

# **EFFECTS of ISLAMOPHOBIA on EMPLOYMENT in QUEBEC**

**Advocacy Presentation addressed to the  
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Islamophobia in Canada  
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## References

**Denise Helly**, Professor, INRS (Institut national de la recherche scientifique) [Entrevue sur la hausse des crimes haineux au Canada](#), with Flavie Sauvageau, Radio-Canada à Québec, 2 aout 2022

**Maryse Potvin**, Professor, Sociology of Education, l'Université du Québec à Montréal,

**Mélanie Beauregard**, Ph.D. candidate, Sociology, University of Ottawa «*L'attentat à la mosquée de Québec dans la presse écrite québécoise entre le 30 janvier et le 1er mars 2017*»,

## EFFECTS OF ISLAMOPHOBIA ON EMPLOYMENT IN QUEBEC

### A- CONTEXT

Some have claimed that the term "Islamophobia" is not accurate, as it is about hatred, not fear. However, the root of hatred is fear.

According to a poll conducted in December 2016 by the international firm Ipsos MORI, Canadians believed that there were 17% Muslims in the country, when in fact there were 3.2%. However, when, at the beginning of my lectures, I ask the question, the overvaluation is sometimes astronomical! Could it be an indication of the fear of the Other?

In Canada, since September 11, 2001, the spotlight has been on "extraterrestrials" called Muslims. The first reaction in Quebec to the arrival of the first "hijabi" women was amazement. Indeed, Quebecers who felt puzzled vis-à-vis these newcomers whom they perceived as different, felt comforted, and legitimized in the fear of the Other. We know that discomfort can become prejudice, and prejudice can turn into hostility...

How to curb this fear which manifests itself as Islamophobia, that is to say into a systemic racism which targets Muslim people... or even who are SUPPOSED to be Muslim?

In the past, French Canadians, not feeling "masters in their own house", expressed their frustrations by ranting against English Canadians, Jews (but anti-Semitism became taboo), then against blacks (then this racism has in turn become taboo)! So, now, we can shout against the Muslims. The expression of this rejection, which can go as far as hatred, has become (almost) legitimate because of social media.

Indeed, we truly believe that the misuse of social media - or more accurately the impunity enjoyed by its users - leads to a breakdown in the social fabric. Think about it! This is the first time in the history of humanity that any layperson has the right to speak in public and hence possesses the possibility to influence a large number of people! The shocking investigation with Pénélope McQuade, directed by Hugo Latulippe in 2018, "Troller les trolls", plunges into the world that hides on the other side of the screen. We can hear: "If this type of platform has democratized speech, it has also revealed the existence of a breeding ground for nauseating ideas..."

Added to this is the context marked by politico-identity issues in Quebec, as we saw during the last election campaign. We learned, for example, of the Islamophobic remarks of a Parti Québécois candidate in Ste-Rose, we heard the false assertions about immigrants by the outgoing Minister of Immigration and Labor,

Jean Boulet: “. .80% of immigrants go to Montreal, do not work, do not speak French, or do not adhere to the values ..of Quebec society”.

But has this minister wondered why, if that is the case, immigrants are not working?

Has he considered the non-recognition of diplomas, qualifications and experience, in particular by professional orders which impose almost insurmountable barriers?

Has he perceived the harmful effects of Law 21 which, by directly discriminating against women who wear the hijab, legitimizes prejudice against all Muslim people... or people who are perceived to be Muslim. For us, forcing women to wear the hijab (as is happening in Iran), or forbidding it at work, is equally unacceptable.

Has he measured the thickness of the glass ceiling that prevents climbing the professional ladder, not only for newcomers, but even for the second generation? Indeed, two university studies in Quebec have demonstrated discrimination in access to employment based on surname, especially if it sounds African or Arabic.

