



Muslim Women's Network UK

WRITTEN EVIDENCE TO GOVERNMENT EQUALITIES OFFICE CONSULTATION ON RETURNING TO WORK AFTER TIME OUT CARING

October 2017

Introduction

1. Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK) is a national Muslim women's organisation in Britain (www.mwnuk.co.uk). We are a small national charity (no. 1155092) that works to improve social justice and equality for Muslim women and girls. Our membership also includes women of other faiths or of no faith and men who support our work. We find out about the experiences of Muslim women and girls through research and helpline enquiries. We identify policy and practice gaps and use this information to inform decision makers in government as well as informing our community campaigns at a grassroots level.
2. We also develop resources and train women so they are better aware of their rights. We have a separate website for our national helpline (www.mwnhelpline.co.uk) that provides advice and support on a range of issues some of which include: domestic abuse, forced marriage, honour based violence, sexual abuse, divorce, discrimination and mental health etc.
3. The impact of our work is particularly felt in reducing the vulnerability of Muslim women and girls, reducing the prejudice they face, and giving them greater access to rights and services – all of which allow them to contribute to society like any other citizen. We are also creating a critical mass of voices to influence change with more women being confident to challenge discriminatory practices within their communities and in society and to influence policy makers.
4. We have previously provided Written and Oral Evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee in respect of their Inquiry into Employment opportunities for Muslims in UK¹, and to the House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship & Civic Engagement². In both instances we highlighted barriers which can affect Muslim

¹ Please see following link: http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/679379-Inquiry%20into%20discrimination%20and%20barriers%20in%20employment.pdf

² Please see following link: http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/191339-House%20of%20Lords%20Inquiry%20Citizenship.pdf

women when both wanting to enter the workplace as well as once in the workplace, and we consider such information similarly relevant in respect of the Government Equalities Office (GEO) Consultation on those returning to work after time out caring.

5. Although we work predominantly with Muslim women and will therefore focus on the experiences of Muslim women within our Evidence, the points we raise can also be relevant to non-Muslim women, as well as men. However, we feel it is vital that Muslim women are provided with a voice in such matters and hope the Government Equalities Office also gives due consideration to the experiences of Muslim women when assessing return to work initiatives.

Summary

6. Childcare issues, pay levels and a lack of flexible working opportunities are key barriers to returning to work which need to be addressed. However, issues of discrimination and Islamophobia as well as cultural issues are also relevant in considering the hurdles faced by Muslim and BME women in returning to the workplace.
7. A review needs to be carried out of the support and training available in preparing those wishing to return to work. CPD and other profession specific courses should be considered in addition to life skills sessions. Charities and voluntary organisations have been an invaluable source of support and should be provided with the necessary funding and resources to continue to do so.
8. Role-modelling campaigns, such as our #AndMuslim campaign, and other mentoring schemes are useful in aiding and empowering Muslim women to enter and return to the workplace. However, it is important to address all the hurdles if the government's commitment to aiding returners to work is to be achieved.
9. Taking time out for reasons of self-care is just as important as taking time out to care for others, and an individual doing so should not be penalised. This is particularly the case when the reasons may be due to (as examples) domestic violence, forced marriage or mental health matters.

What are the key barriers or difficulties faced by this group?

10. The first point we wish to make is in respect of your definition of returners. We understand that the focus of this Consultation is in respect of individuals who have taken time out for caring, with the aims of assisting said individuals to return to work. We note that the Consultation states individual returner programmes may use different definitions and include those returning to work after ill health. With respect we feel that this Consultation should also have included those wishing to return after ill health within their definition. Taking time out for reasons of self-care is just as important as taking time out to care for others, and an individual doing so should not be penalised. This is particularly the case when the reasons may be due to issues of domestic violence or forced marriage. Mental health issues can be a result of such abuse or a standalone matter in its own right and we would ask that a specific consultation is carried out to assist those with mental health issues to return to work;

we do not see why in 2017, certain adjustments and support mechanisms cannot be put in place which would assist those with mental health issues to enter or return to the workplace.

