

THE FORUM

THE VOICE OF THE
BRITISH MUSLIM
CHARITY SECTOR

ISSUE 06

2024



SPECIAL EDITION

**INSPIRING STORIES:
THE BLESSINGS OF
THE SISTERS**

WE IMPROVE YOUR CHARITY FINANCE & GOVERNANCE



We have expertise in dealing with Charity Commission inquiries and have supported many charities improve their Financial Governance."

Nasir Rafiq BA, FCA
Managing Partner
Ex Big 4, Corporate & Govt Sector, CFO

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OVERVIEW

In this issue of **THE FORUM**, we are exploring the contribution and role of women in our sector. **THE FORUM** has explored a wide range of topics concerning the British Muslim Voluntary and Community Sector, and as such we decided to dedicate this issue to a topic that is crucial to explore for the sustainability and success of our sector. Women contribute in many ways to our thriving, diverse sector and it is important that we celebrate this and open discussions on how to better empower them. This issue seeks to do this by sharing perspectives from a range of women in our sector and allowing us to learn from them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MCF has a small but dedicated team of staff and interns, all of whom contributed to the production of this issue of **THE FORUM**, including Jawad Daaboul, Hana Qureshi, Fadi Itani, Baris Varli, Samiira Hasan, Louise Butt and Abdulsami Arjumand. We are grateful for the enthusiastic, talented contributors that have allowed us to bring this issue of **THE FORUM** to life.

Designed By: The Basement Labs

We value your feedback and invite you to consider proposing contributions for the next edition of **THE FORUM**.

Contact us via: info@muslimcharitiesforum.org.uk
Or call one of our team on 0203 336 9704

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FOREWORD



FADI ITANI OBE
CEO OF MCF

In acknowledging the remarkable achievements of Muslim women who have overcome barriers and achieved success in different domains, it is crucial to acknowledge the distinct obstacles they encounter within the charity sector. Shedding light on the significance of women in leadership roles within UK charities, our report, "Bridges of Hope," has prompted us to dedicate this special edition of 'The Forum' to celebrating their accomplishments and stories and facilitating discussions on enhancing support and inclusivity for women in this sector.

To promote the empowerment of women in the charity sector, it is crucial to recognise that this endeavour encompasses more than just achieving gender equality. It also involves fostering an inclusive environment that benefits everyone involved. We firmly believe that Muslim women have a significant role to play on this journey, as they bring unique perspectives and ideas that can contribute to the creation of a better world for all. Our Bridges of Hope report revealed that 45 percent of charitable organisations in our sector, which provide essential services in the UK, are led by Muslim women. While this statistic is certainly great news, it is imperative that we strive for greater representation across charities of various specialties and sizes.

We must prioritise the cultivation of young talent and strive to create an environment where they perceive our industry as an excellent workplace, where they are embraced and empowered to make a meaningful impact. Additionally, it is crucial to foster diversity in skills and backgrounds within

our boards, ensuring that our sisters and young people are adequately represented. We believe such initiatives will hold immense significance in nurturing a feeling of togetherness, inspiring others, and advocating for constructive transformations.

We are proud to have assembled an extraordinary collection of accomplished female leaders and emerging leaders from diverse organisations and departments. They serve as the foundation of our sector. Explore their valuable contributions and inspiring stories. I trust you will find enjoyment and inspiration, just as I did. However, due to space constraints, we regretfully couldn't include all of the great stories. Nonetheless, this initiative marks the beginning of many commendable efforts to recognising and highlighting their valuable contributions and is a significant step towards fostering a culture of appreciation and empowerment.

We hope this edition of The Forum will function as a platform for Muslim women leaders to exchange their narratives, perspectives, and encounters. Through magnifying their voices, our aim is to motivate the upcoming generation of leaders and pave the path towards a more promising future.

To all the incredible sisters out there, I urge you to keep pushing forward and remain a constant source of inspiration for each and every one of us.

We look forward to the conversations and connections that will be sparked by this exclusive edition.

CONTRIBUTORS



RAHIMA AZIZ BEM

MUSLIM PHILANTHROPY: INVESTING IN THE DREAMS AND THE FUTURE OF COMMUNITIES

Rahima Aziz is a trustee at the Aziz Foundation, a charitable family foundation that supports British Muslims, especially through Masters scholarships.



MARWA SOLIMAN

CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR MUSLIM WOMEN IN NOTTINGHAM: THE JOURNEY OF HEYA

Marwa Soliman is the founder and CEO of Heya Nottingham. Marwa has devoted her time and resources to make women feel they are part of a big community, and break stereotypes around Arab Muslim women.



MAARIA MAHMOOD

WHY DO WE NEED FAITH-SENSITIVE SERVICES TO TACKLE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FACING BRITISH MUSLIM YOUTH?

Maaria Mahmood is the Director of the Muslim Youth Helpline. MYH is a national listening service helpline, providing faith and culturally sensitive emotional support to young Muslims in the UK through phone, Webchat, WhatsApp and email



ASIFA PRADHAN

SERVING HUMANITY FROM OUR LIVING ROOM - A FAMILY'S JOURNEY IN LAUNCHING A NATIONAL CHARITY

Asifa is an administration and IT Assistant by profession. Asifa is part of Hand on Heart's Management Team and is responsible for planning campaigns and works closely to enhance volunteers engagement and experience during projects.



DR. HINA SHAHID

NAVIGATING MULTIPLE FRONTS: MUSLIM WOMEN CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES & BREAKING BARRIERS AGAINST THE ODDS

Dr Shahid is a General Practitioner and Chairperson of the Muslim Doctors Association. She qualified with a distinction in Medical Sciences at University College London with the first prize in Psychology, Sociology and Epidemiology.



LUCY BUSHILL-MATTHEWS

MUSLIM WOMEN IN SENIOR LEADERSHIP

Lucy Bushill-Matthews has worked in the third sector for the past 15 years, she specialises in finance and governance for a number of different charities. She is the former chief operating officer at the National Zakat Foundation. She is also the author of the book Welcome to Islam: A Convert's Tale.



JAVERIA HASHMI

EMPOWER HER: THE ROLE OF MUSLIM CHARITIES IN SUPPORTING FEMALE EDUCATION

A proactive strategist with a progressive history in the development and oversight of global humanitarian efforts and long-term sustainable programmes working in coordination with international country programs, government, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).



DR. NAJMA MOHAMED

ON BEING MUSLIM AND GREEN

Dr. Najma Mohamed works in international development at the nexus of climate, nature and inequality. She is a trustee of IFEES, the Islamic Foundation for Ecological and Environmental Sciences and a 24-2023 Atlantic Fellow in Social and Economic Equity at the London School of Economics.



KATHLEEN ROCHE-NAGI

BUILDING FAMILIES, THE CORNER STONES OF OUR SOCIETY

Kathleen Roche-Nagi is the Managing Director of Approachable Parenting. Kathleen is also one the developers of "The Five Pillars of Parenting" 11-4 years and pregnancy to 3 years programmes. Kathleen has a varied background, including being a qualified nurse, community mediator, counsellor, life coach and teacher.



PULVISHA RAJA

EMPOWERING VOICES AND BREAKING BARRIERS: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE BRITISH CHARITY SECTOR

Pulvisha Raja is the Interim Director of the Global People and Culture Department at Human Appeal. Pulvisha is accredited at level 7 CIPD, holds an MSc in Human Resource Management and has experience across HR, Safeguarding and Volunteer Management.



JULIE SIDDIQUI OBE

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO SPREAD PEACE AND BRING COMMUNITIES TOGETHER

Julie is a mentor, consultant and activist with a focus on gender issues, Jewish-Muslim relations and social action. Julie has a background in community grassroots work spanning 20 years and founded a local charity for Muslim women's needs, which she led for 10 years.



HANAN ASHEGH

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE BRITISH MUSLIM CHARITY SECTOR: EMPOWERMENT, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES.

Hanan is a mental health practitioner, a published researcher, a mother and a humanitarian at heart. Hanan trained and worked in the National Health Service in the UK for 12 years with a focus on anxiety, depression and PTSD in the field of CBT which informed Hanan's work with refugees and traumatized displaced populations.



LINSAY TAYLOR

TACKLING ISLAMOPHOBIA - WHY I DO WHAT I DO.

Lindsay is currently the Head of Community Development and Engagement at MEND, who aim to tackle Islamophobia in all its forms across the UK. She is also Chair of Interfaith Scotland, part of the committee for Peace and Unity events in Glasgow, as well as sitting on the committee for Scottish Faith Action for Refugees along with other charitable organisations.



SABAH GILANI OBE

BUSINESSES SUPPORTING CHARITIES: TIME FOR A NEW APPROACH IN TACKLING SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

Sabah Gilani OBE is the Chief Executive of the Better Community Business Network, a grant-giving charity which has distributed 1.4 million to over 70 charities across the UK. She has led various initiatives through BCBN, including an ex-offender housing project, launching the Muslim Fostering Network and founding the Muslim Mind Collaborative.



PROFESSOR HUSNA AHMAD OBE

A SYSTEM CHANGE: RESTORING DIGNITY WHILE ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Dr Husna Ahmad OBE is the CEO of Global One which is a Muslim International NGO focused on women. With a PhD in International Environmental Law from the School of Oriental and African Studies, [SOAS] London University. She was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for her services to disadvantaged people for work promoting social justice with disadvantaged communities.



MAJIDA SAYAM MBE

MY JOURNEY, THEIR JOURNEY: EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS, THROUGH SAFE SPACES.

Majida Sayam is the founder and director of Jannaty Women's Social Society and has served the community for more than three decades. Majida established Jannaty in 2010 which provides services to disadvantaged women including skills training, health and wellbeing activities, social events and specialist support. She has established a strong network with local VCS services, the local authority and businesses to strengthen the charity.

CONTRIBUTORS



SHAHIN ASHRAF MBE

EMPOWERING MUSLIM WOMEN IN GLOBAL ADVOCACY: OVERCOMING CHALLENGES, PROMOTING CHANGE

Shahin Ashraf MBE is a distinguished philanthropist and esteemed leader within civil society, known for her strategic acumen and extensive experience spanning over 25 years in diverse humanitarian, development, and civil society organizations. Throughout her career, she has worked closely with marginalized communities, demonstrating a deep commitment to their well-being.



SADIA SAJJID

TORCHBEARERS OF SOCIETAL CHANGE – THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERING AND YOUNG PEOPLE

With over 15 years of experience in the Muslim charity sector, Sadia has a proven track record of executing highly successful fundraising initiatives and campaigns. As a freelance fundraiser, Sadia has spent the last five years working with a diverse range of organisations. Serving the Muslim community here in the UK, Sadia is honoured to work for the Muslim Scout Fellowship. Sadia supports them in developing their new organisational strategy to ensure long-term scalability and stability for the organisation.



DR SANDRA PERTEK

HOW CAN MUSLIM CHARITIES IMPROVE PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN DISPLACEMENT?

Dr Sandra Pertek is Project Lead for “Protecting Displaced Women and Girls in the Muslim World” Initiative and an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Birmingham. She is a gender and protection practitioner with over a decade’s experience in humanitarian and international development settings. Dr Pertek has led several research projects on protection in forced displacement across regions, including in Turkey, Tunisia, Ethiopia, Zambia, Poland and Ukraine. Previously she served as Senior Policy Advisor on Gender at Islamic Relief Worldwide where she authored the first Gender Justice Policy in the Muslim charity sector. She also consulted on behalf of multilateral organisations, including governments and international organisations.



DR SOFIA BUNCY MBE

INVISIBLE CAUSES: SERVING THROUGH A VALUE LED, CULTURALLY AND RELIGIOUSLY ALIGNED MODEL

Dr Sofia Buncy is one of the UK’s leading practitioners and thought leaders on the experiences of Muslim women in the Criminal Justice System (CJS). She has produced ground-breaking research and co-authored the 2014 report titled ‘Muslim Women in Prison-Second Chance: Fresh Horizons’. This was the first report into the experiences of Muslim women in British prisons which was awarded the coveted Butler Trust Award from Patron HRH Princess Anne in 2017. Sofia continues to embark on research in this specialist area and is currently on her 5th collaborative report, alongside Leeds Beckett University, understanding the experiences of Young Muslim Women under 25 who have come through the criminal justice system. Sofia is also the Director of the Muslim Women In Prison project, pioneered alongside her team as a community resettlement hub for Muslim women prison leavers at Khidmat Centres in Bradford.



SAMIIRA HASAN

MY JOURNEY INTO THE MUSLIM CHARITY SECTOR AS A YOUNG PROFESSIONAL

Samiira Hasan is the Climate Action Lead at the Muslim Charities Forum (MCF). She entered the charities sector through MCF’s Future Leaders Programme after graduating from UCL with a degree in Politics and International Relations. Prior to her current role, she conducted research at the University of Oxford where she worked on a project aimed at addressing food-related environmental impacts and sustainability. Samiira is dedicated to increasing the representation of young people and Muslims in the climate conversation.



SHAZIA ARSHAD

STORYTELLING – THE ULTIMATE TOOL FOR CREATING CHANGE AND OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Shazia Arshad is the Head of Communications and Creative Content at Islamic Relief UK. She oversees the running of the media, advocacy and public affairs and creative content work in her department. Shazia’s background is in media and advocacy having worked in the NGO sector for over a decade with a range of international development and human rights organisations. Before joining Islamic Relief Shazia worked at the Ethical Tea Partnership, as well as helping to establish a number of voluntary organisations within the Labour Party promoting equality and human rights.



ZAMZAM IBRAHIM

ARE WE REAL STEWARDS OF THE PLANET?

Zamzam Ibrahim is a British-Somali activist, she has spent the past decade representing students and young people advocating on various causes related to social justice, education, and the environment. As a young climate activist, she co-founded Students Organising for Sustainability UK (SOS-UK), She is also a co-founder of the Muslim Leadership Foundation. In 2019, launched the Climate Education Bill, which calls for mandatory climate education in schools throughout the UK. She’s the Former Vice President of the European Students Union (ESU), Vice Chair Muslim Leadership Foundation (MLFUK) and the former National President of the National Union of Students in the UK (NUSUK). She currently serves as a board member of SOS International and SOSUK, works as a consultant for Julie’s Bicycle amongst various other projects and has been selected as a Youth Advisor on UN Green Jobs Pact.



CATHERINE ROE

THE ART OF BUILDING BRIDGES

Catherine Roe began her career as a British diplomat, specialising in multilateral negotiation, before she moved into the world of philanthropy. She has over 25 years’ experience of creating, developing and leading foundations. For 12 years, Catherine was CEO of the Said Foundation, working to effect lasting change in the lives of disadvantaged children and high potential young people in the Middle East. As Director of the Said Business School Foundation, she helped to create and develop Oxford University’s Said Business School, now one of the world’s leading business schools. For 15 years, as Director of CMR Consult Limited, Catherine worked with a range of foundations, philanthropists and not-for-profits in fields as diverse as education, child development, arts and culture, social cohesion, disability and refugees.

In 2016 Catherine helped to found Amal of which she is Chief Executive. Amal exists to help shift the dominant negative narrative around Muslims in the UK to one that is confident, diverse and just. It does so by growing opportunities for Muslims to unleash their massive creative potential.



JAMILLA HEKMOUN

TACKLING UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN BRITISH MUSLIM CHARITIES

Jamilla Hekmoun is a Research Fellow of the Faith in Mental Health project at the Woolf Institute. She is currently writing up her PhD on Muslim men’s mental health where she is exploring the relationship between faith, ethnicity, masculinity, and mental health. Jamilla is Chair of the Muslim Mental Health Alliance; a network of organisations aiming to collaborate on mental health in the sector. She is an Executive Board Member at the Muslim Council of Wales. She has also written a book chapter on Muslim mental health published in 2019. In 2022 she won Cardiff University 30ish award in addition to receiving the Special Recognition Award for Community Activism.



YASHMIN HARUN BEM

THE JOURNEY INTO SPORTS & DIVERSITY

Yashmin Harun BEM is a trailblazer, is tenacious and is the founding Chair of Muslimah Sports Association (MSA). Yashmin established MSA in 2014 as a charity that aims to empower Muslim women through sports. She is the first Muslim Bangladeshi woman to become an iNED at British Fencing, elected Director at London FA, FA National Game Board member, FA Council Member, and Chair of Frenford and MSA WFC. She has over 20 years banking experience and has recently completed her Masters in Global Public Policy. Yashmin’s most recent awards includes the Asian Woman of Achievement Award for Sports and The National Diversity Award in 2023.

MUSLIM WOMEN IN SENIOR LEADERSHIP



Lucy Bushill-Matthews

A charity communications group was considering a new campaign idea that centred around donors “winning”. They all agreed donors would love it. Just before it was put forward for final approval, the group checked the idea with the senior leadership, which included a woman. The woman gave a different perspective: not everyone wants to win; the average female is less competitive than the average male; some people might think that if some people win, others have to lose. The group weighed up their new input and revised the idea to develop a more collaborative concept.

TIMES ARE CHANGING, BUT CHANGE IS SLOW.

The Muslim Council of Britain elected its first - and youngest - female leader in 2021. A large Muslim charity, Penny Appeal, has been under the leadership of a new female CEO since earlier in 2023. Many Muslim charities are now explicitly seeking female trustees with the skills and abilities to take on such roles.

One in four Americans think it is more likely that humans will colonize Mars than that half of Fortune 500 CEOs will be women. If the survey involved Muslims and Muslim-led organisations only, it is likely the results would have been even more extreme.

SOME CHALLENGES RELATE TO PRECONCEPTIONS.

Traditionally, successful workplace cultures have been led by men. Historically, the top Muslim leaders have all been men. While UK workplace culture is changing, anecdotal evidence indicates UK Muslim workplace culture is changing more slowly. In the Muslim charity space, until earlier this year, not one of the largest ten charities has been led by a woman.

There is often a perception that women prioritise family over career. Yet experience in family roles can make for a better employee and indeed leader. Someone who prioritises their family wellbeing knows how to multitask and learns how to manage both people and process to achieve a worthy goal.

And there is a perception that women are less effective leaders than men. In an interview with members of Hillary Clinton’s press corps, a veteran reporter noted, “The story is never

what she says, as much as we want it to be. The story is always how she looked when she said it.”

THERE ARE PRACTICAL BARRIERS TOO.

Senior executives can use their influence to advance the professional lives of others. Such sponsorship is often key to an individual’s professional career success. As most of the senior leadership in the Muslim charity space is male, it would only be expected for most senior sponsors to be male. Given cultural norms, women – and Muslim women in particular – are likely to end up under-sponsored relative to men.

An alternative and valuable addition to workplace support is personal connections. However Muslim women usually have more limited access to those personal connections which can help with career development.

In addition, the sense of community at work is likely to be more male-centred. The Harvard Business Review records female employees sharing the sentiment: “It’s nothing overt. I just feel less of a connection, either positive or negative, with the guys I work with.” In the Muslim charity workspace, where men form most of the senior leadership, it is not unheard of for Muslims to write group emails to ‘brothers’ or to refer to each other as ‘bro’ without taking a moment to consider who else is in the physical or virtual room.

THERE ARE CLEAR BENEFITS OF HAVING MUSLIM WOMEN IN SENIOR LEADERSHIP.

Organisational diversity of thought comes from having a variety of perspectives. Having Muslim women in senior leadership

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Organisational diversity of thought comes from having a variety of perspectives. Having Muslim women in senior leadership contributes to that diversity.

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contributes to that diversity. Furthermore, having Muslim women in senior leadership can motivate other Muslim women to aim high. Some will find it inspiring to have such examples and it can make it more comfortable for other women to apply to comparatively senior levels. Women know they will have at least one other female colleague to work with.

SO, LET'S SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER.

More can be done to encourage and support Muslim women into senior leadership positions within the Muslim charity sector and the charity sector more generally.

Muslim women must put themselves forward for leadership roles if they are qualified. If you're unsure if you are sufficiently qualified, find assurance from others around you who know your skills and abilities well. Seek out sponsors and look for advice from others to support you in your roles, as engaging in supportive partnerships with other women – as well as men – will help you to succeed.

Muslim men who are leaders can help too. Don't assume you know how to help Muslim women, instead ask the Muslim women around you how you can help. Muslim men must be prepared to change the status quo. Whether that is changing the seating arrangements in the workplace, or re-thinking the nominated speakers at an event, someone has to be

prepared to be first. Engage in supportive partnerships with women - as well as other men – to help women succeed. If you believe they have the necessary skills and ability, let them know. Share your social capital – your influence, your knowledge, and organisational resources - with women as well as men.

The best ally relationships are reciprocal, respectful and enable growth. I once heard a Muslim charity CEO describe a female senior leader's value to their organisation as '99% due to competence, 1% due to being female'. When colleagues are working effectively in the workplace in pursuit of a common goal, identity markers such as gender become subordinate to a higher purpose.

In a verse coming shortly after the explanation of the eight categories of Zakat, God says in the Qur'an: 'The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and establish prayer and give zakāh and obey Allāh and His Messenger. Those - Allāh will have mercy upon them. Indeed, Allāh is Exalted in Might and Wise.' (9:71)

Being a senior leader in the charity sector is challenging. So, let's support one another in that endeavour - both men and women - for the benefit of us all. As that communications group might put it: through collaborating, we all win.♦

A SYSTEM CHANGE:

RESTORING DIGNITY WHILE ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

In November 2022, the world population officially reached eight billion people. Approximately, 85% of the world's population identify with a religious belief emphasising the significance of incorporating diverse faith perspectives into the policies of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs). Religion frequently assumes a pivotal role in shaping individuals' convictions, principles, and behaviours, thereby impacting their viewpoints on matters pertaining to healthcare, education, and employment.



