

# The Canadian Council of Muslim Women

## Engaging Muslim Women in Civic and Social Change

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*L'auteure présente le fruit des recherches au sein du Conseil canadien des femmes musulmanes «Encourageons les femmes dans les changements civils et sociaux». Le projet qui a duré trois ans a favorisé l'intégration et la participation des musulmanes afin qu'elles deviennent des agents de changement efficaces dans la vie civile et socio-économique du Canada.*

The Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) was established in 1982 when a group of Muslim women from across Canada, attending a conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba, observed that there was no voice representing Muslim women on issues that affect their lives. CCMW is a national non-profit organization of believing women, committed to the equality, equity, and empowerment of Muslim women. CCMW promotes Muslim women's identity in the Canadian context and encourages mutual understanding between Canadian Muslim women and women of other faiths. The council's membership is diverse and inclusive. It welcomes any woman who shares its guiding principles and objectives. Over the years it has tackled many issues, including women's leadership, political and civic participation, violence against women, racism and discrimination, and identity issues facing young Muslim women. It is unequivocal

in saying that it does not represent all Muslim women and that it is but one voice among many other voices of Muslim women in Canada.

The council's guiding principles are as follows:

- We invite Muslim women to join us in achieving our common goals.
- We are guided by the Quranic message of God's mercy and justice, and of the equality of all persons, and that each person is directly answerable to God.
- We value a pluralistic society and foster the goal of strength and diversity within a unifying vision and values of Canada. Our identity of being Muslim women of diverse ethnicity and race is integral to being Canadian.
- As Canadians we abide by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the law of Canada.
- We believe in the universality of human rights, which means equality and social justice, with no restrictions or discrimination based on gender or race.
- We are vigilant in safeguarding, enhancing our identity, and our rights to make informed choices amongst a variety of options.
- We acknowledge that CCMW is one voice amongst many who speak on behalf of Muslim

women and that there are others who may represent differing perspectives.

- We aim to be actively inclusive and accepting of diversity among ourselves, as Muslim women.

During the past several years, the council has undertaken several projects to increase Muslim women's civic and political participation. None was more comprehensive than its three-year project entitled, *Engaging Muslim Women in Civic and Social Change*, designed to increase integration and participation of Muslim women to enable them to be effective agents of change in Canada's civic and socio-economic life. A key objective of the project was to assess Muslim women's needs and levels of participation and presence in broader Canadian society, e.g. in politics, community organizations, educational institutions, business, and other forums that affect their lives.

Before embarking upon the assessment, CCMW commissioned three separate studies to obtain a greater understanding of Muslim women and issues confronting them: 1) a general demographic profile of Muslim women based on the 2001 census; 2) a report of Canadian Muslim women's experiences of discrimination in a post-September 11th world; and 3) a study of

Muslim women's political participation at the municipal, provincial and federal levels.

The resulting reports, *Muslim Women: Beyond Perceptions*, *Muslim Women's Civic Participation: From Polling Booths to Parliament*, and *Triple Jeopardy: Muslim Women's Experience of Discrimination*, enabled CCMW to focus the needs assessments on issues that demanded most critical attention. The reports painted a bleak picture of Muslim women's labour force participation despite high levels of education, a lack of civic and political participation, and experiences of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity and religion.

Based on the results of these reports a needs assessment was conducted in winter 2005-06. Two key instruments were used for the assessment: 1) a survey questionnaire, administered online and in hard copy in English and French, and where necessary, through interpreters in other languages; and 2) Focus groups held in Toronto, Calgary, Halifax, Ottawa (bilingual), and Montreal (separate English and French).

The survey, *Muslim Women's Needs Survey* was the first of its kind in North America and Europe, aimed at identifying the needs of Canadian Muslim women for the purpose of improving programs that assist in their integration into the broader society. The survey design and analysis of the results were carried out by Dr. Daood Hamdani, Canada's foremost expert on the Muslim Canadian population.

Focus groups with Muslim women were held in large urban centres across Canada. They were designed to include participants from surrounding communities as well, for example, the session in Toronto included participants from Peel, Kitchener-Waterloo, London and Niagara Falls. The groups ranged in attendance between 10 and 30 participants and comprised diverse ethnicities, occupations, and ages. Fo-

cus group questions were designed to probe further the issues covered in the survey questionnaire. Participants were also asked to identify strategies for action.

Results of the survey and focus groups, supplemented by other pertinent research, are discussed in CCMW's report, *Engaging Muslim Women: Issues and Needs*. The report focuses on three important aspects: political participation, economic integration, and social engagement.

