



Speech - Harun Khan

International Women's Day Event (delivered in Portcullis House)

7th March 2018

Assalaamu Alaykum, Peace be with you

Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends, Colleagues, Supporters,

First of all, thank you to all of you for taking time out of your busy lives to be here today at this Muslim Council of Britain event.

Today's event is to mark **International Women's Day**, a day recognised and promoted by the United Nations for over 40 years since its inception in 1975.

Ladies and gentlemen, whether it be through our words or our actions, it's time to **Press for Progress** with regards to women's rights.

By **Press for Progress** - the theme behind International Women's Day in 2018 – the MCB, alongside other bodies in Muslim civil society, really means we **must press for progress**.

It's time to say enough is enough and it's time to ensure that everyone understands their **own** responsibility in achieving equal access and opportunities for men and women in British society today.

Why do we still live in a society where 1 in 4 women in the UK will experience domestic violence in her lifetime?

Why do we live in a society where employers - including well-recognised brands like EasyJet and the BBC - still think its okay to pay a women less than a man for doing the same job?

Only now, from April will all mid-size companies in the UK with over 250 employees will be required by law to publish their gender pay gaps.

Why do we still live in a society where women are abused, harassed and exploited everywhere, even in the very halls of power that we stand in today?

Closer to home, **why** is Muslim civil society still full of many mosques that only have prayer spaces for men and none for women, as if to imply that prayer and a sense of community is only for men?

We must all recognise our role in **tackling these injustices** against women.

This includes myself. I am aware that as a man, I have certain privileges which I need to be aware of and which put me in a position where my voice is unfortunately prioritised in some parts of society than a woman's.

Having this privilege means that I **must** use that opportunity to **challenge these injustices**.

In the Quran in Sura An-Nisa translated as 'The Women' in verse 135, Allah says:

"O you who believe! Be maintainers of justice, bearers of witness of Allah's sake, though it may be against your own selves or (your) parents or near relatives; ..."

As a father and a husband, I am very much aware of the disadvantages faced by my wife and daughters due to their gender. And I am very much aware also of the responsibility that I have been given as the Secretary General of the MCB.

This is a responsibility on my shoulders and our organisation. A responsibility to ensure that we never neglect to ensure that our female members are afforded the same rights as males.

A responsibility to ensure that our 500 affiliates are constantly reflecting on their practice, understanding how women are disadvantaged and implementing policies to eradicate gender inequality.

A responsibility to ensure that an attitude which is intolerant of women is an attitude that is not given the oxygen to thrive in our communities.

Today, the MCB is pleased to launch three specific initiatives to help tackle gender inequality in our society.

Firstly, throughout the month of March, the MCB will be raising awareness of our affiliates who are making great efforts towards equality.

We are pleased to welcome a new affiliate, Muslim Women of Merton, who have been empowering young female activists in their local area for years.

East London Mosque has made enormous efforts to prioritise engagement with women through the dedicated Maryam Centre. And Lancashire Council of Mosques is establishing a specific Local Women's Forum soon to bring together the voices of women who want to make a **difference** in their mosques.

These examples show us that with determination and self-organisation, we have the ability to press ahead with progress. They show us that we can do better.

Secondly, we're proud to be involved in supporting our long standing affiliate Islamic Relief, who have recently begun consulting on a Gender Justice declaration- a landmark step in ensuring that we all recognise our responsibilities towards eradicating injustice against women worldwide and demanding equality.

But, the MCB recognises that we can't just celebrate the good, we must also recognise and address the bad.

We've heard **too** many examples of mosques and organisations in our communities accepting cultural practices and being closed to women, with the MCB office regularly receiving emails of complaints about this.

At MCB's inaugural Our Mosques Our Future conference in January this year, we hosted a session on a Women's Perspective on British Mosques highlighting the scale of this challenge. The marginalisation of women in our mosques – a key institution of our communities - is simply unacceptable.

Thus, thirdly, I am very pleased to announce today that the MCB is launching a programme to help accelerate the *progression of women* in the running of our mosques. We know that the deficit does not lie within the capabilities of women to do so, but in the structures and cultures that exclude them.

The "Women in Mosques Development Programme" is designed to take capable, enthusiastic Muslim women with an interest in mosque management through a 6-month intensive training programme. They will be assigned an experienced mosque manager or trustee as a mentor, given the opportunity to visit best practice mosque across the UK and have access to media interview and charity commission guidance training, to prepare them to become mosque managers and trustees.

The programme will run with 15 Muslim women later this year, with applications opening today and closing on 30 April 2018.

We are aware that there are a growing number of Muslim activists who are leading their university Islamic societies, running campaigns and driving forward their local youth groups.

It is time we celebrate the immense contributions that Muslim women are already making to our institutions, and ensure these contributions are also appreciated and find a home in the many mosques up and down the UK too.

We recognise this programme is a drop in the ocean compared to what needs to be done to address the challenges in this space, but we hope it is the start of much more.

As the MCB, we're saying it is no longer acceptable that mosques across the UK are unsighted to 50% of their own communities.

The Women in Mosques Fast Track Programme will run for six months in late 2018 and we would encourage you all to spread the word, to encourage young women who you know to apply to it, and to get involved.

In addition to this, later this month, the MCB's **Mosques and Women working group** will meet for the first time to discuss what action needs to be taken to increase access for women within mosques.

And when we say access, we do not mean just getting through the door.

We mean women being active in all aspects of mosque life, in the management committees, being at the forefront of the services which mosques offer, working on outreach projects and so much more. To get involved with this, get in touch, attend the meeting, propose an idea, critique ideas, start the conversation, tell us what we should be doing better. Speak to an MCB volunteer at today's event or email us to find out more.

To some of you, action on the inequality faced by women in our Muslim communities will have been a long time coming. And I agree. I recognise that the MCB has historically not done as much as we could have with regard to the issues facing women and gender inequality. I can't change our past, but I can influence our future, InshaAllah.

At the **Our Mosques Our Future** conference in January we heard from many speakers about how we can be re-imagining the future of our mosques, and by extension our Muslim communities.

We also said that the MCB is **not** interested in just being a talking shop, but in working on real, practical and tangible initiatives to create the better future that we all seek.

We hope today's event – marking International Women's Day and emphasising the need to **Press for Progress** – is the first of many steps MCB is taking in that direction, and I invite you to join us on that journey.

Thank you.