11. We note that page 5 of the Consultation mentions the main barriers to return and the penalties faced by returners in the workplace; we echo the points made therein. Child care issues, a lack of suitable jobs and accepting employment below their level of skills and experiences, and financial viability are all key barriers which hinder Muslim and BME women from returning to work after taking time out caring.
12. The cost of childcare can act as a significant barrier for Muslim women who wish to pursue employment, particularly when combined with the scenario of not being on particularly high salaries. It is not the case that Muslim and BME women have an array of relatives waiting to assist them by providing free childcare; whilst this may be true for some, it is not the case for all and certainly not for single mothers who may have obtained a divorce by going against the wishes of the family. Whilst the government has put forward some proposals which will go towards addressing the issue for childcare costs, such as increasing the number of free childcare hours for children aged three and above from fifteen to thirty hours, there will still be a number of individuals for whom employment will not be cost-effective due to the costs of childcare. We note that the Consultation does not consider those who take maternity leave as returners to work, however we feel that there is a very vital link between maternity leave and childcare costs in that we are aware that a number of women do not return to work after maternity leave due to this very reason.
13. Maternity leave can last up to twelve months, yet free childcare only begins when a child is two years old and even then it is only available where certain benefits are being claimed by the parents. We are aware of a number of women for whom the costs of childcare would have been so high that almost all of their salary would have gone towards meeting said costs. Financially it did not make sense for them to work to pay for someone else to look after their child and they therefore waited until their child was old enough to go to school before deciding to return to work. However, this automatically meant that there was at least a four year gap and in our opinion, this gap was not made out of choice but rather due to financial hurdles created by childcare costs. Although we welcome the government's proposals to increase free childcare hours as it is of course a step forward from the current status, the fact of the matter is that it is not a solution for all and would only go towards reducing the four year delay of returning to work to three years. We urge the government to consider amending their proposals so that free childcare is made available for children from at least the age of twelve months onwards so that women, and parents generally, are not having to make compromises based on finances.
14. A linked issue relates to the accessibility of suitable childcare. Concerns can be wide-ranging in this respect and can include concerns over health and safety, feeling their child is too small or dependent to be able to cope at nursery, cultural and faith matters (or a lack of understanding of these aspects) and convenience issues, beginning with trying to find a suitable nursery at a convenient location and which allows flexibility in respect of opening and closing times.

15. As an example, one parent explained that her home and place of work were a 25 minute drive from one another and included driving on the motorway. She could not leave her child at a nursery near home in case she was ever late out of work or stuck in traffic due to bad weather or an accident on the motorway and decided to look for a nursery nearer to work. However, her workplace was in a business park and the nearest nursery was still a ten minute journey and she found if she left even five minutes late then she would end up stuck in traffic and would be filled with guilt and anxiety at arriving late to pick up her child. After three months she decided to reduce her hours drastically but this also meant having to move teams and accepting a role less demanding and also requiring of a skill set lower than which she possessed. Interestingly, she made the comment that there were many empty floors in buildings across the business park and if just one or two of the empty spaces were converted into nurseries then this would have made life easier not just for her but also her colleagues and other parents across the business park. We feel it may be helpful to consider the logistical issues and perhaps assist in childcare facilities being made available near workplaces, particularly in business parks where the need may be high.
16. Some women only wish to take time out caring until they feel their child is sufficiently developed to be able to be in an environment such as nursery or being alone with a childminder; they may feel that the child is not ready until they can walk or talk or be able to eat solids for example. Therefore they may only wish to be out of work for another six or nine months in addition to the twelve months of maternity leave, but as maternity leave cannot be extended, they are required to take time out completely.
17. In the interests of raising all pertinent issues, we wish to raise that a small number of Muslim parents have expressed their fears that returning to work whilst leaving their children at nursery from a very early age may mean their children are deprived from opportunities to learn about their individual faith and culture and that this may create distance amongst them. We feel these concerns are unwarranted due to the age of the children, the fact that parents of course are still very much involved in their children's lives and spending a day at a nursery does not change that, and that requirements such as halal food can be easily accommodated. Moreover, attending a diverse and inclusive nursery has many benefits including developing good social skills in children. Perhaps these worries can be counteracted through educating parents of the benefits to their children, and dispelling any myths. Muslim Women's Network UK are happy to provide assistance in this respect.
18. We would like to highlight at this point that salaries may not in fact be reflective of skills and experiences but rather what they were able to secure as a returnee to the workplace, or what they chose in order to be able to maintain a level of flexibility so that they may continue their caring responsibilities effectively. It must be borne in mind that caring responsibilities do not end automatically with return to work. We are aware of the right to request flexible working but having the right does not necessarily translate to being able to utilise the said right. Firstly, a request can only be made after 26 weeks of service and this can be an issue for returners who thought a particular working pattern may be best for them but once they started work they realised they needed more flexibility. Secondly, a number of individuals have expressed their concerns that they feel flexible working can only be accommodated if they accept a different role which may be below their current level of skills and

