

OSCE CONFERENCE ON COMBATING DISCRIMINATION AND PROMOTING
MUTUAL RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING

Plenary session 2: combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims

Submitted by:

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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. We appreciate the opportunity to share with delegates key trends and challenges facing Muslims, particularly Muslim women, in Canada, from an NGO perspective.

Discussions and debates related to Muslim women are often reduced to images and media clips of Muslim women's dress and dichotomies of oppression and liberation. The arguments on both sides – whether it's Muslim women themselves or the broader society – focus on the dress as a symbol of faith and freedom of religious expression on the one hand and a lack of freedom and oppression on the other. There are also many views and opinions between these two sides. So what does this have to do with Muslim women's civic and political participation?

The niqab, a form of dress which requires Muslim women to be fully covered and allows for only the eyes to show, has been both a source of comfort for those who wear it and discomfort for those who see it as a symbol of separation and difference. Islam does not require women to cover their faces, yet many of the women who wear it say they feel more comfortable in it. Others say that they wear it for reasons of piety and adherence to their faith. While deliberate or unintentional, the niqab can be perceived as a mark of separation and may not invite engagement or interaction.

In Quebec's recent provincial election, women in niqab were prevented from voting because of public reaction to their dress. In two separate incidents, Muslim girls were prevented from participating in sports because they were wearing head scarves. In these instances the women and girls were prevented from exercising their franchise and participating in civic activities. While the niqab makes many people uncomfortable, including some Muslims, it should not be an excuse to further disengage Muslim women from civic and political participation, either by Muslims themselves or by the broader society. CCMW's recent work reveals many disconcerting facts and trends with respect to Muslim women's civic and political engagement.

In November 2006 CCMW released the results of an extensive assessment of Muslim women in Canada in a report entitled, *Engaging Muslim Women: Issues and Needs*. 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.

The findings of this report were the backdrop for the council’s November 2006 conference, *Canadian Muslim Women at the Crossroads: from Integration to Segregation?*. 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.

Participants at the conference were 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 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 important policies and programs that further women’s equality.

One of the key strategies towards addressing discrimination and intolerance is to ensure every citizen’s full participation in the civic, political and socio-economic life of the country. It is in these spheres that individuals have the opportunity to learn about one another’s cultures, faiths and traditions, leading to greater understanding and mutual respect. Separation or isolation from mainstream society can only exacerbate the lack of engagement and a sense of alienation and de-valuation. This contributes further to the majority society’s perceptions of Muslims as the other. It is also necessary for Muslims themselves to seek out opportunities to engage more broadly beyond their families and faith communities to become fully contributing members of the societies they live in.

It is incumbent upon all OSCE member states to ensure that Muslims do not remain on the margins of society – it is not enough to be tolerated – Muslims must be able to access education, employment and fundamental human rights accorded to them through their respective governments and international conventions without fear of harassment and discrimination.