

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: [Employment opportunities for Muslims in the UK, HC 782](#)

Tuesday 12 April 2016

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Muslim Council of Britain](#)

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Members present: Mrs Maria Miller (Chair); Ruth Cadbury; Angela Crawley; Mrs Flick Drummond; Jess Phillips; Mr Gavin Shaker

Questions 1–42

Witness[es]: **Talat Ahmed**, Chair of the Social and Family Affairs Committee, Muslim Council of Britain, **Miqdaad Versi**, Assistant Secretary General, Muslim Council of Britain, **Iman Abou Atta**, Deputy Director, Faith Matters, and **Fiyaz Mughal**, Director, Faith Matters, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Thank you so much for joining us for this evidence session today for the Women and Equalities Committee's report on Muslims in the workplace. We are really grateful to you for giving your time. I know you are all incredibly busy so we are immensely grateful that you have taken a morning out of your week to come and talk to us. We know your evidence will be incredibly important to us in unpacking what is such an important problem that we have decided to look at. You will know that the drill is that our colleagues have got a number of questions that they want to ask, but before we start that it would be very good indeed if you could just introduce yourself and the name of your organisation, so that we have that for the record.

Talat Ahmed: I am Talat Ahmed. I am representing the Muslim Council of Britain. I am the chair of the social and family affairs committee. I have been with MCB as a volunteer for the last seven or eight years.

Miqdaad Versi: I am Miqdaad Versi. I am assistant secretary general of the MCB. I work on a range of issues including equal opportunities for women within mosques.

Fiyaz Mughal: I am Fiyaz Mughal, director of Faith Matters. I am also director of Tell MAMA, the national Islamophobia monitoring project.

Iman Abou Atta: I am Iman Abou Atta. I am deputy director of Faith Matters and I work with young people and women.

Q2 Mr Shuker: Thank you so much for coming along. I am Gavin Shuker; I am the Labour MP for Luton. I obviously appreciate the work that both your organisations have done there. I wonder if we could start with something a bit more topical, because I think it goes to the heart of many of the things that we want to look at in the rest of this session. You will have obviously seen the Trevor Phillips piece over the weekend and the Channel 4 programme that is coming out tomorrow night. To what extent do you think a debate about the attitudes of British Muslims is helpful or harmful at this stage?

Talat Ahmed: I would say it is unhelpful and actually mainstreams the idea that we are not part of Britain as a whole. The fact is that Muslims here in Britain are very much a part of British society. So much negativity was portrayed by Trevor Phillips, and I do not think it was progressive in any way. We have to look at ways of moving forward, which is why we are very glad to have been invited here today to discuss how we do that.

Miqdaad Versi: I will just add that important things are brought up in this poll. We should not shy away from real issues facing Muslim communities across the country. We have to try to look away from this idea of exceptionalism: that Muslims are exceptionally bad or exceptionally different from the rest of society. Evidence does not support that thinking. This poll was done within specifically more conservative and poorer Muslim communities, which are almost twice as deprived as the rest of the British Muslim population. That is supposedly compared with a control group, which was done throughout the country as a phone poll, which is a very different method. It was not similar to the way that the initial poll was done. You have a very different and skewed attitude, and you have to be careful about what conclusions you draw from those things.

When you have a poll that has been done specifically for a news channel or for a programme, it is very different from one that is done for academic research. Those academics who looked at Muslim integration have said that actually from 2001 to 2011, Muslims have got less concentrated and more integrated compared with before. There is a big difference and that is something that needs to be thought through much more carefully.

Q3 Mr Shuker: Trevor Phillips said in his piece on Sunday that the evidence showed a chasm opening between Muslims and non-Muslims on such fundamentals as marriage, relations between men and women, schooling, freedom of expression and even the use of violence in defence of religion. It suggests that some of the numbers that are there would support that view. As I understand it, you are saying that the issue here is the quality of the polling and that it is not comparing like with like.

Miqdaad Versi: It is not comparing like with like. I do not think anyone could claim that it was. The poll for Muslims was done face-to-face. In that very article Trevor Phillips said that the reason it was done face-to-face was so that you could not hide your divisive opinions because through a face-to-face interview you can get to the bottom of it. However, the control group that they are comparing it with was done as a phone poll and they did not do the same thing. The initial poll was done in more conservative communities and poorer communities; it was not like with like.

Fiyaz Mughal: There is also an issue where you are looking at the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities specifically in these polls, but you miss out the large convert community that is of British heritage. They are born and brought up in this country and their views will be distinctly different. We do not even have the Muslim convert white

community reflected in that poll. You do not have the Arab population reflected in that poll. You do not have the Bosnian Muslim population reflected in that poll. I can go on. You do not have the Somali population reflected in that poll. How reflective is this poll? It is reflective probably, as Miqdaad has said, of a set of areas that are extremely deprived, with people who are of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage. It is very specific.

I just wanted to add something else in terms of what Talat said earlier. We are in an environment where it seems that anything goes in relation to daily headlines about Muslim communities. You look at the diet of press headlines. You look at the plethora of documentaries that constantly focus on Muslim communities. This is in an environment where over the last year, for example, we have received over 2,500 incidents of Islamophobia compared with 700 in 2014-15 and we will be responding to this in our Tell MAMA report. Granted, that increase is also because police forces have fed some of that data to us. We are in an environment where Islamophobia is a problem. The perception in the community is that it is a growing problem. Comments and statements like this, and issues like this, do not add to cohesion. They do not add to integration and, if I can also say so, they add to a sense of alienation and isolationism within mindsets, which can also feed extremism.

Q4 Mr Shuker: The specific purpose of our inquiry that we have established is to look at why outcomes for Muslim people in the workplace seem to be so disproportionate compared to the wider population—pay, health and so on. Do you think that what has happened over the weekend and this question about what Muslims think plays into that? If so, how do you think that happens?

Miqdaad Versi: When you look at the British Muslim society as a whole, it is so diverse. You have your Nadiya Hussains; your Mo Farahs; you have the dragon from *Dragon's Den*. You have different people, British Muslims, in public life out there. That reflects a very big part of British Muslim society. Instead you have this idea that this small grouping is now seen as the reflection of Muslim communities, when the reality of the broad, mainstream integration of Muslims within society is being ignored. Of course that is going to cause problems. For those who have not met a Muslim, these types of things reflect really badly.

Q5 Mr Shuker: Let me just draw you to one other area that is related to this, and I know we have some expertise on the panel. Obviously we are talking about the attitudes of broader society towards British Muslims; what about the attitudes of British Muslims, in particular with regards to women within the Muslim community? One of a series of submissions that we have received has suggested that there might be something about the attitude and the place of women as perhaps being expected to be in the home or taking caring responsibilities more than in the general public. What is your view about that?

Iman Abou Atta: In interviews and definitely in the research that has been done around women in general, Muslim women tend to be asked more than white British women about marriage, about their childcare, about whether they are looking to have this marital status. There are always those questions that focus on their marital status and their life. That seems to hinder the recruitment of Muslims in the workplace. It is more in the private sector, and you can see that most women tend to take more roles in charity and the public sectors than the private sector, which is quite a hindrance for Muslim women. It is definitely a difference between white British women and Muslim women.

