



## **Muslim Women's Network UK Response to Consultation**

**31<sup>st</sup> May 2015**

### **About Muslim Women's Network UK (MWN UK)**

Muslim Women's Network was formally established in 2003 with the support of the Women's National Commission (WNC), to give independent advice to government on issues relating to Muslim women and public policy. In 2007, Muslim Women's Network decided to establish itself as an independent organisation to ensure its autonomy from Government. The group was renamed 'Muslim Women's Network UK' (MWN UK) and became a Community Interest Company in 2008. In December 2013 it formally became a registered charity<sup>1</sup>.

MWN UK's aim is to gather and share information relevant to the lives of Muslim women and girls in order to influence policy and public attitudes, to raise the profile of issues of concern to Muslim women and to strengthen Muslim women's ability to bring about effective changes in their lives.

At the time of writing, MWN UK has a membership of over 600 that includes individuals and organisations with a collective reach of tens of thousands of women. Our membership is diverse in terms of ethnicity, age, religious backgrounds, lifestyles, sexual orientation and geographic location. Members are also from a range of employment sectors including: higher and further education; voluntary sector and support services including services workers; health and legal professionals; the police and criminal justice sectors; and local and central government. Our members are mainly Muslim women living and working in the UK while our non-Muslim members work with or on behalf of Muslim women.

Supporting actions to address Islamophobia and discrimination is one of our six current priority areas and forms a part of our overall commitment to promoting equality, diversity, religious harmony and the social inclusion of all individuals in society. MWN UK are aware of cases of discrimination, hate crime and Islamophobia which are adversely affecting the British Muslim community and are particularly concerned by the impact of such on women and children who appear to be at most risk of discrimination and Islamophobia. In turn MWN UK have been providing guidance and assistance at a grassroots level as well as engaging with key policymakers and other organisations, including the police and Independent Police Complaints Commission in a bid to address these issues. We in turn hope that our Response to the questions raised will provide assistance in achieving your aims to prevent and combat anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hatred in Europe.

We must explain that our comments and examples will be limited to BME and/or Muslim victims due to the nature of our organisation and its work. As a national Muslim women's organisation our work predominantly deals with Muslim and BME women albeit we also work with individuals of other ethnicities and faiths and are

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<sup>1</sup> Charity Registration Number: 1155092

therefore also aware of issues of relevance to other communities and in particular the Jewish community. In turn we wish to clarify that where we ask for faith and culturally sensitive support packages and mechanisms we do so on behalf of victims of all race, ethnicity, religion and faith.

## **Response to Questions**

**1 – Can you inform about new trends showing an increase in anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents? What are to your mind the underlying factors for each of these phenomena: religion, culture, socio-economic or political circumstances, prejudices, etc.?**

MWNUK is aware of the general consensus of the British Muslim community of feelings of a rise in anti-Muslim hate and Islamophobia not only within the UK but also across the world. However, although some evidence can be collated from police records and media stories, unfortunately there is not sufficient data evidence available to confirm the specific trends in this regard.

A key issue in this regard is the lack of recording hate crime by the Police and other statutory authorities due to individuals not wanting to or feeling unable to report crimes for fear of repercussions, and where people do come forward the incidents are not always recorded correctly so as to truly reflect the anti-Muslim hate aspect of the incident. This is one of the key failings in addressing the current situation. There are various forms of incidents ranging from violent attacks to verbal abuse; these incidents are targeting individuals, groups and places of worship.