Professor Husna Ahmad OBE

Having spent the majority of my career within civil society organisations, I believe that these spaces need to be navigated appropriately. By turning challenges into opportunities, institutions and networks have a huge part to play when shaping norms and cultures – both internally and externally. As a British Muslim woman working in this space over the past few decades, I feel that without institutional changes, diverse communities will continue to be disengaged and marginalised in these spaces – terminally regarded as 'Other' and causing the persistence of inequalities, particularly gender inequality, continues to endure.

Whilst being a woman in leadership poses its own challenges; being a hijab-wearing, Muslim woman of colour has an intensified difficulty to it. Having held leadership positions for the better part of twenty years, I can say confidently that time is not always a great healer. In my experience, what tends to happen is that eventually the discrimination and disregard shown to you begins to take its toll, leaving you feeling dejected and expecting this as the status quo.

In such situations, perseverance is of utmost importance, as is the ability to cultivate relationships and form alliances with colleagues who provide unwavering support in order to successfully overcome obstacles, especially when faced with challenging environments.

SYSTEM CHANGE

It is my firm conviction that civil society organisations whether in the global south or the global north should steer clear of token gestures, seriously invest in inclusion and

genuine representation, and when formulating policies, should take into consideration some of the following factors:

Cultural Sensitivity and Understanding:

Acknowledge the diversity present within religious communities and comprehend the cultural subtleties associated with various faiths. This entails showing respect towards religious practices, traditions, and beliefs that may influence individuals' perspectives on health, education, employment, and emergency situations.

Collaboration with Religious Institutions:

Establish connections with religious leaders and institutions, take them on the journey to foster cooperation and ensure that policies are in line with the values and teachings of different faiths. This can enhance the acceptance and effectiveness of initiatives within religious communities.

Gender and Equality Considerations:

Recognise the influence of religion in shaping gender roles and dynamics. Develop policies that advocate for gender equality and inclusivity, while considering the intersectionality of religious and gender identities.

Health Policies and Cultural Practices:

Take into account the religious viewpoints on health matters, including beliefs about medical treatments, vaccinations, and reproductive health. Be aware of cultural customs that might impact health behaviours.

Religious Education Integration:

Within the framework of educational policies, acknowledge the significance of religious education and cater to the

various religious backgrounds of students. Encourage tolerance, comprehension, and reverence for different faiths within educational environments.

Inclusivity in Employment Practices:

Incorporate inclusive employment practices that honour religious diversity. This could entail accommodating religious practices, granting religious holidays, and cultivating a workplace atmosphere that appreciates diversity.

Addressing Religious Discrimination:

Implement measures to combat and prevent religious discrimination. This entails establishing an atmosphere that actively opposes stereotypes, prejudices, and biases based on religious affiliation.

Engaging with the Community and Seeking Input:

Engage communities actively in the process of policy formulation. Seeking input from religious leaders, community members, and individuals representing diverse faith backgrounds ensures that policies are well-informed and responsive to the needs of the community.

By incorporating these considerations into their policies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) can deliver a real change, contribute to more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and effective global initiatives in areas such as healthcare, education, and employment. This approach acknowledges the significance of religious perspectives in shaping the behaviours and aspirations of individuals and communities.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN ACTION

How we as humanitarian actors in the international development sector treat

our beneficiaries is of utmost importance, particularly our women beneficiaries. Women leadership in our sector can play a significant role in changing the narrative around the way in which we perceive beneficiaries. The key aspect of this narrative is that women understand and comprehend the needs of women in both a cultural and faith sensitive way which can easily be missed by men.

Dignity for all is what we need to promote in all our humanitarian and sustainable development interventions. So many traumatic experiences are faced by vulnerable women in the global south that the least we can do is give them some semblance of dignity in the way we interact with them.

Global One, my organisation, is an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) dedicated to women's empowerment. We operate in seven countries located in the global south. Our core belief is that when women are empowered, they have the ability to transform not only their own lives but also their communities and the world at large. Which is why we work with some of the most marginalised women around the world, to equip them with the tools they need to break the cycle of poverty and injustice.

We believe that the key to prosperous communities lies in sustainability and knowledge. Our unique gendered and religion-cultural approach is effective because it appeals to the personal and strongly-held beliefs of the communities we work with when advocating for gender justice and puts sustainable development firmly within a framework that is sensitive. Our work focuses on women who are chronically underrepresented and

disempowered on the global stage and aims to create a platform that enables women to be resilient drivers of development in both local communities and wider society.

The significance of acknowledging faith and cultural sensitivities and incorporating them into our actions is often overlooked when it comes to empowering women. This is precisely why I emphasise the importance of advocacy. However, in order to effectively advocate for change, it is crucial that we possess the necessary knowledge and evidence. Additionally, establishing connections and networks plays a pivotal role in this endeavour.

Global One commissioned research in 2016 on the effect of statelessness on Syrian refugee women which resulted in a report called More Than Half. This research analysed the impact of statelessness in several crucial areas of women's lives including water, sanitation and hygiene, menstrual health, mental health and psychosocial support, and religious and cultural beliefs. It found that women suffer disproportionately from the negative effects of statelessness, being exposed to far worse conditions relating to their psychosocial and physical wellbeing and increasing the risk and incidence of sexual and gender-based violence.

We found there was a lack of an intersectional understanding of these women's' needs, as well as their Muslim identities.² Not only are humanitarian efforts failing to address women as women, but they are also failing to tailor interventions towards the gendered and faith specific needs of Muslim women. These two central identities of an individual, gender and faith – are not, and should not be compromised even in the most devastating of circumstances.

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Women leadership in our sector can play a significant role in changing the narrative around the way in which we perceive beneficiaries. The key aspect of this narrative is that women understand and comprehend the needs of women in both a cultural and faith sensitive way which can easily be missed by men.

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LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

The Sustainable Development Goals are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice. As the SDGs are a universal call to action, it is important that we all work together to address the pressing concerns globally that impact on all human life – governments, civil society, faith communities and international institutions. A by-product of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDG's is the 'Leave No One Behind' initiative. Representing a 'commitment of all UN Member States to eradicate poverty in all its forms, end discrimination and exclusion, and reduce the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind and undermine the potential of individuals and of humanity as a whole'.♦

STORYTELLING

THE ULTIMATE TOOL FOR CREATING CHANGE AND OVERCOMING OBSTACLES



Shazia Arshad

As Head of Communications and Creative Content at Islamic Relief – no two days, indeed no two minutes are the same! But that is what makes this job so interesting and inspiring – using my experience to help tell the stories of our organisation, and most importantly the stories of the rightsholders that we serve. I’ve always been fascinated by the power of stories, the power they have to move, to stir emotion and most importantly to inspire and create real, transformational change. For so many of us working in the charity and NGO sector, it’s this passion to create change that motivates us every day.

Youthful exuberance encouraged me to embark on a career path that would help to create real change in the world. That desire to create a better world for those who need it most, for vulnerable communities suffering from humanitarian disasters, conflict and long-lasting instability has continued to motivate me. Whether through my work in politics or my work in the NGO sector, the thread that has run throughout my career is the role of communications and using stories to inspire and create moments of advocacy.

I’ve had many unique experiences during my career, and perhaps one that stands out was a trip that I led with leading members of the Labour Party Shadow Foreign Office team to Palestine. On that trip, the group of MPs met with a young girl in a refugee camp who had witnessed the brutal and violent arrest and detention of her teenage brother. The young girl’s story resonated so strongly with the group that it was recounted on the House of Commons floor in a debate on refugees and human rights. It was just one story, and just one young girl and her family, but it was the

power and the truthfulness of her story which motivated the MPs to take this story back to their colleagues as evidence of the change so desperately needed in the region.

Moments like this demonstrate why the real-life stories of people are so important and, indeed, so impactful. Stories help us to understand why systemic change is needed, and how without that change it is the most vulnerable communities around the world that continue to bear the harshest consequences of that.

Yet communicating stories is perhaps one of the most sensitive and complicated things to do. As well as protecting the rightsholders, whose stories we are communicating, we also must balance these within the contextual environment in which we tell these stories. When I first joined Islamic Relief UK, my first foray into the Muslim charity sector I recognised that one of the major challenges would be the prevailing negative stereotypes and misunderstandings that create barriers to effective storytelling. These stereotypes can perpetuate mistrust, hinder engagement, and lead to biased media coverage. To counter this, it is crucial to proactively address misconceptions by showcasing the diversity, inclusivity, and positive impact of Muslim organisations. By promoting authentic stories, highlighting successful initiatives, and engaging with local communities, these organisations can challenge stereotypes and build bridges of understanding.

While the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine capture headlines, the crises in places like Syria, Haiti, Sudan, Yemen, Myanmar and many forgotten causes also require

sustained attention, diplomatic efforts, and humanitarian assistance. Advocacy for increased awareness and support for these regions is crucial to addressing the immediate needs of affected populations and working towards long-term solutions –and currently one of the most difficult issues facing us is the impact of hunger in East Africa. Over the last year we've been trying to tell this story to the world, and highlight the devastating impact that hunger is having on millions of lives in East Africa, especially on women and girls. Yet, telling this story has been challenging, with few media outlets picking up the stories, few politicians carrying forward the call for action and ultimately a continued lack of funding further perpetuating the hunger crisis across the region.

One of the biggest challenges we face as a Muslim organisation is telling the stories of the Muslim rightsholders we serve who are often in far flung countries, whom many news organisations and audiences feel disconnected to. Our job is to bridge that gap and tell the stories of the people we work to serve. The obstacles to telling these stories are numerous from racism and Islamophobia to the physical distance and the growing concerns facing communities here in the UK, but overcoming these obstacles means that we give a voice to the communities in the global south. The everyday challenge I face is taking on the role to bridge that gap, finding the journalists who will help me tell the story of Islamic Relief's work in East Africa.

During the opportunities I've had to meet with journalists and discuss the challenges of getting the stories of Muslim charities heard in the media, many of the conversations have dwelt on the limited access journalists have to

the many stories we wish to tell. Journalists face difficulties gaining access to charities work, especially in regions where political, social, or security concerns restrict media freedom or the work of non-governmental organisations. This limited access can hinder the journalists' ability to investigate and report on the activities, impact, and the challenges faced. As economic and political challenges here in the UK dominate headlines, and indeed the newspaper readers everyday concerns, it's the stories of ordinary East African's that fall down the priority list.

These obstacles might make the situation seem bleak, but in reality, this is just one example of the mountains that need to be climbed in my role. It means finding stories that resonate with journalists, it means telling media organisations about the incredible rightsholders that we're supporting every day in places like East Africa and making these stories accessible, by reminding everyone that they are stories about mothers finding ways to feed their children, stories about families thinking about how to make ends meet, and farmers looking for ways to keep their livestock alive. One of the many privileges of all my roles, has been the opportunity to meet people whose lives are directly impacted by the organisation. Whether it's a young girl in Palestine or a mother in East London, I've been granted the honour of meeting inspiring people who've shared their incredible stories with me and given me the chance to share their stories as part of my work to campaign for the change that will ultimately improve the lives of so many communities. On every occasion, I recognise that each story is a special and rare gift.



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Ultimately, it is the stories that we tell that will help us to harness the power for change – it will encourage policy advocates to understand the changes needed to improve people's lives, and it will be these stories that will showcase the ultimate successes of the long term transformational change that lift communities out of the hardships they face.

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And it's the gift of these stories, when they become accessible and relatable, that help us to overcome the challenges of telling the stories of Muslim organisations. But they're just one tool in the toolbox, ultimately it requires a concerted effort. We need to actively address negative stereotypes, engage with the media, and leverage digital platforms effectively, to amplify the narratives of our Muslim organisations and foster a more inclusive and informed society. It is essential for stakeholders, including the charities, to collaborate and develop tailored strategies

that highlight the invaluable contributions of Muslim charities dedicated to improving the lives and livelihoods of families around the world.

Ultimately, it is the stories that we tell that will help us to harness the power for change – it will encourage policy advocates to understand the changes needed to improve people's lives, and it will be these stories that will showcase the ultimate successes of the long term transformational change that lift communities out of the hardships they face.◆



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FAITH & BELIEF FORUM AND ISE FAITH CENTRE

MY JOURNEY INTO THE MUSLIM CHARITY SECTOR AS A YOUNG PROFESSIONAL



Samiira Hasan

Would you trust a young person with no experience working in the charity sector to lead on crucial projects and campaigns within your organisation? MCF not only gave me the opportunity but also encouraged me to do just that. Last Summer, as a fresh graduate from UCL with a degree in Politics and International Relations, I found myself at a crossroads in my career, contemplating the next steps in my professional journey. Reflecting on my brief experiences in sustainability research, public relations and as a volunteer for different charities, I knew that, moving forward, I wanted a role that would leverage these skills and resonate with my commitment to fostering positive social change and contributing meaningfully to my community.

Inspired by the words of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), “Whoever relieves a Muslim of a burden from the burdens of the world, Allah will relieve him of a burden on the Day of Judgement.” (Jami` at-Tirmidhi 1930), I longed for a career that would allow me to leave a lasting impact on the lives of others. This desire naturally directed me toward the nonprofit sector.

Particularly, the Muslim charitable sector appeared to align seamlessly not only with my career aspirations but also with my religious values, which was a welcomed bonus. However, like many recent graduates, I faced challenges finding a position that suited me and would allow me to gain the necessary skills to succeed. It appeared as though there were limited opportunities for entry level roles or internships within this sector, something I would later discover was a symptom of the overextension and underfunding of many charitable organisations.

GETTING MY FOOT IN THE DOOR

At the time, I believed I was worlds apart from breaking into the sector. But, by the will of Allah (SWT), I discovered the opportunity to become a Future Leader at Muslim Charities Forum (MCF), an organisation leading the way towards a more accountable, transparent and sustainable sector. I was instantly drawn to this opportunity due to its potential to offer a platform to engage on new initiatives and serve the community as well as address some of the most pressing issues facing Muslim-led charities in the UK.

Entering this role, I was full of energy and curiosity, but uncertain of what to expect from this programme. However, from the moment I joined, I found myself embraced by a small yet diverse team and was soon immersed in meaningful work that helped broaden my understanding of international aid and development. Whether it was working on emergency responses to crises across the world, supporting ongoing research projects in areas affecting Muslim-led charities or writing blog posts on sector news, each day presented new tasks that helped contribute to both my personal and professional growth. As a Future Leader, no two days were the same, allowing me to fully experience the fast-paced nature of the charity and humanitarian sector.

FROM FUTURE LEADER TO CLIMATE ACTION LEAD

Undoubtedly, the Future Leaders programme played a pivotal role in opening doors for me and preparing me for the next chapter of my journey at MCF as a Junior Climate Action Lead, a position kindly supported by the Aziz Foundation. Given my strong interest in sustainability and positive social action,



it was an opportunity too compelling to pass up. Alhamdulillah, I successfully secured the role, embarking on a journey that would later challenge me in the best ways possible.

From the very start, I was entrusted with real responsibilities, managing and leading all climate related initiatives at MCF. This role encompassed a range of exciting tasks, including overseeing MCF's communication strategy for COP28 where we amplified the voice of the Muslim charity sector in the global climate conversation and highlighted the sustainable aid projects of our member organisations. Additionally, I took advantage of countless opportunities for learning and upskilling, such as participating in climate communications training and attending sector-wide events, including the first-ever Muslim Charities Convention. These experiences enabled me to connect with inspiring individuals who have excelled in

their careers within this sector. Being amidst such a diverse array of people and thoughts was particularly refreshing, and I truly value the advice I received.

My biggest project to date involved conducting crucial research into climate action within Muslim charities and organisations in the UK. With the impacts of climate change affecting communities both locally and globally, including those in Muslim-majority countries, the imperative for charities, regardless of their mission, to address these challenges has never been clearer. However, for various reasons, many Muslim-led charities and organisations are facing barriers in taking meaningful climate action. The primary objective of this project was to identify these barriers and develop practical recommendations to help increase engagement with climate issues across the sector. Although the fight against climate change is far from over, knowing that

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By contributing to a more just and sustainable future, our work has the potential to act as a Sadaqah Jariyah (ongoing charity), where even benefiting a single individual represents a significant achievement.

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I have contributed to projects that are part of something much bigger, such as working towards a healthier, greener future for all, is beyond rewarding.

Operating within a small team in the charity sector presents its unique challenges, including limited resources and the need for additional support to have a greater impact. Nevertheless, the work culture at MCF serves as a strong motivator. The team embodies the organisation's values, emphasising that our work is more than just a job; it holds spiritual significance. By contributing to a more just and sustainable future, our work has the potential to act as a Sadaqah Jariyah (ongoing charity), where even benefiting a single individual represents a significant achievement.

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE NOT JUST THE FUTURE OF THE SECTOR, THEY ARE THE NOW.

Moving forward, it is crucial for the Muslim charity sector to offer more opportunities to young people where possible and actively involve them in different projects and campaigns. Young people can contribute significantly to various organisational goals, such as enhancing representation, connecting with younger audiences, facilitating more effective outreach efforts, and fostering greater technological adaptability in the digital era. Although it is simply beyond the scope of this article to further list how young people can bring about value to the sector, it must be acknowledged that they are an asset, bringing fresh perspectives, innovative ideas and a unique outlook to various initiatives. It is time to provide them with greater opportunities for learning and development, empowering them to become the leaders and activists our community needs. ♦

THE ART OF BUILDING UNDERSTANDING



Catherine Roe

“I was like a scrunched up leaf when I walked in here yesterday. I now feel I have opened up.” These words, from a participant at one of Amal’s workshops, tell us so much about how access to creative opportunities can change things for individuals. “I think we were all healed in every possible way,” said another woman. “I feel like a kid again,” said a third. They were part of a group of Brummie Muslim women who, using intuitive drawing techniques and printing, created work shaped by iconic Muslim women and took away inspiration for making positive choices in their own lives. At Amal we have witnessed that process of unfurling countless times – of connecting with others, sharing experiences, growing in confidence and pride, healing, feeling joy. Always, it has been the opportunity to be creative that has sparked the unfurling.

It has been Amal’s mission to help unleash the vast creative potential of British Muslims. Happy as it makes us to see how this enhances individual wellbeing, we have been pursuing a society-wide purpose too. Our starting point is that the dominant negative narrative around Muslims in the UK stokes prejudice and discrimination, holding Muslims back in every walk of life and standing as a barrier to greater social cohesion. It is unjust to British Muslims and detrimental to the success and harmony of British society. In place of a stereotyping narrative, we need ones that are authentic, nuanced and confident. That is why Amal has sought to grow opportunities for Muslim creativity – so that many more stories can be told in all their diversity.

This is not easy work. Muslims face multiple barriers to creative engagement, first and foremost their economic situation, collectively the most disadvantaged in the country. Many

major arts venues are in city centres where research shows Muslims may feel themselves to be more vulnerable to aggression than in their familiar neighbourhoods. Despite the arts sector’s emphasis on diversity and inclusion, most arts venues still don’t feel like places that are for Muslims. Monitoring of demographics, widespread in the sector, rarely asks about faith as opposed to other protected characteristics so there is less incentive for arts organisations to think about how to ensure Muslims are included. Muslim artists tell us they can feel tokenised or exoticised in what they are commissioned to do and we have often encountered an assumption that what Muslim artists do is far more limited than it is in reality. Some members of some communities have a more conservative view of what constitutes “acceptable” arts than we see in multiple Muslim heritages or contemporary cultures in many Muslim-majority countries.

Over seven years Amal has sought to overcome these barriers by providing opportunities that would not otherwise have existed. We have learned that, if you can remove the barriers, there is a huge appetite for creative engagement. This means making arts accessible – meeting Muslims where they are, providing opportunities in local spaces including mosques and churches, community centres and outdoor spaces, taking people to art galleries and theatres to which they have never ventured and making them feel at home there, making sure the facilitators they work with understand their circumstances and, if necessary, languages. It means making art relevant by co-creating work with Muslim artists and communities and discovering what relevance really means. In our experience, this encompasses all art forms and a vibrant, sometimes surprising, blend of influences that



are Muslim, cultural, British, traditional and contemporary. It means making spaces safe for people to express their challenges and their stories, but also have fun. A lot of support is needed to help community organisations and artists strengthen the processes required to do this work. You also need to take into account that the people you work with are often dealing with adverse life events and give them more time to deliver projects. Then, the high-quality work these projects produce deserve to be showcased in places that allow cross-community encounters to take place, encounters which take people into places and conversations they would not otherwise have.

As a Muslim-led and inspired organisation, we have found it really matters to be as inclusive as possible of the huge diversity of the UK's Muslim communities, in our projects and our team. Including people who are not Muslims has proved to be a strength too. You can't disrupt a negative narrative by working only with those on the receiving end of the prejudice you want to undermine. We've found it also matters to insist on high standards of transparency, accountability and learning, even when this is irksome to hard-pressed partners, because some people remain to be convinced that these standards are adhered to in the sector. And we've discovered the benefits



of being an all-female team (which happened by accident, not design). For our work to be effective, we need to be close to communities and that is often easier for women.

