

19th April 2015

MWNUK STATEMENT

Insinuations made about Forced Marriage and Domestic Violence Victims by George Galloway and his Officials is Irresponsible

Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK) is a charitable organisation with the aims of promoting equality, diversity, social inclusion and racial/religious harmony, and 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 MWNUK deems it necessary to challenge certain insinuations made about forced marriage and domestic violence victims by George Galloway, currently the Respect Party's PPC for Bradford West, when he commented on Labour candidate Naz Shah's forced marriage and domestic violence experience. Given his influence, we consider Mr. Galloway's insinuations to be irresponsible and which will have a wider, counter productive impact on victims of forced marriage and domestic violence or those at risk.

When Ms. Shah shared her story publicly, she explained that she was married at the age of 15 and suffered from domestic violence. Many women tend to remain in abusive relationships and suffer in silence. Cultural concepts of honour and shame often prevent women from articulating their experiences openly even when they have escaped their situations. We therefore commend Ms. Shah's courage in sharing her very personal experiences. It is important that when survivors share their stories, which is often very difficult, that they are heard. Only with open discussion will more victims or those at risk come forward and ask for help.

Although we cannot comment on the details of Ms. Shah's personal experiences, we are very concerned about the misleading information regarding forced marriage and domestic violence being alluded to in the statements made by Mr. Galloway and his officials. MWNUK challenges the assertions that have been made as follows:

- It has been alleged that Ms. Shah could not have been married as a minor at the age of 15 because her official marriage certificate registered with the authorities in Pakistan states her age as 16 and a half.

It is not uncommon for victims of child marriage to have an unregistered Islamic (nikah) ceremony while they are under age and to later register the marriage officially once the child is over 16 especially if documents are needed to make an application for a spousal visa. It is important to recognise this can happen to children. In fact we have come across victim stories where this has indeed happened.

- It has been alleged that Ms. Shah's marriage could not have been forced because her mother was present at the marriage.

Parents are often the instigators of forced marriage, coercing their children to marry against their will and therefore present at the marriage ceremony. In fact parents themselves can be pressured by members of the extended family to accept marriage proposals for their children and feel they cannot back out due to dishonor.

- Ms Shah has been questioned as to why she did not (as a British citizen) simply get on a plane and come back to the UK if she had been forced into marriage.

Girls are more aware of their rights now due to forced marriage campaigns, yet the crime continues to be under reported. Twenty-five years ago victims faced even greater barriers to disclosing. The Forced Marriage Unit did not exist then and there were far fewer women's rights organisations. To imply that it is easy to escape a forced marriage suggests that victims are at fault for not leaving abusive situations.

- Ms. Shah has been questioned about why she had not gone to the police, social services or an imam if her husband had subjected her to violence.

This indirectly suggests that women who do not report their abuse cannot be suffering from domestic violence. Such assertions are very dangerous. Women from all communities find it difficult to come forward and report abuse and the reasons can vary such as: fear of consequences; women blaming themselves; women not realizing they are victims; lack of awareness of the help available; being isolated from family and friends and not being able to reach help; being worried about finances; and hoping the partner may change. Asian women face additional cultural barriers that prevent them from seeking help such as, fear of dishonouring family, shame, stigma, taboo and being rejected by the community. Also women in these communities are expected to suffer in silence. They are also usually blamed for any problem within the family including the violence and abuse to which they are subjected. This fear of blame can also prevent women from coming forward and getting the help they need. Not surprisingly domestic violence is therefore under reported in Asian / Muslim communities.

- Ms. Shah was questioned about her domestic violence and child marriage because her first husband has denied the abuse.

Denial by the alleged perpetrator should never be used as evidence to determine whether abuse has occurred or not.

It is clear from this rhetoric that Mr. Galloway and his spokespersons have no understanding of the complexities and realities of forced marriage and domestic violence. Victims may now feel unable to come forward due to the fear of not being believed and perpetrators may attempt to use similar reasoning to deny that forced marriage, child marriage and domestic violence is taking place.

Forced marriage is a violation of human rights and disproportionately affects young women. Approximately 8000 actual or threatened forced marriage cases are reported every year with many involving an overseas element. Available data from the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) indicates that two thirds of forced marriage cases are from South Asian communities. In 2013, the FMU handled cases involving Pakistan (42.7%), Bangladesh (10.9%) and India (9.8%). Given the constituency of Bradford West, where George Galloway has been an MP and is seeking re-election, and which has a large Pakistani population, his comments are even more astounding. The hidden nature of forced marriage, and the lack of discussion within communities, is already very challenging. To change entrenched attitudes is very difficult. Mr. Galloway has made this task even more difficult because he has given potential perpetrators a checklist of excuses if they want to hide the abuse.

Raising awareness of forced marriage is essential to preventing it. Over the next three months MWNUK will therefore work with local partners to organise events in 5 cities. We will educate communities about the consequences of forced marriage by sharing survivor stories and providing information about the help that is available. For example, the Muslim Women's Network Helpline (www.mwnhelpline.co.uk) that can be contacted on 0800 999 5786 / 0303 999 5786), regularly provides support to victims of forced marriage.

Women have long endured sexism and misogyny in many fields, including politics. Their integrity is often challenged in ways in which male integrity is rarely challenged. Given such barriers operate it is not surprising that we still do not have sufficient numbers of female politicians. This gender imbalance needs to be addressed so we have a parliament that better reflects the composition of our society. It is important that women have a voice in politics to ensure women's specific rights and interests are protected. MWNUK cannot and will not tell you who to vote for, but we encourage all voters to scrutinise and question their local candidates on where they stand on women's rights and whether they represent all sections of society including the most vulnerable such as forced marriage and domestic violence victims.

Please remember you have to be registered to vote. The deadline to register is midnight on the 20th April 2015. If you have not registered yet, you can register here at www.gov.uk/register-to-vote

Muslim Women's Network UK

www.mwnuk.co.uk

contact@mwnuk.co.uk

0121 236 9000