experience or where they may need to be retrained thus impacting on their appraisal in that they are still learning the new job and therefore their appraisal would not be the same as had they remained in the first role. Some feel there is resentment towards those with flexible working hours, whether from employers or other colleagues. As an example, one Muslim woman who works in a law firm stated that her colleagues would email her more asking questions about different cases when she was working from home than when she was in the office and she felt as if subconsciously her colleagues felt that since she isn't in the office she isn't working hard enough. It is therefore necessary to address both the issues of pay and flexible working; a need for the latter should not mean a reduction in the former, and taking time out caring in itself should not be the justification for a reduction in salary.

19. To this effect, we are aware that it is not always employers but rather the clients or customers of employers that can hold an inflexible approach to working hours. Employers may be happy for an individual to leave the office early unexpectedly, for example if their child or relative has fallen ill and needs attention, but clients or customers would not be happy if their matter is not dealt with despite the matter not being time-sensitive. We appreciate that businesses do need to consider their service levels and similarly that clients and customers should not have to compromise on the service they receive. However, we feel the solution is to have an honest review of the situation and ensure contingency plans are in place as far as possible not just for situations where there is a power cut or a fire but also situations such as these. In many such cases, the issues arise from understaffing or impossible commitments to clients in the first place.
20. As an example, we highlight our own organisation in which some staff members need to leave the office at 2.30pm for school runs. We cannot of course allow all staff to leave at the same time but we manage our rotas accordingly to ensure that other staff members are available to cover those hours, and also ensure that no staff are placed at a detriment where they are having to carry out more tasks than others due to our flexible approach. Similarly, when considering holiday rotas we cannot feasibly allow all staff members to take time off at the same time, such as during school holidays. We therefore deal with time off requests with an honest review whereby we balance the need to be fair to all staff members and also ensuring that the organisation is not affected, and make decisions accordingly. We do not expect employers to act to their detriment or that of their clients and we appreciate that not all requests can be fulfilled all the time. However we do ask that employers take an honest review of the situation and try to be accommodating as far as is possible and where relevant, propose alternative solutions that are fair and helpful to the situation. A simple case of allowing flexibility in terms of school runs can be a great step in assisting returners to work. Some employers may think that after school clubs are the solution but such clubs are not convenient for everyone and a financial cost is also attached; this is what we mean about proposing alternative solutions which are fair and helpful to those involved
21. We also feel that there appears to be a greater expectation on women to deal with the likes of school runs or picking up children from nursery. To this effect we would ask that employers also ask fathers whether they require any flexibility in working so that both parents can assist, and it is not just upon the mother to make arrangements.

