

September 22, 2022

**Islamophobia in Canada: A Call to Action for Government**  
***Sarah Khetty, Director of Marketing for Zabiha Halal, Maple Lodge Farms***

Dear members of the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights:

On behalf of my employer, Maple Lodge Farms, I would like to thank you for assembling this important committee to focus on the critical issue of Islamophobia in Canada. I would also like to thank you for inviting organizations and members of the Muslim community from across the country to share their stories and perspectives with you over the course of this study.

It is my honour to appear before the committee today, as well as to submit this brief exploring what we at Maple Lodge Farms feel is key to advancing the discussion around Islamophobia, and the steps we can collectively take to overcome it.

This brief details both my personal perspectives as a Canadian Muslim, and insights from Maple Lodge Farms' deep ties to Canada's Muslim community.

I joined this family-owned company in large part for its commitment to meeting the needs of Canadian Muslims, beginning first where the company was founded, in Brampton, Ontario.

More than 30 years ago, Muslim residents in Peel Region approached Maple Lodge Farms to ask if the company could supply Halal meat for the growing number of Muslim consumers in the area. In 1990, working hand in hand with the Muslim community, Maple Lodge Farms brought a line of 100% Halal certified products to market. In 2003, when our Zabiha Halal brand officially launched, our offering expanded to encompass a wider range of products under an exclusively-halal brand, endorsed by a variety of trusted Halal certifiers and Islamic organizations.

The nationwide demand for Halal meat has grown steadily since and, today, Zabiha Halal is the top Halal brand in Canada. As a result of continuous collaboration with the Muslim community, and through the brand's support of a variety of community events and conferences, Zabiha Halal has gained an intimate understanding of not only Canadian Muslims' grocery needs, but the cultural struggles they face as well. Soon, the Zabiha Halal team found themselves not only advocating for greater distribution of Halal products across Canada, but also for a greater understanding of the diverse Canadian Muslim community.

In the wake of events like 9-11, along with growth of the Muslim population (an estimated almost 3 million by 2030<sup>1</sup>) giving way to greater representation in more communities across the country, misconceptions around the Muslim faith have become increasingly pronounced. During the runup to the 2016 U.S. election, this faith was politicized and negative sentiments leaked into the Canadian discourse as well. The Québec City mosque shooting in early 2017 as well as various other global events also prompted widespread discussion of racism in Canada.

Maple Lodge Farms' grassroots connections to the Muslim community led the company to try to counter negative sentiments by bringing to light real stories and real experiences of those who share the Muslim faith.

This sparked the *Sharing Halal* campaign that, which over the last four years, has brought personal narratives to the forefront in a bid to dispel myths and break through both explicit and implicit biases regarding Muslims. These are stories of immigrants, of small business owners, of people giving back to the communities they live in, of Muslim women entrepreneurs, of hopes and aspirations, of joys and challenges, of the extraordinary pride so many have in being Canadian.

Indeed, our own research<sup>1</sup> has shown that 98 per cent of those who identify as Muslim are very proud or proud to be Canadian, with only 1 per cent indicating they were not proud. In addition, 97 per cent said they felt a very or generally strong sense of belonging to Canada. It is important to note that this survey was conducted in late 2016, and these positive sentiments may have shifted given the rise of real-time fear, prejudice, and misplaced hatred in everyday life for Canadian Muslims.

~~~~~

While *Sharing Halal* gave Canadian Muslims a voice to share their own stories in their own words, we knew after a Muslim family was targeted and killed in London last year that we needed to dive deeper into the discourse and call the issue what it is: **Islamophobia**.

It was a major step, but at Zabiha Halal we felt the shift into a more direct advocacy role was necessary. As a brand so close to Canadian Muslims, we want to transform the narrative and push for change in an increasingly negative climate, where rhetoric around the Muslim faith had become more extreme, conversations more vitriolic, and misinformation abundant. The London truck attack was the catalyst for Maple Lodge Farms to take an increasingly active role towards challenging and dismantling Islamophobia in Canada.

---

<sup>1</sup> Maple Lodge Farms Halal Consumer Segmentation Report, Nielsen Market Research, January 2017

In this year's *Sharing Halal* campaign, Muslim Canadians spoke openly about the Islamophobia they have faced by sharing their own personal experiences. We shared these experiences with Muslims and non-Muslim Canadians alike to give Muslims content to share and a vehicle for sharing their own stories and non-Muslims insight into the experiences of the Muslim community and the negative impacts of systemic racism.

In order to ground our qualitative storytelling with facts, Maple Lodge Farms issued a national survey of more than 1,500 Canadians, designed to uncover attitudes and perceptions about the Muslim faith. The results, though uncomfortable, are not intended to elicit judgement. Rather, they quantitatively demonstrate a significant opportunity to enhance understanding and compassion through education, awareness, and action.

Key findings include<sup>2</sup>:

- While eight-in-ten (81%) respondents believe that Canada is accepting of people with varying ethnic, cultural, and faith backgrounds, one in four Canadians (25%) do not trust those who belong to the Muslim faith.
  - 68% of Canadians state they trust someone who is Christian. That number drops to 54% when asked if they trust someone who is Muslim, a full 10% lower than those who trust Atheists (64%).
- A majority of respondents (58%) also believe that religious groups are discriminated against in Canada and 73% of respondents think racism and discrimination are a problem in Canada.
- While the majority agree that Islamophobia is a problem in Canada (59%), the survey also revealed that:
  - Half of the population (50%) believes that Muslims should do a better job integrating into Canadian society
    - 77% of Canadians 55+ compared with 49% of Canadians between the ages of 18-34 agree that people coming to Canada from other parts of the world should conform to Canadian cultural norms
  - One-third of Canadians (33%) are concerned with the number of Muslim immigrants entering Canada
  - One in four Canadians (27%) say hijabs should be altogether banned

---

<sup>2</sup> Zabiha Halal commissioned Leger to conduct an online survey of 1,538 adult residents of Canada in April 2022 using Leger's online panel. No margin of error can be associated with a non-probability sample (i.e. a web panel in this case). For comparative purposes, though, a probability sample of 1,538 respondents would have a margin of error of  $\pm 2.5\%$ , 19 times out of 20.

Meanwhile, personal stories from Muslim Canadians paint a qualitative picture of just how pervasive the misunderstandings and challenges are. Here are just a few of the many sentiments we have heard, and continue to hear, from our community:

*“When people look at me, they see a Muslim first and foremost. There’s pressure to always be on my best behaviour.”* – Golnar Elgammal

*“As a kid, because I was embarrassed of my full name, I had people call me Abu.”* – Abubakar Khan

*“This is where I’m from, I was born here. I’m not from any other country. But I started to feel like, okay, maybe I’m not as accepted as I thought that I was.”* – Minatallah Ali

*“I’ve been stopped many times at the airport randomly. And it’s definitely not random anymore because there’s a pattern to it. I worked for an airplane company one of the times I got stopped and my clearance was actually higher than the individual who was interrogating me. So it’s definitely a sad reality that many of us have to face.”* – Mohamed Hassan