The current global political situations appear to prey on people's lack of knowledge and understanding to incite hatred often in people who do not understand the culture or religion and follow extremist views fuelled by leaders/people who do not want to see multi-culturalism or communities united. A very specific example of such a scenario can be clearly evidenced by the response to various grooming cases that have been uncovered and brought to trial in the United Kingdom over the last few years. Although perpetrators of sexual exploitation come from varying backgrounds including differing faiths, ethnicities, age and professions, the focus within the media and elsewhere has focused on the faith and ethnicity of some of the groomers; more specifically the Muslim community has been targeted. It has been suggested that Muslim men are specifically targeting non-Muslim women and girls, rather than the reality that perpetrators are pursuing a sexist and misogynist agenda and exploiting the vulnerabilities of victims; this has in turn fuelled hatred towards the Muslim community. Indeed aside from the increase in Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate incidents, it has resulted in Muslim and BME victims of sexual exploitation being ignored. MWNUK's report 'Unheard Voices' (published in September 2013) highlighted how Asian girls were being exploited by perpetrators of varying faiths and ethnicities but being ignored by key organisations including the police and social services. MWNUK are also aware of various comments being circulated on social media where male individuals of non-Muslim background have suggested that Muslim girls be sexually abused as a means of obtaining 'justice' for all non-Muslim women and girls that have been sexually abused and exploited by Muslim men. Although we appreciate that these are social media comments and do not mean that such suggestions have in fact borne out, it does however highlight vast and dangerous impact of prejudices and Islamophobia. In this regard, we do feel that wider society, including school teachers, media outlets and politicians have a responsibility to counteract such prejudices. They hold the power to disseminate the correct information.

Globally some violent examples of anti-Muslim hate include the incident of the three young students (two young ladies wearing headscarves and one young man) in America being gunned down, the shooting of a husband taking pictures of his family (wife was wearing headscarf), the pregnant lady in hijab (Islamic dress) being beaten up in France, the verbal abuse on Muslim commuters on public transport and discrimination on a flight<sup>2</sup>. These are unfortunately just a few examples and it is extremely concerning how easy it is to identify

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<sup>2</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/05/30/us/united-flight-muslim-chaplain/>

such recent examples as well as the frequency and seriousness involved. People are being killed due to a rise in anti-Muslim hate; the threat is real and scary.

MWNUK are also aware of serious cases of anti-Muslim hate. Case studies include a Muslim woman who had a bottle of glass thrown at her, a pregnant Muslim woman wearing a niqab (veil) who tripped over in a grocery store and instead of helping her up staff mocked her for her attire and suggested that she pray for help, and a Muslim woman wearing a hijab who had an apple thrown at her by a male driving a van passed her who shouted "Go home terrorist!". Generally Muslim women who report such incidents to MWNUK do not report the same matter to the police as they feel that they will not be helped or that they will face repercussions from the perpetrators and some even hold paranoia that by reporting the incidents to the police they may be drawing attention to themselves and may become victims of a campaign of anti-Muslim hate.

It is noteworthy that incidents across the world affect people in their homes who then feel anger at what they see (such as Woolwich killing, Charlie Hebdo shootings) and then in their anger individuals tarnish the all those who subscribe to a perpetrators culture/religion as being violent even though the reality is different. Indeed whenever such incidents take place, the British Muslim community is the first to come forward to condemn the actions and remind the public that not all Muslims are the same; it is saddening that average British Muslims are compelled to continuously make clear that they do not hold the same views as perpetrators of violence, because there are members of the British population who do not hold the level of education and understanding to appreciate the diversity of society.

The trends also show that more young people are being 'pulled' into this fighting ring and are using social media to air their anti Muslim/Semitic views yet there is no monitoring by the service providers. On the other hand, it appears that if a Muslim pursued a similar dialogue on the same space they would be investigated.

The underlying factors are silent prejudices that seem to come out when something goes wrong such as the recent march in USA Arizona, where about 200 people turned up with weapons outside a Mosque through incitement and invitation via Facebook. Politics and politicians aim to calm matters but can also fuel disparity and create divisions. Freedom of speech and freedom of choice, such as in respect of what you wear, is seen as biased and unequal; for example, the hijab (headscarf) is seen as being 'forced' upon women yet it is forgotten that for some women it can be a choice. MWNUK abhor any practices whereby a woman's choice is taken away; we therefore hold that a woman forced into wearing a hijab or forced out of a hijab are both wrong and against freedom of choice.

## **2 – To which extent do you think anti-Semitism and Muslim hatred require a specific or a common response?**

Although there will be some commonality in responses towards anti-semitism and anti-Muslim hate, specific responses will nevertheless be required as in some situations there may be different triggers, reasons, actions and consequences. A common response will need to be holistic and may not have same level of the strength as individual responses.

