

# Muslim Women's Network UK: Raising the Voices of British Muslim Women

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## **Introduction**

Muslim women in Britain have faced numerous challenges over the past decade. Public debates of faith and nationality have focused on issues such as the face veil and have consequently led to the negative stereotyping of Muslim women as uneducated and oppressed while emphasising Muslim 'otherness' in general.

Where they have engaged in wider society, Muslim women face multiple forms of discrimination, and also encounter many hurdles in education, employment, healthcare, housing, and in civic and political spaces of participation. Within Muslim communities, women face numerous barriers as they struggle against patriarchal cultures and interpretations of Islam.

In the UK, in response to the hurdles faced, there has been a growth in the number of community organisations, run by and dealing with the needs of Muslim women. These needs are linked with intersecting issues of gender, race/ethnicity, class, religion, culture and identity. Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK) was established in order to unite various individuals and organisations whose aim is to address the needs of Muslim women.

This article presents MWNUK as a case study of how British Muslim women have constructed platforms and spaces in order to have their voices heard. The article is organised in three parts. The first presents a history of the network. The second highlights the main issues addressed by the network. The third focuses on the relationships formed by MWNUK with state and civic organisations and the challenges which are presented therein.

## **History**

In 2002, in the wake of the 'northern riots' and events of 9/11, Patricia Hewitt, the New Labour Minister for Women, began meeting regularly with a small group of Muslim women who it was felt could act as bridge-builders between the state and Muslim communities, especially as mothers, sisters, and wives of men who were potentially in danger of being influenced by extremist ideologies. However, the group of women consulted believed that the wider, systematic exclusion of Muslim women's voices in public policy making meant that the serious social issues facing them were unlikely to be addressed.

## **Muslim Women's Network**

In 2003, with the support of the Women's National Commission (WNC),<sup>1</sup> this group formalised itself as the 'Muslim Women's Network' (MWN) with the aim of providing independent advice to government, on issues relating to Muslim women and public policy.

Those who formed MWN came from different social, ethnic and political backgrounds. However, they all understood that religion played an influential role for them and other Muslim women in British society. They supported an approach combining gender equality and human rights within Islam which could potentially create spaces of liberation for Muslim women in Britain. They also believed firmly that Muslim women could and should speak for themselves, and that their individual and collective experiences were valuable in generating positive social change.

### **'She Who Disputes'**

One of the first activities undertaken by MWN, in collaboration with the WNC, was to find out what was important to Muslim women. Over 200 Muslim women from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds participated in events which took place in Manchester, Bradford, Leicester, Birmingham and London. What made this consultation programme unique was that the women themselves set the agenda and spoke about a variety of issues ranging from the lack of representation of Muslim women in British society generally and in their own communities to discrimination in employment, education and other public services; the misinterpretation of Islam; violence against women. Racism and islamophobia constituted an overarching theme.

This 'listening exercise' was published as a report, *She Who Disputes'* (2006), which exposed both the lack of opportunities afforded to Muslim women in Britain and the barriers they faced. The participant responses were presented in five broad areas; 'enabling Muslim women's voices to be heard', 'violence and safety', 'enabling economic participation', 'attitudes within society' and 'encouraging civic participation'.

For example, under the category 'encouraging civic participation', women expressed their desire to speak out about issues but felt there were almost no opportunities to do so. They were angry that in government consultations with the Muslim community only men were invited. The women also sharply criticised organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)<sup>2</sup> which claimed to represent the views of various Muslim communities while either completely excluding women's voices or marginalising those women who worked to improve the future of their communities and/or in organisations affiliated to the MCB.

Many women expressed their pleasure at being at the 'Listening to Muslim Women' events but stressed that these should not be 'one off' events and that the dialogue between policy makers and Muslim communities, including women, must be ongoing. Many felt that Muslim women role models should be made more visible.

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<sup>1</sup> Established in 1969, the Women's National Commission was a quasi-governmental advisory body feeding the views of women to government. It was disestablished in December 2010.

