

“Understanding Islam and a Challenge to Islamophobia”

Conference organized by FAIR and SAFH, 10 March, 2004

The conference on ‘Understanding Islam and a Challenge to Islamophobia’ was held with the objective of discussing pertinent issues affecting the Muslim community in Britain, the positive contributions they have made, and their integration into British society. The aim of the conference was to initiate dialogue with a view to working towards constructive policies and partnerships with British society. Topics of discussion included the role of the media in its reporting of Islam and Muslims, to address key questions as to why misrepresentations in the media occurs, and ways the media and British Muslims can work together in promoting mutual understanding. Other discussion topics included; challenging stereotypes of Muslim Women and their rights under British family law, and faith based service delivery.

The conference saw attendance from policy makers, journalists, health organisations, and faith based organisations. The purpose of the seminar was to explore case studies and policy issues surrounding the role of women in Islam, institutional Islamophobia, religious discrimination and stereotypes of Islam and Muslims as projected by the media. The conference also raised issues of the negative impact Islamophobia continues to have on the mental and social well-being of Muslims, and effective means through which these areas can be challenged.

The Conference got underway under the Chairmanship of Elizabeth Bayliss, Director, Social Action for Health (SAFH). In the first session three papers were presented as follows: “Understanding Islam” by Shaiekh Kahlid Yasin, Islamic scholar from the Islamic Teaching Institute; “Contemporary Muslim Experience in Britain” by Dr. Humayun Ansari OBE, Senior lecturer, Centre for Ethnic Minority Studies, Royal Holloway, University of London; and “Engaging British Muslims as Health Citizens”, by Sr. Shahid Dadabhoy, General Practitioner, Waltham Forest.

Dr. Ansari described the contemporary Muslim experience in Britain and effective ways to challenge Islamophobia. He stressed the importance of developing a deeper understanding of Islam to enable the British communities to be in a *“stronger and more informed position to challenge Islamophobia. This includes reviewing how we interact with colleagues as well as how we develop and deliver services to the mixed community to whom we*

provide services. This will be relevant whether we provide, for example, employment, education, health services, social services, business advice and leisure”

In the second session two papers were presented, namely; “FAIR - Combating Islamophobia and Working Towards a Multi-Faith, Multi-Ethnic Britain” by Samar Mashadi, Director of Projects, Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR), and “Faith Based Service Delivery” by Khalida Khan, Director, An-Nisa Society and Trustee of FAIR.

A further two papers were presented during the third session of the conference, namely; “Challenging Stereotypes about Muslim Women and British Family Law” by Fauzia Ahmad, Research Fellow at Department of Sociology, University of Bristol, and “Can Muslims, Christians, and Jews talk to each other?” by Sidney Shipton OBE, Coordinator at The Three Faiths Forum.

Fauzia Ahmad drew attention to the way that *“the media often failed to make the distinction between Islam as a faith and Muslims as flawed individuals that practice the faith”*. The application of Western concepts to describe non-Western communities often resulted in *‘reductionist stereotypes’*. A key example was the way Muslim women were spoken about as *‘subjects of gendered orientalist and colonial discourses’*. A list of the basic rights of women in Islam was presented in order to challenge stereotypes of Muslim women, such as the right to sexual pleasure within marriage, and the right to participate in public life and independent ownership.

Adding to the general call for more faith-sensitive services, Ms Ahmad highlighted the example of family law. Noting an increase in the numbers of Muslim women seeking Islamic divorces and accommodation of these within British family law, she cited previous work by Sonia Nurin Shah-Kazemi which found that many solicitors were often unaware of the particular needs of Muslims. A new course on Islamic family law for legal professionals run by the Legal Action Group, and to be held at the end of March, would aim to address some of these needs.

Workshops on various themes followed. Some of the issues raised by participants included concerns around religious discrimination, inter-faith dialogue, and faith based service delivery. These highlighted an existing need for further dialogue and a call for similar initiatives linking grassroots organisations with policy-makers.

The conference was very well received. Building on its overwhelming success, FAIR will be holding a series of seminars and workshops to further explore the issues raised and to discuss practical solutions in combating Islamophobia which continues to affect the lives of Muslims.