

Four Decades of Determination: A Story of Muslim Women's Agency and Perseverance

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Abstract

The Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) is one of the oldest national Muslim organizations in Canada. It was founded in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1982 by the late Dr. Lila Fahlman and a group of determined Muslim women who sought to channel their passion for faith-centered social justice work and create a more inclusive Canada for all. CCMW promotes Muslim women's identity in the Canadian context and encourages mutual understanding between Canadian Muslim women and women of other faiths. CCMW is a national not-for-profit organization with 17 chapters across Canada comprised of Canadian Muslim women and girls of diverse races, ages, ethnicities, sexualities, and abilities. This paper chronicles the experiences of CCMW to continue its work and thrive on the strengths of its volunteers and commitment to improve the lives of Canadian Muslim women and girls. The need for an organization like CCMW continues to grow as Islamophobia and gender-based violence become more pronounced. Raising funds for causes that focus on issues facing Muslim women has been challenging, yet CCMW has survived while many other Muslim organizations have come and gone. The paper will share CCMW's experiences in seeking and acquiring grants to carry out projects without charitable status and plans for long-term sustainability. Through the case study of CCMW's Lila Fahlman Scholarships as a philanthropic endeavor, the paper will illustrate successes and struggles to raise funds specifically for Muslim women and girls. The paper will share CCMW's journey in applying for charitable status and insights on the application process.

About the Canadian Council of Muslim Women

The Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW), established in 1982, is a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to the equality, equity, and empowerment of all Muslim women in Canada. Its mission is to affirm the

identities of Canadian Muslim women and promote their lived experiences through community engagement, public policy, stakeholder engagement, and amplified awareness of the social injustices that Canadian Muslim women and girls endure in this country. CCMW advocates for the diverse needs of Canadian Muslim women and girls and equips local chapters with the necessary resources to maximize national efforts and mobilize their communities to join the movement. There are now 17 chapters across Canada.

In the beginning

In 1979, a pan-Canadian organization, the Council of Muslim Communities of Canada (CMCC), asked Dr. Lila Fahlman of Edmonton, Alberta, to join their board of directors to represent Muslim women in Canada. After a year on the board, she decided to resign because she had been attending meetings but had no vote. The board refused to accept her resignation. She told them that to truly represent Canadian Muslim women, she had to get to know them. After many discussions with board members, she was provided with funds to travel across Canada over the next two years to meet Muslim women from British Columbia to Newfoundland. This journey crystalized for Dr. Fahlman that the women needed their own organization. She told them that she would bring them together somewhere in central Canada and decided to assemble them at the mosque in Winnipeg in the fall of 1982. The Muslim women who lived in Winnipeg provided the accommodations, and the women from across Canada paid for their own travel. So began the Canadian Council of Muslim Women with a view to having a chapter in every province. As Dr. Fahlman (1999/2001) notes in her own story in CCMW's book, *At My Mother's Feet*, "News of our decision was received positively but there were a couple of exceptions" (pp. 51–70).

She crossed many milestones to become a role model for Canadian Muslim women. In 1971, Dr. Fahlman became the first Muslim woman to run for political office when she ran for the federal New Democratic Party. She was also the first Muslim woman to be elected to the Edmonton Public School Board. Dr. Fahlman and the Edmonton Chapter of CCMW were instrumental in saving Canada's first mosque, the Al-Rashid Mosque in Edmonton, from demolition. The chapter members raised funds to move the mosque from its original location to its current place at Fort Edmonton Park. She was also the first Muslim woman to receive the Order of Canada, and her trailblazing continued throughout her life. Thirty-nine years later, CCMW continues Dr. Lila Fahlman's legacy.

As CCMW set out to work toward the equality, equity, and empowerment of Canadian Muslim women, it articulated a set of guiding principles that have held the organization together for the past four decades as follows:

1. We are guided by the Quranic message of God's mercy and justice, and of the equality of all persons, and that each person is directly answerable to God.
2. We value a pluralistic society; foster the goal of strength and diversity within a unifying vision and the values of Canada. Our identity of being

Muslim women and of diverse ethnicity and race is integral to being Canadian.

