

28<sup>th</sup> January 2016

Dear Trustees of Birmingham Central Mosque,

**Re: Concerns about views held by the Chair of Birmingham Central Mosque**

I write further to my visit on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> December 2015 to Birmingham Central Mosque when I attended with my colleague Chaplain Shahin Ashraf MBE on behalf of Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK). We met with three trustees one of whom was your Chair, Muhammad Afzal. We understand the other two trustees were Mr. Niaz Ahmad and Mr. Sarwar.

Mosques in Britain are often criticised and accused of being out of touch with issues relevant to the lives of Muslim communities, particularly those concerning Muslim women and girls. As mosques generally do not reach out to Muslim women's groups, and after consultation with our members, we decided to start a proactive engagement with religious institutions and alert them to issues of concern to Muslim women and girls. We have already held a successful event in partnership with a religious institutions, for example in Rochdale where a number of imams / scholars spoke on this issue and which was also attended by men. We felt it was also important to hold similar events in other locations, including Birmingham.

Hence, on Friday 27<sup>th</sup> November 2015, my colleague, Chaplain Shahin Ashraf MBE, visited the manager of Birmingham Central Mosque and verbally put forward a proposal for an event on forced marriage to be jointly organised by Birmingham Central Mosque and MWNUK. We offered to provide funds for the event to cover refreshments, venue hire (at the mosque), an administrative fee (for costs incurred in identifying guests, sending invitations and organising a male focus group) and speaker fees for the religious scholar. We were hopeful of a positive response because the mosque had published an article in one of its newsletters that forced marriage was against Islam. The manager requested that we put the proposal in writing so that he could forward it to the trustees. We sent the proposal on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2015.

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Muslim Women's Network UK



[muslimwomensnetworkuk](https://www.youtube.com/muslimwomensnetworkuk)

We were then asked to meet three trustees on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> December 2015. Mr Muhammad Afzal, Chair of the trustees, was present at this meeting and did most of the talking. We explained that we wanted to hold a forced marriage event with the mosque because it was able to reach an audience (that is, Muslim men) that we as a women's group find difficult to reach and that we needed the mosque's help. We provided examples of case studies from our helpline and explained that other women's helplines across the country were regularly receiving calls on forced marriages and that a high percentage of these concerned Muslim women and girls, particularly from Pakistani background. We also mentioned the successful event we had organised in Rochdale, with faith leaders.

Mr Afzal responded by saying forced marriage was no longer a problem. His colleague (Mr. Ahmad) stated that it was now an abandoned practice to which Mr. Afzal agreed. We felt that Mr Afzal was dismissive as he went on to say that many marriages took place at the mosque, that the couples who got married were happy and that the mosque would know if forced marriages were taking place. When we informed him that many such marriages were taking place abroad, one of the trustees (Mr. Ahmad) argued that due to stricter immigration rules families were no longer marrying off their children abroad, a statement to which Mr Afzal agreed. When we challenged them about the evidence they had for such a claim, and that we were receiving a large number of telephone calls and emails about such cases, they responded by saying 'we just know, 'we don't need evidence'. We were made to feel that our claims about forced marriage being a problem were dishonest. Mr. Afzal even said: 'women these days are strong and educated, how can they be forced into marriage?' He did not recognise that educated women and girls could be pressured, emotionally blackmailed or threatened into marriage.

One trustee even stated that it was acceptable to advise their children to get married if they had behavioural issues. We reminded them that emotional blackmail counted as forced marriage and that a marriage was only deemed arranged (and not forced) if the children gave consent. When we pointed out that UK Government Forced Marriage Unit statistics indicated that significant numbers of victims were from the West Midlands, Mr. Afzal responded that the government's figures were exaggerated. Mr. Afzal went on to say that we could hire Mosque premises an independent event but that the mosque would not be a partner or participate in it because it would send a wrong message to the community that forced marriage was a problem when actually it is not.

Before leaving we asked whether they would consider working with us on domestic violence. Mr. Afzal responded by saying that more men than women suffered from domestic violence these days. We argued that although men did suffer from domestic violence, by far the larger number was made up by women. He then went on to state that 'domestic violence was happening mainly in the Christian community because they get drunk.' I explained that the problem was also significant in Muslim communities and that women have been murdered as a result. However, Mr. Afzal questioned why he had not heard about these murders in the media if they had taken place. We explained that cases had been reported in the media and that, in fact, there had been several murders in the West Midlands alone. We were surprised by his views given that the mosque runs a well-known divorce service where domestic violence is regularly raised as a reason for divorce. Mr. Afzal, we felt, was clearly out of touch with the mosque's own service users.

