

**Realising our Potential:
Promoting the Talents of Muslim Women**
Monday 21 January 2008 - Albert Halls Bolton

Final Report

**Business
Bolton**



FOI
Friends Of Islam
All Party Parliamentary Group
أصدقاء الإسلام



Contents

Introduction	2
Working together: men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims	3
Session 1: Different perspectives	4
The need for dialogue and understanding	4
Local councillors play a key role	4
We need a sensible debate	5
Questions and comments from the floor	6
Session 2 – Inspirational stories	6
Promoting a modern view of Islam	8
Muslim women need appropriate support	8
Questions and comments from the floor	9
Session 3: Where do we go from here?	10
Making learning accessible	10
Helping women into work	10
Issues raised by the audience	11
New opportunities	14
Concluding remarks	15
Key findings of the day	15
Barriers for Muslim women	15
How to reach Muslim women	16
Funding for community-based projects	16
Sharing good practice	16



Left to right: Vas Patel, Sarah Carling, Ian Stewart MP, Councillor Nargis Khan, Huda Mamoun and Councillor Akhtar Zaman

Introduction

When did you last hear about Muslim women being successful in their choice of career? Rahila Bano, herself an award-winning journalist, asked delegates this question as she introduced 3 exceptional Muslim women from the North West region who took the stage at a groundbreaking event held in Bolton on 21 January. Poet Shamshad Khan, structural engineer Khalida Begum and business adviser Huda Mamoun were just a few of the remarkable women to share their stories. This report captures highlights from their talks and summarises the issues, challenges and opportunities discussed on the day so that these can be taken forward.

There is a clear appetite for events of this kind, as over 150 people braved the downpours and risk of flooding on Monday 21 January as they made their way to Bolton's Albert Halls on what the media announced that morning to be officially the most depressing day of the year.

The mood inside the Albert Halls was anything but depressing, as we heard speaker after speaker talk passionately about their determination to work towards change. Change in how we think about Muslim women, how we can change the opportunities available to them to realise their dreams and their potential and perhaps most importantly, change in how Muslim women think about themselves.

"The event was inspiring and different from all other conferences I have attended so far..."

Fateha Begum, Oldham Council

Working together: men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims

Ian Stewart MP opened the event as Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group, Friends of Islam, explaining that it was a follow up to a very successful forum held in London last year. He was pleased to see non-Muslims as well as Muslims in the audience and that, although the focus was on women, that there were also a number of men in the audience.

"Any good practice identified today can only be taken forward into wider society by men and women working together."

Councillor Kate Hollern, welcoming delegates on behalf of the North West Regional Assembly, mentioned that 12.5% of the population of her ward in Blackburn are Muslim women and that she knew what a pivotal role they played in the local community.

"We women have a strong voice. I think it is time people heard it."

Councillor Akhtar Zaman from Bolton Metropolitan Council talked about Bolton's growing prosperity, with the potential to create 20,000 new jobs and to attract over £1bn private sector investment. The challenge for the council is to ensure that this regeneration delivers benefits for all, not just for a few.

“Brave and inspirational leaps” are needed to encourage more women to become positive role models.

Session 1: Different perspectives

The need for dialogue and understanding

A Parliamentary perspective: Ian Stewart MP, Chair of All Party Parliamentary Group Friends of Islam

Ian was a founder member of Friends of Islam, which was founded in 1999 and formally constituted in 2002. The need for better understanding about the creed and philosophy of Islam is what drives him personally and is the motive behind the group. Friends of Islam aims to create a bridge between Parliament and Muslim communities. Despite all the consultations that have taken place since 9/11, Ian felt we have not made as much progress as we could.

“Many of my constituents feel that consultations are for the privileged few.”

He hopes that the Parliamentary group can play a role in changing this situation, recognising the need for the Muslim community to play a positive role in the Britain of tomorrow.

Turning to the role of women, Ian talked about attitudes when he was growing up in Scotland, where it was felt that home was the best place for women. Nowadays women should be getting the opportunity to go into a wider variety of careers. He stressed how important it is to open a debate about what can be done. He hopes to start a conversation that will challenge bigotry, cliques and chauvinism that exists in all groups, including within the Muslim community.