“Children of immigrant origin have a harder time breaking into the job market, although they are significantly better educated, finds a study by Statistics Canada. These difficulties, which mainly affect visible minorities, illustrate how the effects of discrimination experienced by newcomers are perpetuated among the second generation, observes a specialist (Marie-Thérèse Chicha, holder of the Chair in Ethnic Relations at the University of Montreal).” (Pierre-André Normandin, La Presse, Feb. 19, 2019)

However, in this period of labor shortage, extreme in Quebec, everyone can find "a job", but a large number of immigrants, in particular those labeled "Muslims", occupy jobs that have no connection with their qualifications, jobs shunned by the majority of Quebecers! Indeed, according to Lia Lévesque (La Presse, Oct. 16, 2022): “During this 10-year period (2011-2021), the share of immigrants in total employment increased, from 12.4% in 2011 to 19.2% in 2021.” Therefore, “almost 1 in 5 jobs on the labor market (in Quebec) is currently held by an immigrant”.

## **B - REALITIES IN QUEBEC**

### ***Timeline – Historical background***

**1994** A first debate around the Islamic headscarf in Quebec schools emerges. The population as a whole showed little interest in it, believing that it was an exceptional case.

**September 11, 2001** Comes the world catastrophe! In Quebec, we consider that this was the starting point of the interest of the conventional media in Muslims.

In particular, TV debates are focused on questions about Muslims:

For example, at TVA, Anne-Marie Dussault had invited Omar Aktouf, Ahmed Skali, Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, (American) and Samira Laouni to analyze the September 11 attacks.

She questioned us as if we were specialists in terrorism!

2nd example: Lisa Frulla, on Radio-Canada TV, had dealt with "battered women in Islam", strictly providing examples from Afghanistan. In the background, women in burkas paraded... The guests were all women: Leila Lesbet, Najat Bougaba, Rabia Naguib, and Samira Laouni.

The two journalists did not seem to understand that there was a risk of ensuing an essentialization of Muslims, as well as an assimilation to the Taliban.

It is as if we, Muslim Quebecers, had to take responsibility for the behavior of all Muslims in the world! As if we could explain and justify all these acts, even the most atrocious ones!

**2005 to 2007** The saga of reasonable accommodation - Hérouxville

In 2005, the Commission des droits de la personne et de la jeunesse presented awareness workshops on reasonable accommodation to put an end to discrimination based on disability, religion, age or any other ground prohibited by the Charter.

In January 2007, Councillor Drouin, from the small village of Hérouxville, proposed a code of conduct intended for POSSIBLE immigrants (there wasn't a single one in Hérouxville!). It mentioned, among other things, that it was forbidden to stone women, to burn them alive or to practice excision on them!!!

The provincial government then set up the Bouchard-Taylor Commission with the aim of raising awareness of the reasonableness of accommodation on cultural or religious grounds in a plural society. This commission traveled to 16 regions of Quebec. Unfortunately, the formula used, despite the combined efforts of the two presidents, favored the public expression of the worst xenophobia of a small section of the population, especially in remote areas, where there were no immigrants. It was the triggering of a social division in Quebec.

### **2011 to 2013** - the Charter of Quebec Values

The full title was “Charter affirming the values ..of secularism and religious neutrality of the State as well as equality between women and men and framing requests for accommodation”: we were aiming big!!!

The dispute related to the prohibition of wearing religious symbols in public and para-public service, understood in its broadest sense: it concerned not only civil servants, teachers, health professionals, but even companies doing business with the government.

This famous Charter of values..., we consider that it is the charter of misfortunes, because it has started a polarization of the debate, which is growing.

Indeed, the announcement of this draft charter seems to have allowed the expression of any preconceived opinions, without knowing the Other. Thus, many private employers found in it a justification for refusing employment, in particular to Muslim women wearing the hijab.

Let us recall the “Manifeste des Janette, aux femmes du Québec” in which Janette Bertrand, a historical icon of Quebec feminism, claimed that the principle of equality between the sexes seemed in her opinion, to be compromised in the name of freedom of religion. A large number of well-known Quebec women had signed it, among others, Céline Dion, and Julie Schneider...

Several studies have demonstrated, at that time, the rise of a certain extreme right in Quebec, which manifested itself especially in social media, which reinforced a feeling of rejection, that subsequently caused a community withdrawal among Arab- Muslims.

**2014-2015** Boom of the war in Syria - Daesh: scandalous radicalization of certain young Muslim Quebecers and massive arrival of Syrian refugees.