Last winter, I watched 25 Muslim boys, most of whom had never performed before, sing as The Nasheed Choir of Bradford. "I feel excited," said one of the boys. "I've always wanted to do something unique or something that's never been done before." What was unique was that the Choir developed a new form of music that blended their Muslim, British and South Asian heritages. Performing to a packed Bradford Cathedral, they showed us how exciting it can be to be all those things at once. Parents talked about seeing their sons' confidence grow as they learned and rehearsed. Many people commented on how good it was for the community and for Bradford that the Choir performed in the city's cathedral. One audience member said: "We've got Muslim people, we've got Christian people, we've got Hindu people, we've got people of no faith, enjoying an evening together. I hope it will be used to bring our communities together in a world which is really, really separating people."

At Amal we share this hope. ♦



EMPOWER HER

THE ROLE OF MUSLIM CHARITIES

IN SUPPORTING FEMALE EDUCATION



Javeria Hashmi

Over 222 million school aged children are affected by some form of crisis, whether it is extreme poverty, natural disasters, or conflict. Globally there are 132 million girls who are not in school, and it is estimated that over 9 million girls of primary school age will never start school or set foot in a classroom (UNICEF). Those who do attend school are not achieving minimum proficiency in mathematics or reading.

Poverty is one of the most important factors for determining whether a girl can access and complete her education. If families cannot afford the costs of schooling for all their children, they are likely to send boys rather than girls to school. If this is coupled with other disadvantages such as living in remote locations or have a disability, they tend to be farthest behind in terms of access and completion of education.

Additionally, violence prevents girls from accessing and completing their education especially when they are forced to walk long distances to school placing them at an increased risk. Research shows that approximately 60 million girls are assaulted on their way to or at school every year. This can lead to stigmatisation from communities and the victims dropping out of school and not returning.

Child marriage is also a critical challenge, with girls who marry young much more likely to drop out of school and complete fewer years of education. This leads to having children at a young age, consequently affecting the education and health of their children, as well as their ability to earn a living.

Furthermore, the unprecedented increase in conflict in recent years has left more people suffering due to protracted humanitarian needs and represents a central challenge to the educational progress of girls with their right to quality education either denied or destroyed. The climate crisis is also one of the leading causes of displacement with a disproportionate impact on girls with reduced school attendance, increased drop out, and risk of child marriages. Their learning suffers and are more likely to be out of school in non-emergency settings.

222,000,000

SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN ARE AFFECTED BY SOME FORM OF CRISIS

132,000,000



GIRLS WHO ARE NOT IN SCHOOL



“With more than **800 references** to the word *ilm* (knowledge) ... in the Quran, it urges mankind to think and learn.”

As a woman myself in a leadership position, I have first-hand knowledge of the importance and necessity of education for girls and young women, that if given the right opportunities at the right time, they can achieve so much. In the past 23 years of working in the charity sector, I have practically seen how educating a girl has a transformative effect on families and communities, uplifting and supporting them economically and protecting future generations. International NGO's and charities can greatly contribute to ensuring gender equitable access to education by identifying and removing barriers to help keep both boys and girls in schools, building prosperity for entire countries.

Unfortunately, many Muslim girls in least developed and developing countries face further challenges with institutions lacking female teachers, no separate bathrooms or sanitary facilities. This is exacerbated by girls and young women living and growing up across classes, impacted by the rural and urban gap due to varied socio-economic development, and feudal conformities imposed on their lives. With the non-involvement of the community and lack of gender sensitivity hampering their access to education, many girls either never go to school or drop out before completion. The critical issue of early marriage arises at the senior & higher levels of education with parents succumbing to monetary pressures,

believing girls to be a liability.

In Islam, education is a divine command for men and women. The Quran as well as the hadith leave no doubt that women, like men, are obligated to increase and pursue knowledge. With more than 800 references to the word *ilm* (knowledge) and its derivations in the Quran, it urges mankind to think and learn.

Muslim charities have the unique role of social mobilisation and to work with families, communities and local governments, reiterating how Islam values education and that it is one of the sacred rights. They can work in regions where girls are discriminated against due to social resistance and aim to improve access. This can include safe learning environments, improving teachers' skills, and supporting gender-responsive education programmes along with awareness raising for families and communities.

Additionally, girls' education goes beyond getting girls into school. Muslim charities can aim to ensure multi programming, allowing girls to not only learn but feel safe while in school. Robust safeguarding measures and incorporating protection alongside capacity development of teachers and school staff will allow girls to feel less vulnerable and allow them to focus on their studies. Interventions should provide opportunities to girls to



BY 2030, ONE IN FIVE GIRLS IN CRISIS-AFFECTED COUNTRIES WILL NOT BE ABLE TO READ A SIMPLE SENTENCE.

complete all levels of education and acquire the knowledge and skill to successfully compete in the labour market and gain the socio-economic and life skills necessary to navigate and adapt to a changing world. Education will build confidence in making decisions about their own lives; and contribute to their communities and beyond.

Whilst improving access, Muslim charities should also focus on reducing drop out and bringing back the girls who have had to drop out for different reasons. Again, highlighting the importance of social mobilisation and working closely with families and communities, especially those who influence decisions made by the heads of households.

Girls are also impacted disproportionately in emergencies. It is estimated that by 2030, one in five girls in crisis-affected countries will not be able to read a simple sentence. Muslim charities are designing programmes and increasingly implementing in the humanitarian space, giving them the opportunity to promote gender-responsive and inclusive planning. This will include focusing on interventions to ensure equitable education during the planning of emergency preparedness, response and recovery. Charities themselves need to ensure a participatory approach as girls' meaningful contribution in planning educational responses can provide

opportunities for change and highlight issues which may be left unresolved. Addressing social barriers, more specifically financial, can ensure that girls continue learning during emergencies and can eventually return to school.

Hence women who have had an education tend to be healthier, are economically stronger, marry at a later age and, if they choose to have children, they are healthier and attain an education themselves. Muslim charities can play a huge role in uplifting women, their families and entire communities out of poverty.

At READ Foundation we strongly believe in the power of education as it transforms lives, giving vulnerable communities a way out of poverty and builds resilience in crises. Our programmes ensure the educational empowerment of marginalised communities. We are building and opening schools that provide an education to the world's most vulnerable, setting up mobile classrooms in refugee camps and conflict zones. Aside from Pakistan, we have now expanded to Yemen, Lebanon, Turkey, and Bangladesh with a special focus on girl's education, especially under the umbrella of our programme 'Empower Her'.♦

THE ROLE OF WOMEN
IN THE BRITISH MUSLIM CHARITY SECTOR:

EMPOWERMENT CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES



Hanan Ashegh

When contemplating humanitarian charities, it is customary for most people to sympathise with what they have been conditioned to see; a traditional list of vulnerabilities that begins, and often ends with women and children in need of protection from exploitation, as well as assistance to survive during difficult times. This becomes particularly relevant during challenging economic periods, in the aftermath of a global pandemic, and ongoing political conflicts that leave behind the scars of war and forced displacement.

I invite you to delve deeper into this matter. Who, in your view, is better positioned to lead humanitarian projects aimed at supporting these vulnerable groups, especially women and children, than a woman equipped with the requisite skills?

However, it seems on the most part, that beyond general discussions and support for lower-level roles women are not at the forefront of leadership roles in the charity sector – especially in the Muslim charity sector. A 2019 survey conducted by Charity Finance reveals that ‘almost 70 percent of chief executives at the largest charities in the country are men.’¹ This disparity becomes even more evident when examining the UK Muslim charity sector, where it has been documented that ‘none of the top UK Muslim charities are led by women.’² A quote from the Quran reads, ‘Men will be rewarded according to their deeds and women equally according to theirs. Rather, ask Allah for His bounties. Surely Allah has perfect knowledge of all things.’³ (*Surah An-Nisa 4:32*), the verse in the Quran is clear.

We have all heard the saying, ‘it’s a man’s world’ and in developing countries this sentiment often becomes even more apparent due to cultural constraints. Women leaders such as myself are often viewed through the lens of a ‘third-world culture’ and the achievements of UK Muslim charity CEOs are not necessarily based on their merit. Empathy and lived experience of unconscious bias in a female Muslim leader’s life empowers her with the tools needed to lend an empathic point of view. It is likely she who can gracefully navigate the intricacies of culture, religion, and societal nuances, bringing forth

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Through my work at Goodwill Caravan, I have witnessed the immense challenges concerning female beneficiaries in developing countries. These obstacles often arise from limited access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and the pervasive issue of gender-based violence. Muslim charities have a crucial role to play in addressing these specific needs.”

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a transformative impact while upholding the values of compassion and solidarity, and is fully capable of leading Muslim teams of both genders.

Empathy and lived experience of unconscious bias in a female Muslim leader's life empowers her with the tools necessary to lend an empathic point of view, and it is likely she who can gracefully navigate the intricacies of culture, religion, and societal nuances, bringing forth a transformative impact while upholding the values of compassion and solidarity, and is fully capable of leading Muslim teams of both genders.

Eight years ago, while I was juggling patient reports and other responsibilities as a mother, I saw a harrowing report on the evening news about the heart-wrenching disappearance of 165 unaccompanied children in the Calais

Jungle. What was once an old military base used to train 2000 soldiers has since turned into a wasteland of muddy dishevelled tents containing over 10,000 forcibly displaced people from all over the world with little to no security.

Unable to ignore the profound pain and suffering etched into the eyes of mothers who had lost their children, I felt an irresistible calling within me. It became an indelible catalyst, urging me to leave behind the familiar confines of my long-standing role as a Cognitive Behavioural Practitioner in the NHS, along with the pause of my Ph.D. aspirations in the field of neuroscience. Driven by an unwavering determination, I founded a non-profit humanitarian organisation called Goodwill Caravan and later registered it in the United Kingdom and as an NGO in Greece – one of the main geographic ports of entry for

refugees fleeing wars and persecution into Europe.

Since that transformative moment, I have shouldered both the privilege and the weight of bearing witness to the plight of refugee women whose resilient souls we labour to assist and protect. It pains me to see them ensnared in a web of unfortunate circumstances largely stemming from a lack of support to facilitate their integration into a new life. Compounded by an alarming lack of reliable information available to them, these vulnerable individuals find themselves at an elevated risk of exploitation. Our exhaustive surveys have revealed a sobering truth that while donors often feel gratified by contributing towards tangible items such as food packs, blankets, and shelters there exists a crucial commodity that remains distressingly scarce for refugees. It is the dire need for reliable and up-to-date information encompassing access to legal support, medical assistance, employment opportunities, and education to name but a few. Refugees and asylum seekers are unequivocally entitled to receive accurate and pertinent information, a belief shared by the signatories of the U.N. 1951 Refugee Convention.⁴

Through my work at Goodwill Caravan, I have witnessed the immense challenges concerning female beneficiaries in developing countries. These obstacles often arise from limited access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and the pervasive issue of gender-based violence. Muslim charities have a crucial role to play in addressing these specific needs. By prioritising projects and initiatives that empower women within their communities, we can create a lasting impact. Collaborating with local organisations,

designing tailored programs, and implementing capacity-building initiatives can help break the cycle of inequality and uplift women in these regions.

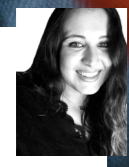
A clear example of this bias is an 'Access to the Job Market' project Goodwill Caravan have implemented since our inception. Unfortunately, the main beneficiaries put forth in this program are often male, as it appears women were viewed by their communities as caretakers for children and are culturally expected to remain concealed. It is imperative that we implement policies addressing unconscious bias, promote work-life balance, and provide mentoring and networking opportunities for these women. By fostering an inclusive workplace culture, we can attract and retain talented individuals from diverse backgrounds, ensuring a vibrant and diverse sector from both genders.

With time comes change and in contemplating the gradual change in the role of women in the British Muslim charity sector, it fills me with a sense of hope for the future and gratitude for the strides that have been made, and the enduring positive impact we continue to forge. By empowering women in positions of leadership, actively addressing the unique challenges faced by female beneficiaries, and enhancing the support systems in place, Muslim charities can play a pivotal role in shaping a more just and compassionate society. Moreover, by fervently championing diversity and inclusivity within our sector, we create an environment that nurtures growth, fuels innovation, and fosters collective impact. Together, let us strive towards a future where the invaluable contributions of individuals, irrespective of their backgrounds or gender, are not only recognised but also celebrated with utmost reverence.◆

TACKLING

UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

IN BRITISH MUSLIM CHARITIES



Jamilla Hekmoun

From University ISOCs to multi-million-pound non-profits, female volunteers are the backbone of Muslim charities in the U.K. But when we look at their trustees, directors, and senior management, women seem to be notably absent. We depend on the unpaid labour of women to raise funds for charities, volunteer at events, and even cook for them. Yet, women are severely underrepresented in these higher positions. Let's look at Trusteeship as an example of the underrepresentation of women in the British Muslim charity sector, as this information is readily available on the Charity Commission website. Islamic Relief Worldwide is a positive case of female representation, where four out of nine trustees are women¹, and Muslim Aid is also doing well with four out of seven trustees being women.² On the other hand, if we look at other major UK-based Muslim charities, the circumstances look bleaker. As per the Charity Commission records, four of the biggest with an income ranging from 25 to 60 million have no female trustees at all. This is not only about a lack of representation of women at these senior levels, but also the affect this has on a charity's policies and focus.

Many of their beneficiaries are children and women, a significant proportion of whom have been widowed or abandoned because of war, poverty or other factors. Would it not make sense to have more women making decisions that affect our gender? Having women in decision-making roles increases the diversity of thought and representation. With women making up "50 per cent of any refugee, internally displaced or stateless population", it is important for governance structures to reflect this.³ Issues like access to hygiene products or sanitary items in refugee camps is

just one example of an issue that a male-led team would not necessarily consider or place on such high importance as is needed. If a charity believes women are good enough to be running events, manning donation phone lines, and providing meals for hundreds of people, there should be an encouragement into more senior roles, making changes at a board or director level.

There are hundreds of qualified women in the charity sector, often overlooked in favour of their less experienced male counterparts, where some organisations more resemble a fraternity than a charity. While this issue needs to be addressed within charities themselves; helping to promote more women to these senior positions, we need to empower more women to apply. Evidence suggests that as men make up the majority of leadership positions, it's easier to imagine a man succeeding in these roles, while women wanting to apply will face "perpetual scepticism"⁴. It is also dependent on charities to encourage women into applying for leadership roles and giving women more chances to succeed. One great example of this was the 2018 Muslim Council of Britain's Women in Mosques Development Programme – which I participated in. Although I am not certain whether the programme has been re-established post-COVID, its aims were to take women who showed leadership potential and get experience as Trustees in mosques. Though a mosque's role and focus does not exactly match that of a large charity, the principles of the programme could be easily replicated.

And there are examples of some amazing Muslim women led charities. Take the Muslim Youth Helpline for example, an organisation I was proud to be a trustee for. Currently, it has

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My message for British Muslim charities: do not promote women for solely diversity's sake but examine any unconscious bias that may exist when you interview women for these male-dominated roles. Think about the different voices that women can bring to the roles and how this may benefit your organisation and its beneficiaries

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a female director, and three female trustees⁵. The charity is a mental health helpline, and from my experience in the mental health sector, it is a field which tends to attract more women than men. However, they are positive example of women in leadership roles which could be replicated amongst wider British Muslim charities.

There is also a need to empower women to apply for leadership roles. Studies suggest that women tend to understate themselves, “rating their performance as 33% lower than their equally performing male colleagues”⁶. Additionally, women are more likely to show where there are gaps in their knowledge, instead of emphasising their abilities (Ibid).

Understanding these indirect barriers to progression could help British Muslim charities fill their gender gaps. Women are also less likely to be in higher positions due to career breaks they may take to have children, so rather than their careers progressing, they remain stagnant. Women can be reluctant to disclose their marital status to prospective and current employees for fear of being discriminated against due to the possibility of

needing maternity leave and being passed over for promotions. There needs to be a general attitude shift towards women in the workplace, and British Muslim charities are no exception – and should be leading by example.

My message for British Muslim charities: do not promote women for solely diversity's sake but examine any unconscious bias that may exist when you interview women for these male-dominated roles. Think about the different voices that women can bring to the roles and how this may benefit your organisation and its beneficiaries.

For an example of a Muslim woman leader, I look towards Khadijah (r.a), the wife of the Prophet Muhammad (saw), who was a successful businesswoman in Mecca, at a time when these trades were male-dominated. She was a trailblazer, whose reputation preceded her, and was known as al-Tahira (the Pure One), due to her integrity. She is someone who I strive to emulate throughout my career. British Muslim charities should also look to inspirational Muslim women across Islamic history and encourage women to take up leadership roles.♦

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MUSLIM PHILANTHROPY

INVESTING IN THE DREAMS AND THE FUTURE OF COMMUNITIES



Rahima Aziz BEM



I was just shy of fourteen years old when the Aziz Foundation was created. The brainchild of my father, Asif Aziz, the Foundation began as a grant-making organisation with a focus on providing support to the most underprivileged communities in the UK; this included the Afro -Caribbean, Roman Gypsy travellers, White working class and, of course, British Muslims. Over the course of the following four years, we have supported a variety of different projects in the arts, commissioned research on the British Muslim community, and operated a microgrant scheme all in the name of raising the profiles of these underrepresented communities. My involvement increased steadily over these years. I attended plays of theatre companies we supported, I sat in on grants meetings where we combed through numerous applications to decide which were most likely to make the most impactful change, and I went to networking events where I met key changemakers from Muslim communities and got to grips with what it means to be intimately involved in such communities.

Often the youngest person in the room, I often found myself quite intimidated. It had never occurred to me so poignantly as it did in those moments how important it was to have the difficult conversations. Conversations about why Muslims, why our community, our people, were not where they should be. They were working just as hard, why was this hard work not paying off? Where could we focus our efforts to make the most substantial change? In 2018 we underwent a strategic review of our entire organisation which revealed that our quest to tackle so many different communities and issues at the same time was ultimately diluting our social impact. It is for this reason we decided to shift our focus down

to a scholarship scheme for the British Muslim community, one where we could make a root impact by supporting the further education of individuals who are committed to bettering their community and wider society.

Now in 2023 we have found a model that works. That is not to say we are not still developing this, but our model works because we identified areas where Muslims are particularly underrepresented, and we have found a way to focus on these areas. Our scholarships are open to all British Muslims who wish to pursue a career in one of our seven target areas: journalism, tech, sustainability, law, policy, arts & culture, and sports. These target areas are not rigid. Each year we review what areas we could perhaps move away from, and what areas we need to open our programme up to. An area I personally pushed to bring in was sustainability. In 2022, on the heels of the pandemic and COP26 conference, conversations in the field of climate change were more necessary than ever. These conversations proved to be difficult in the Muslim community. There are a plethora of grassroots organisations targeting environmental issues however a lack of funding and communication hindered our progress. What became apparent to me was that everyone was more than willing to talk about climate change, recognising the role of Muslims as stewards of the earth, but few were able to commit to working with us to tackle this issue.

We launched a programme with Willowbrook Farm to encourage more Muslims to learn about tayib organic farming practices, offering them the opportunity to embark upon short courses in halal butchery, beekeeping, lambing

and much more. Interest in these courses was not what we had hoped, and ultimately, we had to consider if we were being tactical in our approach. The introduction of school groups proved to be more successful, suggesting when it comes to sustainability, targeting the younger generation is a more prosperous means of enacting meaningful change.

The development of our Preferred Partners programme allowed us to ensure we were only working alongside forward thinking institutions who were committed to creating an inclusive learning environment for Muslims. Our strategy focused on leveraging our scholarships with universities to open conversations about EDI, the degree awarding gap and widening participation. Based on feedback from our scholars, we developed an internships programme that meant we could propel them into the job market after completing their masters. We offer apprenticeships at some of the top organisations in the UK, including The Evening Standard, The Financial Times and The Independent. We offer internships at MP offices, exposing young Muslims to work that will ensure their community perspectives are valued. These paid experiences are a crucial aspect of our strategy. By working with organisations that have wide reach, we can better their understanding of equality and diversity as well as engaging more British Muslims in these fields.

The Aziz Foundation's benefactor is property company Criterion Capital, the largest landowner in Piccadilly Circus. This has afforded us a wealth of opportunities, the most recent of which was our key involvement in bringing Ramadan Lights to London. It has always been a central focus of the Foundation to uplift the Muslim community, and an

important facet of this is engagement with other communities, cementing our place, making it clear what we have to offer and what we deserve to have recognised. London is the city with the most Muslims in the entire United Kingdom. With an average age of thirty-five, London is a young city in an otherwise ageing country and Muslims are a key part of this. To create impactful change, we must direct our focus to those who are our future leaders. Walking Coventry Street in the days after we unveiled the lights was surreal. Small children out with their families were staring up in awe, teenagers were posing for photos, influencers were taking videos. It was beyond what I could have imagined. Finally, an outward expression of Ramadan could light up the city. The hope was, and still is, that other cities in the UK follow our example and commemorate Ramadan in a similar way.

