue of questions deemed irrelevant or too sensitive (i.e. hijab-wearing for Ismailis, or comparative treatment of sons to daughters). As for the length of the survey, this is the most ambitious survey of its type and it is expected it will take much longer to receive replies because of it. Nevertheless, Muslim groups do see the benefits for the community in the process. We expect to have around 300 returns, based on early projections, representing about 15-20% of possible respondents.

A preliminary report on the women's roles will be made to all religious groups (Sunni, Shi'a, Ismaili) in Calgary and Edmonton beginning in September, at which time, any issues raised by the groups will be addressed. It is hoped that the process of conversations on the questionnaire results will move rapidly for a revised report to be issued to the various Muslim organizations by December, for feedback, with a final report due out in April, 2000.

#### **4. Preliminary Findings**

Already several issues seem to be playing a role in the minds of Muslims: inter-group conflicts, representation of women appropriately, and problems between Muslims and Alberta society. On the first, Muslims do not wish the survey to be the basis of distinction between them, so basically all groups want group identity hidden in the data. This is not universally true, as, for example, the Ismailis do not want any negative feedback from hijab-wearing to accrue to their group. On the second, the community is clearly split, with some wanting the community's treatment of women to be acceptable totally in accord with Alberta standards, and some, the more conservative, wanting the community to appear traditional on men-women relationships. There is a high degree of resentment to hijab-wearing women being rejected for jobs or advanced placement purely because of the headscarf, a situation for which there is much anecdotal evidence. We hope to have solid evidence on this issue from our survey. Anecdotal evidence suggests real issues arising between generations. We hope to look at this problem by a comparison of returns from single young Muslim women and their older colleagues. This material will prove helpful to the groups as they plan their programmes of integration of immigrants to Alberta.

On the third, Muslims do not claim, officially, of systemic discrimination, but they do claim that prejudice plays a role in the way both business, government and Alberta institutions function. We hope to address this in a more general way after we have looked at problems that Muslims have had in establishing their institutions and educational structures. In short, we hope we can provide solid evidence of the 'state' of Muslim women in the province in a relatively comprehensive manner.

### ***The Educational Report***

New schools are under construction in both Edmonton and Calgary, and considerable amounts of personal funds have gone into their creation. We hope to provide a profile on the problems and issues implicit in these building projects. A major source of irritation within these groups is curriculum, with the culture of schools taking on the patina of the 'ruling' ethnic group, rendering the school marginal for someone out of that group. We hope to indicate how this problem might be addressed by the schools, both in the curriculum and in the culture of the schools.

### ***The Leadership Issue***

Almost all groups have irritants in the area of leadership: they find it difficult to establish means by which community will can be translated into local group policy. Some groups have problems at the leadership of the mosque itself, when, for example, they must hire from the Middle East in order to get someone competent in Arabic for Qur'an school, but once such a person is hired, he proves to be too much attuned to Middle Eastern culture to adapt easily to North America. One proposal, with which we will deal, is the establishment of a Canadian Imam training centre, where candidates can be taught Arabic, but will be part of the North American culture.

1. In general, then, the project has moved into its chief data-gathering phase, with the principal feedback phase to come in the fall. Thus, we will have a better idea of the outcomes of the women's roles questionnaire after we have received the completed forms, and we have had the opportunity to interview selected women about their person concerns. Major-data-gathering in the other areas is slated for the spring of this year.