



Muslim Women's Network UK

WRITTEN EVIDENCE TO HOUSE OF LORDS SELECT COMMITTEE ON CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

September 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 the 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. Our knowledge and experiences are therefore directly relevant to the House of Lords Select Committee. 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 Muslim men and the British Muslim community as a whole. However, we feel it is vital that Muslim women are provided with an adequate voice in such matters and hope the Select Committee also gives due consideration to the experiences of Muslim women.
5. Although we have chosen certain questions to respond to directly, we have endeavoured to provide responses to the remainder of your queries within this Evidence.

Summary

1. Rather than attempting to define “British values”, it would be more productive to focus on the values universally shared across the globe and across different faiths and cultures, and promote these as part of our civic rights and responsibilities. These values are at risk of being undermined by both Far Right and Islamic extremists and it is vital that all such groups are challenged.
2. A key barrier to the civic engagement of British Muslims, particularly Muslim women, is the issue of discrimination and Islamophobia directed towards Muslims in the work place, in education, in the political arena as well as when trying to access housing and other public services.
3. There are also barriers arising from within sections of the British Muslim community due to patriarchal and misogynist views which need to be robustly challenged. Ensuring representation of Muslim women across all organisations and sectors, including within faith institutions such as mosques will promote diversity and inclusion of Muslim women in wider society, which will in turn promote a better integrated Britain.
4. Economic issues such as high tuition fees, the cost of childcare and the lack of flexible working hours can also act as barriers which need to be addressed.
5. Children and young adults should be encouraged to think critically about universal values and initiatives should be set up in school which reward civic engagement.
6. Role-modelling campaigns, such as our #AndMuslim campaign, can be utilised effectively in promoting social cohesion, integration and citizenship.
7. English proficiency is a key step towards empowerment and integration and should be encouraged. However it is noteworthy whilst some immigrants may have limited English language skills, it has not necessarily stopped their children from speaking English fluently nor impeded their children’s successes, achievements and contributions to society. Moreover, it is important to also provide education and raise awareness of rights and responsibilities available to everyone as citizens so as to be able to truly empower and enable others.

What are the values that all of us who live in Britain should share and support? Can you identify any threats to these values, which affect citizenship of, for instance, women or various minority groups? If so, how can their citizenship be strengthened?

8. We have heard the term “British values” being used a number of times in recent years without, we submit, any true agreement on what these values entail. Ultimately all discussions in this regard point towards what we deem to be universal values, rather than strictly British, and which can be found in the majority of faiths and cultures. These include but are not limited to: Rule of law, democracy, equality, social justice, respect, tolerance, community, compassion and individual liberty including freedom of choice.

9. In fact we would suggest that rather than trying to finalise a set of values that are labelled “British”, it would be more productive to focus on the values universally shared and promote these as part of our civic rights and responsibilities. This would have the effect of developing a sense of membership and belonging across all communities, and will also show that Britain is not an isolated country but one that is very much a part of a wider global community that promotes peace, harmony and social justice.
10. It is important to stress that promoting British citizenship should not mean imposing restrictions on individual liberties and human rights, unless they of course undermine human rights of others and the said universal values central to British society. A woman wearing the Niqab for example may be just as compassionate and respectful of universal values as a woman who does not. Instead of making some people feel that they cannot be “British” because of their outward appearances, we should praise them for the intrinsic, positive values they do hold.
11. From the perspective of British Muslims, the universal principles mentioned at para.6 above are also key to the Islamic faith. Islam teaches principles and values that are not dis-similar to what may be regarded as universal values, and which are held of importance in Britain. Islam promotes the principles of sovereignty of the rule of law of the state in which you reside, equality, justice, respect, tolerance and compassion, as well as citizenship and community spirit. All Muslims (including Muslim women) are encouraged to gain knowledge through education, empower themselves through employment and enterprise and make positive contributions to their communities, including taking care of the environment, being a good neighbour, carrying out charitable work or exercising their right to vote. As such, there is no conflict between Islamic values and those values which we believe are the cornerstones of British society.
12. Unfortunately, some Muslims in the UK have forgotten the true essence of Islam which is why we hear of gender inequalities, of intolerance and of barriers being placed which hinder engagement with civic society. A lot of misinformation can be found in some cross-sections of the British Muslim community. For example, some may believe that women do not have the right to vote whilst others are told that Muslims cannot participate in the democratic process of a non-Muslim majority society. Another example would be the misogynist notion that Muslim women should not enter the workplace, and do not even have a place at a mosque. These attitudes are a serious threat to the universal values which we believe are of importance to British society and need to be challenged.
13. However, we can utilise the messages of Islam to our advantage and remind British Muslims of the principles of their faith which will empower others to take steps to promote their participation in public life and strengthen their feelings of belonging and citizenship.
14. The other threat to these universal values come from Far Right extremists who promote hate and intolerance towards women and minority groups, and particularly towards British Muslims. Where there are some Muslims who feel they do not belong and therefore cannot engage in civic society, we have those on the Far Right telling them precisely that – that they are not citizens, that they should not be part of British

