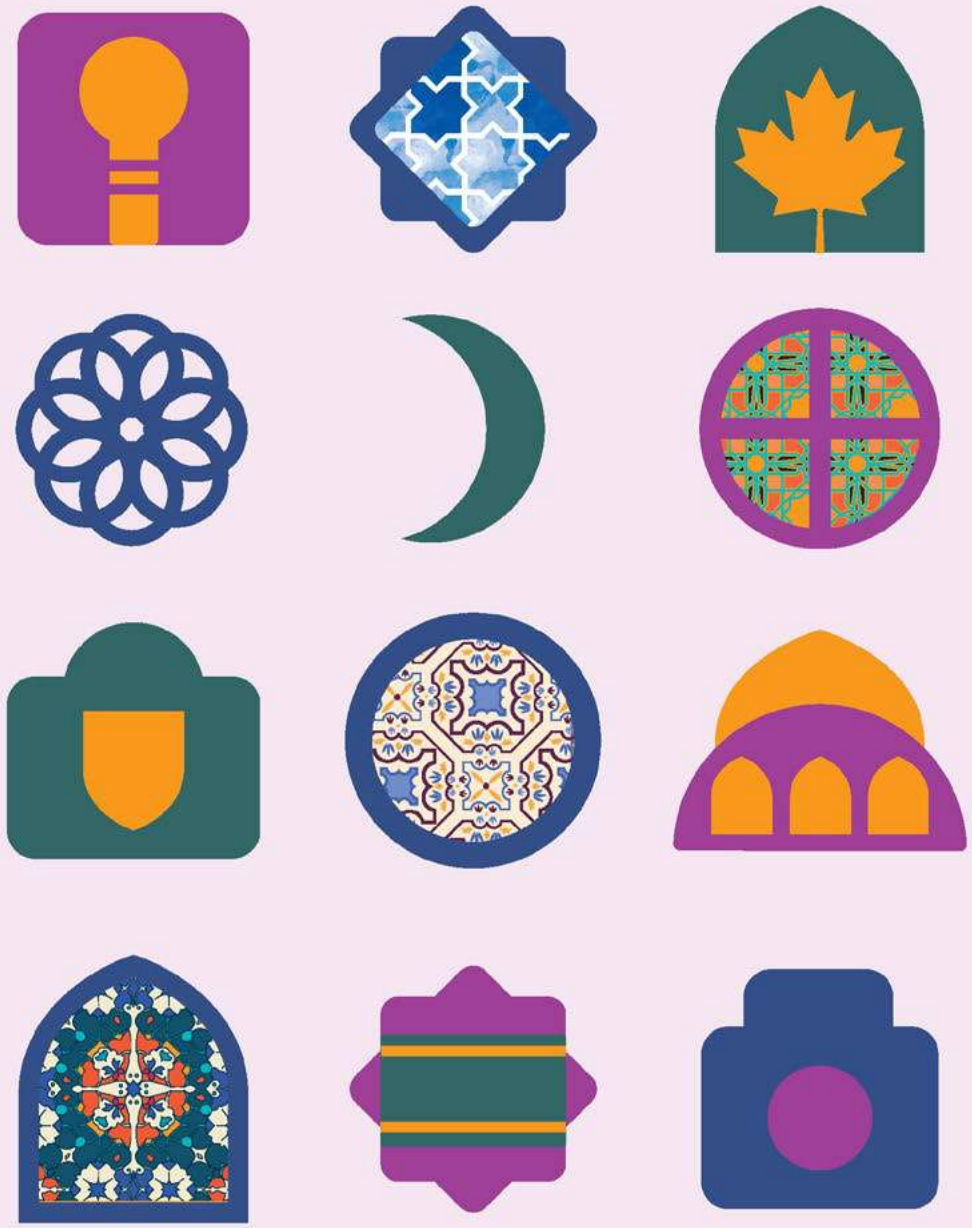
MUSLIM ARTISTS LIVE HERE

The opportunities and challenges for Muslims working in Canada's cultural industries



INSPIRIT FOUNDATION | FONDATION INSPIRIT

narrative change lab

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FOREWORD

In 2021, Inspirit Foundation launched the Narrative Change Lab — an initiative that engages creatives from underrepresented communities to develop strategies that challenge dominant narratives and create new ones to help build a more pluralist Canada.

To kickstart the inaugural theme, Reimagining Muslim Narratives, we convened 20 Canadian Muslim artists over the course of a year to engage in a deep exploration of existing tropes and develop solutions to reimagine pop culture narratives from a place of strength and agency.

Across Canada, Muslim artists are telling stories through film, music, visual arts and countless other forms of expression. Their work reflects the diversity of Muslim experiences in this country — sometimes joyful, sometimes difficult, always creative.

Yet, there remains relatively little research and data on how many of the approximately 1.8 million Muslims in Canada are contributing to this country's arts and media landscape or what their journeys through these industries really look like.

This report, *Muslim Artists Live Here*, helps to change that. For the very first time, data from the 2021 Statistics Canada Census reveals how many Muslims were working in cultural fields across the country, where they lived, what kinds of roles they had, how much they made and more. While this data is incomplete and requires further exploration, it is an important starting point.

To bring those numbers to life, report author Radiyah Chowdhury spoke directly with Muslim artists about the opportunities they've found, the barriers they face and the visions they hold for the future of their work.

We've also offered a list of recommendations informed by feedback from interviewees and Inspirit's experience supporting organizations that advocate and create opportunities for greater equity and inclusion in Canada's arts and media sectors.

By combining quantitative data with case studies that highlight lived experience, we hope to shine a light on the creativity and impact of Canadian Muslim artists working in pop culture, identify barriers and solutions to create more opportunities and continue opening the door to richer, more inclusive cultural narratives.

Chris Lee
Inspirit Foundation

Celebrate Her Installation by Aquil Virani

METHODOLOGY

Notes on methods and approach

Muslim Artists Live Here is a high-level scan of Muslim artists across Canada. It is not meant to be a comprehensive or academic review of public and private funding systems or specific disciplines and industries; rather, it is an initial step in documenting and understanding the experiences of Muslims pursuing artistic endeavours in this country. Its purpose is not to delve into Islamic theology, sectarianism, doctrine or debates. It is about Canadian Muslim artists.

There is a distinct lack of quantitative data about Canadian Muslims, especially when it comes to participation in Canadian arts and culture sectors. In 2024, Inspirit Foundation commissioned Kelly Hill, of Hill Strategies Research Inc., to compile custom datasets from Statistics Canada's most recent 2021 Census.

The datasets provide statistics on Muslim workers, with comparative data for all workers, organized into three general categories:

Representation of Muslim workers among professional artists, arts leaders and all cultural workers in Canada

Geographic distribution of Muslim workers in Canada, including professional artists, arts leaders, cultural workers and all workers

Incomes of Muslim workers and all workers within four broad groupings of occupations, including artists, arts leaders, workers in cultural occupations and all Canadian workers

A note on data analysis from Kelly Hill:

The analysis relates to professional workers, but with a very specific concept of professional. Census data on occupations include people who worked more hours as an artist than at any other occupation between May 1 and 8, 2021, plus people who were not in the labour force at that time but had worked more as an artist than at another occupation between January of 2020 and May of 2021. Part-time artists who spent more time at another occupation in May of 2021 would be classified in the other occupation. The same would be true of workers in arts leadership occupations and all cultural occupations. There is no information about secondary occupations in the Census. To a certain extent, working more hours at one's art than another job can be seen as an indicator of artistic success.

The occupational perspective counts people who work across the economy, as long as they are classified into one of 10 artist occupation groups, five arts leadership occupation groups, or 52 cultural occupation groups. No estimates of fewer than 40 people are presented in order to ensure confidentiality and data reliability.

The challenging context of the pandemic in the spring of 2021 is important to keep in mind when interpreting Census data on artists, which were collected in May of 2021. Income data from the Census relate to the 2020 calendar year.

We have presented the Census data as is and have not done additional research or analysis to dig deeper behind the numbers; that is beyond the scope of this report.

This report does, however, include data collected through interviews with Canadian Muslim artists and cultural workers, as well as non-Muslim professionals in the arts and cultural fields.

While the report attempts to demonstrate a breadth of experiences from Muslims from across Canada, we focused on more densely populated regions where the majority of the resources are located. We interviewed 25 self-identified Muslim artists from varying backgrounds, artistic practices and career influence. While not all of their voices were referenced in this report, their feedback was crucial to informing much of the content and resulting recommendations.

We hope this report can inspire further research, as there is still much to explore.

A note on terminolgy

Muslims have complex and multi-faceted identities that intersect with race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, citizenship status, immigration, income levels and much more. While it's impossible to capture each of these nuances, there is also fertile ground for further research that focuses on specific intersections. All artists have been described as "Muslim artists," unless they specifically requested otherwise.

Any mention of "media" pertains to arts and culture unless otherwise stated and does not include the experiences of those in news media or journalism.

This report does not attempt to address Islamic theology, sectarianism, doctrine, debates or Islamic art as a specific form nor does it attempt to represent Islam as a religion.

INTRODUCTION

"All great artists draw from the same resource: the human heart, which tells us that we are all more alike than we are unalike."

— Maya Angelou[1]

Muslims have lived in Canada since the late 19th century.[2] Islam is the second-largest religion in the country after Christianity, and the numbers continue to rise. Muslims contribute to their communities, open businesses, build mosques and enrich the fabric of Canadian society. They are represented across sectors, from education and medicine to governance and law. However, if considering the positive impacts made by Canadian Muslims by how often they are seen in popular culture and media, a skewed narrative may emerge. In fact, they may not be seen at all.

To date, there is very little that encapsulates the experience of Canadian Muslims in creative sectors. This is troubling, given that much of what is known about Muslims and Islam is derived from popular media depiction. As Muslim poulations increase in Canada, so too do instances of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bigotry. In 2023, police-reported hate crimes against Muslims increased by 94 per cent and were expected to rise in 2024.[3] More Muslims in Canada have been killed in targeted hate crimes than in any other G7 country.[4]

Hate crimes targeting Muslims jumped 151 per cent in 2017, the same year six Muslim worshippers were killed by a gunman who opened fire on a Quebec City mosque.[5] The legal proceedings following the mass shooting revealed that the perpetrator frequently consumed troubling Islamophobic media that painted Muslims as threats to society. Unfortunately, that was not the last time Muslims in Canada would face violent assaults with tragic results. In 2021, the **Afzaal family** was out for a walk in their hometown of London, Ontario when a white supremacist intentionally drove into them with a pickup truck. Four out of five of the family members were killed.

Islamophobia presents in many ways, from these individual acts of hatred to systemic and institutional discrimination. Whether it's over-policing and security, the rise of anti-Muslim hate groups and protests, vandalism and destruction of mosques or individualized attacks on visible Muslims as they go about their lives, the somber truth is that Canada has an Islamophobia problem[6].

Hollywood and mainstream media have been at the forefront of shaping public perception and amplifying dominant stereotypes. The typical tropes of Muslims are varied; they're depicted as terrorists or security threats, unwilling to be part of the national identity, uneducated with backward views, barbaric, orientalized and othered. Gendered depictions of Muslims are clear; women are often shown as subservient, oppressed, in need of Western liberation and exoticized or sexualized. Men are seen as brutish, violent and abusive.

These characterizations are harmful and reductive. Muslims are a diverse group of people with complex identities and experiences. According to the 2021 Census, they make up 1.8 million of Canada's population — a figure that has likely grown since then.[7] Portraying them homogeneously does a disservice to their many intersections, be it race, gender, ethnicity, income level, political affiliation, immigration, citizen status and more.

Muslim Canadians in Pop Culture

Jamelie Hassan is a trailblazing visual artist, activist and independent curator based in London, Ontario. Since the 1970s, she's exhibited across Canada and the world. In 2001, she was awarded the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts.

