

# Women and Equalities Committee

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

Tuesday 19 April 2016

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Muslim’s Women Network](#)

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Members present: Mrs Maria Miller (Chair); Maria Caulfield; Jo Churchill; Angela Crawley; Mims Davies; Mrs Flick Drummond; Ben Howlett; Jess Phillips; Mr Gavin Shaker

Questions 43–93

**Witness[es]:** Nazmin Akthar, Vice Chair, Muslim Women’s Network, Raheel Mohammed, Director, Maslaha, and Sufia Alam, Maryam Centre, gave evidence.

**Q43 Chair:** Good morning. Thank you for coming in to give evidence today in front of the Women and Equalities Select Committee. I am sure you know about how these things work. Our inquiry into Muslim people in the workplace is something that we are taking evidence on at the moment. My colleagues have got lots of questions to ask you. Please excuse us if Members of the Committee come and go through the session, but they have other meetings in other parts of the House at the same time—we always find this to be the case. Again, I am very grateful to you for coming in to give this evidence, particularly to Raheel, who is stepping in for a colleague who is unable to come because of sickness. Thank you very much.

Before we start, would it be possible for you to state your names and the organisations you represent?

**Raheel Mohammed:** I am Raheel Mohammed. I am the Director of Maslaha.

**Sufia Alam:** I am Sufia Alam, the centre manager for the Maryam Centre, East London Mosque.

**Nazmin Akthar:** I am Nazmin Akthar. I am the Vice Chair for Muslim Women’s Network UK.

**Q44 Jess Phillips:** First of all, a lot of evidence has obviously been focussed on broader discrimination against Muslims in the workforce, and specifically discrimination faced by Muslim women. Could each of you could just talk for a minute or two about whether you

feel that Muslim girls have the same opportunities and aspirations in school as their male counterparts? I suppose aspirations and opportunities are quite different.

**Sufia Alam:** Working on the ground level over two decades in Tower Hamlets and from my experiences, there has been an increase in aspiration. Looking at the league tables for education among young girls, there has definitely been an increase, matched by an aspiration, and leadership from schools, for women to do well. They are doing better than their male counterparts.

However, when it comes to university level or applying for the top universities, this is where we have seen a dip. There are many factors there, one being a cultural issue among some of the south Asian communities, because women are not perceived to leave the family home and live alone, so the better universities are not always a first choice because of the distance and things like that. The other factor is the increase in tuition fees, especially for the top universities where there is a bigger rise. We have a very deprived south Asian community in Tower Hamlets, and we see that the preference is to go to a local university for that reason.

There are some people who are even considering not going to university because of ethical issues, such as the interest on loans. We are seeing an increase in conservative Muslims who are very strict about interest, and there are not many choices for ethical or Sharia-compliant loans.

**Q45 Jess Phillips:** Would you say it is a problem, in the majority of cases, for young women to go to their local university, regardless of the standard, rather than young Muslim men?

**Sufia Alam:** Yes.

**Jess Phillips:** Does the rest of the panel agree?

**Nazmin Akthar:** I would agree with that to a certain extent, and on the issue of university fees we also need to consider the fact that, as well as the higher tuition fees, you also have the issue of not having as many opportunities to get into the workplace and develop a career. What we are seeing is parents saying to their daughters, “Do you really want to get into debt and then not get a job? You might as well not do that.”

**Q46 Jess Phillips:** Why are they saying it to their daughters and not to their sons?

**Nazmin Akthar:** I guess it is that whole old cultural viewpoint that if you are going to spend money, you spend it on your son.

**Jess Phillips:** A sexist viewpoint?

**Nazmin Akthar:** Yes, a sexist viewpoint that has been there in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, where the idea is that daughters are going to get married, so why spend money on them? That rhetoric has started to feed back in here as well on the basis that, if you are going to spend so much money, why spend it on a daughter? As their daughters are going to get married anyway, at some point, instead of them getting loans or getting into debt they encourage them to get married now. That is completely unacceptable, but we are seeing a lot like that coming through now.

**Q47 Jess Phillips:** Raheel, do you have anything to add?

**Raheel Mohammed:** I would say that Muslim women will face discrimination based on their gender as well as their religion. There are a number of reports from the Department for Education and the Institute of Education showing that teacher expectations can affect the aspirations of young Muslim women. I am not so sure how helpful it is to compare Muslim men and Muslim women. There are statistics about the disproportionate numbers of young Muslim men going through the criminal justice system. The Muslim population is about 4.4% in England and Wales. In prisons young Muslim men make up about 12% or 13% and in young offender institutes they make up about 22% or 23%.

**Q48 Jess Phillips:** I do not disagree with you, but that is a completely different inquiry. What we are trying to ascertain is discrimination against Muslims in the workforce, and I suppose this is a specific section of questioning, from evidence we have already heard from young Muslim women in Bedfordshire, which relates to some of the problems that might be arising both externally and internally within the community. It is not that I think that Muslim men have it rosy; I do not. There are a lot of problems. I suppose, as has been outlined, if there is this issue around Muslim girls, what should schools, career advisers and colleges be doing to overcome it?

**Raheel Mohammed:** We ran a project recently called Muslim Girls Fence, which was in collaboration with British Fencing and Sport England. We were trying to do two things there: first, to diversify the sport of fencing; and secondly, to raise aspirations amongst young Muslim women. As part of that we explored how they thought they were perceived both by pupils and by wider society. Actually, some of the comments we were getting back were pretty shocking, such as, “We are always seen as being repressed,” or “We are seen as being terrorists.” Islam is portrayed very negatively in the wider media. We cannot disconnect the wider public narrative with what happens in schools and the knock-on effect that has. We have a generation of young people who have been growing up since at least 2001, and they have been seen through a particular lens in the media. That has an effect. The Prevent duty, which became a duty in 2015, has had a negative effect in terms of how teachers work in schools, but there is also the knock-on effect that has both on families and on pupils. That will affect aspirations.