Not every response to this was positive. There were some that felt this was a waste of time, money and resources, that just by putting up something pretty we were not changing people's minds about Ramadan or Muslims. To this I say look no further than the mobile phone in your hand. Whether we like it or not, social media has an impact far greater than any other form of engagement. It is through platforms such as Instagram and TikTok that people, namely millennials and Gen Z, share content that creates lasting impressions on viewers. In a thirty second reel you can find out all the best places for halal chinese food in North London. In a fifteen second TikTok you can find out what companies are environmentally friendly, and which to boycott on the basis of human rights violations. In a single post you can learn more about Ramadan than you perhaps ever learnt at school. This information is surface level, of course, but it

is undeniably effective. Christmas lights draw thousands of people into central London, sometimes just for the photo opportunities. Ramadan lights being featured on Coventry Street, believed to have the highest footfall in all of Europe, resulted in sparking an interest in millions of people across the world in what is otherwise a relatively unknown holy month to those outside the religion. Five years from now, perhaps no one will ever ask you at work again 'but can you drink water?'. They will already know. To make a lasting impact you have to know where the movers and shakers are, and how they operate.

The Aziz Foundation prides itself on uplifting young Muslims in the UK, specifically young Muslim women. This is reflected in over 70% of our scholarship recipients being women, and over 80% of our interns. Young Muslim women are a crucial part of our future but are minimally represented, both in opportunity and in ability to access faith provisions. Our plans to open a nice prayer space in Piccadilly Circus, with significant prayer space for women, hope to relieve this issue. By creating a space in which young Muslims working, studying or visiting Central London can form a community and engage with their religion, we hope to raise the profile of Muslims in London and cement the feeling of London being a truly multicultural hub.

The British Muslim Philanthropy sector is one that is constantly evolving. We are more engaged, more accepting, and more prosperous, but we also have a long road ahead of us to truly be a community at the top of our game. From the perspective of a young Muslim, and more importantly a young Muslim woman, the glimmer of hope is brighter than ever before.♦

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To make a lasting impact you have to know where the movers and shakers are, and how they operate.

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EMPOWERING
VOICES AND
BREAKING BARRIERS

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE BRITISH CHARITY SECTOR



Pulvisha Raja

In the charity sector, as in many industries, the compelling voices of women are often muffled. As the Associate Director for People & Culture at leading UK humanitarian aid charity Human Appeal, my journey reflects that of many others, as one marked by resilience in a sector where challenges are prevalent. Breaking through societal and professional constraints, the stories of many females in this sector highlight the transformative impact of navigating adversity to shape our success in positions of leadership.

These experiences are more than just a personal journey; they serve as a call to acknowledge and overcome the distinct challenges that women face on their path to leadership roles - both within the charity sector and beyond. Our stories are a call to break down barriers and foster an environment where every woman's journey is acknowledged and valued as an integral part of the sector's narrative.

NAVIGATING CHILDHOOD ADVERSITY

The educational journey for Muslim women is marked by challenges that can significantly influence our paths: stereotypes, low expectations and sometimes bullying by those who take a hostile attitude towards Muslims, impact our confidence, for example due to our different ways of dressing and the distinctiveness of our names. The dearth of female Muslim role models during these formative years also moulds our career aspirations, by shaping our self-perception and impacting our self-esteem. Despite these hurdles, we persist, to carve a space where our identities are validated and celebrated from childhood, as we navigate the path to adulthood.

Societal expectations can also curtail opportunities for higher education, adding to the difficulty young people face when taking control of their futures. For example, it is assumed by some that many Muslim women prefer to stay at home, which puts limits on our aspirations and prospects, and reduces our opportunities, to the point where many submit to societal expectations. However, for those who pursue higher education, these struggles may still emerge later - questions about settling down arise, often overshadowing our ambitious career goals. The discrepancy between starting a family and prioritising our careers presents an ongoing battle for many women.

FAITH IN THE WORKPLACE: NAVIGATING BIAS, CULTURAL SHIFTS, AND INCLUSION

When we strive towards achieving our career goals, unique challenges arise for women. Unconscious bias in interviews can exert pressure on candidates to conform to preconceived notions of organisational culture, impeding genuine self-expression - that's if we even reach interview stage. A report from Labour Force in 2017 states that British Muslim women are approximately 70% more likely to be unsuccessful at seeking employment¹ than Christian women - even when we have the same qualifications and skills. Cultural differences in the workplace may also cause isolation, creating obstacles to career progression and hindering our ability to showcase our skills and talent.

For those who are successful in accessing opportunities in the workplace, our cultural and religious practices can still be subject to bias. For example, an often-overlooked aspect

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Inclusive workplaces aren't just a goal to fulfil ESG targets; they are necessary for respecting and unlocking the full potential of every individual.

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is the accommodation of our daily prayers—a simple yet crucial practice for people of Islamic faith - which reflects the broader challenge workplaces face in adapting to diverse backgrounds and faiths. Inclusive workplaces aren't just a goal to fulfil ESG targets; they are necessary for respecting and unlocking the full potential of every individual. Yet we still face problems and often feel we must adapt in workplaces where our own acts of worship are not common practice.

BRIDGING THE GAP: A CALL TO ACTION FOR MUSLIM CHARITIES

While progress toward greater inclusivity is taking place across all industries, Muslim charities and organisations have the unique opportunity to draw on elements of our faith to drive this forward: by emphasising justice, charity and the importance of strengthening the community as a whole.

Bridging the gender gap at all levels is a pivotal first step. Despite constituting 60% of the third sector's workforce², women remain notably underrepresented in leadership roles. Establishing clear and transparent career pathways, coupled with regular gender pay gap analyses, are imperative steps toward addressing this persistent disparity. Policies supporting women in the workplace, including

flexible arrangements for young mothers and those re-entering the workforce, cultivate a more nurturing and supportive environment.

Recognising inherent gender differences and embracing diverse approaches is paramount. Leadership teams, especially those led by women, must comprehend their roles as influential figures, and strive to become empowering role models, setting the tone for an inclusive and collaborative environment.

EMBRACING DIVERSITY: A CALL TO CULTIVATE INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES

The idea of embracing diversity and equity is instrumental in driving the overall success of charities and organisations to unprecedented levels. As Muslim women, advocating for our voices to be heard becomes essential, not only to create a more inclusive environment but also to yield tangible outcomes in our productivity, engagement and positive workplace culture. Fostering an environment where women feel confident in their abilities is crucial to their success, considering that 90% of women worldwide are penalised and undermined because of their achievements at work³, according to a recent study by The Tallest Poppy. Creating forums for open dialogue, where women of all faiths can share experiences and insights, also fosters a sense of community and support.

While inclusive workplaces benefit women in particular, it's also the responsibility of men in leadership positions to recognise the disparities and take measures to ensure a more equitable working culture. In doing so, we ultimately support the careers of all employees, and Muslim women specifically who are statistically more likely to face



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Actively implementing strategies to increase diversity and inclusivity isn't just a commitment – it's an investment in the sector's future and dynamism. It is an understanding that a more inclusive sector doesn't just benefit women or one specific faith; it enriches the entire landscape of charitable work.

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hardships. Muslim charities and organisations should be the ideal place for women to thrive, due to our focus on the community, so we have the responsibility to make changes in the sector to reflect this active inclusivity for generations to come.

THE CONTINUING JOURNEY: TOWARD A MORE INCLUSIVE AND DYNAMIC SECTOR

While positive steps are being taken, the path towards equity and inclusion for women in the charity sector is still unfolding. Actively implementing strategies to increase diversity and inclusivity isn't just a commitment – it's an investment in the sector's future and

dynamism. It is an understanding that a more inclusive sector doesn't just benefit women or one specific faith; it enriches the entire landscape of charitable work.

The ongoing narrative of empowerment and breaking barriers requires collective effort, dedication, and an unwavering commitment to ensuring that every voice, and specifically those of underrepresented communities, is valued. As we continue this journey, let us envision a future where the British Muslim charity sector represents the values of diversity, equality, and empowerment—a testament to the potential that we foster in individuals when all voices are heard.♦

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO SPREAD PEACE

&



Julie Siddiqui OBE

BRING COMMUNITIES TOGETHER



Being around Muslim communities as an activist, a community organiser, a lover of meeting new people, for more than twenty years has given me insight and perspective that I am really grateful for. I have been involved in social action projects, in raising awareness and celebrating Islam and Muslims, as well as supporting women who have been abused. Within all of that, I have worked with people from all faiths and different backgrounds. It is something that has just made sense to me, why would I not do it rather than wondering why I do.

Living in the UK as a woman, as someone passionate about their faith and then interested in how that all fits together in society alongside differing views, means there is never a dull day. The opportunities are many, the skin becomes thick, the resilience is built and yes, the faith and belief in God becomes even stronger but more outward looking, more generous, more open, more inclusive, and more curious.

Women in all faith communities face similar challenges in ways that I think are often overlooked. Maybe it is easy for society to think of the 'poor oppressed Muslim women' and make us the scapegoats and forget the issues of gender in all communities and in society itself.

A few years back I had an enlightening conversation with Archbishop Justin Welby at an interfaith event when I asked a question about faith, leadership and women that some people in the room found a bit difficult. He came up to me afterwards, thanked me for asking the question and said "if anyone tries to tell you that we don't have any issues with gender and leadership in the Church, they are lying. Two thousand years since Jesus and we are still struggling to get it right!"

As is the case with mainstream charities, the CEOs of most of our Muslim charities are men. The Councils for Mosques are all men. The holders of the community purse strings are mostly men. We must know that Muslim communities will never fully fulfil the potential with half of the community not properly involved or having a seat at the table. And the flip side of that is that we know in all charities, women are the backbone and do the most work, raise the most money, build the most relationships and connections. If we could transfer and share more of the decision making, imagine what could be possible.

I also feel that the work of faith charities and organisations has so much untapped potential yet to be explored and put into play when it comes to different faith communities working together. Imagine a church, with a foodbank in the church hall, every week the volunteers arrive, all of them over 65. They are surrounded by food that has been donated, they have set rules and ways of doing things, so they don't adapt and change. Up the road is a Mosque, they have a committee who are open to new ideas and working with the local community, but they have no idea where to start, they have never done this kind of work before. They have a dozen or more willing, young, passionate volunteers all under 30 who want to help and be involved.

Is the matching up and piecing together of the two examples above happening much? Not really. But imagine the potential, the benefit to everyone involved when finding creative and positive ways to work together in service. Sadaqa is about giving our time, not just our money.

Lots of good work is happening but in silos, not enough joining up or sharing of resources

– be they human, material, or physical resources. For some communities they will be hesitant or reluctant to join up and work together with people from different faiths and backgrounds. And that's OK, it's expected, it's understandable, to a point. So, it will always take brave people, the bridge-builders, those who are willing to build relationships, to develop the trust, to cross the divides that have been put up in peoples' minds. We need to get practical and think about what the needs are in our local communities and what can faith groups, centres, charities do to bridge that and make a real difference, together.

I have always put a lot of emphasis on friendship, finding good people from Muslim and other faith backgrounds to develop a good, trusted connections with.

I realised after some years at the start of my interfaith community journey, that Jews and Muslims have very little interaction in the UK. There were pockets of good work happening but most of it was governed by the conflicts in Israel and Palestine. For many, they will tell you "It's not religious" but in reality, the impact and heartbreak among Jews and Muslims here is felt more intensely than among other groups. This sometimes strays into being offensive, making judgements on a whole people without any caveats and with lots of blame, and often without ever having properly spoken to or got to know anyone from the other group.

The first person to call me after the Christchurch Mosque terrorist attack in New Zealand was a Jewish friend. She knew some of how I would be feeling and allowed me the trusted space to share my frustration, anger, and fear. She listened and it was powerful and so helpful to have her there in that moment.

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So, some of my interfaith work has been specifically with Jews and Muslims. Alongside a Jewish co-founder and Muslim friends who gave me advice and encouragement, Nisa-Nashim, the UK's Muslim and Jewish Women's Network, was born. Nisa and Nashim mean 'women' in Hebrew and Arabic. We have now set up a national network of local groups, organised activities and sessions in-person or online, and most of all, we have listened to each other. The similarities are, of course, many. The challenges of this work are big, when there is a war happening it has a deep and lasting impact on us here. Some friendships have broken down.

It's work I am proud of; it has also been some of the hardest work I have done and certainly put to the test while the war continues in Israel and Gaza. Causing me to dig deep and regularly re-check my intentions for why I do what I do.

Working with different faith communities can be complex, as it presents both external and internal obstacles. Among the internal

challenges, one's own community may question and misunderstand the reasons behind involvement in such initiatives.

I have personally encountered my fair share of suspicion, accusations, and even serious online threats.

So, I remain optimistic and hopeful because that is what God expects of me, while also being pragmatic and realistic of where we are and the attitude shifts that are needed for real change and impact to happen.

Right now, in Britain in 2024 we have so much opportunity. We really can do more together, build bridges, be a collective positive force for good and show the rest of the world how it is done. Our faith communities bring so much tangible good to Britain. I just hope we can find more ways to work together to make that even more of a reality in all of our communities.♦

ON BEING MUSLIM

AND GREEN

From the start of my green career in post-apartheid South Africa, I have been involved in developing and implementing inclusive policies and solutions that deliver social, climate and ecological outcomes. Working with urban and rural communities, policy makers and investors, workers and employers, I have realised that the green agenda is a social agenda.



Dr. Najma Mohamed

Climate scientists warn that global temperatures are likely to surge in the coming decade, with catastrophic impacts on people and the planet. Biodiversity is in crisis – with a million plant and animal species at risk of extinction and over 75% of Earth's land areas substantially degraded. Inequality is deepening. Poverty is entrenched in much of the world and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Actions to combat climate change and environmental degradation is now an imperative to save lives and livelihoods and should be on the agenda of every organisation working for social good.

Clearly the actions that countries are already taking, such as restoring nature, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and creating green jobs – though a step in the right direction, is not enough. We are facing a 'code red' for people and the planet as we enter a decisive decade that requires courage, determination and whole-of-society action. We need a societal response for this planetary crisis. This includes harnessing the power of religious traditions in advocating for a healthy planet.

Ecological ethics which inspires and directs humankind towards responsible and just action is necessary. Religious environmental values and ethics can promote responsible and respectful interaction between people and the planet, it can inspire and motivate for change, and it can encourage positive social action.

For the two billion Muslims and the network of organisations that they have established to work for social good, Islam's ecological values and ethics is a source of power to drive responsible, just, and respectful action for the wellbeing of people and planet.

ISLAM'S GREEN ETHIC SEEDS A NEW MOVEMENT

Concern for the planet is deeply rooted in all fields of Islamic teaching and culture. Today, Muslim scholars are investigating the implications of key conceptual principles in Islam for human interaction with nature. They have started to develop and share the green ethic of Islam, and from the minbars of Cape Town to the coral reefs of Zanzibar, Muslims are reviving the environmental teachings of Islam in practice.

Students of Pondok Pesantren near Bogor, Java initiate a river conservation programme premised on Islamic teachings; youth in Birmingham, UK take to the street in an 'eco-jihad', a clean-up campaign called 'Clean Medina'; mosques across Canada implement a green Ramadan campaign to discourage wastefulness; while Misali island fishers in Zanzibar change course when they learn that the widespread practice of dynamite fishing is against the ecological teachings of Islam.

The green banner of Islam is being held aloft by a cadre of thinkers and doers who are showing, through words and actions, that in being true to the teachings of Islam, every Muslim is required to exercise responsible stewardship on planet Earth. They are all unanimous that Muslim institutions constitute the bedrock for raising awareness of the ecological teachings of Islam and ensuring that it becomes a part of every Muslim's daily life.

HOW CAN MUSLIM CHARITIES GO GREEN?

Climate and environmental actions are not confined to the environment and climate sector. It is increasingly becoming the

responsibility of every organisation working for social good, since it impacts the issues and the communities that charities, Muslim charities included, serve. Drawing on Islam's ecological teachings, there are five actions that Muslim charities can undertake to begin to embody and reflect this message in their work. These are:

Develop a Vision: understand why climate and environment matters to a Muslim charity. It matters as one of the greatest risks to societal wellbeing and social good, but also because Muslims need to exercise the ethical mandate of responsible and just trusteeship in their work and lives. Education and training materials that outline Islam's teachings on climate and nature are widely available and can be used to help shape and develop a mandate and vision for climate and environmental action rooted in the teachings of Islam and aligned with the charity's mandate.

Identify and Assess Impact: climate and environmental breakdown will differ in the extent it will impact a charity's mandate (what they work on), operations (how they work), partners and stakeholders (who they work with) and context (where they work). Climate change and environmental degradation impacts geographies and communities differently, and so a key step for any charity is identifying the risk, opportunity, and vulnerability that climate and environmental issues present. This will help identify the contours and key areas for action.

Green Your Mandate, Operations and Processes: there is growing guidance (and practitioner community to boot) to support

organisations to assess, audit and review how climate and environmental issues impact the organisation, and strategies for climate and environmental action. This includes integrating sustainability practices in the delivery of the organisational mandate, but also 'greening' processes and operations (how we work), such as travel, procurement, event management, ensuring good practices are implemented.

Mainstream Climate and Environment Action: monitoring the implementation of the climate, environment or sustainability strategy will be essential to ensure that this growing awareness and action becomes embedded in the culture and operations of the charity. Climate and environment strategies and actions are already becoming core, and not a separate strategy, to organisational vision and mission, driven not only by policy and regulatory requirements, but by the recognition of the climate and environmental risk (and opportunities) that charities and the people they serve, face.

Build Alliances: partnerships and alliances with the broader climate and environmental movement are crucial. To achieve a transition to a nature positive, climate resilient and just world – one in which no-one is left behind, Muslim charities must display the transformative force of their religion that propels them towards living in justice with people and the planet. They must fulfil their mandate of securing the public good in line with Islam's climate and environmental message and principles, and work with those who are leading the transition to a just and sustainable world.

CHARITIES CAN ACT FOR JUSTICE AND SUSTAINABILITY

Scientists have warned that if we do not act with urgency, we face an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events due to climate change. By the end of 2022, the impacts of climate change were already being felt as heat waves, wildfires, storms, and drought, both more frequent and more intense, led to billions worth of damage and loss of lives, livelihoods and income.


Living in justice with people and with the planet is an obligation for every Muslim individual and collective, who accepts the mandate to live as a vicegerent of Allah on earth. The eco-justice ethics of Islam seeks to rectify humanity's relationship with the planet, inculcate just and moral behaviour, and mitigate all creaturely harm. Muslims must play their part in crafting new pathways for societies, communities, and economies, and display the transformative force of their faith which propels them towards living in justice with all creation. For, 'Indeed, God loves those who are just.' (Al-Mā'idah 5:42)

Muslims own a fair share of the global responsibility around the wellbeing of the planet and its people. They draw upon religious teachings to shape their values, beliefs, and attitudes towards life, including the climate and ecological crisis. Muslim charities should be on the frontline of the struggles for climate and ecological justice, reviving the ecological message of Islam by raising awareness and most importantly, acting upon these teachings as part of their mandate to work for social good. ♦

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No to
Islamophobia.
No to war.

EMPOWERING MUSLIM WOMEN IN GLOBAL ADVOCACY

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES, PROMOTING CHANGE



Shahin Ashraf MBE

As Muslims, we are called upon to be ambassadors of justice, compassion, and positive change in the world. Advocacy empowers us to raise our voices, stand up for the marginalised, and champion just causes. In this article we unravel and embark on a transformative exploration of the power of advocacy, its significance in our lives, and the remarkable individuals who embody its spirit and how through the Prophetic lens we cultivate a world where justice prevails, and our values illuminate the path to a better tomorrow.

The Muslim charitable sector should recognise the profound significance of advocacy, as it resonates harmoniously with the principles and teachings of Islam which emphasise justice, compassion, and the protection of human rights. Advocacy allows Muslims to actively engage in positive change, address social injustices, and uplift marginalised communities. The example of Prophet Moses (Musa, peace be upon him) advocating for safety from Pharaoh provides a powerful illustration of the significance of advocacy within Islamic teachings. As narrated in the Quran, when Moses was chosen as a prophet by Allah, he was tasked with confronting Pharaoh and advocating for the freedom and safety of the people. This narrative highlights several key aspects of advocacy.

The Story of Prophet Moses recognises the injustice and oppression faced by his people, and he and his brother felt compelled to take action. This aligns with the Islamic principle of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong (Quran 3:104), which encourages Muslims to actively stand against injustice and advocate for positive

change. Moses, guided by Allah's command, fearlessly approached Pharaoh, and conveyed the message of liberation. This Quranic story serves as a timeless reminder, demonstrating the importance of speaking truth to those in positions of power and advocating for the rights and well-being of others, even in the face of adversity.

Another powerful reminder is from the life of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), after his initial encounter with Angel Gabriel in cave Hira, Prophet Muhammad was deeply affected and troubled by the experience. Seeking solace, he returned to his home and confided in his wife Khadija, seeking her counsel, "O Khadija! What is wrong with me? I was afraid that something bad might happen to me." Then he told her the story.

Khadija said that in order to soothe him, she brought to his attention his remarkable attributes and the impactful actions he had taken in his daily life. "Nay! But receive the good tidings! By Allah, Allah will never disgrace you, for by Allah, you keep good relations with your Kith and kin, speak the truth, help the poor and the destitute, entertain your guests generously and assist those who are stricken with calamities." (Sahih al-Bukhari 4953)

By following these beautiful examples, Muslims can actively contribute to positive change, promote social justice, and build a more equitable society.