Actor **Hamza Haq** is best known for his lead role as Bashir Hamed in the medical drama series *Transplant*, which ran from 2020 to 2024. This role won him three Canadian Screen Awards.

Poet and singer-songwriter **Mustafa the Poet** has written for some of the biggest names in music. His debut album, *When Smoke Rises*, won Alternative Album of the Year at the 2022 Juno Awards.

Zarqa Nawaz created the internationally renowned comedy series *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. Airing from 2007 to 2012 on CBC, *Little Mosque* premiered to the highest ratings CBC had seen in over 20 years. It went on to win several national and international awards and remains the only show of its kind in Canada.

Singer-songwriter **Nemahsis** won Alternative Album of the Year and Breakthrough Artist of the Year at the 2025 Juno Awards for her debut album, *Verbathim*.

A media diet that consists of inaccurate and negative portrayals affects how people perceive Muslims, especially if they rarely encounter them in real life. One doesn't have to seek out Islamophobic or anti-Muslim media to be influenced by social media or the manufactured fear and hate propagated by the Islamophobia industry.[8] According to a 2023 study from Angus Reid Institute, Canadians across the country are less likely to hold favourable views of Islam than Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism and Buddhism.[9] Around 43 per cent of Canadians believe Islam is a "harmful presence" to Canada, [10] while 25 per cent "don't trust" Muslims.[11]

There are many ways to tackle intolerance, hatred or ignorance; the arts are among the most accessible. Much of what we consume in the things we watch, music we listen to and art we experience profoundly affects our perceptions and understanding of the world around us.

Canadian Art Festivals By Muslims, For Muslims

MuslimFest is an annual cultural festival bringing together Muslims from across North America. Created in 2004, it played a large role in encouraging arts and entertainment, and showcasing the diversity of Islamic culture and identity. It's based in Mississauga, Ont.

The Mosquers Film Festival is a nonprofit cultural organization founded in 2006. Every September in Edmonton, The Mosquers hosts a mutli-day festival including industry panels, networking, red-carpet gala, film screenings, and an award show.

The Muslim International Film Festival (MIFF) is a Toronto-based nonprofit that hosts an annual event aimed at bringing together filmmakers, storytellers, and creatives to portray Muslim excellence on the big screen.

The Muslim Literary Festival fosters a community where Muslim writers connect, collaborate and learn from industry professionals. Founded in 2024, the annual festival offers a range of networking opportunities, panels, workshops, and more.

The Silk Road Literary Festival is a two-day celebration of art, literature and ideas. It was launched in 2024 and highlights the diverse stories of Muslims and racialized voices.

The arts have been foundational to Muslim civilizations throughout history, with the earliest Islamic art dating back to the seventh century CE. Muslims have been pivotal to the development and advancement of many art forms, including devotional music, calligraphy, architecture, textiles and pottery. In Canada, Muslims continue this tradition of artistic excellence.

Trailblazing visual artist **Jamelie Hassan** has been exhibiting in the country since the 1970s and was subsequently awarded the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2001. A recipient of the same award in 2020, **Zainub Verjee**'s art has been displayed at New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Venice Biennale. As an arts leader, she's been instrumental in forming cultural institutions like the B.C. Arts Council and In Visible Colours, a groundbreaking international festival in Vancouver featuring film and video by women of colour in 1989.

Contemporary musicians **Nemahsis** and **Mustafa the Poet** have both picked up Juno Awards. **Hamza Haq**, lead actor of the medical drama *Transplant*, has several Canadian Screen Awards. **Bilal Baig**'s hit television show *Sort Of*, which follows a non-binary millennial grappling with various identities and labels, amassed the most television nominations at the Canadian Screen Awards in 2022.

These are just a few examples. The lack of acknowledgement and targeted support, underfunding and exclusion from cultural institutions are all barriers that continue to stand in the way of further progress. The opportunities available to Muslim artists are still few and far between — in some instances, they are completely non-existent.

This report hopes to explore the current landscape for Muslim creatives in Canada, examining what's available to them and what barriers they encounter while pursuing their art. Because it's impossible to expand on all the variations of Muslimhood, we will strive to remain as general as possible. By examining aspects such as representation, access to resources, community support and industry dynamics, we hope to shed light on the challenges faced by Muslim creatives and explore new pathways to help them flourish in Canada.

Artwork by Jamelie Hassan

Jamelie Hassan

is a visual artist and co-founder of the artist-run centre Embassy Cultural House based in London, Ontario.

On finding art at a young age
"When I was 11, a family moved in across the street from our home in London, Ontario. We're talking the 1950s. They were artists and very involved in mental health work; they established one of the first art therapy programs in Canada. We were a pretty large family, and I was in the middle of 11 kids. My parents made friends with the new neighbours who leaned in the same social and political direction that our family was immersed in. These neighbours were very involved in Indigenous issues; our family was involved in anti-racism initiatives and establishing the first mosque in Ontario, here in London. So I grew up with a lot of encouragement around me that people could dedicate themselves to something as fulfilling as cultural work. I had examples in front of me."

On her artistic journey
"My parents are from present-day Lebanon and Syria, and part of the reason my dad and maternal grandfather left was because they were pacifists and didn't want to be drafted into the Turkish army, as it was still the Ottoman Empire in our part of the world. I would have the privilege of going to study at an art school in Beirut in the late 60s, when I was very young. So during these formative years, I was with my elders in the village as well as at this school. When I returned to London, I already knew people in the arts world thanks to my upbringing. I got a studio and a job to support my art; I worked at the university library. At the same time, I started to organize an artist-run centre in London."

On the barriers she faced
"The way my dad lived and made decisions was a philosophical tradition within Islam. It wasn't a dictatorial approach. Sometimes senior male, European Canadian artists would say to me, 'Oh my God, it must have been so difficult for you.' And I'm going like, 'No, actually. You're way more patriarchal than my dad ever was.' There was a focus on the senior male artist. It was very common at that time for exhibitions not to have any women artists included, especially in institutional settings. So that's why a lot of the artist-run centres emerged; it was because of the inequity and to showcase more women artists."

On the importance of artist-run centres
"Artist-run centres are a movement that emerged in Canada where the founding vision and protocols are established by the artist community. They pushed institutions that were more conservative to do more exciting work. The alternative spaces they created were the ones getting attention in terms of artistic merit and impact within the overall ecology of the art world in Canada and beyond. So we are quite known for artist-run centres, and many of them are celebrating 50 years. It is quite a legacy."

On her hopes for the future
"I think that a living wage should be established across the board, not just for cultural workers. A guaranteed annual income is the way to go. I also think building bridges is super important. Collaborate with other communities, including Indigenous and other faith-based groups, to address broader social issues. Participate in initiatives that benefit the wider community, not just Muslims."

Meryem Saci

is a musician based in Montreal, Quebec.

On being a musician

"It started in Algeria when I was young. I came to Montreal as a teenager and it really popped up when I was in a band called Nomadic Massive, a multilingual hip hop band. I went into my solo career about three years ago. My fourth project is about to come out in September. It's my first official album called *Journey*, made between Algeria, France, and Canada."

On funding her artistry

"Music is my main source of income right now. I used to do real estate, but I quit to see if I can make this music thing my full-time. There's different avenues of revenue through music. I do coaching, mentoring, teaching, and background vocal work, as well. I'm mostly surviving on savings and grant help, as well as different types of contracts."

On barriers she's faced

"It's challenging to find a box I fit in, whether it's linguistically or stylistically. It's as if I'm being stuck in the category of world music, which is where they throw anything and everything that isn't English or French. Because I mostly do soul, r&b, and hip hop, and I sprinkle it with rhythms and stuff from my culture, it becomes difficult to find a place in the industry, especially in this world of algorithms and playlisting and fitting within certain parameters."

On being based in Quebec

"I feel like my ability to go further and have more opportunities has been, in part, blocked by being in Quebec. When it comes to surviving off art, if you're not Québécois, it's extremely difficult. Quebec fights to maintain the French language through education, culture, media. The ability to get on rotational radio is usually easier when you do French music. I'd say there's a lot more space for Québécois French, not just French from France. For example, hip hop did not have a space for a very long time here. And now the main space is for a new category called rap québ, or Québécois rap. There's an industry for that, there's labels and awards for that. But when it comes to soul, r&b, and hip hop, there's still not much space for it here and the small space it does have is mostly Québécois."

On her support system

"I've been lucky to have some grants from Canada Council. I've worked on different projects with different artists. One of the biggest pushes I've gotten is from this legendary hip hop band called IAM. In Quebec, Narcy is a big source of support and collaboration. Then there's the help from Inspirit. It was a breath of fresh air to find out there was a group of folks that decided to create the New Narratives Fund. It wasn't even in my mind as a possibility. The fact this fund focuses on Muslim artists is truly amazing. It's inspiring to see how I can eventually contribute to things like that as well, to create these structures and spaces where other artists can thrive. We're blessed to be part of a society where we can find or create our own spaces. That's not always easy elsewhere."

MUSLIM PARTICIPATION IN CANADA'S CREATIVE CULTURAL SECTORS

Not much data exists about Muslims across creative sectors in Canada. This isn't entirely surprising — collecting ethnocultural data in public sectors has long been challenging, from health care to the arts. Understanding the system might help illuminate why certain gaps exist. As cultural strategist and consultant **Kelly Wilhelm** puts it, this country's public funding model was based on the British model. The rationale behind our system has been two things, she says. As a country colonized by France and Great Britain, we have academic and artistic pursuits on par with Western European countries. This includes ballets, symphonies, regional theaters and other artistic practices. The second rationale has to do with Canadian sovereignty.

"It's this notion of a Canadian perspective, which has evolved to Canadian perspectives. We understand that we don't have a singular identity, that we never have. But it's very much a reaction in their protection against the United States ... if we don't have public funding in Canada, the likelihood of our artists being seen and heard and our stories being told is lower," Wilhelm says.

While significant efforts are made to protect Canadian media from our neighbours to the south, there has been a recent push to expand what qualifies as Canadian content. It's hard to gauge who falls between the cracks if the data doesn't exist.

"We haven't asked artists to identify their religious affiliations, so [public funding for the arts in this country] can't answer the question of how well do you serve Muslim artists," Wilhelm says.

It's not just the arts, though.

"There's not a lot of data on Muslims in general," says **Anver Emon**, director of the Institute of Islamic Studies at the University of Toronto. The institute's flagship project, the Muslims in Canada Archive (MiCA), is developing an archive of the diverse and vast contributions of Muslims to Canada's history and heritage.[12] "The religious category to begin with, in the Canadian context, is problematic for places like Quebec. The moment you make religion legible, it's always going to be a challenge given the Quebec laïcité [secularism] politics and the significance of that at the federal level with respect to federal sources of funding."

There are constitutional distinctions, he says. In Ontario, for example, Catholic school boards are publicly funded. "But I don't think 'Muslim' as a religious identity is really part of the Canadian data landscape." MiCA is in the process of finalizing its big survey on Muslims in Canada, and Emon says the absence of robust data on Muslims is partially what inspired them.

The best data set we currently have to measure Muslim presence in Canadian creative sectors is from the 2021 Statistics Canada Census. **Kelly Hill,** who has nearly three decades' of quantitative and qualitative arts research experience, was asked by the Inspirit Foundation to document the demographic characteristics of Muslim artists, arts leaders and cultural workers in Canada.

Hill created and analyzed the results of a custom data request from the Census, looking into cultural work, religion, location, age, gender, education and other demographic factors.

"The Census is not a perfect fit for the nature of cultural work, which can

involve irregular financial returns, multiple jobs and atypical work flows — none of which are captured in the Census questions," he says. "However, the Census is still the best source for this type of information." His findings are included below.

Please note: Census data are based on occupations someone spent the most time at in May of 2021. There is no information on secondary occupations. The creative landscape in Canada was affected greatly by COVID-19, a time after the Census data was recorded. We do not have updated figures.