He ended by describing 800 years of Islamic civilisation, where leadership was based on meritocracy, not inheritance.

“In potential dark and serious times like this, we must remind ourselves of this vision of Islam.”

Local councillors play a key role

A personal perspective from Nargis Khan, London Borough of Hackney

Nargis’s story began in Bolton, where she was born and where she grew up. Her aspirations were changed by taking part in an Asian and African Caribbean girls group set up by Bolton Council, which she felt was ahead of its time.

The group gave her the opportunity to try activities like canoeing and going to the countryside for the first time, which widened her horizons and built up her confidence. Her first public speaking experience was right there in the Albert Halls, when at age 11, she argued successfully for women-only swimming classes.

After being the first in her family to go to University, Nargis worked in Russia and America before volunteering for an MP, which gave her an insight into the role of a member of parliament and made her decide to join the Labour party. In 2002 she was selected by her local branch to stand for Hackney Council. Her motivation in joining the Council was to make life better for local people, in a borough where one of the streets was known as Murder Mile. Two years on, she was promoted to a Cabinet role and is now responsible for Hackney's swimming pools, as part of a wide brief that covers health, adult social services, the voluntary sector, culture and leisure.

Her experience as a Councillor and as a member of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion has made her see the key role local government plays in building cohesive communities. The role of a local councillor has changed and in order to build trust, it is vital that institutions are representative of the communities in Britain. Yet women, who make up 52% of the population, are only 29% of all councillors.

"I have faced glass ceilings and many barriers along the way. These barriers have only made me more determined to be part of change."

We need a sensible debate

A policy perspective- Vas Patel, Equality and Human Rights Commission

Vas started his presentation by thanking the organisers for having the courage to bring this issue to the fore. His own first experience of Bolton was at a football match, when he was working on a project to deal with racism in football. He was called an offensive name by a young child on that occasion, but hoped that the good practice developed by Bolton Council has reduced the incidence of blatant racism of this kind these days.

One of the key challenges facing society today is how to deal with human conflict – the conflict that arises from difference. Put simply, we need to learn how to live with each other. The vision of the new organisation is to work towards a society built on fairness and respect, where people are confident in all aspects of their diversity. Vas explained that the Equality and Human Rights Commission will deal with equalities in a more joined up way. Its work will focus on tackling unequal life chances in four areas:

- Poverty gap
- Caring gap
- Life chances gap
- Power gap

Vas talked about the massive changes in society and how it makes no sense to ignore groups and communities with talent. Research by the Equal Opportunities Commission into Pakistani and Bangladeshi women's employment had come up with some ideas about what needs to change:

- Careers advice and guidance could be used more proactively to open new opportunities

- Involve Muslim women in decision making to bring public policy up to date with the real issues facing such women
- Change perception held by employers of Muslim women
- Equip managers with skills and knowledge to manage diversity in the workplace

He welcomed the opportunity to have a sensible debate about these issues.

Questions and comments from the floor

Has Nargis been able to help other Muslim women, having been successful herself?

Nargis makes sure that Muslim women are involved in local consultations and have the opportunity to shape how the council delivers local services. On the Commission for Integration, she made sure that the role of women was on the agenda.

Are there any statistics on the recruitment of Muslim women before and after 9/11?

Although the panel were not aware of any figures on this, Nargis felt that Muslim women have become more politicised. ***“I think it has made us stronger.”***

Muslim women want to work, but information does not get through to them. A business grant scheme was available from the Department for Trade and Industry, for example, but it was not known about within the community.

Ian Stewart agreed that Government could do more. He wanted the Friends of Islam group to be a critical friend to Government and to work in partnership to develop better communication with the Muslim community. Before leaving to attend a vote in the House of Commons, Ian explained why he, as a white man, felt he was an appropriate chair for the event.

“It is the white males we need to change. I don’t come here as an expert, but to learn. After all, we all breathe the same air, so we must have something in common.”