Talat Ahmed: I would like to quote an example. There is a social enterprise in Basildon that has recently received funding. They help women in their area. They said that there was one Muslim woman who wears the hijab, who actually really came out of her shell. She had such low self-esteem and low confidence but through this mentoring programme she has successfully secured a job and integrated well into society. You need opportunities like that, where people are open to those opportunities, and also organisations facilitating that development, and giving that confidence and that advice, so that those women can progress and become economically active.

Q6 Mrs Drummond: You mentioned the rise of Islamophobia and there have been police reports that show that that is the case. What impact do you think that it is having on the Muslim community? Have you any evidence of hate crime units shutting around the country?

Fiyaz Mughal: Within Tell MAMA we have built up a significant resource over the last four years that shows a year-on-year increase in Islamophobic incidents, so it is not only to us as a third-party reporting service. We know very clearly from Met data and other police data that this has been increasing year on year across the board. The fact is that also within Muslim communities there is a very strong perception and sense of fear today. That has increased over the last four to five years. We hear it particularly and acutely from Muslim women. For example, if they go out to work, they do not want to go out in the evening, or if they come back from whatever they are doing, they will ask their husbands to go out and do the shopping for them if it is slightly late. It has a distinctly strong impact on their lives. We then hear that, if they suffer an incident, the husbands tell them not to go out. In a way they become more restricted in their environment because the husband is trying to do the right thing in his opinion. What we have is a particular and an acute impact at a street level on visible Muslim women. We know that women who wear the niqab suffer more incidences, and more aggressive incidents, including assaults.

This is not just an issue around street-based Islamophobia. Let us also be clear that the online world is absolutely toxic. The online world and the lack of social media company activity to try to deal with this issue is an ongoing problem. Social media companies will talk about free speech but they will not fund it. They will not fund a civil society and particularly Muslim community organisations to do counter speech. We are in a toxic environment.

The last thing to say is that we are also talking about institutional Islamophobia. We must not forget institutional Islamophobia—the perception that people cannot get jobs because they are Muslim, and the perception that when they turn up to an interview with a niqab or a hijab they are not going to get the job, and if they do not get the job it is because of that. These have deep impacts on the psyche of Muslim communities. Again, they create long-term issues of “them and us”.

Iman Abou Atta: Can I just add some numbers? From January 2015 to March 2016 we have received 43 cases of discrimination, out of which seven were directly in the workplace towards Muslim women because of the hijab and asking them to take the hijab off. In addition, these incidents are still underreported. Some of them came in in the last two weeks as well, given the significance of what is happening in the media. There is always an impact on what happens. You can be employed by someone today, who is aware that you wear the hijab—this is a real case that took place. He employed a person

wearing the hijab, she started to work, and within two weeks the news media was so skewed about Muslims that he asked her to take her hijab off.

Q7 Mrs Drummond: Does it just affect women, or does it affect men as well?

Iman Abou Atta: It is affecting men, but more women.

Fiyaz Mughal: It is affecting men in a different way. It is affecting men institutionally, quite strongly. It affects women much more physically at a street level, in terms of the verbal comments that are made to them.

Miqdaad Versi: I have spoken to many women who, because they have seen examples of things happening when they go on public transport, have been very careful about public transport. One of my friends is a Cambridge graduate and his wife is a pharmacist; these are not people who you would consider to be more away from society. These individuals wanted to travel together—the wife said, “Actually, husband, can you come with me?” after seeing an incident. That is really worrying. I have seen people who in the past used to stand on the platform edge, but now they have moved back because they are worried that they might get pushed off. It is not just what is actually happening, but the perception that that creates within Muslim women communities, because then they get even more worried about what might happen; forget about what is actually happening as well.

Q8 Mrs Drummond: None of you are going to set up a social medium. I have just been in the UAE and they have set up Sawab; I know it is in Arabic but they are dealing with counterterrorism. It might be something that we need to set up here. Perhaps one of your organisations would like to look into that?

Fiyaz Mughal: The real problem that we have is social media companies not taking responsibility. Frankly, let us cut to the chase: they talk counter speech, they make enormous profits and they invest very little in terms of organisations to do the counter-speech work. We see it every day with police officers coming in and out of our door. The resource from the state is drained. The resource to civil society is drained but they make enormous profits. It has to stop because the impacts are significant. One of the cases we had relates to how social media can affect people’s lives. We had a woman who reported to us; she was being targeted because she was Muslim; the individual went to her workplace, because he trawled through her Facebook page and found her workplace; and he sent her a picture, and this is the kind of intimidating behaviour that social media companies will not even act on. It has to stop.

Q9 Mrs Drummond: I do not know if you have noticed that hate crime units have been shutting because of cut backs.

Fiyaz Mughal: Yes, cut backs right across the board.

Q10 Ruth Cadbury: Are the perpetrators of Islamophobia the same sort of people who have been perpetrators of appalling racist attacks, or is the demographic different?

Fiyaz Mughal: The demographic is actually identical. The demographic is mainly young white males between the ages of 15 and 35. That is the core demographic we are talking about. At a street level, as I said, predominantly it is Muslim women who are affected. Now, let us just frame this as it is. It is male-on-female gender violence and abuse as well

as Islamophobia. We need to look at this gender component very strongly. If you look at the timing of the mosques that are attacked, from what we have received, it is between 10pm and 3am. It is mainly white males between the ages of 15 and 35. That is the demographic base that we are dealing with, and quite a few of them would have come across far-right material online. The impact of the far right is significant in terms of the influence on rhetoric and the hardening of thoughts that these individuals have around Muslim communities.

Q11 Angela Crawley: I wholeheartedly agree that social media should take a greater responsibility. I just wanted to come back to a point that Iman has made about mainstream media, and whether you think the portrayal in the media and perhaps also representation in the media in terms of diversity, could do more to tackle some of these issues that you have raised as well.

Iman Abou Atta: I agree on this point and I will give you a live example. Regarding the poll that took place, we have now been asked by Channel 4 to allocate some victims to speak and go live on Channel 4. Every single victim that I spoke to about that was happy to speak to the press, but once you mentioned Channel 4, they would tell you that Channel 4 are very Islamophobic in their stance, with the way they portray Muslims in the media, and therefore they did not want to engage with them. Again, you are building that divide between even mainstream media and Muslim communities, just because of a poll and the way they are looking at it.

Miqdaad Versi: Cambridge University did a roundtable, which you may have seen, and we are happy to share some of the information from that. It looked at the impact of the media on Islamophobia in the UK, and it corroborated previous discussions and research, which said that the way that Muslims are portrayed in the media has a direct impact on Islamophobia. This is real; it is happening. When we look at what can be done when it comes to the media, we have got three or four main areas. One of them is ensuring that whenever there is a headline or sensationalist way of thinking, there needs to be appropriate governance around it. You have IPSO there, which has a certain amount of teeth. When you have a front-page headline, which millions of people read and that actually acts as a news story for the BBC, ITV and broadcasters afterwards, and then you end up having a correction on page 2 six months later, fine, it acts as a little bit of a deterrent, but it really does not stop the impact. You need to have stronger diversity within media organisations to ensure that, as much as possible, the views of Muslim communities are heard. I know of people in the media who have said their very presence in the editorial decision-making room has been very important in shaping stories and ensuring that they are not being done in perhaps an unintentionally Islamophobic way.