22. The lack of flexible working opportunities available can be a particular hindrance for Muslim women with caring responsibilities. In some cases, this may be as a result of unaccommodating family members, such as parents or in-laws, who expect women to carry out certain responsibilities in the home as a condition of being allowed to work. For example, even if they are working full time they may be expected to return home and cook meals and complete household chores. In other cases, the needs can be much more crucial and unavoidable such as caring for elderly parents, family members with disabilities or young children. Whilst the situation of the unaccommodating family members is clearly unacceptable and should be challenged, the point remains that flexible working would assist Muslim women to be able to perform other responsibilities whilst also being able to work, develop their careers and empower themselves and others.
23. Cultural issues can also act as a barrier in this regard, with some Muslim and BME women feeling guilty or being made to feel guilty about wanting to return to work instead of caring for their children or elderly. One Muslim woman stated that even though she lived with her husband's extended family and her mother in law and two sister in laws would be at home to look after her child (meaning that the child would be around family members at all times), she was made to feel as if she is an uncaring and neglectful mother for wanting to return to work. Her mother in law would make comments such as children deprived of their mothers love and attention do not prosper and she felt she had to remain at home so as not to be held responsible for any issues, even though it meant that her husband then had to work longer hours and the decision ultimately affected the time he could spend with the child. She states her husband was also made to feel guilty and accused of being greedy, by wanting his wife to bring in money and neglecting the needs of the child. Another woman stated how her father in law told her that he will not accept a stranger looking after their grandchild and if she really wants to work that badly then he will have no choice but to get his son married again.
24. Attitudes such as these need to be addressed and challenged because they are depriving Muslim women of their choices. We feel these attitudes arise from patriarchal notions whereby a woman's role is considered as a wife, mother and home-maker first, despite the fact that Islam itself does not limit women in this way and there are ample examples of historical and contemporary Muslim female role models who are mothers and wives and have also excelled in their chosen fields. We believe some religious scholars are also adding hurdles in this regard not only by suggesting women should focus on being mothers and homeworkers but also in terms of suggesting women must remain segregated from men even in the workplace. Such regressive and un-Islamic attitudes need to be robustly challenged and women need to be made aware of their rights under Islam and UK law. Muslim Women's Network UK are happy to provide assistance in this respect.
25. Recent trends highlight an increase in divorce³ and in this regard we wish to make the comment that as Muslim women are becoming more empowered and becoming aware of their rights, it is natural that many are also seeking a divorce (instead of remaining in unhappy and/or abusive marriages) and as a result we are seeing many single

³ Please see following article for reference: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-41669400>

Muslim mothers who are bringing up their children on their own and without support from the wider family, who may have disowned said women for seeking a divorce.

26. A further barrier to Muslim women entering the workplace is the discrimination and Islamophobia being experienced by them. We are aware that direct and indirect discrimination towards Muslim women in the workplace is very prevalent, as shown by the number of calls received by the MWN Helpline on such issues. This is also relevant for Muslim women wishing to return to work. Presumptions appear to be made about their commitment and work ethic, and their requests for flexibility appear to be interpreted as demands by colleagues who then hold the belief that the 'demands' are being fulfilled due to alleged preferential treatment towards Muslims. Given the rise in anti-Muslim hate crimes especially against Muslim women, many Muslim women are also hesitating to return to work due to fears for their own safety. If the government is committed to aiding returners to work, all the hurdles need to be addressed and this includes discrimination and Islamophobia.