**Nazmin Akthar:** I would just like to add that if you look specifically at schoolchildren or those in college or university, one of the key issues now to succeed in the workforce and get to the point of employment is to have good work experience and work placements, and to prove your commitment to a career early on. Unfortunately, you do not always have these opportunities available, because you might not have the connections, or you might not be able to travel. It is similar to not being able to go to a better university and having to go to a local university. You might not be able to travel from Leeds to London to do a placement for a week or so, because you are told you cannot travel. Issues like that are limiting.

**Q49 Jess Phillips:** Do you mean you cannot travel because of cost?

**Nazmin Akthar:** It could be cost.

**Jess Phillips:** That is the same regardless, if you are from an unconnected community.

**Nazmin Akthar:** Yes, exactly. It could be cost. Again, connections and networking could be issues across the board, but it could also be a parent saying, “Why are you going to

London for a week?” “To do this placement.” “What is the reason for it? You are still at University.” There is a lack of understanding about why it is important to have these kinds of opportunities and why you need to take advantage of them early on.

**Q50 Jess Phillips:** The evidence we heard when we were in Luton, which you might want to comment on, was that an opportunity that the university was laying on for all students was a mentoring scheme with somebody from their chosen profession. There was an example of a young Muslim woman. I think she wanted to be an architect and she was paired up with a top architect to be her mentor, but she had to turn him down because he was a man and she could not be seen in public with him, because of familial reasons and other issues. What opportunities do you think need to be tailored to this group of people to make it so that it is better for them?

**Nazmin Akthar:** The first thing that I would like to say is that not every Muslim woman would have turned that opportunity down.

**Q51 Jess Phillips:** Absolutely, but it makes your heart bleed when you hear things like that.

**Nazmin Akthar:** Completely. Not all of them would have turned it down, and I think that is the crux of it. We do need to make sure that opportunities are available and not assume that just because this section would say no, for whatever reason, another girl would do that too. My second point is to highlight the importance of it. It goes back to the community issues: why can a man and a woman not be seen together? Why does there have to be something sordid about it? It could be for professional reasons, they could be friends, or it could be for any reason whatsoever. That must obviously be challenged by us and by everybody involved, and we must address these issues. The main thing is that we need to make these opportunities available, because unless they are available we will not get the opportunity to change the status quo and be able to address them and help women progress further.

**Sufia Alam:** Another example I can give you is of a local school that approached us, because a young woman had got a scholarship to Cambridge but her parents were not happy for her to move out. We had one of the imams go into the school and explain the importance of education and comfort the family by saying that it was okay in the religion in terms of education. Those kinds of collaborations need to happen more with schools and communities.

One of the things that we find is that community organisations are usually managed on a very shoestring budget and they have not got the resources to expend. We have been running a schools programme for over a decade and that funding has come to an end. You need to have sustainable projects that can continue not just for one year, but beyond the life term of young people.

The other thing that is really important is to work with schools from a very early age to raise those aspirations and then look at a local level. We did a programme with Skillsmatch, which is a recruitment agency based in Canary Wharf, on sending people to a no-go zone in Tower Hamlets, so there were two things going on there: we have a poor, deprived community, and then we have this extreme wealth, in one borough. To work with Skillsmatch gave that opportunity to see what City life was like and to get the foot in the corporate door, and then also having more organisations coming into the community

and understanding what the community, the culture and the religion are about. We ran a series of diversity courses from the mosque for corporate agencies and public services so that they have a better understanding.

**Jess Phillips:** Your mosque sounds brilliant.

**Sufia Alam:** We try to aspire to be a brilliant mosque, but again it comes down to resources. We need that collaborative working because you cannot do it on your own; you have to work together.

**Raheel Mohammed:** It is also about what success looks like, and whether that looks different for different communities? We have had a really good mentoring organisation that has worked with schools across the country, and they have come to us and said, “We do not think we actually have the kinds of cultural competency skills to be able to work successfully with young Muslim pupils”. It is important to understand that granularity that exists, which can be between Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Somali communities, but also between the Pakistani community of Walthamstow and the Pakistani community in Washwood Heath, Birmingham.

**Jess Phillips:** An area I know well.

**Raheel Mohammed:** The thing that we would not want to do is to try and create clones through lots of different mentoring schemes, with examples like, “This is a really successful guy in the City and we should all be like him.” It is good to be able to adapt those programmes. There are also lots of reports that show that the relationships schools have with parents at an early age affect attainment.

**Q52 Jess Phillips:** Do you think that Muslim parents have good relations with schools? Do you think that the schools and Muslim families work as well together potentially as other communities?

**Raheel Mohammed:** No, I do not. That is missing. It would also be the same for the white working class. I would not say that that relationship does not exist. Somali pupils tend to be some of the most disproportionately excluded from schools across the country. It is a community that did not have a written language until the 1970s. What does learning mean in that community? It will vary.

**Q53 Maria Caulfield:** I want to move the focus on to work, because we know from the figures that 28% of Muslim women are in employment, compared with 51% of the general female population, so there is obviously a massive gap there. Do you think that discrimination is a key factor in that difference, or are there other factors that you have talked about in education that are coming into play in the workplace?

**Sufia Alam:** There is discrimination in the workplace. One of the early projects I did a couple of years ago, when I started working within a mosque, was looking at 100 women getting into employment. It was to find out where people were and what the skills base was and what the barriers to employment were. We got inundated with many graduates who wanted a job but could not get one because of their face veil. There were also professionals who felt that they were struggling with applications and were struggling to get an interview because of their religious attire. We worked with trainers and recruitment

agencies to gain a better understanding of how we could make it easier and how employers could understand and not discriminate.

Over the years I have found that applications were rejected because the names could not be spelt or, if they had gone to an interview stage, their hijab was a question, or their religious attire or even their family planning was questioned. Those were deterrents where women feel quite discriminated against when applying for jobs. We found that graduates were going for the lower end of jobs. We were seeing a lot of classroom assistant jobs being taken. There are obviously different factors there, because childcare is an issue. After graduation, the likelihood of someone getting married and having children is high, so that age group category fits in, where women are probably taking time out and then they are unable to go back into work because of the gap that they have had.

