



VAWG Experiences of Minority Women in Britain – causes, consequences and policy and service gaps (Submission to the UN VAWG Rapporteur on her Feb 2024 UK visit)

About Muslim Women's Network UK

Muslim Women's Network UK (MWN UK) is a national charity (reg. no. 1155092) that works primarily to improve social justice and equality for Muslim women and girls. We are informed by lived experiences through our: national membership, research, and national culturally sensitive helpline. In February 2024 we launched AMAL, domestic abuse safety mobile app (for Android and Apple). It has been dedicated to one of our member's, [Fawziyah Javed](#), who was a domestic homicide victim in 2021. It will provide safety advice and legal options as well as facility to record incidents and option to contact the helpline via the app.

We help and support women from diverse demographics (including non-minority and non-Muslim) in terms of age, socio-economic backgrounds, education levels, religiosity and ethnicities (Arab, Afghan, Bangladeshi, Black African / Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Other South Asian and White etc). Further information can be found on our website: www.mwnuk.co.uk

Background About Muslim Women in Britain

The minority ethnic population according to the latest 2021 Census is 18% and the Muslim population is 6.5% (4 million). This means that the 2 million Muslim women are making up one in three of the minority ethnic women in Britain. Unfortunately, anti-Muslim attitudes have intensified over the last two decades and not surprisingly Muslim women suffer multiple discrimination because of their gender, ethnicity and faith. The prevalence and pervasiveness of structural and institutional discrimination due to race /and or faith that perpetuates inequalities requires us to be more vocal about the ways in which major organisations operate, including the government. The following sections highlight some of our key concerns. Our comments are not just limited to Muslim women and include other minority ethnic women.

Domestic Homicide rates of Minority Ethnic Women

Action Needed: *There should be a public consultation / inquiry on domestic abuse and domestic homicide rates of minoritised women to fully uncover the factors contributing to their over representation in domestic homicide rates.*

Every week 2-3 women are killed in domestic homicide. These figures mask the disproportionate number minority women victims. This led to us creating the [Say Her Name](#) page on our website. We are particularly concerned about rates for Black women. This over-representation has received little attention from women's groups, Commissioners and the government. To confirm the figures and raise awareness, Baroness Shaista Gohir, (CEO of MWN UK) formerly asked the government about its assessment of domestic homicide rates for minority women on 22 January 2024 in the House of Lords. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at Home Office confirmed they were over represented and made up [22% of the victims](#),

indicating an over-representation by more than one fifth. The Minister in his response mentioned that the '*domestic homicide review, work is under way to review, improve and update the statutory guidance on that review.*' However, in such general consultations, minority ethnic women will not be given sufficient attention and focus is likely to be limited to lack of funding for specialist services, language barriers, honour-based abuse etc., rather than considering all contributing factors.

In relation to minority women, there is a tendency for government policies to focus on prioritising tackling certain types of abuse such as forced marriage, honour-based abuse and female genital mutilation. However, the overwhelming majority of domestic abuse homicides tend not to be linked to these issues. Only a thorough examination can reveal the interconnected and contributing factors. For example, Black men have the poorest mental health outcomes. It is important to therefore consider if their poor mental and lack of intervention in primary care is linked to domestic homicides of Black women.

We also found that the criminal justice is not meeting the needs of minority women through our research, *Muslim Women's Experience of the Criminal Justice System (2019)*. We found that some of the poor service Muslim women experienced was a result of their social positioning at the intersections of gender, ethnicity, faith and class. Findings included victims not always correctly being identified as high risk and therefore not offered appropriate safeguarding services. Stalking victims were not taken seriously even though it is a feature in the majority of female domestic homicides. Police are also not sign posting victims to specialist services (such as the Muslim Women's Network Helpline) that may best meet their needs. Sometimes there is a tendency to only make referrals to mainstream well known services.

Honour Based Abuse

Action needed: *If honour-based abuse is defined, a wide range of expert organisations must be consulted including faith-based ones.*

Action needed: *The Home Office should develop a comprehensive risk assessment tool (which includes honour-based abuse) that can be used by all police forces and other agencies and is done so in partnership with a wide range of specialist stakeholders.*

Some women's advocacy groups want to embrace a definition of honour-based abuse. We do not oppose this idea, but are concerned that some stakeholders are trying to link honour-based abuse with the extent of one's religious practices, which could miss safeguarding risks. For example, Karma Nirvana wants the government to adopt its definition which it has not made public so cannot be scrutinised. It has also convinced some police forces to use its honour-based risk assessment tool where victims are asked about the religion of the perpetrator and whether they are 'practising.' Depending on how police interpret this information, 'practising' perpetrators may be regarded as higher risk of perpetrating HBV and 'non-practising' perpetrators may be deemed as less of a threat (or even vice-versa). Potential victims may be missed, the consequences of which could be fatal. Also, the victim's definition of what is 'practising' or 'non-practising' is also likely to be subjective and may vary widely.

One revised assessment tool should be used across all police forces. Currently, victims can be made to endure hours of assessments using different tools (such as one for domestic abuse and another for honour abuse), which can be very stressful especially if they are already very

traumatised, it is late at night and / or they have young children with them. The government should therefore develop a new assessment tool in partnership with the diverse range of expert stakeholders that can be used across different agencies across different police forces. This would ensure a more consistent approach.