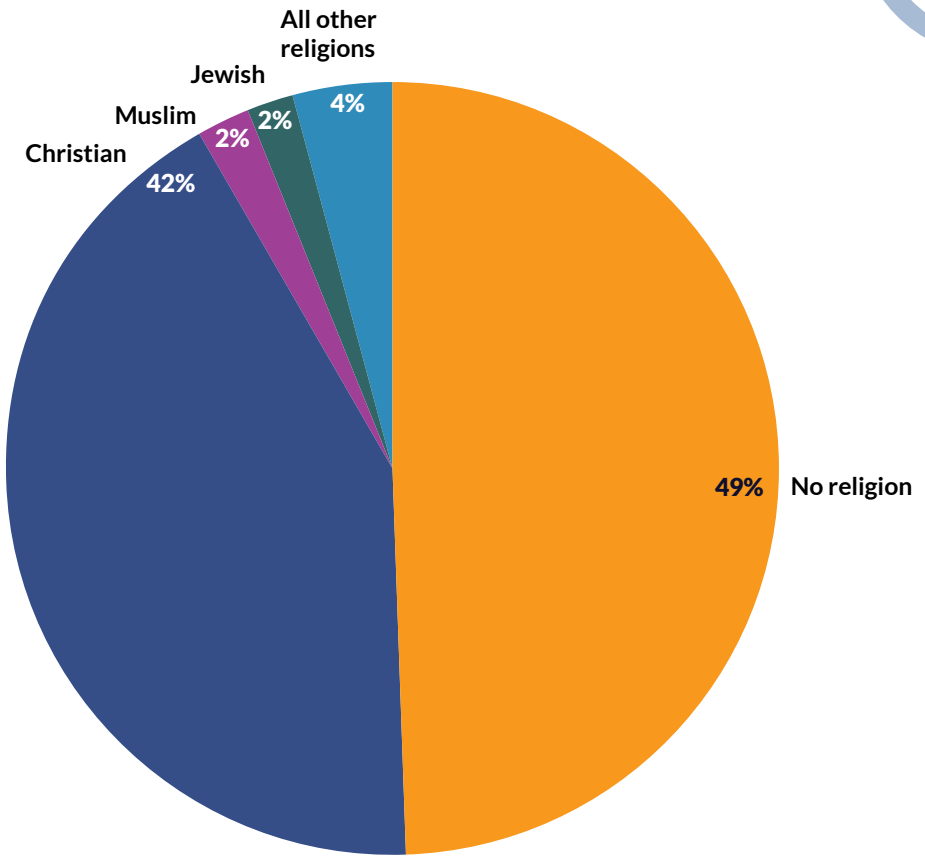
Who are Muslim creative workers in Canada?

From filmmaking to music, fine arts to comedy, writing to acting — Muslim creatives are active contributors to art scenes across the country. If you look closely, you can see them on your television screens, in your playlists, on the walls of museums and in the books you read. While they are often not recognized for their talent or contribution, they live here.

Of the 20.6 million workers in Canada documented in 2021, four per cent identified as Muslim. Despite being just as likely as other Canadians to be in the labour force, the unemployment rate was higher among Canadian Muslims (16.7 per cent) compared to other Canadian workers (10.3 per cent).

In terms of the arts, around two per cent of Canada's 202,900 artists are Muslim — the rest either have no religious affiliation or identify as Christian. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of Muslim artists are racialized (89 per cent) compared to just 19 per cent of Canadian artists.

Canadian artists by religion, 2021



Hills Strategies Research Inc., 2025

Note: The Census counts people in the occupation in which they worked the most hours in early May 2021. If they did not work that week, they are classified into the occupation of longest duration since January 1, 2020. Source: 2021 Census, custom data request by Hill Strategies for the Inspirit Foundation..

Among all Canadian artists, women narrowly make up the majority at 54 per cent, whereas Muslim artists are divided equally between men and women.

Muslim artists are more likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher, and they tend to be younger than other artists. This lines up with immigration statistics, as well. Most Muslim artists are more likely to be immigrants to Canada (71 per cent) than all Canadian artists (21 per cent). For people new to the country, traditionally "stable" jobs like medicine or engineering may be preferable to the finicky business of the arts. Younger generations may be choosing creative fields more than their predecessors, and this could be why Muslim artists tend to be younger compared to Canadian artists in general — 51 per cent of Muslim artists are under the age of 35. And while 28 per cent of all Canadian artists are 55 or older, only 12 per cent of Muslim artists are in that age range.

Similar to the general demographic trend of immigration to Canada, most Muslim artists have roots in Asia and the Middle East, with 40 per cent coming from the Middle East, Central Asia or West Asia and 33 per cent coming from South Asia. About 19 per cent have African ethnic or cultural origins, and only six per cent of Muslim artists have European roots compared to 69 per cent of Canadian artists.

Timaj Garad, a Toronto-based multidisciplinary artist and cultural worker, sees the lack of Muslim representation in the arts sector.

"We come from communities, most of which migrated here, immigrants, refugees, who are already in survival mode. I don't blame our parents or the generation before us for that, because in their minds it was like, 'I don't want you to take that risk on a career that is possibly going to put you in a precarious financial situation,'" she says. "Which is true — the arts can do that. They were looking out for us and saying, 'I want you to pursue something that's solid, that we know works.'"

Israa Howlader knows something about that, too. Born to Bangladeshi parents in Toronto, Howlader says she's always been drawn to the arts. From childhood, she showed an affinity for painting — her current medium.

"Like a lot of immigrant families, I was always reminded of the fact that I needed to have a solid career," she says. "I didn't really pursue art because I thought that it's something hard to rely on after school." Instead, she pursued interests in health studies while continuing to make art on the side. She found success painting vibrant, detailed scenery on wooden coasters, among other things. While she says she'd love to pursue art as her primary career, the path isn't very straightforward.

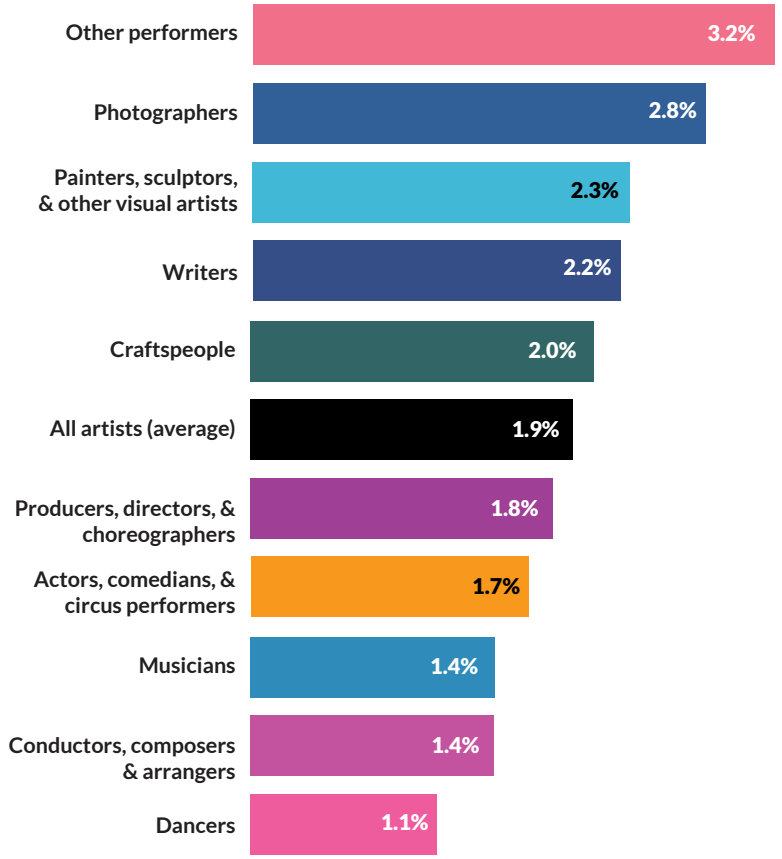
Other considerations for the lack of Muslim presence in certain artistic spheres may have to do with cultural and religious interpretations. Like many other faiths, Islam generally discourages material deemed lewd, blasphemous or contrary to scripture and Prophetic tradition. There are robust theological debates around music, for example. While this report will not be dealing with religious jurisprudence, it's important to keep in mind the complex and nuanced ruminations facing Muslim artists.

What type of art are Canadian Muslims making?

According to the Census, **10 occupation groups** make up the category of Muslim artists:

- 650 **producers, directors, choreographers** and related occupations (17 per cent of all Muslim artists)
- 620 **writers** (16 per cent)
- 560 **photographers** (14 per cent)
- 540 **musicians** (14 per cent)
- 490 **visual artists** (12 per cent)
- 400 **artisans and craftspeople** (10 per cent)
- 330 **actors, comedians** and **circus performers** (8 per cent)
- 170 **other performers** (4 per cent, including buskers, puppeteers, deejays, models, influencers and many more not included in the other categories)
- 120 **dancers** (3 per cent)
- 50 **conductors, composers** and **arrangers** (1 per cent)

Muslim workers as a percentage of artists, arts leaders, workers in cultural occupations, and all workers, Canada, 2021 Census



Hills Strategies Research Inc., 2025

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This is particularly interesting when compared to the percentage of Muslims in each occupation group. For example, while just four per cent of Muslim artists are considered "other performers," they make up 3.2 per cent of that general occupation group. And even though 17 per cent of Muslim artists are producers, directors, etc. — they only make up 1.8 per cent of that general occupation group. (See chart on left.)

While the representation of Muslim artists across sectors is noticeably smaller than general Canadian artists, the numbers become even more stark when analyzing Muslim representation in arts leadership. Among the 56,200 arts leaders in Canada, only 900 are Muslim. These are senior-level positions that have some authority or power.

We've narrowed it down to five groups:

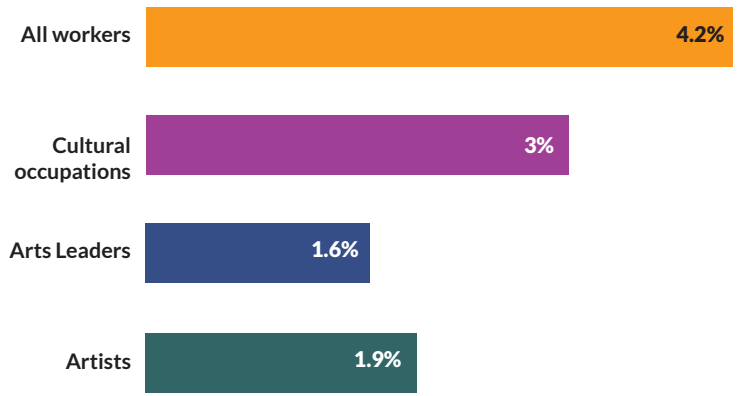
- **Producers, directors, choreographers and related occupations** (36,200 workers in Canada, including 650 Muslim workers)
- **Managers in publishing, motion pictures, broadcasting and the performing arts** (8,800 workers, including 140 Muslim workers)
- **Library, archive, museum and art gallery managers** (5,100 workers, including 40 Muslim workers)
- **Conductors, composers and arrangers** (3,900 workers, including 50 Muslim workers)
- **Conservators and curators** (2,200 workers, including fewer than 40 Muslim workers)

These categories do not fully encapsulate every career that could potentially be considered arts leadership, as some are grouped into other occupation groups that are not arts-specific and fall under a third category — cultural workers. While all arts and arts leaders are counted as cultural workers, not all cultural workers are counted in the converse.

There are 52 occupations in the arts, culture and heritage sectors. They include all of the above, as well as other careers like graphic design, architecture, advertising, marketing and more. This is the broadest category, making up 914,000 Canadians in the Census.