Advocacy from a women's perspective in Islam holds great significance, as it aligns with the principles of justice, equality, and empowerment emphasised in Islamic teachings. Muslim women have a unique role to play in advocating for their rights, addressing gender-based injustices, and working towards

positive change. For example, the advocacy and activism of Yemeni Journalist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkol Karman, serves as an inspiration to women all around the world by demonstrating the power of peaceful resistance, determination, and commitment to fighting for justice and human rights. Her efforts have not only brought attention to the struggles faced by Yemeni women but also empowered women globally to raise their voices and advocate for positive change in their own communities.

Nevertheless, the challenges in advocacy are numerous and Muslim women in international advocacy roles within the Muslim charitable sector encounter a multitude of intricate challenges and formidable barriers.

While significant strides have been made in recent years regarding international advocacy, it is crucial to acknowledge and address the limitations that hinder the full participation of Muslim women within the Muslim charitable sector. Often, there is an excessive emphasis on fundraising and immediate relief, which inadvertently overshadows the importance of advocacy and long-term systemic change. However, by consciously redirecting attention and allocating resources towards advocacy efforts, we have the potential to foster sustainable solutions and effectively address the root causes of societal challenges.

In addition to systemic barriers, diverse cultural and societal norms also exert influence on the roles and expectations placed upon Muslim women. Muslim women often encounter intersecting forms of discrimination, including Islamophobia, sexism, and racism. These biases hinder their meaningful engagement in advocacy roles and

undermine their credibility and influence. Nonetheless, by challenging these norms and promoting gender equality within Muslim communities, we can create an environment that not only supports the engagement of Muslim women in advocacy but also amplifies their voices in transformative ways.

Addressing stereotypes and prejudices through education, awareness campaigns, and fostering interfaith and intercultural dialogue is vital for creating an inclusive and equitable space that recognizes and values the contributions of Muslim women in advocacy. To enable Muslim women to be effective advocates, providing them with training, mentorship, and capacity-building opportunities is essential. Enhancing their skills in communication, negotiation, policy analysis, and leadership equips them with the tools necessary to drive meaningful change.

Supporting their professional development and creating platforms for networking and collaboration empowers Muslim women to make a greater impact and contribute to advocacy efforts. Muslim-led INGOs can amplify their advocacy initiatives by collaborating with local and international organisations, governments, and civil society actors. Building strategic partnerships expands their reach, influence, and resources, enabling them to address complex challenges more effectively. Joint advocacy initiatives and the sharing of best practices enhance the collective impact of Muslim women in the sector, fostering collaboration and promoting mutual support. It is crucial to recognise the importance of Muslim women in global and international advocacy roles and create an enabling environment that values their expertise, amplifies their voices, and supports



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their leadership. By addressing the challenges of limited advocacy focus, sociocultural factors, representation, marginalisation, and capacity building, Muslim women can continue to be powerful agents of change. Through collaboration, partnership, and inclusive practices, we can strive for a more just, equal, and sustainable world. The time has come to acknowledge and support the vital contributions of Muslim women, rekindling the light of their historical legacy within the Muslim INGO sector.

To achieve this meaningful change, the Muslim charitable sector needs to embrace a paradigm shift. This entails developing strategies and policies that actively promote gender diversity, fostering a culture of inclusivity,

and implementing transparent and fair processes for career progression. Additionally, investing in leadership development programs specifically tailored to women can help equip them with the necessary skills, confidence, and networks to assume leadership roles.

Finally, as geopolitics changes and the world become polarised, advocacy becomes imperative for promoting understanding, inclusivity, and justice. Ensuring that Muslim women have a seat at the table is essential for amplifying diverse voices, addressing gender inequality, countering stereotypes and Islamophobia, promoting social cohesion, and empowering Muslim women themselves, ultimately paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable global society.♦

HOW CAN MUSLIM CHARITIES IMPROVE PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN DISPLACEMENT?



Dr. Sandra Pertek

Alarming, the number of forcibly displaced people continues to increase, with 19 million more affected people at the end of 2022 than in the previous year¹. Forced migration trends are increasingly feminised, as seen through the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, where most displaced are women and children. Displaced women and girls are disproportionately subjected to cumulative risks of violence and exploitation across the continuum – from conflict and transit to refuge.²

However, the number of forced migrants who experience gendered violence remains unknown and varies by context, but it can be as high as 69.3% for women and 28.6% for men.³ The continuum of violence against women (VAW) along forced migrant routes includes physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated by persons in authority, smugglers, traffickers, border control officials, militia, their partners and other migrants. The needs of displaced survivors are largely unmet as the protection and provision of mobile services remain severely underfunded.

The growing scale of forced displacement necessitates innovative responses. While it is estimated that over half of the world's forcibly displaced people are hosted in Muslim-majority countries, most of which lack migration laws, religious resources offer opportunities for strengthening protection in forced displacement contexts. For centuries, significant contributions to humanitarian crises have come from instruments of Islamic philanthropy, such as Zakat (a form of obligatory charity), Sadaqah (voluntary charity), Waqf (endowment) and other Islamic social finance tools such as zero interest loans. However, little is known about the role of Muslim religious resources in addressing the challenges displaced women face.

Muslim humanitarian charities – often driven by faith principles of social justice – administer principles of Islamic philanthropy and run relief programmes globally. These charities significantly support displaced women through various initiatives and programmes. While specific activities and services offered may vary among different charities based on organisational mandates, resources and the

contextual needs of displaced women, many Muslim charities support displaced women with immediate assistance (e.g. food, water, shelter, healthcare), economic empowerment (e.g. vocational training, income generating activities), mental health and psychosocial support, advocacy, policy influence and multi-stakeholder coordination initiatives. Arguably, Muslim charities may be better positioned to understand the needs of Muslim displaced women accounting for their faith-related needs than mainstream agencies due to the shared cultural and religious proximity. They are also responsible for the equitable distribution of life-saving religious resources, such as Zakat. Therefore, Muslim-led charity responses to humanitarian emergencies must ensure gender-sensitive design to strengthen the protection of displaced women from exploitation, discrimination, and exclusion.

In this piece, I consider how Muslim humanitarian charities could take the next steps to strengthen protection pathways for displaced populations. I draw on my professional experience as a gender and protection specialist, along with research findings from my five-year academic research on women in forced displacement. Given the resources and humanitarian motivations of Muslim charities, I argue that they have a strong potential to develop gender sensitivity in response to displacement, to protect the most vulnerable groups from harm along forced migrant routes.

RISK FACTORS IN DISPLACEMENT

Displaced women face a range of vulnerabilities to violence: loss of resources to pay for travel passes and ransom if detained, family loss,

social isolation, precarious legal status and ineligibility to access aid and public funds due to aid conditionality, and language barriers, to name a few. Many African forced migrant women I spoke to in Tunisia were abused across pan-African routes and sexually exploited in Libya (see Ayesha's story⁴). Similarly, the displaced women I interviewed in Turkey faced a heightened risk of exploitation and sexual harassment by local and migrant men. Many lived in inadequate housing conditions (e.g. ruined houses and basements) and with food insecurity. All Syrian and Iraqi women I spoke to disclosed that strangers approached them in their homes with transactional aid offers. For example, Mona, a woman from Syria in her 30s, disclosed:

"They [informal helpers] would help you a few times, and then they would say, let's keep in contact by phone, and if you refuse, the help stops. They would say either we get married, but secretly, with no rights, or they cut help..." (Ankara 2019)

As revealed above, informal aid provision lacking safeguarding measures enables unscrupulous informal aid workers to harass women to exchange intimate relationships for aid. This is just one case of abuse, among many types of violence, that Muslim charities are suggested to address in areas of their operations.

STRENGTHENING PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE AGAINST DISPLACED WOMEN

Faith-inspired action against VAW

First, as inspired by their faith, Muslim charities would benefit from standing by the Islamic ethics of honouring and protecting

women, especially those most vulnerable women in displacement conditions. Therefore, religious donations, such as Zakat, might be increasingly directed to support women on the move to prevent their exploitation due to destitution and irregular legal status. The Qur'an commands believers to support a 'wayfarer' with charity, which also refers to people on the move and crises-displaced populations:

"The alms are meant only for the poor and the needy and those who are in charge thereof, those whose hearts are to be reconciled, and to free those in bondage, and to help those burdened with debt, and for expenditure in the Way of Allah and for the wayfarer." (Quran 9:60)⁶

Women on the move, often travelling alone, require help to reach refuge safely. Supporting safe transportation and connecting them with local faith communities along their migratory pathways can protect them from exploitation in transit. Likewise, the best protection for forced migrants is their inclusion in local communities. Actions promoting refugee integration and access to health, work, education, and safe accommodation are essential to enable them to rebuild their lives. For example, enabling livelihood opportunities can reduce displaced women's economic vulnerability to abuse.

AN INTEGRATED INTERSECTIONAL AND ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Second, the management of Zakat and Sadaqah funds can be strengthened by applying the best quality mechanisms to identify and effectively respond to protection concerns specific to women during conflict, transit and in places

of refuge. An integrated intersectional and ecological analysis of vulnerability and resilience is a powerful approach that helps identify groups at higher risk⁷. This tool helps to capture risk and protective factors related to identity markers of displaced populations at individual, interpersonal, family, community, and societal and structural levels. Such an approach also means engaging diverse stakeholders from the social ecology of forced migrants, including faith actors - women's faith groups and religious leaders. Intersectional and ecological analysis can be used to design responses to identity-based violence and discrimination and to develop resilience-building interventions.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

As custodians of religious resources for destitute people, Muslim charities have a moral obligation to strengthen protection of displaced women from violence. Key recommendations for Muslim humanitarian actors include:

Programme design and delivery

Programme specialists might consider to develop forced migrant-sensitive programmes with appropriate actions to prevent and respond to violence against women along forced migrant routes, recognising that violence extends beyond conflict into flight and refuge. It is also important to ensure that Zakat and Sadaqah programmes mainstream protection and gender sensitivity in responses to displacement to protect the most vulnerable groups from harm.

In countries of transit

Humanitarian teams can strengthen their work by prioritising the protection principles of dignity, access, participation, and safety of crises-affected people in responses to conflict and humanitarian and immigration settings. They might consider providing mobile services to people on the move along forced migrant routes,

reception centres, and migrant hotspots, including through healthcare, safe spaces, and shelters. Key considerations include to prioritise women's safety and confidentiality and their access to necessary support services, such as counselling and legal advice. Finally, Muslim charities might ensure faith-sensitivity to displaced women's needs, for example providing adequate clothing, and spiritual care, and connecting them with local faith communities, including women's groups.

In places of refuge

Promoting and supporting the integration of displaced women into local communities and access to health, work, education, and accommodation is vital. In addition, investing in developing faith-sensitive and trauma-informed mental health and psycho-social support for displaced survivors is crucial to support their mental health. Furthermore, Muslim charities might consider innovative ways to empower displaced women economically to strengthen their resilience and reduce dependence on the kindness of strangers and informal helpers, along with informing forced migrant victims about legal support, and their rights and entitlements in appropriate languages.

Lastly, Muslim charities can monitor and address risks associated with informal helpers supporting displaced women and girls.

OPERATIONS

On an operational level, Muslim charities can strengthen their work by ensuring remote/mobile response teams and services are trained and sensitised to the needs of survivors of violence and offer appropriate first aid, including psychological first aid. Furthermore, humanitarian teams would benefit from gender balance and trained female staff available to respond to displaced women's needs. It is also essential that protection practitioners develop safe referral pathways to local services for displaced people to access necessary help,

as well as internal safeguarding measures to ensure humanitarian personnel do not pose any risks. In addition, Muslim charities can strengthen inter-agency collaboration, coordination and resource and expertise sharing to effectively address violence against women in displacement.

ADVOCACY

Finally, campaigners might consider innovative ways to raise awareness about violence against women in displacement and push for policy changes that prioritise the protection and rights of the survivors. Advocacy to governments can include calls for safe and legal asylum routes for people subjected to persecution and effective legislation, policies, and services for displaced populations.◆



BUSINESSES SUPPORTING CHARITIES

TIME FOR A NEW APPROACH IN TACKLING SOCIETAL CHALLENGES



Sabah Gilani OBE

As the CEO of Better Community Business Network (BCBN), I firmly believe in the power of businesses to drive positive societal change. BCBN works with businesses of all sizes to support and fund charitable initiatives that create real impact within communities in areas of education, health, disability, environment, arts, prisoner rehabilitation, amongst others. We have seen first-hand how businesses can make a difference in communities, bringing resources, skills, and expertise that support social innovation, sustainability, and growth.

At BCBN, we often work alongside business organisations, entrepreneurs, and corporates, engaging with them to support the most vulnerable and marginalised communities. By fostering collaboration between the business and non-profit sectors, we can leverage the strengths of both to address some of the most pressing social and environmental challenges of our time. This approach can lead to more effective solutions, greater impact, and a more inclusive economy that works for everyone. Our approach is not just about giving money, but about creating meaningful, long-term partnerships that generate shared value and impact.

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR CORPORATE GIVING

To preface, it is important to acknowledge the immense impact that businesses can have on society. Whether through providing employment opportunities, contributing to the economy, or donating time and resources to charitable causes, businesses are uniquely placed to effect positive change. Charities, on the other hand, often have greater expertise in specific areas of need and can provide targeted

support to communities that might otherwise be overlooked. From fighting poverty and social exclusion to providing essential health and education services, charities and non-profit organisations operate in areas where government and market forces often fall short. However, these organisations often struggle to secure sustainable funding streams, find volunteers, or access the resources they need to grow and develop.

That said, there are many reasons why businesses should support charities. Firstly, supporting charities is a way for businesses to give back to their communities, contribute to social good, and demonstrate their commitment to corporate social responsibility. This creates a sense of purpose and meaning for employees, customers, and stakeholders, strengthening the company's identity and reputation. In a world where consumers are becoming more socially conscious and vocal, businesses that actively support charities are more likely to attract and retain customers who share similar values and beliefs.

Secondly, by supporting charities, businesses can tap into new markets, build relationships, and foster innovation. Collaborating with charities and non-profit organisations can provide companies with valuable insights into the needs and expectations of local communities, helping them to tailor their products and services to better serve those markets. Furthermore, charities often operate at the forefront of social innovation, experimenting with new approaches, and testing new ideas. By partnering with charities, businesses can access this knowledge and expertise, learning about emerging trends and best practices that can inform their strategies and decision-making.

Finally, businesses can support charities in practical and tangible ways, leveraging their skills, resources, and network to help nonprofits address their most pressing challenges. Businesses can provide pro-bono services, volunteering opportunities, mentoring, or fundraising, all of which can make a significant difference for charities with limited resources. From marketing and branding to financial management and strategic planning, businesses can offer charities the expertise and support they need to become more effective, efficient, and sustainable.

MAKING A REAL DIFFERENCE

In my capacity as a community leader and changemaker, I have been able to lead various initiatives including an ex-offender housing project, launching the Muslim Fostering Network and founding the Muslim Mind collaborative – all with support from BCBN.

As a co-founder of the Muslim Foster Network, I have had the privilege of supporting Muslim heritage children in care through fostering and adoption. Our organisation operates with the belief that every child deserves a loving home, regardless of their background or circumstances. And through our community-driven efforts, we have helped many Muslim children find a stable home and achieve a sense of belonging.

More recently, I set up the Muslim Mind Collaborative as a means of advocating for better access and support of faith communities in mental health services. In today's world, where mental health challenges are on the

rise, it is essential that Muslim communities have access to culturally sensitive and appropriate support systems. This includes providing much-needed spiritual guidance and rehabilitation support for former Muslim prisoners. This vision led to the first opening of a Muslim ex-offender housing programme, which takes a holistic approach to addressing recidivism and helping ex-offenders reintegrate into society.

Furthermore, another area of focus for me has been on ending youth violence and gang culture. This is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires a collaborative approach. Through key partnerships and collaborations with community leaders, we have been able to provide preventative support and crisis intervention to at-risk young people. By addressing the root causes of gang culture and offering viable alternatives, we are helping to break the cycle of violence that plagues so many of our communities.

SERVING THROUGH INNOVATIVE APPROACH

At BCBN, what sets our approach apart is our dedication to understanding community needs and assessing gaps in service provisions, taking an informed approach through research, stakeholder and community consultations, and learning from experts in the field. By identifying the right delivery partners and working closely with them, we are able to address some of the biggest social challenges facing Muslim communities today.

Through this work, I have made it my mission to foster a Muslim-community-centric voice in the various partnerships, boards, and events

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By fostering collaboration between the business and non-profit sectors, we can leverage the strengths of both to address some of the most pressing social and environmental challenges of our time.

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we have a presence in. Through consultations and meaningful collaborations, we are creating positive change that encourages mainstream services to support faith and culture-sensitive approaches to their support services. Our inclusive and representative approach ensures that Muslim communities have a seat at the table..♦

WHY DO WE NEED

FAITH-SENSITIVE SERVICES

In 2001, three 18-year-old men in London hoped for a listening service to help young Muslims. They dedicated their time to creating the Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH), and after over 20 years, it continues to operate, listening and supporting thousands of young people every year.

The Muslim population in the UK is very young, with 47% being 25 and under¹. We are also a population that is experiencing a higher prevalence of common mental health disorders, with anxiety, depression, and stress being most common among young Muslims. Our studies show that 52% of young Muslims have experienced depression, and 37% said they had nobody to turn to the last time they had a problem². With Muslims being less inclined to seek help, we need to understand the challenges and barriers they face to know how we can best make a change.

The body of research on Muslim mental health is limited but has started to grow steadily. Mental health remains one of the most stigmatised areas of health, and many neglect their mental health in favour of more 'pressing' issues such as taking care of their families. Furthermore, others don't recognise what they are experiencing is a mental health concern. At MYH, we track the primary concerns of our service users to ensure we are best placed to support them and to identify mental health trends amongst young Muslims.

When looking at our helpline data, we have found a range of different issues facing Muslim youth. Within the family, young people's struggles include arguments between family members, dealing with separation or divorcing parents, and sharing their mental health concerns with less understanding

family members. Secondly, we see various relationship issues, from friendships to family to romantic relationships. We listen and offer support to our users to navigate these dynamics and develop the best solutions for their situation. Many young people also access our helpline for support with faith-based concerns. While we cannot offer religious advice, we explore underlying feelings of religious guilt. Many classify their issues, such as behavioural addictions and substance misuse, as sins. They fear being judged by friends or family or being misunderstood or shamed. This often leads to feelings of isolation and loneliness, which are then reflected in other negative mental health patterns, such as depression. Furthermore, many young people access our helpline without a diagnosed mental health condition and are unsure why they are experiencing certain feelings. While our helpline does not diagnose, we help young people get the support they need with their mental health by signposting and working through appropriate coping mechanisms.

We find there are several barriers to Muslims accessing mental health care. These include long waitlists for free care, lack of open dialogue surrounding mental health as many don't associate their symptoms with psychological causes; many issues (e.g., pornography addiction) are still considered taboo, so young Muslims struggle to speak openly about them; the stigma around mental health from the community or families; and a lack of understanding of mental health services available.

Our service users often turn to us because they cannot find an alternative mental health service through the NHS that considers their



Maaria Mahmood

TO TACKLE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE
FACING BRITISH MUSLIM YOUTH?

religious or cultural background and how to incorporate this into their recovery plan. After navigating waitlists and other obstructions in their mental health journey, they often cite that they are 'back to square one' because their counsellor suggested support through a less holistic approach. This affects their help-seeking behaviour, trust in counselling and overall well-being. At MYH, we adopt a culturally and religiously sensitive approach, which puts our beneficiaries at the heart of everything we do.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE FAITH AND CULTURALLY SENSITIVE

Often, the Western model of what encompasses mental illness and how to deal with it does not always make sense in the lives of young Muslims. Having someone who understands the nuances and shares a religious or cultural background with the caller allows a level of familiarity, and the caller can feel confident that they are getting the best holistic and tailored support. Having someone to talk to who follows the same faith, shares similar values, or speaks the same language can make a difference in how comfortable you feel having difficult conversations. Although callers don't expect to receive religious advice, we are a faith-sensitive organisation where callers can feel comfortable speaking about personal experiences. These nuances are usually linked to the reasons they are calling; therefore, having someone to relate to makes a caller more likely to delve deeper into their crisis.

Simply put, young people need to feel as free and at ease as possible when making the most harrowing call of their lives. Because of this, MYH provides a space where young people can discuss anything that concerns them

without fear of judgment. On the helpline, we practice active listening and can signpost to other services where appropriate. Signposting bridges the gap, linking young Muslims to support services they may not have reached out to otherwise. This service also ensures young people are taking the essential steps to begin their journey toward mental health and well-being. Our signposting services are comprehensive and range from therapists to domestic abuse support services, to addiction support, and Imams and Masjids (Mosques).

Since its launch in 2001, the helpline may have altered slightly over the years, but the core service and the desire to help young people through talking, listening, and empathy remain. We know immediate, anonymous support is vital due to long NHS waiting lists. MYH has spent the last two years preparing ourselves to be well-positioned to grow each year to take on all the calls we anticipate. We have sought the best technology to enhance the experience of the service user and our staff, adopted new working models to ensure we deal with the most enquiries daily, and sought the best staff and volunteers to provide a vital service. In 2023, 15,113 enquiries came to the helpline. This was a 22% increase from the year before³, and we're ready to take on an even higher number of enquiries.

