

# MUSLIM WOMEN IN PRISON

**SECOND CHANCE**  
**FRESH HORIZONS**

A STUDY INTO THE NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES OF  
MUSLIM WOMEN AT HMP & YOI NEW HALL & ASKHAM  
GRANGE PRISONS DURING CUSTODY & POST RELEASE.

## REPORT OF THE PILOT PROJECT

### DECEMBER 2014

(A joint Muslim Hands and HPCA project)

Report written by Sofia Buncy and Ishtiaq Ahmed



Huddersfield Pakistani  
Community Alliance

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## FOREWORD BY THE CHAIRMAN OF MUSLIM HANDS

Muslim Hands is an international charity which strives towards supporting poverty and disaster stricken vulnerable communities in different parts of the world. The charity's international relief work encompasses education, health and housing. It also provides immediate provision of basic life saving relief in parts of the world affected by natural disasters and conflict. This includes a global supply of medicine, clothing, food, fresh water, tools and equipment, and other day to day necessities.

Muslim Hands are equally concerned and aware that support is required to meet the ever changing needs of the community in the UK. We are very pleased to say that in the past year we have been privileged to be able to support and grow the 'Muslim Women in Prison Project' in partnership with the Huddersfield Pakistani Community Alliance (HPCA). The need for this project was based on the fact that Muslim women in prison are not on the radar of the Muslim community and other service providers. This is often a forgotten section of the community. We were alerted to the issue by a number of high profile cases involving Muslim women and the experiences and awareness, shared by our Director for Community Development, Maqsood Ahmed, a former advisor to Her Majesty's Prison Service (HMP).

Muslim Hands and HPCA undertook a pilot project for improved in-depth understanding of issues, challenges and experiences of Muslim women during their custody and post release. HPCA was selected as a partner due to its successful track record of managing sensitive issues within the Muslim community and also its close proximity to HMP New Hall, a women only prison. Our faith in HPCA was not misplaced. The findings from the pilot project are testimony to the care and diligence the organisation has exercised in taking the initiative forward and making it a resounding success.

I commend this report to you. Please study its findings and send us your feedback. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the Governor of HMP New Hall & Askham Grange prisons and her team. I would also like to thank the management of HPCA, particularly the Project Advisor, Ishtiaq Ahmed. Special recognition goes to Sofia Buncy the Project Lead Officer, for her dedication, sensitivity and creative handling of the project.



Syed Lakhte Hassanain  
Chairman of Muslim Hands

DIANE  
PELLEW



## GOVERNOR'S NOTE

As the Governor of HMP & YOI New Hall and Askham Grange I have been very grateful for the pioneering and insightful work that has been undertaken within the current project.

The connections that have been made with Muslim women in custody and the wider community through this project have been excellent. This can only serve to strengthen the support in custody and resettlement work on release that ourselves and our partners undertake with Muslim women across these two female prisons.

I would like to thank both Muslim Hands and the Huddersfield Pakistani Community Alliance for the insight to make contact and take this valuable work forward. It will inform our current and future thinking and will be of interest to other female establishments across the estate.

*Diane Pellew*

Diane Pellew  
Governor of HMP & YOI New Hall and Askham Grange Prisons



## PROJECT BACKGROUND

The trend of Muslim women in prison is something which has come into significance in the UK over the last decade. Some choose not to believe that Muslim women in prison even exist, as the subject is embroiled in stigma, taboo and shame. There is the attitude that these women are 'bad eggs' and should not be discussed or supported, let alone rehabilitated. Unfortunately, among the service providers, there also appears to be a lack of awareness of the socio-cultural norms and sanctions as well as the religious governance that affects the lives of female Muslim prisoners. Thus engagement can often be limited and ineffective.

A significant part of my professional career has involved researching faith based issues and cohesion within the prison service. I was fortunate enough to specialise in the subject of Muslims in prison and also acted as a Senior Government Advisor on this matter. The work I developed stayed with me and the difficult issue of female Muslim prisoners has been on my radar for some time now. Others may not see this group as significant as they are a minority group and of course, the issue of Muslim men in prison continues to over shadow that of their female counterparts.

The charity I now work for, Muslim Hands, commissioned the Huddersfield Pakistani Community Alliance to carry out a year long pilot project so that we could ascertain a true reflection of prison life for Muslim females at New Hall & Askham Grange prisons. From the findings, one thing is clear - that the majority of Muslim women undergo a challenging plight in their journey during custody and post prison release. A multitude of issues plague these residents which are detailed extensively in this report.

The ensuing report provides valuable insight into the difficulties, challenges and issues facing Muslim women in their prison and post prison life. Drawing on the learning that the pilot project has provided, the report goes on to make a number of recommendations for authorities and support agencies to address gaps in services.

My sincerest thanks go out to the Huddersfield Pakistani Community Alliance, especially the Project Lead Officer Sofia Buncy who has developed and embraced this piece of work. HMP & YOI New Hall & Askham Grange and also Governor Diane Pellow for her initiative and forward thinking in helping to embed this project.

*M. Ahmed*



Maqsood Ahmed OBE  
Director of Community Development, Muslim Hands

SHAZAD  
HUSSAIN



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From the outset, Huddersfield Pakistani Community Alliance (HPCA) would like to record our acknowledgement to Muslim Hands guided by Maqsood Ahmed OBE. We applaud his vision and courage to address the difficult issue of Muslim women in prison. Maqsood comes from a long and distinguished career in and around the prison service and is extremely aware and alert of the challenges facing Muslim prisoners.

On the same note, the work of this pilot project would not have progressed without the welcomed support of the Governor, Diane Pellew at HMP & YOI New Hall & Askham Grange prisons. There are particular thanks to Susan Field (Reducing Reoffending Manager), Jeanette Gagg, (Equality Officer), Wayne Clayton (Activities/Programmes Custodial Manager), Kazam Hussain (Bail and Legal Services), Joanna Smith (Together Women Project) and the Prison's Chaplaincy for being forthcoming and helpful in their practice.