society and that they do not belong. The intolerance shown by such groups makes some British Muslims, and indeed various other minority communities, feel that they can never truly belong even if they were born in UK, shared the pride and values of being British and made contributions to society both socially and economically. Many a times we have heard the phrase “back home” being used by for example, second and third generation British Asians to describe their parent or grandparents country of birth. Whilst we do not intend to police or dictate language or feelings and appreciate that the dynamics of every household can be different (and a person can in fact have dual citizenship), the point we make is that some individuals from minority groups are feeling disconnected from British society due to being made to feel unwelcome, and some are even feeling “state-less” in their minds because they feel they do not belong anywhere – they are not British enough in Britain and too British for the rest of the world.

15. It is ironic that Far Right extremists and Islamic extremists tend to share the same views and values on a number of matters; both these extremists agree FGM is an Islamic practice for example, which undermines all the hard work carried out by Anti-FGM activists who have endeavoured to stop FGM in some communities by highlighting that FGM is in fact against Islam. Or perhaps it is not ironic that those who threaten social cohesion and harmony agree with one another.
16. We can see from media reports that British Muslims, and particularly Muslim women who can be more visibly Muslim due to their attire, have been regularly subjected to violence and abuse at the hands of Far Right extremists and these are only the cases that have been reported. MWN UK are aware of many instances of anti-Muslim hate which are going unreported for various reasons, including a fear of reprisals and feeling that they will not be heard or given justice. Online abuse has also escalated. We are aware that some Muslim women are having to make compromises in a bid to ensure their safety; for example, some Muslim women have chosen to give up jobs where they were making great achievements and giving up chances of quick progression so that they may take up employment that is nearer to home and therefore will reduce their commute time, or will allow them to avoid certain routes where they feel they could be a target. That someone in Britain must choose between their career and safety is abysmal and it goes without saying that such instances are clearly undermining civic engagement of Muslim women.

Why do so many communities and groups feel ‘left behind’? Are there any specific factors which act as barriers to active citizenship faced by different communities or groups – white, BME, young, old, rural, urban? How might these barriers be overcome?

17. A key barrier to active citizenship of British Muslims in public life is the discrimination and Islamophobia being experienced by them, and this is especially the case for British Muslim women.
18. 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. However such discrimination is generally under-documented and under-reported, particularly in respect of Muslim women. This makes it difficult to reference research and statistics to highlight the extent of the issue involved. The

Women & Equalities Committee did however find and report that Muslim women face triple discrimination in the workplace, as well as when trying to obtain employment, when they held an Inquiry early 2016 into the discrimination and barriers in employment for Muslim women¹.

