Submission from

Muslim Women's Network UK

for the

All Party Parliamentary Group inquiry into Tackling Terrorism

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Executive Summary

The Muslim Women's Network (MWN) was established in 2002 to work with the Women's National Commission (WNC) and to give independent advice to government on issues relating to Muslim women and public policy. Members of the network represent a diverse range of women's groups and organisations from across the UK. On 7th December 2006, MWN launched the report 'She Who Disputes – Muslim Women Shape the Debate.' The report was a result of a year long listening to women exercise which took place across five cities in England, where women themselves set the agenda.

The report supports the view that although the 'war on terror' has pushed Muslim women up the political agenda, its negative impact has been immense, especially for those who are very visibly Muslim. The discrimination and violence that existed prior to 9/11 and 7/7 has been exacerbated by the terror attacks, the political discourse on the 'war on terror' and the portrayal of Muslims by some sections of the media.

The Muslim women that attended the listening event gave first hand accounts of the hostility they have been facing due to the intolerance of Muslims in the UK today. Their greatest concerns were with regards to:

- Safety
- Education
- Employment

Muslim women are facing verbal abuse, physical abuse, racism and discrimination in all areas of life. Evidence also suggests that Islamophobic incidents against Muslims, especially women, increase when politicians make comments against Muslims and with negative media reporting. There is a fear that being anti-Muslim has become so socially acceptable to the extent that even children are involved in behaving negatively towards Muslims.

The 'war on terror' has also had an impact on the employment of Muslims. The unemployment rate for Muslim women at 18 per cent is about four times the rate for Christian and Jewish women. These figures may not entirely be due to the 'war on terror,' but our findings suggest that it has made the situation worse. For example, the educational attainment of Muslim girls is rising in that they have overtaken white boys and are quickly catching up to white girls, yet they still face poor employment prospects due to racism, sexism and negative stereotypes which include negative attitudes to religious dress at work. There are wider implications for community cohesion if Muslim women continue to experience as they do now, high levels of unemployment and low pay and progression in work. Action to break down barriers, open up new work opportunities and reduce discrimination will be critical.

There is a huge potential for Muslim women to play an active role in all areas of political and public life as well as raising children who are productive and active members of society. Muslim women could therefore be the key to tackling extremism. Women's issues could be effectively used as a part of a strategic initiative against extremism. Support to empower women from within the community

may be limited as questioning the status of women can be controversial and difficult. Government support will therefore be essential for the empowerment of Muslim women within their communities as well as in the wider society. This will need to include actions to break down barriers to higher education and employment; improve their safety; tackle discrimination and perceptions; and enhance roles of women within their communities

About MWN

The Muslim Women's Network (MWN) was established in 2002 by the Minister for Women, the Right Honourable Patricia Hewitt MP. The aim of the network is to consult Muslim women and to give independent advice to the government on issues relating to Muslim women and public policy and to ensure policies suggested to Government include the concerns of Muslim women both in their formulation and their outcome. The MWN is supported by the Women's National Commission, which is the government's official independent body on women and is a non departmental public body.

Membership is open to women living and working in the Muslim community and is not focussed on a specific ethnic community, religious sect within Islam, political allegiance or geographical affiliation. Members represent a diverse range of women's groups and organisations from England, Wales and Scotland. All have strong track record in minority women's rights and bring linkages with wider regional, national and international networks and organisations. Members work in voluntary sector groups that provide support services for women; within the government sectors of education, health and local government; and as independent researchers, academics and business women.

On 7th December 2006, MWN launched the report 'She Who Disputes – Muslim Women Shape the Debate.' The report was a result of a year long listening to women exercise which took place in London, Birmingham, Leicester, Manchester and Bradford, where women themselves set the agenda.

The Impact of the 'war on terror' on Muslim women

The terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001 and 7th July 2005 as well as the 'war on terror' have been a double edged sword for UK Muslim women. From the positive point of view Muslim women have been pushed up the political agenda. Previously Muslim women's voices and concerns were ignored and now the government is willing to listen to their voices. For example, MWN was set up by a senior government minister and since its inception has generated considerable interest within government and the community. And on the 10th May 2006, Prime Minister Tony Blair met with 40 Muslim women at 10 Down Street and discussed issues that concerned them. Muslim women have also been empowering themselves – a number of local Muslim women networks have been set up within the last few years across the country.

