
THE IMPACT OF FEDERATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION UK WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

BY MUJAHIDAH MEBUDE

INTRODUCTION

Federation of Muslim Women Association UK (FOMWA UK) is a not for profit and non-governmental organisation Muslim women's charity organisation. FOMWA UK was formally inaugurated in London, United Kingdom in 2013.

FOMWA UK was formed by a group of volunteers from an array of professions – a pharmacist, teachers, HR executive, civil servants, scientists, home makers, self –employed people and a social worker. Our aim is to provide support and guidance for the families in the upbringing of children and effective parenting, providing guidance on religious, social and family needs.

The organisation, inspired by a Muslim ethos, empowers and supports women, youth and families. This is done primarily by organising and running major events throughout the year by volunteers. In doing so it puts into practice Islamic values of ethics, care, and community.

During the COVID pandemic, FOMWA organised weekly sessions for women as a support network to engage and discuss concerns regarding the developing medical situation in the UK. Also, volunteers visited vulnerable individuals within the community who were isolated and affected families due to the epidemic and required additional support from the community.

FOMWA UK serves a largely Black Muslim community in London. The socioeconomic context is important because of the disparity that characterises the local communities.

The ONS published a summary of differences in wellbeing by ethnicity, which explains levels of wellbeing in BME populations in England and reports disparities for BME groups (ONS, 2016). With respect to life satisfaction, the White ethnic group reported an average of 7.4 out of 10, compared to 6.7 in the Black ethnic group, though some other ethnic groups reported similar or slightly higher averages. On the question of 'how worthwhile the things they do are' also, the White ethnic group reported a higher average than all other ethnic groups. In the same vein, the recent outbreak of COVID-19, has been reported to have a disproportionate impact on the BAME ethnic minority communities (Public Health England 2020).

The ONS study also highlights the barriers to adopting healthy lifestyles in the African and Black-Caribbean community. It explains that advice on healthy behaviour has little relevance when set alongside the daily struggle against racism and discrimination faced by such families.

It is in this light that this report aims to address the issue of Black Muslim women particularly of African descent with the hope that it can lead to further research and enable appropriate statistics/results to be gathered and explored by policy makers.

FOMWA UK OVERVIEW

Of particular interest to the women is the support for the young members of the community and personal development.

This has led to FOMWA UK developing four major events which are cornerstones of the services we offer to support women. One such service is Islamic Vacation Course (IVC) which is always organised during the school holidays i.e. Christmas break, Easter break and summer holidays. These programmes are run by a group of female volunteers in a mosque and sometimes at a local park. The programme is well executed by having presentations on Islamic etiquettes, Islamic games and quizzes, cookery and indoor/outdoor play.

Our four major events are:

ANNUAL LADIES DINNER – This is usually held in January solely to give women ‘me time’ out of sight of children and husbands. It has proved popular for the fact that it is a free event with a three course meal served and we usually ask the audience for donations and pledges – funds collected are used to execute some of the projects’ expenses for the year.

WOMEN’S CONGRESS – which coincides with International Women’s Day/Week. The theme of the annual congress usually centres around International Women’s Day’s theme. It is a day of relaxation for women focusing on their health and wellbeing through lectures and various activities and workshops at the congress.

As part of our organisational growth, we embarked on collaborative work and got more Islamic organisations outside of London involved in our programmes. The intention is to move forward with global growth in order to reach out to more women who share our values and vision. This culminated in having the first Women’s Congress in Manchester this year tagged **Manchester 2020**. The event took place in March and despite Covid-19 starting to rear its ugly head, we had a fantastic turn out of about 90 delegates who attended from London, Manchester, Liverpool, Salford and the surrounding neighbourhood.

Youth Conference brings all youth representatives of our various Islamic organisations together under one umbrella to plan and deliver the programme annually. This programme enables youth from various backgrounds to share the common theme and network under the same umbrella.

A youth participant summarises the impact the conference has had on young people within the community.

The online youth conference this year was something I needed, as it was enlightening and relatable. It made me feel like I wasn’t alone and in a way it was therapeutic. Hearing and seeing others perspectives on depression and mental health issues. Overall it was very beneficial to listen to.

Marriage and Family Life Conference is an enlightening annual conference especially within the community and society at large. It emphasises the core practice at home with families as our core objective of delivery. Basically we focus on current issues within the community and

society at large and invite a range of speakers to deliver the chosen topics based on tenets of Islam as well as giving practical examples that are in tune with having a better family life.