Also, women are changing their names by deed poll, which for me is really disconcerting and concerning. Why should women have to go to those extremes? They were anglicising names as well, so that they would have a better opportunity. That is really sad, because women have come a long way even to have graduated, so it sad to face these problems in employment.

Those are the kinds of things that I find are big issues. I advertised for an admin job just six months ago and got 80 applications from graduates who were overqualified. However, they felt that the mosque was a safe place where they could practise their religion and would not be discriminated against for wearing the hijab. Those kinds of things concern me. What is the outer community doing? What are we doing?

**Nazmin Akthar:** Muslim Women's Network UK is a charity that works on a national basis, and we have Muslim women who, in addition to facing all the issues that have been mentioned, such as wearing the hijab, are in the workplace and do not wear the hijab, are not overtly practising and who are not taking prayer breaks, yet they are still facing discrimination issues. It is not just that women are not able to go into the workplace because of their religious beliefs; they are actually perfectly fine with doing whatever work it is that they need to do, yet they are still facing prejudice and stereotypes. They are still finding that between them and a colleague, when they have both done the same amount of work, the colleague is going to get promoted over them because of some inherent subconscious bias within the system and workplace that the other person is doing better than them or that they might leave or they might get married in a couple of years, or something like that, even if they have no children.

So, on the one hand Muslim women with children face the issue that they cannot progress because they have to look after their kids, and on the other hand Muslim women who do not have children face the idea that, "They are going to have children one day and then they are going to leave us." It is a no-win situation. You are always going to be stuck and you will not progress.

**Q54 Maria Caulfield:** Raheel, do you want to comment on that?

**Raheel Mohammed:** The only thing I would add is that discrimination in the workplace cannot be taken out of the wider context. Again, there is such a binary, negative media portrayal of Muslim communities, and that does have an impact on employers. It also cannot be taken out of the context of education. We all know that it is not enough just to



get good grades and to get a job; there are other skills that we need to be learning. There is a phrase that is used, which I have heard certain educational consultants use, where Muslim girls are regarded as being invisibles or radiators within the school environment; they will do enough to get the grades but not enough to really fulfil their potential. If that is the training at a young age, how do you work a system that is discriminating against you? If those discriminatory practices are not going to change in the next 10 or 20 years, we have to equip our young people with the skills to be able to deal with those situations, as well as tackle the practices.

**Q55 Maria Caulfield:** Do you feel that the existing laws that are in place to prevent or tackle discrimination are actually having an impact? If they are not, what would you like to see instead to protect against discrimination?

**Raheel Mohammed:** There is something about being confident enough to first be able to report that there is discrimination. Is there enough cataloguing of all of these experiences? I don't know if my two colleagues would be able to give an answer on that. It is a really fast-moving situation. If there are attacks in Paris, the next day there could be a situation in the workplace. It's almost about having a system or framework in place that is sensitive to the way in which international situations can have an impact at a local level.

**Sufia Alam:** Sometimes it is quite difficult to pinpoint an obvious discrimination; it is quite unspoken. We try to encourage people to report these to agencies like Tell MAMA. You are right that what happens in the wider media and what happens in the world has an effect. Women are living in fear and this is backtracking women back into isolation again. With all of the work that we have done over the last 20 or 30 years, it just feels like we are banging against a brick wall sometimes because of these issues. One of the things that we could look at is employers anonymising applications and shortlisting procedures, so there is not discrimination if it is at that level. There obviously needs to be a clearer reporting strategy for all women, not just Muslim women. That is something that needs to be recognised in the workplace.

**Nazmin Akthar:** It is important to remember that anyone facing discrimination may find it difficult to come to terms with what is going on; it takes them a while. What we have found with one of our cases, for example, was that she said that by the time she had understood what had happened and come to terms with it, the time limit had gone, so she would not be able to make a claim anyway. In addition, there was the thought of having to go through and explain the situation, and have people question her. The whole process of litigation can be quite scary for people, and then there are potential litigation costs. A lot of women—in fact not just women—feel that by complaining and by making a claim they could potentially be committing career suicide, and that no one else will hire them because they will be seen as a troublemaker. One of the things that does need to happen is that all employers across the board need to make it clear that you are allowed to complain and that they encourage it. At the end of the day, all companies and employers have to deal with complaints, because if employees keep leaving then they will never address the issue and the workplace environment will always be hostile, potentially without the managerial level knowing what is going on down below. It is important to promote that culture and say, “The laws are there. If a complaint is valid, it will be taken seriously and you are not going to be penalised as a result.”

**Q56 Maria Caulfield:** I have one final question to ask the panel. I have recently put out adverts for staff to work in my office, and I have had hundreds of applications but not one from a Muslim woman. It is very much a middle class, male-dominated set of applicants, who were excellent but there was not much diversity. I was wondering whether it was something I put in my advert that did not encourage people from various backgrounds to apply. If people are not actually applying for jobs in the first place, it makes it very hard for employers to reach out and have a diverse team of people working for them. What could employers do to encourage people to apply for jobs that maybe they would not necessarily normally do but, if they applied and had the skills, they may be successful in getting? Could employers do more to encourage young Muslim women, or any Muslim women, to apply for posts?

**Sufia Alam:** There needs to be a level of flexibility for women in general, and especially for Muslim women of a certain age category as well, because of the child-bearing age and the cultural issues that we are seeing. Those are the things that will encourage them: the fact that they can take time off for childcare or maternity and they can integrate back into the workplace again, because that is really important when we are seeing that people have gone off on maternity and are not returning back to their jobs because of the challenges of the work-life balance.

**Q57 Maria Caulfield:** We perhaps need to make it clearer in job adverts that that is available.

**Sufia Alam:** That would help. In addition, having something stating that you welcome ethnic minorities applying would help generate a response, because there is that perception and stereotype that these are middle-class jobs. Certainly, we try to get aspirational politicians and we have quite a few in Tower Hamlets. We try to encourage young women to join politics and other streams where there is a minority. Employers need to work at a grassroots level and with recruitment agencies as well.