## **3 – Beyond security measures, which are necessary to ensure the security of people and sites, how can the feeling of security of Jewish and Muslim communities in European States be improved?**

Security comes with a feeling of belonging and being part of a society that accepts who you are and your culture and gives you the freedom to make choices about your life like other citizens of that country. At present for Muslims it appears that absolute assimilationism has failed in France, but so has segregation in Germany and multiculturalism in the Netherlands.

The French ban the headscarf in public schools. The Germans ban it among public employees. The British celebrate it (or it would appear to a certain extent). The Americans tolerate it (again, or it would appear to a

certain extent). Perhaps separating religion from politics without placing a wall between them, helping immigrants slowly adapt but allowing them cultural autonomy and preventing secularism that estranges Muslims and other believers might be a good way to move forward. Europe needs to develop an integration policy that works, it needs to offer more dialogue and it needs to provide people with jobs and social opportunities. It needs to understand that just as people want to be liberated and free, those same people should be allowed choices to follow and practice a faith, through visibility such as particular clothing and practices. It is unfair to dictate matters of choice; after all, no two individuals even of the same faith and ethnicity would wish to be uniform – why do we therefore expect uniformity from migrants?

Discrimination, hate speech and religiously aggravated violence that target citizens violates their rights to freedom of religion, freedom of worship and freedom against discrimination based on religion. The key we believe is to take a universal approach of humanity and human rights, rather than to place alleged nationalism as the main priority. Thus whilst practices such as Female Genital Mutilation and forced marriage, which violate principles of human rights, are deterred other matters such as clothing and food should be viewed as a matter of choice. Feelings of security will be achieved through such a positive and welcoming attitude, rather than one which brandishes all faith and cultural practices as objectionable.

#### **4 – Which measures do you think would be most effective in tackling the issue of hate speech, including online, with a particular focus on expressions of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia?**

There are some measures taking place in the UK about reporting hate crime, including a media campaign to say hate crime is a criminal offence and should be reported. However, much more needs to be done to encourage individuals to report crime and indeed more is required to make clear what constitutes a crime. Also, are current legislative measures a sufficient deterrence? Or does more need to be done to strengthen the provisions?

Leaders, whether political or community based, should voice concerns and issue statements that hate speech is criminal, unacceptable and that all forms of abuse will be taken seriously. Reporting should be made easier as should recording of incidents. More importantly however, it is essential that what constitutes hate speech and Islamophobia is reviewed and training and guidance provided to police and other frontline professionals to identify and take action against such incidents immediately and effectively.

Social media can make the whole issue of hate speech ‘normal’ as it is unfiltered and can be used to inflame and to mobilize using shocking images and hashtags. This happens in a vast number of cases where people have turned up to riots/marches. People can self select what they want to see and can become radicalised by extremist views online which can be unchecked propaganda. Legislation should be made to tackle this by warning companies such as Facebook and Twitter to act faster and take stronger action against hate crime on their platforms. They need to remove racist and hate speech, improve reporting of criminal activity to the police and prevent offenders restarting from the same IP address.

#### **5 – What are the main challenges and gaps in effectively combatting racist, anti-Semitic and islamophobic speech and crime in terms of legislation and its implementation? What should be done to overcome these challenges and how do you think the EU could facilitate this?**

The UK has made enormous strides and taken commendable steps to address racial discrimination in the UK and in challenging anti-semitism through the establishment of an All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism and progressing work emerging from its reports via the All Party Parliamentary Committee on Antisemitism. The UK has also attempted to address the problem of religiously aggravated crimes by introducing new legislation covering this category and in passing legislation on Incitement to Religious Hatred. These measures are however, inadequate to the task of detecting, monitoring and prosecuting anti-Muslim prejudice evidenced by the fact that only a single prosecution has advanced under the incitement laws to date, a case that resulted in an acquittal. As the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma

Jahangir, puts it in the foreword to the Minority Rights Group's report 2010 on the 'State of the world's minorities and indigenous peoples', "when governments work to ensure that the rights of members of religious minorities are protected, this not only leads to a more stable and secure society, it is also an indicator of how seriously invested they are in the protection of human rights." It is imperative that government recognise the dangers of Islamophobia and its violation of the rights and liberties of a section of the population to live in peace, secure in their religious freedoms. Government and politicians have demonstrated the political will to eradicate racist and anti-semitic hatred in Britain, the same needs to apply to Europe and the same needs to apply in respect of anti-Muslim hatred.