**What support or information are you aware of to help this group to return to work?
How useful do you feel the current support or information available to this group is?**

27. We are aware of various charities and voluntary organisations who provide support to Muslim and BME women in entering or returning to the workplace, and we must thank these organisations for the assistance they provide. Such assistance can include help with CV and cover letter writing and providing advice on interview preparation, as well as running various courses. Whilst a lot of information is now available online, having another person available with whom you can have 1 to 1 discussions about your needs and worries is a helpful tool of empowerment. However, we are also aware of the limited funding and resources available to such organisations which can mean that support and information available to Muslim and BME women is not as regular or as extensive as it should be to meet demands. Such organisations should be assisted in providing the vital support needed by returners.
28. We do wish to point out however that, again due to a lack of funding and/or resources, the help and support available can be limited in its applicability and may not be relevant for all individuals. For example, life skills courses such as English and Maths proficiency or courses such as on customer service, whilst useful for some are not relevant for others. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses exist for most professions and can and should be utilised not only after re-entering the workplace but also before. It may also be useful to consider developing courses for returners to work through various learning providers and professional bodies; doing so would assist both in terms of refreshing relevant knowledge and skills, and also increasing confidence levels for potential returners. Further, changes arising from technological advances are inevitable during time away from work and courses in IT skills can be useful. However, such courses would not necessarily reflect the level of changes within a particular profession or industry. Whilst we note that many employers are understanding in this respect and do provide support for new employees, where we know there are particular case management systems or software packages used by a particular profession, it may be useful to develop courses which allow an introduction to these systems and software. Even if at a basic level, an introduction to new systems and technology would assist in returners feeling more

confident and will also make their return and ongoing development a smoother process.

29. This should not mean however that focus is taken away from life skills related support, which should be made available for all those who require them and who would gain confidence from being able to participate in the likes of CV writing or interview preparation sessions.
30. At present, career advice tends to state that gaps in employment need to be explained in a CV and advice is available on how best to highlight the relevance of your skills as a carer to the world of employment. Whilst we appreciate the good intentions behind such advice and understand the reasons therein, we feel there needs to be a change in the attitudes towards how time out caring is viewed. Caring for others, whether that is children, elderly parents or relatives or friends with disabilities, comes with its own challenges and achievements. This is more so the case when the time taken out is to care for yourself due to ill health or reasons of abuse. Just as abilities are assumed when seeing a candidate with particular qualifications or experience, the same should be the case for carers and they should not have to justify themselves or prove more than others that they, for example, are organised and able to manage their time effectively. Caring needs to be regarded in the same way as other forms of employment, and perhaps more so when we consider the personal nature of the role.
31. We also feel it is necessary to highlight that whilst there are positive examples, there are also concerns as to the help and advice provided by Job Centre Advisors which many consider to be lacking. It is also necessary to review the benefits system and the extent to which the rules are hindering returners; some individuals have expressed how they would have liked to return to work gradually by starting with a few days and then over time increasing their hours but that doing so would have placed them in a worse financial situation as they would no longer have been entitled to any benefits, whilst the salary would not be the same once they take into account travel expenses, child care costs and other work related needs such as clothing.
32. For some it does not make sense to take on low paid jobs which would place them in a financially worse off situation as they would no longer be entitled to for example, housing benefits or council tax reductions. A living wage is therefore vital in assisting returners to work. Some are also concerned as to the consequences of taking on short term employment, or even returning to work in a permanent role but realising a few months later that they are not quite ready to return, due to the fears of potential future delays in receiving Universal Credit. That is, some are worried about returning to work in case it does not work out and they then have to wait months for Universal Credit to be received, and end up with no financial assistance in the meantime. They do not want to be in a situation where they or their family is starving, and this is a clear example of why it is important to review the rules and procedures involved. For the avoidance of doubt this situation is not specific to Muslim women only or even to women only, but rather to a large cross-section of society.
33. There can also be a lack of understanding of the financial help that individuals may be entitled to. Some individuals are not aware that they may earn a certain amount a week without it affecting their entitlement to carers allowance, or that other support is

available. For example, we are aware that those in the Muslim and BME communities who have dementia or other mental health issues often struggle to access support available to them. This is also the case for carers who confuse dementia with 'normal age-ing'. Greater awareness of entitlement and support services is needed. We also feel a review needs to be carried out in terms of fairness of benefits entitlement; for example, single mothers earning between £50,000 - £60,000 a year are required to pay back a portion of their child benefit in extra Income Tax. However with couples, provided that both earn less than £50,000 a year they are not required to pay back any portions even if their combined salaries may be in excess of £60,000.