Far-right groups have sprouted like mushrooms, particularly in the Quebec region, some more dangerous than others (such as MEUTE, Soldats d'Odin, La Fédération des Québécois de strain, Justiciers du peuple, Pegidas, ...)

## **2017** Quebec City Grand Mosque Massacre

Paradoxically, the tragedy of January 29, 2017 provoked a general reaction of compassion and support throughout Quebec. During the Vigil, the gatherings of tens of thousands of our fellow citizens in freezing cold showed us absolute solidarity, which showed that Quebec is a land of welcome, benevolence and respect.

Unfortunately, this wonderful solidarity crumbled after only a few weeks: social networks were further inflamed with hate speech; populism has become less complex, and far-right groups, previously discreet, have come out into the open.

## **2019** The prohibition of religious symbols by Law 21: Law on the secularism of the State

First, we affirm loud and clear that the religious neutrality of the state is a sine qua non of a just society. Indeed, this neutrality is essential so as not to favor or disadvantage any belief or non-belief whatsoever.

**But we also emphatically state that it is the state that should be secular, and not the individual.**

Several commentators have analyzed that the excessive ambition of the Charter of Values allowed the acceptance of this law that Prime Minister Legault presented as “moderate”. Indeed, as this prohibition affected fewer people than that proposed in the Charter of Values, many people, without being Islamophobic, said to themselves that it was an acceptable compromise, without mentally putting themselves in the place of the excluded person.

According to researcher Maryse Potvin, from UQAM, since the so-called Charter of Values project in 2013, which wanted to ban religious symbols for all civil servants, we have seen “more than 60% growth in hate speech that has been reported by authorities”.

The survey published in March 2022 by the Association for Canadian Studies (ACS), in collaboration with Léger, among 1,828 Quebecers, measures the impacts of Bill 21 on the religious communities concerned. It also sheds a revealing light on the claim of its promoters that this Act would ensure gender equality. For example, a Muslim can apply for any job and promotion while a Muslim who wears the hijab will be rejected in certain fields of employment. Jewish, Muslim and Sikh women mostly reported the deterioration of their sense of security in public places. Many of them no longer dare to speak publicly. They feel an obvious decrease in their importance vis-à-vis men. And they are more worried about the future of the new generation.

## C - PROPOSALS TO COMBAT ISLAMOPHOBIA

There has been, here as elsewhere in Canada, an increase in racist remarks, because right-wing populist groups – hopefully small groups – have had an increasingly a louder voice, especially thanks to social media. In Quebec, the polarized debates on secularism, or more precisely on religious symbols, which have been going on for years, have centered on Muslims, more precisely on Muslim women.

According to Statistics Canada (March 2022): “In 2020, Canadian police services reported 2,669 incidents of hate crimes [...] In the first year of the pandemic, the number of hate crimes reported by the police have increased by 37%, [...]” But hate crime is a rare event, which one can believe is the tip of the iceberg made up of the multitude of racist remarks, spread mainly by social media, but also, in a sometimes-underhanded way, by the mainstream main stream media.

The attacker of the *Centre culturel islamique du Québec* had his hatred toward Muslims nourished by ideas from the French National Front (France) and President Trump. In addition, there was social media which peddled anti-immigration allegations, as shown by researcher Maryse Potvin: "Some columnists have seen the cumulative effect of hate speech on the rise in public space and the media, and their political instrumentalization." Social media, because of its use of algorithms, ensure that their followers are never exposed to an argument against their prejudices.



## **SHORT AND MEDIUM TERM**

1. Improve the laws against hate speech. Let's affirm: yes, to freedom of expression, but recognize that it stops where it affects a person's dignity!

The first step is to publicize and above all enforce the provisions of the Criminal Code concerning defamatory libel and incitement to hatred. But it will be necessary, as soon as possible, to review in depth these definitions (namely defamatory libel and incitement to hatred) so that it would be possible to prohibit them more effectively, regardless the mean of their dissemination. The research Denise Helly, Researcher at the Institut de recherche scientifique (INRS) on this subject should be taken into account.)

For the conventional media, the Press Council should either acquire additional powers, perhaps coercive, or create an ombudsman position, like there is at Radio-Canada, to deal with complaints about journalistic standards and practices.