Adding to all that, we need to ensure that we do not have a situation where, when something bad happens, there is no response. When something happens in other communities, we see very strong responses. When it comes to Muslim communities, “No, it is fine; it is just them.” That attitude is very problematic. In fact, you see “Muslims are silent on terror”, in *The Times*, on the front page. When Donald Trump says it, guess what? We had Theresa May say that he is talking rubbish. There is a big difference here. What is happening here when Muslim communities are being ignored when it comes to the treatment in the press?

Q12 Ruth Cadbury: I am going to focus on the core topic of the inquiry, which is on discrimination in the workplace. A general question to start with: how prevalent is discrimination against Muslims in the workplace, and what can we do, or what is anybody doing, to tackle this successfully?

Iman Abou Atta: Unemployment rates for BME women have definitely increased sharply since 2008. It is more prevalent in the private sector, where equality monitoring is almost non-existent compared with the public sector. You can see as well that there are gaps in pay between ethnic minorities and white British women. Within the Muslim community, there is something that we call the Muslim penalty. They might have the same qualification as a white British woman, but they will not get the same pay or role, even if you have the same qualification.

Q13 Ruth Cadbury: Can I pick up on something? Is it a Muslim element, or an Asian or a BME element?

Iman Abou Atta: There is a BME element but there is also a Muslim penalty element. You have the two elements together, being from an ethnic background as well as being Muslim. That is what we call the Muslim penalty.

Fiyaz Mughal: Just to add to what Iman has said, again, this is about perception. Individuals we have spoken to that have gone to interviews have said that, because of what they are wearing, they have been asked questions about why they wear those certain things in interviews. They have left the interview thinking that they are not going to get that job because what they have been wearing may be seen as an impediment. They have been asked questions about whether they are thinking about having a family when those questions should not be asked. The perception is that, because they are from a Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage, they might want to have families, or they have larger families. These are stereotypes. These are stereotypical tropes in the minds of interviewers that give a strong perception that that individual is not going to get the job, and in many instances they do not get the job.

There was actually something quite stark in a recent Department for Work and Pensions survey that we listed in our submission. In 2013 it found that ethnic minority applicants had to send 74% more applications than their white counterparts to achieve an equal level of success. Again the hurdle is right at the start; it is at the application process where you have to literally put in double the number of applications to try to get an interview in that process. It is not only at the interview stage; it is right at the application stage, which means more effort, more time and more resources need to go in just to get an interview and get your foot through the door.

Talat Ahmed: On getting your foot through the door, we would advocate anonymised CVs and shortlisting at the first stage. As you said earlier, when you meet a Muslim that is when perceptions change. It is about having that face-to-face interaction and the person proving their worth and their ability to do the job.

Q14 Ruth Cadbury: That was going to be one of my next questions. Can I just get from the rest of you what your thoughts are on anonymised or name-blind applications? Would you all support that?

Iman Abou Atta: I am definitely supportive of that. We have had cases where people actually have submitted the same CV with a British name and a Muslim name, and they got an answer for an interview. We have evidence of this so that would definitely help very much.

Miqdaad Versi: It is not just about the application stage, though obviously that is the initial hurdle. There are so many other examples that are really important. I have spoken to a Muslim woman who, for example, was clearly told by the employer, “If you want to have a chance in this industry, remove your headscarf.” This is not a one-off case. This is a case that is experienced by many women across the country. I do not have stats. I am not sure of the percentages, but in my experience, when I have been talking to Muslim women, that is a reality. That is problematic, because British Muslim women have three barriers very often: first, that they are a woman; secondly, a significant proportion of the time they are from an ethnic minority background; and thirdly they are also from a Muslim community. They are three barriers, each of which research suggests holds people back. That is problematic. Each one of those independently does so. There is lots of research to support that.

Q15 Ruth Cadbury: Regarding discrimination within the workplace and other ways that employers could tackle this, we have addressed gender-blind applications; are there other issues?

Iman Abou Atta: Equality measures attract applicants from ethnic minority groups. This has been reduced recently, according to the last surveys. From 2004 to 2011, this has been reduced by 3%. The two things that employers overlooked totally were sexual orientation and religion. The main thing that was highlighted was disability. It is important, even at the recruitment stage, to talk about the recruitment stage, then the workplace itself, and then monitoring and making sure that there is equality monitoring during the whole process. There is a lot to be done.

Talat Ahmed: Also the MCB is working with and partnering up with Reed in employment. They are looking at how to access Muslim women in terms of building their confidence and making them more economically active. You need those kinds of positive projects but it should be coming at a national level. It should not be recruitment agencies taking the initiative and applying to the European Social Fund or the National Lottery in order to put those processes and systems in place. It should be mainstream, so that it includes all, because it is about equal opportunity, at the end of the day. Where people are not getting those opportunities, those opportunities should be accessible to everyone. No group should feel disadvantaged over another.

Miqdaad Versi: There are two sides to every point. Of course it is a big part of discrimination that we are talking about right now, but obviously on the other side of the coin it is always worth trying to support British Muslim women as much as possible in these regards—for example, leadership development programmes and networking events. These types of things help everyone and in particular when you are disadvantaged in these three ways, everything helps in that regard. Extra work needs to be done to reach out and extra work needs to be done to try to support those British Muslim women through that process and through application processes.

Q16 Mr Shuker: One of the suggestions that we have heard is about the prevalence of social activities around the workplace as well; for example, in professional jobs in London it is not unusual for people to go for drinks or to eat together. Do you think that that is a significant area that we should look at in this inquiry, or do you think it is overplayed?

Talat Ahmed: It is significant in terms of the feedback that has been received. When a group of men or women go to the pub and Muslims feel they cannot, they know that there is another level of engagement that is happening outside, which is excluding them. It can be significant. We talk about glass ceilings. When you go to the pub, relationships are being built. How do you include your workers who do not want to go to the pub? Relationship-building takes place outside that, so social networking and socialising within the organisation and getting to know employees at another level, such as with mentoring opportunities, and having those structures in place would be very helpful.

Iman About Atta: Some of the women have found ways to participate other than going to the pub. Looking at it, it is not cultural attitudes; it is actually the structural discrimination that is taking place that is hindering them to take part and get to higher levels in their role, rather than cultural attitudes.

