

**‘A SHARED FUTURE’ CONSULTATION REPORT**  
**Al-Nisa Association Women’s Group**  
**30 June 2003**

At the request of participants, the facilitator took time to explain the context and background of the consultative document. She also explained the questions that were listed in the consultative document so that participants could more fully understand what is to be expected of them in relation to responding to the document.

The participants then decided to respond to the document by first looking at their concerns. They then moved on to answering the following four questions:

- (i) What is your vision of Northern Ireland in twenty-five years?
- (ii) What do we need to do to get to that vision?
- (iii) Who should deliver it?
- (iv) How do you think that a new strategy for improving relations ought to be monitored?

An Urdu-speaking interpreter was available during the whole period of the consultation.

**Concerns:**

The following issues were of concern to members of Al-Nisa Association Women’s Group:

- Muslim culture is not understood properly by the wider community for a number of reasons, including the influence of the media, little desire to explore other cultures and Islamophobia.
- For Muslims, Islam is a way of life. It is not just a religion. There are guidelines that must be adhered to and people live by those guidelines; they provide guidance for all aspects of private, social, economic, political, moral and spiritual affairs of life.
- People are generally too busy to notice the emerging multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Northern Ireland and the media, until recently, has not reflected the changing nature of the make-up of communities in Northern Ireland.
- Public sector service providers and the Government sector in general have not taken on board, in a co-ordinated manner, the need for their staff to learn about the Muslim culture and particular issues in relation to Muslim women.

- There have been little requests for training in Muslim culture and traditions. When requests do come in, they are for talks of no more than an hour, which do little to effectively change people's attitudes. And such requests are received two or three times a year.
- Another concern is that public bodies prefer to use consultancy firms who do not have any history of working with the black and minority ethnic sector to carry out cultural awareness and anti-racism training, rather than obtaining services from experienced facilitators and existing community service providers.
- Very few public bodies have taken an interest in, or made any efforts in understanding and applying their understanding of, Muslim culture and traditions.
- Al-Nisa has produced an information pack entitled 'Muslim Culture and Traditions' but only 200 organisations and individuals have bought the pack so far. Only one or two libraries in Northern Ireland have actually bought the information pack; as a result, Al-Nisa's educational information is failing to reach the general public.
- Al-Nisa would like to see a more genuine commitment to consulting with and providing feedback to them.
  - Participants recalled how a consultation session organised by a Government Department was cancelled without notice and no one has contacted Al-Nisa since about a future date for the consultation.
- Muslim women feel discriminated against and they are treated like second class citizens.
  - It is not unusual for people to look at them as if they are strange creatures. They often do not feel welcome and even when they try to make conversation, they are often ignored.
  - Participants related that wherever they go, they are inevitably asked when they are going back home, whether they really want to stay in Northern Ireland and why they want to stay in this country. They find that rather insulting and their children (who have not lived in any other country but Northern Ireland) feel doubly hurt.
  - It is also the case that Muslim women, children and young people are often abused and that abuse is worse in segregated housing areas. Participants said they seldom are able to walk outside without being harassed or verbally abused.

- In the words of one participant: “When we cover our heads, we are either stupid or terrorists.”
- There are many needs of Muslim women which remain unmet and participants said they feel “vulnerable”.
  - Hospitals and schools need to accept responsibility for providing appropriate services, for example, for halal food to be made available for Muslim people. And then, even when instructed, the need to provide a balanced diet is not considered . At best, the patient or pupil is offered a vegetarian diet and sometimes even those diets are not suitable because of contamination with ingredients which are not halal.
  - Schools continue not to recognise the need for pupils to fast during Ramadan.
  - Hospitals also do not provide the specific care needs required by Muslim patients in an effective, co-ordinated or consistent manner.
  - One participant related how when a female doctor was requested for, she was made to wait for two hours and then an interpreter was brought along to her. She had not required an interpreter as she could speak English. As a result, the appointment was delayed and she had to make a further appointment.
  - Another participant said that in asking for an interpreter, no one checked with her as to what language she spoke. The doctor contacted the Indian Community Centre and a Hindi interpreter was summoned to interpret for the woman who happened to be an Arabic speaker!
- Al-Nisa had to choose to be located in the Stranmillis area in Belfast even though the rent is high because they feel safer in this area in South Belfast and funders and service providers must be aware that location is highly important to consider when delivering services to Muslim women.

**Q1. What is your vision of Northern Ireland in twenty-five years?**

Participants’ vision of Northern Ireland in twenty-five years included the following:

- Everybody has equal access to services, employment, training and education (primary, secondary and tertiary) and experience equality of treatment and outcome from those services.
- Northern Ireland is recognised as a multi-cultural society.

