



The Rt Hon David Cameron MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

5th February 2016

Dear Mr. Cameron,

Main barriers to Muslim women's participation in Britain

I am writing to you in your capacity as both Conservative Party Leader and Prime Minister regarding your recent announcement of plans to fund English language classes for Muslim women. Muslim Women's Network UK agrees that learning English is important because it can help people to better engage with their children and those involved in their children's education (teachers, school officials etc.), access services, know about their rights, increase employment opportunities and engage with decision makers. However, English language classes should not be limited to Muslim women only and should be made available to men and women from all communities where required.

Also learning English should not be linked to the fight against extremism; there are countless Muslim and other women who speak little or no English have raised children who have grown up to be successful citizens in terms of their contribution to British society. It is misguided to target Muslim women in this manner because they are already a disadvantaged social group. If you really want to empower Muslim women the government should turn its efforts to institutions both within Muslim communities (e.g. mosques, Sharia Councils) and outside them (e.g. political parties) whose male members too often display misogynistic attitudes in this day and age.

One of the fundamental barriers that we have come across that limit Muslim women from influencing local community life is the systematic misogyny displayed by Muslim men who are in positions of authority such as those in mosque committees and/or local councils. While we have come across particular examples of these in the Labour Party, this is of course also likely to be a cross party issue for all BME women. The likelihood is that our Sikh, Hindu, Black and other minority sisters face the same barriers in political life. We have also written to the Labour Party and have requested they investigate why and how Muslim women who are highly credible potential candidates are routinely blocked in favour of men with

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lesser CVs or sometimes women who are co-opted by influential men in their family or among their friends. These men often gain influence through their close links to other patriarchal community structures such as mosques and bring a culturally misogynistic mindset to local politics. We would point out that Muslim women do not encounter barriers solely within their own communities but are also excluded from numerous public sites of decision making as a consequence of the prejudice and discrimination displayed and practiced by majority British society.

More Muslim women than ever before actively contribute to British society and some have been active for decades in a wide range of paid and voluntary employment. However, they generally remain socially and politically marginalised. They are prevented from entering decision-making positions in both British political and civic institutions and in Muslim community structures and are therefore prevented from influencing and shaping their local communities. With the odd exception, mosques have no female trustees despite the lack of valid reasons for excluding them. Most mosques reap the benefit of charity status and, in principle, exist for the public good but fail to reflect or engage with issues which are important to and which affect 50 per cent of their congregations, that is, Muslim women.

However, we have found that some Muslim male councillors further exacerbate this situation. More often than not, it is same Muslim men, with a misogynistic mindset, who become local councillors, who are well networked and connected to the mosques, who marginalise Muslim women. They may themselves be trustees of mosques or have friends or families members who are trustees. They use their tax-funded positions of power in public office to continue limiting Muslim women's influence. This situation can no longer be allowed to continue.

We became acutely aware of how women's voices are not heard by such men recently when we visited Birmingham Central Mosque and put forward a proposal to hold a joint forced marriage event as part of a project funded by the Forced Marriage Unit. We were informed by the Chair / trustee who has also been a Labour councillor for over 30 years (and has now been selected as the next Lord Mayor of Birmingham) that forced marriage is no longer a problem and that he could not understand how educated and strong women could be forced into marriage. He also challenged government statistics as exaggerated, claimed that more men suffered from domestic violence and that the latter was mainly happening in Christian communities because of their propensity to get drunk. We are completely aghast that a man in his positions could make such statements. We have therefore also written a letter of complaint to the mosque., a copy of which is also attached.

In the current context, the role to be played by Muslim women in their communities and societies is even more important. We believe that their influence can result in Muslim communities developing positive social change for the benefit of wider society. Muslim women must be involved in decision making if we are to tackle the many underlying issues which prevent Muslim communities from developing and progressing both socio-economically and politically. This includes education, employment, and challenging intolerant attitudes to ensure that

children, women and the most vulnerable in society exercise their rights and are safeguarded from abuse. Given the numerous barriers and hostility faced by Muslim women, we commend those women who have persevered and overcome obstacles to get heard, to challenge the status quo and to get elected. However, and not surprisingly, some men often deliberately make their lives difficult in their respective communities. Often such women are also portrayed negatively in the mainstream media.

We therefore request your government to take the following action to support Muslim women in accessing decision-making positions. This will allow them to shape and influence their communities, challenge intolerance and build cohesive communities:

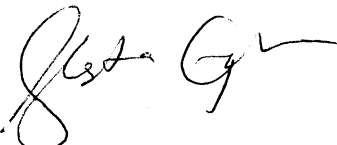
- 1. Hold an independent inquiry into the political participation of BME women** – we think a cross party review is required which would learn from the experiences of women and investigate how postal voting, candidate selection and local memberships are controlled to block independent candidates not connected to sitting councillors or other influential agents. The inquiry should also consider the lack of knowledge and training of councillors on gender equality and issues affecting women and girls, including all forms of abuse. Raising standards should include the selection of candidates who have a good command of verbal and written English as well as greater scrutiny of conflicts of interest. Unfortunately we regularly hear about community interest companies and charities, closely connected to councillors, receiving public funding in preference to independent third sector organisations. The likelihood is that these many such organisations will be accessing your recently announced funding for English language classes. Complaints and grievance processes should also be impartial and improved.
- 2. Launch initiatives to increase women's political participation** – The government should consider projects that would help support women of all backgrounds to improve capabilities and opportunities to participate in local, national and European politics across all political parties.
- 3. Amend charity law** – It is unfair that organisations are allowed to become a registered charity and reap the benefits while barring women from becoming trustees. Charity rules should be amended to require, by law, that any charity purporting to serve both men and women must include equal numbers of men and women in their various governance structures. For example, according to the Charity Commission website, there are 39 trustees listed for Birmingham Central Mosque (the Birmingham Mosque Trust Limited, charity number 259545) and not a single one is a woman. You will agree that this is an unacceptable state of affairs. The absolute number of male trustees in this case shows the level of blatant discrimination against women. In fact, we are wondering whether this is a breach of the Equality Act. While religious institutions are exempt from the Equality Act, our understanding is that such an exemption is in relation to practices only linked to worship. Trustees have legal responsibilities and these roles must be taken seriously because all trustees are equally liable. In this respect, we have also noticed that only a

number of the mosque's 39 trustees are listed on their website. We are concerned that only a handful of the trustees may be taking decisions while most of the others are 'dormant' and have little if any oversight of this charity's activities and finances.

4. **Amend the Equality Act 2010 to outlaw caste discrimination** - The Act should be amended to outlaw caste discrimination because it appears that caste has been routinely (and unofficially) used to select and / or bar candidates in local elections in some areas where the 'Biradari' (male clan) system has been allowed to operate. We believe hierarchies based on caste are also being promoted through trustee positions as officially logged with the Charity Commission. For example, we have noticed that some trustees (as in the case of Birmingham Central Mosque) have 'Ch.' in front of their name. We understand this stands for the caste of Chaudhary. If this is not the official name of any given trustee in the legal paperwork, we would question why the Charity Commission allows caste to be indicated on its official documentation in this manner? We notice that some men also include 'Haji' as part of their official names (on charity documents), presumably to promote a moral hierarchy which indicates their status as a pilgrim to Makkah. Many men and women undertake the pilgrimage, which is a personal matter, and as such the title 'Haji' should have no place in official and legal documentation. These issues need to be addressed by the Charity Commission.

We look forward to your response on the issues and recommendation raised above and to further discussion with you.

Yours sincerely,



Shaista Gohir MBE
Chair of MWNUK
On Behalf of MWNUK Board