Fiyaz Mughal: We have never had any strong business leadership, whether it is the CBI or other bodies, saying things around the need to include women from BME, and particularly the Muslim communities, in the heart of small to medium enterprises. Where is that discussion? We have not had anything around that discussion. The fact is that if we have strong leadership at a political, business and structural level, as well as from entrepreneurs who are running agencies, and the ability to include the human capital of what they have in their business in the running of that business, you will get the best productivity. In a way, I am saying that Muslim women's voices need to be part and parcel of the development of any small to medium-sized enterprise. That is good leadership and that is what we need to be promoting. The pub culture days need to be over; I am quite frank about that. The pub culture of, "Well, actually, that is my mate, he is male, he is probably over 50," and "James and I have gone to the same college," are well and truly over. London is an extremely pluralistic, diverse city, and so actually the pub culture is something we should not look upon as being a remnant in our society that we need to have space for. We should be saying, "People need to be included in every part of what we do, and if they do not go to the pub, how can we include them in the heart, life and soul of a small business or a small enterprise?"

Q17 Ruth Cadbury: I just wondered if you had specific recommendations that we can pick up on, or experiences where an organisation has shifted its culture.

Fiyaz Mughal: I know of incidences, for example in north London, where we do a bit of work and local enterprise agencies have shifted their culture significantly. They have individuals from BME communities leading at the front. They provide support and training to small and medium enterprises, and they are constantly pushing the issue of diversity being beneficial to businesses, to raising and generating income, and actually promoting symbols and role models of women from different communities, right the way across their publications. In many instances, that gives the kind of impetus and energy for women who are looking at that material and those businesses to actually say, "I would not mind looking at that sector. Actually I feel included in what I am seeing and I see promotional material that is actually relevant to me." We can provide some of those

examples, but it comes down to the fact that we have to have the kind of leadership and political statements from the business sectors that actually promote the fact that London is a very different place. I am sad to highlight again this culture of the over-50 white male individual sitting there saying, “London is great; it is very diverse,” but the workforce not even reflecting it. It is so different from what we are in London. It has to significantly change but it has to change because of good, strong leadership and strong messaging over a period of time.

Q18 Angela Crawley: One of the things that has come across is the fact that Muslims are underrepresented within Russell Group universities. What I wanted to ask was whether there are any factors that you think are unique to Muslims when they are choosing a university or a career, first of all.

Iman Abou Atta: Sometimes the Muslim community do not want to leave the areas where they are living. We are talking about their socioeconomic background and the families that they are taking care of, and these elements actually make them stay where they are and not move into other areas where you have the Russell Group universities to enrol into. Family is a factor, as is the socioeconomic background. Also again the whole thing of being qualified and coming out of a Russell Group university and not getting the same job as others that are from the white British population is a factor that the younger generation are thinking about. They may think, “I might as well study in my own area and not go to a Russell Group university because I am not going to get that job.”

Miqdaad Versi: I will just reiterate what was said. There is a big diversity here. There are some communities where the idea of going away from home is more problematic and more challenging, in particular when it comes to some groups within British Muslim women and families. That is a concern within those groups, but I think that that is changing significantly though time, and as a whole poverty and ethnic minority background, play a very big role in that, possibly more so than religion, in these areas.

Talat Ahmed: There have been cuts, a rise in tuition fees and the cuts in EMA for students. Accessing funds more easily is also significant to those from the poorer backgrounds.

Miqdaad Versi: In addition, half of the British Muslim population live in the 10% most deprived areas, so poverty is a major concern for some.

Q19 Angela Crawley: I wholeheartedly thank you for those points. There are a number of factors about Russell Group universities that are not unique at all in terms of their diversity and what they offer for young people. I do not necessarily think the factors are in any way unique. The point that you raised there about funding is quite a valid one. I wanted to ask whether you think the role of Sharia-compliant loans is a factor in decision-making for young people when they choose to either go away to university or choose to go to a Russell Group university, for example.

Talat Ahmed: They probably feel that their options are limited, as they may have been brought up to believe that you should not pay interest on money that you borrow, or that it should not be derived from unethical sources. Sharia-compliant loans or an alternative would be far more appealing if they were easily available. It would be something that mainstream society would advocate as well. They want to know that the money is not

coming from investment from pornographic companies or gambling or alcohol-based companies. Anything that gives access to all but also looks at it from an ethical source would be a very good thing.

Miqdaad Versi: Regarding the idea of interest-related loans, there is a big diverse Muslim opinion. There is a minority for whom this is very important, but it is important to note that that is probably a minority. However, when it comes to education, it is all about equal access for all, and if that minority happens also to be poor, this becomes a very big factor for them, because not only are they not able to pay their fees, but they feel that they have either to give up part of their faith and take the normal loan or they will not go through that process. Yes, it will help, but for a specific minority group within Muslim communities.

Iman Abou Atta: There is a gap that needs to be addressed because there is not enough research actively showing why they are not joining Russell Group universities, so there is a gap there that needs to be addressed.

Fiyaz Mughal: I will just add one last thing. We should welcome the fact that credit unions that work right in the heart of communities are today providing some Sharia-compliant loans. That has been a huge step forward. Again we can provide examples of credit unions that are actually providing these facilities for between £6,000 and £25,000. We are not talking small sums; we are talking substantive sums. That is a really positive step forward that has come over the last three successive Governments, which have pushed for these opportunities to be available. I support what both Miqdaad and Talat have said: that the more opportunity you give to young people, at least you give them an option for what is available to them in a resource-scarce environment right now.

Q20 Mr Shuker: Can I just briefly ask about students not choosing to move away from home? We have talked about the financial element of it. I would assume there are probably inherent cultural attitudes about perhaps how willing Muslim families are for their kids to move further away.

Fiyaz Mughal: My dad was trying to get rid of me very soon, I can tell you that.

Mr Shuker: I have got 15 years to go; I am all right. What do you think?

Talat Ahmed: The largest Muslim communities are Pakistani and Bangladeshi, so they will tend to be more conservative. However, as Miqdaad said, that is changing. It is about the trust, understanding and how important education is. If a child from a poor background got into Oxford or Cambridge, it is more likely that the parents, no matter how protective they are, will let them go, because Oxford is a great university and a great opportunity. If Russell Group universities are not accepting more young people from poorer backgrounds, we are not going to see that trend. It is about making that available to them and giving them aspirations.

Miqdaad Versi: There is also an element of role models within communities. As a conservative family, if there is someone that you know in that area who has also gone to a different university, that makes a big difference. That is why some of these access schemes have been quite helpful. I was involved in one at the University of Oxford and have been involved in others. I have seen many of them. They have gone back to the

communities they have been involved in and feel they can relate to them and say, “Here are the challenges that you may talk about, but this is how they were overcome.” You cannot necessarily deal with the issues entirely but you can at least address some of the concerns that they may have. I have heard people say, “Oh, will that mean my son or daughter will suddenly get involved in alcohol and drugs and they will be out all night, because I am not there to look after them?” For some people this is very important. For everybody this is very important—it is not specifically the Muslim community. This is what I hear, anyway. When you suddenly say, “Actually there is already a community of Muslims and there is an Islamic Society. There are people there already who are of your background, whom you are already aware of.” That really helps mitigate some of that damage or risk.

Q21 Mr Shuker: I just have one other very brief question on the finances. Do you think the bigger factor is around Sharia compliance and so on, or do you think the bigger factor is a fear of debt? Would you say there is a disproportionate fear of debt?