- Northern Ireland is more progressive in a positive way for all aspects of society and has created an environment that is welcoming to all.
- There is not just tolerance but understanding, respect, appreciation and enjoyment of other people's cultures.
- There is public recognition that black and minority ethnic people have contributed a lot to Northern Irish society, ie, that black and minority ethnic people in general and Muslim people in particular are "not just here to take".
- Black and minority ethnic people are not dismissed as unsuitable for a particular job just because of their religion, their ethnic origin or their colour.
- Northern Ireland will have minority ethnic politicians including minority ethnic women politicians who truly understand the needs of all minority ethnic people including Muslim women. Those people should be people who do not want to advance their personal agendas.

## **Q2. What do we need to do to get to that vision?**

In order to get to that vision, participants believed that the following must happen:

- The majority ethnic people living in Northern Ireland must learn to recognise the contributions made by black and minority ethnic people. Participants suggested that a book documenting the contributions made by black and minority ethnic people to different aspects of life in Northern Ireland will be a welcome project as such a publication will contribute to promoting a higher visibility of minority ethnic communities in NI in civic, political, social and economic life.
- Employer organisations must develop and implement ethnic monitoring in order to ensure that there is appropriate representation of black and minority ethnic people within their workforce and at different levels of the workforce.
- Service providers must also develop and implement ethnic monitoring to ensure that the services they provide are culturally-sensitive to a range of needs and that they are reaching the people who need them and that minority ethnic people are not discriminated against in terms of service provision.
- All employer organisations must take steps to provide training on Muslim culture and traditions and on anti-racism for all their staff and for all their staff to be made aware of the specific needs of Muslim women.

- ❑ All employer organisations must put in place affirmative action measures to encourage Muslim women to apply for jobs.
- ❑ There is a need for all types of religious education in schools to include teaching and examination about the Islam religion.
- ❑ There is a need for intercultural and anti-racism education in schools so that children and young people are aware of their prejudices and learn to accept and value cultural diversity. Participants said that young people are the future of Northern Ireland and, therefore, it is essential for them to be properly instructed.
- ❑ There is a need for the Department of Education to consult with Al-Nisa about the revision of the national curriculum.
- ❑ There is a need for proactive steps to be taken to ensure that there is gender balance within all decision-making processes.
- ❑ There is a need to mainstream 'race' equality into all Government policy- and decision-making.
- ❑ There is a need for acknowledgement that English language is the language adopted by most first generation black and minority ethnic people living in Northern Ireland. One way of demonstrating that acknowledgement is for the majority ethnic population, in interviewing and consulting with minority ethnic communities, to avoid colloquialism.
- ❑ There is a need for funding bodies and employer organisations to move away from looking for key phrases and words in application forms filled in by minority ethnic people. The same principle should apply to situations where people are interviewed.
- ❑ There is a need for tailor-made capacity building programmes for minority ethnic and for Muslim women.
- ❑ There is a need for the Housing Executive to take steps to recognise the existence of racial harassment and understand the cultures and situations of black and minority ethnic people so that people are not put at risk when allocated to areas unsafe for them and to take action quickly when harassment takes place.

### **Q3. Who should deliver it?**

Participants felt that all individuals and all organisations should have a role in delivering the vision. They also believed that organisations, particularly government departments, should be able to contribute considerably to making the vision a reality if they take on board the comments made in this response.

According to participants, the body charged with delivering the vision should be an independent body fashioned in much the same way as CRC but more approachable, more flexible and more understanding of minority ethnic issues.

Participants were of the view that the Board and staff of the new organisation must have representation from different religious and racial backgrounds. It would be essential for that representation to be drawn from people who are aware of minority ethnic issues rather than selecting any minority ethnic person or any person of different religious belief.

Participants said that activities need to be monitored and reviewed annually and for that monitoring information to be provided in accessible and comprehensible language and formats, eg, other world or community languages, Braille, audio, etc.

It was also the opinion of participants that the community relations officers in District Councils need to be informed about black and minority ethnic communities and the issues that affect their lives and local councils should have the same responsibility for funding local minority ethnic communities as they do other local community associations in the wider community.

#### **Q4. How do you think that a new strategy for improving relations ought to be monitored?**

Participants were first asked to consider the examples listed in the consultation document before suggesting any extra indicators. The following are the comments made by participants about the indicators listed:

- Using a decrease in sectarian and racist incidents as an indicator for monitoring improved relations is a good way but not be the only way as this indicator relies on the reporting of incidents and does not take into consideration the manifestation of racism and sectarianism in other ways.
- A decrease in flags and emblems in public places is not necessarily an indicator of improved relations because the hearts and minds of people can remain unchanged and unmoved.
- An increase in shared facilities and services is a more positive approach to monitoring improved relations.
- An increase in integrated education would be a better indicator of improved relations than an increase in mixed housing.

- An increase in tolerance is not an indicator of improved relations. Genuine improved relations involve respect for and enjoyment of cultural diversity.

Participants felt that mixed 'race' marriages are not the solution to improving relations.

They agreed with the other indicators not specifically referred to above and they said they did not have any other indicators to offer.

However, they advised that when developing and agreeing on indicators, steps must be taken to involve the appropriate, knowledgeable minority ethnic people to contribute to this process.

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