Of these cultural workers, three per cent are Muslim. While one in every 23 Canadian workers is in the cultural sector, only one in every 31 Muslim workers can say the same.

Muslim workers as a percentage of artists, arts leaders, workers in cultural occupations, and all workers, Canada 2021 Census



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SPOTLIGHT: FAHMIDA SULEMAN

Dr. Fahmida Suleman is the Senior Curator of the Islamic World collections at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) and an Associate Professor at the University of Toronto (U of T) — where she did her undergraduate degree in Islamic Studies and Religious Studies. While Dr. Suleman had always loved learning about Islamic history and art, her father discouraged her from pursuing either subjects, considering them more hobbies than suitable careers. "I hadn't seen a brown Muslim curator at that point," she says. "I left U of T liking art, [but] I thought maybe I should still focus on becoming a professor."

She went on to pursue her master's and PhD in Islamic Art and Archaeology at the University of Oxford, where none of her professors were Muslim. It was between her master's and PhD that she fell in love with the museum world after interning at the British Museum in London. "Living in England changes things, because in Canada at the time, we were so inward. We were very North America-focused, and sometimes we still are, but not as much as we used to be when I was growing up. But when you're in England, you're kind of at the centre of the world. It's so easy for you to travel," she says. Suleman's mentor at the British Museum suggested she find a specialization within Islamic art if she wanted to become a curator someday — advice she says changed the trajectory of her life. When she returned to Canada 24 years later, things were different than she remembered. "I was blown away by the number of artists in Canada who are Muslim," she says.

She got the job at the ROM in 2019. "I was hired as Curator of Islamic Art and Culture … this role started in the mid-60s, and I'm the first Muslim curator. The very first one." While the scene has certainly improved, she says there still aren't enough Muslims and she encourages Muslim artists to get themselves out there. Send a portfolio of images to a curator, connect with full-time artists, visit museums and gallery events to network and connect with curators, and take the opportunities you get, she advises.

Where do Muslim creatives live in Canada?

Most Canadian Muslims live in metropolitan areas. While this reflects where Muslim artists reside, it also corresponds to broader trends in immigration and newcomer settlement. These trends often shape access to cultural infrastructure and funding; if you live in a smaller city, you'll likely receive less funding. Ontario has the largest proportion, making up 58 per cent of the country's share of Muslim artists and 40 per cent of all Canadian artists. As Toronto is the largest Canadian city by population, it's no surprise it's home to the highest number of both Muslim artists and artists in general.

Creatives trying to make their careers in other cities know how Toronto-centric opportunities can be. This became especially clear to **Rhia Aden** when she became the first executive director of The Mosquers Film Festival, an Edmonton-based non-profit dedicated to supporting Muslim narratives through film and art. She says similar organizations doing great work to diversify Canadian screen arts, like BIPOC TV and Film, Reelworld Screen Institute and Black Screen Office, are far more successful in getting attention and support from stakeholders outside their communities. Part of that may be attributed to their location — they're all based in Toronto and have more access to opportunities that help them grow.

Despite Mosquers being around for the past 19 years, they might not be as well-known in the metropolis. "I think if we were based in Toronto, [it] would be a lot easier to have a bigger presence," she admits, while reiterating the festival will remain in its birth city of Edmonton.

There are advantages to being outside one of the most expensive cities to live in. For screenwriter and showrunner **Abdul Malik**, the cost of living in Edmonton can't be beat.

"One of my competitive advantages is that I live in Edmonton. It's cheap. I've paid off my house," he says. "Most people who live in Toronto can't do that, they're struggling a lot." But even Malik splits his time between both cities and finds himself in Toronto a lot for work. "There's an expectation that you have to be where the action is," he says.

While Ontario leads in the percentage of Muslim artists by a long shot, the second most populous province is Quebec — with the second-largest population of Muslims across the country and 18 per cent of Muslim artists. The province itself has a contested history with its Muslim residents. Laws like Bill 21, which prohibit public sector employees from wearing religious symbols such as hijab, have directly contributed to the exclusion of Muslims across industries. According to the Angus Reid poll, a little more than half of Canadians in Quebec hold an unfavourable view of Islam. And where 16 per cent of Canadians hold "Very Negative" views towards Islam, the number is nearly doubled in Quebec at 30 per cent.[13] Living in an environment hostile to their identity can shape how Muslim artists navigate visibility, public reception and even access to institutional support.

Mohamed Shaheen founded the Silk Road Institute (SRI) in 2013 while living in Montreal. "There was a lack of representation for Muslim communities in the arts and storytelling," he says.

Shaheen started the organization after witnessing the provincial debate around reasonable accommodation — a legal framework prohibiting discrimination based on religion, among other things. It also requires employers and the government to accommodate the beliefs and practices of Canadian citizens to a certain degree. During the debates, he noticed that Muslims were discussed solely through a political or policy lens rather than acknowledged for their individual stories.

In 2018, SRI launched Canada's first professional Muslim theatre company. Their inaugural show was *The Domestic Crusaders*, a play by American writer **Wajahat Ali** about a multi-generational Pakistani American family dealing with their tribulations in a post-9/11 world. This was followed by British writer **Rabiah Hussain**'s play *Spun*, which follows two Pakistani English women navigating the intricacies of friendship into adulthood. When the 2005 London terror attacks happen, it further complicates their relationship. The most recent production was written by Canadian author **Uzma Jalaluddin**. Performed in 2023, *The Rishta* is a romantic comedy about a South Asian woman who falls in love with a Moroccan man.

"Montreal is a centre for the arts, which means it's quite a good place to start an organization like Silk Road … it's such a creative city," says Shaheen. It also has the second-largest population of Muslim artists after Toronto, at 12 per cent.

Though, the city of Montreal is not necessarily an accurate representation of the province of Quebec, says singer and songwriter Meryem Saci. Born and raised in Algeria, Saci fled civil war in the early 2000s and settled in Montreal, where she's been based ever since.

"Montreal is filled with a certain level of multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism, so that becomes the minority or the diversity, but the rest is Québécois. Being a Montrealer is one thing … but the essence of identity here in Québécois."

While Saci speaks French fluently, considering it her second language after Arabic, her music is primarily in English. And despite living in Quebec since she was a teenager, she isn't technically considered Québécois.

"There's a monopoly for Québécois artistry and artists. If you're not Québécois, or you don't present Québécois, or sound Québécois, it's much harder. That's been my experience," she says. "There's this need and focus to maintain the culture and language as much as possible, and everything else is like a threat to that."

Saci has found more success with national grants than she has with provincial opportunities. She acknowledges it's been difficult to make a lucrative career in Quebec, but leaving is not as simple as it seems, either.

"I know I don't have a place in certain spaces. Not only that, but I know my voice or what I have to say would be bothersome," she says. "I don't present as a Muslim artist, [but] if my music was related to my faith, or if I wore hijab, I know for a fact that it would have been very problematic."

She says it all depends how you present. "There's this stand-offishness … like, you're different. We know you're not from here. And I don't claim to be from here. I have a whole different story. I'm a political refugee."

The third-highest percentage of Muslim artists is in British Columbia. Fourteen per cent of artists live in the province; that's higher than B.C.'s share of Muslim workers in general.

After Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia, the numbers dwindle significantly. The Census deems statistics in all three territories and certain Atlantic and Prairie regions as "not reliable." This generally means fewer than 40 Muslim artists reside there.

Provinces and regions (as % of Canadian totals)	% of Muslim artists	% of all artists	% of all Muslim workers	% of all workers
Canada	100%	100%	100%	100%
Atlantic region	2%	5%	2%	6%
Newfoundland & Labrador	N/A	1%	0%	1%
Prince Edward Island	N/A	0%	0%	0%
Nova Scotia	1%	3%	1%	3%
New Brunswick	N/A	1%	0%	2%
Quebec	18%	21%	25%	23%
Ontario	58%	40%	52%	38%
Prarie region	9%	13%	13%	18%
Manitoba	1%	3%	1%	4%
Saskatchewan	N/A	2%	1%	3%
Alberta	8%	9%	11%	12%
British Colombia	14%	20%	8%	14%
Three Territories	N/A	0%	0%	0%
Yukon Territory	N/A	0%	0%	0%
Northwest Territories	N/A	0%	0%	0%
Nunavut	N/A	0%	0%	0%

(Note: If there are fewer than 40 workers, Census deems it to be "not reliable.")

As for Muslim arts leaders, the data trends the same as Muslim artists. Ontario (56 per cent) and Quebec (28 per cent) have the first and second largest populations, and B.C. remains third but at a much lower rate of eight per cent.

How much do Muslim creatives make in Canada?

Visual artist Aquil Virani notes it's important to push back against the lawyer-doctor-engineer trope in many racialized, immigrant cultures.

"The logic is somewhat circular because we pay artists poorly, and then say people shouldn't be artists because they're paid poorly," he says.

The B.C.-born Ismaili Muslim artist has a long resume of successful work: the first national artist-in-residence at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 in Halifax; multi-award-winner, international exhibitor and subject of a CBC radio documentary. The list goes on.

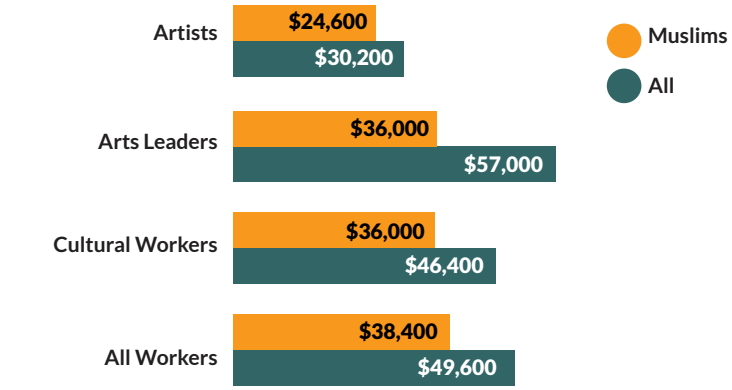
Still, Virani kept a side job to help pay the bills when he was starting his artistic career.

The median salary of Canadian artists in 2020 was $30,200. Muslim artists were making 19 per cent less, at $24,600. Both these figures are below the livable wage in Canada.

In select senior occupations, Muslim arts leaders made $36,000. This is 37 per cent lower than the median for all Canadian arts leaders, who made around $57,200 — the general threshold for a livable wage in 2020.

Muslim cultural workers also made $36,000 compared to their peers, who made $46,400.

Median personal incomes of Muslim workers compared with all Canadian workers for select groupigs of occupations, Canada, 2021, Census



Hills Strategies Research Inc., 2025

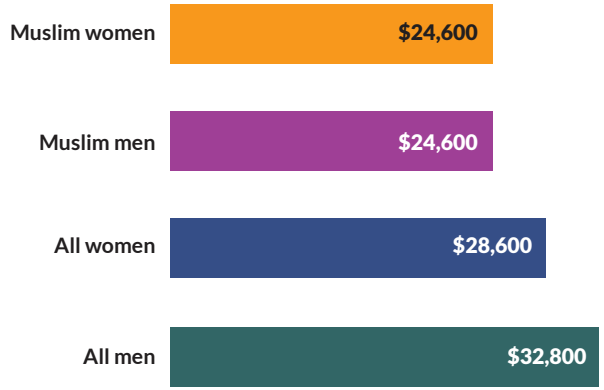
Note: The Census counts people in the occupation in which they worked the most hours in early May 2021. If they did not work that week, they are classified into the occupation of longest duration since January 1, 2020. Source: 2021 Census, custom data request by Hill Strategies for the Inspirit Foundation.

2017 Bochra Manai portrait by Aquil Virani

Across Canada, Muslim and Sikh artists have the lowest incomes among all religious groups. Jewish artists have the highest median incomes at $36,400, followed by artists of no religious affiliation and Christians.

Muslim men and women make an equal amount, which isn't the case for the general population of artists, where women artists make 13 per cent less than their male counterparts.