**6 – What would be the most effective avenues of cooperation to ensure greater effectiveness in preventing and combating anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim discrimination and hatred (i.e. in the area of investigation, prosecution, data collection, victims' reporting and support, etc)? What would be the role of civil society and national and local authorities and communities?**

Presently there are huge gaps in data collection, collaborative working with agencies, legal framework and support for the victims. Governments need to promote opportunities for dialogue and facilitate platforms for debate and understanding. There is a great need for investment by Governments to defend and protect the rights of Muslims to hold and practice their beliefs free of suspicion, disparagement and, more importantly, fear. We need to see political parties come together to set some acceptable base rules /framework and incorporate these into policies that protect all citizens. Legislation needs to be available to protect against hate crime and reporting should be made easier and accessible through a variety of channels that can support the victims as well so that they feel safe and protected and do not face any repercussions as a result of reporting.

We also need to work at the local level to ensure that civil societies, communities and local authorities come together to plan and organize a strategy that work with its particular population which can be diverse. People need to know that they have a voice and that it is being heard, they need to feel involved and take ownership of issues facing their communities and be supported to tackle them. Reporting of hate crimes can be made easier if it becomes a local community lead initiative where there are links/partners with the police to ensure safety and transparency.

The media should portray positive topics about immigrants, other faiths and communities so that the wider population can become knowledgeable about other cultures and faiths. Contributions made by Muslims and Jews need to be highlighted to raise aspirations of youth who feel alienated, disenfranchised and disillusioned.

**7 – How can social inclusion and inter-cultural cooperation contribute to actively combat anti-Semitic and Anti-Muslim discrimination and promote equality? What can be done at local level to contribute to actively combat such discrimination? Could you give some examples of best practices? What are in your opinion the most effective tools to counter amalgams, stereotypes and negative perceptions?**

At a local level there are many things that can be done to combat discrimination. In the United Kingdom we have worked over many years to integrate communities and promote community cohesion. It is a continuing struggle which takes a setback when unfortunate events take place in the UK or abroad but a framework is in place which works. One of the key points is to maintain a strong group of leaders from different faiths and backgrounds who are available to respond to incidents together as a collective. They would work on calming the situation, conflict resolution and bringing focus back to the local people to unite and find a solution together through dialogues, consultations and debates. The local government's councils should also get involved and work with statutory groups to stop wide spread unrest, promote tolerance and give opportunities to work together.

Local groups can also provide input by raising awareness of cultures, traditions and religions by holding events for the wider public, celebrating open festivals, sharing ideas and even simple actions such as sharing food and showcasing art. It is important for a truly diverse and multi-cultural society that all individuals get to know one other and focus on similarities rather than differences which create barriers. This way there is a network of

local people in civil society who can collectively pull their communities together during negative incidents and events and maintain focus. There are different ways to combat stereotypes/negative perceptions and one of the ways is for the media to portray positive images and stories, air healthy debates/dialogues, raise awareness of issues and peoples understanding of them.

**8 – What are the main gaps and obstacles (legislative, political, administrative, or financial) to fill at national/local level to counter discrimination based on religion, belief and/or ethnic origin in practice? How can such gaps be tackled at EU level?**

In response to recent events we are aware of the current Prevent training that has been taking place nationally in schools and organizations across the UK, however there are concerns and questions that are linked to this initiative. Do we know the action and impact of such initiatives and do the public have access to these findings?

At a local level there is still a lack of knowledge about Islam leaving people open to perceptions and what extremist groups want to portray about Muslims. Indeed, we feel that there is a lack of knowledge about Islam within the Muslim community itself whereby the real principles of Islam have become skewered through patriarchal interpretations and need to be challenged; hence MWNUK's work in tackling issues such as honour based violence, domestic abuse, forced marriage and FGM. It is interesting to note that there are individuals within the Muslim community and individuals outside the Muslim community with anti-Muslim sentiments who both agree on their version of Islam; for example, both will agree that FGM is Islamic irrespective of the wider British Muslim population condemning such practices. It is vital that there are clear and robust awareness raising campaigns that will reach various communities and ages to educate all communities in terms of the religion as well as to make clear that discrimination is against law. There is a need for multi faith initiatives that share similarities and promote the positive messages in all faiths.