We are equally indebted to Sofia Buncy the Project Lead Officer whose dedication, hard work and unrelenting persistence has made this project a rewarding and insightful experience. She was greatly supported in the background by our HPCA secretary Aasma Akhtar who we would also like to extend our thanks to.

Finally, HPCA also acknowledges the guiding hand of Ishtiaq Ahmed, our Strategic Policy Development Officer for keeping the project on track.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S. Hussain".

Shazad Hussain  
Chairman of Huddersfield Pakistani Community Alliance



Huddersfield Pakistani  
Community Alliance



## AUTHORS' INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

From the outset we confess that we approached the project with some trepidation. This was due to the lack of available information known about Muslim women in prison and the experiences and challenges they face. Secondly, there is a lot of stigma and taboo surrounding Muslim women in prison. The general view in the Muslim community is that this area is something which needs to be left untouched. Attitudes towards Muslim male and female offenders for whatever reasons are very different. Naturally, we were unsure as to what we may unearth and how this piece of work would be received by the Muslim community.

Equally, due to the challenging nature of the project we were also uncertain as to how our project would embed into the prison service. We were pleasantly surprised by the reception from HMP & YOI New Hall and Askham Grange prison management and their team as well as the Muslim women prisoners in these establishments. This made our journey easier without underestimating the huge challenges that lay ahead around Muslim women in prison.

This report details the work undertaken over a period of 12 months at HMP & YOI New Hall & Askham Grange prisons. It is based on a caseload of 17 Muslim women, detailing their experiences during and post prison release. The report contains case studies, testimonies, the lead worker's observations and demonstrations of the practical support provided. In the process of compiling this report we have tried to be as frank as possible whilst maintaining individual anonymity.

We hope this report will be read and absorbed by the Muslim community so they can begin to address some of the challenges and hardships which Muslim women are experiencing. We need to recognise that our approach and treatment of Muslim male prisoners and their rehabilitation is fundamentally different in comparison. Therefore, the "silent suffering" of Muslim women in and post custody needs to be remedied.

At the same time we hope the report will be a valuable source of information for different providers. We aim to enhance understanding of the issues and barriers facing Muslim women in custody so that providers will be more informed to take into consideration the needs of this specific group. There are gaps in the way facilities, services and rehabilitation programmes are structured which discourage female Muslim inmates from accessing support available.

We would welcome feedback and insight from providers and members of the community.

*Ishtiaq Ahmed*

Ishtiaq Ahmed, Project Advisor



Huddersfield Pakistani Community Alliance

*Sofia Buncy*

Sofia Buncy, Project Lead Officer



Huddersfield Pakistani Community Alliance

# ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUNDS

## MUSLIM HANDS

Muslim Hands is a UK registered charity (Charity Reg. No. 1105056) founded in 1993. The organisation is also an international NGO working in over 40 different countries worldwide with those affected by natural disaster, conflict and poverty. Internationally, Muslims Hands are committed to tackling the root cause of poverty around the world by giving relief from poverty, sickness and embedding educational provision worldwide. Some of their current projects involve establishing safe water schemes, healthcare programmes, food distribution schemes, making provisions for orphan care and livelihood creation schemes.

Muslim Hands' UK programmes support the public's right to a sustainable livelihood and the right to a life of dignity free from poverty, exploitation and oppression. This has been demonstrated through schemes such as educational GCSE booster classes, empowering women through leadership programmes, drug awareness and prisoner rehabilitation programmes, establishing UK food banks and responding to emergencies such as the Somerset floods.

## HPCA

### HUDDERSFIELD PAKISTANI COMMUNITY ALLIANCE

The Huddersfield Pakistani Community Alliance (Charity Reg No: 1140996) was formed in 1997 at the direction of the then Leader of Kirklees Council, Sir John Harman. This was following a report by the University of Huddersfield which highlighted the relative low presence of the Pakistani community in the town's civic life and ad hoc representation in the local decision making processes. Various notable members of the town's Pakistani community were duly invited to embrace the recommendations of the report and agree a way forward. Voluntary Action Kirklees was given resources to support the development process. Subsequently, HPCA was established as a broad based community organisation to 'bridge the gap'.

Under the constitution of the HPCA, the management committee is elected annually. Presently, there are a broad range of people on the committee from backgrounds such as youth work, social work, law, business and education as well as local parents and residents.

The core work of the HPCA falls in to three main categories:

1. Developing community facilities and services aimed at addressing disadvantage and the relief of poverty.
2. Nurturing new community leadership, particularly among young people and Pakistani females and supporting their active participation in designing facilities and services which meet their needs.
3. Addressing the issue of under-representation of the Pakistani community in decision making.

Our current delivery services include youth leadership programmes, junior activity schemes and adult education courses. We are also a director for the North Huddersfield Trust High School based in Huddersfield (further information on our services can be found on our website [www.hpca.org.uk](http://www.hpca.org.uk)).

HPCA has a no nonsense approach to community issues. No issue is too big or too difficult. We are always raising the bar by venturing into areas socially 'tabooed' by the community. The Second Chance-Fresh Horizons project falls into this category. Simply put, the plight of Muslim female prisoners is not recognised or acknowledged within the community or support agencies. For the community, the issue goes unacknowledged and for agencies, the number of Muslim women is too small to merit attention. Therefore, we warmly welcomed the suggestion from Muslim Hands for a pilot project to ascertain the needs of Muslim women in prisons. Particular emphasis was placed on prisoners leaving prisons and their post prison resettlement issues.



