

Women from Muslim Communities, Political and Civic Engagement in the UK

Report of Round-Table Meeting with Government Equalities Office Held on 29th November 2010

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WARWICK

Coventry, CV4 7AL

In collaboration with



Muslim Women's Network UK

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1. INTRODUCTION

This round-table meeting brought together women from Muslim communities, either in an individual capacity or as representatives of community organisations, and the Government Equalities Office (GEO). The aim of this ‘pre-consultation’ meeting was as follows:

- To discuss how best the GEO could engage with women from various communities around the UK following the closure of the Women’s National Commission (WNC) on 31st December 2010;
- To listen to the views of women from Muslim communities in Britain and to feed back these views into the main consultation (on the government’s approach to engaging with women) which will take place in the first quarter of 2011.¹

The meeting was organised by Shaista Gohir and Faeza Vaid of Muslim Women’s Network UK (MWNUK, Birmingham), in collaboration with Khursheed Wadia and Danièle Joly from the Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, University of Warwick (Coventry). It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK within the context of a research project entitled: *Women from Muslim Communities and Politics in Britain and France*² which is being undertaken by Khursheed Wadia and Danièle Joly.

The agenda for the meeting comprised two parts. In the first part, the GEO’s Sarah Morgan (Deputy Head of Gender Equality Function) explained why the WNC was closing, how the GEO was stepping in and also put a number of questions to the women present about ways in which the GEO could communicate with them in order to seek their views and engage with them effectively. The second part of the meeting was taken up by discussion based on a set of questions circulated in advance of the meeting by the Warwick researchers.

The meeting was opened by Shaista Gohir who invited Khursheed Wadia to explain the importance of the ESRC research project and Sarah Morgan to introduce the GEO’s engagement with women plan.

Khursheed Wadia outlined the aims of the four-year study. One of the main aims of the study had been to challenge stereotypes, to demonstrate that women from Muslim communities are not submissive, apathetic or uninformed as often viewed in the public mind, but that they have the capacity and desire to act as subjects in their own right and that they are deserving of any gains to be made from exercising their political rights and duties. In uncovering the extent of Muslim women’s civic action and political participation in Britain and France, the types of participative action engaged in and the issues which mobilise them, the aim of the study is to push political decision makers to stop pathologising Muslim women’s presence in society, to respond to their needs and hopes and to ensure that they are afforded the means by which to maximise their contribution to society.

¹ It should be noted that a number of women who were unable to participate in the round-table meeting were given the opportunity to feedback their views through an email questionnaire sent out to MWNUK members across the country. Nine questionnaires were returned.

² ESRC Research Award RES-062-23-0380, 1st June 2007 to 31st May 2011. For further details of the project please see Appendix 2 and <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/crer/mwp/>.

Sarah Morgan explained that the Coalition government's pledge to increase accountability and transparency in the public sector entailed the closure of about 300 public bodies of which the WNC was one, and the reorganisation of a further 500. The disestablishment of the WNC meant that its brief was transferred to the GEO from January 2011 while the GEO became part of the Home Office and answerable to Home Secretary Teresa May and Equalities Minister Lynne Featherstone. It is claimed that the logic underpinning these moves is to bring the voice of women in Britain **directly** to government by facilitating the latter's engagement with women at grassroots level. The key questions to be asked therefore are:

- How can government engage with women, on an individual as well as group level, in particular with those from marginalised communities?
- What means can the GEO use to work directly with women at grassroots level in order to influence government departments across the board into considering the aspirations and needs of women from different communities?

In order to answer these questions, the GEO held a number of pre-consultation meetings to discuss some if not all the elements of a four-pronged approach involving:

- direct engagement between government ministers and women's community organisations;
- identifying issues of importance to women in the UK today;
- using the expertise residing within women's organisations in order to identify and deal with issues of importance to women in the UK;
- using modern communication technologies, encompassed within a new government IT platform, in order to connect effectively with women in the UK. It is the last element which constituted the GEO's main interest at this round-table meeting.

2. THE NEW IT PLATFORM AND COMMUNICATING WITH WOMEN

It was reported that the GEO aims to establish an IT platform to support interactive media with the potential of offering opportunities to women, both as part of organisations and as individuals, to engage in online dialogue with government and with each other. Such media would include various social and professional media tools; for example, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, e-newsletters, teleconferencing, virtual discussion groups and so on.