Additionally it is important to challenge the spread of hostility towards Muslims through traditional and new media and the role that they play in confirming or propagating stereotypes; there should be fair media coverage to highlight incidents especially violent ones and how these effect the community and there should be easy reporting structures which are currently not in place and support for victims at a local level. It may also be useful to consider strengthening legislative deterrence; are the criminal and/or civil sanctions a sufficient deterrence? Is the current legislation sufficient to pursue all incidents of anti-Muslim hate or are we being restricted to only the very serious of cases? It is important to remember that a number of "smaller" incidents can eventually lead to a much more serious situation.

At EU level we need to be able to understand what is going on in each country and why, then get stakeholders together from civil societies, police, religious groups, politicians, youth to start a coalition that will brainstorm initiatives that can be developed to reach migrant communities to start a dialogue, starting with areas where discrimination is high.

The EU needs to promote access to public services, meaningful employment, and education and equal treatment in these areas, including special attention devoted to gender dimensions. There should be participation and engagement in policy and local decision making or constituency building and community organizing having specific advocacy goals.

**9 - What role could leaders including religious and community leaders, play in proposing social representations and a narrative which are inclusive, based on common values and mutual understanding? Which are the most effective practices taken that have effectively evidenced a positive impact and a potential for replication, in particular at local level and amongst and by young people?**

As mentioned earlier, a multi faith group from representatives from across the country to look at similarities in faiths and to focus on universal human rights principles, encourage communities to come together and tackle

similar ideologies/issues would be an effective means by which to achieve a positive narrative and tackle key issues. It should therefore not be about religious and community leaders from just one faith or community but rather for all communities to come together; it is only through collective action that inclusivity and harmony can be achieved.

Political and community leaders need to encourage participation and engagement in policy and local decision making, as well as community building with specific advocacy goals. Additional focus should be placed on capacity building and organizational development, collaboration among organizations working on areas such as incident reporting, victim support and counselling, as well as gender-inclusive multi faith groups and youth support organisations. Greater focus and impact can be achieved through collective action and one vital link to include in such work is to include schools, colleges and universities so as to directly involve all young people in such work. There are various examples of available of where Muslim youth have taken the initiative started projects to reach out to the wider society and effect positive change including projects such as feeding the homeless, raising money for charity, helping the elderly in their area and participating in awareness raising campaigns to tackle issues such as domestic violence and discrimination.

Young people should be given opportunities to develop and understand their own identities, have role models/mentors from communities and be given opportunities to work and gain the required experience to excel in their chosen careers. The Birmingham Role Model project by MWNUK was a way to show the contributions that local Muslim women have made in the local community so as to inspire and motivate young girls; the booklet was distributed to organizations and schools. Additionally, The Big Sister Project, also by MWNUK, highlighted contributions made by Muslim women in history who challenged norms to be successful in their field. Further initiatives in this regard would be useful in changing attitudes and reducing Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate.

### **10- What type of discriminatory obstacles Jewish and Muslims experience most frequently in the field of education and employment?**

Recently an article in The Independent highlighted how “British Muslim women 71% more likely to be unemployed due to workplace discrimination”<sup>3</sup> and indeed MWNUK case studies suggest that it is in fact Muslim women and children who bear the brunt of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate whether this be through physical abuse or in the field of education and employment. This is perhaps because some Muslim women are visibly as such through their clothing.