Beyond MYH, we need to help change the mental health landscape to support young Muslims better. We must support each other in understanding mental health and wellness and encouraging helpful, wholesome conversations. The future is bright, and if everyone does their part on a personal, local, and broader community level, we can transform the lives of our loved ones for many generations to come.♦

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CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR MUSLIM WOMEN IN NOTTINGHAM

THE JOURNEY OF HEYA



Marwa Soliman

My name is Marwa, I arrived in Nottingham nine years ago with my husband and two toddlers. I found it hard to leave my family and everything behind to explore a new way of life here in the UK. Wearing a hijab made me a clear target for racial abusers and Islamophobic harassments.

By nature, I am a very active person, but sadly, those harassments made me feel devastated and I stayed home feeling it's better and safer this way, isolating myself at home affected my mental health and my children's mental health. I have always believed that a good Muslim should never surrender to any barriers and should pursue to change his/her life for better and other lives as well. If we want to see the change, we must be the change as there wasn't any Arab community where I live. I arranged a focus group run by Communities INC to gather the views of Arab women and what they are facing because of their different types of clothes and their religion. It was a very informative focus group, so colleague who was advising us, suggested why don't you start up your own organisation to help and support women?

So, we went for advice to the Nottingham women's centre where they were very kind and they have been supportive to us until this moment. We wanted to exist, to make sure that our voices are being heard and to represent the needs of our community and our ultimate goal is to have an Arab Community Centre to make sure that Arab women are guided and aware of all the opportunities when they first move to the UK. We wanted a centre that will be the place where Arab women where they can meet in a safe environment with their children and get together in home-like settings, to feel safe and build their confidence. We believe it is important to empower and support Arab women because when they first arrive in the UK, they find themselves in unfamiliar territories, new society and have to learn and deal with the needs of their families without any support network and feel overwhelmed. Sometimes they don't know the language

which increases the gap and affects them and their families.

Heya journey as a charity began, run by three directors; Marwa Soliman, Hanan Shaikh and Nouran Mahmoud. Heya is an Arabic word meaning (She). We have an amazing range of volunteers from all over the world who live in Nottingham to help and support the Arab community of Nottingham, including refugees and Asylum Seekers. It is a proactive community group for women who partake in several events and workshops throughout the year. The activities are free, expressive and without language boundaries making it a personal feel for each person. The women of Heya usually provide traditional Arabic cuisine which are enjoyed by all the members of the community.

Heya has been operating for 5 years. In that time, we have built up a community of Arab women (and their families) in Nottingham. We are open to all women but work primarily with Arabic speaking women from a range of backgrounds with a large proportion of them being refugee and asylum seeker women. Our support network includes over 500 women, and we have direct contact with 800 women. As the group is led by and for Arab women, we serve those who would not otherwise access services or have support. Our service users include women from Syria, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Algeria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Also, we have members from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.

Like any other minorities we have faced various challenges. First, is the language barrier - being mainly Arabic speaking women. This is evident when we try and reach out to external



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Organisations like Heya Nottingham, are providing essential safe spaces and are great assets to the women in our communities, allow women to break barriers by giving them the space, the voice and the resources to develop and showcase their skills and contributions as women of power.

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organisations and service providers, we have to try hard make sure our voices are heard and the needs of those we serve are appreciated and understood by those organisations. As Arabs in Nottingham, another challenge we faced is the misunderstanding between our religion vs our traditions and country of origin. Our culture and religion are not synonymous with each other. Our religion is Islam, not our nationality or language – as mistakenly perceived by some in the community.

As women, we have faced discrimination based on our appearance and misconceptions from different people. It was only when we decided to change the narrative and present ourselves and our culture in a way that allows for our views and values to be respected by the wider society that we have now assimilated into – either by choice or through fleeing devastating situations.

Another issue is the lack of awareness and knowledge concerning our rights and duties. As a group of women, we wanted to break down the social barriers that hinder our integration into mainstream society. Breaking down stereotypes, prejudice and build the awareness

and knowledge about our rights and duties. It was so hard to judge something that you don't know, and it means something different in our culture. We as a group of Arab women wanted to break social barriers that hinder integration into mainstream society. We wanted to have inclusive communities, promoting cultural understanding, and challenging stereotypes are crucial steps toward fostering social cohesion and ensuring equal participation for all individuals. Our organisation is for all Arab Women who have recently moved to the UK and lack personal and social networks. In Nottingham, we offer a safe space for all Arab women to reduce social isolation, support and improve mental health and well-being.

Organisations like Heya Nottingham, are providing essential safe spaces and are great assets to the women in our communities, allow women to break barriers by giving them the space, the voice and the resources to develop and showcase their skills and contributions as women of power. With the help and support of many organisations in Nottingham we have been able to amplify the voices of women and offer them most needed services and this could have only been achieved by working together. ♦

INVISIBLE CAUSES

SERVING THROUGH A VALUE LED, CULTURALLY AND RELIGIOUSLY ALIGNED MODEL



Dr Sofia Buncy MBE

The Muslim Women In Prison (MWIP) Project began in 2013 when Huddersfield Pakistan Community Alliance (HPCA) was commissioned by the U.K. based international charity, Muslim Hands to investigate the needs of Muslim women in British prisons. Some sections of the Muslim community had become aware of the widely unacknowledged issue that there are a small but growing percentage of Muslim women within British prisons. However, very little is known about their plight coming out of the prison systems and their efforts to re-integrate into the community. Equally, there is little known about how they fared within the system and with allied agencies. This was partly due to their relatively small numbers, and a lack of acknowledgement from the community that their women folk could ever be inside prisons. Thus, the plight of Muslim prisoners both in and out of the system was unaddressed in wider contexts. They were simply deemed invisible.

Conducting this research required great attention and sensitivity in working with Muslim women. As a designated youth worker at HPCA, I supported young Muslim women into education and employment. This involved organising a range of activities in the evenings and weekends for young women, whilst building rapport with parents and the older generation as their trust was essential to the process. Soon, my community became familiar with my tenacity to provide help and guidance. When HPCA agreed to partner with Muslim Hands, my established role in the community was considered a natural candidate to lead on the preliminary community-based research into the challenges faced by Muslim women post their release from prison. It was

a demanding and sensitive topic to engage with, but I passionately felt that it needed to be tackled directly, yet sensitively.

The first report 'Muslim Women In Prison: Second Chance, Fresh Horizons' was published in 2015. This highlighted several competing challenges faced by Muslim prison leavers. The research focused on capturing the lived experiences of women leaving prison and indicated that the shame attached to female criminality is gendered, as many men leaving prison are often welcomed into the family fold with protective zeal and shield. Some of the challenges we uncovered for women included: stigma of being a prisoner, family and community rejection, lack of housing, lack of income, scarce work prospects, language barriers, unstable immigration status, and many lacking in confidence and social skills. The lack of familial support systems compounded these issues as they felt the need to hide away from the gaze of their community.

To avoid community backlash, the project was presented as the community taking ownership of their challenges from within. It was framed as an understanding of the challenges Muslim prisoners face to support their integration back into the community, rather than to shame the community. Moreover, the concept of Islamic responsibility remained at the forefront of our approach. Being faithful to the concerns of women whilst alleviating the fears of the community was a difficult balance to achieve. For these reasons, the project team was carefully curated. The team consisted of myself as the lead, supported by Ishtiaq Ahmed. Ishtiaq contributed his knowledge surrounding equality and supported the project through his role as advisor to Bradford

Council for Mosques. This collaboration enabled the commissioning of future research and successfully modelling the community-based support services for Muslim women post their release. Additionally, it was favourably received by the stakeholders and the community which showed an appetite to grapple with this sensitive issue.

After the publication of the first report and its positive reception, I was given the responsibility by Muslim Hands to network with other prisons nationally to promote the findings of the report. I then began to oversee the design and implementation of a second in-depth research commissioned by the Barrow Cadbury Trust and develop a working model of support at Khidmat Centre in Bradford. Initially, the funding was to support Muslim women leaving HMP Newhall and Askham Grange prisons, who were partners in our first research. However, since the initial days of our project, the interest in our support services expanded to other prisons around the country particularly as the Muslim women being relocated came from diverse areas. This was also preceded by the understanding that Muslim women in HMP New Hall and Askham Grange may end up in different areas. Therefore, it was essential for MWIP to have a wider national reach. After dividing my time between the offices in Nottingham and Bradford, I felt the need to focus on developing the community-based model of intervention and support. This led me to work full time, embedding the MWIP project at the Khidmat Centre. This model was developed with sustained funding from the Lloyds Bank Foundation.

The MWIP model is a value led, culturally and religiously appropriate model of front-

line services for women which helps them to mitigate an intersectionality of issues. The two key features of our approach are that our support is not bound by time constraints, and we are accessible when needed. Secondly, the MWIP team of volunteers, in most cases are women with lived experiences who work diligently to provide personalised tailored support in a safe and supportive environment. This fosters a sense of understanding with our clients as there are women working at the centre with relatability. As the delivery is in a front-line community centre, much of the initial support is available on site. This avoids women being passed from agency to agency. The practical support onsite ranges from registering women with local medical practice, access to benefits, safe and affordable accommodation support, family mediation, religious counselling, navigating local transport, and exploring available employment and educational opportunities.

The frontline delivery is combined with policy and impact work. This is done through contributing to a number of national forums within the criminal justice system and allied agencies such as Women in Prison, Agenda, Zahid Mubarek Trust and Hibiscus. Wherever possible, women with lived experiences are provided opportunities to influence conversations and decision making, often leading the discussions. The policy impact is re-enforced by on-going research in collaboration with Sheffield Hallam and Leeds Beckett Universities. MWIP has also recently received commissioning from Barrow Cadbury Trust (T2A) to undertake research looking at the challenges faced by young Muslim women under the age of 25, which is another area of need which greatly concerns us.

Additionally, our culturally appropriate support has further resulted in an 80% success rate of reintegration among MWIP clients. Some have proceeded to colleges and universities undertaking further studies. For example, one of our clients has recently completed a masters in criminology and another has secured a university place to study software engineering. These are just two examples of the achievements of former prisoners who received tailored and needs based support.

The work of MWIP has been highly commended and described as a best practice specialist community-led provision nationally, in this field. The project has received pioneering Criminal Justice Awards such as the Butler Trust Award presented by Patron Princess Anne (2016-17), Criminal Justice Alliance Award (2019) and the Howard League Award (2020).

Due to our hard work, I was awarded an MBE in the late Queens Honours List 2022, an Honorary Doctorate by the University of Bradford as well as the appointment of Deputy Lieutenant for Yorkshire. All this would not have been possible without the support of my colleagues at the Khidmat Centres and our dedicated volunteers.♦

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Some sections of the Muslim community had become aware of the widely unacknowledged issue that there are a small but growing percentage of Muslim women within British prisons. However, very little is known about their plight coming out of the prison systems and their efforts to re-integrate into the community

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ARE WE REAL STEWARDS OF THE PLANET?



Zamzam Ibrahim

Muslim charities and organisations must actively address the climate crisis, not only within their own operations but also in their external endeavours.

Charity is a religious obligation in Islam; therefore, it's no surprise that experts have predicted that Muslim charities in the UK could see a six-fold increase in value, worth £4.4bn by 2050 . So, it begs the question of what impact this increased scale will have and are Muslim charities solving short-term problems without creating long-term ones?

Having worked and volunteered as a fundraiser for multiple Muslim charities early in my career, I am intimately familiar with the urgency and dire need that drives the charity sector. Similar to the climate crisis, it is often the devastating impacts of a disaster coupled with a compelling story that moves people to take action.

In 2011, a devastating drought in Somalia resulted in the loss of 250,000 lives. Regrettably, less than half of the promised humanitarian aid was provided to the affected communities, resulting in the tragic and avoidable deaths of thousands of individuals.

But let's connect the dots; droughts are caused by a lack of rainfall which is the byproduct of a warming planet due to emissions. The Global North is responsible for 92% of global emissions whilst Somalia's emissions are only 0.08%. From this we can see how those in the Global South are paying with their lives because of actions taken by the Global North. This was my trigger point. A catalyst that led to my first charity fundraiser and my broader understanding of how the climate crisis impacts me directly.

I've spent that past decade advocating for a just and sustainable planet, from co-founding SOSUK; a student-led education charity

focusing on sustainability, to working and advocacy, I was running campaigns on youth empowerment, Islamophobia, free education, prevent policy, and work rooted in the fight for justice. As Muslim's we have a duty to act in the face of injustice and it's this principle that guides my work.

The climate crisis holds a slightly different significance, particularly for Muslims living in the UK. The story portrayed in the mass media about the climate crisis is packaged in a way that makes us feel so far removed from the issue and apathetic to change. On the same coin, Muslim charities consistently raise funds for dire situations directly linked to the climate crisis. In the 2022 Pakistan floods, we lost just under 2,000 precious lives and saw millions displaced. With rising temperatures, we know that the glaciers in the northern mountainous regions of Pakistan are melting, contributing to future devastation. We know

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The Quran and hadith contain numerous textual reminders that advocate for the responsible stewardship of the environment. In one such verse, the Quran states, "It is He who has appointed you vicegerent on the earth..." (Quran 6:165)[1]. This serves as a reminder of our duty to protect and preserve the Earth

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the science, we have the data, and we have heard the stories, yet it's as if these events that cause mass devastation take us by surprise.

It is of utmost importance to acknowledge that Muslim charities play a crucial role in addressing the urgent requirements that arise from the climate crisis. I have had the privilege of working with charities that have promptly provided vital assistance and support to affected communities, offering immediate relief, shelter, healthcare, and access to clean water. Through their programmes and efficient allocation of resources, these charities alleviate the hardships faced by vulnerable populations impacted by the consequences of climate change.

The Quran and hadith contain numerous textual reminders that advocate for the responsible stewardship of the environment. In one such verse, the Quran states, "It is He who has appointed you vicegerent on the earth..." (Quran 6:165). This serves as a reminder of our duty to protect and preserve the Earth.

Muslim charities must actively promote sustainable development and resilience-building as integral components of their initiatives. It is imperative that we comprehend the significance of addressing the root causes of the climate crisis and strive towards long-term solutions. This necessitates investing in sustainable agricultural practices, clean energy projects, efficient water management systems, and environmental conservation. By doing so, these charities empower communities to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change, thereby finding localised solutions for global challenges.



While it is crucial for the charity sector to respond to immediate needs, it is equally important to recognise the growing awareness of the need to address the underlying causes of the climate crisis. Muslim charities are slowly integrating climate-conscious practices into their operations. By embracing sustainable strategies such as reducing carbon footprints, minimising waste, and promoting environmentally friendly practices, these charities not only set an exemplary standard but also contribute to the creation of a more sustainable future. Here are a few things I'd like charities to take on...

Resource Consumption: Large-scale charitable activities increase resource consumption, such as delivering aid or running events. This includes energy, water, and materials required for transportation, logistics, and infrastructure. Without proper management, this can contribute to an avoidable amount to carbon emissions, waste generation, and depletion of natural resources.

Waste Generation: The charity sector generates waste as a byproduct of its activities. This can include packaging materials, food waste, and discarded items from donation

centres. Improper waste management practices can result in increased landfill waste and environmental pollution.

Regenerative practises: Some charitable projects, such as infrastructure development or emergency relief efforts, may require extensive use of resources and energy. If sustainable practices are not considered, these projects can lead to land degradation, deforestation, or habitat destruction. For example, construction projects may involve the extraction of natural resources but should only happen with proper restoration or conservation measures.

Climate advocacy: Muslim charities can play a significant role in advocating for the climate; they can raise awareness within Muslim communities about the importance of environmental conservation through educational campaigns and sermons. Highlighting Islamic teachings that emphasise the stewardship of the earth can inspire individuals to adopt sustainable practices in their daily lives. Additionally, they can support and engage in international climate conferences and forums, advocating for policies that address climate change and environmental justice. Through these efforts, Muslim charities can significantly contribute to protecting the planet and fostering a sustainable future.

Most importantly, localise your work as much as possible and be led by the community that you are working to serve. By implementing these local solutions, communities can significantly contribute to addressing the climate crisis. It is through collective action at the local level that global efforts can be strengthened, creating a more sustainable and resilient future for all.♦

THE JOURNEY INTO SPORTS & DIVERSITY



Yashmin Harun BEM

Growing up with two older brothers, it was inevitable that sports would become so ingrained into my life. My father was an avid sports fan. In fact, some of my earliest memories were of my father coming to watch me on sports day taking part in the races and then him participating in the dad's race, which he absolutely relished!

I was very fortunate growing up. I had many opportunities to try different sports. I learned how to ride a bike at the age of five and played football with my brothers and their friends, and was also a keen athlete so loved athletics, including 100m, relay and high jump. When we moved to Scotland, sports was an icebreaker for me. As the only South Asian Muslim family in the small harbour town of Fraserburgh, sports became very important and central to who I was as a person. It removed barriers and instigated conversations, allowing me to make friends.

School played a pivotal role in opening opportunities across many different sports for me such as running, netball, rounders, hockey and football and I was very privileged to captain these teams. Reflecting now, sports taught me resilience, winning mentality, teamwork, leadership, and strategic skills. However, reality hit when at the age of sixteen I had to give up my love for sports.

THE GAP IN THE MARKET

Whilst I was no longer participating in sports as an adult, I was still avidly following it. It was not until I had my two sons, I wanted to return to team sports. There was something about the camaraderie and adrenaline that I really missed. When I began this journey into

the sports sector, I had no idea where it would take me or how far I would go. I suppose I was naïve and did not recognise how under-represented the sector was – not just in participation but across the whole workforce.

In fact, when I set out to find a football coach, I could not believe how difficult it was to find a female coach. It was clearly something that needed to be addressed and I began to probe why it was that there was so little female, Muslim representation across the sports sector. Surely there were many Muslimahs (Muslim Women) who felt like me, who were once keen footballers, athletes and badminton players who loved playing, but no longer had the opportunity because participating may mean comprising on cultural or religious values.

I began with running casual basketball sessions with a qualified female coach, which was supported by a local charity and in 2014 I established Muslimah Sports Association (MSA). Initially MSA sessions faced many challenges. Firstly, we saw resistance from the Muslim women themselves, secondly from the wider local community, and thirdly from the sector what had a lack of understanding of what Muslim women need to engage and participate in sports.

To engage Muslim women, I needed to change the mentality and mindsets around exercise and keeping active. Our bodies are our Amanah from Allah (SWT) and whilst this is very much promoted for men and boys, this is sidelined and not prioritised for women and girls. Exercise is often used as a reactive measure to a diagnosis, whereas it should be ingrained and be part of everyday life.

MSA was established to provide a safe environment for Muslimahs and women from all backgrounds to participate in sports without comprising cultural or religious beliefs. I wanted to create a space where Muslim women could be their individual selves in an all-female environment with qualified coaches and instructors who understood the barriers and challenges we face as a community. The Sport England Active Lives Survey have consistently reported the high inactivity rates of South Asian women, and whilst the data is not broken down into to religious backgrounds, an educated guess indicates a large proportion are from Muslim backgrounds. MSA's own research conducted in 2022 showed there is a large appetite for Muslim women to be more active and engaged in sports, but the lack of safe environments and facilities presents a huge barrier.

WHERE ARE THOSE WHO LOOK LIKE ME?

My background is in banking and my love for sports brought me back to it. My aim was never to be on this path, but Allah (SWT) is the best of planners. Whilst being on this journey over the last ten years, the one thing that always struck me was how I was typically the only brown and hijabi woman in that room, where consultations, decisions or strategies were being established on behalf of my community. The room would inevitably be full of white middle-class men, with very few women dotted around. What lived experiences and insights did they have to make those decisions? Surely, they should consult "hard to reach" communities if they want to increase participation?

Whilst the sector has created several campaigns over the years, such as Us Girls and This Girl

Can, aimed at women to increase participation levels, these campaigns often marginalised Muslim women and girls, making us feel like an afterthought. MSA has helped to challenge the landscape, the narratives and stereotypes around Muslim women and sports. We have made huge strides in making positive impacts not only for our participants, who many have gone on to become qualified coaches, or achieve personal goals they never even contemplated, but also across the industry. MSA have worked closely with national sports governing bodies such as The Football Association, British Fencing, GB Archery and other organisations like Mind and Faith & Belief Forum. Our experience has provided important insight in how the sector needs to adapt to engage communities, especially Muslim women. Some of our participants now sit on boards and committees to ensure our voices are heard and we contribute to the conversations.

The sector is evolving and to meet the Code of Governance from Sport England, boards are recommended to have a good gender and ethnicity balance. You do not need to have a background in sports, (though this does help) to sit on a sports board. Professional experiences bring vast knowledge and expertise, but more importantly your lived experience sets you aside from others. The sector is crying out for people like us to apply for positions across the workforce and we need more people from our community to make it more diverse and representative.

THE FUTURE OF SPORTS

Sports still has a long way to go before we can truly say it is representative of the diverse country we live in. Whilst football has seen an influx of Muslim players from African

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The [sports] sector is crying out for people like us to apply for positions across the workforce and we need more people from our community to make it more diverse and representative.

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countries which makes us proud, we are yet to see a homegrown Muslim player represent the national team in either the men or women's game. We as a community also need to do more to ensure sports is a viable career for our children by providing opportunities, especially taking advantage where opportunities are provided and supporting local initiatives.