The GEO consultation with women aims, therefore, to find out which IT-based technologies would most/least likely be used and which factors encourage women to use such technologies or discourage their use. This question led to a considerable amount of discussion. While the majority of the women present said they already used one or more of the abovementioned IT-based technologies either in their line of work or for social networking purposes, they expressed serious reservations about these communication technologies.

What might be achieved through a government IT platform providing interactive communications media for online dialogue

The discussion on the use of new interactive technologies for consultation with communities and listening to women revealed a number of concerns of which the main ones are summarised below. However, before this discussion got underway, the question as to "why consult?" was raised by several participants.

Why consult?

Many of the women present (including those who returned the email questionnaire) felt that before government consultations took place, it was necessary to make explicit the reasons for consultation as well as the desired outcomes of the consultative process. There was a view that those involved in third sector organisations had already been “already consulted to death” over the past decade or so without clear knowledge as to which decision makers received their views and demands and how these were translated and fed into the policy making process. There was considerable doubt, based on previous experience, about whether the government’s desire to engage with them was genuine or whether it merely constituted a tick-box exercise in order to demonstrate grassroots consultation and engagement within the democratic process. The following comments express the depth of scepticism about the government’s motives.

One woman’s efforts to contact the current government’s Minister for Women came to nothing:

“ ... if the government wanted to engage with us, then I should at least have had a response from the Minister of State . All I got was a negative response from Theresa May’s office and was cut off straight away so it’s very difficult to engage with government ...”

Another felt that Muslim women were being patronised:

“There have been numerous consultations or events where the government has claimed to be involving women, Muslim women. I have found all these events to be tokenistic so far. I feel there is no genuine interest in us”.

For a significant number of the round-table participants and email respondents, government’s failure generally to explain clearly why consultations took place, how any views gathered were considered, what impact they made on decision making and what benefit could be derived from planned policy, meant that there was little incentive for them to take part in consultation exercises and other initiatives aimed at them. Linked to the question of “why consult” was also that of “who to consult with”. It was felt that government departments had their favourite “consultees” so that the same people’s views were sought time and again and cited in order to justify new initiatives and policy proposals. The common view of the round-table participants was that in order to enter into meaningful dialogue, not only would government have to make consultation aims and outcomes clear but also:

“Given ... that government consults with big male-dominated organisations and not small, grassroots organisations, the GEO needs to be aware that all organisations are given a voice in any consultation”.

As far as the use of new communications technologies was concerned all the women present and email respondents used one or more online means of communication in both the public/professional and private spheres of their life; the most common were email (messaging, mailing and discussion lists) and Facebook. However, three main problems areas were highlighted in terms of using these means of communication in order to dialogue with government.

Trust

An important issue and the first to be mentioned was that of trust. A majority of the women consulted said that they would only “open up to a computer”, i.e. engage in online dialogue with the government if they were sure of being afforded privacy, anonymity and secure storage of any information provided to a government agency. However, many felt that government could not be trusted to engage fairly with them, without passing on information gathered for purposes (e.g. for so-called counter-terrorism use by MI5) other than those that might be explicitly stated. Asked what would stop them from using new media to dialogue with government, the following response summed up the prevailing mood on this issue:

“Security would. Who could read my answers? Will the information I am providing be kept secure?”

The government would therefore have to work hard to build trust amongst women from Muslim communities and to provide cast-iron guarantees that any information provided through online consultation and discussion would not be divulged to other parties.

Accessing and confidently using new communications technologies

The main hurdle faced by Muslim women in communicating with government through new interactive media was that of accessing and using such technologies. While those present at the meeting and those who responded by email were familiar with these means of communication as are students, professionals and young people with access to IT generally, the broad view was that the vast majority of Muslim women are not “plugged in”. This was either because they come from disadvantaged families and communities which can ill afford new media; or because they are part of an older generation unwilling or unable to understand new technologies; or, in the case of many young women, because their parents disapprove of social network media and will not allow access to Facebook, Twitter etc.; or simply because they are unable to communicate well enough in English. Consequently, it was felt that government engagement with Muslim women, through new media, was realistic only if some form of training and demystification of new media were to take place and if confidence building was provided to women who fell into one or more of the categories mentioned above. It was also felt that part of confidence-building in using the new media includes putting information across in uncomplicated language within easy to navigate IT sites. However, it was feared that current cut-backs in public spending would go further in limiting access, including to those already using new IT technologies through free public access points such as local libraries.