**Q58 Mims Davies:** I will just come in quickly on that point about recruitment, which is incredibly well made by Maria. I have experienced the same. In fact, the role of supporting MPs is really good and flexible for women, and obviously there is the way the calendar year works, for example. I was just wondering if mentoring is something that would be helpful in particular to Muslim women, to make sure that their potential in the workforce is seen. By having the right mentors, the challenges can be busted before they lose the confidence to come into the workplace at a level that they could be expected to start employment at.

**Sufia Alam:** I definitely think it is a great opportunity to have mentors. That would really help bring people back into employment in areas where there is not a common ethnic minority representation.

**Q59 Mims Davies:** Do you think those mentors perhaps should not come from the same background, so that it could be an educational experience on all levels?

**Sufia Alam:** Definitely. There needs to be a diverse group, because you learn from each other. We should not have that “them and us” idea. That is always the rhetoric that causes a lot of problems. Definitely in the mosque, when people have come to the diversity courses from corporate agencies, they are really quite wowed and taken aback by things that they never knew. Those kinds of opportunities for organisations is the way forward as



well, to have a better understanding of culture and faith and not what the media is portraying.

**Q60 Mims Davies:** Nazmin, do you want to come in?

*Nazmin Akthar:* I completely agree with that. The only thing I want to add is that mentoring schemes are useful at all levels across the board, so not only in schools and universities or when you start your career, but when you are within your career, because then you have a mentor to help you progress further and achieve whatever your aims are. It is definitely a positive way to promote career progression.

**Q61 Mims Davies:** What do you think with regard to small businesses, because often corporates can lead the way? Is there something Government can do with small business to encourage diversity?

*Nazmin Akthar:* To be honest, both small businesses and large corporations could do with making diversity a priority and making mentoring, career progression and career retention issues more of a priority and making sure that they are being open to everybody. Small businesses would obviously benefit from more governmental support in that sense, because otherwise the burden would be more on them. That does not necessarily mean that large corporations are all doing it the right way. They can also learn and find out other ways of doing things. If something is not working, and they already have a scheme in place that is not quite achieving what they want to, they should be looking at that, not thinking, “Oh, we have a scheme, and that is enough.” They should be thinking, “What else can we do? What more can we do?”

**Q62 Chair:** Before we go on to our next set of questions, I cannot resist asking this question. Nazmin and Sufia, you are very successful women in your own right. What helped you to get where you are? As MPs, we are often asked that question, so I am going to turn the tables and ask you. What was the one thing that really helped you succeed in the way you have?

*Sufia Alam:* I worked very closely with a local authority. In the two decades that I have been working in the community, I started off as a volunteer. I got real empowerment from the work that I did with the third sector team, in terms of the encouragement that I could actually do this and represent my community.

**Q63 Chair:** So confidence building?

*Sufia Alam:* It was confidence building matched with resources, because there have to be localised resources to empower women as well, from all levels—from schools to older women. From ESOL all the way up to a lot of skilled jobs, it helps to have that confidence-building network and have that opportunity for networking. I had that opportunity to network with the corporate side, the charities and local government, and I had a better platform for a voice. That has really helped me to be where I am today.

In addition, encouragement from my own community has helped. Being in the mosque and being one of the leading people for the East London Mosque from the women’s side makes me aspire to encourage other women to be in that position, and also to make changes within other organisations that are going to be reflective of our faith, culture and British values, if you like.

**Nazmin Akthar:** It is difficult for me to answer. I am a lawyer by profession, and I guess the real reason I was successful was because nobody said that I could not be a lawyer by profession. When I told my parents I wanted to be a lawyer, they said, “All right, go for it. Just make sure you get the good grades.” My teachers were very encouraging, in high school and at university. I did the Bar and when I got to Inner Temple they then put me on a work-shadowing scheme, so I marshalled a judge. Opportunities were there, and I guess I wanted them as well. It is that combination of me wanting it and nobody saying that I could not have it.

**Q64 Jess Phillips:** Can I ask whether you have children?

**Nazmin Akthar:** No, I do not.

**Sufia Alam:** I do. I have three girls and, believe me, I have faced some challenges over the years. I have probably worked for five or six years just to pay for my childcare. The family network plays a really great part in supporting that, but if you have moved out of that network as well, then you are faced with expensive childcare. That has been a really big challenge. I have overcome that and in my own self I am an example to show women that you can do it, but you have to fight for the right. I welcome the Prime Minister having childcare places for three-year-olds, because this is going to give real opportunities for women to go back into work.

**Chair:** We are going to come on to childcare, but I just want to summarise what Nazmin said, which is important for all of us. Sometimes the only thing that limits us is our own imagination, is it not? I know that is a very simplistic statement to make, but it is important to hear that, particularly perhaps for the young ladies sitting behind you who are here with us today from Birmingham University. Both of you are very inspiring in the way that you talk, so thank you for that. We are moving on now to Mims, who is going to deal with childcare, because that is a real issue for women.

**Q65 Mims Davies:** It is very interesting to hear Sufia mention that, because a lot of us realise that we do not have a family network and therefore we are looking for formalised childcare. Demos did some analysis on understanding society. A high proportion of Muslims in the feedback said that the family suffers if the mother works. That is their perception. Is that why you think Muslim or BME women are less likely to use the formalised childcare that is now available?

**Sufia Alam:** There are lots of factors and they are very individual to people. Obviously income brackets vary as well; people qualifying for childcare places differs from one family to another. However, as we have seen a more conservative Muslim community growing, people are a bit more conscious of their cultural sensitivities as well and they want to have a greater impact on their childcare. We are seeing home-schooling, so people are taking career breaks to home-school their children because it makes economic sense to stay at home and also have an input on how they want to bring their children up.

Obviously, rising childcare costs are a big concern for many families as well, and cuts in the tax credits have also had a big impact. I was on the Fairness Commission two or three years ago in Tower Hamlets, and these were the things that I was hearing on the ground: that the cut in those areas had had a big impact on how people were managing childcare as well as their work preferences. You were seeing graduates going to a classroom assistant

role because they could work around their children's school timing and they would take that time out. In fact, what is happening is that big career break is making them less likely to go back into the workplace. Childcare has a big impact on employment as well.

