



**14<sup>th</sup> March 2024**

## **MEDIA STATEMENT**

### **Concerns of government using false allegations of extremism to silence Muslims**

Muslim Women's Network UK urges the government to withdraw its new definition of extremism. We consider the plans set out by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Michael Gove, and which is being supported by the Prime Minister, to be dangerous and divisive. As legislation already exists to tackle hate speech and incitement of violence, the motives of introducing a new definition must be questioned. In fact, the government's independent reviewer of terrorism legislation Jonathan Hall KC has also said that there are no gaps in current terrorism legislation that would impede arrest and prosecution. He has also warned that the new policy "could undermine the UK's reputation because it would not be seen as democratic." With the election looming mere weeks, at best months away, there is a strong sense of feeling that this definition appears to be a strategic move to garner support, target Muslims and divide communities.

Every individual deserves to feel safe, yet we feel the ongoing rhetoric from some politicians in this government continues to unfairly single out Muslim communities and aims to conflate being Muslim with being extremist, thereby perpetuating fear, hatred, and intolerance towards Muslim communities in Britain. There have been a number of occasions when some Conservative politicians have made accusations against Muslims which have been proven to be false. Such actions have shown that words have consequences including death threats, and damage to reputation and livelihoods as well as inducing a severe toll on mental health.

For example, Baroness Jacqueline Foster accused the Oxford University student Melika Gorgianeh of being anti-Semitic following her appearance on University Challenge. These unfounded allegations resulted in Baroness Foster having to issue an apology and pay substantial damages. Another recent example includes Cabinet Minister Michelle Donelan who falsely suggested the academic, Professor Kate Sang, supported Hamas. Ms Donelan too had to apologise and pay damages. There have been many other cases such as Dr Salman Butt who was accused of being an extremist hate preacher who legitimised terrorism. It took him several years to clear his name.

Baroness Shaista Gohir, CEO of Muslim Women's Network UK said: *"There is serious concern therefore that politicians and others, may intentionally recruit the new definition of "extremism" when making accusations and attempting to silence individuals and organisations, fully aware that even if these allegations are refuted, irreparable damage*

*would be inflicted. Furthermore, such actions contribute to perpetuate a damaging narrative about Muslims that is difficult to dispel. We feel there is a real risk of the government being able to abuse its power to restrict freedom of speech and limit criticism that it does not like. Ironically, this is exactly the sort of measure that is condemned by the UK Government when introduced by foreign governments."*

The obvious but presumably unintended consequence of not withdrawing the new definition of extremism, if it is to be consistently upheld, would be that all those who espouse intolerance would be caught by it, including politicians who cultivate discord for personal or political gain. Falling into this category would be those who seek to erode the basic rights and liberties of others by advocating for policies and laws that undermine democratic principles, such as withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights. Michael Gove himself, along with some of his present and past Conservative colleagues, could quite conceivably fall within the scope of this definition.

*The statement is based on the release of the following definition of extremism released on 14<sup>th</sup> March 2024 by the government: The promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, that aims to:*

- 1) negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; or*
- 2) Undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or*
- 3) Intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results in (1) or (2)."*

### **Additional Information**

•Media enquiries can be directed to: [contact@mwnuk.co.uk](mailto:contact@mwnuk.co.uk) or 0121 2369000

•Muslim Women's Network UK is a national charity and more information can be found on the website: [www.mwnuk.co.uk](http://www.mwnuk.co.uk)

•MWN Helpline (national specialist faith and culturally sensitive helpline) can be contacted on: Tel: 0800 999 5786 / Email: [info@mwnhelpline.co.uk](mailto:info@mwnhelpline.co.uk) / Text: 07415 206 936 and further information can be found at: [www.mwnhelpline.co.uk](http://www.mwnhelpline.co.uk)