According to the report, while most Muslim women embrace Canada as their home and admire its multicultural values, many tend to be disengaged from the civic and political life of the country. They tend to be more socially engaged within Muslim communities and less so in broader Canadian society. They are also more likely to be unemployed, underemployed, or absent from the labour market despite high levels of education. Concerns about workplace discrimination, especially for women in "Islamic" dress, were identified as one of the key barriers to employment. Participants in the needs assessment were also concerned about a movement towards systemic or self-imposed segregation of Muslim women and the growing acceptance of this phenomenon within some segments of Muslim communities in Canada.

Reasons given by the participants for this disengagement range from apathy towards politics, growing experiences of discrimination and prejudice against Muslims and Islam, and a trend towards a more traditional interpretation of Islam among some Muslims. Possible solutions and strategies to address the issues identified are included in the report.

Findings of the report were the backdrop for the Council's November 2006 conference, *Canadian Muslim Women at the Crossroads: from Integration to Segregation?*, held in Ottawa. The council felt compelled to address the implications of separating Muslim women further from mainstream society. It tackled several

topics that participants in its needs assessment had identified as reasons for Muslim women's disengagement.

About 200 Muslim women from across Canada attended the conference. Inspired and informed by a roster of experts, academics and activists, they left the conference feeling charged and mobilized to re-engage within their own communities and in Canada's civic, political, and socio-economic life. Strategies for action included exercising their own agency to remove barriers to employment, educating themselves, and communicating with political leaders and their communities about Muslims and particularly Muslim women, their assets and contribution to Canadian society, and challenging policies and practices that prohibit women's full participation. This includes advocacy and mobilization with sister organizations for progressive policies such as universal day care, reproductive choice, employment equity and affirmative action, and protection of the court challenges program. Over the next year or so, CCMW has commissioned three new projects: a paper on cultural relativism and its implications for women's equality; another on informed choice and consent; and a community action research project to determine what attracts young educated Muslim women to a more traditional interpretation of Islam and gender roles.

The Canadian Council of Muslim Women has proven to be a formidable force in the Canadian feminist scene, having led and won the fight to remove religious arbitration in family law in the province of Ontario. It has come to be recognized for its work on the integration of Muslim women and is called upon often to share its work and wisdom at international meetings and conferences as well as at policy and legislative consultations hosted by the federal and provincial governments across Canada. While there is still much work to be done, CCMW is fully entrenched in

Canada's women's movement and is engaging Muslim women in civic and social change for a better life for themselves, their children and their country, Canada.

*Nuzhat Jafri is a member of the National Board of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women and has led several research, policy and program initiatives in that capacity. She has been invited to share CCMW's experience and work at various provincial, national and international forums, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Amnesty International, Ontario Justice Education Network and Canadian Federation of University Women's Clubs.*

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**About the Guest Editors ...**

*Vijay Agnew* is a Professor of Social Science at York University. Her most recent publication is *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home* (University of Toronto Press, 2005).

*Linda Christiansen-Ruffman* is a Halifax member of the steering committee of the Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA). A committed feminist, she teaches women's studies, international development studies, and Atlantic Canadian studies at Saint Mary's University.

*Jennifer deGroot* is a feminist and farmer with a passion to end socio-economic injustices around the world. She has worked with refugees and within the peace and anti-globalization movements and has travelled widely through her work in international development.

*Laurence Fortin-Pellerin* has been active in the women's movement for several years. She is Ph.D. student in community psychology at Laval University writing about empowerment in women's groups in Montreal and Quebec city.

*Nuzhat Jafri* is a member of the National Board of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women and has led several research, policy and program initiatives in that capacity.

*Lee Lakeman* has spent more than 20 years doing front-line anti-violence work. She is the author of *Obsession with Intent: Violence Against Women* (Black Rose Books, 2005). She is the representative for British Columbia and the Yukon on the board of the Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres.

*Diane Matte* is a long-time feminist activist. She was one of the instigators of an action carried out by Québec women and thousands of women's groups across the world—the World March of Women in the Year 2000. Today she coordinates this ongoing feminist global solidarity action network against poverty and violence against women.

*Angela Miles* teaches in the Adult Education and Community Development Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. She is the author of *Integrative Feminist Perspectives: Building Global Visions, 1960s-1990s* (Routledge, 1996).

*Shree Mulay* is the director of the McGill Centre for Research and Teaching on Women whose mandate is to foster feminist research and coordinate women's studies program.

*Kathleen O'Grady* is the Director of Communications for the Canadian Women's Health Network, and a Research Associate at the Simone de Beauvoir Institute. Her reviews and articles on women's health, sexuality and cultural issues have also appeared in a variety of magazines and newspapers.

*Kim Pate* is currently the Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies. A teacher and lawyer by training, she has experience working from a grassroots perspective on policy development and legislative formulation at local, regional, and national levels.