# PROJECT RATIONALE

*“For women from some BAME groups, attitudes to offending within families and communities, arising from cultural or religious beliefs, may result in an additional stigma being attached to offending”.*  
(NOMS Women and Equalities Group. March 2012)

*“BAME women are more likely to experience isolation when in prison leading to increased levels of depression but may be less likely to seek help from health care staff”.*  
(Oxford University 06 The Health of Women in Prison)

Muslim women incidentally do not feature much on the radar of the general prison population. Very little is known about the challenges and issues facing these women. Given the growing size of the Muslim population in the UK, it is inconceivable to think there is not a significant percentage of Muslim women in our prisons and custodial centres. The anecdotal evidence from prison visitors and agencies also support this contention.

The fact that so little is known about Muslim women in prisons may be due to the relatively small numbers thus not meriting attention and focus of the community and agencies. It may also be partially due to the failure on the part of the Muslim community to admit to the problem. Whatever the contributing reasons, the fact is that so little is known about the predicament facing Muslim women in both prison and post prison life. The lack of attention and acknowledgment of the issue of course means that Muslim women may be missing out on essential, timely and appropriate support and guidance. This may particularly be the case where Muslim prisoners may be deprived of contact with their families and members of the community, having been left abandoned and cast aside for bringing shame and dishonour to their reputation in the community.

Muslim Hands, the UK based international Muslim charity, commissioned Huddersfield Pakistani Community Alliance (HPCA) to undertake the initial pilot project to assess the scale of the problem and to identify specific areas of need for Muslim women. In particular, HPCA focused upon issues and challenges they envisaged prisoners would have upon leaving prison, specifically upon successful transfer and integration into community life.

**At the time of writing this report, the pilot project is in its 12<sup>th</sup> month of running and therefore this report pulls together findings and key learning for this period.**

Muslim Hands initially funded 7 hours of dedicated work on the project to be led by a senior staff member of HPCA along with project support costs. It soon became apparent that these hours were insufficient, given the complexities of issues entailed and hence Muslim Hands kindly increased the hours to 14 hours per week.

The key aims of the pilot study were:

1. To establish links with the prisons in the area, namely HMP & YOI New Hall and Askham Grange and other support agencies.
2. Establish regular contact with Muslim women in Prison to ascertain their particular issues and sensitivities whilst in prison and upon leaving prison.
3. To explore the Muslim women's need for structured support for re-integration back into the community and the challenges, concerns and issues that may make successful transfer back into the community more difficult.
4. Explore issues around more structured support for integration back into the family, remembering that in some cases this may not be a safe option.
5. To explore the scope for a volunteer based befriending service for women returning back to community life.

From the very outset, we anticipated that in some cases a Muslim female prisoner may not have any degree of relationship with their respective families and would be fearful of backlash from the community on their return. The lead worker's practice was therefore to take each case on its own merit and situation and handle it sensitively and according to need.

## PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The project methodology for the Muslim Women in Prison Project was based on an exploratory framework. Due to the lack of previous data and research on this target audience, there wasn't a great deal of clarity regarding the support required and the existing arrangements for engagement of Muslim women. Hence, the initial findings were applied to tailor a more structured support and rehabilitation programme.

The steps employed for engagement of the project were:

- Meeting with the Governor and her key officers:  
An initial meeting with the Governor of New Hall and Askham Grange Prisons, Diane Pellew was arranged to give information about the pilot project and to explore possibilities for mutually beneficial arrangements for the partnership work. The project's aims and aspirations were positively received - HPCA were greatly encouraged by this.

We were able to demonstrate HPCA's strong community development background as well as targeted work with Muslim women. On the Governor's part, there was recognition that cultural and religious factors do play a strong part in the lives of these prisoners and their rehabilitation. Contributions were also made by Susan Field (Reducing Reoffending Manager) and Jeanette Gagg (Equalities Officer). There was a note that another agency had attempted a similar project but this had not developed enough to make real impact or outcomes.

- Meetings with the Muslim prison Chaplain were arranged to discuss the best way forward in making contact with Muslim women as she already had some established contacts and rapport.
- The Chaplain and lead worker then proposed carrying out two focus groups at the Chaplain's Friday prayers in order to carry out a needs assessment. These were insightful. At first it appeared the females struggled to convey how they may require intervention specific to Muslim women. However, as conversations ensued, issues began to surface such as families not visiting the women in prison, cases of child abduction (sometimes abroad) by ex-spouses, threat of honour killings, and Sharia law issues such as divorce.
- A series of regular visits to New Hall prison for one-to-one case load issues then commenced as the worker was allocated a specific slot at the New Hall 'Drop In' centre for once a month sessions however this soon developed into a once weekly visit due to demand. This allocated space allowed for privacy without interrupting the Chaplain's services on Friday.
- The lead worker managed to mobilise and make contact with services both inside and outside the prison to address the queries of the clients. At New Hall, this meant working closely with the Equalities Officer to make contact with Offender Managers, the Bail and Legal Services Officer, and the mother and baby unit. The lead worker's expertise was also offered to the prison especially with her strong background of community development, cultural knowledge, bilingual skills and funding programme development.

Examples of agencies worked with or contacted have been; Together Women Project, Women in Prison, York Law University, University of Law, various probation services depending on the client's origin/exit, housing associations, social workers, solicitors, counseling services and community organisations. In more complex cases various UK MP's have been contacted as has the Pakistani Embassy and High Commission.

- Post release whether this is bail, licence or Home Detention Curfew has involved home visits, agency referrals, providing the women with emotional/cultural support and a friendly ear on the outside in order to aid effective resettlement. In cases of severe isolation where the resident's family and friends have severed all contact, the lead worker has had to collect clients 'at the gate' and assist with transporting/settling the client at home or them being received in their home town by a support agency.  
Advice and preparation prior to a client's release is a key part of the lead worker's role. This can continue for several months after release.
- This report's findings and recommendations are based on the engagement with Muslim women in prison, conversations with the prison staff, one to one client support and contact and experiences with a range of agencies in the field.

## SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The research sample was made up of 17 residents who came from diverse ethnic and cultural Muslim backgrounds; Indian, Pakistani, Kashmiri, Arab and white British. The majority were British born residents, while some had come to the UK as spouses or on a student visa. A few of the women spoke little or no English at all. The sample also featured 5 converts to Islam. Geographically, the women had come from all over the UK.

There was no correlation between the crimes committed by the overall cohort. However, we did identify a theme of family loyalty and crime, where the female prisoners may have been connected to a crime which is linked with other family members.

The youngest offender was 20 years of age and the oldest 63 years of age. During the life of the project there has been an increase in the number Muslim residents over the age of 50 coming into the establishments. Over half of the sample size had been married at some point but only 2 disclosed still being married while in custody. At least 5 of the residents disclosed they were/had been on methadone treatment for substance misuse.

## SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK AND FINDINGS

Muslim women in prison most often have to overcome additional and exceptional challenges and hurdles in the form of rejection, cultural taboos and forced family/ community isolation. It appears that the Muslim community is more accepting of male prisoners but females are marginalised and labelled as bringing 'shame and dishonour' to the family and community.

Generally, there appears to be no structured support for Muslim women ex-prisoners within support agencies. This is not to say that there are not ad hoc examples of incidental good practice. This may be because Muslim women in prison are a relatively new wave and hence there is not a great deal of information on their particular/specialist needs. The pilot project has already established that some of the women leaving prison have a phenomenal amount of personal issues and feel cut off from their families and in some cases their children. They need dedicated one to one support on self esteem issues, and personal and life development skills. In most cases, there is fear of violence or reprisal from their families for 'shaming' the family name and going to prison.

Muslim women in any particular prison establishment do not come from a particular locality. For example, prisoners placed at New Hall come from all over the country making it more difficult to provide one to one support. Often agency funding criteria dictates who can and cannot be worked with in custody and post release. This was a barrier which we identified with the cohort. We also learned that other community organisations/agencies on the ground are hesitant to help as they lack the time/expertise/resources to provide support to Muslim women ex-offenders. We learned some of this hesitancy also includes the stigma associated with working with this type of client and any work with the offenders is viewed suspiciously and as discrediting to the organisation. More importantly, these organisations lack proper training and resources to make a lasting intervention.

We have found that Muslim women ex-prisoners have a multiple of additional needs with respect to Islamic divorce, inheritance, access to children, legal matters in countries of their origin and immigration status to mention a few. These are complex, sensitive and time consuming issues that require specialist intervention. There is a need for a pro-bono legal system to help give these women awareness of their rights and the support to move on with their lives. Particularly to banish anger and frustration and the feeling that they cannot move on. Ultimately the aim of the project is to reintegrate Muslim women back into society and minimise the risk of reoffending. For this, partnership and commitment is required from allied agencies.

Due to shame, embarrassment, pride and dignity the women are often disowned by their families or relationships are severely fractured and hence there is no or little link when they are in prison. Once they leave the prison, they are often not able to return to their families or their communities for fear of rejection and criticism. This can lead to settlement in areas away from their community and away from guidance and support, going back to loneliness and isolation or a life of crime be it theft or prostitution. In some cases it was discussed that periods of stay at a hostel have also had a negative impact on the Muslim women. They disclose being exposed to drugs, scrutiny and questioning by other residents and sometimes a restless environment where arguments often ensue.

Feedback which we have received from Muslim prisoners relating to their stay at HMP & YOI New Hall or Askham Grange is that overall the women feel safe from any immediate threat within the prison and are settled. Most are able to function on a daily basis. Those Muslim women that are less confident, unaware of the prison system or have poor English language skills are supported by those more able. However, there is fluidity and movement among the women so this support can be lost. The lead officer often received requests to enable facilitation of support via the Equalities Officer; this is understandable as there is only so much support one prisoner can give to another prisoner and in instances to protect breach of confidentiality. 'Language Line' is an interpreting service used by the prison and on

a functional aspect it may meet some basic needs. However, its adequacy and appropriateness can be questioned for mental health assessments, doctors consultations and ACCT\* reviews.

Our research also suggests there are particular and specific issues, concerns and needs for Muslim women in custody. Namely, a sense of isolation and self consciousness among the residents in the pilot scheme regarding their ethnicity and culture. In some cases, this is further reinforced by the lack of English speaking skills especially among the elder prisoners aged over 50 years. Some of them do not have a meaningful conversation with another person for days.

We have also found that the Muslim women are acutely aware of being a minority group. The residents have shared fear of rejection from other prisoners due to lack of understanding and empathy for their cultural and religious needs within the prison. For example some women have discussed that they are fearful to wear traditional shalwaar kameez (cultural clothing) and hijab (headscarf) due to name calling and a sense of drawing attention to themselves. This is as much about self esteem, self consciousness, changing identity as well as the prison culture. This points to the need for more one to one support and group work around identity, considering that some of these women have backgrounds of domestic violence, family control and a culture of gender manipulation and inequality.

The pilot research has discovered there are many hard hitting issues amongst Muslim women prisoners' past lives such as rape, domestic violence, grooming, emotional and physical abuse, and threat of deportation. There is hesitancy for them to discuss this openly with the male Muslim staff or with mainstream service providers. The only reason we can attribute to this is the strong cultural stigma and dishonour of 'the failure of them as a woman'. Feelings of inadequacy, self blame and failure are very prominent. This is symptomatic of the south Asian community where often there is a huge gender inequality. We fear that isolation, self doubt and fear of being marginalised will have dire consequences for the wellbeing of these women in and post prison release. There are examples where women are suffering from low self esteem and depression.