Shariah Divorce – Domestic Abuse Victims

Action needed: *Support the establishment of a self-regulating body and a code of practice for Shariah Councils that preserves the right of women to seek a religious divorce without risking exposure to discriminatory practices.*

Muslim women are sometimes forced to remain in abusive marriages because they find it difficult to obtain a religious divorce. Those who are in marriages not recognised by the law face greater hurdles i.e. those who have had the religious marriage in the UK but not a civil marriage. Approximately 25% of Muslim women are in such marriages in the UK according to our annual helpline data and our research, *Information and Guidance on Muslim Marriage and Divorce in Britain (2016)*.

While all women have negative experiences, abuse victim experiences of Shariah Councils have included: being pressured to mediate with the husband despite there being a non-molestation order in place, revealing the location of the new home address to the husband, requiring two male witnesses to verify abuse occurred, encouraging staying in abusive marriages and discouraging making police reports, requiring women the payment of a financial compensation to the husband, interfering on child custody matters and pressuring to agree on unfair financial arrangements for civil divorce proceeding (for legal marriages).

British law must provide alternative solutions so Muslim women are no longer solely dependent on these religious institutions. UK has an obligation under The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Article 16 requires measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and divorce.

The government commissioned a review of Shariah Councils, which resulted in the report, *The Independent Review into the Application of Shariah Law in England and Wales (2018)*. However, there has been no follow up on the recommendations. We responded to the inquiry and recommended a Code of Practice be adopted. The government should help to establish a self-regulating body and a code of practice for Shariah Councils that require best practices are adopted to safeguard women and eliminate discrimination.

Spiritual Abuse

Action needed: *Establish a statutory definition of spiritual abuse through consultations with diverse stakeholders, and ensure that the manipulation of religion used by perpetrators is duly reflected in sentencing measures.*

Action needed: *Improve awareness of spiritual abuse within faith communities to better safeguard women and children.*

Spiritual abuse is not limited to any one religion. However, our remarks will focus on Muslim men who hold formal or informal religious roles within their communities and who target vulnerable Muslim women, such as those with poor mental health or victims of abuse. A

common theme has been exploiting religious beliefs, practices, or affiliations to coerce, manipulate, abuse, blackmail and silence women and girls.

Cases received on our helpline have included:

- coercing women into secret religious marriages where they are used for sexual gratification
- raping victims and then telling them it was not them but they had been overcome by 'jinn',
- sexually abusing victims then blackmailing them into handing over large sums of money,
- coercing victims into having sex in exchange for solving their problems
- physically abusing them during exorcism
- sexually abusing them during hijama (wet cupping) therapies

Hate Crime

Action needed: *Have initiatives to increase reporting of hate crime by Muslim women and girls that involve Muslim women's groups.*

Action needed: *Public campaign / initiatives to tackle anti-Muslim prejudice in society.*

Action needed: *Change the current funding model and work with women's groups that can reach Muslim women so they can be empowered to report abuse and provided safety advice*

Muslims experience the highest rates of religious hate crime making [44% of all victims](#). Hate crimes of [increased over the last decade](#) and the recent Israel-Gaza situation has led to a further surge in hateful rhetoric. Muslim women and girls are at increased risk because of their more visible Muslim identity due to their clothing. However, when requesting hate crime data from police forces in 2023 for the previous five years, we found that in many police force areas the reports made by Muslim women was less (one third) compared to those by Muslim men (two thirds). This is likely to indicate that Muslim women are under reporting. In the majority of the cases the perpetrators tended to be white male.

The government appears to display minimal interest in genuinely addressing anti-Muslim prejudice, particularly in challenging public attitudes. Notably, there has been no effort to engage with Muslim women's groups capable of effectively reaching and representing the concerns of Muslim women. In our enquiry to the government regarding its approach to tackling Islamophobia, the response focused on expenditures for enhancing the security of places of worship, addressing bullying in schools, and funding of Tell Mama, an organization monitoring and reporting Islamophobia. The government has suggested these measures suffice, but it is unacceptable that a proactive stance to challenge prevailing attitudes in the broader public has not been taken. Also, the government is prioritising protecting mosque buildings over protecting Muslim women.

VAWG Minoritised Women's Specialist Funding

Action needed: *Funding should be made available and accessible to 'by and for' organisations (e.g. 'by' and 'for' minoritised women).*

Funding aimed at addressing VAWG in minority ethnic communities or for specialized services is less accessible to organizations led 'by' and 'for' minority ethnic women. Applications have changed from straightforward grant forms to complex tendering processes. Additionally, the

annual income thresholds are set at a considerable level, often exceeding £500,000 per year. Consequently, minority ethnic women's groups must form coalitions to meet eligibility criteria, placing additional strain on their resources. As a result, many minority women's groups opt not to apply for the funding, with only a handful meeting the stringent criteria and benefiting from it. This situation potentially gives rise to systemic discrimination.

Consultation Response prepared by: Baroness Shaista Gohir OBE (On behalf of MWNUK)

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