

A Canadian student leader faces discipline for Facebook post blasting 'white fragility'

## **A Canadian student leader faces discipline for blasting 'white fragility'**

By Tamara Khandaker Oct 20, 2017

<https://news.vice.com/story/a-canadian-student-leader-faces-discipline-for-blasting-white-fragility>



A Muslim Dalhousie University student is being accused of reverse racism and facing disciplinary action for a Facebook post calling out white fragility.

Ahead of Canada 150 celebrations this past summer, Masuma Khan, a Dalhousie Student Union Vice President, drafted a motion to boycott any events associated with the anniversary on campus. Similar motions had been adopted by student unions across the country, and Khan didn't anticipate the storm of controversy that would follow.

At the council meeting, the motion had widespread support except for a few students who strongly disagreed, Khan told VICE News. Some council members suggested that if Khan wanted to “question the legitimacy of Canada,” she should renounce access to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

But the real battle started after Khan posted a sharp response to a Facebook post from a young conservative group, which criticized the student union for the proposed motion, saying that the union should “prioritize advocating for student issues, not attacking Canada.”

“At this point, fuck you all,” Khan wrote in a Facebook post that she said the university pressured her to delete. “Be proud of this country? For what, over 400 years of genocide?”

To sign off, she used three hashtags: #unlearn150, #whitefragilitycankissmyass and #yourwhitetearsarentsacredthislandis.

“The university is policing speech and characterizing political speech as personal harassment. That’s a bit much.”

A few days later, a student named Michael Smith filed a formal complaint with the university, alleging that Khan “targeting ‘white people’ who celebrate Canada Day is blatant discrimination,” according to a copy of the document obtained by *The Globe and Mail*. Smith subsequently wrote an op-ed in the *National Post*, making Khan the target of a flurry of social media backlash.

“It bombshelled after that. I almost got impeached, I am dealing with this [disciplinary] process... It’s been very hectic and long, to say the least,” Khan said.

Following a formal investigation, Dalhousie’s administration found that Khan had violated the university’s code of conduct, which prohibits “unwelcome or persistent conduct that the student knows, or ought to know, would cause another person to feel demeaned, intimidated or harassed.”

According to Khan, the university took issue with her tone and use of profanity, siding with the complainant and finding it understandable that he felt offended.

Dalhousie's Vice-Provost of Student Affairs, Arig al Shaibah, said she wouldn't comment on specific student matters, citing privacy concerns. But respect and inclusion are at the core of Dalhousie's mission, al Shaibah said in a statement sent to VICE News.

"These are complex issues, and it is my hope that all campus community members will play an active role in promoting critical and constructive dialogue about individual, relational and systemic opportunities to advance our equity, diversity and inclusion goals," she said.

"No one who looks like me will have the power to oppress folks with privilege."

Khan contends that it's inappropriate for the university to dictate to her, as a racialized woman, how she should talk about race.

"The university is policing speech and characterizing political speech as personal harassment. That's a bit much."

Khan said terms like white fragility are regularly used in academia, including in classes that she's taken at Dalhousie. As for the reverse racism allegation, Khan said she's tired of having to explain why the concept isn't valid.

"The people at the top don't look like me and they have never experienced anything like what I've experienced. They will never know what that feels like," said Khan. "No one who looks like me will have the power to oppress folks with privilege. It's me who's not getting the job because my name is different, it's me who won't be able to get that mortgage because people don't want me in their community, it's me who has to go through extra security checks at the airport, and gets called a terrorist when I walk down the street."

The university proposed an informal solution that she attend leadership and coalition building counseling sessions. Khan, a well-known activist on campus, refused, arguing that she sees nothing wrong with her tone. “Anger is definitely reasonable for being personally targeted,” she said, and that the university has never made an issue of students swearing in any other context.

Now the case has been kicked up to the Senate Discipline Committee, which could potentially add additional penalties. Khan has enlisted the help of a lawyer, and a hearing is expected to happen in the fall.

Cover: Photo credit: Meghan Tansey Whitton