



## WRITTEN EVIDENCE TO FAWCETT SOCIETY'S COMMISSION ON GENDER STEREOTYPES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

July 2019

### Introduction

1. Muslim Women's Network UK (MWN UK) is a national Muslim women's organisation in Britain ([www.mwnuk.co.uk](http://www.mwnuk.co.uk)) that has been advancing equality and connecting voices for change for the last 15 years. We are a small charity (no. 1155092) that works to improve 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](http://www.mwnhelpline.co.uk)) that provides advice and support on a range of issues including: domestic abuse, forced marriage, honour based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, female genital mutilation, divorce, discrimination, 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. Although we work predominantly with Muslim/BAME women and girls and will focus on the experiences of young Muslim/BAME girls within our Evidence, that is not to state that the same or similar issues do not impact children more generally.

### Evidence

5. We must begin by commending the Fawcett Society for launching the Commission on Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood, so as to address the gender stereotypes affecting children across communities. We are pleased to have been given the opportunity to contribute with our views on the issues which affect children from minority communities, in particular Muslim, BAME children.

6. We raise the following issues which we feel are contributing towards the continued promotion of gender stereotypes and which we feel are hindering the rights and choices exercised by children (in the present and in their future) and which continue to allow abuse and gender inequalities to prevail.

## **Traditions**

7. Traditions and cultural practices are helping perpetuate gender stereotypes from as early as pregnancy and birth, and in some cases, such practices also have racist connotations which add to the negative impact upon children. It is interesting to note how traditions vary amongst different communities and yet still manage to promote stereotypes. For example, the general focus on 'blue-for-boys' and 'pink-for-girls' when choosing gifts for a baby shower or for a gender reveal are not particularly relevant in South Asian communities; 'traditional' clothing of all colours are available for all genders and children are able to wear any colour of their choosing. (However we do feel that there may be some concerning change in this respect when it comes to boys due to increasing homophobia and that whilst colour of clothing has not been an issue before, it is starting to creep in for boys when wearing non-traditional attire). Nevertheless, the issues still manifest in different ways.
8. Although much has changed for the better, sadly the boy-child continues to be preferred over the girl-child by some individuals and families; this is not restricted to any one community and certainly in the UK, can be attributed to the continued promotion of the image of an 'idyllic' family of a mother, father, brother and sister etc. However, how this preference is exhibited does vary.
9. Take for instance the Punjabi Sikh woman who informs us that very soon after her wedding, her mother-in-law took her to a Gurdwara to specifically pray for a son – even though she didn't care whether she had a boy or a girl and wasn't even planning on having children straightaway. Similarly, a Punjabi Muslim informs us that her parents would continuously invite 'Pirs' and similar spiritual leaders to their home so that they could 'bless' and make special prayers for her to have a son; she already had daughters and her parents were concerned that this may lead to her husband and in-laws becoming unhappy with her. A Tamil Hindu woman also states that she had to visit various temples and keep fasts as her in-laws felt this will ensure that she would have a son.
10. Many women from minority communities feel pressurised to have a son, though some will argue that it is simply their 'wish' and not due to sexism. Nevertheless it is interesting that those who have already had a son feel that there is less pressure for them to need to continue to have children. Such attitudes are of course harmful on many levels but much more so for the child who perhaps witnesses such 'praying' or where stories are proudly shared of how a couple were only able to have a son after they visited such and such a shrine or completed such and such a ritual.
11. We are all aware of pregnancy related myths which allegedly determine the gender of the baby but in some cultures and communities, these myths themselves associate negativity with the girl-child. For example, there is a myth in some regions of India that if the child is conceived during 'poornima' (full moon) then it is a boy and a girl if conceived during 'amavasya' (no moon) (a variation of this is where the first missed

period falls during full moon etc). Similarly there is a myth that if the mother craves sweet foods then a boy will be born, and a girl if she craves sour foods. Such myths can and do of course vary according to the family and community but these examples highlight how the positive imagery (full moon, sweets etc) are associated with boys. Interestingly in some African communities, the myth is that if the mother's skin is glowing and hair is shiny then a girl will be born, whilst if the face is rough then it will be a boy; whilst in this instance the myth attaches the positive trait to the girl, in fact it simply promotes the idea that the key qualities for a girl are based on 'beauty'.