19. Muslim women have reported that there seem to be various stereotypes at play both in the interview process and during employment. There appears to be a presumption that they will get married and leave, or go on maternity leave and not be able to work as many hours or work as hard. These concerns are of course not limited to Muslim women only and can be shared by women of other faiths and ethnicities and on a general basis. However, it appears that the media representation of Muslim women as submissive and weak is a contributing factor for how Muslim women are treated. Like all individuals, Muslim women, and Muslims generally, also want to advance their careers and work in a healthy and safe environment; unfortunately this is seriously lacking in a number of sectors which needs to be addressed if we are truly committed to promoting civic engagement of all British Muslims.
20. It is important to remember that the burden of proof is on the employee to prove direct discrimination and it is not always easy to do so, and proving indirect discrimination is even more difficult. Even where employees have been able to cite clear examples of discrimination, they have reported how they are still disbelieved by co-workers which makes it even more difficult for them. Many feel unable to even discuss the issues they are facing in the workplace because of fear of further alienation and finding themselves penalised as a result.
21. Discrimination and Islamophobia is not only prevalent in the workplace but also in other areas, such as when trying to access housing and other public services. The rising hostility against Muslims has been fuelled by political rhetoric, media misrepresentation and a rise in right wing movements demonising the Muslim community. Such anti Muslim discourse has had an impact on the way Muslims in Britain are treated including in education, when accessing housing and other public services.
22. Muslim women may also have to contend with issues of misogyny and patriarchal attitudes from within the Muslim community and its institutions which impacts on their ability to participate fully in public life. It is deeply concerning for us to hear for example, of British Muslim women and girls being stopped from pursuing further education or employment, or stopped from even leaving their homes without a male chaperone, due to misogynist and patriarchal attitudes which have no place in Islam nor in British Society.
23. It is even more concerning when we hear such misogyny being advocated (or alternatively dismissed as a non-issue, or even silently condoned), by key institutions and individuals within the community.
24. We wish to highlight that in January 2016 we wrote a public letter of complaint to Birmingham Central Mosque due to the misogynistic attitudes displayed by their

¹ Please see following: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmwomeq/89/89.pdf>

Chair and Trustee, which included being dismissive on the issues of forced marriage and domestic violence.² The following month we wrote to the Leader of the Labour party Jeremy Corbyn MP to complain of the systematic misogyny displayed by some Muslim male Labour Councillors, who have been marginalising and silencing the voices of Muslim women³. It worries us that these are merely examples known to us which we have publicly challenged and that there may be many more such instances within the Muslim community which are going unchallenged, and Muslim women are being adversely affected as a result. It is imperative that such misogyny is robustly challenged so as to empower Muslim women to participate fully in British society. One such means of tackling such barriers is by ensuring that there is a representation of Muslim women across all organisations and sectors, including faith institutions.

25. We are also concerned by reports of girls as young as 5 years old wearing the headscarf to school. Whilst there is some debate as to whether wearing a headscarf is compulsory generally, there is absolute consensus over the point that young children are not required to wear a headscarf. Why then are parents allowing this to happen? How can we say that a 5 year old has understood the principles behind the hijab, understands the concept of modesty and is making an informed decision? Are we not sexualising young girls in this manner? We are aware of the case of a 22 year old woman for example, who began wearing the hijab at the age of 16, incidentally at the insistence of her then boyfriend and in a bid to prove to him that she would be “suitable” as a wife in the future. The relationship ended a long time ago and she no longer wishes to wear a hijab but feels she will be judged for taking it off having put it on. Whilst of course many do wear the hijab out of choice, given that we know social stigma does exist, is it fair that a woman may feel compelled to continue wearing the hijab because of a decision made as a 5 year old?
26. Whilst we believe respect and tolerance are important universal values, we must not be wary of questioning practices which may act as a means of undermining equality and choice. In this regard we feel education in schools and colleges where open discussions can be had in respect of our universal values and civic engagement, including how different faiths practice these values, are imperative in developing critical thinking amongst children and young adults which will in turn empower them to challenge negative attitudes and become active citizens. However, we believe such education should go beyond the basic comparative exercises and look deeper. For example, when looking at Islam, discussions should be had on the different sects and differing practices and allow an evaluation of these practices with regard to the overarching Islamic principles and universal values.
27. We would also like to stress the importance of asking questions and promoting critical thinking amongst all citizens. Some individuals belonging to minority communities have made the point that their questioning of a policy or practice can lead to their commitment to UK and their level of “British-ness” being called into question, but this treatment is not meted out to their White British counterparts.

