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# Introduction

From coast to coast to coast, we appreciate the historic connections of all Indigenous peoples to these lands. As Canadian Muslim women, we are committed to confronting historical and ongoing colonialism and violence against First Nations and Indigenous communities. We stand in solidarity with them in a spirit of collaboration and reconciliation.

We recognize the intersecting forms of oppression, including settler colonialism, racism, and sexism, that create unique but connected forms of injustice we all experience. As Canadian Muslim women, we recognize our fight to end gender based violence against Muslim women cannot be sufficient without supporting those looking for their Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, girls, and non-binary loved ones. No woman is safe until all women are safe.

The Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) has been confronting Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments since its inception in 1982. After each major international conflict such as the first Gulf War, the 9/11 attacks or elections in Canada and the United States, we see a rise in harassment, intimidation and attacks on Canadian Muslims. This has been documented with empirical data by the researchers at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding in Washington, D.C. In more recent years, each time there is a hate-motivated attack on Muslims, such as the one in Christchurch, New Zealand, the murders at the Islamic Centre of Quebec, the murder outside the IMO mosque in Etobicoke, and the murders in London Ontario, there is a spike in hate-motivated attacks on Canadian Muslims, particularly assaults and harassment against Black and/or other visibly Muslim women.

Canadians' views towards Islam and Muslims are reported to be less favourable compared to other faith communities. According to a 2017 Angus Reid Institute study, 46% of Canadians had an unfavourable view of Islam – more than for any other faith tradition. Factors contributing to these unfavourable views, include anti-Muslim political discourse, negative media coverage and the rise of white supremacist, neo-Nazi, ultra-nationalist groups who spew hate speech online and now openly at rallies in public spaces. Stereotypes abound of Muslim men as violent terrorists and Muslim women as oppressed, lacking agency and being voiceless, and Islam itself being a violent religion, abound. In the face of all of this we are not be surprised that 11 Canadian Muslims have lost their lives since 2017. The violence against Canadian Muslims has to stop.

On the evening of June 6, 2021, Talat Afzaal, her son Salman, her daughter-in-law Madiha, her granddaughter Yumna, and her grandson Fayez were out for a late spring walk in their London, Ontario, neighbourhood when the lives of four members of that beautiful family came to a crashing halt. Nine-year-old Fayez survived after sustaining serious injuries and is now an orphan. This mass murder and heinous attack was the work of a white supremacist who was filled with hate against Muslims.

In the aftermath of this horrific Islamophobic attack, Bilal Rahall and Nusaybah Al-Azem, spokespersons for the London Muslim Mosque, called on all three levels of government to hold an Emergency National Action Summit on Islamophobia and address individual and systemic issues Canadian Muslim communities are facing on a daily basis – whether it's their personal safety, physical, mental and economic well-being or the education of their children.

CCMW welcomes the opportunity to share its concerns and calls to action as they pertain to Canadian Muslim women and girls. We also endorse the recommendations of the National Council of Canadian Muslims and those put forward by the Noor Cultural Centre and the International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group.

## About CCMW

CCMW is an organization dedicated to the equality, equity and empowerment of Canadian Muslim women and girls, 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-centred social justice work and create a more inclusive Canada for all. With 17 chapters across Canada, our 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 Muslim women and girls endure in Canada, while advocating for their diverse needs and equipping local CCMW chapters with the necessary resources to maximize national efforts and mobilize local communities to join the movement. We approach our work through an intersectional lens and recognize our diverse identities and expressions. We are but one voice among many.

## Defining Islamophobia

While there are many definitions of Islamophobia, CCMW is using the definition from the Ontario Human Rights Commission:

**“Racism, stereotypes, prejudice, fear or acts of hostility directed towards individual Muslims or followers of Islam in general.”**

## Gendered & Intersectional

We recognize and must respect that Canadian Muslim women and girls are very diverse in every way. Islamophobia is experienced differentially by each person. Structurally, it intersects with other forms of oppression such as anti-Black racism, sexism, homophobia and ableism. The lived experiences of Muslims with intersectional identities are often removed from conversations surrounding the Muslim experience.