Domestic obligations and lack of time

For a small number of participants, a further obstacle to women using new technologies was the domestic burden and the resulting lack of time. The argument was that new IT-based media generated such high volumes of material, much of it worthless, that it was difficult to see how women with homes, families and jobs to look after would find the time to deal with much of the output from government, let alone engage in prolonged, meaningful discussion and offer considered views on proposed policies.

However, it was also pointed out that new IT-based media, if it could be afforded, might have a liberating effect on women tied to the home, enabling them to communicate with the

outside world, including government, while continuing to meet domestic and/or professional obligations.

Conclusion

While the largest part of the discussion was taken up with the identification of barriers to Muslim women's engagement with government through new IT-based media, there was acknowledgement that such media had its place as one of many communication strategies that government should adopt. One suggestion was that grassroots organisations could help in this respect:

“IT has benefits ... all options have to be explored. Is there an opportunity for [women's] organisations to act as a bridge, for face-to-face contact? People have to know the benefit of engagement, of communication with GEO or other government agencies ...”.

It was concluded that ultimately communication through IT-based media could only be seen as a useful adjunct to personal contact. It was felt that government needed to go into the heart of communities in order to understand the problems people faced, the issues of interest to them and the resources that they needed. If government used new media as a stand-alone method of consultation and discussion then it would no doubt fail to engage with Muslim women as well as those from other communities.

3. ISSUES OF CONCERN AND PATHS TO INVOLVEMENT IN CIVIC AND POLITICAL LIFE

The second part of the round-table meeting was devoted to a discussion of the issues that concerned Muslim women in their daily life and which they felt constituted barriers to their participation in public life and which should be addressed by government at both local and national levels. It also included discussion on how women might be encouraged to overcome the barriers and maximise facilitators to political and civic engagement.

Issues

The discussion about issues of concern and interest to Muslim women was prefaced by the affirmation that Muslim communities across Britain generally and women within those communities more specifically did not form a homogeneous population but were divided along socio-professional, generational, locational and other lines. Therefore issues of concern and problems would vary accordingly. It was pointed out that this fact had been amply demonstrated in the 2006 report *She who Disputes*.³ It was also noted that there were so many different problems affecting Muslim communities across the UK that those which were being discussed at this round-table meeting merely constituted the tip of the iceberg.

However, the round-table meeting identified a number of key issues which affected the overwhelming majority of women from Muslim communities. These were the rise of Islamophobia (i.e. fear or intolerance of Muslims because of their religion); the persistence of rigidly patriarchal structures and attitudes within Britain's Muslim communities; the lack of public resources, exacerbated since 2009 by public funding cut-backs in the context of the economic downturn; and government policies vis-à-vis Muslims.

³ MWNUK & WNC (2006), *She Who Disputes*, London: Quark Press.

The intensification of Islamophobia

A key concern among the participants at the meeting was the rise of Islamophobia, particularly since the events of New York 9/11 and London 7/7. Islamophobia, it was felt, touched almost all aspects of their life – on a more or less daily basis. It affected the way in which Muslims, especially women, were portrayed by politicians and media commentators who in turn influenced wider public opinion. The reduction of Muslim women to a hijab/niqab-clad dummy, devout at best but more often subjugated or religiously extreme at worst meant that they faced not just discrimination at school/college, in employment, in shops and public services but also verbal and physical abuse in the street; for example:

“Personally I am affected by the sharp rise in Islamophobia and everyday racism, the images of Asian and Muslim women portrayed whether by the media, government, services ...”.

“Being Muslim, one of the greatest issues affecting me is the government's constant admonishing of the Muslim community, for either being extremist or supporting extremism. As law abiding citizens who work actively in our communities, integrating with the people, [I feel] the media's portrayal of Islam has been offending Britain's Muslim population for decades and will no doubt continue to do so unless the government takes action to change this”.