Talat Ahmed: Debt.

Iman Abou Atta: It is to do with independent living, when you are moving out. This affects all communities, not just the Muslim community, across the board.

Miqdaad Versi: I entirely agree.

Q22 Mrs Drummond: If we called it a graduate tax would that be all right? As effectively, that is what it is.

Fiyaz Mughal: I was a previous Lib Dem card carrying member, so yes.

Mrs Drummond: That is what it is, effectively.

Miqdaad Versi: It is also about the living costs during the period when you are actually there at university and the lack of support for some of the people who fall in between those who are supported by grants and those who are wealthy enough to pay. That middle category finds it very difficult. There is actually an element of living costs and not necessarily just the graduate tax element of the loan itself.

Q23 Angela Crawley: You are absolutely right; there is a lot of pressure on young people across the board now and the cost of going to university and your socioeconomic background can all be factors in your decision-making. The other thing that was picked up on that I wanted to address is: we have talked about the role of alcohol in the workplace. I wondered if that was a factor also in moving out to go to university as a young person. Is the climate of socialisation for a young person a factor?

Miqdaad Versi: People acknowledge the fact that there is alcohol and people will get involved in that. There is an element of freshers’ week that some students, who do not necessarily want to participate in the alcohol-related activities, find a bit more concerning. Normally, very often they have non-alcohol equivalent sessions done. In very few situations would that really be a problem, and I think that there are Muslim Societies across the country which provide a freshers’ week alternative as well. As far as I am concerned, I do not think that that is a real concern.

Iman Abou Atta: Actually the younger generation of the Muslim community do not currently hold the belief that women should be homemakers; they actually should seek their own careers, so it is the other way round.

Q24 Chair: I know Jess wants to come in, but you have touched on research and I just want to pick up on that. In reading the research that is available, to say that some of it is contradictory is an understatement, and that is why in today's session it has been particularly useful to hear your views. You can understand our confusion in looking at things that say diametrically opposite things, and this is coming out in some of the questioning today. We know that some of that is because views are different between first and second generations. It may be age-related but actually what we pick up is that it is more to do with whether people are first or second generation. How can we get a better grasp of what is really happening in society, so that your opening comments around the research that was published on Sunday are a thing of the past and that we actually have a data set that we all feel confident in? What can we do to improve the data sets?

Fiyaz Mughal: Let me just start off with the premise that there is less engagement taking place with Muslim communities today than there was seven, eight or nine years ago. It sounds bleak but sadly that is what is happening right now. Not only is it a resource issue but we are into this scenario of good organisations and bad organisations to deal with. We are in this scenario today where there is less engagement and less talking going on within Muslim communities and with Muslim communities. We are in a scenario where, I have to say, Ministers are going out less in communities and having some of those roundtable discussions. Frankly we are moving in the wrong direction. If we are to take up some of these challenges, we need to have a Government and Ministers who are willing to go out and have some of those debates and discussions. I was with the Rt Hon Hazel Blears in 2007 and 2008, when she would go out and talk about Prevent. She took that agenda, one of the toughest agendas to talk about, particularly within Muslim communities. She went out there and she talked and she engaged with people about whether people agreed or disagreed with Prevent. Some of those debates and discussions really informed the decision-making that was taking place. Less of that is happening.

We are in an environment where some of the engagement from Government needs to be better. We need to have less of an approach of who is good and who is bad, and actually talk with people who are willing to sign up to our democratic values. If they are willing to sign up to some of these core values, let us get them around the table. Last but not least, we need to have more voices around the table, particularly of women, as we are talking about today, rather than people who are males like myself. Maybe that will put me out of a job but we need to have more discussion, more engagement and more proactivity from this Government, going out and talking and engaging with Muslim communities.

Miqdaad Versi: When it comes to your direct question, research funding seems to have been changed quite a lot. We have talked about Islamophobia. The Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group was set up by the Government as a cross-party group. Three of the members have resigned because they feel like there is nothing being done on the topic. Obviously many people have remained but it is very interesting to see. In Matthew Goodwin's article in *The Guardian* he is quite harsh about the fact that he felt the Government was not supporting the work there in an effective way.

When it comes to research in many of these areas, funding has gone down in general. Demos and others have done some research in these areas but it is not enough. Instead the research is then being done by news channels and by media organisations whose primary purpose is to attract viewers; of course there is going to be a difference in the way that that is going to be framed and the way that research is going to be done. The impact and the value of that research is then much less. Instead, you need to have academic papers done by university professors and academics or scholars, and it needs to be peer-reviewed and compared against everything else that is out there already. It is then a case of being able to deal with the contradictions that you have talked about, identify the reasons for those contradictions, commission more research to understand that better and then get to a conclusion. We will then be in a much better position.

Q25 Chair: My question was about why that is not there. I was quite perplexed at the paucity of the research that we had to look at. I am not denigrating that research that has been done; it is just that there does not seem to be a huge amount. Why?

Talat Ahmed: Do you think it is because why Muslim women are excluded is not a priority? Looking at BME women in general, why are they not in work? At face value it is not a priority and it is not newsworthy, whereas other things like how many mums do not speak English, like David Cameron said, is newsworthy. Maybe more funding and research is going to teaching people English and being British as opposed to finding employment.

Q26 Jess Phillips: From some of the things that you have raised about how Ministers and the Government are engaging less than nine years ago, first do you think that potentially one of the reasons is that Ministers are much less likely at the moment to represent those communities? Do you think that at the moment the Government are engaging with the Muslim community effectively? What is good and what is bad?

Fiyaz Mughal: Let us go back to this issue around Prevent. Any Government that takes a position, for example, that it can set up systemic structures that can bring in referrals or engagement from the Muslim community misses out the key component, which is the actual dialogue and engagement work. In a way this Government have stepped away from doing the core work, which is really about going out, speaking, discussing and engaging. Do I think there is a specific reason for that? The engagement with the community or engagement points are just not there. Muslim communities are willing to talk to the Government in many instances. They want to talk with Government, but I think the accessibility is not there.

Let me just give you a stark example: there is a risk aversion element going on here, which says, ‘We are not quite sure who we are dealing with and they might be a headline in tomorrow’s *Daily Mail* if we engage.’ I am sorry, but this is the reality. ‘They might be a headline in the *Daily Mail* tomorrow because they might have said something at some platform; we are not quite sure. Just leave them there.’ This risk aversion and this principle that actually there might be something inherently faulty with the Muslim community is deeply problematic, because it cycles. This is a constant cycle of disengagement. Frankly we need to have an element of risk if we are dealing with organisations and individuals. I am not talking about individuals who, for example, will say, ‘We do not believe in democratic principles.’ There are certain organisations that are beyond the pale and that you just cannot deal with. There are others that actually are

willing to talk and to engage and should be given the opportunity to do that. Muslim communities should not be seen as a form of risk. They should be seen as citizens who have something to give back to their nation. That is the starting point. The way that some elements of the Government are framing and viewing Muslim communities is in a way pathological and is actually distinctly different from what it was during the last Government and the Government before that.

