



ZAHRA DHANANI

Woman of Distinction 2008 Social Change



Artist, educator, DJ and lawyer, **Zahra Dhanani** lights up a room with her passionate and creative approach to social justice for women and girls. Currently the Senior Manager for Operation Springboard, an agency that assists those involved in the justice system, individuals with developmental disabilities, those needing employment and the homeless, Zahra has devoted her young and productive life to multiplying the arenas in which justice work can be done.

Her contributions include breaking taboos about body image and sexual abuse in South Asian communities. Through initiating groups for women of colour at Sheena's Place, bursting forth on radio, in print and through her magnetic Djing of Funkasia, her own late night invention, Zahra is a pioneering and exuberant proponent of healthy and pleasurable sexuality for all orientations.

Zahra's joyous cultural activism is matched by an equal measure of somber attention to the structures of inequality that trap women and girls on the negative side of society's ledger. Zahra is an accomplished lawyer who has devoted herself to increasing access to justice for immigrant and refugee women, often fleeing violence, abuse and political repression at home. Zahra Dhanani studied at Osgoode Hall Law School, where she received her LL.B. She is currently completing her LL.M. in Alternative Dispute Resolution at Osgoode Hall with a focus on Restorative Justice. Zahra's leadership in finding new definitions of justice has benefitted many young women of culturally diverse backgrounds in low income communities. She has directed special Restorative Justice and peacemaking initiatives in St. Jamestown and Regent Park with Aboriginal and Black young women. Openly embracing the stereotype-defying identity she has been brave enough to grow into, this lesbian, Muslim woman born into poverty has lived her life out loud, to the immense benefit of others.

An early and enduring advocate to end violence against women, Zahra began her engagement with social justice while she was a student of Women's Studies at the University of Ottawa, spearheading the "no means no campaign" that set out to reverse the shocking rates of sexual violence on university campuses. With its frank message targeting the nature of true consent, the campaign gained momentum on campuses all across Canada. As staff lawyer at the Barbra Schliker Clinic in Toronto, Zahra represented women from around the world, always going the extra mile to ensure every avenue to their success at living violence free and fuller lives. Her pioneering work at Sheena's place included direct counselling work with women on eating disorders and crippling body self-image, noticing how



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social expectations of women included not just unrealistic body size, but white skin, and a certain class-based self-assurance and self acceptance. Zahra proved herself to be an irrefutable and compassionate advocate as the principle trainer selected to educate the Police, Children's Aid workers, shelter workers on the realities of violence against immigrant and refugee women on behalf of METRAC, the Metropolitan Action Committee Against violence Against Women and Children. She demanded of her trainees a level of self-reflection critical to authentic social change; a demand that she makes by the example of her own rigorous self-examination, shared with everyone she meets. Not surprisingly, others have recognized her life of contribution, and she has won the Remarkable Woman Award, and the 2006 Honoured Dyke award of the Toronto Dyke March. Zarha has served on the board of several women's organizations, including Intercede, the organization for domestic workers' rights.

Zahra Dhanani is a rare model for girls, showing what it means to follow your passion and live your life to its fullest, bringing a spirit of generosity and affirmation to all she does. The multilingual and multi faceted Zahra Dhanani is a rarity: a woman who can speak to inequities with fervent candor, never trampling the dignity of those she seeks to convince, and always with her eye on sharing her effervescent expectation that life just gets better.