“The issues affecting me and other Muslim women on a daily basis are Islamophobia, particularly around hijab and niqab, discrimination due to race, faith and gender, particularly when going for interviews for jobs”.

“A big issue is Islamophobia ... I was targeted, my veil was ripped off ... I waged a successful prosecution though ...”

“I'm tired of hearing and seeing the constant negative perception of Muslims and Islam in general. 'Fundamentalist' Islam of the type espoused by men from the Indian subcontinent - as a British Muslim, I cannot relate to, or understand their interpretation of Islam”.

The women present also feared the effects of Islamophobia on entire Muslim communities of which some were becoming increasingly marginalised and the impact that this would have on the long term life chances of their children who were already in a situation where they were not realising their educational potential.

Rigid patriarchal structures and attitudes within Muslim families and communities

The second issue of importance raised was that of prevalent and rigid patriarchal structures and attitudes within Muslim families and communities which meant that women were often locked into traditional feminine roles (as carers of immediate and extended family and home) without the possibility of occupying other less traditional roles in the public sphere. Moreover, within the context of the traditional roles they occupied, there were tremendous expectations of women to make successful marriages and raise strong families based on principles deemed Islamic by male members of their family and community. Often, where

women fell short of expectations of marriage and family responsibility, they could be seen as a threat to the family and community's Muslim identity.

It was argued that the unremitting pressure of "getting things right" or as one woman put it, "[being expected] to magically manage everything and be an 'all rounder'" meant having little time or energy for oneself and leading a balanced life within and outside the home/family. This frequently led to depression and mental health problems among women, relationship breakdown and divorce all of which were seen as a repudiation of the 'Islamic' principles created and espoused by male family and community members in particular. It was recognised that what was dressed up by community patriarchs as an 'Islamic' identity or principles and then applied to marriage and family was in fact based on ethno-cultural beliefs and traditions.

Challenging extreme patriarchal attitudes could also lead to domestic violence and problems of drug and alcohol abuse among second and third generation children of Muslim families. It was in making these challenges that Muslim women required support.

The impact of government public spending cuts

The majority of the round-table participants and email respondents represented community organisations and/or worked in the public sector. Consequently there was a sharp awareness on their part of the actual impact of declining public funds since the economic downturn of 2009 and of further swingeing cut-backs in public service provision. The lack of funds and public services were therefore seen as a major issue for Muslim women who form part of some of Britain's most socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

The concerns over public funding cut-backs revolved around two facts. The first was that support mechanisms already in place to encourage women from Muslim communities to gain confidence – whether in undertaking employment and further/higher education, being active in civic and political life, supporting their children's education or extricating themselves from difficult personal circumstances – were at risk of being dismantled. There was a real fear that progress made by 'front-line' workers in grassroots women's organisations since 2001 would not only be halted but that there would be a loss of gains made which would not be recouped easily in future.

The second concern was over what would happen to really vulnerable women (e.g. those suffering domestic violence; those brought to the UK as 'slave-brides' who not only endured difficult marriages and insecure immigration status but who also experienced desperate isolation because often they spoke no English; those who had fled forced marriage; those who lived below the poverty line) who were in the process of being helped. The prospect of leaving this category of women in the lurch caused both anger and anxiety.

The majority of the round-table participants and email respondents felt that government had to do more to find innovative ways of supporting grassroots women's organisations especially if there was serious intent behind its "Big Society" programme. Government agencies such as the GEO could not rely on women being "changers of society" through sheer good will. Even if good will continued, those already at the front-line of providing services (voluntarily) that were really in the remit of government were constrained by time. One woman explained:

Who looks after, teaches, develops and supports my children ... whilst I'm out active in civic life? At this stage in life, education and developing my children to become active and positive citizens is most important. ... You'd need to give me more time, or pay me - I also work part-time. Just maximise the little time I have!

It was suggested that the government should be obliged to carry out a gender equality impact assessment of its programme of public funding cuts.

Government policies vis-à-vis Muslim women and communities

The final key issue of concern was to do with the attitudes of political decision makers towards Muslim women and communities generally and policies that reflected such attitudes.