~~~~~

To confront Islamophobia, we must first define it. And I would suggest such stories and feelings make up the definition. Some are explosive front-page tragedies, but most are born from quiet confrontations and inaccessible opportunities only those affected know about.

I myself have experienced many instances of Islamophobia, as have many of my Muslim family members and friends. In one upsetting incident that sticks out in my mind, my dad was trying to park the car at a family reunion in a small town in Ontario. We were about to park in a street spot when someone marched out of their home and started yelling profanities and racial slurs at us, directing us to “go back to where we came from.” My father is so proud to be Canadian, so humble, so generous. My uncle was in the car as well, another lovely human who is also a CFO and a contributing community member. Upset at this blatant act of Islamophobia at two respectable men, I swore back at the individual, letting my emotions get the better of me.

As we drove away, my father was so disappointed he did not speak to me. His generation believes that the privilege of living in Canada means we must accept the bad with the good. But no one should accept such treatment based on their colour or creed. And yet such blatant acts of Islamophobia continue in this country every single day.

The cumulative impact of such verbal assaults can carry deep consequences. They can cause a loss of one’s sense of self and culture. They can promote shame where there should be

pride. Disempowered, many feel like they need to hide things that are important about them. This begets acculturation, where communities lose the benefits of diversity, of different ways of thinking, of inspiring traditions.

A direct result is that countless people stop participating as fully in day-to-day life. Families and children avoid activities. Young men are told to shave their beards, women are afraid to wear their hijabs, mosque-goers go straight home to change out of their Islamic dress before running any errands. This bubble of fear clearly hurts the mental health of Muslim Canadians in ways that are hard to measure. And it hurts economies too – I am quite reluctant to plan another family trip in Northern Ontario again and will likely stick to culturally diverse urban centres when picking locations for family reunions.

At its worst, Islamophobia results in violence, even death. But Islamophobia also comes in tiny, measured doses from unexpected places – like one’s own well-meaning but uneducated friends, colleagues, and fellow students. Comments like, “You can’t even drink water? That’s barbaric!” when discussing Ramadan’s fasting traditions have a real impact. These microaggressions, or more aptly, subtle acts of exclusion, born of unintended ignorance, also chip away at one’s sense of identity and well-being.

