

MEDIA STATEMENT

27 December 2018

MWNUK is in favour of the proposed definition of Islamophobia by the APPG on British Muslims

Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK) are in favour of the APPG on British Muslims' working definition of Islamophobia, which states: *"Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness."*¹

Islamophobia is a complex reality for many British Muslims and we acknowledge the work of the APPG in promoting discussion of the issues involved. We are pleased that the definition has highlighted that Islamophobia is a form of racism, and as such has validated the experiences of British Muslims who will have suffered religious and/or racial discrimination because they are, or were thought to be, Muslim. By doing so, it makes clear that our concerns must not be focused on only extreme cases of violence towards Muslims, or anti-Muslim hate crimes, but that all forms of Islamophobia must be tackled including those which may be experienced in the workplace, when accessing services or simply when walking on the streets.

We are also pleased that the definition has not focused on only those who are Muslim but also those who may be targeted because they are perceived as Muslims. We are aware of many instances where Sikh men and women have been targeted and it would be unconscionable to ignore their experiences just because they do not identify as Muslim.

Executive Director Shaista Gohir commented:

"We need to be mindful however that the adoption of this definition on its own will not result in its acceptance overnight. It will not end comments such as 'Islam is not a race' and that anti-Muslim sentiments cannot be racist; or stop individuals from playing with the semantics of the use of the word 'phobia' and argue that Islamophobia is simply a fear of Islam and that calling someone Islamophobic is an attempt at suppressing debate. The term Islamophobia is widely used and as such it would be counterproductive to propose any alternative label for the proposed definition. However in order to get the message across loud and clear we feel it is necessary to also stress that Islamophobia encompasses anti-Muslim sentiments, anti-Muslim prejudice, anti-Muslim racism and anti-Muslim hate crimes – and if people need to use these terms to provide validity to their experiences then they should be free to do so. It would be useful to keep in mind the bigger picture where many individuals who experience Islamophobia are likely to have experienced double or even triple discrimination based on their ethnicity or gender. Our collective priority should be on making a positive difference to their lives, which is more important than academic debates on definitions".

To this effect we also support the use of the Runnymede Trust's shorter and simpler definition which defines Islamophobia as *'anti-Muslim racism'*². We feel that the combined use of the two definitions going forwards is what will have the most impact on the everyday lives of British Muslims, and those perceived to be Muslim.

Debates also need to be had as to what constitutes Anti-Muslim discourses as it is apparent that we have yet to reach a consensus on this point. We were disappointed to hear that

1

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf>

2 <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/Islamophobia%20Report%202018-Executive%20Summary.pdf>

Boris Johnson has been found not to have broken the Conservative Party's code of conduct over his comments about Muslim women who wear the veil and feel that this will only go towards legitimising prejudice and hate towards Muslim women.

Chair Nazmin Akthar said:

"What is the difference between comparing Muslim women who wear the veil to a post box and comparing Muslim women who do not wear a hijab to an unwrapped lollipop? Not much, other than perhaps the intentions behind their respective uses - where one appears to adopt such language to further patriarchal agendas and the other to pander to the far right. No one should be allowed to objectify Muslim women in this way, especially where such language can and will have very real adverse consequences for Muslim women. Of course the term Islamophobia must not be used to quell any genuine debate but it is also possible to exercise your right to free speech and raise your views regarding, for example, the veil without adopting sexist or xenophobic language which dehumanises Muslim women. If we can agree that referring to Muslim women as lollipops is unacceptable then we can also agree that comparing them to post boxes is equally wrong."

MWNUK also wish to make the point that whilst it is important to acknowledge all sides of a debate and allow space for genuine dialogue between those with differing viewpoints, we do not feel that such acknowledgement is deserved by those whose agendas are very clearly racist and sexist and who have nothing to contribute towards the debate other than their racism and sexism.

We look forward to seeing how the APPG's definition of Islamophobia can be used in conjunction with current legislative terminology in future to ensure that all forms of anti-Muslim conduct is called out and tackled effectively, and so that victims can gain redress. It is further hoped by MWNUK that the APPG's definition will be a significant step in bringing the concept of Islamophobia into sharper focus for the government and public alike.

Ends

For further information contact:

Shaista Gohir OBE (Interim Executive Director of MWNUK)

0121 236 9000 / 07802 225989 / contact@mw nuk.co.uk / contact@shaistagohir.com

Nazmin Akthar (Chair of MWNUK)

0121 236 9000 / / contact@mw nuk.co.uk / 07972 542475

Muslim Women's Network UK (www.mwnuk.co.uk) is the national leading Muslim women's charity working to improve the social justice and equality for Muslim women and girls.