It was agreed that by and large there was little trust in government because those making important political decisions have historically considered Muslim women as passive subjects to be ignored or derided, or more recently as part of an extremist agenda to undermine British society and therefore to be clamped down upon. The debate started by Jack Straw over the face-veil or niqab, in 2006, is seen as representative of politicians' disregard for the impact that their statements can have on public opinion and ultimately on the safety of Muslim women and their families.

It was felt that even after the events of London 7/7 2005, when the Blair government realised the importance of dialoguing with Muslim women and decided, for the first time, to engage with them through a publicly-funded programme, the engagement took place through the prism of extremism.⁴ The question was asked as to why (preventing) violent extremism formed the sole basis for the government on which Muslim women could be invited into the civic and political arenas.

A number of the round-table participants and email respondents felt that Muslim women in Britain had accumulated valuable social capital despite the general lack of resources and could have been invited to play a useful part in any number of social, cultural, economic and political initiatives and programmes. Instead, the fear is that they are now associated with a failed programme and a "political mistake", given that the current government is dismantling the PVE programme and funding. Moreover, those Muslim women's organisations which had benefited from PVE funding were now having to radically alter their business plans and community support programmes as the funding rug was being pulled from under their feet without the prospect of replacement funds.

Achievements

While the major part of the round-table meeting had been taken up with discussion about issues concerning Muslim women and the barriers to their involvement in civic and political life, the majority of the participants felt that compared with 20 years ago significant progress had taken place and that the situation of Muslim and black and ethnic minority women

⁴ The Prevent programme (or PVE – Preventing Violent Extremism), piloted in 2007 and launched in 2008/9, was part of the New Labour government's counter-terrorism strategy which aimed to mobilise communities, but particularly women and young people, in the fight against ideologies of extreme violence. While in principle it's focus was not Islam and Muslim communities, the fact that funding was allocated to local authorities, in proportion with the density of Muslim populations in their area, meant that it was Muslims who were linked most directly with violent extremism and terrorism.

generally had improved vastly. It was noted that more Muslim women are visible today in education, employment and other areas of public life than was the case two decades ago. It was argued that this fact should be acknowledged and celebrated more often in order to encourage their daughters to go further and break through the various glass ceilings and bottlenecks in employment, education and politics that persist. The discussion revolved around what had worked well in allowing ordinary Muslim women to get on the first few rungs of the civic action/political participation ladder. From their own experiences, three main facilitators were identified: having an interest in and caring about your community and society enough to want to make improvements; having the support of family and wider community; Islam.

Interest in community and desire for improvement

While an interest in “hard politics” (party politics) was not considered necessary, having a commitment to one’s community and wanting to contribute to change society for the better was seen as a crucial element in becoming engaged in civic and political activity and action. For many women the need for positive change (that is equal rights and opportunities for all regardless of sex, race/ethnicity, religion etc; justice for all) stemmed from an intense desire to make a better world for their children; if they became beneficiaries of their action for change then that was almost a bonus. Thus:

“The need for justice and equality ... I have an interest. I want to ensure my daughter grows up participating in life in the fullest sense and being aware of politics and the change she can possibly make”.

“[you need] compassion ... Supporting causes that affect my life and my children”.

It was agreed that without being able to appeal to people’s basic interest in improving society, it would be impossible to mobilise them around important social, economic and political issues.

Support from family and community

A second important element in facilitating civic and political participation was the support of family and community. Without family support, the most civic-minded and politically motivated of women with home and children to look after would find it impossible to devote time to active citizenship. However, once family support was gained, it was important to be visible and known within one’s local community especially if one wanted to enter into a public service or elected office at local level. For example, this is how one woman saw it:

“Fortunately, I have the support of my local community, but if I were to do 'outreach' type work ... then working with Muslims of all persuasions would be very important”.

Islam

A third important driving factor influencing engagement in civic and political life was the women’s Islamic faith. It was felt that significant numbers of Muslims were motivated by their religion, and particularly the concept of *jihad*, into being civic-minded and politically motivated. For many, the concept, according to its original *Qur’anic* meaning, meant striving

for self-improvement and hence the struggle for positive change in one's community. As one of the respondents put it, her faith had taught her:

“a strong ethic of voluntary work, an inclusive vision of Islam, an ethic of contributing positively and peacefully to the society in which you live, taking [from Islam] that which serves me and my culture well and leaving aside (but not outwardly and publicly condemning it) that which does not”.