Session 2 – Inspirational stories

Shamshad Khan opened this session with a powerful rendition of her own poems, drawn from personal experience as an Asian woman.

This ladder of opportunity stops short by Shamshad Khan

The sky's the limit
they tell me
bright blue

if I work hard
I can get there too
A step up from my parents
I miss out rung number one

education, training
rung after rung

ignoring
the funny looks
inappropriate questions
and

disbelief

I get my first promotion
I'm nearly there

then I notice
a strange glare

a distorted reflection of me
in the ceiling

glass
not open air

no more rungs
I stretch but can't reach

it takes more than
"as good as"

to get to the top

trade marks of migrating
generations
prepared to do more for less

with all the ingenuity and
determination of my parents
I stand on my brown hands
and reach with my feet

boots not stiletto heels
I kick

the beautiful blue sound of
sky glass
cracking.

Khalida Begum – promoting a modern view of Islam

Khalida confessed that she didn't think she had done anything special to become one of the very few Muslim women engineers in the country. She loves planes and so it was a natural career for her, she didn't see why engineering should just be a career for men. Khalida's main message for the audience was to take a step towards people from a different background in order to break down barriers. Conscious of the fact that she is the only Muslim that many of her colleagues come across on a regular basis, she wants them to feel comfortable talking to her. She doesn't mind people asking her questions about her scarf, her religion, or sharing her views on programmes they may have seen on the television about terrorism or Islam.

“We need to make ourselves more visible. Talk to your neighbour. Talk to the person who sits two desks away.”

Khalida talked about the great experiences she has had working for a large company. She's never had an issue, perhaps because she refuses to accept there are any barriers for her career progression. She's been backpacking in Australia, where she also went skydiving and assured the audience that a hijab stays on 14,000 feet down!

Huda Mamoun – Muslim women need appropriate support

Huda started by saying she never expected to be here today, just like she never expected to receive Merseyside woman of the year award. After arriving in Britain she decided she wanted a change of career and started by attending English language classes and then went on to study for an MBA. Having worked in various educational institutions, she now works for Train 2000, a women's enterprise organisation. She explained why there is a need for specialist support for women entrepreneurs. It can be difficult for men as well as women to start up their own business and some women are happy to use generic training that is not specifically aimed at women. Other women however, particular women from minority communities, have issues with confidence, religion and re-training which means they benefit from a service that is tailored to their needs.

The proof is in the sharp increase in ethnic minority women accessing services from Train 2000. Huda has helped women to set up all kinds of business, including B&B, hospitality and property management. Many of her clients are seizing opportunities offered by Liverpool as European City of Culture. She shared two case studies with us:

Ilham Hamoud, a freelance photographer who came to Britain from Yemen as a young housewife with basic education and limited English language skills. She started English language classes when she became a single mother with a 5 year old daughter to raise and enrolled on a photography course.

“Starting the course was the turning point of my life. I became determined and focussed and knew what I wanted to do.”

Ilham’s exhibition of 45 images of refugees has been on display in Liverpool and London and she is now opening her own studio.

Ayesha Choudury set up her business when she became a mother, so that she could maintain financial independence and her career whilst still being at home whilst her daughter grows up. Sacred Lotus, her successful online shopping business based on Fair Trade products has been running for 2 years.

Huda ended by saying that access to appropriate services and finance, especially Muslim loan funds, were their main requirements for Muslim women starting a business. Women’s family responsibilities, including extended family as well as childcare were also significant barriers.

Questions and comments from the floor

What was the reaction from your family and friends when you entered the arts?

Shamshad replied that she had been interested in drama at school but studied science at university, so her path has not been a straight one. She felt family attitudes vary very much between families and even towards siblings within the same family.

Huda mentioned that services should be appropriate to women’s different family circumstances, including lone parents. She added that the number of women who are now economically active after support from Train 2000 has paid for the cost of the service. Women need good networks and well resourced training and support services.

As a service provider, how can we access women who might need our support?

Huda said there were two different routes to accessing hard to reach groups.