<sup>2</sup> The MCB was established in 1997 as an umbrella body comprising over 500 affiliated national, regional and local Muslim organisations, mosques and schools.

The women were also sceptical of government foreign policy which was seen by many to be pursuing an anti-Islamic agenda thus reducing women's faith in political structures and processes. They raised concerns about government funding of organisations as this could restrict such organisations' freedom to critically comment on government policy. The voices of the women consulted helped shape the purpose of the Muslim Women's Network and emphasised the need for an improvement in Muslim women's lives.

In 2008, Muslim Women's Network was legally registered as a company with community aims<sup>3</sup> and renamed itself as the 'Muslim Women's Network UK' (MWNUK). The reason behind this was to ensure that MWNUK had complete freedom of action and that it was able to freely critique government policies.

### **Building the Network**

The abovementioned consultation of ordinary Muslim women represented the start of the network. Most women who participated became network members, sharing a sense of solidarity and the belief of achieving change. They recognised that a network provided a means through which to share knowledge, raise individual and collective profiles and issues and influence policy and public attitudes.

Very quickly MWNUK began to receive enquiries on a wide range of issues affecting Muslim women. As a network organisation, it directed inquiries either to other MWNUK members (individuals or organisations) or to other experts and organisations outside the network. Groups of Muslim women also requested advice on how to set up local and regional Muslim women's networks and advice on how to become effective advocates for women's rights.

MWNUK developed its capacity to reach a broader audience by creating an information and resource-based website ([www.mwnuk.co.uk](http://www.mwnuk.co.uk)). Office space was rented in central Birmingham and employed a part-time member of staff, thus giving the network a tangible presence. The network also benefitted from the expertise of its volunteer advisory board members.

### **Using the Media**

The network's staff and advisory board members began speaking, on behalf of Muslim women in Britain, at events and in various media organs. MWNUK's public profile improved and more women became members. Regular appearances in both ethnic and mainstream media were considered a must in order to raise issues of importance to Muslim women in the UK and overseas. MWNUK has contributed to news and current affairs programmes and columns in the following media organs: Islam Channel, Alhulbayt TV, Ummah TV, BBC and ITV channels, Al Jazeera, *Evening Standard*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Independent* among others.

One of the most successful media appearances took place in July 2010, when a ban on the *burqa* was proposed in France. Faeza Vaid (MWNUK's then co-ordinator) appeared on ITV's 'This Morning' programme and presented a human rights argument in favour of a women's right to dress as she chooses.

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<sup>3</sup> In the UK, such companies are known as 'Community Interest Companies' (CICs).

'This Morning' is a popular lifestyle programme on one of the UK's main TV channels and Faeza debated the issue with Saira Khan, a regular contributor to British television. MWNUK's daily website 'hit rate' increased from 50 to 1600 that day proving how vital media visibility is to raising the profile of organisations and issues.

At the time of writing, MWNUK had 420 members - individuals and organisations - with a potential reach of about 73,000 Muslim women. Its current members include academics and students; voluntary sector employees; health professionals; experts in women's rights and migration issues, diversity and disability policy; businesswomen; local government employees; police officers; artists etc. Membership is also diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, sexual orientation and geographical location.

## **Issues**

Over the past four years, inquiries received by MWNUK have concerned: the marriage and divorce rights of British Muslim women; forced marriages; employment discrimination; child abuse; sexuality issues; immigration; health care. While most inquiries have come from Muslim women, many mainstream organisations have also sought advice.

MWNUK's approach to sharing knowledge, experience, best practice and opinions among Muslim women and those working with them, has strengthened Muslim women's ability to bring about positive changes in their lives. Below are two examples of issues raised by British Muslim women and how MWNUK has tackled them.

### **Negative Stereotyping of Muslim Women**

Following work done in schools and other public sector organisations among groups of Muslim girls and women, MWNUK observed first-hand the harmful effect of negative public images, of Muslim women, on the aspirations and expectations of these groups. It was evident that on the whole Muslim girls were not encouraged to develop interests and ambitions beyond the domains of home and family. Moreover, they lacked positive role models to which they could relate. The same applied to many adult women who lacked confidence and self-esteem to pursue their goals.