Median personal incomes of Muslim artists and all artists by gender, Canada, 2021 Census

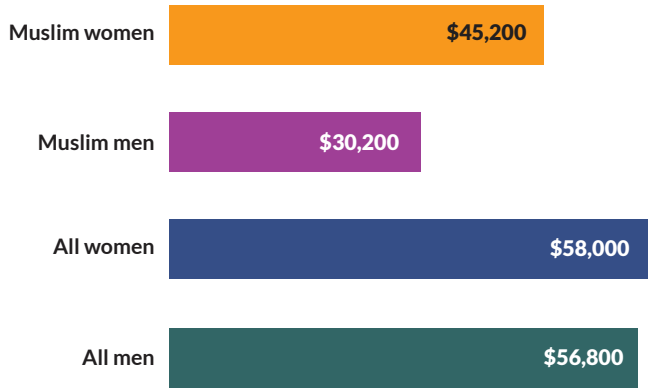


Hills Strategies Research Inc., 2025

Note: Personal incomes include all sources for an individual during the 2020 calendar year. Source: 2021 Census, custom data request by Hill Strategies for the Inspirit Foundation.

When it comes to arts leaders, the numbers shift a bit. Muslim women who are arts leaders have much higher median salaries than Muslim men. And for general arts leaders, men and women are paid similarly, with women making a little more.

Median personal incomes of Muslim arts leaders and all arts leaders by gender, Canada, 2021 Census



Hills Strategies Research Inc., 2025

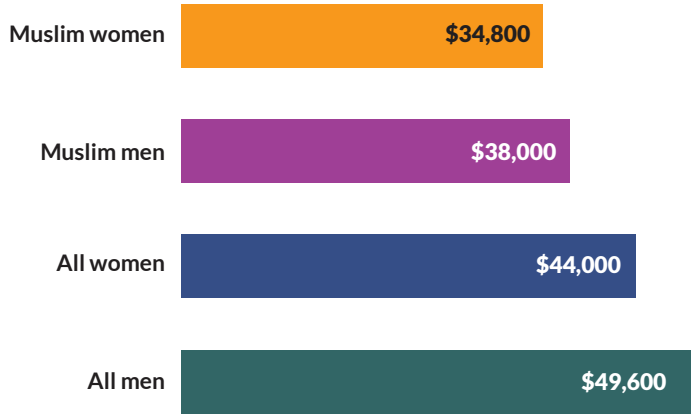
Note: Personal incomes include all sources for an individual during the 2020 calendar year. Source: 2021 Census, custom data request by Hill Strategies for the Inspirit Foundation.

While we don't have crucial information like the types of leadership positions held by respondents or their education levels, work experiences and differences in household incomes, the statistics indicate that women who obtain leadership positions are paid more than men. Muslim men and women, however, continue to earn less than general median incomes.

Among all cultural occupations, Muslim workers have the lowest median incomes of any religious group. The wage gap rears its head again, with Muslim men cultural workers making $38,000 and Muslim women making $34,800.

Note from Kelly Hill: The above income statistics relate to 2020, a year with many pandemic lockdowns and slowdowns in artistic activity. It was also a year when many artists and cultural workers received support from pandemic assistance programs.[14]

Median personal incomes of Muslim artists and all artists by gender, Canada, 2021 Census

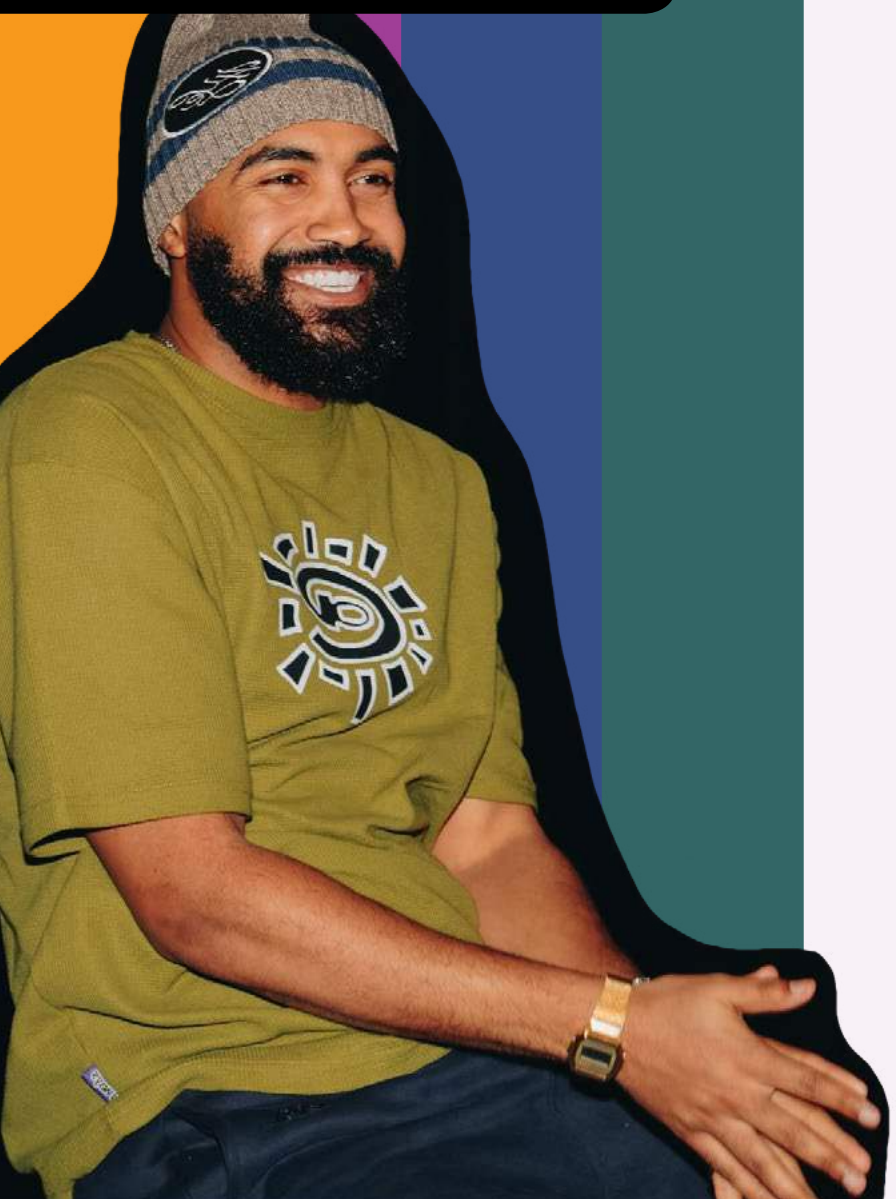


Hills Strategies Research Inc., 2025

Note: Personal incomes include all sources for an individual during the 2020 calendar year. Source: 2021 Census, custom data request by Hill Strategies for the Inspirit Foundation.

Hassan Phills

is a comedian based in Toronto, Ontario.



On choosing stand-up comedy
"I was in love with the idea of doing stand-up comedy since my childhood, but I wanted to live a life before I started doing it. While I was in university, I was doing a lot of things in my life halfway. I told myself if I could just dedicate five years of my life to something I wanted to do for the next 30 to 40 years, I should be in a good place. I scaled back on a lot of things like school, basketball, YouTube content, relationships, and I solely focused on comedy. I think very rarely do young Black men find something that they're good at and run with it. Alhamdulillah, I think I found that at the right time and I've been running ever since."

On making comedy work
"I had to streamline my life. I got day jobs so I could focus on comedy at night. I made sure I made enough money from those jobs so I didn't have to rely on making money from comedy, because I think finances in the early pursuit of any artistic career could really disrupt the process of growing and getting better. I didn't want to rely on making money from the art to continue pursuing the art."

On funding
"I've been doing comedy full-time for the past three or four years. I don't know, it's such a blur. Funding is always going to be the most challenging part for any artist. You have ideas, but even those cost money to bring together. Aside from some brand deals and sponsorships, most of the money comes from people who buy tickets. Those ticket sales are what puts money in our pocket so we can do a show in the next city or come back again. It helps us grow and scale the journey."

On representation
"To be honest, I face more racism than I do Islamophobia. I've also dealt with racism amongst Muslims. I don't think I'm the typical Muslim that people perceive online. I'm of Caribbean and East African descent, which is like the perfect mix for a person from Toronto. I'm a standup comic who happens to be Muslim and not just a Muslim comedian. I also take pride in not being the kind of comic that makes fun of Islam. To me, that's extremely corny. That's not me. As a Black Muslim person, the representation card holds so much weight. You're representing your house, your family, your kin, your heritage, and on top of that, Islam. I don't think of it as a burden, but it is a responsibility."

On how he can be better supported
"I need Black and brown people to buy tickets early. They wait till last minute. They raise my blood pressure, my anxiety, my stress. If I'm working with bigger venues to fill out these spaces, they like 'We're a week out and we've only sold this many tickets. We don't think anybody's going to come.' I'm telling them, Wallahi, just trust me. They're gonna come, they're just indecisive. They're super last minute."

Mustaali Raj

is a visual artist based in Vancouver, British Columbia.

On his journey
"I grew up in Calgary, where most people get close to the energy sector. I did engineering before, and I disliked it. I ended up moving out to Vancouver and going back to school for design and illustration. And then I completely switched industries to design and advertising. Now I primarily work as a visual artist and designer."

On funding
"In 2016, I became independent. I've been working as a freelancer and a consultant. My earnings are still from the branding and advertising side of my work, but I'm continually building my visual art practice and my goal is to make that my primary source of income. In terms of my personal work, I've funded it all myself. Grants are something that I'm looking into, but it's daunting. It's overwhelming. I'm the designer, the accountant, the marketing, business promotion, so I'm wearing a lot of hats. And then grant writing and applications is another thing I have to take on."

On being an artist in a charged political climate
"Last year has probably been the roughest, and there's several reasons for that. One is the overall economy, all sectors are getting affected. But I feel like the political landscape might also contribute to that a little bit. It has to do with Palestine. In my personal work, I have been vocal in advocating for human rights in all parts of the world, including Palestine. I can't confirm this, but I'm sure all this affects people in other industries, as well. There might be some hesitation with some clients to engage."

On the next steps
"One of the reasons why I didn't go into this field at the get-go is because there was no one who looked like me, who came from my background, doing the things that I wanted to do. You didn't see a lot of Muslims working in design or advertising or visual arts at the forefront of the industry. Canada still needs some sort of creative platform for Muslims that not just showcases artists but also advocates for Muslim artists in this space and provides guidance and resources."

FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE TO MUSLIM CREATIVES IN CANADA

The Canadian arts funding model is rooted in the 1951 report by the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences — more commonly known as the Massey Report. The recommendations made in this document resulted in the creation of institutions like the Library and Archives Canada and the Canada Council for the Arts, along with introducing the idea of Canadian content. But since its creation, the document has remained unchanged. There have been many calls to update the Massey Report, including from prominent artists and scholars like **Zainub Verjee**. In a 2025 *The Hill Times* article, Verjee emphasized cultural sovereignty as an integral component of national identity, rather than a nostalgic relic. A renewed Massey Report, she writes, "must celebrate the diversity of Canadian voices — Indigenous, immigrant, francophone, and anglophone alike — while positioning Canada as a global leader in cultural innovation and pluralism."[15]
When considering that our cultural policies are still influenced by a policy document from 74 years ago, and one that omits the rich diversity of Canada today, the systemic gaps and barriers become clearer.

As it stands, only two national funds exist expressly for Muslim artists. These are separate from monetary awards any universities, mosques or community organizations offer.

The first is Inspirit Foundation's New Narratives Fund, launched in 2025. This awards up to $50,000 per project to support marketing, distribution, audience development and presentation of impactful creative works by Canadian Muslim artists. The Fund does not focus on content creation but on amplifying and strengthening narratives that are ready to launch. Seven projects were awarded in the inaugural year.