**Q66 Mims Davies:** Is there a cultural sensitivity as well in terms of childcare placement? Do you think that the childcare arena does not cater for Muslim women in a way that it should, particularly in certain areas?

*Sufia Alam:* People have had concerns about sex education, for example, for very young ages. A lot of Muslim women have protested against that, because they think that should be something that families should be ready to incorporate, rather than through the state system. Those have been the factors where people have been concerned that they want to take more control over how they want to bring up their children.

*Nazmin Akthar:* There is a bit of fear of the unknown and a fear generally about what is going to happen when their child is with a stranger and what they are going to show them. To be honest, that is just ridiculous. The reason I find it most ridiculous is that Muslim women and parents are willing to leave their children with the next-door neighbour who is a Muslim, who could be abusing their child, but not with somebody in the childcare environment who is obviously vetted. Obviously there will be safety issues—it is not as if every place is perfect—but that is not to say that every single childcare provider has some sort of issue in that sense. It is that fear of the unknown.

**Q67 Mims Davies:** Is there a self-segregation happening in some ways?

*Nazmin Akthar:* To a certain extent, yes. Why is that there? Why must you have your child with a Muslim care provider, whether it is a neighbour, aunt, uncle or whoever else? Why can it not just be a childcare facility that is providing that? More than anything, we need to highlight the benefits of this as well. A child of a young age should be able to interact more with other children their age or in a different environment. It is good for their growth and I do not understand what the issue is, but again the other part of it is that there is a stigma around it.

**Q68 Mims Davies:** It is also segregating parents, perhaps, because they are not used to having to start that school gate mentality quite young.

*Sufia Alam:* I would say it is a very small minority of women. I am part of a playgroup. We have a very diverse group of children, and we encourage that, as does the local authority. They keep an eye on the diversity level, but if you are in a predominantly ethnic-minority area, the likelihood of you having more children from one ethnic background is going to be there. It is an increasing problem, and it comes down to the fear and the perception that the media portrays. Women think that is the only area they can control. There needs to be more integration work around that.

*Nazmin Akthar:* There is a stigma around Muslim women and mothers who are leaving their children with somebody else. That is why they feel like they need to keep them with a relative.

**Q69 Chair:** When you say “stigma”, who is judging them?

**Nazmin Akthar:** The wider community. It is not necessarily just Muslim women; it can happen elsewhere that you are seen as a bad mother for not giving your children 100% attention all the time, or that the reason a child has done this, that or the other is because the mother was not at home, because obviously mothers hold the key to every little thing in society.

**Q70 Chair:** While that may have been a prevalent attitude in the past, I am not sure that would be a prevalent attitude today.

**Nazmin Akthar:** It does still exist in the Muslim community, in my opinion. Obviously, it is not across the board at all and it is a minority, but it does still exist and it does not change the fact that there are women who feel that they have to give their children attention, because otherwise they will be deemed to be bad mothers.

**Q71 Mims Davies:** Colleagues visited Luton and there was a perceived weakness in the childcare provision for Muslims—that they would not be catered for appropriately. In some ways, is it a communication issue, and that there are groups doing this really well and it can be a positive experience?

**Raheel Mohammed:** We worked in Birmingham for about a year on a health resource to do with healthy pregnancy. One of the things that was available was free fruit and veg for pregnant mothers, and that resource was not taken up because the message was not communicated effectively enough, and this is one of the issues. We have worked in health for six years, and we look at things like depression. There is no word for “depression” that translates directly into Urdu, Arabic, Sylheti or Bengali, so when you have service providers or some sort of provision that is trying to communicate directly to a community that is already not quite sure about what that means, it has to be really effective. What tends to happen is there is a badly produced pamphlet with some English and another language and maybe a verse from the Koran. That is not going to be enough to encourage people to take up a service or change behaviour, so there is an element of that as well.

**Sufia Alam:** The Sure Start programmes have done some excellent work. Especially in Tower Hamlets, I have found that they have really integrated and got that message out by working through the community hubs and helping people to understand the importance of child development from a young age and how settings help develop children in all five areas. Those have been encouraging factors. If we had any more Sure Start closures, it would have a big effect on the community.

**Q72 Mims Davies:** In terms of provision, do you think specific childminders might be a better way forward than the traditional nursery setting?

**Sufia Alam:** It depends. It is a small minority that Nazmin is talking about that we are seeing, and that has come out of fear, but it is the cost as well. Childminding costs are still quite extortionate for some families. The other issue is trying to keep the cultural baggage as well. One of the advantages of children being raised with grandparents is that they keep some of the culture. That is a big issue behind all of that: that the children are brought up with a fair culture, if you like, and not one-sided. There is a fear of losing that cultural baggage a further generation in.

**Q73 Jo Churchill:** If you were designing, six years on, and health programmes and childcare still are not working, how would you use your skills from both sides to say, “This is how we cross that communication divide”? What should people be doing?

**Raheel Mohammed:** We created a resource on depression called Talking from the Heart, mainly aimed at women in the Somali, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. We worked with GPs, therapists, those communities, imams and a Somali musician called Maryan Mursal to create a resource that was both online and physical, and it was used in a couple of local GP surgeries in London. We then wanted to make that national, and the way we did that was to work with Mind, which did not have such a resource, so we latched on to a larger organisation. NHS trusts were using our resource around the country. The Royal College of GPs started to endorse it. We were then included in NICE guidelines. There was then a public narrative message as well. For us, it is always about being rooted initially in the locality, having that kind of understanding and then it has to have a wider systemic impact. The reason we used audio-visual was because the Somali communities we were talking to were saying, “We keep being given these badly produced pamphlets that mean nothing to us.” If you use film, you have people from those communities in them and people immediately resonate. The reason we used Maryan Mursal’s music is because if you mention her name to most Somali people they will recognise it, and her songs are about exile, so there is an added textural thing in the background. It needs to have that kind of complex communication exercise, but what we created was a language that was not only for Muslim communities; it was for the health practitioners as well. It was a bridge and that is the way we did it.