Q27 Jess Phillips: Specifically on the criticisms of what was said about English-speaking women from MCB, what was it that caused your consternation?

Talat Ahmed: It is about promoting again this fear that we are the other, and that Muslim women are kept at home, they do not integrate, they do not socialise and they are not part of British society and hence they do not bother to learn English. We are so diverse. It is only a handful of people and you have more and more people coming into the country—refugee status and immigrants. It was wrong to just put us in that category talking about Muslim women’s English-speaking ability.

Iman Abou Atta: That announcement on its own shows exactly how the Government are failing to treat the Muslim community as equals. Even if you take it back to the workplace employment study and you look at it, as Fiyaz mentioned, the whole Government, Labour, the coalition and the Conservatives, have failed, as the research shows. They have failed significantly in actually making sure that there is equality across the board, even in the private sector. Highlighting the strands of extremism and terrorism by looking at the Muslim community, rather than looking at the diversity and the richness that the Muslim community is bringing to society, is a problem. Employment is a great place to start, by looking into it and bringing that Muslim community back on board.

Q28 Jess Phillips: I do not disagree with anything that you have said, and I am no friend of the Prime Minister. As for how he phrased it, no doubt about it, I agree with you. However, do you think that there is any truth in the need to invest money for—not necessarily Muslim women; I would not say Muslim—BME women, although I am happy for it to be spent on Muslim women? Is there an issue about some Muslim women and their integration into society?

Miqdaad Versi: The stats that I have seen say that around 40,000 Muslim women perhaps do not have a very good grasp of English. The vast majority of those are from immigrant communities, and the vast majority of those are not second generation and therefore not in the same group. As long as this is not something which is seen as, “Oh this is stopping extremism or terrorism,” and as long as they are dealing with all communities, it is fine. Indeed, the Muslim Council of Britain has been calling for that for 10-plus years. The funding for English speaking has gone down in the last five years. This idea that suddenly it is a big issue is quite frustrating, and in particular the focus on British Muslim women. When we talk about the thing that reinforces a stereotype about Muslims being the other, the Prime Minister’s interventions make a big difference.

Q29 Jess Phillips: We have covered the English speaking issue. Going on to the Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group, do you feel that this had had any particular impact so far?

Fiyaz Mughal: I used to be on the Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group and I left about two and half years ago. The reason I left was because there was no traction or focus in its work plan. There was bitter in-fighting.

Q30 Jess Phillips: Can I just say, as somebody who has been on many working groups for different crimes, that is not unique to the Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group.

Fiyaz Mughal: Fantastic. I took it personally; I will not now. The problem has been that there was not any sense of momentum behind that working group. There are excellent members on that working group who come in with a lot of skills and abilities, but it felt like there was no momentum and there was no resource to go behind it, as Miqdaad has said. When we invited members, particularly and acutely from the Department for Education, to turn up, they never bothered to turn up. There was a feeling that some sections, including the DfE, decided that they did not want to input into matters. It felt fragmented and it felt that actually it was not a core part of the work programme for different Departments, and that poor DCLG were left hanging onto this little vehicle that they had created, and that actually it was a group of individuals sitting around, having a chat and then going away.

How did it impact on anti-Muslim hate crime work? It did not for the last three years. How did it impact on the media and the press? It did not, and people like Miqdaad and others have had to write letters and do things themselves. It has been in existence for the last four years and it has done very little in the last three and a half years. I understand it has started to do some work now, which is liaising with IPSO, liaising with press editors and the Society of Editors. However, we are now four years into a work programme.

Q31 Jess Phillips: What do you think does work in stopping hate crime? I have a personal view. I come from a city that has had race riots; better neighbourhood policing and better engagement with police with different communities seems to have improved that.

Fiyaz Mughal: Education, education, education. I hate to go back to an old Blairite statement but actually the reality is as simple as that. You start early in schools and you can shape and change young people for life. When they come to us, through our doors in terms of victims, or particularly perpetrators, they are already far gone. They have probably been in a criminal cycle of some sort along the way. The reality is that we have to get them young and we need to inform and educate.

Q32 Jess Phillips: Is this the perpetrators that you are talking about?

Fiyaz Mughal: I would say society, but also if we look at the perpetrator element we have got to look at restorative justice elements as well. Restorative justice is a powerful tool. It has been rolled out, we know it has been rolled out, but let us put it into a place where people who may be 20, 30 or 40 years old have a chance to learn from that experience of what they have put victims through. If we go right to the beginning stage, we have to have this in our schools, through PHSE classes and citizenship classes. The fact is that we need to look at how, as diverse communities, we add enrichment to our society and what we each bring to a community.

Q33 Jess Phillips: It is interesting because usually hate crime and racism exist much more in places where people do not live side by side rather than where people do. Regarding the

Prevent strategy that we talked about earlier, we have heard from lots of different people about how the Prevent strategy has damaged Muslim people's confidence in authorities. What do you think the Government can do to build that trust back up? I think that it is very difficult in the environment that we exist in currently, and as a strong feminist who represents a seat with a 25% Muslim community, I do not find it difficult to stand up and say, "There are bits of your community that are doing things wrong. Do not invite me to a meeting unless there are women in this meeting." However, some of what we have said about the Prevent strategies, where people have tried to be upfront about it, it has caused problems. What can be done to get that balance right for policymakers, so that we do not make you look like baddies in the newspaper and so that we do not end up looking like baddies ourselves?

Talat Ahmed: There is nothing wrong with the concept of Prevent; it is very good. It is the way it has been brought out and branded. If Prevent was actually shown to be safeguarding communities, Britain as a whole and children it would be far more helpful, instead of it being seen as a targeting mechanism. In addition, the criteria around how you are targeting people who would fall under Prevent or referred to Channel are damaging—when you pick on a certain faith group in particular, or a certain community—and limiting discussion is a problem too. Teachers are not trained on how to manage those discussions or whether they are allowed to have those discussions if something has happened in the news that they want to talk about or discuss. Freedom of speech is limited when it comes to Prevent.

Miqdaad Versi: The concerns of Prevent have been very well documented, whether it comes to transparency, the perception of targeting Muslims or the lack of any real evidence base for some of the ideas that have been espoused in the media by senior politicians on the topic. One of the biggest challenges is really the narrative through which Prevent is talked about in the mainstream. You have this sort of loudspeaker, media-type discussion on Prevent, rather than the real challenges that are being faced on the ground. We need to encourage Muslim communities and all communities to report to the police as much as possible. We need to work with Muslim communities as much as possible to ensure that where there are problems they can work together to solve them. This is a collaborative effort that needs to take place.

There are Prevent officers on the ground doing really fantastic work; some are doing the opposite. However, when they face Muslim communities and the day before you hear Nicky Morgan on *Channel 4 News* saying, "If someone becomes Catholic that is not a sign of radicalisation but if they become Muslim that is a sign of radicalisation", that is a problem. These are not things that are said on the sidelines; these are things that are said in the public domain. A DUP MP—I have forgotten his name for the moment; it is in *Hansard*—asked why the same Prevent policy was not being used in Northern Ireland. Of course there are lots of issues and differences, and the response that he was given—supposedly he talked to a senior Minister—was, "Do not talk about it like this. This is not a counter-terror strategy; it is a counter-Islamic strategy." That is what is happening.