Unfortunately the negative impact of the 'war on terror' on Muslim women has been immense, especially those who are very visibly Muslim. Discrimination and violence existed prior to 9/11 and 7/7. However, these problems have been exacerbated by the terrorist attacks; the political discourse on the 'war on terror;' and the portrayal of Muslims by some sections of the media. Collectively these have given rise to intolerance of Muslims in Britain today - Muslims are being victimised by the general public because they are associated with terrorism and extremism. The increased hostility towards Muslims has manifested itself in the form of increased verbal and physical abuse, racism and discrimination in all areas of life. Sometimes the discrimination can be subtle and hard to prove, especially in the work place or when accessing services. The greatest impact of intolerance has probably been felt by Muslim women, yet they could provide the key to tackling extremism. Three areas where Muslim women have felt the greatest impact is with regards to their safety, education and employment.

Safety and Violence

During the MWN listening events, there was an awareness of the corrosive impact of Islamopohobia and the need to counter it and the stereotypical representation of Muslim women. Safety was the biggest issue raised and it generated long discussions. The majority of women had personal experiences to recount which ranged from harassment and verbal abuse to serious threats and assaults stemming from the fact that they were Muslim. Women who wear the hijab are more easily identifiable as Muslim and have therefore been more vulnerable to abuse and discrimination as illustrated by the comments below (taken from the 'She Who Disputes – Muslim Women Shape the Debate' report [1] :

"For 20 years, I had no problem wearing a hijab. Now you get intimidated in the street – stared at – and even challenged as a professional."
Leicester

"A car was driving past my friend, and they opened the car door on her, just because she was wearing the hijab."
Manchester

"My mum wears the hijab. She's a little old lady in her sixties. She lives in a white area. Now young kids are throwing things at her – bottles and cans – every time there's something in the media about Muslim extremism."
Manchester

"When you wear a hijab people stare at you! Someone even said to me one time 'aren't you hot in that? Why don't you take it off? . . . is the Taliban making you wear this?'"
London

"After 9/11, we had all this stuff demonising us – even round here (Whitechapel) women were attacked."
London

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1 She Who Disputes : Women Shape the Debate (2006). Muslim Women's Network

"I am wearing a hijab: I find it difficult to get a job, even to walk the streets!"
Manchester

"I felt self-conscious after 7/7. A hijabi woman was spat on because of it. In central London a German man said to my friend as she was walking, "disgusting!"- – Since 7/7 Muslim people are unjustly feared, shouldn't there be a law against that?"
London

"Since the July bombing, women have had their scarves ripped off and are being spat at."
Birmingham

"One time I was on the bus and someone said to me: 'you haven't got a bomb in your bag have you?' I turned around and said to them, your bag is bigger than mine, have you got one in yours?"
London

Evidence also suggests that Islamophobic incidents increase on comments made by politicians and negative media reporting. For example, a number of incidents took place mainly involving Muslim women after Jack Straw, the Leader of the Commons, made his controversial remarks about the face veil as illustrated below:

Thursday 5 October: Mr Straw described the veil as, "a visible statement of separation"

Friday 6 October: Muslim woman had her hijab, or headscarf, pulled off and thrown on the floor by a white man in East London.

Friday 6 October: Muslim woman had her veil snatched from her face in Liverpool.

Friday 6 October: Muslim girl wearing a veil in Mr Straw's Blackburn constituency was verbally abused by three youths. One allegedly threw a newspaper at her and shouted: "Jack has told you to take off your veil."

Saturday 7 October: Two Asian men were attacked by racists in Leicester, one critically injured.

Sunday 8 October: Racist graffiti was daubed on a house on Teesside. Slogans, included the words "kill Muslims" and "terrorists live here."

Monday 9 October: A 21-year-old Turkish woman wearing a hijab was verbally abused by a white woman in Canterbury, Kent.

Monday 9 October. A black Muslim woman wearing a veil was verbally abused in Hackney, East London.

Other pronouncements on ethnicity issues have been followed by instances of racial abuse. Two days after the Home Secretary, John Reid, declared at the Labour Party conference that extremist Muslim "bullies" must be faced down, the Jamia Masjid mosque in Preston came under attack from a gang of white and black youths, who threw bricks at cars while 100 Muslims, attending mosque for Ramadan, worshipped inside. The following day Falkirk's Islamic centre was set on fire, causing £10,000 damage. Within 24 hours of that incident, a dairy owned by a Muslim family in Windsor also came under siege. Groups of up to 30 people attacked the Medina Dairy, which has also allegedly been fire bombed [2].