3. As Canadians, we abide by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the laws of Canada.
4. We believe in the universality of human rights, which means equality and social justice, with no restrictions or discrimination based on gender or race.
5. We are vigilant in safeguarding and enhancing our identity and our rights to make informed choices.
6. We acknowledge that CCMW is one voice among many who speak on behalf of Muslim women and that there are others who may represent differing perspectives.

Role of Volunteers and a Generous Spirit

Since its inception, CCMW has survived because of the strength of its volunteers on the national board of directors and chapter members across Canada. They have demonstrated an unwavering generosity of spirit to achieve equality for Canadian Muslim women and girls. In its first decade, CCMW board members consisted of the presidents of each chapter. For the board meetings, the members traveled either at their own expense or relied on funds raised by the local chapter. Meetings were held in different cities to allow chapters to host them and keep them motivated to engage on issues facing Canadian Muslim women. Local chapter members opened their homes for accommodation and prepared and provided the food for each board meeting. The board meetings were held at the home of one of the local chapter members, usually the president's.

This structure of the board evolved to ensure that no single chapter would wield more influence at the national level than another. In the 1990s the structure shifted, whereby national board members were nominated and elected by the general membership of CCMW at its annual general meeting. The tradition of hosting meetings at a member's home continued until it became logistically difficult to do so. It was also financially challenging for board members to pay for their own travel. CCMW nevertheless continued to find ways to deal with these financial hurdles.

After CCMW's inaugural assembly in Winnipeg, it continued to hold annual conferences in different Canadian cities. The local chapter planned and hosted the conference. In this instance also, the women themselves raised the funds to travel and participate in the annual conferences. Once government funds became available to hold national conferences, chapter representatives were able to travel more readily. Unfortunately, the federal government stopped funding conferences for a period of time, and CCMW was unable to bring chapters together in one location.

Canadian Muslim women had a tradition of raising funds for their local mosques both for capital projects and for mosque-related events and programs.

Most mosques and Muslim organizations had a “ladies auxiliary” or a “Muslim women’s benevolent” society or similar body to help raise funds and prepare and supply food for congregants attending Friday prayers or special occasions such as Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Adha, or Ramadan iftars. Canadian Muslim women’s spirit of giving and charity continues to fuel Muslim communities across the country.

Raising funds for CCMW’s work

In the last three decades of the 20th century, as their population grew, Muslim communities across Canada were focused on building mosques and programs to meet the growing needs of their communities. This included fundraising for new construction or adaptation of existing buildings, offering Arabic lessons and Islamic education on weekends, and offering recreational activities for youth. Programs specifically for Muslim women were not as evident.

Canadian Muslims have also been very generous in their response to humanitarian crises and natural disasters in their countries of origin. The same organization that asked Dr. Fahlman to join its board of directors, CMCC, also established the International Development and Relief Foundation (IDRF), which continues to flourish today.

By contrast, CCMW does not enjoy the same financial support from Canadian Muslims as the initiatives mentioned above. It has struggled to survive since its inception. The reasons for this are twofold: a lack of charitable status and a lack of interest in issues facing Canadian Muslim women, particularly issues related to family law and gender-based violence. On the latter, CCMW often tackles matters that are considered taboo and challenging for Muslim families such as polygamy, sexual assault, gender identity, and diverse interpretations of Muslim family laws.

CCMW has always been inclusive of all Muslim women, regardless of sect, and does not favor one school of thought over others. It celebrates the diversity of Muslim women and attempts to be inclusive of all intersections of their identities. CCMW’s positions are perceived by some co-religionists to be too liberal and progressive and its members’ “Muslimness” questionable, which has led to backlash on occasion. CCMW’s positions and work are sometimes perceived to be fomenting Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism because they shine a light on challenges Canadian Muslim women are dealing with. The irony is that it is a “Muslim” women’s organization first and foremost, and its members pride themselves in being believing adherents of Islam who leave the judgment of their faith to God.

