

# MP Iqra Khalid on being ambitious, ethno-cultural and female in Canada

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Shortly after 29-year-old Iqra Khalid decided to seek the nomination to become a candidate in the last federal election, the Pakistani-born immigrant visited a community adviser along with her father. He invited them to sit down in his living room. Then, in an utterly calm, icy voice, he delivered his verdict: "Don't run — there's no way you'll ever win."

Khalid understood what he meant. She was young, female and a visible minority, and outside the establishment of typical MPs. Khalid felt momentarily defeated.

"Dad, should I be doing this?" she asked.

"If you think you can, then let's do it," said her father.

Buoyed by her family's support and her own determination, Khalid ran as the Liberal candidate for the riding of Mississauga-Erin Mills. "I'm headstrong. When I set a goal I'll tunnel vision that goal — that keeps me going at times when I don't want to go on," she says. Khalid went on to win the election, unseating the incumbent, in October 2015.

Growing up in Pakistan Khalid has always had a stubborn streak. She went to an all-girls' school in Pakistan, where pupils were expected to be obedient, recite lessons and conform to the rules. Khalid didn't. "I did my own thing," she says. When she was disobedient, teachers smacked her palms with a ruler.

Khalid, a sister to three brothers, also felt gender discrimination during these times. Though her brothers got to go out and play in the park, Khalid stayed home and learned cooking and sewing. "I remember often feeling trapped," she says.

Khalid also knew that her career opportunities in Pakistan would be limited. If she was lucky enough to attend university, soci-

ety would have pushed her toward a degree in home economics and family obligations. "If I was in Pakistan, I'd be married with four kids by now," she says.

The limitations she faced in her birth country have galvanized her to make the most of opportunities in life. "My experiences in Pakistan have pushed me to really get out there," she says.

Immigrating to Canada After immigrating to Canada via England, Khalid says, "I felt equal to my brothers here." Her parents were very progressive, raising her like a son, with as much opportunity to get an education. Khalid completed a bachelor's degree from York University later a law degree from Western Michigan University. "I'll be forever grateful to my parents for that."

But even with the confidence her parents gave her, Khalid faced systemic racism and gender-based discrimination. Being a Muslim, female immigrant, Khalid had trouble making friends at school. "I was the odd one out." Later, at a clerical job following graduation from York, she discovered that she was paid considerably less than a male colleague. She confronted her boss and received a raise.

Inequity as a woman in Canada Khalid is not alone in having faced inequity as a working woman in Canada. Despite Canada's entrenched values of women's equality and human rights, the day-to-day reality is that women still face barriers and challenges their male counterparts do not.

According to a recent report published by Oxfam Canada and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, women earn less and perform nearly twice as many hours of unpaid work as men. In spite of high levels of education among girls and women, the report, Making Women Count, states that the wage

gap in Canada is getting bigger, not smaller. In 2009, women earned 74.4 per cent of what men earned; in 2011 it was 72 per cent. And the gap is worse for immigrant and ethno-cultural women. They also face higher rates of unemployment despite higher levels of education, according to Statistics Canada.

Spreading the message of women's equality

For her part, Khalid is using her platform to help spread the message of women's equality. She seconded a motion creating a day of equality for women, to highlight the challenges Canadian women still face. She also hosted a women's empowerment event in her riding, where a panel of distinguished women, including a female police chief, discussed how they balanced home with a demanding career. Khalid is also the vice-chair of the Women's Caucus, a group of female Liberal MPs who meet weekly to consider all the different policies and bills through a gender lens.

Khalid's personal experiences have encouraged her to champion fairness not just for women, but all victims of discrimination. "It made me a lot more empathetic toward women's issues, race problems, gay rights and transgender concerns because I've experienced what inequality feels like," she says. "We can't succeed if we're not intertwined with each other, if we're segregated by language, nationality, gender or skin colour."

Of all her accomplishments, Khalid is most proud of being a role model for minority women. Shortly after she was elected to office, a couple of young immigrant girls came up to her and thanked her for her leadership. "We really look up to you — you've shown us that things can be done," they told her.

Khalid concludes: "Hopefully I've contributed to a more open and inclusive Canada."



Metroland file photo  
Mississauga-Erin Mills Liberal Iqra Khalid answers a question at the all-candidates debate held at University of Toronto Mississauga.