

Conference Reports

The Twenty-first Annual Conference of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women

The Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) held its Twenty-first Annual Conference, October 4, 2003 at Crowne Plaza, Montreal, Quebec. CCMW was established in 1982 to attain and maintain equality, equity, and empowerment for Canadian Muslim women in the North American setting. Participants from across Canada came to celebrate CCMW's renowned presence throughout the nation as well as to discuss issues related to the conference: "Engaging Muslim Women in Civic and Social Change." The conference was officially opened with the reading of the Qur'an in Arabic, English, and French, followed by the Girl Guides of Canada, Muslim Chapter, singing the Canadian national anthem. They were accompanied by the CCMW attendees.

Dr. Homa Hoodfar (Concordia University, Quebec) opened the conference with the first session: "Building Civil Society in our Transnational World." Civil society, defined as a society ruled by laws and norms and obeyed by the governing body and the public, was discussed, along with its relationship in dealing with such minorities as Muslim women in Canada. A civil society permits a group of people to lobby and work with the public in a democratic system to facilitate change and development. However, transnational support and solidarity are required in conjunction with lobbying. Hoodfar effectively illustrated this concept by bringing to light the organization Women Living under Muslim Law (WLUML), which currently comprises 4000 individuals and organizations and has surveyed the implementation of Islamic law in many Islamic countries. Along with serving as a platform to network, the organization exists as a powerful institution to help Muslim women earn their civil rights and liberties.

The presentation "Restoring the Glory of Muslim Women: Leadership, Scholarship, and the Family" by Dr. Azizah al Hibri (University of Richmond, Richmond, VA) passionately described another influential women's organization. Al Hibri, who has visited 12 Islamic countries, high-

lighted the organization Karamah (founded in Washington, DC, 1993) whose membership comprises primarily Muslim women lawyers. The organization seeks to provide leadership training for Muslim women to occupy such leadership roles as *imamah*.

Heavily quoting from the Qur'an and the Hadith literature, al Hibri interconnected the position of a woman as a leader and a scholar, and her role within the family. She discussed several fundamental theories and philosophies from the Qur'an in order to circumvent barriers and ultimately build bridges between organizations and individuals, and emphasized that individuals with the most *taqwa* (God-consciousness) should occupy the top of the leadership hierarchy. Al Hibri culminated her lecture by recounting one of the many Qur'anic verses that have been defined by patriarchal strictures. Al Hibri presented a survey of opinions of various historians from the classical period on the verse. Her opinions and reinterpretation of the Qur'an in relation to women will be published shortly.

The plenary session, "Context for Change: The State of Muslims in Canada Today," was shared by four panelists: Bilal Kuspinar (Concordia and McGill University, Quebec), Noreen Majeed, Hanny Hassan (CCMC), and Riad Saloojee (CAIR Canada).

Along with portraying Muslim women's involvement in a variety of spheres during the Prophet's time, Kuspinar identified several noteworthy procedures for Muslims, and especially Muslim women, to facilitate change within Canada. For instance, he emphasized that both women and men should specialize in Islamic studies in order to surmount contemporary problems. Two underlying principles in the Qur'an, namely, individual responsibility and fairness and justice, were emphasized. Kuspinar stressed that one should not take any hadith literally nor at face value, especially when it contradicts the spirit of the law and the majority of the Hadith literature.

Majeed stressed the importance of individual accountability in Islam. In addition, she commented on how one should implement a realist perspective by admitting that there are problems in the community so that solutions to facilitate change can be found. She mentioned several detrimental issues prevalent in the Muslim community and its reluctance to confront the apparent issues and problems.

Facilitating change within Canada from a political perspective was presented by Hassan. He stated that although Muslims comprise only 2 percent of the Canadian population, they can make a significant impact on the government only if they join forces with the mainstream commu-

nity. Simultaneously, these affiliations cannot be made at the expense of the Islamic ethical and theological foundation.

Saloojee closed the plenary session by bringing forth the concept of *'ubudiyah* and showing how every dimension in life is as a journey to the divine. The need to facilitate change was stressed, along with the belief that change must commence in the individual first and foremost. Numerous examples were presented from the Qur'an, the life of the Prophet (pbuh), and such renowned leaders as Mahatma Gandhi.

Muslim Veil in North America: Issues and Debates (edited by Sajida Alvi, Homa Hoodfar, and Sheila McDonough) was touched upon by Alvi and McDonough after the CCMW web-launching session. The book is considered a medium for those who wish to keep themselves enwrapped in traditional thought and those who wish to adhere to a modernist or liberal approach of Islam.

The role of art as a medium for change and its use to express the impact of traumatic events, such as world conflicts and their aftermath, at a personal, family, and community level were presented in the fourth session: "Art as Medium for Creating Social Change." The panelists comprised the renowned artists Jamelie Hassan, Rosemary Mountain, and Naz Ikramullah. Hassan illustrated how art promotes social change as portrayed by her projects "Gathering of Good Minds" (featuring Canadian aboriginals) and her film "Sister, Speak with Me." featuring Zahra Kazemi, a journalist silenced by force in Iran. Hassan also previewed a selection of her paintings featuring a variety of landscapes of historical sites, and explained how each painting represents an important mood and/or concept.

Mountain presented various points of view concerning music in Islam and Christianity and provided a historical survey of the Islamic music tradition. The function of music was presented along with a stress on the importance of music. Subsequent to playing a sample of songs for the audience, including "Love Song to God," sung by an Uzbekistani Sufi, Mountain encouraged young Canadians to integrate their own culture's music into the Canadian milieu. From dancer to artist, Ikramullah foretold art as a personal and political statement in which one can make an effective universal statement. She previewed some of her paintings reflecting her own personal thought, whether it was using art schemes to portray different moods or the military occupation of Palestine.

Four workshops were held during the concurrent session. Colleen Purdon discussed "Increasing Women's Participation in the Political

Process,” which highlighted a project undertaken with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to make municipal processes easily accessible and relevant to Muslim women. “Social Inclusion and Determinants of Health for Muslim Women,” by Omaima Mansi and Soni Dasmohapatra, dealt with how health determinants affect women’s participation in a civil society undergoing civil and social change. Several young women, who produced the video “In My Own Skin,” mentioned how the video is presented in order to assist in engaging Muslim youth, females and males, in dialoguing about their failures as well as successes. “Developing a Media Kit,” the fourth workshop, conducted by Raheel Raza and Libby Stephens, dealt with a hands-on workshop to assist attendees develop a media kit. Guidelines and examples to effectively interact with the media were also presented.

Nurjehan Mawani, the Commissioner of the Public Service Commission of Canada, concluded the conference by issuing important tips on “Overcoming Challenges and Leading Change: A Personal Journey.”

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