Policy Brief 1:

Cultural Responsiveness as a Core Safety Standard (Not Optional)

Core message: Mainstream shelters are failing many Muslim women because "safety" is being defined too narrowly. Cultural and spiritual safety must be treated as a core standard of care, on par with physical safety, rather than as an optional accommodation.

Issue

Women experiencing GBV often face impossible choices between staying with an abuser or entering a shelter system that feels unsafe, culturally hostile, or practically inaccessible. For visibly Muslim women and women with limited English, mainstream shelter environments can be retraumatizing due to discrimination, lack of halal food, lack of prayer space, lack of privacy, and exposure to substance use and mixed-gender settings.

Evidence from the Nisa Homes report

- Among surveyed clients, nearly half (46%) reported feeling unsafe in prior shelter environments (15 "very unsafe," 8 "somewhat unsafe").
- Women described being denied halal/vegan meals, having no space for prayer, experiencing theft and lack of secure storage, and encountering discrimination when raising concerns.
- Women emphasized that surveillance measures (cameras, locked doors, 24-hour staff) did not automatically create safety when identity-based risk remained (e.g., fear of being recognized in an abuser's community).

- By contrast, 72% chose Nisa Homes because it aligned with their religious/spiritual values; 60% cited responsiveness to cultural and religious needs (e.g., halal food, prayer spaces).

Policy problem

Current shelter funding, standards, and accountability frameworks often treat culturally responsive care as "nice to have," leaving it under-resourced, inconsistently delivered, and dependent on individual staff capacity. This results in
(1) delayed help-seeking,
(2) premature exits from shelter,
(3) return to unsafe relationships, and
(4) repeated shelter use; these outcomes are costly for systems and devastating for survivors.

Policy recommendations

1. Adopt cultural and spiritual safety as a formal shelter standard within provincial shelter regulations, GBV frameworks, and homelessness program guidelines (not as an "accommodation" policy).

2. Tie public funding to measurable cultural-safety indicators (e.g., culturally safe food access, privacy and prayer space options, anti-Islamophobia protocols, language access plans, staff training completion).

3. Require intersectional GBV risk assessment that recognizes spiritual abuse, reputational risk, and immigration-related coercion (especially in sponsorship contexts).

4. Fund cross-sector training and partnerships that allow mainstream shelters to co-design services with culturally grounded organizations (e.g., joint training, referral pathways, shared case conferencing).

Implementation considerations

- Define “cultural safety” operationally (inputs, processes, and outcomes), to avoid tokenism (e.g., a one-time training) and ensure accountability.
- Do not treat cultural responsiveness as uniform: build flexibility to serve diverse practices within Muslim communities (including non-practicing clients and converts), as emphasized by Nisa Homes staff.
- Resource language access (interpretation, translated materials) and culturally aligned mental health supports so safety does not depend on informal volunteer labour.

Success metrics

- Reduced “delayed help-seeking” attributed to fear of discrimination or cultural mismatch.
- Increased shelter retention through stabilization (fewer premature exits for identity-related reasons).
- Client-reported cultural safety and dignity indicators integrated into quality assurance.
- Reduced repeat shelter stays and returns to unsafe housing.

- *Based on research developed in collaboration with Nisa Homes, the Women’s National Housing & Homelessness Network, the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, and Wilfrid Laurier University.*

- *Source: Faith-Centered Shelter Models and Muslim Women’s Pathways to Housing Justice in Canada: The Case of Nisa Homes. Read the full research report.”*