**Q74 Ben Howlett:** Moving on to employment support, the Government’s evidence submitted to our inquiry so far says that in relation to access to jobcentres, Muslim women do not get the help they need to improve their employability skills in order to help find a job. Why do Muslim women report negative experiences of the jobcentre?

**Sufia Alam:** I am just trying to think back to the DWP work programmes that we have done over the years. First of all, we are looking at the hardest to reach in the job market and language is a big deterrent. Again, the religious attire has a stereotyped perception. I have been to jobcentres with clients and there is the assumption that I cannot speak English and I have been talked down to and told, “Wait there”, and there is a rudeness that comes across. Those things need to change, first of all, but some of the work programmes that are delivered within the community are so under-resourced that they cannot really do anything much with that group of women. Especially if the funding is for a year, you are just getting to the tip of the iceberg and then the funding runs out. There need to be sustainable resources and funding at grassroots level to support those people.

I am talking particularly about women who are furthest away from the job market because of their low education and so on. Those women need to be integrated into a community, first of all. In my experience, most of them have been isolated for decades, so exposure to the community is a big step, and to get to that step and then the resources are gone just does not work. Lots of charities in Tower Hamlets have been closed, especially women-based charities, and there has been an impact in the community as a result. A DWP programme that is happening on our premises at the moment for another partner is coming to an end and I am inundated with women saying, “We need to do ESOL. Where can we go next?” It has left women in limbo, so there needs to be more localised

resources and jobcentres need to work with the community to understand the needs of a particular community.

**Q75 Ben Howlett:** I know the Government are focusing more of their attention on universal service, rather than looking at specific types of communities in order to help them access work. Given your experience in Tower Hamlets and seeing women being in limbo, not quite knowing where they are going to go for their next area of support, are you seeing areas of weakness within the new universal service, in that they are not being able to pick up the workload that was previously being administered by the old system?

**Sufia Alam:** With the new system it is all computerised, and again it does not serve a particular group. There need to be agencies to support women who are less literate. The system is much harder and it is putting a lot of stress on people and families, so there needs to be more collaboration with the community before packages like this are designed.

**Q76 Ben Howlett:** Raheel, what is your experience of this area?

**Raheel Mohammed:** One-size-fits-all approaches never work. I don't know when you went last in a jobcentre, but I can still remember going to a jobcentre and not being particularly inspired. The other question is what employability skills are, and whether we are really going to get those from a jobcentre. If we are being honest, those employability skills should be embedded within the curriculum, but they are also found through your external networks. I do not think you are going to find them in a jobcentre.

**Q77 Ben Howlett:** What specific skills would make a big difference to the communities?

**Raheel Mohammed:** It is things like critical thinking, emotional intelligence and confidence; it is about how you work a system. It is about if you are sitting at a policy roundtable, how you are heard when there are other voices that are louder than you. It is all of those things. I might be wrong, but I do not think you are taught that at a jobcentre.

**Ben Howlett:** You might see the Government's own evidence when it is published, but it is possibly along those lines.

**Raheel Mohammed:** It would then have to look at how this is delivered for particular communities, and it has to be adapted for different communities.

**Q78 Ben Howlett:** Nazmin, bringing you into this, are there specific areas that you think should be improved within the employability realm, whether that is the economically inactive or those who are economically active?

**Nazmin Akthar:** As Raheel said, a one-size-fits-all approach does not work for everybody. Rather than trying to find a quick fix, look at other ways of helping people to progress into employment. For example, one of the complaints that was given to me was when she got to the Jobcentre Plus and was told about the courses available. They were reading, writing and customer service, and this was for a person with an HR degree. We need to look at what else we can do to help somebody get onto the career ladder and, again, Raheel is completely correct. We just assume that things like how to perform at an interview and how to sell yourself best are things that everybody knows, but they do not. It takes years



of practise and doing interviews to understand how best to sell yourself and what part of your CV should be enhanced more. Programmes that could focus on these areas, for example, would be very useful across the board.

**Q79 Ben Howlett:** One specific question relates to how important English language is to being able to access work, and also employability skills as well. From the evidence that we have seen, pretty much every time the need to improve the quality of English language teaching is there. In specific terms, what do you think should specifically be delivered in this area and how would you specifically like to see that improved?

**Sufia Alam:** I have been running ESOL and English classes for two decades and I have seen an improvement. I run a social enterprise with women who can barely speak English, but they have gained confidence because they can speak some English. It is a catering social enterprise; they have great culinary skills and through the practical work opportunity they are able to enhance their English language. English should not just be in a classroom; it should be matched and done with work opportunities and work experiences. That is when English will develop, because with two decades of English language funders will say, “There has not been an improvement”. It is only when you come out of the classroom situation and put it into practical use that people gain confidence and practise the language.

I know it is in the Prevent agenda and I cannot understand why. It is putting pressure on people and it is quite draconian in the approach, especially for Muslim women. It should be that ESOL courses are welcomed by all women and you need that diversity within the ESOL courses as well to get people job-ready and ready for society, if you like.

There needs to be a different approach to ESOL and it needs to be sustainable. We have had lots of funding cuts. As a result, many community organisations have had to close and, as has been described, people are in limbo. This is a stepping stone for people to progress, especially those far removed or new to this community. We have a new immigration flow coming through and it is more important to have ESOL or English language classes than ever before. It is a crucial part of integration.

**Q80 Angela Crawley:** You have made a good point that English classes are not a new initiative; they have been running for many years. On that point, what initiatives do you think would be most effective: community-based peer support programmes, job fairs, or tailored work experience?

**Sufia Alam:** Tailor-made job fairs have created some results. I explained earlier that I have started one and lots of issues come out of it. If you have a large network you can signpost people to appropriate services, but it is really important to have those resources at grassroots level, because communities know their community. They know who is in the community and can signpost appropriately. Again, it is about having well-resourced partnerships of training organisations, recruitment agencies and employers, including small business, because they do not have the resources to support people going through that route. Again, it is localised resources. We have seen lots and lots of cuts and it has had a detrimental effect. People are going back into isolation and that is something I really worry about.

