

Despite Barrier, it is empowering to be a Muslim woman in Britain (Shaista Gohir – UK)

Introduction

I am a board member of Muslim Women's Network UK, the only national Muslim women's organization in Britain. Even though Muslim women face many barriers, it is still empowering to be a Muslim woman in Britain. You may be wondering why I have chosen to be positive despite the fact that Muslim women face so many barriers – well too when we all think about Muslim women there is a tendency to only focus on the problems they face. Little or no attention is paid to their successes and achievements. However, I believe it is important to celebrate and highlight these as it can also be one strategy to advance their rights. And this also helps to:

- To raise aspirations of young girls
- To show girls and woman change is possible
- To break stereotypes

The barriers

However, before I talk about the positive experiences of Muslim women, I want to give you some background information. Muslim women are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Britain – they have the poorest health, live in the poorest housing, have the highest unemployment rates and face discrimination on multiple levels because of their gender, ethnicity, religion and the way they dress. They also face internal, problems linked to their culture. In addition to all this, their bodies have become battlegrounds for extremists on both sides – on one side you have a rise in religious extremism and conservative Muslims are criticizing women like me who do not cover their heads – they tell us we are too westernized, too integrated and are bad Muslim women. On the side, right wing politicians are telling Muslim women who choose to cover that they are not integrated enough.

Muslim women making history - politics

However, despite all of this, Muslim women in Britain have also made history. Last year in the elections, we saw for the first time a Muslim woman being included in the government cabinet. For the first time we also saw three elected members of parliament.

Other Muslim female role models

Politics is not the only arena where Muslim women are breaking barriers. Muslim women are participating at all levels in civil society and in diverse sectors.

For example, we have Muslim women in the police force, in the army, as district judges, lawyers, teachers, scientists, engineers, bankers. There are also muslim female actors, tv presenters, comedians, writers and even participating in sports. For example, one young girl is training in boxing for the 2016 olympics, another girl who is about 16 years old is plays golf at an international level representing Wales and Great Britain in tournaments. Another young woman plays for her regional women's cricket team and was the first Asian and muslim woman to do

so. She is also a nurse and coaches and trains school girls to play cricket. Another muslim woman is a sports coach and has also played in the national rugby league team. All of these examples show that when Muslim women are given opportunities, they are taking them – so more opportunities need to be given.

Some examples of good practice

Next I want to highlight some examples of good practice, but I will only focus on initiatives promoting role models.

- a) A couple of years ago the national human rights body partnered with a national newspaper and identified the 50 most powerful women in Britain which helped break some stereotypes
- b) There have been a number of initiatives which have involved sending Muslim female role models into schools to speak to and mentor Muslim girls.
- c) The Muslim Women's Network UK (www.mwnuk.co.uk) developed exhibitions showing role models which they now lend out to schools, libraries, and women's groups. They have also developed role model posters and sent them to schools. They have also produced booklets highlighting role models. I have two examples here. One aimed at girls and the other aimed at women.
- d) I launched a website last year called big Sister, the website address is www.bigsister.org.uk in which I highlighted Muslim female role models from past to present, from around the world and from diverse sectors. To this website I also added a myth busting section on women's rights in islam where I included satirical cartoons and provided arguments to challenge extremist rhetoric which is often used against women. This website was aimed initially at Muslim girls in the UK. However, since its launch, I have been contacted from Muslim women around the world who are telling me they are using it as a resource in schools, universities and empowerment workshops. The myth busting section has proved so popular that I recently set up a Youtube channel called Muslim feminist where I now plan to deliver lectures on Muslim women's rights. I uploaded my first lecture last week on Islamic feminism. I have already received emails from women from other countries. In fact one women's groups from south Africa who had seen both the Youtube lecture and the Big Sister website asked me if I would deliver a talk via Skype to a their members – and I did this last Saturday. I already have another request to do one for women in Pakistan. The point in telling you all this is that when women are give the information they need, it does have an impact – so we need to get better at ensuring they have the right information.

Some recommendations

I want to conclude with some recommendations:

- 1) More Muslim women need to be empowered with information to be able to challenge religious extremist rhetoric
- 2) Currently there is only a focus on empowering Muslim women who live in Muslim majority countries, Muslim women living in the West as

minorities are being neglected. There are 10 million Muslim women in Western Europe, they need to be connected to each other so they can work on the similar challenges they face of both right wing extremism and Islamic religious extremism.

- 3) More resources need to be created to highlight role models and relevant role models need to be included in the education curriculum.
- 4) Women need to be trained to make better use of information technology including social media.