34. Volunteering is usually put forward as a middle ground by which an individual wishing to return to work after time out caring can ease themselves into the work environment, before they move into paid employment. Whilst this is very useful for many and as a charity we ourselves value the importance of volunteers (and volunteering generally) and have helped develop the skills and experiences of our volunteers to aid their future development (with some taking employment with us and others elsewhere), we also know that volunteering is not possible for all because of the financial implications. They may not be able to volunteer if they have child care issues, and paying for childcare for an unpaid voluntary role is not financially feasible. Similarly, those on disability benefits who want to start taking steps towards entering or returning to the workplace would find volunteering helpful but it may affect the benefits they receive. It is therefore important to consider the circumstances of all returners and understand that not all solutions are suitable for everyone.
35. At MWN UK we do encourage flexible volunteering in addition to flexible working; our trustees (who are volunteers) for example have full time jobs and the majority are based away from our Birmingham office but are able to provide assistance in their own time and from home and other volunteers have also provided us with assistance on research projects from home. However, overseeing volunteering projects generally requires considerable time and resources and it is not possible for charities to do so as regularly as we would wish to or at a large scale. If the government feels that voluntary work is relevant to its commitment to assisting returners to work, then we feel support should be given to the voluntary sector to allow them to support said returners. We would also recommend free child care provisions be made available for individuals who wish to carry out volunteering activities but who are unable to do so due to the costs involved.

What do you feel works well, and what could be improved?

36. As mentioned in paras. 27 - 30 above, we do feel there is positive support available and organisations providing such support should be given the necessary funding and resources to continue to do so. However, we feel much more can be done to assist returners, including introducing new courses more specific to their chosen professions. There also needs to be a greater understanding and appreciation of those who take time out for caring, including caring for themselves.
37. We note that a number of return to work schemes are being introduced in the public sector, focusing on civil servants, social workers, health professionals and teachers and we hope to see further schemes being introduced across the board. We have also noticed that a number of organisations in the private sector are also introducing return

to work schemes, including in construction, finance and the legal sector. We are pleased to see that companies of different fields are supporting returners, and would like to see such placements increase. We do hope that these schemes are open and inclusive and take the circumstances of the individual into account.

38. We are also aware of good practices amongst some companies and organisations where new and returning employees are given the opportunity to shadow other colleagues, and employees are able to agree on training plans together with their managers so that it caters for the individual. Such good practices should be highlighted and recommended across all sectors.
39. Mentoring schemes both within and outside the workplace are also useful in aiding return to work, as it allows individuals to have a point of support who can provide advice and allay any concerns. It is important that we involve Muslim and BME women in such mentoring schemes as both mentors and mentees; this will ensure that mentors are able to provide insight and act as role-models, helping to empower mentees who in turn can act as role-models for others. Networking events can also be useful in this respect but it is important that those within the profession are open and honest about 'real life' issues and are willing to provide insight into their journey, any personal or professional hurdles they faced and how they overcame these.

What other support or information do you feel would be useful in helping this group to return to work, and why? In responding please consider the specific interventions focused on this group as opposed to more widespread policy reforms.

40. Despite the various barriers, there are many Muslim women who have achieved great success. We can highlight examples of British Muslim women who are doctors, lawyers, teachers, accountants, academics and politicians to name a few. British Muslim women are a part of and contributing to all public and private sectors and this is a substantial asset which needs to be highlighted so as to promote integration and participation in public life. By emphasising the achievements and contributions of British Muslims, especially British Muslim women, we will be encouraging others to also have such aspirations and take steps to empower themselves which will in turn assist them to participate fully in the social and economic life of British society. This will include those wishing to enter and re-enter the workplace.
41. It is for this reason that we at Muslim Women's Network UK launched the #AndMuslim campaign in October 2016, with the aim of challenging the negative stereotypes of Muslim women who are often portrayed as victims, oppressed or linked to extremism⁴. Our campaign instead promotes the diversity of the female Muslim community in Britain and celebrates their successes, achievements and contributions. By doing so, we highlight how Muslim women are active contributors to Britain and how for many, their faith has been an important and enabling part of their identity, which has helped them to succeed. Such role-modelling campaigns not only encourage other Muslim women and girls to take a step towards fulfilling their dreams and ambitions, but also shows other communities within the UK that the

