



ISLAMIC WOMEN'S WELFARE COUNCIL *of Victoria Inc.*

15th August 2007

The Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria (Council) appreciates the opportunity to submit their submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Dress Codes and School Uniforms in Victorian Schools.

The Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria is a community welfare organisation established and managed by Muslim women for Muslim women. The Council was established in 1991, as a non-religious organisation reflecting the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and sectarian diversity of Muslim women living in the state of Victoria.

1. In 199, the Council published a research document titled, 'Dress, Culture and Migration'. The research demonstrated that Australian Muslims, like Muslims worldwide are a diverse community and for women particularly, dress varies according to sectarian, ethnic and cultural background as well as interpretation of religious requirement. In Australia, Muslim women wear the hijab for a variety of reasons, including as an expression of modesty and religious belief and/or community affiliation. Other young women prefer and can generally choose not to wear the hijab, also for a variety of reasons.
2. It is our experience that the lack of recognition of young Muslim's women's religious dress code requirements have locked young women out of many school activities that they otherwise would and should have participated in.
3. The Council believes that any policy written about Dress Codes and School Uniforms should include the right to express one's religious or cultural background and therefore to freely wear appropriate religious or cultural attire.
4. We are strongly of the view that in order for young Muslim women to comfortably and confidently participate in the full range of school activities, school uniforms must accommodate the wearing of the hijab and loose fitting attire. Young women should be offered a range options to facilitate their participation in as many school activities as possible. For some young women, school will be their only opportunity to access many of resources Australian society provides. Some of these options are very practical and straightforward: such as allowing young Muslim women to wear pants under netball skirts when playing sports.
5. A number of schools that the Council has worked with do seem to have a sound understanding of the cultural and religious requirements of Muslim students. However, there are also a significant number of teachers who continue to believe that cultural/religious background and needs of students are not legitimate issues for consideration by schools. We believe this further alienates young Muslim women from school activities.

6. We have met with schools across Victoria who accommodate and are sensitive to young Muslim women's dress needs. We know this because they have allowed young women to alter the school uniform (dress, skirt) to a specific length. Some schools have even provided young women with school space, material and an experienced tailor to sew their own uniforms. Such initiatives generally had school council approval and ensured that the young Muslim women used the material and patterns of the relevant school uniform. However, young Muslim women in some schools are not allowed to wear loose clothing in accordance with their religious requirements. Young women have been refused the option of altering the school uniform and as a result cannot participate in subjects such as physical education.

7. Sports and recreation for young Muslim women has always been an issue and has been looked at quite closely by the Council. For young Muslim women the importance of participating in sports will vary according to their religious beliefs and for others the uniforms required in order to play that particular sporting game. For example; swimming costumes, netball / tennis skirts, soccer shorts, etc there are alternative sports dress in accordance with some young Muslim women's dress requirements readily available. However, there is a need to look at the costs of uniform and any added cost Muslim families might carry. The Council recommends that all families from a lower socio- economic background should be assisted by the subsidizing of school uniform.

8. The Council has trained a large number of service providers on Islam and Muslims in Australia. Professional development of school staff is crucial to well being and academic development of young Muslim women.

9. Finally, while the Council is of the view that young Muslim women who wear the hijab should be fully supported; schools must also recognize that the wearing of the hijab accompanies many associated issues that schools must be cognizant of. Within the boarder community, young women who wear the hijab are more vulnerable to racial violence and taunts. Within the Muslim community; the cultural and political dynamics and pressures on Muslim women who don't wear the hijab is definitely a developing trend that needs to be monitored. In both cases, young women bear the brunt of issues in the broader community.

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