MWNUK's response was to actively raise the profile of successful Muslim women as role models and to support the network's organisations by highlighting the activities and achievements of their members. It also created resources to challenge negative stereotypes. An example was the 'Birmingham Big Sisters' role modelling project. This project showcased 30 local Muslim female role models through booklets, posters and a mobile exhibition. The exhibition and booklets were presented in secondary schools, further education colleges, Birmingham's Council House and in local community events. Public responses indicated that the resources directly challenged accepted negative stereotypes such as Muslim women's non-participation in political and civic activities, sport further and higher education. Subsequently, MWNUK created similar resources such as the 'Women Like Us' and 'Women in History' exhibitions which have been available for use by network members and non-members alike.



Role Model Exhibition: 'Women Like Us'

### **Muslim Women Claiming their Rights in Islam**

MWNUK's connections with Muslim women over the years has shown - despite the claims of male community leaders and scholars that Muslim women have enjoyed various rights under Islam since the 7<sup>th</sup> century – that women have been systematically prevented from claiming such rights. This is due mainly to the entrenchment of patriarchal interpretations of Islam within cultural norms and the male domination of religious leadership in mosques and other spaces of Islamic practice. Female voices and experiences have routinely been subjugated to those of men by virtue of the fact that religious authority is vested in men whether or not 'qualified' as scholars or legal experts.

However, advances in technology (and the internet in particular) have increased the availability of knowledge, including contested interpretations of Islamic history, jurisprudence and of wider lived practices in different Muslim contexts. This, combined with growing popular movements in favour of human rights globally and in Muslim majority countries in particular, has meant that increasingly British Muslim women are demanding a clearer understanding of women's rights in Islam and a better application of their rights within Muslim communities. Consequently, MWNUK's approach of working within the inter-related frameworks of human and Islamic rights, British and Islamic law while focusing on gender equality and wider diversity principles is welcomed by many British Muslim women.

In response to demands for greater knowledge and understanding of Muslim women's rights, MWNUK has run several events including a 5-day training course, in March 2008, in collaboration with government and international experts. The course, entitled 'Gender, Islam and Advocacy' and the first of its kind organised in the UK, specifically made knowledge of women's rights in Islam and human rights more generally available to Muslim women of diverse backgrounds and ages. For many participants, it was the first time they had worked on understandings of classical Muslim jurisprudence, *Qur'anic* interpretations, and contemporary Muslim scholarship. Theoretical knowledge was supported with examples of successful rights-based advocacy initiatives in Muslim contexts.

In addition, MWNUK has also collated resources on topical issues and has created easy-to-read factsheets. These are available on the network's website and includes factsheets on 'Religious and Belief Discrimination in the Workplace', 'Forced Marriage', 'Female Genital Mutilation' and 'Muslim Marriages in Britain'. The factsheets are in great demand as proved by the high number of downloads which take place each week.



Forced marriage workshop, December 2010.

### **Building Strategic Relationships**

Building strong and strategic relationships with policy makers and other mainstream organisations is one way in which MWNUK aims to make Muslim women's voices heard and to ensure that local and national policy meets their varied needs.

### **Engaging with Policy Makers**

Historically, engagement on issues affecting Muslim women in Britain has been problematic for two reasons. First, successive governments have talked mainly to male community leaders and Muslim organisations led by men who have contributed to the silencing of Muslim women. Second, in addressing abuses of women, e.g. forced marriage or female genital mutilation, governments have found it difficult to act against such abuses without avoiding negative cultural stereotypes. However, in recent years there has been more willingness on the part of governments to work on policy formulation with Muslim women's groups which have a history of activism.

