

## **Statement to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting by**

### **The Canadian Council of Muslim Women**

**October 12, 2006**

Promotion of tolerance, non-discrimination and mutual respect and understanding

The Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) would like to commend the OSCE member states on measures taken to promote tolerance, non-discrimination, mutual respect and understanding. We also welcome the focus on youth as the incoming chairmanship sets its priorities for the next year.

During the past several years the Canadian Council of Muslim Women has focused on civic, political and socio-economic participation of Muslim women as a means to achieving positive change in their quality of life both at a personal and at a societal level. We recognize that civic and socio-economic participation and engagement are key to integration but are often overlooked in Europe in favour of cultural integration.

In our work we have identified several disturbing trends. While we pride ourselves as a leader in a multicultural and tolerant society, Canada is not immune to the rising tide in intolerance and discrimination towards Muslims. As we have studied barriers to full participation of Muslim women in Canadian society, several issues have surfaced that must be addressed. We are certain that they are not unique to Canada and are pertinent to OSCE member states, particularly as they directly impact the socio-economic conditions of Muslims and will invariably have negative consequences for Muslim youth.

According to our studies, discrimination against Muslims is increasing, particularly in employment, which impacts the life chances of Muslim children and youth.

Despite their high level of education Muslim women continue to be underemployed, unemployed or absent from the labour market altogether. CCMW's recent studies paint a bleak picture of Muslim women's economic conditions, with lower levels of income compared to other women in Canada. Canadian-born Muslim women are not doing better than Muslim women who immigrated to Canada before the 1990s.

Racism, discrimination and stereotyping on the basis of one's name, skin colour, accent, and dress have been identified as significant barriers to employment. Many employers are hesitant to hire Muslims in general and specifically Muslim women wearing headscarves. While sales clerks and cashiers wearing headscarves are sometimes seen in the retail sector, promotion into senior level positions is rare for women wearing any form of Islamic dress. It is also easy to identify and rule out Muslim job applicants because of their names.

These are very disturbing findings indeed. While many question why there is a perceived trend towards Muslim communities recoiling from the broader society and self-segregating into their own communities, we must acknowledge that this is not necessarily self-imposed. With deterioration in socio-economic conditions and overt acts of discrimination, it is not surprising that Muslim women and their children are becoming more and more disenfranchised and disengaged. In many OSCE states Muslims are facing greater alienation and exclusion from mainstream society. This can only exacerbate the current situation.

In November of this year the Canadian council of Muslim Women is holding a consultative forum to tackle these issues head on. The forum, entitled, *Canadian Muslim Women at the Crossroads: From Integration to Segregation?* will examine why Muslim women and youth are becoming more disengaged and why their level of success in the civic and socio-economic aspects of Canadian society is declining. We will also examine the role of the media and public

discourse and the balance between civil liberties and national security and the impact of these have on integration and civic engagement.

The issues that we are facing are not about cultural integration but rather about civic and socio-economic engagement and participation of all of our population. In today's economy no single state can afford to have any of its citizens or residents excluded from any part of its society. It is urgent that the OSCE member states find solutions to improve the socio-economic conditions of Muslims. Deteriorating socio-economic conditions and overt hostility towards Muslims are at the heart of societal dysfunction which may sometimes lead to radicalization and anti-social behaviour.

We recommend that legislation to prevent discrimination and harassment on the basis of faith, race and ethnicity be strengthened in OSCE member states to protect all members of society similar to human rights legislation in Canada. This must be accompanied by education to counter discrimination, which is often based on ignorance, stereotypes and prejudice. An ongoing focus on media and public discourse will also go a long way to address these issues as the public takes its cue from political leaders and the media in how they interact with Muslims and other minorities in their communities. We recommend that the OSCE also focus on socio-economic inequities facing Muslims to ensure full participation and engagement in all aspects of society. In closing, we hope that the OSCE will intensify its efforts to address the issues. Thank you.