



**Muslim Women's Network UK**

**Annual General Meeting 2012 Report**

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**Date: 19 January 2012**

**Venue: Peel Room, House of Commons, Westminster.**

**Abstract**

The Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK), Chaired by Cassandra Balchin, held their annual meeting at the House of Commons. The meeting was attended by supporters who are active in their respective communities and fields. The meeting included a number of guest speakers from Parliament which included: Shabana Mahmood MP (Shadow Minister of State for Higher Education), Lynne Featherstone MP (Equalities Minister) Helene Reardon-Bond (Head of Policy in the Government Equalities Office). The meeting was an interactive sessions and gave attendees an opportunity to engage with politicians and policy makers. Great emphasis was placed on the necessity of women to have a greater input in society and to engage with civic institutions.

**Summary of Events**

**1. Introduction**

Cassandra Balchin the Chair of MWNUK opened the meeting and summarised the work of the organisation.

**2. Shabana Mahmood MP**

Shabana Mahmood is a fervent supporter of the Muslim Women's Network. She delivered a heart-felt speech encouraging aspirational Muslim women to seize opportunities and never to be intimidated in doing so. There were three important points in her speech:

- Self belief
- Support
- Confidence

Shabana Mahmood spoke of her own journey into politics and some of the obstacles she faced. The challenge that most resonated with the attendees was the importance of confidence and believing in ones abilities. She further elaborated on how to turn perceived weaknesses into strengths and crucially how skills developed in any field/environment can be transferred. Shabana Mahmood alluded to her own trepidation in standing as an MP for Ladywood as she was contending with people who had years of experience in serving the community. She touched on a crucial factor

which often gets overlooked – the need for a strong support network. This is an area where the MWNUK can be beneficial in putting one in touch with a range of people with varying expertise.

### **3. Faeza Vaid, Executive Director**

Faeza Vaid presented the annual report of the year's activities and spoke of MWNUK's Strategic plan for 2012-2015. The organisation's suggested priorities are:

1. Build Understanding of Gender in Islam from a Human Rights Perspective
2. Build Understanding of Equality in Family Laws
3. Change Attitudes to Domestic Violence
4. Change Attitudes to Mental Health
5. Change Attitudes to Women's Leadership
6. Contribute to addressing Forced Marriages
7. Contribute to addressing Child Sexual Abuse

### **4. Helene Reardon-Bond, Head of Policy, Government Equalities Office**

#### **'Strengthening Women's Voices Government Consultation'**

Helene Reardon-Bond gave a presentation on the work of the Equalities Office. The Equalities Office aims to engage and encompass women from all ethnicities in order to make government policies more representative. The main points of her presentation were:

- Maximising women's contribution, changing cultures and removing barriers, creating the conditions for equality to flourish
- To ensure there is an effective dialogue about key issues of concern to women of all ages and backgrounds in UK today
- Government needs to continue engaging with women's organisations including grassroots, individual and marginalised women
- With other departments rise to the challenge; be part of a cross-government Programme that is visible and direct
- Continuing on-going engagement – Minister for Equalities has met with a number of women's organisations and will be meeting with others in the New Year including MWN UK
- **Forced Marriage Consultation: closes on 30 March 2012. Visit: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/about-us/consultations/forced-marriage>**
- **Definition of Domestic Violence Consultation: closes 30 March 2012. Visit: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/about-us/consultations/definition-domestic-violence/>**
- **Stalking Consultation: closes on 5 February 2012. Visit: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/about-us/consultations/stalking-consultation>**
- **Domestic Violence Disclosure Consultation: closed on 13 January 2012. For information visit: <http://womensgrid.freecharity.org.uk/?p=8832>**

## **5. Lynne Featherstone, Equalities Minister**

### **‘Engaging and Listening to Women’**

Lynne Featherstone, the Equalities Minister further elaborated the work of Helene Reardon-Bond. The Equalities Office reports to Theresa May and Lynne Featherstone in their roles as Ministers for Women and Equalities. Lynne Featherstone’s key points were:

- Government recognise that women are not a homogenous group and are taking steps to address the breadth of issues which women are raising.
- The government is committed to listening and valuing women’s input on an equal footing with men.
- Government acknowledge that the following issues have to be addressed:
  1. Equality in the workplace
  2. Violence against women
  3. Forced marriages
  4. Hate crime
  5. More access to leadership roles for women
- The government realise that faith is of egregious importance amongst Muslim women and hope to engage with Muslim women’s group in the future.
- It is imperative that hate crime is reported to the police so that statistics are compiled and the government can ensure that effective measures are in place.

## **6. Jane Keeper, Director of Operations at Refuge**

### **‘An introduction to Refuge’s Work with Women and Children – with a focus of Refuge’s Culturally Specific Services’**

Jane Keeper stated the work Refuge undertakes continue to be centred on three core principles:

- Prevention
- Provision
- Protection

## **7. Saleha Islam, NSPCC**

### **‘Child Sexual Exploitation – Under the Radar’**

Saleha Islam described the poignant story of a girl she has worked with in her capacity as a Social Worker, named ‘Suffiyah’.

- Suffiyah was from a dysfunctional home whereby her parents were divorced, her mother suffered from depression and her older brother led his own life and showed no regard for the family’s welfare.
- Suffiyah was 13 and doing well at school when she was approached by a 23 year old Asian male, who showed a romantic interest in her.
- Suffiyah at first refused his advances as she was not in position to be in a relationship with anyone. The man was relentless and began to shower her with gifts and affection.

- Suffiyah began to regard this man as her boyfriend and was happy that there was some stability in her life.
- The man eventually took Suffiyah to his flat and told her that he had to attend to some business, but Suffiyah was welcome to stay at the flat and wait for him
- As Suffiyah was at the flat an older man appeared which alarmed her and she questioned why he was in the flat. He told her that he had paid her boyfriend to have sex with her.
- Suffiyah tried to escape and pleaded with the man to show some compassion but inevitably he raped her.
- A distressed Suffiyah confronted her boyfriend who coldly told her that all the gifts and kindness had not been from the goodness of his heart.
- Suffiyah informed her family only to endure a beating by her mother and elder brother who shaved off his sister's hair to punish her.
- Suffiyah was sexually groomed and forced into prostitution.
- She was excluded from school.

The issue of sexual exploitation has gained prominence and has been heavily publicised in the media. A recent documentary by Adil Ray (BBC Asian Network) purported that Pakistani males were targeting young vulnerable white girls for sexual grooming. The documentary suggested that Pakistani males were specifically targeting white girls however the case raised by Saleha Islam highlights the opportunistic nature of offenders and vulnerable girls are susceptible to sexual grooming regardless of race.

## **8. Cassandra Balchin**

Muslim Marriages in Britain Workshop

The session was a short group exercise in order to get an insight into the difference between Muslim and Christian marriages and the difference in Law.

### **Conclusions**

MWNUK has been effective in mobilising women in order to engage and consult with the government. It is evident from the meeting that their expertise is in being a forum for discussion/ debate and being a catalyst for national networking. MWNUK are extremely interactive and responsive to the issues their supporters raise with them.

The meeting was very democratic and there was plenty of scope for the attendees to have an input. It was a fantastic opportunity to network and exchange contact details with the range of women who attended. The network also gives women the confidence to become active and influential in their respective careers by putting them in touch with people.

There is a consensus that Muslim women need positive role models in their lives and the organisation have showcased Muslim women in politics. There is still greater need for more role models and the organisation encourages members to share their work and raise individual concerns.