Apart from these three main facilitating or motivating factors, the participants mentioned a few others such as financial security and being able to afford to volunteer in an organisation or spend time in political activity (rather than having to work all hours to earn one's living); having a certain amount of confidence in oneself to speak out in public; and knowing that there exist organisations which really appreciate having the contribution of volunteers.

4. WHAT MUSLIM WANT AND FROM WHOM DO THEY EXPECT TO GET WHAT THEY WANT?

The last part of the meeting was devoted to what women from Muslim communities wanted and from whom. It was agreed that their demands could be usefully categorised according to what was required from government and that required from their own communities.

What was required from government?

It was felt that government needed to take a number of steps in order to successfully engage with women from Muslim communities and to meet their needs and aspirations. Most important among these were measures leading to a change in the way that government has dealt with Muslims, including women, in the past; and measures to increase the financial and socio-cultural resources available to Muslim women.

Changes in the way that government engages with Muslim communities and Muslim women

There was unanimous agreement that current and future governments had to take the lead in combating Islamophobia within the immediate political circles of Westminster and the media in order to encourage change in public opinion generally. As things stood, there were far too many leading politicians and journalists who made unfounded statements about Muslims and Islam based on scant knowledge of Muslim communities in the UK and elsewhere. The words of political leaders and media opinion formers (as in debates which have taken place over Islamic dress codes for women and extremist violence) often fuelled high levels of public hostility and impacted negatively on Muslim women and their families.

Further, it was felt that high profile politicians at national and local level needed to go into the heart of Muslim communities in order to make contact with ordinary people, to listen and act on their concerns. While it was important to introduce new IT-based means of communication and engagement with Muslim and other women, it was far more important and effective to have face-to-face contact and to build trust between government and local communities in this way.

It was also agreed that organisations representing Muslim women needed to be consulted far more widely during the policy making process in order to produce policies which had their support and which were therefore more likely to have successful outcomes.

Provision of financial and socio-cultural resources

It was widely accepted among the participants and email respondents that financial and other material support was a key issue and that organisations representing and supporting women generally, and women of minority cultures and faiths in particular, had not fared well historically as beneficiaries of government aid. It was feared that current and further public sector spending cuts would undermine the important groundwork already done in local communities by voluntary sector organisations, among Muslim women, in building the knowledge and skills necessary for effective civic and political participation. It was felt that the government should guard against making short-term economies given that community organisations added value far beyond the expected outcomes of funding investments made by government. In addition government should carry out impact assessments of the spending cuts on women in local communities. Not only should threatened funding cuts be reversed but serious consideration should be given to increasing the funding available to organisations serving women from Muslim communities for training/education and local support services, particularly in the areas of mental health and relationship counselling, family and community safety, education and civic/political participation.

What was required from Muslim communities?

There was recognition that while Muslim women should expect a certain amount of government support, there was much work to be done within Muslim communities also. There was agreement that mosques had an important role to play here; for example, in permitting women to participate fully and equally with men in the running of mosques and related bodies; encouraging Islamic scholarly education and training of women in order to allow for a plurality of *Qur'anic* interpretations; and breaking the taboo around the problems of domestic violence, child abuse, drugs and alcohol misuse which were generally swept under the carpet in Muslim communities.

5. CONCLUSION

The meeting concluded with general agreement that women from Muslim communities across the UK had to be prepared to push for change themselves within their communities, to make alliances with non-Muslim women and to work in networks which had wide geographical reach. There was concurrence over the fact that there existed Muslim women within most communities who were prepared to speak out and to stand for public office if only they had support. It was of utmost important, therefore, that existing role-models were promoted and that women supported other women at local and national levels in order to make in-roads into sites of political decision making. However, the efforts made by Muslim women in working towards change in their communities and in wider British society would only be effective with support from community leaders, local politicians and importantly government, through departmental units such as the GEO.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Government engagement with women from Muslim communities

We recommend that:

- ❖ The government (through departmental units such as the GEO) uses direct communication as the principal means of engaging with Muslim women; for example, through the organisation of consultation meetings such as this; or “listening to women meetings” held in at local level, within Muslim communities.
- ❖ New IT-based communication media (email lists, internet sites, Facebook, Twitter and so on) are used as an adjunct to face-to-face communication.
- ❖ That information conveyed through new IT-based media is presented in easy to comprehend language and that it is also available in paper format for those who have limited or no access to such media.

