



Jeremy Corbyn MP,
House of Commons,
SW1A 0AA

5th February 2016

Dear Mr Corbyn,

Systematic misogyny displayed by some Labour Muslim male councillors - the real barriers to Muslim women's participation in society

Muslim Women's Network UK (MWN UK) is a charitable organisation with the aims of promoting equality, diversity, social inclusion and racial/religious harmony. It does not support, nor is affiliated to any political party. However, in order to defend and strengthen women's rights and in particular to promote the empowerment of Muslim women and girls, we regularly engage with, and if required challenge, politicians, political candidates, public servants and any other body or organisation where considered necessary.

It is for this reason that MWN UK deems it necessary to write to complain about what appears to be the systematic misogyny displayed by significant numbers of Muslim male Labour councillors. They therefore constitute the real barriers to Muslim women's participation in their local communities and society. Although this issue will be common to the other main political parties and will involve other BME women (and I will be writing to the other party leaders), from our experience, Muslim women are most affected by Labour Muslim male councillors due to the latter's numbers in certain towns and cities.

As this is an open secret and has been going on for decades, we can only assume that the Labour Party has been complicit at the highest levels. How do men who do not want Muslim women to be empowered or have a voice remain in power unless the Labour Party allows it? It appears that over decades senior Labour politicians have deliberately turned a blind eye to the treatment of Muslim women because votes have been more important to them than women's rights. This in our opinion flies in the face of Labour values. How can Labour say it is a party for women and equality when it appears to actively support Muslim male misogynists, who are often closely linked to other patriarchal community structures such as mosques and bring a culturally misogynistic mindset to local politics?

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Given that councillors are public servants, it means public resources are being used to marginalise Muslim women. This situation can no longer be allowed to continue. It also means that your party is relying on Muslim women's fear of the consequences of speaking out and hence their silence. Muslim women have now had enough and want to be heard. Are you willing to listen to them Mr Corbyn? We believe Muslim men could only have established and be operating the patriarchal 'biradari' system of male kinship because the Labour Party allows them to so. Based on the information and evidence available to us, the impact on Muslim women has been:

1. To prevent Muslim women from becoming local councillors - Able, knowledgeable and independent-minded Muslim women have been undermined, sabotaged and blocked from becoming councillors. Although Labour has attempted to address this through all-women shortlists, this has been circumvented by nepotism and cronyism, e.g. selecting male candidates among family or friends or, in rare cases, women over whom control can be exercised so that they will not challenge or threaten the status quo. Excuses will be shamelessly made to avoid selecting Muslim women who meet all the criteria of a strong candidate if they are deemed to be independent or regarded as people who will challenge the status quo. Those women who have succeeded in gaining nomination, have more often required the approval and support of Muslim male councillors. Good Muslim female candidates should be able to get selected on merit alone. In fact all political parties operate on the principle of patronage and people often don't get through on merit alone and is a problem that needs to be also be addressed more widely.
2. Many selection 'deals' are made informally, behind closed doors, and the process is neither fair nor transparent. Poor candidates are selected time and again and then propped up as councillors while performing poorly at their job. Women are constantly fobbed off with false promises of future selection, in the hope they will not persevere. They are also deterred from putting in official complaints because they are told that this endangers their future selection.
3. To deny issues facing Muslim women - Muslim women and girls face many issues such as different forms of abuse. There is a lack of understanding of these issues and not only are such issues regarded as unimportant, their existence is often categorically denied. Sometimes women's empowerment projects have been thwarted.
4. To be disrespected and silenced - Muslim women's groups have often protested that they are visited by Labour politicians for photo opportunities and for their vote at election time, but that they are systematically ignored when they need help and support. Women who have been vocal and complained about Muslim male councillors have been pressurised (indirectly through their families) to back down; they are often threatened or have been spoken about in a derogatory manner, e.g. accused of being feminist (a slur in the eyes of the abovementioned male councillors) or 'behaving like White women'.