Muslims generally are finding it difficult to acquire work due to rising discrimination and Islamophobia and where they do, they face discriminatory practices in the workplace whereby they are not given due credit for their work and unable to progress further; the glass ceiling is very much real for them. Muslims, and in particular Muslim women, are also expected to provide explanations for matters which other colleagues would not need to such as clarifying whether their holiday abroad is actually a trip for them to get married and bring back their spouses to their UK. One Muslim woman has recounted to MWNUK how on requesting annual leave was questioned as to whether it was due to religious reasons or not as it was during the month of Ramadhan; she stated that she was made to feel as if she had caused detriment to the workplace by requesting some time off to concentrate on fasting and her prayers when in fact she was merely exercising her right to annual leave just as any other colleague and not asking for any preferential treatment. Similar attitudes are appearing in schools and further education establishments whereby teachers and other students are showing discriminatory and Islamophobic attitudes; such behaviours have an especially negative impact on young children. It is important to note that in this instance we have not commented on instances where individuals have been banned from praying at work or in school during their lunch breaks or where individuals have been banned from wearing the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/british-muslim-women-71-more-likely-to-be-unemployed-due-to-workplace-discrimination-10179033.html>

hijab or veil albeit we are aware of such instances as well; we are concentrating on Islamophobic attitudes and behaviours being displayed as general course which need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

**11 – How could the society adjust to an increasing diversity? What is the society at large ready to accommodate for a better "living together"?**

As the world becomes a global village and we are in contact with many different cultures and faiths we need to move beyond thinking in terms of borders and embrace the fact that we live as a part of the global world. It is necessary to promote the positive benefits of such diversity and universality rather than to place obstacles and alienate other communities. It is vital to remember that, in respect of complaints that migrant communities do not embrace the cultures of the “host” country, that it is not possible to assimilate and form a part of multi-cultural society if you are not provided with the opportunity to do so. If you have not been welcomed into a community how can you then be a part of it?

The first step is to promote diversity and human rights within the education system and workplace; these are key institutions and organisations where a large number of individuals can be educated and any prejudices addressed and eradicated. It is therefore essential that opportunities are taken to disseminate the necessary information in such areas.

We also need to stop groups that promote hatred and share misinformation about territorial spaces, jobs, homes and benefits and engage them in dialogues about their concerns and try to work together to find solutions. In this regard it is imperative that media outlets are held to task when misleading information is provided; generally media outlets will put forward a sensationalist headline and cherry pick information points which add to distrust and prejudices against differing groups of community. Although the points of information chosen may not be incorrect they are not necessarily correct either in that they do not highlight the overall picture and therefore such issues need to be properly considered.

All individuals have basic human needs that need to be met; most have the same overall moral values and principles and most want a peaceful place to live without fear. This is what the core of the EU holds - Human Rights – and therefore it should be seen to promote these values and lead the way in living together.

**12 – What are/could be concrete measures with the greatest impact to be taken by businesses (in public and private employment) and social partners to facilitate and encourage inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities and foster mutual understanding, and how could they be disseminated?**

Governments and businesses should work together to provide support and mentoring schemes for ethnic and religious minorities. There should be incentives by government to include minority staff, to offer advice and to reach out to minority groups so that people can get back into jobs and be a part of the countries workforce. Skills should be identified and encouraged to develop all men and women and opportunities made available for further development. It is vital that proper evaluation procedures in place to ensure equal opportunities for all. This will create a sense belonging and self-worth in individuals and most importantly assist all employees to work together for the betterment of the workplace.

Additionally in the work force, there should be policies about discrimination and hate crimes, and being able to report such incidents without facing backlash, making it clear that acceptance of cultures and faiths is part of companies ethos. Most EU countries have forbidden Islamic clothing and religious practices which hinder rather than promote integration. Although we appreciate that there are circumstances where it may be necessary to restrict individual preferences, such as not allowing a school teacher to wear the veil as it would impact on the education value to the school children, it should not be the case that individual preferences are not accommodated at all.



**13 – Which further initiatives could Member States, EU institutions and international organisations take in order to promote common values and mutual understanding and counter stereotypes in the educational sphere (e.g. citizenship education; education about the EU history, its fundamental values and EU rights; intercultural workshops in school, training for teachers, guidelines for educators, etc.). What are already existing best practices in this respect?**

Member states can teach children the way different communities have contributed to their history (working in collaboration with various communities) and celebrate achievements of all outstanding personalities and role models in that country. Many Muslims have fought wars alongside Christians and Jews and this should be highlighted and explained to young people so that they too feel pride and connection to their surroundings. Too many times curriculums are not inclusive and most feel important events and contributions made by migrants and minority communities are ignored.