MWNUK has been one such organisation which has been consulted by policy makers and has thus built credibility in bringing the voices of Muslim women to government. One method used to do this is by responding to and participating in government consultations. These may take the form of roundtable discussions with senior policy makers or may involve the submission of formal reports to government

departments. Issues on which MWNUK has responded include political participation and civic engagement; preventing violent extremism; family migration; gender equality, human rights and religious discrimination; and the appointment of women to the boards of public bodies. Government departments with which MWNUK has worked include the Home Office, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Communities and Local Government, Ministry of Justice and Government Equalities Office.

However, engagement with Government can still be problematic as there are competing influences on Government policy. One problematic area of Muslim women's engagement with government concerned the 'Preventing Violent Extremism' (PVE) programme which was the government's proclaimed 'hearts and minds' response to the threat of domestic Islamist terrorism. Despite the contradiction between the government's focus on Muslims as a specific group and its policy on 'community cohesion', the PVE programme was launched in 2007. A budget of about £140 million was allocated to PVE initiatives between 2008-2011 with the aim of 'promoting shared values, supporting local solutions, building civic capacity and leadership, and strengthening the role of faith institutions and leaders' (DCLG 2007: 5). MWNUK was one of many Muslim organisations to accept a small amount of PVE funding for its 'Birmingham Big Sisters' project.

As such, MWNUK was well placed to critique the PVE programme as it experienced first hand the effects of receiving PVE funding. On the one hand, becoming a recipient of PVE funding meant that MWNUK was mistrusted within some Muslim circles which viewed PVE as a government 'spying' mission on Muslims and which saw acceptance of funding as feeding the notion that all Muslims were potential terrorists. On the other hand, other cash-strapped women's organisations were outraged that Muslim organisations were receiving funds by virtue of being Muslim. It was felt that Muslims were unfairly 'favoured' and this led to the alienation of some mainstream women's organisations from MWNUK and to the harming of potential partnership work on issues affecting all women.

When DCLG reviewed the impact of PVE (House of Commons Community and Local Government Committee 2010), MWNUK consulted network members and submitted a report to the government review. MWNUK presented the responses including those many Muslim women who felt that they were being 'used' by government in the PVE agenda. MWNUK stated:

"Muslim women are one of the most deprived groups in Britain today who should be empowered anyway. There is concern that the skills of Muslim women are being built up to 'spy' on their families rather than participate fully in society and overcome barriers they face. For example, Muslim women face multiple discrimination based on their gender, ethnicity, faith and dress; highest unemployment rates; the poorest health; low educational attainment etc, yet there appears to be no concrete policies to tackle these issues. In addition other faith and secular women's groups are hostile towards Muslim women's groups as a result of the 'prevent' funding being targeted towards them." (Ibid: 6).

MWNUK made a number of recommendations in its report, including that 'policies to tackle the empowerment of Muslim women should not be linked to "prevent"'. It also believed fervently that tackling terrorism, a security and crime problem, should be separated from tackling inequalities and social exclusion which is a community cohesion issue.

## Engaging with Mainstream Muslim Organisations

Again, involvement in Muslim organisations has been difficult for Muslim women whose concerns have often been silenced due to their male-dominated nature. However, because such organisations have credibility within Muslim communities and act as a public voice on issues affecting Muslims, MWNUK has taken the view that that partnering such organisations on certain issues could encourage more widespread support of women's rights in Islam. For example, in 2004 MWNUK partnered with 5 leading Muslim organisations on the 'Model Muslim Marriage Contract' initiative. The initiative to develop a model Muslim marriage contract was initiated by the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain given the growing number of problems experienced by Muslims in this area which had come to light. One major concern was the lack of rights Muslim women had in unregistered marriages. It was hoped that the model Muslim marriage contract would constitute a tool in ensuring that the rights of women were protected. Subsequently, the Muslim Institute<sup>4</sup> took on a 4-year consultation process with religious scholars, community leaders and Muslim organisations including those of Muslim women. MWNUK was one of six leading Muslim organisations in Britain to endorse the model Muslim marriage contract in 2008.<sup>5</sup>

However, despite having had initial support from some of the most important Muslim organisations in the UK, little more was done to ensure the marriage model was applied to Muslim marriages in the UK. Some Muslim 'scholars' publicly denounced the marriage contract document while others went as far as to call it 'un-Islamic'. The MCB withdrew its support for the contract in August 2008, stating that the model Muslim contract included 'misinterpretation of Shari'ah' principles (MCB 2006).