The situation would obviously improve if there were more female officers from the same social/cultural backgrounds or officers who have the necessary skills and understanding of religious, cultural and social norms of these prisoners. The cohort also felt that increased understanding of specific issues around Islam, immigration, child birth in prison and religious festivals and celebrations would be very helpful.

The lead worker's experience seems to suggest that there is a desire and willingness for change amongst the senior management. This may take some time and work to cascade further to ground level officers. The prison management understand the complexity of the issues surrounding Muslim prisoners and empathise that these are not easy to absorb and therefore they have supported this project to understand why there is hesitancy from Muslim women in accessing existing services. We are impressed by the prison management's acknowledgement of the need for continuous advice, support and training.

Our experience of supporting these women indicates a range of needs, some in alignment to those of traditional ex-prisoners but mostly additional and exceptional needs for example:

1. Assistance with explanation of bail and licence conditions. Collection of clients at the gate prior to release.
1. Settling back into the community i.e. help with housing and benefit entitlement and other entitlements.
2. Having someone to talk to on leaving the prison particularly if they choose to move to a new area. Some women do not move back to their towns and cities for the fear of backlash from their parents and community as well as general stigma of having been an offender.
3. Reuniting with their children - in some cases children may be relocated by the family to Pakistan or elsewhere. In other scenarios we have found that some of the prisoners' children have been adopted or fostered and the mothers would like access or visiting rights.
4. Immigration advice and support
5. Reconciliation work with parents and the family.

## PARTICULAR ISSUES

We are of the opinion that the following issues are of importance and need addressing in some capacity. It should be noted that the list is not exhaustive and we have only listed those issues that arose more often than others:

- Rejection by family and breakdown of the family unit.
- Cultural taboos which make acceptance within the family and the community difficult.
- Isolation and rejection.
- English language barriers leading to a lack of basic understanding of prison regimes and systems. This is particularly apparent amongst the older residents and new arrivals. Even very simple things such as how to access the phone, recognition of how to order food and fill in canteen sheets is a mammoth task for some of the women.
- Immigration issues: self and children.
- The majority of cases demonstrate the need for relocation, ultimately leading to unfamiliarity with surroundings.
- Rebuilding self esteem, confidence, re-socialising them as parents, active citizens and as future employees.
- A number of women we worked with were new Muslim converts hence they required support and harnessing in their new found faith and morality in order to remain steadfast and reduce reoffending.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There is already some good work happening in our prisons and our aim is to reinforce and add value to existing good practice. Therefore the following recommended framework is based on feedback from Muslim women in prison, the work undertaken by the project lead officer, and soundings from the prison and other providers:

1. One to one support around facilities and services, rights and entitlements, support with religious and cultural issues and needs and support with building a positive self identity.
2. Arrangements, where possible for mediation intervention for women and their families to reconnect.
3. Strengthening of three way information and communication between the prisoner, the prison and the family. Considering that in many instances the family or the prisoner may not understand the existing arrangements and protocol on or post release, acknowledging that language barriers could be a significant issue in this.
4. Putting in place support structures in different towns and cities so that women moving into these areas can be linked into, welcomed and received in order to reduce isolation and vulnerability.
5. Supporting women to access existing providers and services whilst in prison and then signposting them to local support agencies on release.
6. Helping to establish links within the community and developing social support and social networking.
7. Support with religious and cultural needs.
8. Legal support on a range of issues such as Islamic divorce, immigration matters, child custody/visitation rights, and financial entitlement.
9. Post prison work opportunities for Muslim women. This may mean transferring skills learnt in prison to achieve employability, for example work placement, training and job search/cv development.
10. Explore the possibility of employment for these women within the emerging and growing Muslim business sector.

## SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRISONS

- Information, guidance and training for existing prison staff to enhance their understanding of the complex and often daunting religious, cultural and social norms for Muslim women in prisons.
- For management to give attention to the recruitment of female Asian officers in prisons. These individuals must however be aware of community issues, and at least be bilingual and possess sound community links and partnerships. This will enable the prison to have in-house resources and knowledge on particular sensitive issues and conduct.
- For targeted work to be carried out with the Muslim community to banish stereotypes, negativity and myths about prison life.
- For a long term project to be embedded into several co-operating prisons around Muslim women and their rehabilitation.

## CONCLUSION

We have endeavored to make this report an honest and robust document. We do not expect everyone to agree and endorse all the aspects of the report but we do expect people to give its contents due consideration. The report faithfully records the experiences of Muslim women prisoners at the said establishments along with our observations. It goes on to place a set of issues and challenges at the door step of the Muslim community, whilst at the same time listing a number of points for policy and action for the provider agencies.

We are committed to making this a live document as opposed to allowing it to become dormant. For this, we greatly depend on the goodwill and the leadership support from the Muslim community, HMP establishments, relevant support agencies and the government.

The report clearly highlights the plight of Muslim women in prison and the enormous challenges that they have to overcome during and post prison life. Their situation is further exacerbated and complicated by the lack of empathy for their circumstances in the Muslim community. They are largely blamed, shunned and cast aside. Equally, despite their goodwill, there is no real understanding amongst the support agencies of the religious, cultural and social background from which these women come from or may find themselves in post prison life. This is partly because of the smaller number of Muslim women in custody and hence their needs are not in focus or as clearly understood as other residents. This calls for an integrated programme of awareness, education and training for the community, prison staff and support agencies.

The report highlights many concerns regarding the treatment of Muslim women prisoners and goes on to make some very practical recommendations for action. The report is timely and recommends a sensitive and active approach to rehabilitation of Muslim women to be embraced back into society. The issues and the recommendations for actions mentioned require an urgent and robust action on the part of HMP, the government, support agencies and above all the Muslim community.