Jess Phillips: Is that in *Hansard*?

Miqdaad Versi: This is in *Hansard*. It was not in the Commons; it was in Westminster Hall. I am very happy to share the exact source. I have written about it in *The Independent*. It is public information. This is the reality: the perception there is that Muslims are being targeted; the perception there is that it is not fair. The perception is

very different from reality in some cases, but you also see case after case where it is just because they are Muslim that they are targeted. You cannot imagine someone under 10 years old, not of Muslim faith, saying “cucumber” and it being taken to mean “cooker bomb”. These types of attitudes are problematic.

We cannot just come up with complaints. Let us think about how we can deal with it. We very much support what David Anderson, who is the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, has said on this, which is, when it comes to education in particular, to mainstream this whole idea of Prevent within schools and make it very real for families across the country. People have been coming to me saying, “Maybe I should not send my children to school. Maybe I should home-school them. Maybe I should tell my young child not to talk about what they want to talk about in school. They should keep it at home when it comes to things like Syria.” We will support what David Anderson has said, which is, “Let us have a proper review of Prevent within education and Prevent in general.” There is currently no oversight on Prevent and there is no independent reviewer of Prevent. David Anderson is only on the Pursue element, which is a different part of the counter-terrorism strategy. There is no oversight for Prevent. There is no transparency as to what is happening. There are lots of scaremongering stories, and we do not have any way to test and verify these stories for their veracity, consistency and how often it is happening.

Q34 Jess Phillips: I have three of the Trojan Horse schools in my constituency, so I have lots of parents saying, “I am not sending my kids to school. It is full of terrorists.” There were Muslim people saying, “Why are they saying that my kid’s school is full of terrorists; it is not.” I do not want to have kids having those conversations. I remember similar ones about the IRA when I was a kid. If you had a fight with somebody, they would say, “My dad’s in the IRA”; “No, they are not, are they?” It is similar to what seems to have gone on in the Trojan Horse schools. The issue I have, though, is that there were some fundamental problems in those schools around things that are presented as being Islamic, whether they are or not and whether they are in the Koran—“Koranic” and “Islamic” seem to have two different meanings. As policymakers and Government, I have some sympathy with David Cameron in that he might present it very poorly; however, we have to be able to say, “This is not okay. Some of this stuff is not okay,” but it is not okay to think that all the kids at Golden Hillock School are terrorists.

Fiyaz Mughal: Can I just add to that? I would agree with you wholeheartedly on that. I have been working with the Muslim community now for at least a decade, and there are things I hear in some small sectors of the Muslim community that make my hair stand on end. Again, this is not about pathologising this community but there are certain things around values that I would find are fundamentally opposed to what I, as a Muslim, stand for. The fact of the matter is that we have to challenge those narratives. I am one to say where we find those narratives, whether it is about gender issues or whether it is about saying, “The Koran says this”, and actually takes away the human rights of other people, that we need to challenge some of those issues, both theologically and societally, and I make no bones about them. Whenever I see them I will challenge them.

I would agree wholeheartedly with what has been said before by the MCB, but I would also add some other things. Talat mentioned language. It is really important that we

change from this very boisterous language in Prevent to safeguarding. Let us just put safeguarding right the way through the language element.

The other element is that we should change the narrative from Muslim communities, as Miqdaad has said, because the far right is not talked about enough. We know that they are an issue because it comes through in our work. We see the far right networks and we see the impacts on Muslim communities. The far right element and what the Government do on that can reframe some of that discussion.

I also want to say lastly, as Miqdaad said, transparency is an issue around Prevent. There is also a section within Muslim communities that frankly just denies any issue and that also says that actually they want to prevent Prevent itself. That is a completely illogical argument. Which Government and which country is going to throw out a counter-terrorism strategy? It is not going to happen, it is not realistic and it is actually pathetic thinking. We have a group, or certain groups, in the Muslim community that go around and say, “Oh look, Prevent has done this and if that organisation works on Prevent, do not work with them.” That is deeply problematic and that makes us susceptible to extremism in those areas. Those groups need to be challenged and they are very active in Muslim communities. We need to stand up to them and say, “Your facts are wrong. You are wrong in this analogy and stop promoting this toxic narrative that already is difficult to talk about in Muslim communities. You are adding to a sense of grievance, victimisation and exclusion.” These groups are highly active. We need to challenge them.

Q35 Angela Crawley: My final question was really just to wrap up the point that had been made about multiple layers of discrimination—as a woman, on the basis of race and on the basis of religion—and whether you thought the focus of this inquiry was the right focus. With that, what recommendations would you like the Committee to take forward on the back of this discussion?

Iman Abou Atta: Multi-layer discrimination is taking place and definitely with the Muslim woman element. If you come from an Afro-Caribbean background, you are Muslim and you are wearing the hijab, you have got multi-layer discrimination all across the board, which starts from recruitment to getting the job. One of the recommendations that we would highly welcome if you could support and go for it is to actually work on the equalities monitoring across the board, in the private sector as well as the public sector. In the private sector there is almost none and in the public sector it is going ahead. This should be done all the way from recruitment up to when the person is in the workplace. That would be important to enforce, because that has not been done.

Talat Ahmed: A lot of Muslim people, both women and men, when they are in professions say that there is a glass ceiling. Sometime it is a concrete ceiling and it is really hard to move beyond a certain level. It is about having things in place within organisations in the private and public sector where there is free opportunity for all—for women, men, BME, regardless.

Q36 Chair: Can I just come in with a final question? This is really going back to something that Fiyaz talked about earlier: the need to challenge the issues that are wrong within the Muslim community. We have heard a lot today about what is wrong outside and the pressures that are outside the Muslim community that are creating tensions within. Going back to our exam question here, which is how we help create equality for Muslim people in

the workplace, what would you say, going back to your quote that we need to challenge issues that are wrong within the Muslim community, is wrong within the community at the moment that might be creating some of those inequalities that are inherent and need to be challenged, to use your words, as opposed to just looking at those pressures that are outside?

Fiyaz Mughal: We need to give more platforms and have women speaking for themselves in Muslim communities. That is the starting point.

Q37 Chair: Why does that not happen at the moment?

Fiyaz Mughal: We also need to challenge some of the institutions, which are mainly male, mainly over 60 and mainly individuals who frankly do not want the status quo to change. We need to challenge them on this. It is pretty much like Parliament. No, I had better not—

Chair: No, you can say that; that is perfectly acceptable.

Fiyaz Mughal: We need to say, “Why do we not have 50% of the board of management committees of mosques being women? Why are they predominantly male? Why do we not have women on the governance committees rather than on the advisory boards? Why do we not have women saying things about what they want in their lives around employment? When they do speak up, why are they vilified?”