The second is the annual Silk Road Creative Arts Grants. Two artists receive $2,500 every year. According to their website, "Canadian Muslim artists are invited to apply by submitting a proposal for a new artistic creation. Artistic creations include, but are not limited to, the visual arts (paintings, drawings, photography, sculptures, and architecture), literature (novels, poems, and playscripts), and media (documentary, film, and videos)."

Cultural strategist **Kelly Wilhelm** has a few theories about why Muslim-specific funding isn't available in Canada. Because public funders for the arts haven't asked artists to identify themselves based on religion, they don't know how well they serve religious groups.

"When you go to someone like the Canada Council for the Arts and ask the question, 'What do you do for Muslim artists?' they can't tell you because legally they can't collect that information without permission. They haven't done the work to develop a religious identification form or anything along those lines," she says. It should be noted that within the federal government, public servants are not able to self-identify along religious lines, making it impossible to consider religious identity at all.

The process of data collection takes a lot of time and effort.

"My experience has been that there is not a lot of interest in collecting data on religion, and there are not a lot of people who have been asking for it either, because the racialized categories have gone a long way," says Wilhelm. While some people assumed Muslims would be captured in those categories, that hasn't been the case.

Wilhelm questions how well Muslim artists are served by other equity-targeted programs. "The public funding system does not duplicate. If they're serving a need here, they're not going to want to do a second thing over there." Given the lack of data, it's a tough question to answer.

According to **Timaj Garad**, whose day job is as an arts administrator in the public sector, more can be done to identify unique challenges facing Muslim artists. "Funders prioritize equity-seeking groups," she says. "Muslims are often not identified specifically as part of the conversation when it comes to equity and inclusion within the granting process and also within the arts community as a whole."

In 2021, the National Council of Canadian Muslims released policy recommendations following the Emergency National Action Summit on Islamophobia.[16] Three of their recommendations dealt specifically with Muslim artists, including the call for funding from Canada Media Fund, Telefilm, the National Film Board and provincial and municipal grants. They also requested that a multi-million-dollar fund be allocated through the Anti-Racism Secretariat or the Ministry of Heritage for Canadian Muslims to facilitate grassroots storytelling. Four years later, none of these recommendations have been adopted, though the Office of the Special Representative on Combatting Islamophobia continues to advance the need to recognize the contributions of Muslim artists to Canada through events, including collaborations and participation with Canadian museums, festivals and ongoing discussions with federal departments and agencies.

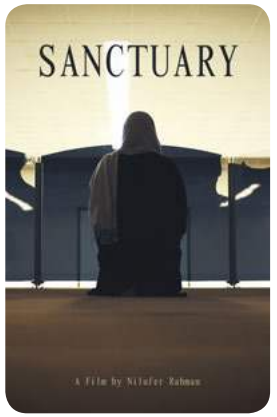
So, how well are Muslims served under the general BIPOC, racialized or diversity funds? Canada Media Fund's Changing Narratives Fund[17] supports diverse communities and "ethno-religious minorities." Their Program for Black and Racialized Communities[18] supports the growth of English and French language audiovisual production from production companies owned and controlled by Black people and people of colour. The Ontario Arts Council has programs that support the work of Ontario-based arts professionals who are Indigenous or People of Colour. The Black Arts Project Program,[19] which Garad led and managed when she worked at the Toronto Arts Council, supports arts projects by Black artists, collectives and organizations. The Canadian Independent Screen Fund for BPOC Creators is a national fund governed and operated by Black and racialized groups to support emerging, mid-level and established screen-based creators from BPOC communities.[20]

These are just a few examples of funds aimed at diversifying artistry in Canada. But the lack of specificity in funding regarding the overarching "BIPOC" or "racialized" categories means many identities fall between the cracks. The broader the eligibility, the more competitive it is.

This competition for funding can affect the kind of projects that artists propose.

"It feels like when DEI was sexy, there was an appetite for Muslim stories — but only if they were a certain kind of Muslim story. So perhaps a little bit self-deprecating, a little bit self-loathing, a little bit pandering, like it had to have elements of that," says **Rua Wani**, a film and television producer based in Toronto. "Of course, [they] are absolutely part of many people's experiences [and] they are completely valid, and must be told as well. But it's just like, how much nuance are we allowed to show? It seems to be mostly just those Muslim perspectives are being shown, and not other ones." Wani describes a common feeling expressed by Muslim artists who don't see themselves reflected in general diversity-focused initiatives. To be considered, they must contort themselves to fit into specified categories.

For **Nilufer Rahman**, independent filmmaker and co-founder of Snow Angel Films in Winnipeg, the funders' appetite for deeply personal stories from racialized creators has been a challenge. "There's a lot of power in sharing personal stories, but I've also found it frustrating that peak funders really don't want to look at the work you're proposing unless you're willing to be really vulnerable," she says.



Poster for the film "Sanctuary" by Nilufer Rahman

"When you look at all these diversity funds, they want to get diverse stories out there and so they're looking for that sort of thing. They want people to tell their deeply personal truths and that's only where they can be authentic, which I understand, but I just feel like … I don't want to use the word 'exploitative,' but I feel that sometimes it is."

Director and writer **Sara Rangooni** echoes Rahman. "I feel like, as a visible Muslim, I have been told on occasion, 'We already have a Muslim story. We don't need another one.' So that's been really hard," she says. If the only financial support for Muslim creators falls under diversity funds, it's unlikely juries will choose multiple "Muslim stories." One spotlight at a time doesn't amount to much progress in the long run.

But even those funds are vulnerable to cuts. The Racial Equity Screen Office (RESO)[21] was founded towards the end of 2020 in the wake of George Floyd's murder by police officers in Minnesota, Breonna Taylor's murder by police officers in her Kentucky home and other tragic incidents that kicked off what is now referred to as the summer of racial reckoning.

Hanna Cho, RESO's former executive director, says the calls started coming from their funders about a year ago. "EDIA funding is sunsetting, given the political climate," she says, referring to equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility. In 2020, up to 15 new advocacy groups were founded. Cho says calls are now being made for these groups to amalgamate as funding runs out. "I'm a pragmatist, so I tend to think that maybe for now, [amalgamation] isn't just a bad idea. But a lot of groups are worried about losing their distinctive voice and becoming a monolith of BIPOC."

Cho reiterates Wani's concern about the lack of nuance. Islamophobia has a very real and potent undercurrent in Canada, and it's targeted in its threat. Failing to acknowledge the specificity of Muslim experience further contributes to barriers and further constraints. As Wani puts it, "Islamophobia is quite embedded and very normalized in many ways. I feel like it's one of the few remaining biases or forums of discrimination that is quite acceptable [in] polite society."

Yassin "Narcy" Alsalman

is a musician and multi-media artist based in Montreal, Quebec.

On the start of his journey
"I started making music in the early 2000s, before 9/11. At the time, Arab hip hop was not really anything yet. I started working with two of my Iraqi friends. Coming up in the Montreal hip hop scene, we realized quickly that it was very divided. On the French side, there was industry. On the English side, there was no infrastructure, and it was very underground. In a weird way, we were at an advantage because our community was in the news, so we struck out and got a lot of press coverage. Within two years of my career, the world went to war with my motherland. We put out 'Stereotypes Incorporated' in 2004 that dealt with all of these subcategories: our visitor status in Quebec, our visitor status in hip hop, and then these people put on a pedestal in North America. And we didn't want the pedestal, so there was an immediate rejection element to our work that had to be present. And then I went solo in 2006, when I started my master's degree on Arab hip hop in Media Studies."

On making it in Canada
"Much of my opportunity was not in Canada, it was in the Middle East. There was no money to be made here, let alone getting into industry spaces and not being pigeonholed as a Muslim Arab artist. So Canada became where I lived, spent my money and created, whereas my output was going towards the east. It's weird because I'm an English artist. I didn't have management, I didn't have a team, I excelled in what I was doing, I became a professor. All these things happened for me, but I'm still in the margins to this day. I'm recognized for what I do, but I'm not in the industry at all. I've never been nominated or recognized for my music. I've been recognized for my visual work. I got the opportunity to direct a video for A Tribe Called Red and Yasiin Bey for the 'R.E.D.' video. Every time I go into something, I think, what is my intention with the work? Industry here doesn't seem to have intention. Here, it's all about safety. There's no sense of challenging the status quo."

On opening a bookshop, Maktaba "I was 38 when the pandemic hit, and my wife Sundus was 36. We both got published around that time, and we realized books have been a throughline in both of our works. Sundus is a visual artist and writer, so when she's researching, she always goes to books. I always go to books when I'm working on albums. She always wanted a bookshop. For the first time in my career, I was like, 'Who am I?' I was forced to sit in the city where I live for an extended period and figure out what I want to do. As much as Maktaba is a bookshop, it's also an art project for Sundus. The curatorial process, our ability to siphon community with a safe space we've created in the city, it became larger than the bookshop."

On being based in Quebec
"Montreal is very different from Quebec. Being in the metropolis here, it's such an artistic space. We could open Maktaba in Toronto, but it'll quickly become a novelty thing. It's expected there. In a place like Quebec, it's an anomaly. The gift and curse of this province is that, yes, you're constantly alienated. Yes, they're super Islamophobic on a government level. But then when you're on the streets, it's like hugs and heart."

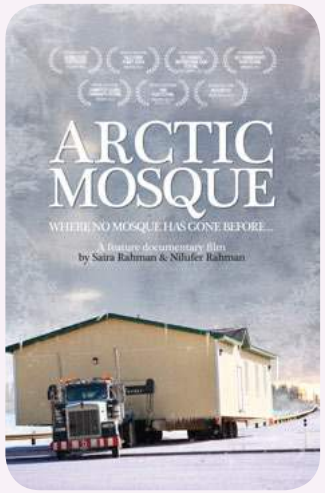
On facing Islamophobia in his career
"From people calling me the Taliban guy early on in my career to now, in my 40s … I tried to propose my TV show to a production house in Toronto and they cancelled my meeting out of fears that I was a dangerous person to bring to the office. One of the executive producers flagged me as anti-Semitic, which is just like the bastion of Arab existence. It's what happens whenever you're just an Arab being."

Nilufer Rahman is a filmmaker and co-founder of independent film production company Snow Angel Films based in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

On finding support in Manitoba
"In the late 90s, my sister Saira and I sought out ways for creative expression. When the first DSLR camera came out, we started accessing a lot of local programs and resources. In Manitoba, we have a really good independent filmmaking scene. We have the Winnipeg Film Group, Manitoba Film and Music, Film Training Manitoba, On Screen Manitoba. In the early 2000s, the Muslim filmmaking scene and social media wasn't big then. We didn't know what other people were doing, so a lot of what we were learning was very local."

On funding their work
"My sister actually has another full-time job right now. I have been doing a lot of the work on my own, and she does much of the back-end work right now. A lot of times, I'll just have to freelance outside of the company and do other things. We haven't been super business savvy; that's something we've struggled with. For past projects, we've accessed a few local grants. The Manitoba Film and Music grants are really difficult to navigate. It's a lot of work for not that much money, but they have been a trigger for us in accessing other funds. We have in development now a series that we want to pitch, and we did get development funding for that, mainly through the Indigenous Screen Office and from Canada Media Fund."

On their big break
"In 2010, we had this opportunity to make a documentary called *Arctic Mosque*. An organization in Winnipeg had agreed to help the Muslim community up North in Inuvik build a mosque. We didn't know anything about getting funding or how to properly produce a film. That was literally our education. It was also the one film where we accessed the most funding and support, we got a couple CBC slots, both regionally and nationally. That triggered a bigger fund which we got called the Shaw Media-Hot Docs Completion Fund, which helped us complete the film. Since then, we're very much focused on local stories. We haven't done anything bigger than that project."