12. Additionally, there continues to be an obsession with 'fair' children in some families and communities and this tends to manifest itself the most during pregnancy. For example, there are myths that drinking coconut water, eating 'white' coloured foods or eating saffron based foods will help to ensure that the baby born is 'fair' skinned. Noticeably, practising such myths appears to increase in some cases where it has been confirmed that the gender of the baby is a girl. Thus whilst 'fair' skinned children are generally preferred, it is so much more important to certain families that a girl is 'fair'. Such toxic views are especially harmful for children as they are taught not only to decide their 'value' (and that of other children) in accordance with their gender but also in accordance with the colour of their skin.
13. It is perhaps unsurprising that the inequalities portrayed throughout pregnancy continue on from birth; mothers may receive better and more expensive gifts when a boy is born than when a girl is born. Indeed, in some communities there may be a custom of distributing, or celebrating with, the 'better' and more expensive Ladoo (Indian sweet) when a boy is born and 'Pere' when a girl is born. In some cases, sweets are known to only have been distributed when a boy has been born; Raj Khaira, from Birmingham, founded the Pink Ladoo Project to challenge and change this practice and encourages families to celebrate the birth of their child by sharing pink Ladoos. Raj states that she was inspired to start the project after seeing the negative reactions to her younger sister's birth: <https://www.pinkladoo.org/the-beginnings>
14. Raj Khaira is a clear example of how children can be affected by such practices and how it perpetuates gender stereotypes and practices. Raj was only 10 years old when she witnessed the negative attitudes towards her sister's birth and was able to clearly see how unfair and harmful such practices have been, and its impact on children. Such practices, attitudes and behaviours suggest to children that boys are 'better' than girls and those who are 'fair-skinned' are better than those with other complexions. This not only affects a child's self-confidence but can also affect their behaviours and choices; for example, girls may feel that they need to 'compensate' for not being a boy by studying harder, being obedient, always doing what their parents want etc. It can also encourage bullying and abuse by those who think they are 'better'.

### **Examples set by parents and families**

15. The examples set by parents and those in the immediate and extended families also instil gender stereotypes amongst young children in minority communities. This is especially the case for girls who may spend time at home the most (due to restrictions on what they can and cannot do). There is a general expectation (and a stereotype portrayed) in some BAME families/communities, that the primary role for women and

girls is based in the home; that is, they are expected to be first and foremost, homemakers. MWNUK have highlighted on a number of occasions, such as to the Women & Work APPG, that there are Muslim and BAME women in the UK who are being stopped from working or studying (or hurdles are placed to make it difficult for them to work or study) and are being forced to remain house-bound: [http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go\\_files/resources/617209-APPG%20Women%20and%20work%20Inquiry.pdf](http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/617209-APPG%20Women%20and%20work%20Inquiry.pdf)