MSA has engaged 1000's of participants, created over 100 coaches across several sports and provided opportunities across many different sports including golf, archery, rowing as well as courses in photography which promoted positive wellbeing and nature walking. I envision numbers increasing as our communities and younger generation are keen to break barriers and ensure their needs are being met.

Finally, the journey into sports and diversity is about creating an environment where everyone, regardless of their background, feels welcomed, valued, and empowered to participate and excel in the world of sports. It involves ongoing efforts to break down barriers, challenge stereotypes, and promote a more inclusive and equitable sports community. ♦



TACKLING

ISLAMOPHOBIA

WHY I DO WHAT I DO



Linsay Taylor

Would you get involved in politics and media organisations, when they do not look like you and streotypes your community?

Definitely no, especially when both of these sectors see a real lack of representation by both Muslims and other minority communities, yet are also known to perpetuate negative stereotypes, especially when it comes to rhetoric towards the Muslim community¹.

At MEND – Muslim Engagement and Development, we are trying hard in a range of ways to increase Muslim participation in British media and politics, while we are working through an extensive programme to tackle Islamophobia in the UK.

Islamophobia passes what Baroness Sayeeda Warsi calls the ‘dinner table test’², meaning it is still treated as a socially acceptable form of prejudice. More often than not, this rhetoric emanates from the centers of right-wing media and political power³. As a result, Muslims of all ages, but particularly young Muslims who make up 50% of the Muslim population, find themselves feeling disenfranchised and disengaging with politics⁴. This is where MEND seeks to push back against divisive and often racist narratives propagated against Muslims, whilst also working to ensure we have a seat at the table in the halls of power.

Looking specifically at the media, we can see that only 0.4% of journalists in the UK come from a Muslim background. This is worrying given that Muslims make up around 6.5% of the total population in the UK. What this shows us is that under-representation is a huge problem within the industry but is this any surprise given that British media reports on Muslims from right-wing tabloids are known to have contributed to the rise of Islamophobia in the UK⁵. It is important for media outlets to engage proportionately and appropriately with

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There will only be positive change when minority communities such as Muslims have a voice and space to speak on issues that matter to them in civic and political society. This will help lead to positive change where the media, politicians and other places of power, start to see Muslims, especially Muslim women, as individuals with agency, and stop viewing them through the clouded lens of Islamophobia.

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the Muslim community, but also acknowledge that we are not one homogeneous group as we are often portrayed.

As a woman, I saw the prejudicial treatment was further compounded for Muslim women who often face further structural inequalities due to their gender. As a Muslim, you are 3 times less likely to be called for a job interview simply for having a Muslim sounding name⁶. However, as a woman you are more likely to be asked about your family situation and childcare responsibilities at an interview than a white, non-Muslim counterpart⁷. It is worth trying to imagine a white non-Muslim man being asked the same question. Surely, the response would evoke feelings of annoyance, frustration and being unable to understand how the question is relevant at all. Sadly, for Muslim women, this line of questioning during an interview has come to be expected. Knowing that this behavior is often inevitable, Muslim women are prepared to respond to it and are less likely to speak up in the workplace about their rights and needs⁸. This means that women who are already facing institutionalised Islamophobia have little voice to counter it. Even if Muslim women are able to get their foot in the door, we find that the journey can be short-lived as few Muslim women are being promoted to higher positions⁹.

However, it is not just in the workplace that women face Islamophobia. Studies have shown that Muslim women, especially visibly Muslim women who wear the hijab or niqab, are more likely to face an Islamophobic attack on the street than their male counterparts, where their attackers are likely to be non-Muslim and male¹⁰. The presumption can only be that such men view Muslim women as an easy target, and these attacks have led

many women to be fearful of leaving their own homes and feeling like they are not a part of wider society¹¹.

This is why I do the work that I do. Do I claim to speak for all Muslim women? No, as I have said Muslims are not one large monolithic group. We are diverse and we are all individuals, but in the work that I do I seek to give those who need it a voice. I look to encourage other Muslim women to take up roles that will empower both them and their communities, helping to tackle discrimination and inequality in our society.

However, this is not an easy role. One of the major reasons for this is that in various political and community spaces where issues such as Islamophobia, racism or inter-faith work are discussed, it is a real struggle to get proper Muslim grassroots opinions heard. Muslim grassroots organisations are often not invited or overlooked, either by design, thinking that they have nothing meaningful to contribute, or by accident, reflecting how they are viewed by the establishment. Encouragingly however, it is often non-Muslim faith groups that notice this absence and campaign for us to be included. Such gatekeeping that actively excludes Muslim voices needs to be stopped, everyone must be able to be part of the conversations in a democratic society.

Of course, once Muslim groups are at the table this has a positive knock-on effect for other Muslim organisations to be invited. Inter-group working is thus vital to ensure we all work together to ensure that every organisation who needs it has a seat at the table. There will only be positive change when minority communities such as Muslims have a voice and space to speak on issues that matter

to them in civic and political society. This will help lead to positive change where the media, politicians and other places of power, start to see Muslims, especially Muslim women, as individuals with agency, and stop viewing them through the clouded lens of Islamophobia.

The differential treatment that Muslims face can have a catastrophic effect on society. We can already see this with 50% of the Muslim community in the UK living beneath the poverty line as opposed to 18% of wider society¹². It is time we start joining the dots and seeing the real cost of Islamophobia to the Muslim community. It is time we start to look at people as individuals and see the reality of what individuals have to bear in their everyday lives, simply for being Muslim. Then we can begin to build a fairer society for all.♦

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Islamophobia passes what Baroness Sayeeda Warsi calls the ‘dinner table test’, meaning it is still treated as a socially acceptable form of prejudice. More often than not, this rhetoric emanates from the centers of right-wing media and political power.

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MY JOURNEY, THEIR JOURNEY

EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS, THROUGH SAFE SPACES



ABOUT JANNATY

Jannaty was established as a charity in September 2010. Jannaty is a charity hub in North London empowering women and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. Majida, Jannaty's founder, has been serving the community since she came to the UK in the early 1980s.



Majida Sayam MBE

When I arrived in the UK from Egypt in the early 1980s as a young mother, I immediately found a second home in my local masjid in North London. There I met other women from many different countries around the world all trying to make new friendships as they too were trying to settle into life in the UK. The safety and connectedness I felt being in the company of other women who I could identify with, helped me to settle in quickly and find the confidence to offer support to others.

The motivation to start Jannaty came about as a result of identifying that the needs of women in our community were not being met. I saw women, especially newly arrived migrants and refugees, sitting in prayer rooms of the local mosque for hours waiting for their husbands and it made me want to offer support by helping them learn various skills, including sewing, handicrafts and sharing our cultural recipes.

This is how it started, a relaxed gathering of women who were sharing skills and building their self-confidence. The demand for the social hub grew very quickly and we needed our own space. Then in 2010, with the support of the community and a local charity Voluntary Action Islington, I was able to establish the charity Jannaty Women's Social Society. The name Jannaty is derived from the Arabic word Jannah (Heaven), as I wanted the space to become a haven for women in need.

Over the years we have faced some resistance to empowering women, especially as women began to build their confidence and started to enrol on courses, applied for jobs, or began spending time away from home accessing services to improve their circumstances. I see

these difficulties as a part of the growing pains of life and it does not stop me, in the same way, that I have a disability and must take painkillers to alleviate the pain, I cannot stop working due to the pain, so I would carry on helping women in need despite resistance.

Over the last 14 years, Jannaty has established itself as a community asset providing women with life-changing services including; skills training, health & wellbeing services, advice and support, mentoring and befriending services. Many of the women we support are refugees and asylum seekers from war-torn countries such as Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan and Somalia. Many of these women present with complex needs due to being survivors of war, trafficking, FGM and domestic violence. I feel honoured to have helped some of these women access employment, enrol on further education and training courses as well as see some set up their businesses as a result of Jannaty's intervention.

WHY WE ARE NEEDED AND WHO WE WORK WITH.

Jannaty is based in Finsbury Park, which is a diverse community with less than half (44%) of Islington residents estimated to be White British, compared to 38% in Greater London¹. The community of women we work with face many disadvantages due to their gender, ethnicity, disabilities, faith or immigration status, and some have been victims of hate crimes.

'Lived experience' and 'representation' have become buzzwords in the charity sector now, however, I have always taken the approach of supporting women from a strengths-based

approach. Our board of trustees has always been made up of minoritized women with lived experience who can be seen as role models to others and our volunteers speak many different languages and come from the communities we represent. Finsbury Park has changed over the last three decades I have been working here and I am pleased to see diversity and inclusion being at the forefront of local authority strategies, however, sometimes this can become a tick-box exercise.

Creating a supportive community is very important for women to feel safe and helps break down barriers. Jannaty can't help all 400+ members alone, this is why we work with other organisations in the borough including health services, the local authority, parks and recreation services, schools, Domestic Violence (DV) charities and other Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) organisations. Building this network allowed Jannaty to serve families during the COVID-19 pandemic. We operated remotely keeping people connected through phone calls and doorstep visits, our sewing group made 1,000 face masks for Islington Council and distributed these to vulnerable people. Working with the Finsbury Park Trust, our charity shop was converted into a food bank and soup kitchen so we could give out food packs, hygiene kits, and free clothing, toys and books to families who were struggling during lockdown.

HEALING THROUGH MOTHER-TONGUE THERAPY

We sadly lost 56 people from the Somali community in the first month of the pandemic and families were not well supported. After COVID we worked with the NHS to offer culturally sensitive therapy

in mother-tongue languages. This was beneficial, but the waiting list was always full. This relates to the wider mental health crisis, where services are not always culturally sensitive, and reflects the pressures on the NHS. To help women manage their mental health our drop-in coffee mornings and social gatherings have been seen as a lifeline for some.

HOUSING CRISIS

Another area affecting our members is the housing crisis. One of our case studies is a mother of four living in a two-bedroom home infested with mice. The home is not big enough and one room is unusable due to black mould which has not been repaired by the landlord. This mother has to share a bed with her teenage children, which has created physical and mental health problems for the mother and her children. The difficulty for these families is that the authorities are not acting fast enough and our community spaces are being under-utilised. The women we work with do not have the confidence to explain their problems; so Jannaty continues to find ways to alleviate their difficulties by writing to the local authority, attending GP appointments, and offering a safe space to talk. We know this is not enough and so we also try to impact social change by taking part in leadership meetings and contributing to research with Healthwatch Islington, the NHS, UCL and the local authority.

BAME REPRESENTATION

Being a female leader places me in a position where I can be a voice for my community, so they can be heard and we can have an impact on developing the community spaces and

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The women we work with have huge potential which is not being supported. Minoritized women are still seen as helpless and vulnerable, but many of our members have degrees, teaching qualifications and some have MBAs and PhDs. They are more than qualified but the societal barriers and a lack of collaboration between organisations which prevents them from fulfilling their potential.

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services around us. While our community still face disadvantages, racism and islamophobia, I feel minoritized women are keeping up the pressure to be seen and heard.

Sometimes systemic difficulties and changes in political narratives can create more challenges. For example, we welcomed Afghan refugee women into our group who were being resettled in the UK. After working with these women for more than 6 months they were suddenly moved out of London to remote locations where they became isolated and Jannaty could no longer provide any support. While I wish to help every woman I meet who is in need, sometimes this is beyond my capabilities.

EMPOWERING WOMEN TO CHANGE THEIR OWN LIVES

The women we work with have huge potential which is not being supported. Minoritized women are still seen as helpless and vulnerable, but many of our members have degrees, and teaching qualifications and some have MBAs and PhDs. They are more than

qualified but the societal barriers and a lack of collaboration between organisations prevent them from fulfilling their potential.

I feel proud to be part of their journey and have seen many women become employed, and access further education, and some have started their own tailoring and dressmaking services, wedding planning business and home bakeries. Jannaty recently created a community clothing brand, Anaqaa Apparel, which has been my dream for many years. Our small sewing group has now grown and offers the opportunity for women to learn a skill, and create a fashionable but modest garment, which is then sold to raise funds and reinvested into the charity, thus helping more women.

Establishing Jannaty has taken many years of effort and challenges, but I believe if we come together, we can make an impact. I would love to see less competition and organisations working together. It is our duty as Muslims to help others and a responsibility from Allah to be of benefit to our communities. ♦

SERVING HUMANITY FROM OUR LIVING ROOM

A FAMILY'S JOURNEY IN LAUNCHING A NATIONAL CHARITY



Asifa Pradhan

Starting Hand on Heart has been an incredible journey. Beginning in our family home in south London to now carrying out all operations from Watford, we are a family of husband, wife and daughter committed to serving humanity together. Hand on Heart have an amazing team of volunteers who have brought their skills to the charity and have grown into a family of friends with the shared purpose of giving back to our communities.

The idea for Hand on Heart came one morning whilst taking a morning stroll by the local canal. We could hear voices and smell fire burning through the woods. As we got closer to the voices, we could see clothes hanging on a line and a makeshift shelter hanging from the trees. I instantly thought I am watching scenes from a movie but quickly realised, sadly that people in our community are and were living in the woods. In the twenty-first century and the sixth largest economy in the world, this was simply unacceptable. Having been refugees ourselves from Uganda in the 70s, we thought it was time for us to give back. If it were not for the sincerity and generosity of the people of the UK in our time of need, we would not be where we are today. All people have ambitions and aspirations, and during a time of hardship, all they need is a bit of hope and a helping hand to reach their goals. It is this idea that inspired the founding of Hand on Heart.

The charity provides essential packs to the homeless, rough sleepers and other vulnerable people including children from disadvantaged backgrounds across England. Our vision is for a fairer society where the vulnerable find stability, rough sleepers can maintain their dignity, the most excluded feel included in society, and where homelessness is eradicated. Our mission is to alleviate the hardship of disadvantaged families by providing essential items and services to support vulnerable people across the country. We support everyone regardless of colour, faith, gender or culture and seek to inspire our volunteers to engage with the community and collaborate with other charities. In 2019 we gathered 25-30 friends to assemble the first 200 essential packs. This became a family activity that would

lead to the children asking questions about homelessness and showing real compassion for their community. The packs were then loaded onto a van and Hand on Heart carried out its first outreach distribution in Holborn, central London.

The contents of our essential packs are seasonal and change depending on the time of year. Generally, they include clean clothes, underwear, toiletries, oral hygiene kits and ladies' sanitary products. We also provide back to school back packs which include a reusable water flask, stationary sets, coloured pencils and USB reading lights, along with scientific calculators and maths sets for secondary school students, and lunch bags and activity books for primary-aged children.

Very soon Hand on Heart started to grow and began increasing the number of packs and areas we were serving in, and then the pandemic hit. We initially considered pausing our operations until we were invited to a COVID response group. Although being very much in our infancy, we had been asked to join a team with well-established and experienced charities. We saw this as a challenge and opportunity to step up and start thinking outside the box. Hand on Heart resumed operations and provided what we could as the needs and services changed. Although our family home has been serving us well and our living room became the engine room for our operations, but started to feel smaller and smaller with the increasing number of packs we have had to put together, then the good news came, when a volunteer offered us an empty unit in Watford as a space to move our operations, we gladly accepted and moved in July 2021.

One of the main challenges we have faced is with donations. Initially we were using usual crowdfunding and grant applications, but since the pandemic we are now struggling to be awarded these grants as such a young charity in such a competitive market. Furthermore, working with other charities was a challenge at first due to the perception of being in competition with each other. We wanted to break down this barrier by bringing our charities together and sharing skillsets. Today, Hand on Heart work across 30 areas in England along with over 30 charities, community organisations and foodbanks. This approach has escalated our work and led to friendship, trust and kinship between our distribution teams, volunteers, and guests.

Achievements are only possible with a wholesome team that share the same vision. Hand on Heart is an all-inclusive charity with over 500 volunteers of all ages, faiths, gender, and backgrounds. The organisation would not be where it is today without the families, children, schools, scout's clubs, corporate teams and care home residents who make up our kindest and most valuable assets. It is important to us that children take part in the charity, whether that be helping to assemble the packs or making cards to be gifted as part of our outreach. Children are our future and will be the ones to carry the baton going forward.

To serve humanity is a blessing and an opportunity given to us. Everyone has a story, some want to share their pain, others just want to be treated like human beings and receive a friendly smile. Whatever you do in life, it must be done with a pure intention. We are all put here on earth for a purpose, and the most noble of purposes is to serve humanity.◆



“

All people have ambitions and aspirations, and during a time of hardship, all they need is a bit of hope and a helping hand to reach their goals. It is this idea that inspired the founding of Hand on Heart.

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NAVIGATING MULTIPLE FRONTS:

MUSLIM WOMEN CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES AND BREAKING BARRIERS AGAINST THE ODDS



Dr. Hina Shahid

Significant progress has been made globally over the past century to address the inequalities faced by women in various aspects of society, including social, economic, civic, and political spheres.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that women in Islam have made remarkable contributions throughout history. For instance, Khadijah Bint Khuwaylid (RA), the first wife of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), exemplified this by being a successful businesswoman and entrepreneur. Additionally, Fatima Al-Fihriya founded the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, which is not only the oldest continuously operating university but also the first to award degrees.

Despite these inspiring examples, restrictive cultural norms and structures have hindered progress and limited the potential of Muslim women. Consequently, many Muslim women around the world continue to face severe exclusions and unfavourable outcomes.

Covid-19 has been described as creating a 'generational loss of progress' on gender equity. Muslim women have been particularly affected by low employment rates and pay gaps, higher furlough rates, drop in earnings and lost working hours during this period¹. Unfortunately, this is not unexpected; the compounding effects of Islamophobia, racism and misogyny, were well documented before the pandemic and termed "The Triple Penalty" to explain the barriers to social mobility experienced by Muslim women². However, certain discourses within the Muslim community further contribute to this trend by amplifying anxieties and tensions around traditional gender roles in a modern postcolonial world. In this article, I draw on my experiences as a Muslim female doctor, researcher, educator, mentor, executive coach and community outreach worker in various positions of leadership and support to highlight the barriers affecting Muslim women

and illustrate how the concept of flourishing is a healthy humanitarian, ethical and Islamic goal to aspire to.

THE CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY MUSLIM WOMEN: EXTRA-COMMUNITY AND INTRA-COMMUNITY FACTORS

Within the healthcare sector, a landmark report by the Muslim Doctors Association and The Grey Area explored the intersectional experiences of Islamophobia, discrimination, and racism amongst the Muslim health workforce. Most respondents were women and had experienced Islamophobia to varying degrees. Casual 'everyday Islamophobia' manifested through stereotyping and microaggressions, whereas more direct discrimination targeted multiple aspects of religious practice and beliefs; four in ten reported verbal abuse due to their religion, and three in ten faced hostilities. Additionally, Islamophobia was found to be embedded in exclusionary cultures and institutional structures of workplaces with four in ten feeling the need to compromise on practising their faith at work resulting in moral injury and distress, and two thirds lacked confidence raising concerns at work. Additionally, nine in ten did not know Muslims in leadership and management positions at work and two thirds could not identify relatable role models. The report lays out a 12-point plan centred around four key principles of authentic allyship and advocacy to improve inclusion and wellbeing³.

Whilst the report above highlights a pervasive culture of Islamophobia in healthcare, which other employment sectors may relate with, the trend in Muslim women under-achieving

in their professional lives and not fulfilling career aspirations cannot be attributed to Islamophobia alone. Research on ethnic minority women demonstrates that half this gap is explained by gender role attitudes⁴. Muslim women are exceeding Muslim men in educational attainment yet these are not matched by progress in the labour market and in career progression². Whilst Islamophobia has a gendered component and regressive and discriminatory socio-economic policies exist as external challenges to the Muslim community, it is important not to overlook the internal challenges within the community which are embodied and internalised by Muslim women.

It is undeniable that cultural and patriarchal norms are still used (by both men and women) to benchmark female success in the Muslim community that prioritise achievements constructed to align with women's biology and support male privilege, such as marital status, reproductive capability and household labour. Whilst of course there are biological differences between men and women, our extra X chromosome does not carry any genes that enhance domestic skills or make us more empathetic or less rational. The transposition of physical differentiation on to social, cognitive and spiritual differentiation also projects women as inferior and vulnerable and therefore unsuitable to lead. Such essentialist arguments are often used, without any scientific basis, to advocate traditional "natural" duties and remind us of "our place" in the home.

This ideology actively discourages and deprioritises Muslim women's professional achievements, and so, it is unsurprising that we are under-represented in leadership

roles. Furthermore, such ideas are not rooted in Islam and in many cases pre-date and contradict Islamic principles. A common argument I repeatedly hear is the conflation of equity with equality which collapses fairness into sameness and erases core Islamic ethical principles of justice, dignity, respect and compassion, as well as directly contradicting autonomy and right to self-determination, which are premised on the core Islamic theological belief of individual accountability.

Androcentric attitudes hold women back and create a false dichotomy. It is therefore equally important not to uncritically idealise Western cultural hegemony and recognise several features of modern life such as high economic demands, focus on productivity and hyper-individualism, and a lack of social support due to nuclear family structures that place increased burdens on women, in addition to neo-Orientalist stereotypes creating gendered-Islamophobia described above. The binary banners of traditionalist conservatism and Western neoliberalism are two sides of the same coin; defining a successful Muslim woman by patriarchal standards.