Q38 Chair: I have not heard that being advocated as an issue that should be addressed. Why are we not seeing more leadership to make that happen?

Fiyaz Mughal: Because when you do that, you get vilified within certain sections of the community. If you stand up and you say, as I have said, ‘We might not like where Prevent is going but it is needed,’ I am vilified; blogs will be written about me and individuals will come out and attack me. We need to say that that kind of behaviour is unacceptable. This is not just on gender issues. On the issue of safety and security of our country, we need to stand up and say, “Look, there are certain issues we need to have hard discussions on.” In addition, this group of organisations that goes around and creates a grievance-and-marginalisation set of identities within Muslim communities by saying, “The Government is against you. The state is against you. By the way, you are never going to be accepted in Britain,” is part of the toxin we need to remove. Frankly, the state is not against you, as far as I understand. The structures in this country are difficult; we were talking about some of them. You need to engage with them and interact with them to overcome some of these issues. We need to robustly challenge some of these organisations and take them on.

Miqdaad Versi: Just to add to that, within the Muslim Council of Britain, the way that we work is that we are an umbrella body of many Muslim organisations. They send their own delegates who then end up voting for our leadership. They used to send men all the time. We used to have our AGMs full of men and very few women. We had to try to find a practical way to start dealing with this. We tried a recommendation-type approach, saying, “Please make sure that you bring a delegate.” That did not work; it only worked to a very small extent. We then ended up having to have a constitutional change, which is very difficult in any large organisation, to force a quota. This started off at 20%, I think, having to be women. This is a very low quota and we want that to be much higher. We had to force that and you had the standard people saying, “You are trying to discriminate,”

and all those kinds of things. The 20% quota was fulfilled a few years ago. There is a long way to go, and what we have to try to do, as Muslim organisations, is to take leadership on this. Reports have been done that have directly focused on the fact that this is a serious concern.

Just recently we have been working on equal opportunities within mosques and having a work stream that has 20 women and five men looking at how we deal with this real concern that is happening on the ground in Muslim communities and how we challenge this and make it happen. We have to recognise that Muslim communities do not want to be talking about the problems in their own communities when everyone else is piling in. Many communities want to deal with these types of things internally. There are advantages to that because they feel they are more able to be open and challenged internally. However, there are big problems with that because sometimes it can be covered up. We have to find a way, and we are working on this, to try to really use Muslim communities and the successful examples of best practice, such as with one of our affiliates where a Muslim woman is leading the mosque entirely. Those are examples of how they have been able to take on those challenges and deal with the problems that have been there, and share that best practice with others.

Q39 Chair: So far I have heard that, in terms of helping people get equal opportunities in the workplace, we need to challenge organisations that say the Government are against people and really effectively challenge them. We need to look at things like having more women participating in mosque boards, which is an important organising group within the community, and that the Muslim Council of Britain has taken action in terms of trying to force more women to be involved in the running of your organisation. You think those are the key things that you need to do to help people get more equal opportunities within the workplace, or are there other things that you could be doing to remove any pressures that create inequality in the workplace?

Miqdaad Versi: There are lots of them. For example, there is the leadership development programme that we have tried to do, to try to ensure that there is strong leadership among Muslim women and ensuring that their training is given to try to support those who require that support, such as networking opportunities, for example mentoring and others. We have something called the Footsteps Challenge, which the MCB was involved with for a few years within schools in predominantly Muslim areas. This was to do with actually trying to mentor some of the children and show examples of success. That is another important point. Having role models is another factor to say, “This is what you could do; this is what is possible.” Sharing best practice is also a big part of it.

All those elements really help, and they are only part of the solution. In reality we cannot say that there has been success here. There is a long, long way to go. This is almost the beginning of a road that should have been traversed a long time ago. This challenge is being faced and is made very difficult because of the external challenges. It means internal challenges are not dealt with as much. If I am in charge of the Muslim Council of Britain—I am not—and suddenly there are 300 things attacking us or perceived to be attacking us from the outside, it is very difficult to then focus time on real capacity-building issues that need to take place within the community.

Chair: Understood.

Iman Abou Atta: In addition, English language is important.

Chair: Although quite a lot of our dialogue today was about how that may have given the wrong impression, there is in fact a requirement to enhance English language skills; that is certainly what the statistics would suggest, particularly amongst those individuals who are coming into the UK. I would suggest also trying to just understand this problem in a more segmented way rather than lumping everybody together, which is not helpful.

Q40 Ruth Cadbury: I just wanted to pick up the two connected strands, which is about women's voices within Muslim communities and challenging extremism. I represent a constituency with several different mosques and a very diverse community. I want to be more challenging but I also do not want to upset my good relationship with the mosques and the mosque management. How can we help in that conversation in a way that drives positive change rather than makes me, as a non-Muslim, feel like I am imposing or interfering inappropriately?

Talat Ahmed: Do you have a good relationship with those mosques?

Ruth Cadbury: Yes.

Talat Ahmed: Do you have relationships with the women who are part of the mosques?

Ruth Cadbury: That is the question, because I would say that, as far as I can see, our mosques do not yet reflect the ideal that Miqdaad was describing.

Talat Ahmed: Encouraging greater female participation is something, saying, "I see your perspective. However, what do the women, the female participants at the mosque, think? Is there anyone that can come and talk to us about the issues?"

Q41 Chair: As community leaders we expect to deal with men and women.

Talat Ahmed: Yes, but sometimes they are not forthcoming.

Q42 Jess Phillips: I will say I will not come to the meeting if there are not women there as well. If I go to the mosque I say that I will not come unless there are going to be women to talk to.

Talat Ahmed: Do they bring women?

Jess Phillips: Yes.

Talat Ahmed: Do you think it is tokenistic?

Jess Phillips: I will not let them take a photo of me unless there are women in it as well. It is part of teaching. To be fair, nobody has ever been offended; they say, "Oh, Jess, you and your women."

Ruth Cadbury: Has it changed the structure or the culture?

Jess Phillips: Give me a chance; I have only been there for nine months. I cannot change the whole community overnight. The point is that it is our responsibility to speak as we find without being rude, in the same way as I would expect them to speak as they find me. When

one represents a large Muslim community, if they feel you are doing something wrong, they tell you.

Fiyaz Mughal: Can I just reaffirm this? We should not shy away from reaffirming what our universal standard values are. We have shied away for too long on this issue that we cannot say things. We can, and you look at where we are in terms of our British Muslim community and at the history of Islam before the last 200 years. Islam was pluralistic and women were at the heart of a lot of the dynamic. We do not need to shy away from some of these universal, pluralistic values. We should stand there and we should say what we need to say, because the community and women deserve our saying that they should have the best shot for their lives.

Chair: On that rather uplifting note, it is probably worth us drawing a close to our discussions today. I am sure we could actually go on all day; I know we could because it is a fascinating area. I cannot thank you enough for your frankness and the passion of the evidence that you have given us today. Can we reserve the right to get back to you if there is any further information that we have not gleaned from you today? Again, thank you for taking the time out to join us and for being so good in the evidence that you have given. Thank you very much.