1. Employ dedicated outreach workers within your organisation who are from the target community
2. Work with women’s organisations and community organisations who are already known and trusted by the women you want to reach

In her experience, if you run events aimed specifically at Muslim women, they will come to them.

You need dedication and you need to build relationships with other organisations. Nargis Khan added that local councils voluntary sector umbrella agencies and Race Equality Councils would have databases of local women’s groups which would be a good starting point for establishing contacts.

Session 3: Where do we go from here?

The focus of the third and final session was on practical action. What can be done to open up more opportunities for Muslim women in the North West to realise their ambitions?

Making learning accessible

The Enlighten Project at Bolton University has helped 400 women, 40 of whom have gone on to University. Funded by the European Regional Development Fund and Aim Higher, the project uses a community engagement model. It is focussed on key wards in Bolton which are socially and economically deprived. The aim is to raise aspirations, from basic learning to higher education for people who faced many barriers to learning – real and perceived, not least the fact that there was often no history of education within the family.

How does Enlighten engage with local communities? They go to community events to talk about the project and get referrals from friends and family of women who could benefit. Project workers arrange events in community venues which are in the women's comfort zone, recognising that the University itself may not be seen as accessible in the first instance. These are informal learning opportunities to build up trust and confidence of the women. Salsa dancing is very popular, for example.

Changed perceptions about the University

The University is now viewed as an organisation which actively promotes diversity in the community. It is seen as having opened its doors to the community because of the type of events held there.

“Our job is to inject confidence” The project workers explained that lack of confidence is one of the key barriers. Women often lack self-belief.

Breaking the cycle

There are no role models in their family. Once they have been through the project, they go on to become the role models within their family. The project raises their expectations and the expectations they in turn have for their own children to go to university. It breaks the cycle.

“When you educate a woman, you educate a whole community.”

Helping women into work

Dr. Sylvie Koestlé, Policy and Research Officer for the Ethnic Minority Foundation (EMF), talked about being concerned by the statistics on Pakistani and Bangladeshi women's employment, which has now become a priority for the organisation. Their EQUAL project which started in 2006 includes one centre in Bolton, funded by the European Social Fund. The

secret of their success is that the projects are run entirely by Muslim women. Project workers are employed from the local community so can knock on doors because they are known and trusted. They have exceeded targets by having approximately 900 beneficiaries in 18 months and around 250 volunteers across the country. Childcare was a major barrier, so the projects encouraged women to bring their children, which helped create bonds between them.

In response to the huge need identified by the EQUAL project, EMF has set an ambitious target of supporting 10,000 Muslim women into employment. This will be funded by a consortium of organisations and launched in the spring, with Bolton and Manchester being amongst the target areas.

Issues raised by the audience

Barriers facing Muslim women

In response to a question about the main barriers women face and whether these have changed in recent years, Enlighten project workers made a number of points:

- It is difficult to generalise because the barriers depend on the demographics in different communities
- Lack of confidence
- Lack of information
- Childcare
- Transport
- Financial concerns – fear of getting into debt puts women off going to University, and high costs of childcare puts women off taking a job

Attitudes within families

Questions about family attitudes towards women going out to work or to study came up throughout the day. Here are some of the responses given by speakers:

- **Involve the family too:** the Enlighten project encourages women to bring family members with them. One woman told them for example that she would like to attend a first aid course but her mother in law would not want her to go, so they asked her to bring her too and she went on to become a volunteer. A student now in her third year at University faced initial resistance from her husband, but by inviting her to bring her husband with her to the University when she first started, so that he could see for himself what was involved, the project was able to allay his fears and enable her to proceed.
- **Individual women's determination:** Khalida said of course people ask her what her mother thinks about her going backpacking in Australia. Her view was that her mother knows she would go ahead anyway and by building a relationship of trust and making sure she

keeps in touch she is able to reassure her mother about it and maintain a good relationship between them.

Her clear message to other women in the audience was not to let barriers get in the way of what you want to do, have the confidence to pursue your ambitions and to realise our religion is not an obstacle.

