



Lifting veil on understanding

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It seems everyone has an opinion about Muslim women, about their rights and behaviour, even their clothing. The opinions that matter most on the subject are those of Muslim women.

At a conference in Gatineau this past weekend, women talked about integration and segregation in Canadian society. The conference name was telling: Canadian Muslim Women at the Crossroads.

Indeed. For generations, Muslim women came to Canada or were born here and made their own choices about how to live. They covered their heads or not, they were devout or not, they were feminists or not. Few non-Muslims paid attention.

Now, the world is looking -- closely. Canadians have seen images of burka-clad women in Afghanistan; they've read the stories of rapes and stonings of women done in the name of Islam; they've wrestled with whether Shariah law has a formal place in Canada.

And many Canadians have questions: Does a veil mean a woman is oppressed? Does she support terrorism? What about women who don't cover their heads: are they not believers? What does it mean to be a Muslim and a feminist?

Conferences such as the one in Gatineau, organized by the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, can help answer those questions.

Ottawa, in general, can do a better job of offering Muslim women the choice to integrate. Outgoing mayor Bob Chiarelli is rightly proud of Interfaith Ottawa; mayor-elect Larry O'Brien should support that partnership and use it to bring the ideas and concerns of Muslim women into public view.

Also this weekend, Muslim women met in New York to launch WISE: The Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity. The goal is to empower Muslim women and to form an international women's council to interpret Islamic law.

As with any movement, there are two basic ways to proceed: include everyone and risk being pulled in a million directions, or include only those who already share a certain philosophy.

Women's organizations have always had to choose between these paths. The more inclusive WISE is, the less efficient it will be. But inclusivity is what it should strive for nonetheless. The Muslim women who are least understood in North America are the women who cover their faces, or who interpret Islam in conservative ways.

The chief organizer of the event in New York has expressed a wish that WISE will be both "diverse" and "a coherent movement." If it succeeds, communities like ours in the Ottawa will be less fractured.

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