

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA

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Canadian Muslim Women's Institute Inc. (CMWI)

The Canadian Muslim Women's Institute was founded in 2006 to empower Muslim women and their families socially, economically and spiritually, within the spirit of Islamic principles.

In Winnipeg, community leaders recognized that existing Muslim settlement and development initiatives served men, or men and women together. However, Muslim women who immigrate to Canada (particularly single mothers) are often uncomfortable with working alongside men they are unfamiliar with. As a result, many women were not accessing critical newcomer services.

CMWI was created to work with these women, and due to a dedicated board and group of volunteers, the services and programming has grown to meet the needs of this community. CMWI strives to foster an environment where Muslim women will be both the leaders and participants of their own organization. The board is comprised of women of all ages from diverse cultures and professions - some board members are immigrants, while others were born in Canada. Three full-time staff, twenty volunteers

and CMWI's board members work with Muslim newcomers and established community members on various community and economic development programs.

Understanding that social isolation and barrier to integration are best broken down by building social networks and access to resources, CMWI provides information to newly arrived Muslims, such as the location of Mosques and halal grocery stores, as well as referrals to other necessities. Their monthly Gatherings at Winnipeg Mosques bring Muslim women together to share experiences and concerns, and to listen to guest speakers. These, along with their peer support groups and home-visits service, ensure that CMWI is kept informed about community and individual needs.

CMWI has responded to community food security needs by creating a Halal Community Pantry that currently serves 80 families by providing food hampers twice a month or when needed. Their weekly Moms and Tots Program provides both informal and structured playtime for 25 preschoolers. This unique program also offers information for mothers regarding issues such as parenting, school readiness, immigration and the law, and nutrition. CMWI's only fee-based program is a weekly women's →

→ yoga class. An instructor is paid to come from a Winnipeg yoga studio and teach in a Mosque where participants feel comfortable. One of the most popular programs offered were swimming classes, which attracted over 100 participants. Many of the newcomers had never been to a swimming pool and did not know how to swim. The Institute has plans to launch newcomer orientation classes, preschool literacy training, and nutrition and healthy lifestyle workshops. These development projects build a sense of community and support for the families involved.

Beyond building a sense of community, CMWI recognizes the importance of self-sufficiency for new and established Muslim women. Inspired by workshops sponsored by the Canadian CED Network – Manitoba and SEED Winnipeg, CMWI has since established various employment-related initiatives in order to create economic opportunities for Muslim women. The Institute offers a weekly English Conversation Support Group with a trained English as an Additional Language (EAL) facilitator to 15 Muslim women. This not only allows participants to practice English skills (thereby enhancing their employability), it also addresses the loneliness newcomers often experience by creating a circle of friends. To provide childcare to EAL participants, CMWI partners with the West Central Women's Resource Centre where women can be trained as childminders. CMWI currently employs 7 part-time certified childminders, thereby providing a double benefit, since the program improves the accessibility of training courses, while simultaneously creating jobs. CMWI also works with local organizations to connect women with job opportunities through their Employment Referral Service, and have created a community pool of Muslim volunteers. They are also organizing a House Cleaning Training Program.

Among their most significant endeavours is CMWI's Canadian Muslim Women's Sewing Training Program and Social Enterprise, known as SewFair. In April 2008, the first group of 10 participants began CMWI's one-year Sewing Training Program, which aims to develop employable skills in women who would otherwise be isolated from the traditional workforce. The training program consists of three main components: vocational training in industrial sewing machine operation (beginner to advanced); life and employment skill development, which teaches participants how they might best apply for and obtain work, and how to integrate into mainstream Canadian society; and English language development. CMWI offers the training to women who are financially dependant on social services.

Nine women graduated in the program's first year, and a new group of 10 began in April, 2009. The graduates form the staff base for CMWI's social enterprise, SewFair. The social enterprise has completed two commercial and one private contract so far; sewing two sets of conference bags and vests for the volunteers at Victoria General Hospital, and tablecloths and runners for a wedding. SewFair is designed to serve as a stepping stone for participants; it provides them with practical work experience and allows them to build resumes and confidence. In addition to the direct benefits of this enterprise, CMWI hopes the business will eventually earn revenue to reinvest in its other development initiatives.

In viewing the results of the SewFair projects in the lives of the Muslim women, and understanding the wide range of integrated initiatives and supports that make up CMWI's approach to creating social, spiritual, and economic opportunities, one could be excused for believing that "the answer is in the bag."