- **Believe in yourself** - One delegate felt that we don't live in a confident world where people believe in themselves. A lot of the barriers facing women as well as men and children are about lack of confidence.

Choosing to stay at home

One person felt strongly that it should be perfectly OK for women who want to stay at home to care for their children to do so. The Government could do more to help women in this position, rather than expecting that all women should go out to work.

Response: The Government recognises the need to support families and has made much progress in terms of childcare provision, increases to maternity leave and paternity leave and the tax credits system. More could be done to help parents spend more time with their families, so this will be on the agenda for the national Muslim women's advisory group to be formally launched very shortly. Employers could also be more open to recognising the skills women acquire through motherhood, such as budgeting and listening, which are transferable to a workplace setting.

How far is this really a choice?

Dr. Sylvie Koestlé from the Ethnic Minority Foundation pointed out that only 27% of Bangladeshi women and 30% Pakistani women are economically active, compared to more than 70% white and black Caribbean women. The huge difference in the figures makes her question whether this is really a true choice. Are all these women really outside the labour market because they want to stay at home and look after their family?

Financial implications: Sylvie also pointed out the financial implications for women who do not work. They are not building up any pension for later life and there is a strong link with poverty in Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, which affects the chances of the whole family.

Short term funding

The biggest barrier for projects such as Enlighten is short term funding. The approach has to be mainstreamed within the University to have a long-term impact.

A delegate from the audience who was a governor at an Islamic school was concerned at the lack of funding for faith schools, making it hard to raise aspirations of young people. Nargis pointed out that there is state funding for faith schools, which has been used by the Muslim girls school in Bolton for example.

Response: Azhar Ali, Special Adviser at the Department of Communities and Local Government, said that the Government is trying to move away from short term funding by rolling out Local Area Agreements. One of the conditions of funding is that projects must be mainstreamed by local authorities. The challenge for the voluntary and community sector is to find out how Local Area Agreements work, what the priorities are and how they can bid for funding. Voluntary organisations have to attune to this new funding environment.

“There is a lot of money out there. You have to get clever”

Access to funding

Local authorities do not always inform communities what is available and the usual suspects tend to get the money. New organisations may not have the right contacts.

Response: Nargis suggested calling your elected members to account. Local councillors can play a greater role in making sure that resources are allocated appropriately. Azhar urged people to take a stand as individuals:

“Sometimes as Muslims we fall into the victim mentality. It is time to challenge institutions. If you keep knocking on doors and there are enough of you, things start to happen.”

Gatekeepers - “It is a lonely journey to get past the gatekeepers”

The situation varies from region to region and from area to area. One delegate said that there is a real problem with gatekeepers in the North West. Another delegate asked why it is in Muslim communities that the gatekeepers are always men.

Response: You have to knock on doors. Write to the chair of the Local Strategic Partnership, write to your MP, write to the Chief Executive of the local council and demand a meeting.

Azhar admitted that male gatekeepers are a problem in most areas but that there were also some really strong women role models out there. He felt that communities in the North could learn a lot from other regions such as London.

“Some of the most passionate local people are women. Some of the best projects are led by women. The Government recognises this.”

Access to information

For many Muslim women, finding out the right information is a key issue. You need the right contacts, to know who to approach. This is particularly difficult in areas with smaller Muslim communities like Carlisle. Women outside the city centres can be more isolated and in need of support.

Role of the voluntary and community sector

Voluntary and community organisations are key to building the healthy society we all want. Professionalism within the sector depends on funding, so that groups can employ people on professional grades rather than relying on people who are paid “a pittance”.

Sharing good practice

Having heard about the achievements of Enlighten and the Ethnic Minority Foundation, delegates wanted to know how this good practice could be shared more widely. We should do more to make sure that the experiences and learning from these projects can help Muslim women in other parts of the region. At the moment, it is difficult to find out about good practice. A suggestion was made for setting up a database of projects that people can access freely and get in touch with each other.

Networking and mentoring

Although informal networking and mentoring takes place, many women do not have any access to these because information about them does not reach women who are not already “in the know”. A national and/or regional mentoring network for Muslim women could make a big difference.