**Nazmin Akthar:** Mentoring schemes are very important here. You are not just going to jump into, “Okay, I am going to go to a job fair, I am going to find a job and everything will be perfectly fine”. That never happens, but having someone there to mentor you and to support you along the way would obviously boost confidence and help.

**Raheel Mohammed:** It is a two-pronged approach. It is about working in those communities and creating new skills and opportunities, but it is also about looking at the structural deficit and discrimination that is happening at the same time. Both of those need to be tackled.

**Q81 Chair:** Sufia, you have been involved in language classes for 20 years. Which groups of women are finding it the most difficult to access that and why? What do you think could be done to change that?

**Sufia Alam:** It is accessible to most people. The people who have accessed it most are women who have come on spouse visas, because it is a requirement for their citizenship and you can see the stress level of people desperately wanting to come into a class. The worst of the women, if you like, in terms of getting results is women who have learning difficulties. It is important to stress that people learn at different levels and sometimes we have seen migrant women who have never had any formal education who are, for the first time, in a classroom setting, in a formal situation. They are not going to progress in one year or two years or even 20 years. There is lots of dyslexia that comes out. All those things need to be measured. In terms of the Prevent strategy and having ESOL in there, how can you pressure people to learn English for one year or two years? It does not work that way. People are at different levels and that needs to be understood and there needs to be support around that, but we have seen schools and colleges that have had the greatest cuts in ESOL classes. The whole thing needs to be resourced and properly managed.

**Q82 Chair:** Do you think that women ever encounter family members stopping them from improving their English?

**Sufia Alam:** I think that is a thing of the past. I see a lot of young men coming with their women who cannot speak English, especially in the last three or four years, who are advocating putting ESOL classes on, and quite desperately as well, because we saw the cuts at that time. I think it is encouraged, definitely. There might be a small minority of the community, but it is a thing of the past. More and more people are encouraged and definitely faith leaders are encouraging people to learn and be educated, and that has had a really good impact.

**Nazmin Akthar:** Our cases show that it might be a minority but it does still happen. We still get calls to our helpline from Muslim women who cannot speak English, so they will ask if there is anybody they can speak to in this language or that language. We hear stories of the domestic violence they have gone through and one of the things that they do mention is that they were not allowed out. They were not allowed to speak to anybody in English. It is a way of controlling people. It might be that it does not happen as much as it used to, but that does not change the fact that it does exist and even one case of it should not be happening.

**Q83 Chair:** Do you think people are prepared to talk about that?

*Nazmin Akthar:* Which people?

**Chair:** Just generally, because it is important. Obviously, you have today, and that is great, but it is important that we are open and transparent about the problems that we might face. Do you think people are open and transparent about the problems that they face?

*Nazmin Akthar:* Part of it is that not everyone knows that it is still happening. You assume that as societies progress these things are matters of the past and then you hear these stories and you think, “My God, what is going on? It is 2016.” The ones who do know about it need to speak up about it and find a way to address the issue.

**Q84 Jess Phillips:** Picking up on the points about language and work, I had the exact opposite experience from Maria when asking people to apply for a job. That is because I asked specifically for people who could speak another language, and so I got only south Asian women, so there we go. I also asked for people with domestic violence experience, so I only got women, largely for that reason. It is about what you ask for in your interview. What you seek can bring people out, so there you go.

On to the different organisations within the community and how they can help to tackle some of these problems. I know that the Muslim Women’s Network in the city where I come from has been quite critical of whether the mosques are playing a role in tackling issues facing Muslim women. Does the panel want to comment on that?

*Nazmin Akthar:* I might as well go first. The Muslim Women’s Network is a charity for Muslim women. Despite that, the board have not ruled out having a male trustee in the future or having male staff members, depending on our needs and requirements. There are mosques around the country, but Birmingham Central Mosque is the one we have been vocal about. It has 39 male trustees. Are they honestly telling me that in Birmingham, where obviously mosques should be catering for Muslim women as well, they could not find one single Muslim woman to go on the board? I know there are debates about whether women should be in the mosque or not, but that is beside the point. If you are running a mosque and you have charitable status, especially, as a mosque, you should be catering for Muslim women and you should have them in roles.

**Jess Phillips:** I agree. Your mosque sounds excellent.

*Sufia Alam:* I am a Muslim woman in a mosque. We have many women trustees on the mosque board and we have a vocal committee that makes day-to-day decisions or strategic decisions that involve women as well as men. I work quite closely with them and we would like to be a model mosque. We are working with MCB at the moment to look at best practices across other mosques and share those practices from our own experiences. There are definitely lots of issues and barriers in having women within the mosque and some smaller mosques have aired the view that there is not space for a women’s area and things like that.

**Jess Phillips:** Cut the men’s area in half, I might suggest.

*Sufia Alam:* Those are the things we are working with the Muslim Council of Britain on, looking at and supporting other mosques. We would definitely like to increase our membership at trustee level and have more young women on the board as well as older women. It is the way forward.

**Nazmin Akthar:** The question I have with mosques—and it is just my question to them—is that obviously there are some very good positive examples of mosques and the work they are doing around the UK, but generally with mosques, when they have sermons on family values and on the role of women in the family environment, to what extent are they going to be that helpful if a woman, say, came to them and said, “I need help with progressing my career” or “I want to leave my children in a childcare facility”? To what extent is that going to happen without some open and honest discussions taking place first with mosques on how they operate?

**Raheel Mohammed:** I think we should rely not just on mosques, but on communities. There is a constellation of different actors and stakeholders, and mosques might well be one place you want to go to, depending on how it is run. There is the Inclusive Mosque Initiative, which my colleague Latifa, who is not here today, would be able to speak more widely on. It is supposed to be very good. I sometimes think mosques and imams get a bad press. We do not drag out Anglican priests when the BNP march.

