

**31 January 2019**

**MEDIA STATEMENT**

**We acknowledge the positive intentions behind World Hijab Day but cannot ignore its negative impact on Muslim women who do not wear a headscarf**

World Hijab Day will be running again for the 7<sup>th</sup> time on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2019, whereby participants are asked to wear a hijab for a day in a bid to foster religious tolerance and understanding, and challenge the stereotypes surrounding Muslim women who choose to wear a headscarf for religious reasons. We understand that the 2019 motto is 'breaking stereotypes, shattering boundaries' with an accompanying #freeinhijab social media campaign in which women are asked to 'voice their choice'.

Whilst we commend the founder's positive intentions and acknowledge Nazma Khan's lived experiences which led to her starting this initiative, MWNUK are unable to support this campaign (or the recently created not-for-profit organisation of the same name) due to the unfortunate narratives which we feel are being propagated by World Hijab Day. Whilst the founder wishes to highlight the choices exercised by Muslim women who choose to wear a headscarf, we feel that the day has become more focused on the promotion of hijab itself rather than the promotion of choice.

Chair Nazmin Akthar stated:

*"We are fully aware of the damaging images and discourses circulating publicly about Muslim women and also of the levels of discrimination and abuse faced by them, especially those who are visibly Muslim. MWNUK have also run role-modelling campaigns to challenge the negative stereotypes which portray Muslim women as weak, submissive, oppressed or linked to extremism. Our #AndMuslim campaign, for example, highlighted the diversity of British Muslim women and celebrated their achievements and contributions to wider society. However, diversity is what seems to be lacking in the World Hijab Day initiative where instead the headscarf and the Muslim woman seem to have a symbiotic relationship. Not all Muslim women wear a hijab and that does not make them any less Muslim, nor does it mean that they somehow become immune to discrimination and abuse just because they do not wear one. If anything, we need to remember that there are Muslim women who face abuse for the precise reason that they do not wear the hijab and are therefore considered as going against cultural norms. We need to be changing the narrative surrounding Muslim women in general, not only those who wear a hijab – and we certainly should not be allowing ourselves to be defined by our clothing".*

Executive Director Shaista Gohir added:

*"Whilst many Muslim women, particularly in UK, do wear a hijab or even a veil out of choice, there are also many Muslim women across the world who are compelled to wear it either through familial or cultural pressures or even state laws. World Hijab Day is not a celebration for them. Moreover, there will be Muslim women who wear a headscarf because they have been told that there is a religious obligation to do so, rather than having had the opportunity to make an informed decision themselves. If we look at some of the comments being shared regarding World Hijab Day by supporters, we see people linking the wearing of a hijab to notions of modesty and piety. A post on the World Hijab Day website also suggests that hijab wearing challenges are a good idea for Muslim women 'to see if they are ready to take that step'; does this not sound more like a promotion of hijab than a promotion of choice? Not only does this reduce Muslim women to their clothing, by judging their commitment to their religion and their general character based on their outer appearance, but it also ignores the fact that there are different interpretations in Islam as to the meaning of hijab and whether or not it is mandatory to wear a headscarf or not. Just as Muslim women who feel it is a religious obligation are entitled to wear a hijab, Muslim women who do not feel that it is mandatory are entitled to not wear one."*

MWNUK unequivocally support a woman's right to choose to wear a headscarf or veil, or to wear neither and we condemn all forms of discrimination, abuse and pressure which may be directed towards any woman who exercises her right to choose. We stand in solidarity with every Muslim woman who has been discriminated against or subjected to abuse due to her visibly Muslim appearance. However, we cannot support an initiative which, intentionally or not, may be used to

place pressures on Muslim women and stop them from exercising their choices. For these reasons, MWNUK will not be participating in World Hijab Day 2019.

**Ends**

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*Muslim Women's Network UK ([www.mwnuk.co.uk](http://www.mwnuk.co.uk)) is the national leading Muslim women's charity working to improve the social justice and equality for Muslim women and girls.*