New opportunities

Speakers mentioned a number of opportunities for resources and support:

- The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) is launching a **community leadership fund** shortly, which Azhar Ali assured us is not intended for gatekeepers! Look out for details on the DCLG website in February. www.communities.gov.uk
- DCLG has also provided funding for **tackling extremism** to local authorities in certain parts of the country. Contact your own local authority to find out their plans for using this money.
- **Equality and Human Rights Commission** has announced an interim grants programme for voluntary and community organisations working on equality and human rights. The closing date for applications is 4 February. Details on www.equalityhumanrights.com
- **National Muslim Women’s Advisory Group**: Launched by Gordon Brown on 31 January 2008, the Government hopes this panel will help deal with the issue of gatekeepers in Muslim communities. 19 Muslim women representing a wide spectrum of communities, professions and traditions have been appointed who will discuss education,

employment, access for women to mosques and their management committees and cultural barriers including issues around forced marriages. Three women from the North West are member of this panel, one of whom was present at the event in Bolton, Siddika Ahmed from Peacemakers, currently on secondment to the Government Office North West. The others are Zulekha Dala from Lancashire County Council and Samina Kauser who works with young people. For more information <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/680335>

Concluding Remarks

Ahmed Suleiman from Friends of Islam ended the formal programme by thanking all the speakers and delegates for their contributions. He also thanked the North West Regional Assembly and Bolton Council for their support which had allowed the event to take place in the region and for making it such a success.

Feedback from those who attended has been very positive, showing that people appreciate the opportunity to hear from positive role models, policy makers and practitioners who are working to promote change for Muslim women at work, in education, in public life and in local communities.

“Many thanks for putting on a wonderful event yesterday, my colleague and I found it very inspirational and worthwhile”.

Shabana Patel, Lancashire County Council

Key Findings of the Day

Barriers for Muslim Women

- It is wrong to generalise about barriers faced by Muslim women as these vary between families and between local communities.
- Some barriers are structural, such as the under-representation of ethnic minority women in public life and in the workplace, which means there are few visible positive role models. Childcare, transport and poverty were all significant as well
- Some women their confidence building up before they can access opportunities
- Information about opportunities for funding and support are not widely known about within Muslim communities. This was echoed in the feedback forms, with many delegates commenting on how much useful information they picked up on the day
- Community gatekeepers who prevent development, access and vocalisation of women’s needs tend to be male, though some women noted that if consultation was with a chosen few women there is the risk of creating female gate keepers

How to reach Muslim women

- Although some Muslim women are comfortable using mainstream services, others benefit from specialist support that is sensitive to their culture and background
- Organisations who wish to engage Muslim women should consider employing specialist outreach workers from the local community and/or work in partnership with local women's organisations who are known and trusted by the women they want to reach
- Public sector organisations can build up trust and confidence by arranging events in community venues. If events are organised specifically aimed at Muslim women, they will come (as proved by this event, which was over-subscribed)
- Transparency and openness in recruitment are critical, so that access to opportunities does not rely on knowing the right people
- If husbands or other family members are worried about women being involved in your organisation or project, invite them along as well to see for themselves what it is about. It is important to engage the men as part of this process

Funding for community-based projects

- Services targeting Muslim women suffer from short term funding, yet well resourced training and support services can pay for themselves in the long term because they will enable women to find work and contribute to the local economy
- Funding for voluntary organisations and community groups is changing, with more pots of money allocated through Local Strategic Partnerships to meet priorities set out in a Local Area Agreement. Women's organisations and Muslim organisations need to find out what is happening in their area and how they can be involved.
- If "gatekeepers" are getting in the way, people should contact local councillors, MPs and Chief Executives of the local authority with their concerns

Sharing Good Practice

- Information about effective projects should be more readily available so that good practice can be spread more widely across the region
- A network of Muslim women in the region would be a positive way forward to share information and help individual women to have more influence
- More role models, high profile or not would be an excellent way to inspire more Muslim women

Report written for the North West Regional Assembly by Helen Wollaston, Equal to the Occasion Ltd, January 2008