**Q85 Jess Phillips:** I totally agree with you, but the trouble is that so much strategy on how to engage with the Muslim community, be it men or women—unfortunately, it is detrimental when it is women—is focused on mosques. I totally agree with what you are saying. Nobody tries to talk to me through a church just because I am white.

**Raheel Mohammed:** There are some amazing community organisations that, despite the cuts, work under the radar. They are experts who know their communities and will be doing work every single day. Those are the kinds of experts who need to be supported more and given more of a public platform as well.

**Q86 Jess Phillips:** So what sorts of things do you think community organisations or mosques or people within the community could be doing to encourage practical action to help Muslim women get into work? Do you think it can and will happen in those places?

**Sufia Alam:** I think so. In most of the work we do we use faith as a driver to encourage and inspire people to change behaviour, and there is a role for the imam to enhance and explain that. Definitely in some of the work that we do through the workshops, on our premises we have a playgroup, we have a staff team of 10, and we have 60 volunteers working in the mosque, so by example people know that this is not something that is forbidden in Islam, but rather encouraged. There needs to be more specific sermons probably up and down the country as well to encourage that. If you are working in partnership with community groups and leaders, there is no reason why mosques cannot work with people like that and enhance it through the teaching, as we can see Islam is a driver to encourage people.

**Q87 Jess Phillips:** Do you think that having Muslim women on those bodies will help, for example on the boards of mosques and leading community organisations?

**Sufia Alam:** Definitely, yes. I could not imagine if I did not have a voice in our mosque. I would be the first person to speak out. It is really important to be heard and implemented.

**Q88 Jess Phillips:** Is your mosque the norm or the rarity?

**Sufia Alam:** It is a rarity, I have to say, but we have to have a standard.

**Q89 Jess Phillips:** What Government support can be provided to Muslim communities in order to empower Muslim women?

**Sufia Alam:** Resources. I keep on banging on about that because I have seen over two decades how resources have come and gone. There is no sustainability, so good work has been diminished and we are struggling with partnership. Some of the major projects that we delivered out of mosque have lost funding and there are lots of factors around that. There is the Islamophobic rhetoric that is going out through the media; you all know that when something happens in the world the East London Mosque is the first one to be shunned, and the amount of interviews that I get requested on a daily basis, like we have the answer for the world. Those kinds of things put a lot of external pressure on organisations, and then we have the internal things to deal with. Without resources, as much funding as we get for the upkeep of our organisation, most organisations would agree that resources have to be there to support it and it needs to be sustainable so that the work continues and does not stop.

**Raheel Mohammed:** There is something about prevention as well, starting really early, starting in schools. As there is so much negative white noise around Muslim communities, we almost need to find a different vocabulary to talk about these issues. The Muslim Girls Fence thing is an example of that. It is unusual and it is very local, but it also has an international reach. It is not just about what Muslims can do better; it is also about those discriminatory practices and institutions that need to change.

**Q90 Jess Phillips:** With my children, half the kids in their class are Muslim, and they certainly do not think that Muslims are terrorists. They are too little to think that Muslim women are subservient. She is just Aisha who plays football with them. Unfortunately, though, it seems that the way that Government support works with Muslim communities is often around that agenda.

**Raheel Mohammed:** It is also around counter-terrorism and Prevent, and that has stigmatised whole communities. I did not realise that ESOL was a part of the Prevent strategy. I do not see how that can be helpful.

**Q91 Mims Davies:** I just want to pick up on Raheel's comment earlier, where you mentioned binary and negative media portrayal. What do you think the Government or watchdogs can do about a balanced approach? Leading into the Prevent issues, what can we recommend to be done on that issue?

**Raheel Mohammed:** I have not seen any research that has looked at the psychological effect it has on a community when they have been portrayed in a particular way for over a decade. Editors need to be held to account when we have reports that are not factual and when we have reports that can potentially lead to community members being attacked. That is a worry. We hear the odd report of something happening to an individual, but what we do not hear about is the knock-on impact on whole communities, and that absence of voice is violence in itself. We are not going to have communities growing up feeling that this is their country if they are portrayed in a particular way, and the Government could do something about that.

**Q92 Mims Davies:** Just to conclude on that, if you did want to stand up, is there an opportunity to be heard? Are those platforms even being offered?

**Raheel Mohammed:** There is that. It is also partly about how any minority community has to find its own skills and messages. Sorry to harp on about this, but the Muslim Girls Fence project was also an exhibition at the Southbank as part of the Women of the World festival. We need to find more creative ways of providing a different narrative. We need new storytellers. We have amazing young women who are doing great things, but we do not hear about them as often.

**Q93 Mims Davies:** Often, the criticism is that there are no speakers of the positive message. It seems to be a catch 22 on that one.

**Raheel Mohammed:** There are plenty of speakers. We have two people here.

**Sufia Alam:** There was the recent programme with Trevor Phillips that we saw, and it was not proportionate. We have 3 million Muslims and only one thousand and something were interviewed in the research, and then it was on national TV about what Muslims think—nobody asked me what I think. Do you know what I mean? These kinds of things again just feed into the far-right thinking, and it is going to cause tension in communities. It is not the way forward. Why do we not hear the good news stories? There is so much good work happening in communities up and down the country, but we never see programmes on national TV about that. It is always the honour-based violence, the domestic abuse and all the negatives. This is the kind of image people are growing up with and it is not healthy and it is not fair.

**Nazmin Akthar:** Trevor Phillips should be congratulated, because he managed to draw out a consensus for 3 million Muslims out of 1,000, even though 3 million Muslims each year disagree on when Eid is. That is the crux of it: we are all diverse; there are variations between us. You are not going to be able to poll 1,000, 2,000, or even 3,000 and find out exactly what 3 million think.

**Chair:** Thank you so much. That was an extremely useful end to our meeting. May I thank you, on behalf of the whole Committee, for giving your time this morning? I apologise that we have overrun, but I thought it was important to give everybody the opportunity to answer fully the questions before us. I hope you are able to read our report when it comes out. Thank you very much.