The two comments below from our participants demonstrates the community’s confidence in our work.

Even during the lockdown, the organisation has organised events like “Sisters’ Hour” online on a weekly basis to assist women in coping with isolation and boredom.

I personally have learnt from their marriage conferences how to handle situations in my marriage. There are other ladies I know, who also have equipped themselves with what they have learnt from FOMWA UK programmes. It is very different from many other Islamic organisations because they focus on engaging the public (not only their members) in lectures and activities that have direct benefits in their lives.

EXPERIENCES /CHALLENGES

Many of the families FOMWA serves are on the lower income threshold and as a result the conferences have an important function. These conferences serve as a space for discussion where relatable/current issues and solutions are discussed and debated. It has always created avenues that highlight further grey areas - the challenges of inadequate housing, effect of government legislation on welfare benefits, unemployment, vulnerable women with social issues but do not know how to access various opportunities that are provided. And those that do know but have had the belief that they have been victim of discrimination and have been marginalised within the society.

As part of providing solutions to the issue of unemployment, FOMWA UK embarked on an Empowerment Project. We had a mini fundraising events through our Ladies Dinner and this culminated in people donating four sewing machines. We have in turn given sewing machines to unemployed women across England and have also signposted and paid for sewing training in order to learn tailoring and become self-employed.

I haven’t been able to work in the UK for the past four years and FOMWA UK have supported and empowered me to pick myself up and do something tangible with my time. They provided me with a sewing machine and registered me on a four month course.

The above comments reflect the achievements of FOMWA UK’s work, which was centred around helping the unemployed and increasing their employability potential.

CHALLENGES

Although FOMWA UK is registered charity we have no official sponsors, hence all our programmes and events are organised and managed by a team of like-minded professional

women. We receive donations from individuals and self-sponsor our programmes, but finance has been a major challenge for our events. In order to keep abreast of all our efforts, we are now looking inward into charging fees for our programmes – a decision that we have considered in the past but was unsuccessful given that most people who attend our programmes are women who are scraping by with meagre salaries with domestic and financial responsibilities or vulnerable adults – unemployed and the elderly.

I must emphasise that sometimes because our programmes are free, we still face the challenge of having limited people attending our events. This is so because the attitude and behaviour to education and widening of horizons is still backward in some quarters of our community. As a group of volunteers, we have busy work lives. Hence time has always impinge on our schedules and have limited us in stretching out to other parts of the UK as we would have loved to.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

More areas of work are emerging, especially in the area of wellbeing. Of particular interest is family welfare and support for vulnerable members of the community especially in the area of health and wellbeing. Covid-19 has brought in a new era and has increased loneliness, isolation, health related issues and boredom especially amongst vulnerable adults and unemployed people.

We are looking at ways of extending our projects to cover this essential wellbeing role in order to alleviate the sufferings and stress of Muslim women in our community. Perhaps we could start with telephone service to these women. It would be beneficial if we can have wellbeing group established, engage them in practical skills – for example crochet and knitting classes play schemes – for example quiz, educational day trips where women can network and support each other in order to address mental wellbeing and alleviate depression.

It goes without saying that there are lots of initiatives we can delve into but obviously our hands are tight due to finance, personnel and time factors which are unavoidably mitigating against rapid growth.

In conclusion, FOMWA UK has become a force to reckon with particularly in our community and in the society at large.



MUJAHIDAH MEBUDE

Mujidah Toyin Mebude is a community leader and a da'wah worker. She has participated and delivered lectures in various islamic discussions and programmes particularly within the African community. She was one of the speakers at Muslim Council for Britain's (MCB) Conferences – Our Mosque Our Future 2018 and Proudly Muslim and Black in February 2019 (an event organised in recognition of Black History Month).

Mujidah is an accomplished educator who has worked in various key stages of British education – KS1 to KS4. She obtained her degree from University of Westminster, Masters of Science from University of East London and her Post Graduate

Certificate of Education (PGCE) from University of Greenwich. She is a member of Society for Education and Training (MSET).

Mujidah has worked with various schools and colleges in London and Essex and has also taught at two Universities in the Middle East viz: Princess Nora University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and Sohar University, Sohar, Oman.

She is currently a lecturer at a Further Education College in East London. She is also the Secretary General of Federation of Muslim Women's Association (FOMWA UK) and also an Executive Member of Council for Nigeria Muslim Organisation (CNMO).

Prior to becoming a teacher, Mujidah worked with five local governments in various roles relating to housing management/development and social care.