# APPENDICIES





# IDENTIFIED ISSUES & NEEDS OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN PRISON

## PRACTICAL

### IMMIGRATION MATTERS

Relating to nationality, home office correspondence, deportation and spouses visa.

### HOUSING & BENEFITS

Resettlement into new areas and practical supports on accessing services.

### CHILD ARRANGEMENTS

Child abduction abroad, child visitation rights, involving social services and working with the prison in cases of a pregnant Muslim resident.

### POOR ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS

Elderly and new arrival residents struggling with accessing services both inside and outside the prison due to a lack of awareness and skills.

### UK DIVORCE

Advice required for prisoners who have been issued divorces from partners and what their rights/eligibility is.

### LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF THE PRISON SYSTEM

Due to the lack of personal & cultural experience of Muslim women in prison, residents sometimes appear to struggle to understand the process, systems & rights they are entitled to.

### LEGAL ADVICE

Lack of pro bono advice around legal issues.

## EMOTIONAL

### SELF ESTEEM/ CONFIDENCE

Generally this has been identified as low amongst the women due to being a minority in the prison. Lack of social contact. Issues of acceptance and a lack of self identity.

### ISOLATION FROM FAMILIES

Due to shame and family dishonor 'Izzat', family and community contact is limited; compared to male Muslim prisoners.

### DOMESTIC ABUSE

Clearly, the majority of women have had severe domestic violence issues from ex-partners. Again this is a taboo subject which they do not speak about comfortably due to shame.

### SELF HARM

Due to the pressure of being in prison, the lead officer and the equalities officer worked to keep careful watch on some women who were practically vulnerable.

### GROOMING

The vulnerability of some pilot cohort was identified when it was noted that several of them have been groomed both sexually and blackmailed to commit crime.

## CULTURAL

### RELIGIOUS & CULTURAL FACTORS

These play a very strong part in the lives of the prisoners. They affect their identity, attitude, belief system, how they relate to others and conduct themselves. The governance and effect of cultural & religious factors can be alien to those not from that particular community & are not always easy to explain.

### SHARIA LAW (ISLAMIC DIVORCE)

The pilot pattern shows that through domestic abuse, a Sharia divorce is used as a hold over the Muslim women as most cannot move on in life until their first husband issues this. The process is lengthy and complicated and years can pass without resolve unless connected to an efficient Sharia agency.

### STIGMA

The cultural concept that the Muslim prisoners have brought shame & dishonor on their own dignity, family & community by being committing a crime & being imprisoned. The likelihood of this ever being forgotten or forgiven is slim and any self respecting family will avenge this with drastic measures.

### DISCRIMINATION

The prisoners have discussed discrimination from within their own community largely from males. They have also touched on the prison raising more awareness about their culture and religion so other residents and officers are more aware and refrain from stereotyping and misconceptions.

### COMMUNITY BACKLASH

There is an obvious differential attitude and treatment of Muslim female prisoners from the wider community.

### FORCED MARRIAGE

Appears to be a reoccurring theme in most cases and in some the officer has found a contributing factor to the crime committed. Some women have expressed they have felt unwanted by partners, others controlled through abuse, blackmail and neglect. Whatever the case, most women are told by families and community to 'tolerate and make the marriage work'.

## TESTIMONIES FROM MUSLIM WOMEN PRISONERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

*"Being pregnant and in prison has been so challenging. I have family on the outside and I know I have brought shame on them and my husband abroad by simply being in here let alone pregnant and in prison! There's stigma and discrimination and gossip on the outside and that's going to have a massive effect on my child and me. If you're not from this culture you're not going to get it at all. I don't want my child to be bullied for the rest of their life and called a 'prison baby' that's why I need to get the baby out to my family. They don't get that I love my baby and that's why I'm doing this. They don't get that when I'm released their duty stops at the gate but I get another sentence from the community and that lasts forever!*

*Since the Muslim Women in Prison project has started working with me I feel like you have raised my voice and now I'm heard. You explain stuff in a way that I can't and now the Officers get why my baby's move is so important to me. I feel like I'm heard and I see progress".*

(Resident supported with child placement)

### TESTIMONY TWO

*"I have been in prison a while now, this isn't my first time and I know the system. From what I have seen of the Muslim Women in Prison project you bring people together. Not all of these lot speak English but that's okay because you speak Punjabi and Urdu and gel everybody together. That's so important especially for the elderly aunties because they can't speak English at all! They don't have a clue what's going on, they are like sheep, they go where they are told. They can relate to you since you're from the same culture and religion and you know what our issues are and about shame and honour.*

*It gets so depressing in here at times but you give us encouragement, tell us its okay and that we will have a second chance and not to listen to what the Asian men in the community have to say. You bring out issues that we know other people won't understand like domestic violence, past relationships, drugs, grooming all that stuff none of our Asian lot want to talk about and how would we ever explain that to a non-Asian?...But you get it.*

*It helps that you don't work directly for the prison either so there's no politics. We can trust you. You know people too, like with Eid you went out and spoke to other charities and got us those gift packs. You really try for us. You care. That's why my family trust you to do the right thing for me".*

(Residents feedback)

### TESTIMONY THREE

*"You are my breath, I can't speak good English and you have helped to break down language barriers and deal with difficult matters like my immigration case. You speak Punjabi and that reminds me of my family back in Pakistan and my community and identity. I feel happy and joyful when you come to visit because nobody else comes to see me. We talk about things and when I'm nervous and upset you give me consolation and direction. It's more your character, you're reliable and you relieve pressure and give direction".*

(Prisoner with poor English speaking skills and immigration problems)