5. To have decisions made about their lives by misogynistic men - Many Muslim male councillors control budgets and local services, taking decisions that impact on the lives of their local constituents and communities, including women who are heavy users of local services and impacted as a result; yet many Muslim male councillors are ignorant about the reality of women's lives.

To maintain Muslim male power structures, it appears some white male councillors are also involved in keeping Muslim women out of local politics. In exchange for their support, they are ensured the support of Muslim male councillors and their 'biradari' when it comes to their reselection, by the local party, as prospective councillors.

This system must be dismantled to allow the advancement of credible Muslim male and female candidates, with knowledge and understanding of today's issues, who will uphold Labour values of freedom, equality, and justice at all times, for all people. There is no place for the archaic, patriarchal 'biradari' system in 21st century Britain. The abovementioned male councillors should no longer be allowed to operate as if they were in their country of origin.

Complaint regarding Birmingham Labour councillor : Mr Muhammad Afzal

There are numerous Muslim male councillors (and those of other faiths) across the country who, in my opinion, should not hold public office given their attitudes towards women and women's issues. Although Muslim Women's Network UK has been told of many such individuals, we are unable to disclose examples in order to protect the identity of our informants due to their fear of backlash against them. However, we wish to share with you an example we recently encountered. We are appalled by the attitude and views expressed by a Birmingham Labour councillor, Mr Muhammad Afzal. The details of the conversation and nature of our meeting with him are given below. Although we met him as Chair of Birmingham Central Mosque, his views troubled us greatly given that he has been a Labour councillor for over 30 years and that he was selected last month to become Birmingham's next Lord Mayor. Whether he is Chair of Birmingham Central Mosque or city councillor/Lord Mayor, it is clear that he will hold the same views he expressed to us. As you will see from the conversation recounted below, he refused to accept that forced marriage occurs among Muslims in the UK despite the case studies and statistics we cited and also believes that domestic violence is occurs mainly in Christian communities due to the excessive consumption of alcohol.

Details of the meeting with Mr Afzal

On Friday 27th November 2015, my colleague, Chaplain Shahin Ashraf MBE visited the manager of Birmingham Central Mosque and verbally put forward a proposal for the Mosque and our network to hold a joint event on forced marriage. We proposed to provide funding for refreshments and venue (at the Mosque), administrative fees (to cover invitations and the organisation of a male focus group) and speaker fee for the invited religious scholar. We were hopeful about such a joint venture because the Mosque had recently published an article, in one of its newsletters that forced marriage was against Islam.

The manager requested that we put the proposal in writing so he could forward it to the trustees. We sent the written proposal on 2nd December 2015. We were subsequently asked to meet three of the Mosque's trustees on Friday 18th December 2015. Mr Muhammad Afzal, chair of the trustees, was present and did most of the talking. We explained that we wanted to hold a forced marriage event with the Mosque because they could reach a far larger audience, in particular men, than we could reach. We said that we needed their help. We then provided examples of case studies from our national helpline and explained that women's telephone helplines throughout the country were in constant receipt of calls on forced marriage and although forced marriages are occurring across communities, a high percentage of these concerned Muslim women and girls, particularly of Pakistani background.

Mr Afzal responded by saying that forced marriage was no longer a problem. His colleague stated that it was now an abandoned practice and Mr. Afzal agreed. He was dismissive of the issue and went on to say that many marriages took place at the mosque, that couples were happy and that they [as Mosque leaders] would know if marriages were forced. When we said that many forced marriages were taking place abroad, one of the other trustees said that due to stricter immigration rules families are no longer marrying off their children abroad, a statement with which Mr Afzal agreed. When we challenged them and asked if their argument could be supported by evidence, they claimed, 'we just know, we don't need evidence'. We were made to feel that our claims about forced marriage as a problem were dishonest. Mr. Afzal even said: 'women these days are strong and educated, how can they be forced into marriage?' He did not recognise that women and girls could be pressured, emotionally blackmailed or threatened into marriage.

