

OSCE CHAIRMANSHIP CONFERENCE ON INTOLERANCE AND
DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIMS

**THIRD PLENARY SESSION: Media and public discourse as instruments to
counter Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims**

Submitted by:

Canadian Council of Muslim Women

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My name is Nuzhat Jafri. I represent the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW), a Canadian NGO, where I am a National Board Member. The views I express today are those of my organization. On behalf of CCMW I would like to commend the OSCE Chairmanship in Office for holding this conference here in Cordoba, home of historic peaceful co-existence of the three Abrahamic faiths.

For one reason or another Muslim women's dress continues to dominate media stories and images. Recently in Canada, Marc Mayrand, the federal Chief Elections Officer, sent a notice to his staff that women who veil, should be asked to unveil, prior to voting, but if they do not, then they have other choices to identify themselves, as outlined in the Elections Canada Act.

This incident once again caused a furor among politicians and the media. Public discourse became inflammatory and suddenly a situation that had nothing to do with Muslims stole headlines across the country. The issue was about identification procedures to vote in federal elections. Current legislation does not require facial identification. This issue was not raised by Muslims – it ended up being exploited by politicians and the media and it only incited further negative sentiments towards Muslims.

We implore our political leaders and the media to, please, focus on more important issues facing Muslim women instead of always focusing on what they are wearing. A Muslim woman is more than the clothes she wears, as are all other women. She is a complex individual who represents many different identities and realities and is entitled to the dignity and respect accorded to all under human rights laws in Canada and elsewhere. She must have access to employment, education, housing, services and an excellent quality of life, like all other women.

Muslim women today have much to contribute to society. Earlier this year CCMW launched a campaign to recognize Muslim *Women Who Inspire* in celebration of our organization's 25th anniversary. The objective of the campaign is to provide girls and women with role models and promote a positive image of Canadian Muslim women who have made a difference within or outside Canada. Another key objective of the campaign is to counter stereotypes of Muslim women as invisible, oppressed, silent beings who remain on the margins of society.

The campaign invited nominations of women, who meet certain criteria, to receive the *Women Who Inspire Awards* later this month at our 25th anniversary conference.

I am pleased to report that the response from the media to our news release announcing the campaign was very positive, with several large media being interested in featuring the women who have been nominated in different parts of Canada.

The nominees demonstrate the diversity of Canadian Muslim women, their ethnic origins, professions, volunteer services and commitment to making a difference in other peoples' lives. They are indeed a complete contrast to images of Muslim women that dominate the pages of our newspapers and TV screens. They are students, teachers, artists, doctors, community activists, engineers, inventors, entrepreneurs, social workers, among others. They are mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, colleagues, partners in numerous endeavours.

It is our hope that the media interest demonstrated at the launch of the campaign will be equally vigorous when we announce the winners of our *Muslim Women Who Inspire Awards* later this month.

This is an opportunity to celebrate the accomplishments of Muslim women and, for a change, provide images that go beyond a piece of clothing. Please watch for these positive images and stories on our website on October 27th at www.ccmw.com.

Thank you.