TESTIMONY  
FOUR

*"My husband abducted my children while we were in Pakistan eight years ago and I haven't seen them since. When you first came to work at the prison some of the people in here were sceptical you could help but I just had this feeling about you and that's why I gave you my contact details. When I was released you couldn't contact me by phone because I changed my number. I always thought I would call you coz I had your leaflet but I was in a real mess. Then one day I saw you park up outside my house and I was shocked. Who does that for anybody? You came to find me and I knew it was a sign from God.*

*I am completely alone and you have relieved my stress by just talking to me. You're from my background and it's easy for me to talk to you and you have given me hope. You have made so much progress politically for me to get my children back and I know I could have never done this on my own. I look back and think I used to have so many plans for my future, I wanted to be a doctor and look where I ended up!"*

(Post release support)

TESTIMONY  
FIVE

*"Our daughter is in prison and a lot of the time it is hard for us to work out what is going on with her. There are so many people involved in her case like Offender Managers and Probation and all these names and half of the time we don't know who to speak to or how. It's so confusing because nobody in the family has been to prison before let alone a girl - there's big shame in that and I spend a lot of time crying over this because who will want to marry her now? You have helped us to understand who plays what role and have given us the correct and accurate information by contacting people yourself. You're the bridge between us and the prison - you come from the same culture and religion so when you speak to us you give that angle and we don't feel like you have a hidden agenda".*

(Feedback from parent of a prisoner)

TESTIMONY  
SIX

*"I'm a drug user. I have been for a few years but I'm trying to change. My boyfriend got me hooked on and I was young and I got caught up and now I can't get out. Nobody tells you that bit. I've lied to my family so many times, said I will change and broken promises. Now they don't want anything to do with me because they don't trust me. I have lost their respect and made them look so little in front of the community. One of my parents is really ill right now and I don't want them to die without us patching things up. I won't be able to live with myself but how do I change when everybody has written me off?"*

(Resident who is undergoing substance misuse treatment)

میری یہ عمر جیل میں گزارنے کی نہیں تھی۔ ساری زندگی  
بچوں اور رشتہ داروں کی دیکھ بھال میں گزر گئی۔

آخری عشر میں یہ دن بھی دیکھنے کو نصیب میں آئیں۔  
ایک تو یہ جیل خانہ اور دوسرا لوگوں کی برنامی اور رسوائی۔  
پتہ نہیں اللہ میاں نے کن گناہوں کی سزا دی۔

اس پاگل خانے میں دن اور راتیں بڑی مشکل سے گزرتی ہے۔  
یہاں تو کسی سے بات چیت کرنا بھی مشکل ہے۔ انگٹش تو میں  
بولتی نہیں دوسروں سے کیسے بات کرو سکوں۔

دوسری پاکستانی عورتوں کے پاس وقت کہاں۔  
اُن کے اپنے ڈکھ ہیں۔ اُن کے پاس فرسٹ ہی نہیں۔

مجبوری سے بات کرتی ہوں۔

تیرا انتظار رہتا ہے توں کب آئے گی۔

توں ہفتے میں ایک دو بار آ جایا کرو۔ مجھ سے بات  
کرنے سے سکون ملتا ہے۔ اب تو میں مرنے کے دن  
گن رہی ہوں۔ پتہ نہیں اللہ کو کیا منظور ہے۔

At my age I should not be in prison, I spent all my life taking care of my children and relatives. Now in the last years of my life I have to experience this.

Besides being in prison, I deal with shame and humiliation from people. I don't know what sins Allah (God) is punishing me for.

My days and nights pass with great difficulty in this asylum; it's difficult to talk to anyone. I don't speak English so how am I to communicate with others?

The other Pakistani women have their own problems; they don't have time to talk to anyone. They only talk when pushed.

I wait for you (Project Officer) to visit. You should come a few times a week. When I talk to you I feel relaxed. I am now counting my final days- I don't know what Allah has planned for me.

(63 year old, non English speaking resident)

# CLIENT CASE STUDY 1

## PRISONERS NAME: PRISONER Z

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Prisoner Z was imprisoned following a sham marriage charge. She claims one of her cousins from Pakistan tried to submit a case as her spouse and forge documents to this effect.

Overall Prisoner Z's case is very complicated. Her husband was murdered a year ago in Pakistan. She had separated from him long before due to an abusive and controlling relationship. She claims to have been physically abused, starved and confined over several years in Pakistan while with him. The husband's mother actively aided and abetted violence against her too.

Prisoner Z comes from a strict Pathaan family background where the family code required her to stay with her husband to make this arranged marriage work in order to avoid shame and dishonour. No longer able to suffer the abuse, she came back to England and her children - a male now aged 10 and female now aged 11 were abducted from her. Prisoner Z says the last time she saw them was at ages four and five years. She has asked for assistance from various local MPs and Councillors. The progression with the case is very slow. To exacerbate the situation, the children's British passports have expired.

Generally, the case is riddled with complications such as no death certificate for the Prisoner Z's husband. Both children are kept at separate locations in Pakistan and previous attempts to transfer them to the British Embassy have failed due to police being 'paid off' by her now demised husband and his family. Occupationally, Prisoner Z's husband was a freelance assassin, not uncommon in Pakistan, and inevitably he had powerful links in the crime world and the law fraternity.

The state of play in the UK is Prisoner Z is based in Yorkshire and has no contact with her parents. This stems from her shaming the family name by leaving her husband. There is tokenistic contact with one of her siblings. Overall, she professes she would like her children back to the UK so she can begin her life and move on.

### CHALLENGES OF THE PROJECT

Post release the lead officer failed to make successful contact with prisoner Z on the three separate mobile numbers or the email she gave while in custody. The officer sought confirmation from Prison Chaplaincy that she had in fact been released. There was concern from the officer's part as the resident appeared desperate for help hence giving three separate mobile numbers. After discussions with management the officer went escorted with another colleague to prisoner Z's house. It appeared the lack of mobile phone credit and inability to afford internet meant that prisoner Z was uncontactable. She was genuinely overwhelmed that the project officers had come to look for her. She was alone, unsupported and despite approaching local women's organisations had limited success in addressing her personal issues.

