



Submission from

Muslim Women's Network UK

on the

**Public Sector Duty to Promote Equality on the
Grounds of Religion**

August 2007

About MWN

The Muslim Women's Network (MWN) was established in 2002 by the Minister for Women, the Right Honourable Patricia Hewitt MP. The aim of the network is to consult Muslim women and to give independent advice to the government on issues relating to Muslim women and public policy and to ensure policies suggested to Government include the concerns of Muslim women both in their formulation and their outcome. The MWN is supported by the Women's National Commission, which is the government's official independent body on women and is a non departmental public body.

Membership is open to women living and working in the Muslim community and is not focussed on a specific ethnic community, religious sect within Islam, political allegiance or geographical affiliation. Members represent a diverse range of women's groups and organisations from England, Wales and Scotland. All have strong track record in minority women's rights and bring linkages with wider regional, national and international networks and organisations. Members work in voluntary sector groups that provide support services for women; within the government sectors of education, health and local government; and as independent researchers, academics and business women.

On 7th December 2006, MWN launched the report 'She Who Disputes – Muslim Women Shape the Debate.' The report was the result of a year long listening to women exercise which took place in London, Birmingham, Leicester, Manchester and Bradford, where women themselves set the agenda.

Introduction

The MWN welcomes the Government's consultation on the introduction of a Single Equality Act and the extension of the public sector duty to promote equality to other grounds such as religion.

The UK is a multi-ethnic and multi-faith society. The law must reflect this diversity and protect all its minorities. No service user should be disadvantaged on the basis of their religion or beliefs. It is important for the government to recognise the importance of religion in defining identity. For example, the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey found that for Muslims religion was a more important marker of identity than ethnicity.⁽¹⁾ Although religious identity of Muslims is not homogenous and all Muslims do not have the same needs, it is important to recognise that significant numbers in areas with large Muslim communities are likely to have specific religious needs when using services.

There is an increased recognition by academics and service providers of the importance of religious identity, particularly amongst minority communities.

1 O'Beirne M. Religion in England and Wales: findings from the 2001 Home Office citizenship survey. London: Stationery Office, 2004.

Good practice therefore exists amongst some public authorities who recognise the overlap between race, culture, ethnicity and religion and ensure services are properly targeted, suitable and accessible to meet the needs of all the ethnic minorities. However, compulsory measures are required to ensure such good practice is followed by all public bodies. For example, a significant number of Muslim participants in a qualitative study carried out in 2003 felt that some local councils are actively hostile to Muslims.⁽²⁾

All socio-economic indicators show that Muslims are one of the most deprived groups in the UK and will therefore be heavy service users. A review commissioned by the Office of Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) confirmed that Muslims face some of the most acute conditions of multiple deprivation – they have the poorest health, live in the poorest housing, have the highest unemployment rate and have the lowest educational attainments.⁽³⁾ So by focussing on the needs of Muslims, public bodies will not only be able to provide better quality services but can target their resources more effectively.

The social exclusion of Muslims is further exacerbated by the increasing discrimination faced by Muslims. The negative impact of the ‘war on terror’ on Muslims has been immense, especially those who are very visibly Muslim. Discrimination and violence existed prior to 9/11 and 7/7 - for example, in 1997 the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia by the Runnymede Trust confirmed the existence of widespread prejudice and discrimination against Muslims in Britain.⁽⁴⁾ However, there has been a further intensification of anti-Muslim attitudes due to the terrorist attacks; the political discourse and the portrayal of Muslims by some sections of the media. Collectively these have given rise to intolerance of Muslims in Britain today - Muslims are being victimised by the general public because they are associated with terrorism and extremism. The increased hostility towards Muslims has manifested itself in the form of increased verbal and physical abuse, racism and discrimination in all areas of life. Sometimes the discrimination can be subtle and hard to prove, especially in the work place or when accessing services.

According to research by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) Islamophobia is in danger of becoming acceptable in Europe.⁽⁵⁾ Another report, which was produced for the cabinet in October 2006, also confirms that Muslims are one of the most negatively perceived groups. The findings revealed Muslims were viewed with fear, anger and hostility because they were seen as a cultural and physical threat. They were also the least likely group to be accepted as British and were not accorded the same opportunities to attain equality.⁽⁶⁾ If

2 Anwar, M and Bakhsh, Q. (2003). British Muslims and State Policies, Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, University of Warwick.

3 Review of the Evidence Base of Faith Communities – Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2006)

4 Runnymede Trust (1997) Islamophobia : A Challenge for us All, London: Runnymede Trust

5 EUMC (2001) Anti-Islamic Reactions in the EU after the Terrorist Acts against the USA, Vienna: European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia

6 Abrams, D; Houston, D.M. Equality, Diversity and Prejudice in Britain : Results from the 2005 National Survey (October 2006).

unequal treatment is to be truly eradicated then a more inclusive law that will address the entrenched and systematic inequality in society is required.