On their current challenges
"The business side of creative work has always been a challenge, and we've always managed it, but I think there needs to be more business support for creators. We haven't accessed Canada Council for the Arts funding because it's often for individual artists, and they look for very POV-style films. We've tried before unsuccessfully, and that's the feedback we've gotten — a lot of our projects aren't POV per se. They're more like amplifying voices of a community. I also feel like we're in an odd place, because we're not just starting but also not 'there yet.' So our portfolio doesn't make us competitive for some of the bigger funds, but we're not quite emerging, but we're not quite established in the industry. It's a very difficult place to be for funding. I think the selection criteria need to be widened a bit."

WHAT WE HEARD: THE GAPS AND BARRIERS MUSLIMS ENCOUNTER WORKING IN CREATIVE INDUSTRIES ACROSS CANADA

This report documents interviews with Muslim artists across Canada who have a lot to say about their mediums, experiences and challenges in building a career. While they overwhelmingly acknowledge and appreciate access to public funding, especially in comparison to artists in the U.S. who don't receive government support, they still assert there is work to be done.

"It's hard as a visible hijabi to be taken seriously in this industry," says **Sara Rangooni**, a Toronto-based writer and director. "I'm finding it really hard in terms of the barriers to entry because I don't think a lot of people understand what I'm trying to do. [Like] I don't write trauma-based stories … I write more coming of age, more pushing the boundaries, trying to change the narrative. I do find people outside Canada understand and accept that a little bit more, whereas here, I don't think they're ready for the kind of stories I have, to be honest."

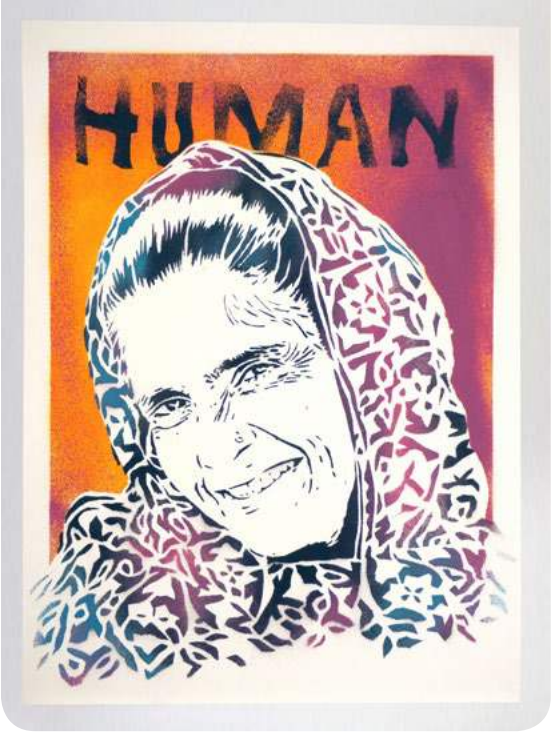
Rangooni found international success when she started pitching her proof of concept short film, *Leveled*, to various festivals worldwide. After receiving accolades for it, she used her own money to make the film. "The first festivals I wanted to submit to were Canadian, and I got rejected quite a bit. It was only once I started garnering a lot of attention in the States, in Europe, did I start getting requests from Canadian festivals asking if they can play *Leveled*."

What she describes is a common experience and complaint of Canadian artists — the idea that you have to make it elsewhere before you can make it in Canada. Imagine if this country celebrated and supported its talent from the beginning.

For Toronto's **Razeem Nauth-Ali**, more commonly known as **Raz Hyder**, everything boils down to a lack of infrastructure. The singer and songwriter has been in the game for 14 years now, and his artistry has been his main source of income for the past two and a half years. Similar to Rangooni, he found success abroad before he found it at home.

"Germany and Europe in general, even the U.K., they're much more open to new artists," he says. "In my experience at least, they're looking for artists who are giving them something new, telling great stories." The idea is that once you book multiple venues abroad, Canadians will start paying attention.

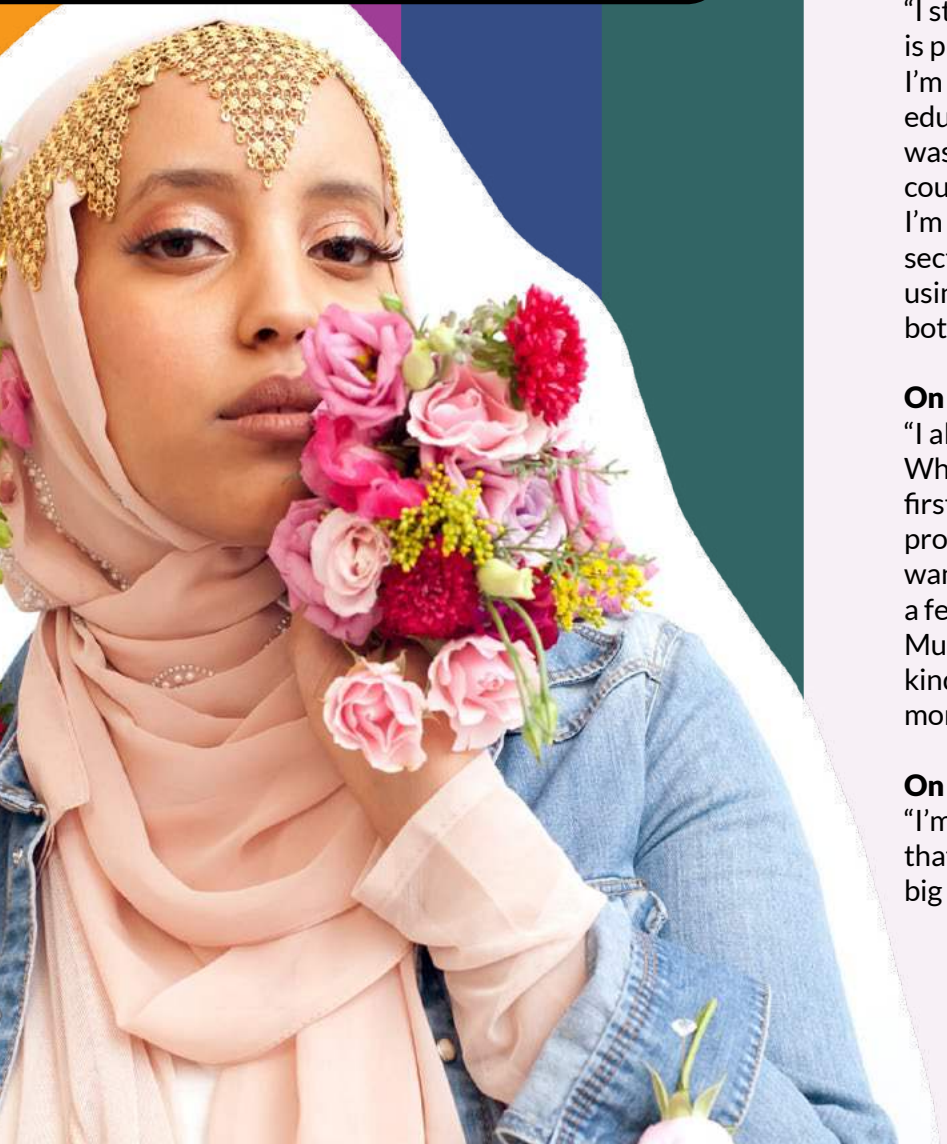
As far as funding artistry, Hyder says artists need to break out of the grant cycle. Leaning on grants to advance your career isn't the best use of the money. "Grant money should be seed money. It should be an investment to build something," he says. "The problem with just funding projects is that, if artists are unsuccessful, their art is stalled. If they are successful, they might be able to fund studio sessions, but what about touring? Then they enter a new round of grants to fund that. If we're just giving our grants and there's no infrastructure, no guidance to teach artists how to use it right, or help artists learn how to be a business, they will not survive. It's that simple."



A to Z Adjectives Describing Women by Aquil Virani

Timaj Garad

is a multidisciplinary artist and arts worker based in Toronto, Ontario.



On her current artistry
"I started like 18 years ago. My practice right now is primarily music, so I'm a singer/songwriter, but I'm also a spoken word artist. And I do a lot of arts education and community-based art activations. Art was my main source of income in the mid-2000s; for a couple of years I was working as a full-time artist, but I'm not anymore. I decided to transition into the arts sector as an arts worker. My approach to the work is using those perspectives as someone who's been on both ends of things."

On being grassroots
"I always see myself as a community-based artist. What was really a catalyst for me was when I got my first ever batch of grants to develop an arts education program and showcase for Black Muslim women who wanted to pursue poetry and theater. I also started a festival called Luminous Fest, which is a Black Muslim arts festival based in Toronto — the first of its kind. It ran for four years, though it's on pause at the moment."

On accessing resources
"I'm pretty good at grant writing, to be honest. I guess that's why I find myself in this profession. For me, a big issue was feeling held back by the lack of support for women in the arts within the Muslim community, specifically for women in music. There's a lot of contention around music, especially for women. I don't think that gender difference is necessarily grounded in anything substantial, from what I know, but it seems there's such a double standard in our community for women taking up space in general. When that kind of double standard exists, you inevitably lack resources by way of missed opportunities being diverted away from you towards your male counterparts."

On the importance of representation in arts funding and arts leadership
"Part of the work I did at Toronto Arts Council was outreach. Across the board, I don't see enough of us represented based on how many of us I know would be eligible to apply, and would probably want to apply if we felt we knew about those opportunities."

On supporting each other
"There needs to be more collaboration within our community. There needs to be support for us to even have the space to collaborative effectively. I find Toronto has this culture of, I'll do it when everyone is doing it. I'll go to your show when others are going to your show. And that bandwagoning attitude isn't conducive to nurturing the development of artists and their audiences."

PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT MUSLIMS IN CANADIAN CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

WHAT'S NEXT?

We asked our interviewees how they can be better supported in Canadian creative industries, and a few key suggestions emerged. Whether you're an artist, community member, funder, policymaker, or just a lover of the arts—there is a lot that can be done to ensure Canada's arts landscape is as diverse as its vibrant population. While "Canadian content" officially refers to broadcasters producing and presenting content from Canadians, it also evokes an image of who represents this country. The story of Canada has evolved over time, and this country is all the richer for it. The arts should reflect that.

This is a critical time in the evolution of Canadian arts and culture industries. In May 2025 the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) initiated public consultations to inform updated definitions for Canadian content (CanCon). Along with the ongoing modernization of the Broadcasting Act (and Bills C-10 and related Acts), this is a generational moment that will influence what content is produced and available to Canadians[22].

Similar calls for change are being levied towards public arts funders, such as the Canada Arts Council, to re-think about who and what gets funded[23].

In the midst of these changes, Muslim artists and cultural workers will continue to contribute to Canadian society every day. But without adequate and intentional support, we risk losing integral members of our national, regional, and local art scenes.