Government and Foundations Grants

None of these challenges have stopped CCMW from relentlessly pursuing opportunities to improve the lives of Canadian Muslim women and girls. With the equality provisions in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms enacted the same year as the birth of CCMW, federal and provincial governments turned their attention to addressing women’s equality in earnest. To tackle pressing issues, CCMW began applying for government grants in the late 1980s to undertake

projects to address pressing issues facing Canadian Muslim women. Another source of funds was foundations that did not require a charitable status, such as the Law Foundation of Ontario.

Two key federal government departments, today's Women and Gender Equality Canada and Department of Canadian Heritage and their predecessors, provided the majority of grants to CCMW. The grant application processes were complicated and cumbersome and required tenacity, patience, and perseverance. CCMW had no dedicated staff or grant writers and relied on board members, usually the president, to complete the applications. It had to mold its needs to the requirements of the applications and had to ensure that its objectives aligned with those of the grantees to their mutual satisfaction. This was not easy because the complexities of the issues facing Canadian Muslim women and their families could not always be addressed within the limits of grantees' funding criteria.

Most of the projects included creation and delivery of education materials, toolkits, and research and policy papers. Examples of projects include:

- Research on barriers to labor market participation and health of Canadian Muslim women.
- Community roundtables on a National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence.
- Legal Services Coordination pilot program aimed at directing Canadian Muslim women to culturally appropriate legal services for family law issues.
- Digital Anti-Racism Education (DARE) project aimed at countering online hate, racism, and Islamophobia through workshops and social media campaigns.
- Engaging men and boys to end violence in the family aimed at educating men and boys on recognizing and addressing all forms of violence against women and girls.
- Canadian Muslim women's family laws and legal rights aimed at educating Canadian Muslim women on their rights as they pertain to Canadian and Muslim family laws and differences between them.
- Being a Canadian Muslim woman in the 21st century aimed at educating the public on myths and stereotypes about Muslim women.
- Violence against women: Health and social justice for Canadian Muslim women aimed at preventing all forms of violence, including femicide, forced marriages, FGM/FGC and domestic violence.
- Women in niqab speak aimed at giving voice to niqabi women about their life experiences, including their experiences of discrimination.

- No religious arbitration in family law aimed at changing provincial legislation and policy to protect women's equality rights in family law.
- Engaging Muslim women: issues and needs focusing on political participation, economic integration and social engagement of Canadian Muslim women.
- Muslim marriage contract kit providing a sample marriage contract for Muslim couples to consider.

CCMW also undertook projects focused on civic engagement of Canadian Muslim youth. This came out of a concern from Muslim mothers about their teenaged and young adult children in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Projects included MY Canada with a focus on Canadian Muslim youth identity; Common Ground project, which brought together youth of diverse faiths to resolve conflict and develop mutual understanding; Project Communitas in which Muslim youth collaborated with youth from other faith communities to develop joint projects of common interest in various Canadian cities; and Civics Works engaged Canadian Muslim youth in local projects on poverty reduction, racism, and countering militarism in several Canadian cities. Most of these projects were funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage. Relying on government funding can be problematic depending on the priorities of the government of the day. CCMW experienced a difficult time during the tenure of an anti-feminist, anti-Muslim government and began exploring long-term sustainability strategies.

Relying on Resilience and Resolve

CCMW did not limit its activities to projects funded by government grants. Relying on its own resilience and resolve and the agency of Canadian Muslim women, it carried on critical work with limited resources to increase awareness about Islam, Canadian Muslim women's contribution to Canadian society, and promoting and amplifying Muslim women's voices in government policy and legislation.