One trustee even stated that it was acceptable to advise their children to get married if they had behavioural issues. We reminded them that emotional blackmail counted as forced marriage and a marriage is only deemed arranged (and not forced) if children give consent. When we pointed out that UK Government Forced Marriage Unit statistics indicate that significant numbers of victims were from the West Midlands, Mr. Afzal responded that the government's figures were exaggerated and not to be believed. Mr. Afzal went on to say that we could hire Mosque premises and hold an independent event but that the mosque would not be a partner or participate in it because it would send a wrong message to the community that forced marriage was a problem when actually it is not.

Before leaving we asked whether they would consider working with us on domestic violence. Mr. Afzal responded by saying that more men than women suffered from domestic violence these days. We argued that although men did suffer from domestic violence, by far the larger number was made up by women. He then went on to say that 'domestic violence is happening mainly in the Christian community because they get drunk.' I explained that the problem was also immense in Muslim communities and that significant numbers of women were being murdered to which Mr. Afzal responded by questioning why he had not heard about them in the media. We explained that cases had been reported in the media and that, in fact, there had been several murders in the West Midlands alone. Before we left Mr Afzal said that we should get in touch with them if we want to partner them on domestic violence and that they would think about it. As we left one of the trustees said we should maintain dialogue with sisters at the Mosque and talk again, and that he would be in touch. By the end of the conversation it

was clear the trustees and especially Mr. Afzal was not interested in women's issues. We have not heard back from them since that meeting.

We are left wondering why Mr. Afzal and his fellow trustees asked to meet with us when clearly they had no intention of working with us - was it to deliberately make us feel undermined? We feel that men with such attitudes should not be in positions of authority and yet the Labour Party is keeping such men in power across the UK. Muslim Women's Network UK is a national and highly respected charity with a good track record of dealing with Muslim women's issues. Our findings on forced marriage, domestic violence and other problems are evidenced by our research and our helpline enquiries. Despite our expertise in these areas we were not taken seriously by Mr. Afzal who gave the impression that he knew better than us. We are concerned that if this attitude can be displayed towards an organisation like ours, that is an organisation with informed women who can hold their own, what chance do other Muslim women seeking support have? When a councillor is so out of touch with the reality of a large section of his constituents' lives, why is he repeatedly selected to stand for local electoral office, especially given his controversial past and less than glowing record as Chair of Birmingham City Council's Human Resources Committee? Are we to believe that his misogynistic and dismissive attitude towards women's issues has gone unnoticed for over 30 years? This is unlikely in our opinion. We would like to know what action the Labour Party will take with regards to his unacceptable views. He is not, in our view, the best person to serve the people of Birmingham as councillor or Mayor. We welcome the fact that he stood down as the Lord Mayor candidate on 1st February 2015. However, this was only due to relentless pressure including from Muslim Women's Network UK. However, he has continued to deny his comments and remains a Labour Councillor.

Concerns and recommended actions

We would like the Labour Party to hold an independent inquiry into how Muslim women are being marginalised by local Labour politicians. Such an inquiry should also be widened to include the experiences of BME women at the hands of local male councillors from their communities. Any women taking part in such an inquiry should not be identified through the local councillor network in order to protect their identity. This would allow women to speak out confidently and also protect them from threats and harassment. There is of course good practice in some parts of the UK and this should be identified and replicated. However, the key concerns to be addressed are listed below.

1. Candidate selection criteria

Concern: selection is not always impartial and can involve nepotism and/or cronyism. Good quality candidates have been deliberately overlooked for poorer quality ones. Poor quality candidates inevitably emerge when friends and family are favoured regardless of wider political knowledge and skills and frequently include candidates who have little or poor proficiency in spoken and written English. Such candidates sometimes include people who have been involved in political corruption and vote rigging. Some of these continue to be reselected. This is facilitated by controlling local Labour Party branch membership (discussed below).