² Our public letter can be found here: <http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/mediaStatmentDetail.php?id=155>

³ Our public letter can be found here: <http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/mediaStatmentDetail.php?id=157>

28. A further barrier can come in the form of the economic circumstances of the individual. Although this can be the case for all cross-sections of society and not just British Muslims, it still needs to be given due consideration as it can impact on the ability of Muslim women, and British Muslims generally, to participate fully in the social and economic life of British society. One issue for example, is the high tuition fees which can act as a deterrent to accessing further education. The cost of childcare can also act as a barrier for Muslim women who wish to pursue employment, especially if they are not on particularly high salaries. Whilst the government has put forward some proposals which will go towards addressing the issue for childcare costs for some, 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.
29. An additional issue for Muslim women can be the lack of flexible working opportunities available, which can hinder Muslim women who may have caring or other responsibilities. In some cases, this may be as a result of unaccommodating family members, such as parents or in-laws, who expect the women to carry out certain responsibilities in the home without any compromise (such as cooking for the family) as a condition of being allowed to work. In other cases, the needs can be unavoidable such as caring for elderly parents, family members with disabilities or young children. Irrespective of the scenario however, it is apparent that flexible working would assist Muslim women to be able to perform their other responsibilities whilst also being able to work, thus engaging fully with British society.

How do you see the relationship between citizenship and civic engagement on the one hand and social cohesion and integration on the other? What effect does the level of diversity in schools and workplaces have on integration in society as a whole? How can diversity and integration be increased concurrently?

30. We believe that citizenship and civic engagement go hand in hand with social cohesion and integration and it is pointless to look at one aspect whilst ignoring the other. We believe diversity in schools and workplaces is key to promoting integration and social cohesion and in turn citizenship and civic engagement. Citizenship ceremonies will achieve nothing if the citizens going through these ceremonies are not able to enter the workplace or get a bus without racist comments being made. It is for this reason that we feel it is essential that the barriers placed in front of Muslims and other minority communities, and particularly Muslim women, needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. A sense of citizenship and civic responsibility can only be felt when individuals feel they are able to fully participate in British society, without fear of discrimination or abuse.
31. This can only be achieved when equality and diversity is met at all levels and across all sectors. This includes public bodies and faith institutions. In respect of mosques, given that Muslim women make up 50% of the British Muslim community, we find it unacceptable that they have no representation within mosques particularly in terms of governance. There are various examples of mosques in the UK where the entire board is made up of men, even when the number of trustees are in double digits. Birmingham Central Mosque for example has 40 trustees, all of whom are men. Perhaps more worrying is the fact that this mosque is also a registered charity and yet is being able to discriminate against women. Misogynist attitudes which believe

Muslim women cannot be involved in such matters are precisely the issues that need to be strongly challenged and eradicated, as these beliefs are hindering integration, social cohesion and civic engagement.

32. Economic barriers mentioned above at para 28, such as high tuition fees, the cost of childcare or lack of flexible working opportunities should be considered and addressed so that they do not continue to hinder Muslim women from taking up opportunities that would help them participate fully in the social and economic life of British society.
33. We also submit that integration and social cohesion are not the responsibility of British Muslims and minority communities alone, but rather the responsibility of all citizens. Much has been said about British Muslims making up the majority of the population in some areas of the UK, with these areas being used as examples of a failure to integrate. However, choice of area can be due to a number of reasons including the financial circumstances of the individual, convenience in terms of access to a place of worship or having family in the same area. That does not mean that these individuals are not integrating in their day to day lives, nor that living in an area not as populated by Muslims will aid integration. We need to address the real issues at hand and not be misdirected by perceptions.
34. Respect, tolerance, compassion and a community spirit needs to be shown by all and we clarify this point further in the following section.

How important are levels of English proficiency for first and second generation immigrants and what could be done to increase them, including through support for ESOL classes? Are there particular barriers faced by newcomers in Britain? Could the naturalisation process, including the citizenship test, be improved and if so, how?

35. We agree that English proficiency is very important for enabling not only integration but also allowing individuals to access services and understand their legal rights and responsibilities. Language is a strong empowerment tool and all first and second generation immigrants should be encouraged to develop their English language skills. In this regard, we feel that individuals should be provided with the necessary support, not only in terms of funding, but also in terms of accessibility and encouragement. One Muslim woman told us that she had been learning English for a long time and whilst she was confident in her classes, she was scared of speaking English in public in case she was mocked or abused due to her accent or pronunciation. Just as immigrants should be encouraged to learn English, the rest of British society should show respect and encouragement when the same immigrants put their learning into practice.
36. It must also be noted that whilst some immigrants may have limited English language skills, it has not necessarily stopped their children from speaking English fluently nor impeded their children's successes and achievements and contributions to society.
37. We would also like to make the point that learning English alone is not sufficient to establish integration, social cohesion, citizenship or civic engagement. There are a number of Muslim women in UK who are fluent speakers of English, who were born, raised and educated in UK but who do not know of their legal rights. One example is

in respect of registered and unregistered marriages; a number of Muslim women in UK have only entered into an Islamic marriage and it was only on breakdown of the relationship that they realised that their marriage is not legally recognised and that they do not have the same rights as a legally married spouse. It is important therefore to invest in education and awareness raising campaigns and strategies that enable citizenship and engagement by allowing individuals to better understand their rights and responsibilities.