Impact on Muslim women and children

Muslim women have featured prominently in media and public discourses. The attention on Muslim women has been indirect (e.g. through the focus on terrorism, extremism and segregation) and direct through the veil debate. Most Muslim women are therefore likely to face multiple discrimination because of the interaction of gender, race and religion. Those who are more easily identifiable as Muslim due to their dress are even more vulnerable to discrimination. Muslim women that took part in the MWN listening exercise faced a variety of issues when accessing public services. These included examples of services that they were not able to access because their faith needs would not be met - health services in particular were criticised for being insensitive.⁽⁷⁾ If public bodies are not obligated to promote equality on the grounds of religion and belief, areas where Muslim women are likely to feel the greatest negative impact are likely to be education and health.

a) Education

During the MWN listening events, the low expectations of Muslim children especially girls, was a recurring theme. It was often linked to women's experiences of teachers with stereotypical views about Muslim girls lacking ambition and not being allowed by their families to pursue higher education and careers.⁽⁷⁾ These recent findings reinforce the research carried out by Basit (1997) which showed that stereotypical attitudes of many teachers towards Muslim girls influenced the nature of the career advice they gave.⁽⁸⁾ Muslim girls that took part in a study carried out by Liverpool University in 2006 also said that there was little encouragement and preparation for higher education.⁽⁹⁾

Although Muslim women's lack of higher educational and economic participation is complex, such negative experiences at school are likely to be a contributing factor. Action is therefore necessary to breakdown barriers in education to aid the empowerment of Muslim women. If they achieve academically, they can act as role models for other Muslim women; fulfill their huge potential in playing an active role in all areas of political and public life; and raise children who are active and productive members of society. If schools had a positive duty to promote equality of religion or belief, then it would have to publish an equality scheme to show how it intends to fulfil its duty in relation to tackling the low aspirations of Muslim pupils in ensuring they have an equal opportunity to achieve and progress which could include staff training in relation to better careers advice.

7. She Who Disputes – Women Shape the Debate (2006). Muslim Women's Network.

8. Basit, T.N. (1997) – Eastern Values; Western Mileau: Identities and Aspirations of Adolescent British Muslim Girls. Aldershot. Ashgate.

9 Tyrer, D and Ahmad, F. Muslim Women and Higher Education : Identities, Experiences and Prospects. Liverpool John Moores University (2006)

A further benefit of having a more inclusive legislation would be to ensure that schools take proactive steps to get Muslim parents more involved. Recent research suggests that barriers to the involvement of Muslim parents largely emanate from the school rather than the parent. The study carried out by the University of Sunderland found that Muslim parents are being constrained from getting involved in their children's education. According to the findings there is a tendency to place the onus of responsibility for educational involvement on the parents. ⁽¹⁰⁾

Another area of concern in schools is faith based bullying. According to the National Union of Teachers, bullying prompted by Islamophobia is on the rise in schools across the country. ⁽¹¹⁾ An increasing number of children are being suspended from schools due to racism against other Muslim children. ⁽¹²⁾ Another study carried out on 15 schools showed attitudes towards Muslims have hardened considerably the 9/11 terrorist attacks. ⁽¹³⁾ At present local authorities, schools and colleges are not required to establish a specific policy to tackle faith based bullying nor to monitor or and record it. All pupils have a right to learn in safe environments. The effects of bullying can last a life time and can seriously damage individual self esteem, confidence, health and participation.

b) Health

Muslims have the highest rates of reported ill-health with Muslim women reporting ill-health more widely than Muslim men - 13% of males and 16% of females were in rates of 'not good health.' Another area of concern is the incidence of disability amongst Muslims. After taking account of the different age structures of the groups, Muslims have the highest rate amongst all the religious groups in the UK. Approximately a quarter of Muslim women and a fifth of Muslim men reportedly suffer form of disability or long-term illness which restricts daily activities. ⁽¹⁴⁾

Despite having the worst health, Muslim women face many barriers when accessing health services. Although mindsets and attitudes need to be changed towards healthier diets and regular exercise, strategic planning by local primary care authorities is also required. At present there appears to be a gap in service provision. For example, the Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster BME Health Forum set up a task group to look at the experiences of Muslim women using the health service. They found that there was a general misconception about the role of health service professionals and the lack of awareness of the services provided in the Primary Care settings – this included the role of GPs, nurses, counsellors, health visitors etc. Furthermore, the issue access to female GPs and other clinical staff was highlighted throughout the consultation process. Although a large number were dissatisfied with

10 Crozier, G; Davies, J. (May 2005). British Bangladeshi and Pakistani Families and Education Involvement : Barriers and Possibilities. University of Sunderland.