Would it be impossible to effectively monitor social media? We don't think so. Canada already has a surveillance system to prevent terrorist acts. Let's use it to stop hate speech against anyone. Pablo Rodriguez

2. Training for Police Forces. There must be mandatory training, including real examples, of all police officers on the provisions of the law, so that they are able to collect and properly formulate complaints from citizens.

3. A Telephone "Green Line" (like SOS Racisme) which could collect and list the calls of victims, but above all direct them to the appropriate resources: police, psychologist, Human Rights Commission, court , etc.

4. Set up an observatory on Islamophobia. We could take inspiration from the "Muslims in Canada Data Initiative (MiCDI)". The starting point in Quebec could be the Semaine de sensibilization musulmane - Muslim Awareness Week (SSM-MAW).

## **LONG-TERM**

5. We demand that politicians at all levels enter into a pact to never, even in jest, express or tolerate any attack on any minority whatsoever. They are the representatives of the people, of all the people. Hence, they are responsible for the publicity material used in their election campaigns: speeches, posters, cartoons, etc. The machinery of political parties has an obvious duty to carry out the necessary research so as not to let through any candidate likely to make racist remarks. If ever such remarks are made, the party leader has an absolute duty to immediately exclude this candidate.

For example, during the last federal election campaign, four Bloc Québécois candidates allegedly made or shared anti-Islam comments on social media. The Bloc candidate in the riding of Marc-Aurèle Fortin, from Laval, where I live, declared, among other things, that Muslim women who wore the headscarf were “a disgrace for feminism”. However, during the recent provincial campaign, most - but not all - candidates who had already published Islamophobic remarks were expelled by their respective political parties.

6. We suggest developing mechanisms to ensure proportional representation of diversity in the public service, in the various boards, etc. There are mechanisms to achieve gender parity and pay equity in the federal public service through the Employment Equity Act. We are proposing that amendments be introduced to make it mandatory to represent the various minorities according to their ratio in the population. Obviously, at equal skill! This obligation to have proportional representation will probably imply the need to deploy extraordinary means to promote the training of young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

7. There needs to be an advertising campaign to educate the general public. It should be focused on acceptance of the Other, of all “others”: people with disabilities, LGBTQ+, Indigenous, Black, Asian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, etc. One thinks first of “spots” during newscasts in conventional media. These would show how the diversity of the population is an obvious contribution to our economy and a factor of cultural wealth. We would present workers of various origins - therefore obviously also of European origin - in different fields of employment: construction workers; office workers; teachers; bus drivers etc. We would also present people who stand out for their particular contribution to our society (a good example is the documentary *Pluri'Elles* by Institut F).

Obviously, the most effective advertising is the one that isn't! For example, at the start of the school year, the news is illustrated on television by children in schoolyards with their teachers, students heading to CEGEP and university. We underline the news on the economy with images of factory workers or customers in the shops... Well! real diversity must not be camouflaged!

But we must also avoid propagating harmful stereotypes. For example, in drama series, especially those intended to reflect current real life, writers need to consider the social implications of their depiction of, for example, Muslims. There have been disturbing episodes of soap operas where the portrayal of Muslim characters was biased and caricatural, because their "Muslimness" seemed to be their only characteristic! In this type of show, characters from any background should not be reduced to a one-dimensional representation.

8. Recurring funding should be provided for awareness-raising projects that have been shown to be effective. Indeed, donors insist that the projects submitted be "innovative": this is often a decisive criterion. But why would a new project necessarily be preferable to one whose usefulness has already been demonstrated?

## **CONCLUSION**

In Quebec, from an intercultural perspective, our ultimate goal is to make living together a reality. But since we cannot deny the existence of Islamophobia, we must first strengthen existing laws regarding both hate speech and hate crimes.

However, it would be more efficient to work upstream. Thus, many measures can prevent Islamophobia by breaking down prejudices against Muslim people... or considered such according to their ethnic origin or their name.

This would promote fair access to the labor market, improve career progression and achieve appropriate representation of diversity.

If we work together to reduce prejudices and stereotypes against diversity in general, but more specifically Muslims, we will, together, improve access to skills-based jobs.