Before we left, Mr. Afzal said that we should get in touch with them if we want to partner them on domestic violence and that they would consider a proposal. Another trustee (Mr. Ahmad) advised that we should maintain dialogue with sisters at the mosque and talk again, and that he would be in touch. We felt these were tactics to appease us in order to deflect our criticism of the mosque – after all we were asked to put in a proposal for forced marriage, only to be told it was not a problem and that the mosque would not work with us. By the end of the conversation, it was clear that the trustees, and especially Mr. Afzal, were not interested in women’s issues and had little, if any, intention of working with us on any women’s rights and issues. We have not heard back from them since that meeting.

If Birmingham Central Mosque was genuinely concerned about addressing issues facing 50 per cent of the communities it is meant to serve, its representatives would have used the opportunity to learn about the issues and explore ways of working together with us. The trustees’ attitude not only reinforces our view that many Muslim men who run mosques are not only out of touch with their communities, especially Muslim women, but also that their lack of interest in women’s issues or denial of them appears to indicate a silent condoning of violence against women.

We were left wondering why Mr. Afzal and his fellow trustees called to meet us if they had no intention of working with us and did not believe that the problem exists. Was it to deliberately undermine us? They were certainly not listening to us, nor were they interested in learning about the experience of Muslim women and girls. Men with such attitudes do not deserve to be in such positions of authority. MWNUK is a national and highly respected charity with a good track record of dealing effectively with Muslim women’s issues. Our findings on forced marriage, domestic violence and other problems are evidenced by our research and our helpline enquiries. Despite our expertise in these areas, we were not taken seriously. Mr Afzal gave the impression that he knew better than us. We are concerned that if such an attitude can be displayed towards women like us who are well-informed and articulate, what chance do other Muslim women seeking support have? Given Mr. Afzal’s complete disregard for women’s experiences, we believe that he should be asked to step down from his role as trustee and Chair. We would like to know what action you intend to take.

Muslim Women’s Network UK would also like to take this opportunity to ask the following questions:

1. What criteria are used by the mosque to select for trustees?
2. Do trustees and other mosque officials receive gender equality training and instruction about gender issues given that 50 per cent of the communities they serve are Muslim women and girls?
3. Why do you not have women trustees?
4. When do you plan to introduce women trustees on your board? If you intend to recruit women trustees, how will you ensure that recruitment is impartial and that positions will not be given to family and friends? If you do not plan to have female trustees, then what are the reasons for this?

5. What plans does the mosque have to address issues affecting Muslim women and girls (including all forms of violence) and how you will assist Muslim women to change and challenge what can only be described as anti-women attitudes of some Muslim men?

We would like to take this opportunity to remind you that charities exist for the public benefit and that therefore the mosque is not the private property of the few male trustees who happen to be entrusted by its charge at any one time. You are required to comply with the Equality Act 2010 and there should be no bar (overt or covert) to women becoming trustees; exemptions for religious institutions are only applicable for acts of worship. We have noticed from the Charity Commission website that you have 39 trustees who are all male. This emphasises the blatant nature of discrimination against women. Are you suggesting that not a single woman had the skills, knowledge and ability to fill one of the 39 trustee positions? Please note that we will be lodging a formal complaint with the Charity Commission in this respect.

We will also be raising concerns about how organisations such as yours promote hierarchy based on caste through the Charity Commission. For example, we have noticed that some trustees have 'Ch.' in front of their name. We understand this stands for the caste of Chaudhary. We would like to know, if this is not their official name in legal paperwork, then why is this logged with the Charity Commission. We have also noticed 'Haji' is also used in front of trustee names on the Charity Commission website, which is a personal matter and not necessarily a barometer of a person's moral superiority. We would like to take this opportunity to remind you that hierarchy in Islam is based not on caste, or gender etc. but on a person's character / piety.


Finally, a reminder about the commands of our Creator:

*'Allah orders for Justice and Fairness.'* (Qur'an, 16:90)

*'O ye who believe! Be ye staunch in justice, witnesses for Allah, even though it be against yourselves or (your) parents or (your) kindred, whether (the case be of) a rich man or a poor man, for Allah is nearer unto both (them ye are). So follow not passion lest ye lapse (from truth) and if ye lapse or fall away, then lo! Allah is ever Informed of what ye do. (Qur'an 4:135)*

It is with full faith in Him alone, that we look forward to your detailed response regarding our concerns and questions.

Yours faithfully,



Shaista Gohir MBE

**Chair**

**On Behalf of**

**Muslim Women's Network UK Board of Trustees**