Action: Set up a system that ensures Labour candidates are selected on merit e.g. political knowledge and skills, experience, honesty and the genuine desire to represent all constituents. This must also include a minimum required standard of proficiency in spoken and written English. Those who currently do not meet the criteria should be deselected. The selection process needs to be made transparent and fair and could involve the National Executive. However, this should not be a long-term solution because it should not be talking over local affairs. Although the Regional Offices could monitor selections, we have been informed that the West Midlands Regional Office is colluding with in nepotism and cronyism.

2. Controlling local party membership

Concern: Some local councillors control local membership by recruiting their friends and family (and we have even heard that such new members' party membership fees are paid on their behalf). The 'packing' of local party branches with one's followers facilitates one's reselection.

Action: Action should be taken to ensure that local membership cannot be controlled by councillors or an alternative method of selecting candidates – such as that introduced for the Labour leadership which involves party supporters also – should be considered. Perhaps paying for another person's membership should also be banned.

3. Postal Voting

Concerns: Postal voting fraud is repeatedly brought up as an issue. There have been a number of cases over the years involving underhand tactics and criminality to control certain constituencies. As the problem appears to be recurring, it is clear that the Labour Party has not done enough to root out the problem.

Action: Hold a cross party review in postal voting and collectively work together to find ways to eliminate the risk of vote rigging with tougher penalties.

4. Complaints

Concerns: Complaints about selection and other matters are not always dealt with impartially because the most senior people in the party, at local level, also conspire to keep Muslim female candidates from being selected.

Action: An impartial complaint mechanism, in which local members have confidence, should be put in place. This could be supplemented by a whistle blowing service where councillors can raise concerns confidentially about the corrupt practices of colleagues without their details being disclosed locally. In addition, it would be instructive to investigate how many BME women have complained at local level, to the Labour Party, about how their complaint was dealt with and what the outcome was.

5. Lack of understanding of issues affecting women and girls

Concern: *There is a lack of understanding, on the part of male Muslim councillors, of issues affecting women and girls in their communities, particularly concerning abuse such as honour based violence, forced marriage, domestic violence, rape / sexual violence, child sexual abuse / exploitation, female genital mutilation. In addition, some councillors simply have no respect for women and girls.*

Action: All councillors (regardless of background) should receive gender equality training and be instructed about the different forms of abuse affecting local Muslim women and girls in their communities. This should be compulsory for all new councillors and should be updated cyclically for those who have already received training.

6. Conflicts of interest

Concern: Numerous councillors will hold other posts, such as trustees of local charities including mosques, which may cause a conflict of interest.

Action: Such conflicts of interest require further scrutiny to avoid the development of corrupt practices, particularly when organisations connected to local councillors are in receipt of public funding, which may then be used to employ friends and relatives on various projects.

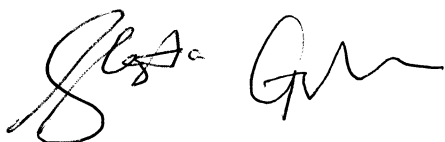
Final comments

Muslim women have progressed in many respects and are now involved 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 nor engage with issues which are important to and which affect 50 per cent of their congregations, that is, Muslim women. However, Muslim male Labour councillors further exacerbate this situation. More often than not, it is same Muslim men, with a misogynistic mindset, who become local councillors and who are well networked and connected to the mosques which 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.

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 to 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, challenging intolerant attitudes to ensure that children, women and the most vulnerable in society exercise their rights and are safeguarded from abuse. Given the enormous 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, their lives are often deliberately made difficult by the men in their respective communities.

Mr Corbyn you see yourself as a compassionate leader, a champion of the most vulnerable in society and you say you want to re-instil the values of equality, fair play, solidarity with the most powerless in society and of mutual respect back into politics. We hope this extends to the tackling of the misogyny displayed by significant numbers of Muslim male councillors in the Labour Party. We would be more than happy to support you on this matter and look forward to your response and a meeting to discuss this further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shaista Gohir', written in a cursive style.

Shaista Gohir MBE

Chair

On Behalf of Muslim Women's Network UK

Board of Trustees