Such attitudes by politicians is alienating Muslims, especially the women and the youth. The very people that the government needs to engage with are being pushed away while racists are exploiting these issues. For example, after Jack Straw's comments, the British National Party sent out anti-Muslim leaflets that included a photograph of a veiled Muslim woman. The government is sending out mixed signals – they state the importance of community cohesion yet some ministers are involved in discourse about Muslims which indirectly fuels hatred and damages community relations.

Research indicates that anti-Muslim prejudice has become socially acceptable to the extent that children are involved in behaving negatively towards Muslims. For example, research by the Islamic Human rights commission on discrimination indicates that an increasing number of women wearing hijab report discrimination, harassment and abuse and some of the perpetrators were children [3]. The government should take a moral stance and encourage those in the mainstream society to counter prejudice.

Education and Employment
During the MWN listening events, the low expectations of Muslim children especially girls, was a recurring theme. It was often linked to women's experiences of teachers with stereotypical views about Muslim girls lacking ambition and not being allowed by their families to pursue higher education and careers. Although Muslims are still the least likely of any faith group to have a degree and one third have no qualifications – this is changing. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) published a report in March 2007 which shows Pakistani and Bangladeshi girls aged 16 have the same aspirations as white girls to combine work and family life and are even more ambitious about their education and future careers.

The report also showed that in GCSE performance these girls have overtaken white boys as well as boys in their ethnic groups and are quickly catching up to white girls. Whilst the focus of the EOC's work was not exclusively in relation to Muslim women, over 90% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women were Muslim and the report explored issues of religious as well as racial and sexual discrimination. For example, the report highlighted that there is a mismatch between the aspirations of the young Muslim

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2 The Independent, 14 October 2006. http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/crime/article1870842.ece

3 British Muslims' Expectations of Government: Social Discrimination across the Muslim divide (2004). Islamic Human Rights Commission.

women and their ability to find work that matches their skills and ambitions. Despite increasing attainment at school and ambitious aspirations, Muslim girls faced poor employment prospects due to racism, sexism and negative stereotypes. Those that were employed were on lower pay, worked in a restricted range of sectors and a lower glass ceiling than white women. The research also revealed that one in five of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi said they experienced negative attitudes to religious dress at work [4]. The EOC report reinforces the findings of the MWN listening exercise. Some comments by participants are listed below [5]:

"Muslims get refused jobs all the time because they're wearing the hijab."
London

A lot of women have good qualifications and don't get jobs because of the way they dress, because the wear the hijab.
London

"Muslims have to keep quiet about harassment. After 9/11 certain comments were made in our office. Management did not challenge it– I had to."
Birmingham

Officially you can't be told not to wear hijab. The problem is the attitude of the people you work with.
Birmingham

My dad, who works at Heathrow Airport, tried to get me a summer job there. My application form was accepted, but after I sent a photo of myself wearing the hijab, my application was unsuccessful.
London

"When 9/11 happened one member of staff shouted at me, 'would you do that, would you kill?' I felt so upset!"
London

I was promised a job over the phone. When they saw me in hijab, they turned me down. I was so hurt.
Manchester

A friend of mine went for 10 job interviews, 8 with hijab and 2 without hijab – she got the two jobs she went for without wearing the hijab!
Birmingham

The negative perception of Muslims has affected the job prospects of young Muslim females. According to the 2004 figures from the Office of National Statistics, unemployment rates for Muslims are higher than those for people from any other

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4 Moving on Up: Ethnic Minority Women at Work (2007). The Equal Opportunities Comission.

5 She Who Disputes : Women Shape the Debate (2006). Muslim Women's Network

religion, for both men and women. The unemployment rate for Muslim women at 18 per cent was about four times the rate for Christian and Jewish women (4 per cent in each case). Unemployment rates for women in the other religious groups were between 6 per cent and 9 per cent [6]. These figures may not entirely be due to the 'war on terror,' but the MWN findings suggest that it has made the situation worse.

There are wider implications for community cohesion if Muslim women continue to experience as they do now, high levels of unemployment and low pay and progression in work. Action to break down barriers, open up new work opportunities and reduce discrimination will be critical.