16. We are aware of a number of instances where young women have been told that they can only study at a particular college or university, perhaps due to its location (i.e. being closest to home) or because other family members are in attendance at the same college or university. Aside from the constant surveillance which naturally has various physical and mental health impacts, this can then also restrict what women are able to study and in turn which careers they are able to pursue. This is especially the case given that certain universities can be prioritised by prospective employers but the individual may not have attended a particular university due to family restrictions rather than due to capability. For example, one Bangladeshi Muslim woman tells us that she did not even bother to apply to Oxford or Cambridge even though her teachers kept encouraging her, because she knew that her parents would never let her move away from home.
17. Additionally, women may be expected to choose a subject or career that is regarded as 'complementary' to the role of a (future) wife and mother. Thus, medicine or nursing can be seen as 'positive' choices for women as it will allow them to care for their family better, whilst law is seen in a negative light as prospective husbands and in-laws may view her as argumentative and someone likely to be too demanding.
18. Women may also feel restricted in the jobs they are able to do as they need to ensure that their employment 'fits' with other expectations of them; for example, if they are expected to be home by a certain time, they know that any roles that may require working late or working overtime is not going to be acceptable. They may also need to factor in the fact that they need to fulfil all household chores too (such as cooking, cleaning etc) and will not be provided with any support. There is a general expectation that women will find a way to balance both work and home and since it is their 'choice' to work, it is for them to find a way to manage both and without causing any 'inconvenience' to others. This is harmful to children of both genders as it continues to instil that housework are for women to complete, not men – and this will be reinforced again and again as children will see women complete all the house work and men not do any of it; or where men do help, they are seen as going above and beyond. It is always concerning to see men praised for something that women do on a daily basis, and it also highlights how men have the 'choice' to get involved in household activities or caring for their children but for women it is a given.
19. There are also examples where women have been banned from working or studying outright and forced to remain at home. Women may also be forced to remain quiet, not raise objections and act submissive. In many such instances, abuse and abusive practices also tend to be prevalent – thus highlighting that gender stereotypes also feed into the continuation of violence against women and girls. It affects both career choices and the ability for children (girl-children in particular) to grow up to have healthy relationships.

20. Children may be growing up seeing female members of their family unable to exercise their rights and choices and this in turn adversely affects girl-children who will feel that they must behave in the same way. For some it will be normalised as the way to be and will strive to be the same as their mothers and aunts. Others may not internalise such behaviours but feel they are unable to do anything about it and simply give up; we know of instances where young girls have given up on studying and make no effort in respect of their GCSEs because they know that they will only end up getting married and managing the house and so do not see the point in studying – or simply want to enjoy the free time they have left.
21. Despite the above, an increasing number of women do seem to recognise that allowing such behaviours and practices is harmful for their children and many women are starting to recognise that their sons will become just like their fathers or other male figures of the family if they put up with abuse or allow gender stereotypes to be perpetuated. Therefore, there is indeed an appetite for change, particularly amongst mothers who are perhaps suffering themselves due to gender stereotypes and are looking for support on how they can break the cycle of stereotypes. In a number of instances women have stated that they are trying to challenge the stereotypes but receive resistance from their in-laws (including grandparents of the children) and feel they have to let things continue in order to keep the peace.

### **Activities/Restrictions**

22. A key issue that comes up time and again is the expectation in some BAME communities that young girls will assist with housework. This goes beyond giving girls toys that perpetuate gender stereotypes and extends to actual participation in chores from a young age to ensure that young girls have the skills to be a 'good wife'. Girls from a very young age would be told to stay in the kitchen and watch their mums and other female relatives to cook so that they can 'learn' and 'remember' for the future. They would be expected to help with cleaning, clearing up after their brothers and generally looking after their younger siblings.
23. "...boys did not do anything. We made their beds, did their laundry ([we would] pick up dirty clothes from floor as it was effort for them to put it in the basket), we made 3-4 dishes so all boys favourite food was cooked, we cleaned up after them, put their dishes away...."

Although this quote is from someone describing their teenage years, other than the physical cooking, activities such as picking up dirty clothes, putting dishes away etc. can start from a very young age and children would be constantly told that this is necessary for their 'training' as otherwise they would get shouted at by their in-laws once they are married, and their husband will leave them if they cannot cook well.

24. Children may also grow up seeing other forms of inequalities such as women eating only after men have finished eating, segregated events where women (and children) are placed in the smallest (and usually most uncomfortable) section of the venue, or even seeing that women are unable to attend a mosque or participate in certain prayers. In some communities, certain rituals to be performed at a wedding cannot be performed by a woman that has been divorced for fear that it would be 'inauspicious'

for the bride and groom and their marriage. These harmful practices go further in promoting toxic concepts, where the value of a woman is attached to being married, even if the reason for her leaving her husband was domestic abuse.