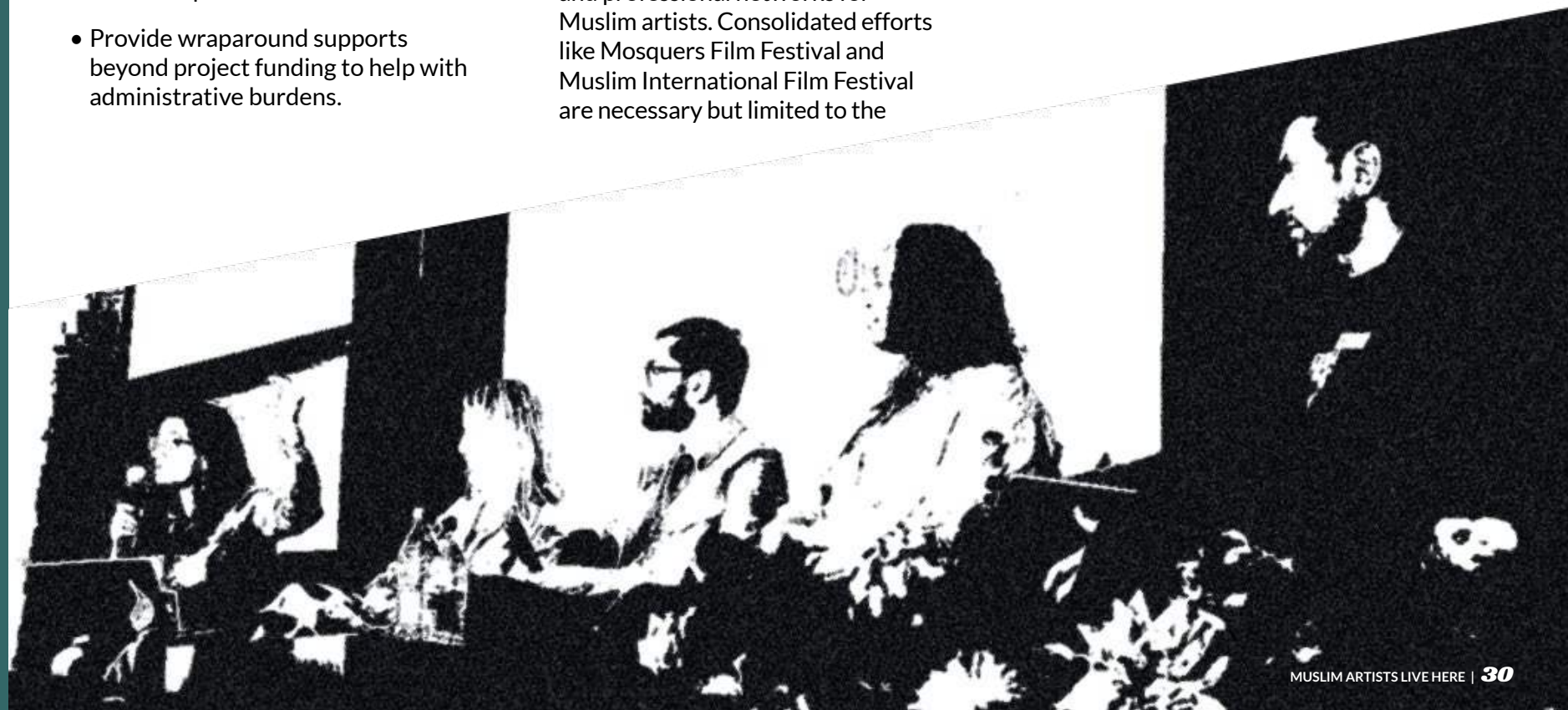
Here are some suggestions to help prevent that from happening:

Data Collection and Visibility

- Develop self-identification methods for Muslim artists in collaboration with Muslim communities to collect meaningful data on representation.
- Collect data on how many projects receive conceptual funding, get made or greenlit.
- Create a comprehensive database of Muslim artists to increase visibility and access to opportunities.

Funding and Infrastructure

- Establish dedicated funding streams for Muslim artists that are similar to those for other equity-seeking groups, recognizing their specific challenges.
- Establish multi-tiered funding structures for Muslim artists across various experience and success levels.
- Provide wraparound supports beyond project funding to help with administrative burdens.
- Provide support and guidance in the grant writing and application process, acknowledging that artists find them inaccessible, tedious, and often unsuccessful.
- Create mentorship opportunities and professional networks for Muslim artists. Consolidated efforts like Mosquers Film Festival and Muslim International Film Festival are necessary but limited to the screen arts. How can we provide an arena for Muslim artists of various mediums to connect and collaborate?
- Increase partnerships with art institutions and Muslim artists.

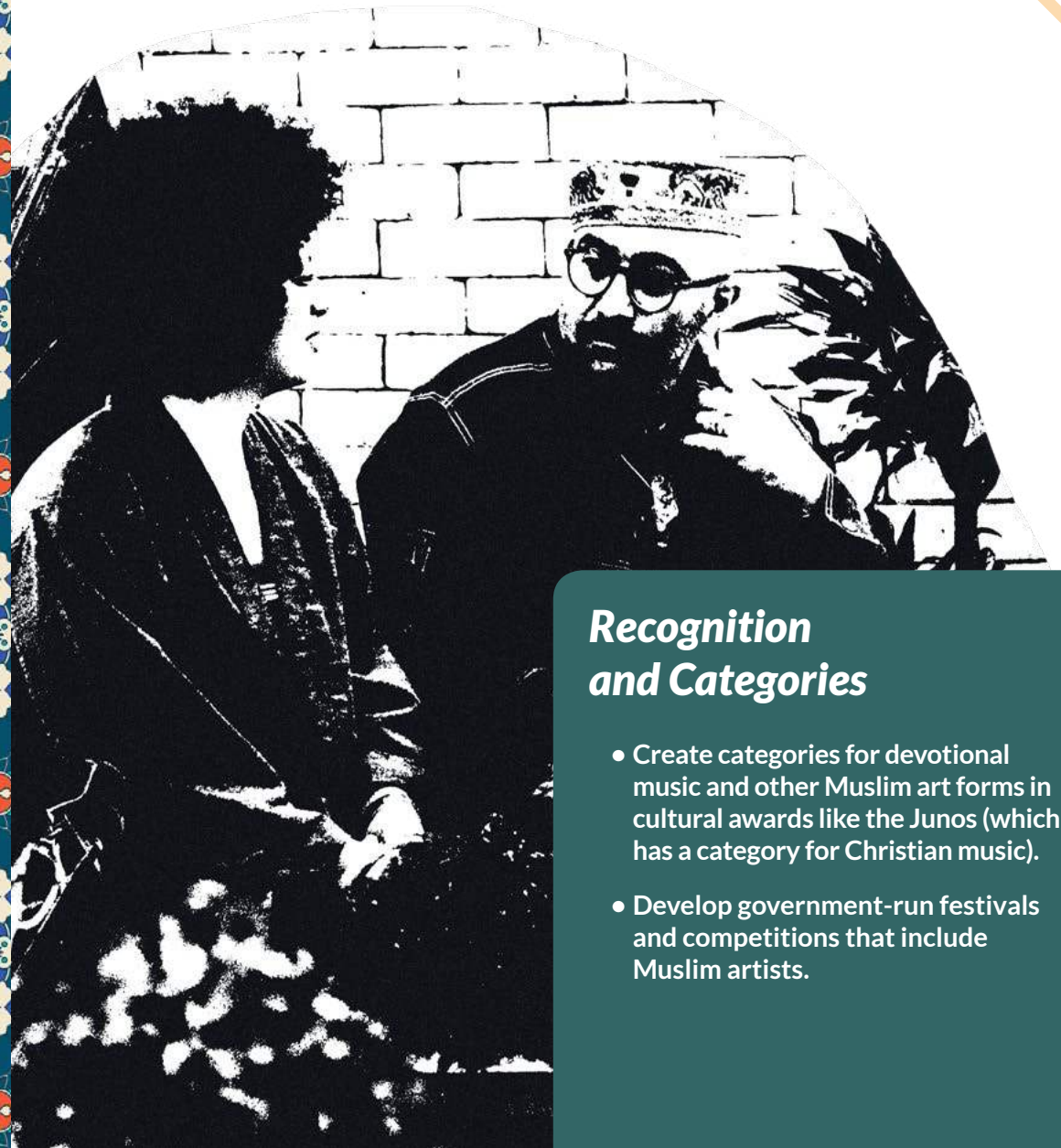


Representation and Decision-Making

- Increase Muslim representation in funding bodies and decision-making positions.
- Create mentorship opportunities to help artists move from mid-level to established positions.
- Develop a pipeline to help emerging artists advance in the industry.
    - For example, the **Pillars Artist Fellowship** offers mentorship, networking, and money to Muslim directors and screenwriting living in the U.S. or U.K. Along with $25,000, recipients get a supportive group of peers, professional development, and access to award-winning actors, directors, producers, and writers.

Community Support

- Support Muslim arts organizations, whether through financial means or collaboration.
    - For example, the **Muslim Media Hub** is a communal space in Mississauga, Ont. for Muslim creatives to nurture and develop talent. Along with creating content that reflects Islamic teachings and the diverse experience of Muslims globally, MMH also provides access to an editing suite, podcast and television studios, prayer space, and more. The initiative came from the seminal television show *Let the Quran Speak*, led by Dr. Shabir Ally and Dr. Safiyyah Ally, which continues to broadcast from the Islamic Information & Dawah Centre in Toronto.
- Create platforms specifically for Muslim artists to provide guidance and resources.
- Support Muslim-led institutions that can address the specific priorities of their communities.
- Address discrimination within Muslim communities, particularly when it comes to intersectionality. Equity training isn't just important for non-Muslims, it's also important within the realms of Muslim spaces to tackle pervasive problems like anti-Black racism, misogyny and more.
- Increase support and recognition specifically for Muslim women in the arts.
- Pay artists to perform at Muslim community events, conferences, etc. at a competitive rate. Respecting and validating artists in the community means paying them fairly.
- Work as a collective. Group shows, for example, attract more viewers and help more artists, rather than big solo shows.



Recognition and Categories

- Create categories for devotional music and other Muslim art forms in cultural awards like the Junos (which has a category for Christian music).
- Develop government-run festivals and competitions that include Muslim artists.

International collaboration

- Identify and facilitate projects with artists and arts organizations around the world. Muslim artists have already been creating international collaborations on their own, but there is a missed opportunity on a national scope. Similar to the work RESO is doing with their export training programs in Asia Pacific, collaborations are waiting to be made — especially, but not limited to, predominantly Muslim regions like the Middle East, across Asia and Africa and beyond.

Combatting Islamophobia

- Promote affirmative cultural content creation as a way to combat Islamophobia, which is not just a social issue but a creative barrier that shapes what gets funded, seen, and supported.
- Recognize and amplify the significance of Muslim citizens in Canada's cultural landscape beyond just Islamic Heritage Month
- Seek a diverse array of voices. Muslim artists often face the burden of representing their entire community rather than being seen as individual artists. Working against this trap of the monolith means providing a lot more visibility for Muslim artists sharing a wide spectrum of experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MUSLIM ARTISTS LIVE HERE

The opportunities and challenges for Muslims working in Canada's cultural industries.

This report was researched and written by Radiyah Chowdhury.

Radiyah Chowdhury is a multidisciplinary journalist from Toronto, Canada. She has a Bachelor's of Journalism from Carleton University and a Master of Arts from Columbia University in New York, where she attended the Graduate School of Journalism as a Fulbright scholar. While at Columbia, her thesis explored the efficacy of representation as it pertains to devout Muslim women in film, theatre, and television. She was awarded the Pulitzer Traveling Fellowship upon graduation in 2023. She's worked across mediums, from television and radio to digital media and print. You can find more about her work at radiyahchowdhury.com.

Additional research was provided by Kelly Hill of Hill Strategies Inc.

Inspirit Foundation:
Chris Lee, Director of Programming
Jozef Agtarap, Communications Manager

Report designed by Azza Abbaro.

We wish to thank everyone who participated in interviews and contributed to the report:

Rhia Aden, Yassin Alsalman, Sara Ansari, Hanna Cho, Naseha Chowdhury, Anver Emon, Timaj Garad, Anas Hasan, Jamelie Hassan, Israa Howlader, Shababa Huda, Raz Hyder, Ali Idres, Zeena Ismail, Shafik Kamani, Nader Khan, Joy Loewen, Abdul Malik, Sajjad Naqvi, Hassan Phills, Nilufer Rahman, Mustaali Raj, Sara Rangooni, Syed Raza, Meryem Saci, Nawal Salim, Mohamed Shaheen, Fahmida Suleman, Basim Usmani, Aquil Virani, Rua Wani, Kelly Wilhelm

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