Tackling Extremism by empowering Muslim women

The triple discrimination of Islamophobia, racism and sexism has meant that, in most walks of life, Muslim women find themselves isolated. While some Muslim women feel alienated, others believe they can play a role within their communities and society. For example, in February 2007, a ground breaking initiative to empower Muslim women to get involved in interfaith activities was launched by the Islamic Foundation. Over forty women attended a year long course during which they learned about six major faith communities along with key organising and personal skills. These women will now take up leadership roles in interfaith activity and be ambassadors of peace and cohesion between faith communities. They will help build community relations and break down barriers between faith communities.

Ordinary Muslim women such as these who have the strength and conviction to play an active role in the face of adversity should be encouraged and supported - they will provide young Muslim girls with the much needed role models. There is a huge potential for Muslim women to play an active role in all areas of political and public life as well as raising children who are productive and active members of society. Muslim women could therefore be the key to tackling extremism.

Women's issues could be effectively used as a part of a strategic initiative against extremism. Support to empower women from within the community may be limited as questioning the status of women can be controversial and difficult. For example, at present women are excluded from some mosques in the UK due to cultural misunderstandings. Government support will therefore be essential for the empowerment of Muslim women within their communities as well as in the wider society. This could include financing organisations advocating women's rights in the UK as well as providing 'no strings attached' funding for Muslim women to train as religious leaders and scholars. Female religious leaders could help curb extremism by educating women, children and youth on women's rights as well as the differences in culture and religion.

The following areas should to be addressed to aid the empowerment of Muslim women:

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6 Annual Population Survey, January 2004 to December 2004, Office for National Statistics

Motivation of Muslim girls to enter higher education
- Schools must highlight role models for Muslim girls. The role models that already exist should be identified rather than waiting for new ones to be created.
- Schools, both mainstream and faith schools must tackle negative stereotypes.
- Career advice for Muslim girls must be improved.
- Initiatives by schools to break down barriers that are preventing parents from becoming involved in their children's education e.g. positive efforts should be made by schools to reach the mothers of Muslim pupils and to engage with them.
- Positive efforts should be made to ensure that school's governing bodies reflect the community they serve, and they must be gender-balanced. More women should serve from the local Muslim community.
- Mentoring schemes should be set up for women from among women in senior positions both in public life and employment.

Breaking down barriers to employment
- The Women and Work Commission should look at the specific problems of Muslim women in employment.
- The Equal Opportunities Commission and the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights should incorporate these concerns into their work on implementing the public duties (currently on Gender, Race and Disability)
- Employers and trade unions should work together to ensure that informal routes to recruitment and promotion do not exclude Muslim women.
- Employers and trade unions should work with Muslim women to improve HR practices.
- The Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) and other professional groups should issue guidance to HR professionals to tackle ignorance about Islam.

Improving safety
- Initiatives to improve 'grass roots' communication between police and Muslim communities, especially for youth and women relations e.g. creating Muslim women's safety forums to support engagement of local women.
- Racially and faith motivated crimes should be recorded as hate crimes and not reduced to assaults or simply other crimes.
- A safe space should be made available for Muslims who wish to report either inter or intra societal crimes or harassment.
- The tackling of all extremist groups irrespective of faith.

Tackling discrimination by challenging mindsets and perceptions of the public about Muslims
- Responsible media reporting in order to combat stereotypes about Muslims and Islam.
- There should be more positive emphasis on diversity of cultures, faiths and ethnicities.

- Schools, both mainstream and faith schools must tackle stereotypes.
- The government needs to take a moral lead in tackling prejudice in society by ensuring their discourse on Muslims is not fueling hatred and causing further misunderstandings
- The term integration should be reconsidered as to many people it denotes assimilation and serves to further alienate Muslims who are British by implying that they are not British, or that they fall short of what is 'Britishness'.
- Local and national multi-cultural events should be supported in order to build mutual understanding and celebrate the diversity that exists within the UK.

Enhancing role of Muslim women within their communities
- There must be regular engagement between Muslim women and Government at all levels. Government at the highest levels as well as locally must be seen to be meeting with women community leaders.
- Support and funding for grass roots women's organisations to raise awareness of women's rights in Islam; differences between culture and religion; the negative impact of culture on women's rights.
- Government funding for Muslim women to train as scholars / religious leaders (without the attachment of unfair conditions).

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