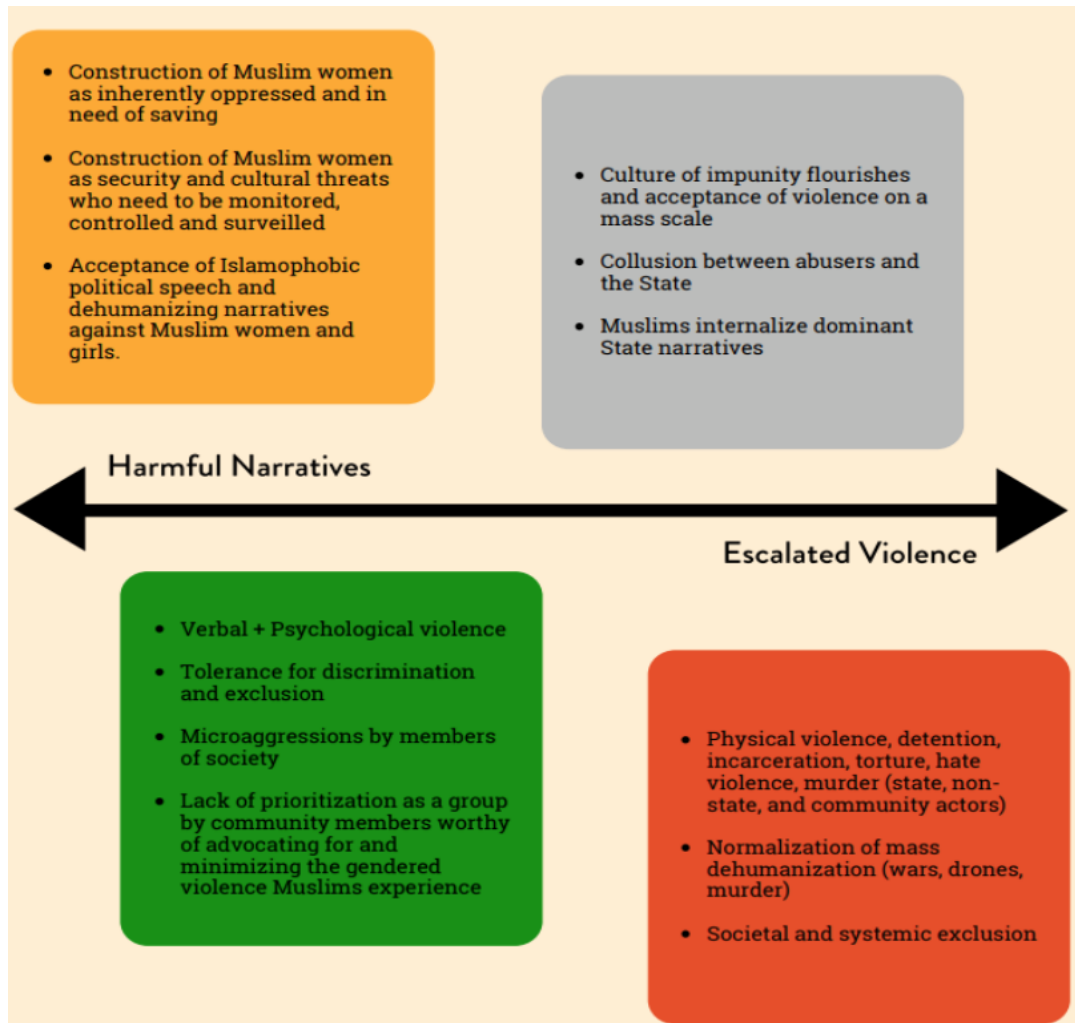
Gendered Islamophobia is a form of Islamophobia that directly targets Muslim women, girls, trans and non-binary individuals. The Justice for Muslims coalition describes Gendered Islamophobia as:

**"The ways the state utilizes gendered forms of violence to oppress, maim and control Muslim bodies."**

This violence and abuse are not limited to state actors. Individuals and groups act out what the state sanctions. At the core of this abuse and violence are sexism and misogyny. We need to understand sexism as a form of social oppression that interconnects with race, religion, class, and other systems of marginalization.

Gender-based violence (GBV) cannot be properly understood without addressing inequality based on race, religion, class, ability, and other intersectional identities.

## Gendered Islamophobia Violence Spectrum



Source: Justice for Muslims Coalition

Three of the four individuals who were murdered in the London Islamophobic terrorist attack were women. With a spate of hate-motivated attacks on Black Muslim women in hijab in Calgary and Edmonton, and most recently in Hamilton, with ongoing harassment and abuse of visible Muslim women (e.g., women who dress in clothing culturally identified as “Muslim,” like hijab), murder as the ultimate result of this violent hatred is not a surprise.

While we don’t know what Talat, Madiha and Yumna were wearing, they were definitely in the perpetrator’s sight. We know of several families that live steps away from where this attack occurred.