This exemplifies the realities faced by those advocating for equal gender rights within an Islamic framework and among a myriad of largely conservative, male-dominated Muslim organisations who are unwilling to publicly stand up for the rights of Muslim women, even when those rights can be claimed within Islam.

However, it is worth noting that within the first 2 years of publication of the model Muslim marriage contract, it was downloaded 17,000 times. And from feedback received by MWNUK, Muslim women have continued to find it a useful and informative tool for negotiating their rights in marriage.

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<sup>4</sup> The Muslim Institute was originally established in 1974 as a think tank and subsequently as a network in 2009. It operates on principles of pluralism and aims to promote the history and cultures of Islam through scholarly and public debates.

<sup>5</sup> The other organisations included the Imams & Mosques Council (UK), The Muslim Law (Shariah) Council UK, Utrujj Foundation, Muslim Council of Britain, the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain, the City Circle.

## Conclusion

To date MWNUK remains the only *national* networking organisation of its kind in the UK if not Europe.<sup>6</sup> It does not replace or replicate the role of individual Muslim women's organisations but instead builds connections between such organisations, encouraging them to retain their respective programmatic goals while creating synergies around issues of concern to women from Muslim communities and pooling activist resources. MWNUK has provided the model for and inspired the establishment of numerous local networks such as the Bradford Muslim Women's Council in 2010 and the Harrow (North West London) Muslim Women's Network in 2009.

While MWNUK has built up an extensive network of Muslim women's organisations, it has also and crucially provided a space in which Muslim women's organisations may encounter and collaborate with organisations forming part of the wider women's movement in Britain (for instance the former Women's National Commission, the Fawcett Society and more recently abortion rights campaigns) and also with numerous state and governmental agencies at national level (e.g. The Department of Communities and Local Government; the Government Equalities Office) and in local areas (e.g. Birmingham City Council Equality and Diversity Service; London Borough Of Tower Hamlets Domestic Violence Team). Over the years, it has succeeded in bringing together thinkers, activists and practitioners from Muslim communities, the women's movement and the state through its commitment to international human rights and justice and Islamic feminist principles.

MWNUK has been successful so far because it has worked hard to listen to the needs of Muslim women, to make alliances with other women's groups over issues such as domestic violence, forced marriage, abortion rights, increasing women's political representation and so on and has not been afraid to stand firm on principles of equality and justice even when dismissed as 'lacking authority' by male-dominated Muslim organisations. The network's success may be gauged by the fact that it has built up a 450-strong membership over the last four years (with an even split between organisations and individuals) across the UK today and that it reaches an estimated 73,000 Muslim women. Furthermore, the scale of this achievement will probably best be understood by comparing MWNUK's position with that of the MCB which claims to be the largest representative organisational network of Muslims in Britain with its 500-strong membership of national, regional and local organisations, mosques, charities and schools (MCB 2012). While it has taken the MCB well over a decade to build up its membership to current levels, MWNUK has achieved half as much in a mere four years. The greatest threat, however, to this achievement is the growing lack of resources in today's economic climate.

The challenges faced by MWNUK, as well as the threat of ever restrictive financial constraints, are being fought with principled commitment on behalf of Muslim women in Britain today. MWNUK aims to show that through collaborative practice, women can use feminism, faith and human rights effectively to improve their lives and experiences in the UK and beyond.

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<sup>6</sup> Although networks such as CEDAR (Connecting European Dynamic Achievers & Role-models) and its off-shoot EMWI (European Muslim Women of Influence) operate at European level, they tend to focus on successful Muslims and their individual contributions to European society, economy and polity rather than on issues and collective campaigns of women's and human rights.

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