Research shows that women in general account for 85% of sole carers for children and 65% of sole carers for older adults, but ethnic minority women in particular are more likely to be negatively impacted, with one in two who have caring responsibilities saying they are unable to pursue certain jobs or promotions and a third have left or considered leaving a job due to lack of flexibility, compared to one in five white women⁵. Many Muslim women I work with tell me about unfulfilled aspirations and the burnout they feel when they want to progress in their careers but cultural expectations of women as primary caregivers

create a double burden and they feel unable or guilty about asking for support, creating an unbalanced career-family ecosystem. The expectation is that Muslim women will step down from their careers, rather than Muslim men stepping up and contributing to domestic responsibilities as the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) did, who they respect as their role model.

FLOURISHING

It may seem like an impossible task to reconcile multiple competing demands and viewpoints. Whilst much of my work and research to date has focused on Islamophobia and informing and seeking allyship from the non-Muslim community, there is a need for honest community introspection with Muslim allies, male and female, asking themselves whether they are genuine about women's rights and progress, and if so, what structures and internalised narratives they are ready to challenge and let go of, and what practical support they are willing to give. Being aspirational outside the home should not be weaponised against Muslim women.

Biological essentialism not only contributes to social exclusion and isolation, but undermines agency and aspirations for Muslim women. Above all, it creates a dehumanising narrative which reduces women solely to biological function and purpose who serve as a helper to further men's aspirations whilst sacrificing their own. Individuals in the Muslim community are willing to challenge racialised biological essentialism in the struggle for racial justice, and rightly so, but the same enthusiasm is lacking when it comes to gender justice where challenging sexism and misogyny is pejoratively labelled as feminism.

The first step in taking action is reversing such dehumanising narratives and replacing them with humanitarian and ethical affirmations that are intrinsic to Islamic values. These values celebrate choice and agency and recognise Muslim women (and men) as full and equal spiritual, social, psychological and intellectual human beings who have a right to realise their potential and flourish in their lives.

Flourishing, is derived from the Aristotelian concept of living well as full human beings, promoting a life of virtue and reason to attain excellence, which is considered one of the highest spiritual goals in Islam. In psychology, flourishing is linked to wellness and happiness by finding fulfilment, meaning and deep connection in our lives⁶. To achieve this state of human excellence and fulfilment necessitates that every human being is empowered to make use of the opportunities and resources gifted to them. Above all, it requires compassion and commitment to supporting each other to reach our full potential, rather than creating models of domination and exclusion. It is only when each one of us rises, that humanity rises.♦



BUILDING FAMILIES

THE CORNER STONES OF OUR SOCIETY



Kathleen Roche

There are many excellent organisations and people who have spent their lives dedicated to assisting families both in UK and abroad. While the focus is often on the physiological and safety needs of a family, we should look further than these needs to achieve self-actualisation.

The primary aim of parenting programmes is to motivate change within the parent's behaviour, perception, communication and understanding in order to create changes in the child's behaviour¹. There is a lot of literature which highlights the range of benefits that participating in parenting programmes can achieve for a family, including helping to relieve parental stress and anxiety. As a Muslim convert, I could see similarities in the psychological concepts of raising children, parenting, and developing families to verses in Quran and examples from Prophet Mohammed (pbuh). Developing the 5 Pillars of parenting programmes was a way to help Muslim communities to understand the psychological concepts of parenting by linking them to the beautiful examples within our faith.

Approachable Parenting CIC is a registered non-for-profit organisation that provides parenting educational programmes, parent-coaching, mentoring, counselling, and other support mainly to Muslim families. This was set up to educate and support our communities to the highest standards possible, as I believe we should do for others as we expect for ourselves. All the trainers who deliver our programmes come from professional backgrounds and are qualified to deliver the 5 Pillars of Parenting programmes, which range from pregnancy to the parents of teenagers.

The idea for establishing Approachable Parenting stemmed from the fact that many Muslim families were experiencing problems with their children and don't know where to get the help and support they require. Such behavioural problems in young children can be associated with a range of problems later in life. Research tells us that parenting interventions should be tailored in a way that respects and does not undermine the cultural values, aspirations, traditions and needs of different minority ethnic groups. However, most parenting intervention programmes have been developed for mainly white and middle-class populations, and therefore may lead to less successful outcomes with other sociocultural groups.

Prior to developing the 5 Pillars of Parenting programmes, it was important to research what the issues were within Muslim families in the UK. Interviews and questionnaires with families were completed by parents attending madrasas (extra-curricular language/religious schools), weekend schools and social gatherings. From this it was concluded that Muslim families wanted support with parenting issues that was consistent with their religion. A comprehensive review conducted in 2014 found that programmes which do not consider cultural factors risk poor engagement and the drop-out of Black and Minority Ethnic parents. Previous research had also identified the main barriers to participation are issues of language, fear of stigmatisation, and lack of culturally compatible programming, including differences in child-rearing practices and values.

The 5 Pillars of Parenting integrates evidence-based psychological models within an Islamic

framework consistent with parental attitudes. The programme uses examples from Quran, Hadith, and the Sunnah. Islamic concepts such as thankfulness and repentance are coupled with psychological principles, while prophetic examples such as the importance of play and interaction with others are also included. I like to remind myself and the team to renew intentions and to do our best to follow the example of role model, Prophet Mohammed (pbuh). In addition, the programme includes effective taught skills such as teaching positive parent-child interaction and communication, specific ways to deal with difficult behaviour, and the ability to practice these during the group sessions via role play and home tasks.

There are some meaningful examples from Islam that inspired the development of the 5 Pillars of Parenting programmes. For example, when the Prophet Mohammed addressed a person, he turned his whole body towards that person. This signifies the importance of body language and how Muslims should communicate with others. We also incorporated the Islamic concepts of Adab and Akhlaq. These are the principles of good manners or conducting oneself in the correct way, and having good character in the way you interact with others. Allah says in the Quran, 'And verily, you (O Mohammed) are on an exalted (standard of) character.' (Quran 68: 4)

When considering thankfulness, praise and penalty. We remind parents that the recommended ratio is 4:1, however this concept is mirrored in Islam with how Allah rewards good versus evil - 'Whoever comes with a goodness, for him there will be ten (goodnesses) like it, and whoever comes with an evil, he will not be recompensed except

with the like of it.' (Quran 6:160). Within the session on family rules and boundaries we introduce the concept of Shura or asking for consultation. This is a value in Islam where the Prophet Mohammed would often seek consultation from his companions. There are many references in the Quran on parenting and raising the family which are used within the programme. In Surah Luqman there are many explicit examples, one of which is: 'And bear with patience whatever befalls you. Verily, these are some of the important commandments ordered by Allah (God) with no exemption.' (Quran 31: 17)

As Muslims we should be so proud of our faith and the examples we have to guide us in becoming better people, and to continue working to the best of our abilities. In conclusion, to enable the next generation to achieve, we need to provide help and support for not just their physical needs, but the other support families may require to ensure their children succeed as confident and successful Muslims. Approachable Parenting aims to build families and communities which empower them to have a positive influence in society. Our evidenced based and award-winning programmes can demonstrate the changes that happen within families as well as to children who have taken part in them. We hope we would be able to support the wonderful charities to extend their efforts.♦



THE TORCHBEARERS

THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERING

IN TRANSFORMING LIVES

In the vast and rich array of organisations and individuals that comprises the British Muslim charity sector, there is a crucial yet often undervalued thread that helps to bring this rich tapestry together – young people, and the role they play as volunteers.



Sadia Sajjid

As someone who began her own volunteering journey some 19 years ago as a painfully shy and woefully unambitious 21-year-old, I have witnessed first-hand the transformative power that lies in being voluntarily of service to others – for both the volunteer and the communities served. Much like a snowball effect, my first footstep into volunteering gained momentum and grew in intensity and significance with the years, leading me to transition into working in the sector full time and to undertake many wonderful endeavours, wearing hats I never would have dreamed of when I started my journey. From travelling the country and addressing hundreds, if not thousands as a female fundraiser, and inspiring the next generation of female fundraisers to having the privilege of leading huge teams of volunteers. In one workplace, I had more than 300 volunteers in just one region! Together, we engaged in hundreds of income-generating and advocacy activities, raising millions of pounds annually, saving and improving hundreds of thousands of lives, and fighting global injustices.

What I can say with full conviction is that it was, and will always be, the sincerity, enthusiasm, and dedication of these young people that play an instrumental role in the success of these endeavours. Indeed, much of the success of the Muslim charity sector can be attributed to the energy and drive that young people bring in abundance. Young volunteers are the lifeblood of these organisations. And it is not just the case for traditional charitable work aimed at uplifting and supporting the world's poorest and most vulnerable.

Islamically too, we know that young people have always been the torchbearers of societal change. Many stories of the Prophets and the

monumental moments they faced as young adolescents highlight how, when faced with the unknown, they forged paths for those to come after them. Likewise, we have examples in the great accomplishments of the youth around Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him), such as Mus'ab ibn Umair and Zayd ibn Thabit, achievements that we still benefit from today.

Our rich Islamic history provides much evidence of the transformative impact that young people can have. A transformation that began with the individual but went on to transform the world. We must learn from these stories and, moreover, learn from our Prophet (Peace be upon him) who recognised the potential and gifts of each young companion, helping and encouraging them to unlock their great potential.

At the Muslim Scout Fellowship (MSF), for the last 5 years, I have had the honour and privilege of bearing witness to the massive power of volunteering in communities right here in the UK. Scouting, for those who do not know, is where young people are nurtured through an informal holistic development programme to become skilled, confident, resilient leaders themselves – the change-makers in society. Scouting is delivered across the country by volunteers.

These amazing, unsung heroes volunteer their time and energy to help plan and deliver weekly sessions, organise exciting trips, and embark on the next big adventure – all to empower, educate, elevate, and inspire our young people to develop the key life skills and qualities that make for positive contributing members of society. Alhamdulillah, we are now approaching 25 years of continuous



scouting in Muslim communities in the UK, meaning we are now seeing the real fruit of these labours. Many scouts have gone on to have incredibly successful careers, yet many continue to support Scouting by returning as leaders — explorers becoming young leaders, and young leaders becoming section leaders, with each building upon their own scouting experiences to provide an even better one for the generation coming up after them.

Similarly, the volunteers that support MSF and the work we do — from those delivering vital training to scout leaders to ensure they are the best role models they can be, to those who help organise and execute our national scouting events, design programme resources

for groups to use, and provide ancillary services like marketing design or IT support — do this and so much more, despite many of them also being involved in scouting with their local scout group! Our record-breaking international jamboree last year was led by two female former scouts, and the camp logistics and maintenance services were the result of a huge team of 14-18-year-old Explorer Boys. What compels a 16-year-old to willingly give up 10 days of their summer holiday to deliver a camp for 5-14-year-olds, and spend hours going around the site topping up supplies, keeping areas safe, and ensuring zones have everything they need to deliver their activities? These are young people driven

by a sense of purpose — to please Allah; they also have a great sense of responsibility for others and are always ready and willing to serve. Through their efforts, over 3000 young people experienced a phenomenal event that they will remember for the rest of their lives and seeing that the people who delivered these experiences to them were not much older than them will inspire and motivate them to continue the cycle.

Volunteering, with sincerity, gives back to the volunteer so much more than what they put in, yet at the same time, can be a catalyst for so much positive change in the world too. The sooner we empower young people to realise that we get and grow by giving, that service to

others provides a sense of fulfilment that very few things in the world will match, the sooner we can help them unlock their immense potential and the more profound and lasting impact they can have on themselves and the world.

These are just a few examples of the way in which young volunteers have and continue to have the societal transformation — one where young Muslims are not just passive beneficiaries of the efforts of those who came before them, but active architects of a more successful, ever-thriving society. ♦

CITATION

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THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE BRITISH MUSLIM CHARITY SECTOR: EMPOWERMENT, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES.

Hanan Ashegh

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Maaria Mahmood

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NAVIGATING MULTIPLE FRONTS: MUSLIM WOMEN CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES AND BREAKING BARRIERS AGAINST THE ODDS

Dr. Hina Shahid

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BUILDING FAMILIES, THE CORNER STONES OF OUR SOCIETY

Kathleen Roche

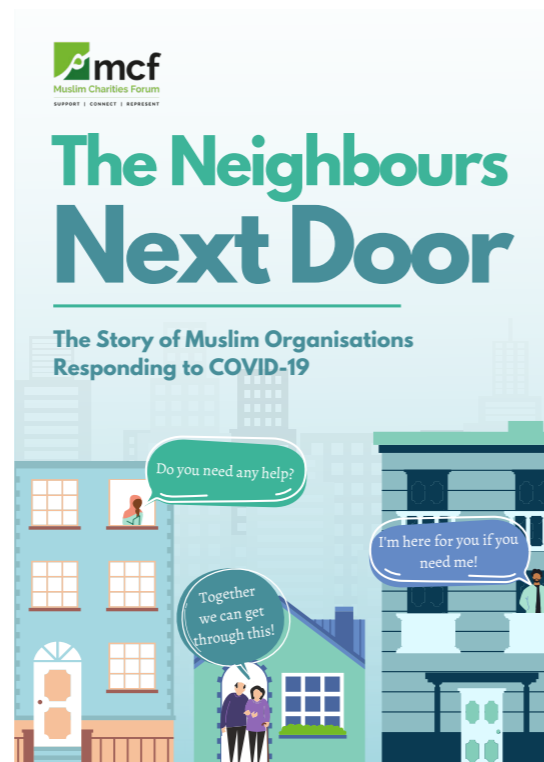
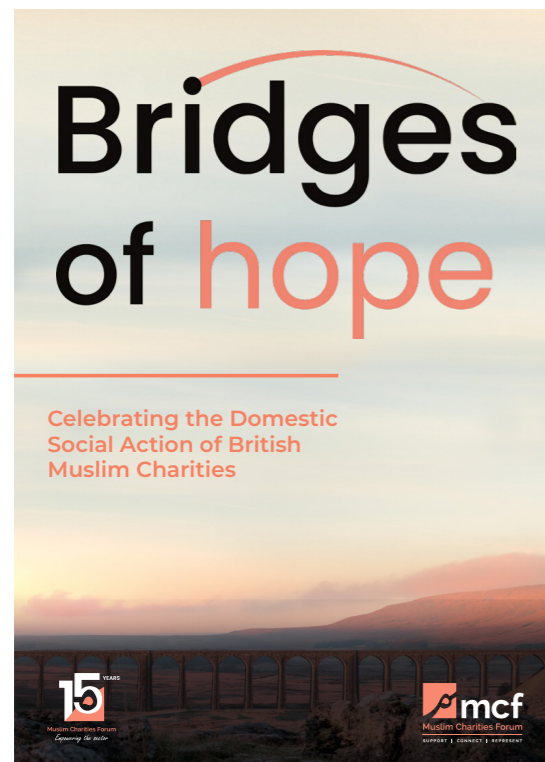
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PREVIOUS PUBLICATIONS

MCF is the UK network for British Muslim charities working for social good in the UK and abroad. Through our network, we aim to collectively build a more accountable, transparent and efficient British Muslim charitable sector, in order to improve our ability, both as individual organisations and as a sector, to contribute to a more just and sustainable world.

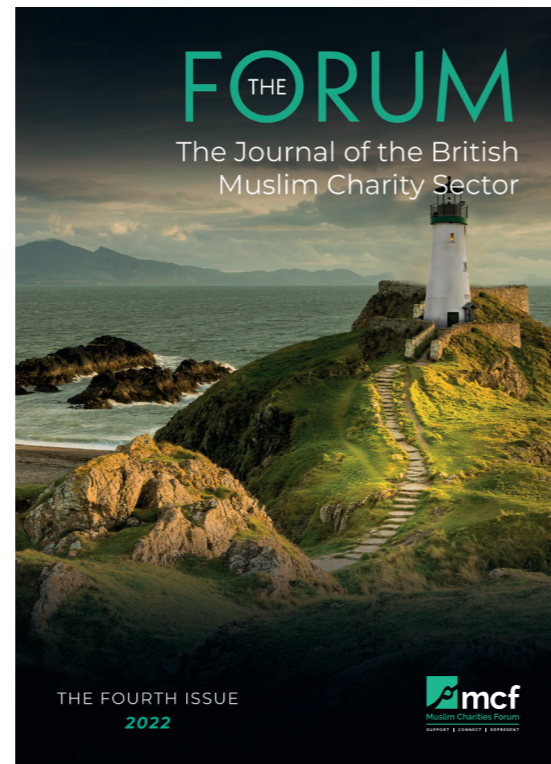
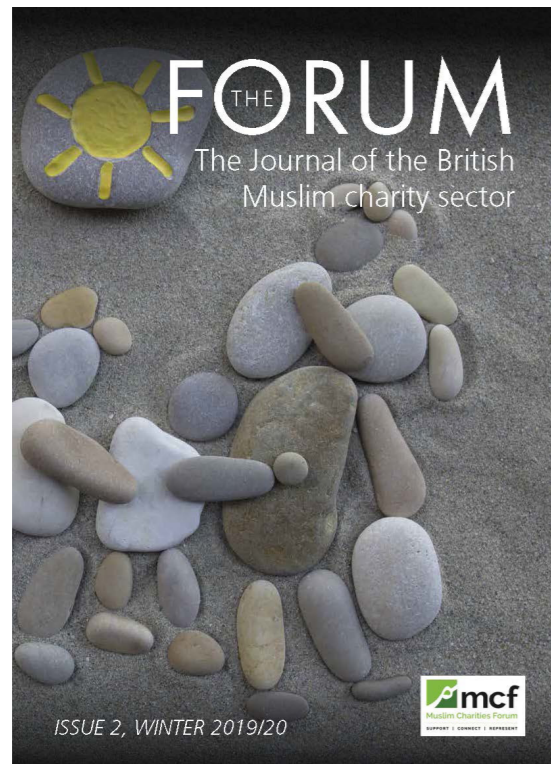
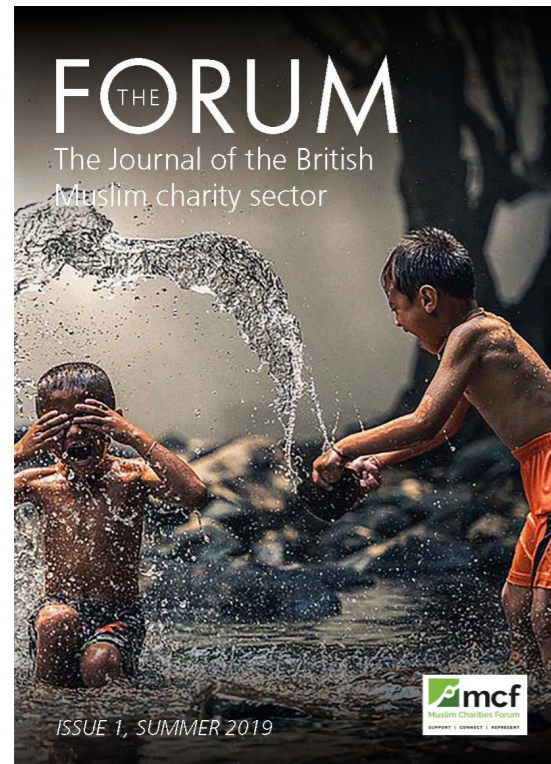


MOST RECENT PUBLICATION



PREVIOUS ISSUES

MOST RECENT ISSUE





STRONGER TOGETHER

THE MUSLIM CHARITIES FORUM, FOUNDED IN 2007, IS THE NETWORK OF BRITISH MUSLIM CHARITIES DEDICATED TO WORKING FOR SOCIAL GOOD BOTH AT HOME IN THE UK AND ABROAD



WE SUPPORT

MCF members to enhance their capabilities, accountability, improve efficiency and ultimately to have a greater impact. We do this through delivering training, facilitating discussion forums, producing resources, collaborating on joint projects and celebrating successes.



WE CONNECT

MCF members to share skills, knowledge, experience and to mobilize resources. Our connected membership creates space to debate issues, engage with the wider sector including policymakers, governmental bodies and research institutions.



WE REPRESENT

MCF members and project them through a data-driven, self confident, collective voice on big debates. We showcase our member's achievements and represent a strong united voice for the British Muslim Charity sector.

Our role is to collectively improve our accountability, transparency and efficiency as a sector - to contribute to a more just and sustainable world. The Muslim charity sector has remarkable potential and has already done phenomenal work - it is now, more than ever before, imperative that we work together, combining skills and lifting each other up. Ultimately, our vision is to see British Muslim charities taking a central role in moving towards building a more just and sustainable world.

Join THE FORUM for

- ◆ Visibility
- ◆ Influence
- ◆ Networking
- ◆ Training
- ◆ Knowledge Exchange
- ◆ Representation

To request an application form or to find out more about how to become a member

📞 0203 096 1983

✉ info@muslimcharitiesforum.org.uk



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OUR MEMBERS



And connected to more than 300 local organisations

We are delighted to share that 2024 marks the 20th anniversary of our formation as the Centre for Charity Effectiveness (CCE) at Bayes Business School (formerly Cass).

The Centre for Charity Effectiveness (CCE)

CCE@city.ac.uk | bayes.city.ac.uk/cce





Muslim Charities Forum

SUPPORT | CONNECT | REPRESENT

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