While we don't know what Talat, Madiha and Yumna were wearing, they were definitely in the perpetrator's sight. We know of several families that live steps away from where this attack occurred. Our members are telling us that they are afraid of leaving their homes, that when going to the grocery store or the bank, they are constantly looking over their shoulders to see if a black pickup truck is following them. That fear is palpable among Canadian Muslim women and girls who can be identified easily by their clothing.

Culturally competent service providers for Canadian Muslim women and girls experiencing gender-based violence are in short supply. There is a shortage of counsellors, therapists and emergency shelters to meet the specific needs of Canadian Muslim women and girls. Islamophobic attacks are another layer of violence they are facing and most service providers are ill-equipped to handle their trauma.

## Experiencing gendered Islamophobia

As part of CCMW's Digital Anti-Racism Education (DARE) project, we recently invited Canadian Muslim women, girls, trans and non-binary individuals to share their experiences of Islamophobia with us. Here are a few examples of what they shared with us:

- **I was assaulted stepping onto the bus as a stranger tried to pull off my hijab.**
- **The day after Donald Trump got elected, a white middle-aged man in a blue pickup truck that was driving behind me switched lanes, pulled up beside me, motioned for me to roll down my window, and when I did, he yelled 'go home, b....!'**
- **After complaining to the Equity and Diversity Office having experienced discriminatory comments from my coworkers, I was fired under suspicious circumstances.**
- **I was sexually, physically and verbally assaulted on the Sky Train for wearing the hijab.**

- In high school two hijab-wearing Muslim girls found their shared locker broken into. Upon attempting to open the lock with their key, it got stuck as gum was stuffed inside. While struggling to open the lock, a group of other high school kids were watching and laughing at them.
- While on the swings at a park, I was approached by a woman who told me to leave and called the police on me. After this incident I posted my story on Facebook and the individual who had approached me started to harass me online. After reporting this to the police, there was no follow up.
- In elementary school, while in kindergarten, I was asked by another student if my parents were suicide bombers.
- While working at a comic bookstore, I had experienced verbal harassment by customers calling me a "towel head" and a "terrorist".
- At the age of five, two classmates attacked me and attempted to remove my headscarf.
- I was verbally abused repeatedly and was spat on.

We also held a Young People's Roundtable on Islamophobia where we heard from young Muslim women with disabilities, Black, queer, visible and non-visible Canadian Muslim women. Their messages to governments and to us were clear; they are speaking truth to power:

**"I'd like to point out that while adults have the gift of experience in comparison to young people, young people have the gift of being able to dream of ways to overcome these challenges and obstacles and restrictions that may be in the way of an issue and its solution. And this undeniable passion and creativity must be seen as an asset that the young people hold."**

**"[The thing] that has really been bothering me, especially with these discussions on Islamophobia is that when these things happen, it is our community that deals with the aftermath and it's our community who does the action."**



I'm enrolling my sister who is nine years old in the anti-Islamophobia program at our local Islamic Center. Meanwhile, our policymakers and those who are supposed to be our protectors are arguing over whether certain symbols are racist or not whether certain groups should be racist or not."

"When the federal government is planning to address Islamophobia, it must contend with its own role in settler colonialism, how it enacts xenophobia, how it brings LGBTQ plus refugees to the country but leaves them unsupported once they get here. You know its role in violence on Muslims here and abroad, heightening Islamophobia through the actions of its armed forces. To meaningfully engage with the Muslim community on the topic of Islamophobia, the federal government must connect this work to their plans on addressing homophobia and transphobia as well, because if the federal government fails to do so it fails to account for the varied experiences and material realities of the more than 1 million Muslims that live in this country. Like the speakers before me have pointed out, the Muslim community is not a monolith."

"I am tired of my body and hijab being politicized. It's time for allies to either pay me for my advocacy, or to start fighting against Islamophobia against racism, and ableism, because I am tired of fighting, I simply want to exist as I am in peace."

"I need to also point out the reliance on state for a solution that is primarily focused on punishment and incarceration isn't sufficient. There's not something Muslims should be advocating for, at least that I believe. I think that we should be trying to advocate for a lessening of police budget, security and surveillance, but more on data collection and how to analyze existing policies that inadvertently perpetrate violence against communities, specifically economic marginalization and all these other situations that have led to the disproportionate targeting of individuals."