There are innumerable examples of CCMW's work without any funds except its determination to fulfill its mission. Some of these examples are discussed in the following paragraphs. With no core funding, CCMW relied on funds from the various government-funded projects to cobble together enough from the administration line in the project budgets to pay an executive director and a part-time administrative assistant. There were times when there were no funds available to pay either. A full-time executive director was appointed in the mid-1990s who was paid when funds permitted.

The executive director, in consultation with the president and national board of directors and chapters across Canada, led or participated in countless initiatives, including the publication of *At My Mother's Feet*, a collection of life stories by pioneer Muslim women; *Islam: Its Roots and Wings*, a plain language primer geared to non-Muslims to increase their understanding about Islam; *Reading Rights*, an illustrated handbook for Canadian Muslim women about their legal rights; *The Al-Rashid Mosque*, the history of Canada's first Muslim place of

worship and the role of CCMW in preserving it; and *In the Footsteps of Canadian Muslim Women: 1837 to 2007*, a timeline of Canadian Muslim women's milestones in their presence in this country. CCMW attempted to recover the costs through sales of some of the publications but it proved to be unproductive. CCMW always had difficulty asking for funds and until recently remained reluctant to do so.

One of CCMW's strategic goals is to promote critical thinking among Muslims and non-Muslims to challenge stereotypes and assumptions about Islam, Muslim women, and their families. One way of doing this is to feature the work of contemporary Muslim women scholars focusing on diverse topics related to Muslim women. CCMW has also issued over 15 position papers or statements on topics that are often subject to public debate and media attention. These topics include *Polygamy in the Quran and in Canada*, *Face Covering (Face Veil or Niqab)*, *Employment and Religious Accommodation*, *Femicide*, *FGM/FGC*, and *Diversity amongst Muslims*.

CCMW has also been active on the international stage and has presented at conferences across the world. It has worked actively for many years with Musawah, a global organization dedicated to equality in the Muslim family, and contributed to its publications and advocacy. The federal government often asks CCMW to meet with foreign officials and international delegations to present its work and approach to diversity and gender equality.

As part of its advocacy work on behalf of Canadian Muslim women, CCMW participated in and contributed to consultations on public policy and legislation on a variety of issues, including the Divorce Act, Family Law Reform Act, the Arbitration Act, universal childcare, basic income, the Employment Equity Act, and federal COVID-19 recovery and response initiatives. CCMW could not do its work without the collaboration and partnerships with national and local feminist, anti-racist, and justice-seeking Muslim and non-Muslim organizations. One such example is CCMW's contribution to and an endorsement of a detailed document from feminist organizations to the federal government for a national action plan to end gender-based violence. All of these efforts are carried out without funding from any sources.

Attempts at Fundraising: The Case of the Dr. Lila Fahlman Scholarships

In 2007, CCMW launched two seminal programs: the Women Who Inspire Awards to recognize Canadian Muslim women who demonstrate a commitment to women's equality and the Dr. Lila Fahlman Scholarships for women and girls pursuing postsecondary education. The main vehicle for raising funds for the scholarships was ticket sales for the annual Women Who Inspire Awards brunch. Rather than raise funds, the brunches barely broke even. Individuals donated toward the scholarship fund as well, but the donations were small, as CCMW could not issue tax receipts. Corporate donors always had the same response—no charitable status, no donations. Then the tide changed!

Demands on CCMW were ever increasing as the needs of Canadian Muslim women were becoming more complex, and governments, the media, and other Muslim and non-Muslim organizations were looking to CCMW for input,

advice, and partnerships. At the same time there were new chapters coming on board looking for assistance to get started. In 2018, CCMW was successful in securing funds for its four-year Strengthening Capacity project from Women and Gender Equality Canada. A key component of the project was to work toward long-term sustainability. The project called for a review of CCMW's fundraising practices and a comprehensive plan with short, medium, and long-term fundraising goals as well as applying for charitable status.