Addressing Islamophobia is, in many ways, a burden. It is hard and exhausting to be the person who must educate others about Muslim traditions in your own country. Confronting seemingly benign remarks on a near-daily basis is part of this, and the energy it takes should not be discounted. Indeed, what happens in the mundane moments of life may ultimately be just as harmful as the more overt aggressions that happen in the spotlight.

~~~~~

I offer to this commission our perspectives on an achievable path forward in dealing with this pervasive problem in Canada.

### **1. We cannot begin to fix what is not measured.**

There is an urgent need for more research into the makeup of the Canadian Muslim community at the national, provincial, and municipal levels.

There must be greater measurement of where these families are living, because it is essential to understand where support must be provided. In fact, the 2021 census religious reference guide<sup>3</sup> is the first time since the 2011 National Household Survey where we have had a certified pan-Canadian attempt to measure this community. We need to ask ourselves

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/ref/98-500/016/98-500-x2021016-eng.cfm>

if measuring the size and location of this rapidly growing community every 10 years allows us to properly keep Canadian Muslims, and other religious and racialized groups, safe. Muslims make up about 90 per cent of the Syrian population<sup>4</sup>, and since 2015, more than 44,000 Syrian refugees have been resettled in this country<sup>5</sup>, in addition to thousands of other Muslim immigrants from across the globe. We will see in late October how the numbers have changed since 2011 – which is a step in the right direction, but also not enough in its own right to build the foundation for change.

In truth, we need as many metrics as possible that capture the Muslim experience in communities across the country. That includes an attempt to measure the occurrences of Islamophobia and categorize levels of severity as well as measure sentiments towards Muslims on a consistent basis. These types of measurement tools can be used to serve as early warning signals of where outreach and education programs are required. While we respond to such attacks as those in London, Ontario, such violent episodes culminate from growing tensions and experiences of Islamophobia that happen every day as a result of deep seeded bias. Indeed, we have participated in many community forums since the London attacks that have revealed a wide range of both micro and macro aggressions that were never officially reported.

The result is a deep lack of understanding of the problem among the broader Canadian population – and it is not until there is a criminal act or someone is killed that people are spurred to speak out. Even then, we have heard from the Muslim community that after the cameras leave, they are left with little more than words and no real concrete action.

## **2. Data that informs action will empower families, normalize Islam and build awareness**

I would like to share one example of a local measurement effort that could inspire similar initiatives. The Coalition of Muslim Women in Kitchener-Waterloo has worked with police and other community organizations, including schools, to measure incidents of Islamophobia, engaging citizens trying to fill a void of information with data.

Efforts of this nature are so important, because it drives us toward where we need to be to start addressing Islamophobia across the country. We know that members of the Muslim community tend not to disclose incidents of discrimination or Islamophobia or even – like my father after our experience in Northern Ontario – talk about them at all. As a society we have accepted this and basked in the belief that being a multicultural society equates to being an accepting society. It is time to take the blinders off and empower Muslims to self-

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/islam-syria>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/welcome-syrian-refugees/key-figures.html>

report their experiences, not with the intention of laying charges, but for the purposes of documenting.

By simply having a mechanism for reporting, Muslim communities would feel greater support, help break the spell of staying quiet and accepting this as the price tag of living in Canada, and result in legitimate change. The knowledge that the police (or an agency entrusted to compile data) wants to be made aware of even minor instances of Islamophobia would imply that the government trusts that someone experienced an episode of hate or discrimination and intends to do something about it.

Measuring these occurrences inherently challenges this blight in our society. Having quantitative data behind the challenges Muslims face and the biases that exist will help us collectively build toward greater empathy in our towns and cities. Members of the Islamic faith will start to feel like their voices matter, and that they do not have to hide who they are. Such intel could in turn help municipalities direct new community programs and outreach initiatives where they are needed most.

Combined with the more basic, fundamental data measurement at population levels, we can start to normalize the traditions of the Muslim faith, drive awareness around what Islamophobia is, and collectively strategize ways to prevent and counter it.

### **3. The key: a collective effort to pair data with connections**

Data is important, but it is only meaningful when it is paired with building connections through community outreach. Ideally, these efforts should be in tandem with government support and initiatives.

On our end, we have seen the value of pairing data we have garnered from our corporate research and measurement, with the lived experiences of Muslims through the *Sharing Halal* campaign. This combination of facts and authentic stories resonates with Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Other private companies and community organizations like The Coalition of Muslim Women, Islamic Relief and others you are undoubtedly hearing from throughout this study, can and are making a difference too.

Ultimately, while Maple Lodge Farms is proud of our ties to the Muslim community and committed to advocacy through the Zabiha Halal brand, we cannot effect meaningful change alone. It will take thoughtful, long-lasting partnerships with government and community organizers on a consistent basis to close the many voids in information and action. Sustained efforts must be in place across the entire country – not siloed and uncoordinated within individual communities – in order to meet the scale of the problem we face.

~~~~~

I would like to conclude with one of my favourite moments from the *Sharing Halal* campaign that shows we are not born with biases, but that they are learned behaviours that can and must be addressed.

During the first year of the campaign, a non-Muslim family visited a Muslim family during Ramadan to learn more about the holy month of fasting. Entering the home, the host family was dressed in traditional clothing and the aroma of traditional Pakistani food filled the air. While the adults greeted each other with nervous hesitation, the visiting family's young son entered and met the gaze of one of the host's young daughters, blurting out unabashedly: "Where are your toys?"

There was no mention of their visual cultural differences. Just a little boy and a little girl, who ambled around holding hands, exploring new toys. Kids being kids – and teachers to us all, that we are more the same than we are different.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present to the committee, and to consider our recommendations for the final report.

*S Khetty*

**Sarah Khetty**  
**Director of Marketing, Zabiha Halal**  
**Maple Lodge Farms**