"It is vital to understand the nuance and intersectionality of what it means to be a visibly Black Muslim woman. It is heartbreaking for me to hear my friends and loved ones share how terrified they are to leave their homes, how they are followed by cars when they're running mundane errands, how they are profiled for simply existing [...]Black Muslim women are battling gender-based violence, Islamophobia, and anti-Black racism at the same time. And although I'm livid and frustrated, I'm not surprised that people have, for the most part, ignored the violence that we face.

**Black Muslim women are not safe in so-called Canada. And I don't know when we will be. I mean, how could we feel safe when politicians and people in power are more concerned about making laws to stop women from wearing a hijab in the workplace instead of strengthening hate laws in their constituencies?"**

**"We don't want to be murdered."**

Other recurring themes had to do with the inequities in the criminal justice system, law enforcement, anti-Muslim and Islamophobic biases in all levels of education, including in curricula, teaching faculty, and among decision makers. The young people are feeling exhausted and frustrated because they are carrying the burden of their intersectional Muslim identities, the pandemic, educational and financial challenges, among other factors. Physical and mental health and also personal safety are major concerns for the young women and girls who spoke at the roundtable. The young people were clear that they are happy to be asked for their input and ideas but they are tired of providing free advice to governments and community organizations without seeing tangible results in addressing their concerns.

According to data from Statistics Canada 2013 General Social Survey on Social Identity, across different types of discrimination (including any discrimination, as well as sex-based, ethnicity or culture, race or skin colour, physical appearance, religion, and language), Black Canadian Muslim women report the highest percentage of discriminatory experience. We might expect this for any type of discriminatory experience within the last five years, but even when considering specific forms of experience, Black Muslim women report the highest rate of experiences. For example, when reporting sex-based discrimination, similar rates of all women regardless of race or religion might be expected to report discriminatory experience. However, more Black Muslim women report experiencing sex-based discrimination (32%) compared to non-Muslim black women (26%), non-black non-Muslim women (15%), and non-black Muslim women (6%). Black Muslim women experience almost six times as much sex-based discrimination compared to non-Black Muslim women (32% vs 6%). Another way to understand this: one in three Black Muslim women experience sex-based discrimination, while less than one in ten non-Black Muslim women do.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Shah, Sarah. "Canadian Muslims: Demographics, Discrimination, Religiosity, and Voting." Institute of Islamic Studies Occasional Paper Series 1, no. 1 (2019)

When considering the context where these experiences happen, we find that proportionately more Black Muslim women report experiencing discrimination in nearly every context compared to others. Compared to any other group, more Black Muslim women report experiencing discrimination in banks, stores, and restaurants, when dealing with the police, and when crossing the Canadian border.

While Canadian Muslim women and girls experience discrimination, harassment and threats in virtually all aspects of their lives, including employment, education, health care, community and social services, settlement services, housing, the justice system, law enforcement, public and retail spaces, we have highlighted the areas of greatest concern to our members and those who have reached out to us to share their experiences.

## Discrimination in employment

One of the major concerns raised by Canadian Muslim women is discrimination in finding employment and once they are employed, advancing in their careers.

According to a CCMW report, *Canadian Muslim Women: A Decade of Change*, based on data from the National Household Survey of 2011, the most recent Census data including the religion variable, Muslim women encountered more difficulties in the labour market than other communities with similar sociodemographic profiles, and in spite of the favourable changes in the Muslim female labour force, the labour market outcomes have not improved for them.

Unemployment among Muslim women was high and persistent. Some 16.7 per cent of Muslim women 15 years of age and older were unemployed in 2011, a figure more than double the national average of 7.4 per cent for all Canadian women. They fared poorly compared with other faith communities. Only the women practising traditional spirituality (Aboriginal) faced higher unemployment than Muslim women and girls. This is in spite of the fact that proportionately twice as many Muslim women as all Canadian women specialize in STEM and twice as many use both official languages at work.

Other communities with many of the same characteristics as Muslims including ethnicity, culture, language and quality of education do much better in the labour market. For example, only 10.9 per cent of visible minorities were unemployed in 2011, well below the jobless rate of Muslim women (16.7 per cent). Nine out of ten (87 per cent) of Canadian Muslim women identify themselves as visible minorities. Visible minority women also had slightly better labour market outcomes than Canadian-born Muslim female graduates of Canadian educational institutions.

The unemployment rate had not budged since the last measure was taken in the 2001 census even as more and more Muslim females entering the labour market are Canadian-born graduates of Canadian universities and do not have language proficiency or fluency issues.