The plan is currently in its implementation phase and CCMW is seeking a full-time fundraising officer to keep up the momentum. It executed two of the recommendations in the plan last year: application for charitable status and a targeted sponsorship effort to raise funds for the scholarships. CCMW was fortunate to have the expertise of a team member who had extensive fundraising experience and was not shy about asking for money. Six weeks before the 2020 Women Who Inspire Awards, which was a virtual event because of COVID-19, with no overhead or food expenses, CCMW set a modest goal of raising \$10,000. CCMW relied on community connections, chapter members, and like-minded organizations to sponsor the event. It also mobilized the chapters to have their own goals to contribute to the scholarship fund. Local chapters had been accustomed to raising funds for charities such as shelters and foodbanks in their own communities. The fundraising plan also called for board member pledges to augment the fund. All of these efforts led to exceeding the goal to over \$20,000. The lesson in all of this was to sustain the momentum and continue to engage local CCMW chapters in the effort.

Journey to Charitable Status

CCMW had considered applying for charitable status over the years. Based on advice from lawyers, it was always reluctant to do so. Possible issues related to accountability and liability for each of the local chapters on the part of the national board and CCMW's advocacy work were cited as issues that may be perceived as problematic in acquiring charitable status. The legislation governing not-for-profit corporations changed in the past decade, and CCMW began the journey to charitable status in 2017.

The lawyer advised that perhaps it would be best for CCMW to establish a separate foundation that could grant funds for targeted education-focused programs and services, while CCMW itself could continue to engage in a wide range of projects and initiatives it had always done. This required incorporating a new organization with its own board of directors.

The incorporation under the name of Canadian Women Who Inspire Foundation was completed but the application for charitable status had not yet begun when CCMW received approval for the Strengthening Capacity project in 2018. The fundraising consultant CCMW hired to develop the fundraising plan as part of the project recommended that CCMW apply for charitable status for itself rather than the foundation because of its own brand equity and recognition. After four months of solid work and correspondence with a lawyer specializing in not-for-profit corporations, CCMW submitted its application for charitable status

in September 2020. The approval of applications can take up to 18–24 months, especially during COVID-19 pandemic.

Moving Forward

It is uncertain what the ability to issue tax receipts will mean for CCMW, but based on experience during the past 39 years, it will be a game-changer for the organization. The test will be to see if donations and sponsorships will be forthcoming for projects focused on all aspects of CCMW work or just for the Dr. Lila Fahlman Scholarship Fund. CCMW is already moving in a direction to have specific fundraising campaigns during the course of the year to solicit funds for specific programs. Based on success from its 2020 Women Who Inspire fundraising efforts, it is currently exploring the possibility of hosting joint fundraising campaigns to support organizations that work with Canadian Muslim women on issues of housing, gender-based violence, poverty, and food insecurity, among other critical life challenges.

After input from CCMW chapters and priorities they identified to deal with the disproportionate impact of COVID on women, CCMW has been launched a campaign for Ramadan 2021 to raise funds for a prominent organization providing housing and support services to Muslim women, children and families who are experiencing homelessness and/or domestic and family violence, poverty and seeking asylum.

Some have questioned the wisdom of CCMW raising funds for another Muslim organization when it struggles to raise funds for its own work, but if the objective of the partner organization is to improve the lives of Canadian Muslim women and their families through direct service, then why not? An important consideration is whether the work of the partner organization is aligned with CCMW's guiding principles and its mission. In this instance, there was enough common ground to move forward. Another benefit to this partnership is that it allows for tax receipts to be issued. This experience will also be instructive in assessing CCMW's ability to raise funds for causes focusing on Muslim women and girls beyond its scholarships. The campaign is off to a great start and will no doubt exceed the goal with the goodwill that comes with the spirit of Ramadan. There is no doubt that having an aspiring vision for the future, the ever-growing need for an organization like CCMW and the determination of its board, chapter members, and volunteers will prove fruitful for the future of Canadian Muslim women and girls.

References

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