25. Restrictions can also be placed on the clothing of girls that are not otherwise placed on boys. We mentioned above that 'colour' of clothing is not a factor; however a clear difference is that it is perfectly acceptable for boys to wear non-traditional attire to weddings and events but girls are expected to wear 'traditional' attire. Restrictions go further in that young girls are expected to wear clothing that is deemed 'modest', essentially promoting a victim-blaming culture: one Pakistani Muslim woman informs us that she had to wear over-sized clothes to hide the shape of her body so that men would not look at her inappropriately. Such restrictions on clothing are placed on girls from a very young age and at least as early as 7 – 8 years old.
26. Other restrictions include: young women and girls not being allowed to socialise outside of the home or after school; not being allowed to attend extra-curricular activities (such as sport clubs or residential weekends) that go beyond what is compulsory in school; discouraged from participating in sports; expected to go straight from school/work to home; only able to socialise with other family/extended family around; not allowed to go on holiday and told that they can only go on holiday once they are married and with their husband. No such restrictions are placed on boys or young men and highlights how concepts of 'honour' are attached to and instilled in children from a very early age, so that the misogyny becomes internalised. Although a number of these restrictions will not manifest in early childhood, children who witness such restrictions will naturally be impacted.
27. In some cases, the promotion of gender stereotypes can certainly be unintentional. For example, one Muslim BAME woman states her parents would ask for her help with preparing food and her brother's help with gardening or DIY. However once this was pointed out to the parents, they made a conscious effort to stop promoting such stereotypes. This has had a positive effect on all the children as they have all then been able to learn an array of skills: *"I think the best thing to happen is that this has now set an example for my younger siblings who don't associate certain tasks with each gender, i.e. they don't think making tea is something the girl should do etc."* Thus whilst in some cases the promotion of gender stereotypes, and restrictions on choices, are a conscious effort, in other cases it is unintentional which suggests that there are also many willing to change the status quo.

## Teachings

28. It goes without saying that sadly in many instances, gender stereotypes are being perpetuated across the board through books, TV, social media and other forms of media and this affects all children in all communities. Additionally however, children from BAME communities may also have the added exposure of hearing folklore which perpetuate and perhaps even romanticise stereotypes. However as these tend to be told or re-told by elderly members of the family such as grandparents, these can go unchallenged – and grandparents may not even realise that the stories they are telling are promoting worrying notions of masculinity and femininity. BAME media, such as Bollywood films, Bangladeshi cinema, TV serials etc, can add to the promotion of

stereotypes. Even though such media is usually not tailored for children, children may nevertheless be exposed to them as parents and grandparents will watch them.

29. It must also be mentioned that some stereotypes and harmful views are portrayed, whether intentionally or unintentionally, through some faith-based teachings. Muslim girls for example may be taught incorrect information regarding their faith as a means to restrict, control and abuse them through the use of patriarchal interpretations of Islam. One such example is the suggestion that Muslim women cannot be political leaders, despite the fact that there are ample historical examples of Muslim women who have acting as leaders of countries and had political careers. Another example is suggesting men are superior to women, which again negatively affects girls. To dispel such myths MWNUK produced the following resource, 'Women's Rights in Islam': [http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go\\_files/factsheets/WR\\_booklet\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/factsheets/WR_booklet_WEB.pdf). The sheer number of downloads highlights that women do want to be better informed of their rights under their faith and challenge patriarchal notions; the more misogynistic practices and attitudes are challenged, the more that gender stereotypes can be dispelled.
30. Similar issues can be found in other faiths and cultures; scriptures may be manipulated for example, to suggest to Hindu women and girls that it is their duty to sacrifice for their husband and family, or simply that the most 'virtuous' women are those which sacrifice and exercise patience etc.

### **Final Comments**

31. As a point of clarification, we must explain that due to the nature of our organisation and its work, it is predominantly Muslim/BAME women and children that come to our attention which is why the examples provided by us have tended to focus on minority communities. Additionally, we have chosen only some examples which we felt best highlighted the range of issues involved; there are of course many more examples and the issues can manifest in a variety of ways in every community. The overall nature of the issues are thus prevalent across communities and we are aware that the issues can and do apply more generally.
32. We would like to thank the Commission for providing us with the opportunity to give Evidence. We hope it proves to be useful in your considerations.

**On behalf of Muslim Women's Network UK,  
Nazmin Akthar  
Chair**

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