While employment equity legislation has improved the representation of some of the designated groups in the federal government and federally regulated sectors, Canadian Muslim women tell us that they continue to experience barriers to access and advancement, especially those who are racialized and visibly Muslim. The Government of Canada recently announced a Task Force on the Employment Equity Act Review. The Task Force does not have any representation of Canadian Muslim women even though we know they face serious challenges in employment. One of the key changes to the Act should be disaggregating the data and renaming the visible minority designated group. Adding a category of religious affiliation would be essential. This is a necessary factor in identifying systemic barriers to employment for Canadian Muslim women. Provincial employment equity legislation would be welcomed. We acknowledge that there is resistance to it across all Canadian jurisdictions.

The Quebec government has institutionalized discrimination in employment for Muslim women in certain occupations in the public sector. For individuals seeking individual remedies or legal recourse this can be an expensive and difficult proposition, financial support for women is critical while they struggle to remedy their situation.

The data from the 2021 census which includes religion is not yet available for analysis.

## Discrimination in education

Canadian Muslim women and girls experience discrimination in education in various ways. This includes inaccuracies about Islam and Muslims in the curriculum, ignorance and Islamophobic views of teachers, faculty members, school board members, administrators and others in leadership positions, as well as guidance counsellors advising students about their academic achievement and future direction. There have been reported instances of teachers, principals, faculty members and elected officials disputing their own anti-Muslim and Islamophobic biases and dismissing concerns of students, parents and community members. Negative portrayals of Muslims and Islam, their history and biased framing of political conflicts in other parts of the world can be found in the curricula in elementary, secondary and postsecondary institutions.

To remedy this situation a full review of curricula from an anti-Islamophobic lens is necessary. Anti-Islamophobia education for all employees and decision makers should be part of diversity, equity and inclusion programs at all school districts, colleges and universities across Canada.

Opportunities to provide accurate information and contributions of Muslims and Islam during Islamic Heritage Month and major Muslim holidays should be maximized to counter negative narratives and images.

## Discrimination in policing

Our members have shared with us their concerns in complaining to the police when they have experienced an Islamophobic, sexist or racist incident. Several shared that they reported the incident to the police, only for the complaints to be ignored or dismissed. In one incident, a woman in hijab was being harassed in a store. She had language challenges but still chose to go to the local police station to file a complaint. The officer on duty said, "That's nothing, you must be used to this sort of thing. Don't your men treat women this way all the time." She was shocked by this reaction and felt completely disempowered and did not pursue the matter any further.

Racialized Muslim women and girls are reluctant to report these incidents because of perceived and real anti-Muslim and anti-Black bias on the part of law enforcement agencies. Anti-Islamophobia and anti-racism education is essential for all police services as well as community liaison officers specifically to connect with Muslims, mosques and other Muslim organizations, such as schools and community centres.

Many police services are not equipped to handle incidents of hate crimes. Data collection is flawed because it does not capture the intersectionality of Canadian Muslim women and girls. As a result, the data do not reflect the extent of hate-motivated incidents against Canadian Muslims of diverse races, ethnicities, abilities and genders. Police services should ensure there is specific unit to deal with hate crimes and data collection systems incorporate the intersectional identities of complainants. Accurate data capture is critical to addressing systemic issues in policing across all Canadian jurisdictions.

## Discrimination in the justice system

Cultural competence for judges and lawyers is very necessary. Canadian Muslim women who contact us have challenges in accessing legal services that are responsive to their specific cultural and religious needs. They encounter anti-Muslim and Islamophobic attitudes in the justice system because of cultural relativism and assumptions about Muslims and Islam.

Anti-Islamophobia and anti-racism education should be provided to lawyers, paralegals and judges in all Canadian jurisdictions.

Flawed laws like the Laicity Act (Bill 21) in Quebec have no place in our justice system. Any law that overtly discriminates against any group protected by human rights legislation and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and in this case predominantly against Canadian Muslim women, should be struck down.

## Muslim while walking, driving, shopping or taking transit

We know that the Afzaal family were out for an evening walk when they were attacked. Now many visibly Muslim women and girls are telling us that they are constantly afraid that they might be next. Black Muslim women in hijab have experienced attacks in Calgary and Edmonton and others have told us of similar incidents in the street, school or college/university washrooms, shopping malls, in public transit or while driving. Bystanders are reluctant to intervene or stop these attacks from happening. We know that Muslims are not the only targets of hate-motivated attacks. Unfortunately, recent targeting of East Asian Canadians and ongoing anti-Semitism, anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racist incidents are commonplace.