Religious studies should include all faiths with children taking ownership of holding awareness days with their parents to share their customs and practices. These should highlight the common values of all the faiths and encourage respect and understanding. Additionally, schools should move beyond traditional textbooks and assist in broadening the horizons of students through alternative interpretations.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) for example, is deemed by some to be a practice condoned by Islam and a part of Sunnah. For some, this is due to their understanding of a Hadith in which Prophet Muhammad (saw) was questioned about female genital mutilation and his response was to not cut so severely as to cause harm. Keeping aside that the authenticity of this Hadith is deemed as very weak to begin with, further analysis would highlight that even on the basis of what was being stated the Prophet (saw) forbid FGM where it caused harm; He certainly did not state it was permissible and the language used at the time would explain the mannerisms of what was stated. This leads to the question, when does FGM not cause harm? In turn, this would mean that the Prophet in fact banned the practice. Moreover, FGM was not performed on his daughters and this would further support the fact that FGM is actually forbidden in Islam.

A further example would be the subject of polygamy. Many are quick to mention that Islam allows men to marry up to four wives. Very few will provide a critical analysis of the criteria attached in this regard which make it virtually impossible for men in this day and age, and especially British Muslim men, to satisfy the requirements. Moreover, it is forgotten that the Prophet Muhammad (saw) did not take a second wife whilst his first wife Khadijah (ra) was alive. If the Prophet Muhammad's examples are to be followed why are British Muslim men not following the example of his first marriage where he married an older widow who was a successful business woman and did not take a second wife whilst she was alive? There is also a Hadith available where Ali (ra) was told not to take a second wife because of the hurt it would cause the Prophet's (saw) daughter Fatima (ra). Most importantly, we have come to find in our daily work that there has recently been an upsurge of discussions on the topic of polygamy and as a result various misconceptions have been spreading. British Muslim girls are being led to believe that allowing polygamy is a requirement which is completely untrue and in fact, they have the power to place conditions on their husbands to not enter into polygamy as per Islam. It is also imperative to highlight that Islam also requires Muslims to follow the law of the land; bigamy and polygamy is illegal as per UK law and cannot be entertained in any event.

These are just two examples of very important issues to be properly evaluated, and there are many more in the same vein. You will note that we have not proposed any reformist perspectives; rather we have provided critical analysis of the origins of practices using the principles of equality, equity and Islamic feminism as tools. It is imperative that students are taught the same because not only will this aid their understanding of the religion of Islam and allow for a truly multi-cultural Britain and wider Europe but will also assist in changing attitudes and raising awareness of very important issues, particularly those which lead to inequality, discrimination and violence against women. As part of our work at Muslim Women's Network UK we frequently provide workshops to youths and attend schools and colleges to speak about topics such as domestic violence, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and child sexual exploitation. Our discussions include considering Islamic

perspectives and ideally we would want such matters incorporated into the curriculum so as to equip all students with the understanding and awareness required which would help fight the likes of forced marriage and FGM and also racism and Islamophobia.

Religious studies would be the perfect subject within which these matters could be discussed. And by virtue of the fact that we undertake such work highlights the fact that there is a serious need for such matters to be raised and addressed within schools and colleges, not just with students but also teachers and governing bodies. Given our interactions with students, we know they hold the ability and intelligence to deal with such matters. At the very least, we ask that what is taught promotes the principles of equality and equity ordained within Islam rather than patriarchal notions that have been imposed.

We would also like to highlight that suggested legislation targeting school children in the CTU Bill in UK has caused much concern and fear as families feel that freedom of speech and expression has been forsaken for no other reason than to unfairly target Muslims further. Nothing has been done to assure the wider Muslim community that the aims are not to cause disadvantage nor have adequate consultations taken place to ensure that the proposed legislation would not undermine the principles of fairness and justice. In turn, this adds to feelings of unwelcome and once against hinders integration and feelings of security.

### **Final Comments**

As a national women's organisation committed to changing attitudes to mental health and other health issues, Muslim Women's Network UK would like to express its willingness to assist through training, support, information or advice or any other means that will promote equality, diversity and social inclusions of all individuals.

We would like to thank you for providing us with the opportunity to respond to your Consultation and hope that our Response proves to be helpful in your considerations.

**On behalf of Muslim Women's Network UK,  
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