38. We would also like to highlight that in some instances newcomers to Britain can in fact hold and practice universal values better than British citizens themselves. We are aware of cases where Muslim women have come to the UK on a spousal visa and wanted to obtain an education and employment and fully integrate into British society and found that their British spouse refused to allow them to do so, and they have been forced to remain caged at home for fear of abuse or divorce and being sent back to their country of origin where they are likely to face stigma or even honour based violence.

Can you give examples of initiatives and role models that have helped promote a positive vision of British citizenship within a tolerant and cohesive society?

39. Despite the various barriers, there are many Muslims, and particularly many Muslim women who have achieved great successes and participated fully with public life in Britain. 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.
40. 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 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. This can then break down the barriers between communities and promote integration, understanding and harmony across British society. After all, integration is a two way street and does require participation from all individuals in society, not just British Muslims.

⁴ Please see our media statement for further details regarding our #AndMuslim campaign: <http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/mediaStatmentDetail.php?id=171>

41. Role modelling and mentoring schemes are useful ways of tackling barriers to participation in public life and encourages Muslims, especially Muslim women and girls, to take the necessary steps towards furthering their education and careers.
42. In this regard we wish to focus on the impact of female and BME politicians on citizenship and civic engagement. We were very pleased to see a record number of women MPs elected in the last general election, with not only included many female Muslim MPs but also Britain's first female Sikh MP. A natural consequence of diversity in the political arena is that women and individuals from minority groups feel better represented and therefore more able to engage with civic society. However, we are disappointed that despite making a formal complaint to Jeremy Corbyn MP and highlighting the systematic misogyny displayed by some Muslim male Labour Councillors who have been marginalising and silencing the voices of Muslim women (as mentioned at para. 24 of this Evidence) we are still receiving accounts from Muslim women who are facing the same hurdles we complained of. It is very disappointing that our complaints raised last year have not been addressed and would like to make the point that it is important to allow active engagement with civic society at all levels. Whilst the number of female and minority MPs elected is a positive achievement, this does not excuse the hurdles being placed at Councillor level. On this note we would like to clarify that we only mention the Labour party as the complaints made to us related to them, but we fully expect all political parties to carry out investigations in this respect and address any issues which are uncovered within their own party and its procedures.
43. A further point we wish to make in respect of female and BME politicians relates to the online abuse and 'smear' campaigns that many have been and continue to be subjected to. Whilst the MPs in question have bravely carried, seeing such harassment and online abuse can be discouraging for the wider public. If we want to promote civic engagement, we must make individuals feel it is safe to engage.
44. Whilst we do not consider citizenship ceremonies themselves necessary, we do believe there is merit in rewarding those making positive contributions to civic society and such initiatives should begin at an early age from school to highlight the importance of making positive contributions to society – including respecting diversity, helping the community and showing compassion to those in need.
45. We would also like to make the point that initiatives proposed to promote integration or civic engagement can intentionally or unintentionally ignore those with disabilities, particular with the focus on making "active" contributions. Those with disabilities should not be made to feel that they are lesser citizens in any way.

Final Comments

46. As a point of clarification, we must explain that our comments and examples have been limited to 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 other faith and non-faith communities. We are also aware that some of the issues experienced by Muslim women can also be

experienced by Muslim 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.

47. 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 healthy, safe and harmonious for all.
48. 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.
49. 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 to integration and which will allow Muslim women to exercise their rights and choices, and participate socially and economically into British society.
50. We would like to thank the House of Lords Select Committee for holding an inquiry into citizenship and civic engagement. We also thank you for providing us with the opportunity to give Evidence and hope that it proves to be helpful in your considerations.

**On behalf of Muslim Women's Network UK,
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Vice-Chair
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