Municipal bylaws to protect individuals from these attacks are necessary. As is bystander training for all Canadians. While we are always concerned about over-surveillance, cameras and good lighting would also be helpful in public spaces. They can be useful in identifying perpetrators and also act as deterrents.

## Traditional and social media

Negative images and coverage of issues related to Muslim women are pervasive both in traditional media and on social media. The image of the oppressed Muslim woman needing to be saved contributes to the violence they face by those who perceive them as weak and easy targets of Islamophobic attacks. CCMW's own experience in attempting to provide counter-narratives and positive images of Canadian Muslim women and girls can tell us that good news about us is not all that interesting. The old adage, if it bleeds, it leads, is still the way of the media. Journalists and reporters are quick to contact us whenever there is a terrorist attack or assault of some sort involving Muslims but rarely do they contact us when we issue a news release about our Women Who Inspire Awards or our publications or events featuring Canadian Muslim women and girls.

Positive stories about Canadian Muslim women and girls need to be featured in video, film, and traditional and social media platforms. This requires financial and professional resources – there is no shortage of Muslim storytellers, poets, artists, filmmakers and videographers to capture and tell the stories and challenge the predominant negative images of Muslim women and girls.

## Recommendations

CCMW endorses the recommendations of the National Council of Canadian Muslims and those put forward by legal academic and journalist Azeezah Kanji and Tim McSorley of the International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group.

You can appreciate the burden and exhaustion we're feeling to confront Islamophobia in our daily lives. To share this burden, CCMW is putting forward specific recommendations pertaining to discrimination and Islamophobia in employment, education, policing, safety in public places, the justice system, and traditional and social media. While there are many other areas of concern, we have identified these as our immediate priorities.

The following reflect recommendations made by our members and other stakeholders who have shared their experiences and ideas with us:

1. Apply an intersectional anti-Islamophobia lens to review federal, provincial, and municipal policies, legislation, regulations, bylaws, programs and services to detect anti-Muslim, Islamophobic bias and develop a plan for remediation.
2. Fund research on the gendered and intersectional nature of Islamophobia and its impact on social determinants of health as well as economic and educational outcomes of Canadian Muslim women and girls, trans and non-binary individuals.
3. Pass Bill C-36, An Act to amend the Criminal Code and the Canadian Human Rights Act and to make related amendments to another Act (hate propaganda, hate crimes and hate speech. In case of an election, reintroduce the bill regardless of the party in power.
4. Ensure that the Task Force on the Employment Equity Act Review includes expanding designated groups and disaggregating data to enable identification of employment barriers for Canadian Muslim women, taking into account their intersectional identities.



## Recommendations

5. Enact employment equity legislation in provincially regulated sectors.
6. Require Ministers of Labour to address employment barriers faced by Canadian Muslim women and girls.
7. Require the Ministries of Educations to review elementary and secondary school curricula from an anti-Islamophobia lens and ensure that anti-racism and anti-Islamophobia content is included in them.
8. Commit to availing of CCMW's Anti-Islamophobia 101 and Countering Cyberhate 101 workshops for:
  - a. Federally and provincially regulated employers and unions, including federal, provincial, territorial and municipal government employees.
  - b. School board trustees, teachers, principals, superintendents, directors of education, administrators, decision-makers and all other employees in the school system.
  - c. Faculty members, department heads, deans, governing bodies, and all other employees in post-secondary institutions.
  - d. Police services and law enforcement agencies.
  - e. Lawyers, paralegals and judges.
  - f. Hospitals, community health centres, social and community service providers, and settlement service providers.
9. Pass municipal bylaws to address street harassment and other hate-motivated incidents, including citizen bystander training to intervene safely.
10. Fund initiatives that celebrate the contributions and achievements of Canadian Muslim women and girls and to tell their stories through multi-media vehicles to address negative stereotypes and disinformation.
11. Promote civic engagement by introducing a buddy-system for Canadian Muslim women and girls, especially those who may be more vulnerable due to age or disability, to accompany them while walking or taking public transit.
12. Adopt an upstream approach to countering racist ideologies by incorporating more anti-racist, anti-oppressive, anti-colonial, and intersectional education across all levels of primary and secondary school education.
13. Allocate additional funding to grassroots organizations, to support their efforts in delivering more culturally adapted mental health care to survivors of Islamophobic attacks and allocate additional funding to support survivors in need of legal services.

## Report cards on progress

CCMW will issue a report card every six months on progress made to hold our elected officials to account. We appreciate the opportunity to share our concerns and recommendations and implore governments at all levels to take them seriously and act on them without delay. Lives of Canadian Muslim women and girls are at stake.