⁴ Please see our media statement for further details regarding our #AndMuslim campaign:

<http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/mediaStatementDetail.php?id=171>

British Muslim population is not segregated or the “other”, but rather is a part and parcel of British society. By challenging the stereotypes and promoting the wide-ranging positive examples, we will be educating the wider community and promoting harmony.

Is there anything further you would like to tell us about your experiences or knowledge of the challenges faced by this group in returning to work?

42. Role modelling and mentoring schemes have been a useful way of tackling barriers to employment faced by Muslims and encouraging Muslims, especially Muslim women, to take the necessary steps towards furthering their careers. It is for this reason we launched our #AndMuslim campaign (please see paras 40 – 41 above). However, it is also necessary to address the hurdles in place. This includes addressing financial issues, cultural hurdles, and discrimination and Islamophobia.
43. Some organisations can treat equality and diversity as a checklist and do not invest into promoting awareness and understanding of such issues within the workplace. We feel employers should be made to properly consider the potential issues within their workplace and ensure that employees are being provided with a healthy and safe environment to work in, which has taken their needs into account. The main concern is that there is nothing to compel employers, particularly in the private sector, to develop a good understanding of equality and diversity principles or to consider issues such as adequate training and progression opportunities. They would of course be aware of the legal requirements as per the Equality Act and would be aware that they cannot be racist, sexist etc. However issues of discrimination are not as simplistic or straightforward and there will be other layers which are currently not being addressed in the workplace.
44. It is also important to ensure that the legislative framework is in fact effective and employees feel confident in using legal remedies as well as informal remedies. Better investment and training is also required for frontline professionals on cultural and/or faith factors relative to BME and Muslim victims of discrimination in the workplace to ensure proper care and support is being provided. Without this, victims of discrimination are unlikely to come forward, and barriers to entering and returning to the workplace will remain.

Final Comments

45. As a point of clarification, we must explain that our comments and examples have focused upon Muslim women due to the nature of our organisation and its work. As a national Muslim women’s charity our work predominantly deals with Muslim and BME women albeit we also work with individuals of other faiths and are therefore also aware of issues of relevance to women of other faith and non-faith communities. We are also aware that some of the issues experienced by women can also be experienced by men. In turn we wish to clarify that although we may make recommendations in respect of Muslim women, we do not intend for such recommendations to apply only to Muslim women but rather to all those within wider society who may be affected and who may benefit from such recommendations.

46. We are open and inclusive and seek to promote equality and diversity for all individuals irrespective of their gender, race, ethnicity, faith, sexuality, age, disability etc., and hope that all sectors can develop an environment that is welcoming, healthy, safe and harmonious for all.
47. Our case studies are anonymised for the safety and protection of those involved. Some cases however may have come to us anonymously and remained as such throughout our involvement.
48. MWNUK would like to express its willingness to assist through research, training, support, information or advice or any other means which would assist in removing barriers and which will allow Muslim women to exercise their rights and choices, and participate socially and economically in British society. To this end we are happy to assist with any further research you wish to undertake on this topic.
49. We would like to thank the Government Equalities Office for holding an inquiry into returning to work after time out caring. We also thank you for providing us with the opportunity to give Evidence and hope that our comments prove to be helpful in your considerations.

**On behalf of Muslim Women's Network UK,
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Vice-Chair
22nd October 2017**

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