Government strategies to reduce and prevent Islamophobia

We recommend that the government promotes:

- ❖ Strict observance of the 2006 legislation against religious hatred, particularly in statutory agencies, elected offices and public services.
- ❖ Tolerance of all dress codes (including headscarves and face veil).
- ❖ Respect for the desire of Muslims’ to observe Islamic festivals in schools, public office and services.
- ❖ Flexibility regarding provision of religious needs in the workplace (for example, concerning prayer and diet).
- ❖ Flexibility regarding provision of religiously appropriate services at local authority level, especially regarding those which deal with problems of family relations, mental and reproductive health for example.
- ❖ Positive terms and images relating to Islam and Muslims in policy speeches and literature and all communication through popular media.
- ❖ Disconnection between Islam, Muslims and violent extremism.

Government provision of financial and other support to women from Muslim communities

We recommend that government provides:

- ❖ Funding for training opportunities, through local authorities, voluntary sector organisations, national outreach services (e.g. Parliamentary Outreach) and citizenship training in schools, in how to become actively engaged in civic and political life at local and national level.
- ❖ Funding for ‘role model’ and mentoring programmes, especially for young Muslim women who are keen to participate in public life.
- ❖ Financial support for the provision of culturally/religious appropriate local services for women, especially in the social services, health and education sectors of which women are the majority users.
- ❖ Funding for training for women in marketable employment skills.

- ❖ Funding to facilitate Muslim women’s participation in the abovementioned training and mentoring schemes – namely to cover crèche/child care costs.

Future funding cuts in public services

We recommend that:

- ❖ The government carries out gender and race/ethnicity equality impact assessments of current and proposed funding cuts in public services.
- ❖ The government reviews its decisions to dismantle certain funding schemes from which organisations supporting Muslim women benefit.
- ❖ The government makes clear statements about how “at risk” funding will be protected or substituted.

APPENDIX 1: Round Table Participants

Ahmed Zlakha	Project Manager at the Apna Haq Project in Rotherham
Ali Aisha	Educational Consultant, currently to ACPO on E-safety, Leeds
Ali Aziza	Community Development Worker, North London Muslim Women's Network, London
Ansar Rehana	Chair, Ansaar; Managing Director, Transparent Training Consultancy; disability representative, Leicester Partnership; and Governor, Leicestershire Partnership Trust, Leicester
Balchin Cassandra	Global Communications Advisor, Musawah – the global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family, London)
Darr Ateeqa	Youth worker, JUST; representative, Bradford Muslim Women's Council, Bradford
Gibbs-Murray Mike	WNC Sponsorship Manager, Government Equalities Office, London
Gohir Shaista	Executive Director, Muslim Women's Network UK, Birmingham
Hassan Faiza	PhD student, Birmingham University; Founder member, Guiding Stars, Birmingham
Iqbal Robina	Chair, Sparkhill Asian Women's Association and Women Acting in Today's Society; Groundwork UK board member, Birmingham
Irfan Fozia	Solicitor in employment law; Chair, Aspire, Luton
Joly Danièle	Professor in Ethnic Relations, Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, University of Warwick, Coventry)
Khanom Sultana	Partnership and Project Manager at Jagonari Women's Education and resource centre, Tower Hamlets, London
Mahamud Saynab	Somali Family Support Group; Co-ordinator Tawjeeh Project, Harrow, Middlesex
Master Sabiha	Development Worker, Build Community Development, Leicester

Morgan Sarah	Deputy Head of Gender Equality Function, Government Equalities Office, London
Nanabawa Zaheera	Youth worker, Gloucestershire County Council; Co-ordinator, WINGZ – Women’s Inclusive Network, Gloucester
Shah Tazeem	Chair, Muslim Communities UK, Stockport
Thomas Fariha	Secretary to Management Committee, Amina Muslim Women's Resource Centre, Glasgow
Vaid Faeza	Co-ordinator, Muslim Women’s Network UK; Chair, Sister-2-Sister, Birmingham
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