11 <http://education.independent.co.uk/news/article358189.ece> Independent (17 April 2006)

12 <http://www.yorkshiretoday.co.uk/ViewArticle2.aspx?SectionID=55&ArticleID=1575287>

13 <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,5500,1450551,00.html?gusrc=rss> (1 April 2005)

14 Census 2001 - Office of National Statistics

their GP, none of them knew that there was a complaints procedure in place. In addition, most had no knowledge of sexual health services; many were not aware of walk-in clinics; there was a lack of awareness of breast screening services amongst older Muslim women; and there was a lack of awareness of why visits to ante-natal clinics were necessary and some did not visit at all. The research also highlighted that some services were not culturally appropriate and that there was a need for more and improved cultural awareness training for staff, especially front line staff as they were viewed as less sympathetic and often prejudiced.⁽¹⁵⁾

The fact that Muslims face discrimination by the National Health Service was reinforced by findings of Muslim Voice UK (MVUK) in 2006, where 25% of Muslim participants stated that discrimination in the NHS was a significant / very significant problem.⁽¹⁶⁾ Another survey by MVUK reveals that one of the reasons for Muslims not donating blood included the lack of sensitivity by the National Blood Service to their religious needs and not creating an inclusive environment.⁽¹⁷⁾ This is problematic as the rates of blood donation amongst ethnic minorities is currently very poor which is leading to acute shortages of blood types common to Asians.

The barriers mentioned here could be overcome if public authorities were required to be more inclusive and recognise the religious needs of a community. They would have to raise awareness and provide culturally / religiously appropriate services and work with the communities they serve and ensure their concerns are taken into account to offer targeted services.

One of the solutions for improving the health of Muslim women includes exercise. However, currently there is a low rate of Muslim women participating in sports and exercise.⁽¹⁸⁾ Although this may be partly due to religious misinterpretations or a lack of awareness that Islam promotes good health and fitness for both men and women – other factors contribute to this. There are situations where schools are reluctant to respond positively to dress requirements and faith obligations for Muslim girls. According to findings by Duval, Sampson and Boote (2004), some schools do not cater for dress code and for young Muslim girls PE at school evokes negative feelings about exercise which leads to a decrease in participation post-school age.⁽¹⁹⁾

The lack of single sex provisions by local authority run leisure centres can also put young women off sport and physical activity. To enable Muslim women to participate in sport and physical activity it would be good practice (providing there was a demand) to have single sex classes, women instructors and flexible dress

15 Task Group on Experiences of Muslim Women Using Health Services. Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster BME Health Forum (August 2002).

16 Gohir, S. (2006). Understanding the Other Perspective : Muslim and non-Muslim Relations. Muslim Voice UK.

17 http://www.mvuk.co.uk/feature_view.asp?feature_id=30

18 Muslim Women in Sport : A minority within a minority. Women's Sports Foundation UK. (Factsheet).

19 Duvall, L; Sampson, J; and Boote, E. (2004). Perceptions of local women about physical exercise provision in Shelton, Tunstall, Bursan and Longton.

requirements where Muslim women are allowed to wear clothes they feel comfortable in - for example, for swimming they may wish to cover more than what a conventional swimming costume would allow.

Thus it is important that schools and other local authority run sports facilities are aware of the needs of Muslim women and offer appropriate arrangements so they can participate in sport and practice their faith without having to compromise either. Good practice is important to prevent Muslim girls from becoming disengaged from physical activity. An example of good practice can be found in Cardiff where women only swimming sessions were introduced after requests from the Muslim community. However, they are now so popular with women from all communities that more special training sessions had to be set up to get more female life guards. The women only sessions have become the most popular activities at the centre. Although other Councils have also started women-only swimming sessions - some still have male life guards or windows where other visitors can look into the swimming areas.⁽²⁰⁾

Concluding Remarks

The fact that Muslims are one of the most deprived groups, heavy service users and at high risk of being discriminated against warrants them being protected directly and indirectly against discrimination in the delivery of public services. The harmonisation of the public sector duty across the strand of religion will also compensate for the present gaps in service provision under the gender equality duty which research suggests can often exclude equality for Muslim women who have distinct religious needs. This will result in an improvement in the quality of life e.g. better health, better literacy and will tackle social exclusion. The accommodation of core Muslim needs by mainstream public institutions will fulfil the important goal of mainstreaming Muslims and making sure that they identify with national public institutions. This will enable Muslims to be, and to feel, a part of British society.

Taking the needs of people from all religious groups and beliefs into account will also result in using resources more efficiently and improving the productivity of public services. Furthermore, the MWN urges the government to fulfil their 2005 manifesto pledge of introducing a single equality act that tackles discrimination and promotes equality for all. This commitment cannot be fulfilled if the legislation continues to exclude some faith groups such as Muslims.

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²⁰ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/south_east/3742264.stm