### PRACTICAL SUPPORT GIVEN TO THE CLIENT BY THE PROJECT

To date seven home visits have been carried out to the client's residence over the 10 months since release. During this period we have achieved the following:

1. Assisted in helping the client fill in and achieve a home carer as she had an operation soon after release. She currently resides alone and the operation has induced mobility issues.
2. Renewed the client's British passport at the cost of Muslim Hands.
3. Liaised with the client's former solicitor to assess the situation with regards to retrieving her children from Pakistan and the legality of this. The obvious struggle being the lack of funds to pay for any more legal representation.
4. Had the client's ex-husband's First Information Police Report which outlined his murder in Pakistan, translated and certified from Urdu to English. This had to be done as nobody was willing to provide us a copy of his death certificate despite our extended team's efforts in Pakistan. Again, this was at the cost of Muslim Hands. An FIR report would work towards proving her as the surviving parent.
5. Assisting in facilitating and attending several meetings with the local MP and his office so we could collectively liaise with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Consequently they signposted us to seek help from the British High Commission in Islamabad and a local lawyer in Pakistan.
6. We are currently corresponding and making a plea with the Pakistani High Commission to give attention and assistance in this case so the client can be reunited with her children.

## CLIENT CASE STUDY 2

### PRISONERS NAME: PRISONER S

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Prisoner S was a pregnant resident who was in the early stages of her pregnancy when she first starting accessing our service. Her concern was that she did not want her baby to be born in the prison and kept at the Mother and Baby unit after delivery. Her reasons for this were she did not want the baby to carry the stigma, shame and dishonour of being a 'prison baby'. She emphasised that she did not mind being punished for a crime, but it would be totally unfair for her baby to suffer from bullying and taunts from the wider community for the rest of the child's life. Prisoner S emphasised that her Pakistani community would never forget the mistake of being in prison and even worse, having a prison baby. The thinking behind this is that a prison is an immoral place which houses undesirable elements of society and any association with this also stains your character. Any amount of time spent in this environment will have a lasting impact and stain on ones character. i.e once bad, always bad.

For these reasons, Prisoner S wanted her baby to be born outside of the prison and immediately given to her mother who would then take care of the child until the resident's release. The Offender Manager genuinely had concerns about the ability and the motivation of the grandmother assuming the role of guardianship. It was felt that the prisoner's decision was greatly influenced by her mother and she was more of a controlling influence. Another concern was if the child was removed from the mother this would prevent an effective mother-baby bond from developing. At the time of the lead officer's intervention, these discussions were ongoing but the resident felt that she was not being listened to and her points about cultural stigma and religious requirements were not being understood.

Taking on board the complexity of agency concerns and residents needs the lead officer contacted the Equalities Manager to give community and wider perspective to these concerns. The officer made it clear that the resident's concerns were not unfounded or exaggerated and that the officer would be happy to mediate between the resident's family, Offender Manager and officers to find a happy medium recognising that there were genuine concerns on all sides.

The lead officer facilitated communication along with the Equalities Officer and Offender Manager in order to explain the prisoner's concerns and the context in which these were stated. At the same time the officer took on board the Offender Managers concerns and offered to speak to the resident's family to put forward the prison's concerns and to enable them to take these on board and address them. As a result of this, the following steps were taken towards the final arrangements of the baby's birth and placement:

- The lead officer was kindly shown around the prison's Mother and Baby unit by the Equalities Manager at the prison. The resident was also shown this facility on a separate occasion to put her mind at ease regarding the quality of the facility. The offer to be 'shown around' was also given to the resident's mother.
- The resident declined the facility not on the basis of the service but because her own anxiety and concerns stated above proved to be an overriding factor. The lead officer supported the resident in her preparation to present her reasons and her case to the Mother and Baby unit Manager. Facilitated by the Equalities Officer she was able to do this.
- As further conversations ensued, it came to light that the resident may be eligible to transfer to an open prison facility where she might feel more relaxed and different towards having her baby placed with her. It also gave other options such as if the baby was placed with the prisoner's mother then there was the option that the child could have overnight stays with the mother and their bonding could be facilitated without the baby being a permanent resident at the prison.
- The resident was apprehensive about the move. She did not understand the motivation behind it and was suspicious about what was being suggested. The lead officer worked with the resident to alleviate her concerns regarding prison transfer, and the fact that this was not designed to side step her request. Following this a successful transfer took place once the resident and her mother understood the bigger picture.
- Whilst at the open prison, the lead officer was able to engage the support of the Barnardos family worker, the Mother and Baby unit Manager to convey Prisoner S's concerns. A wider meeting was organised which was attended by the afore mentioned, the Assistant Governor, lead officer and colleague as well as the project link officer from Muslim Hands who was formally the Senior Government Advisor for Muslim Chaplaincy at the HM Prison Service. The meeting gave the resident the opportunity to share her concerns but also seek guidance on religious requirement regarding child birth.
- Eventually, the baby was born in an outside hospital and placed with its grandmother. Subsequently, a few weeks later, the resident had completed her sentence and rejoined her child.
- The lead officer continued to support the ex-resident on her rehabilitation for example accessing benefits, searching for employment and immigration matters. As a result of this Prisoner S has now successfully obtained full time employment.

The key elements of the lead worker's input were, facilitating communication between the resident, HMP providers and the family of the resident. The officer also helped to clarify the religious and cultural concerns the resident had about the birth of her baby. Inevitably this built Prisoner S' awareness of the process as well as self esteem, trust and the confidence required to negotiate a successful outcome facilitated by the prison staff.

## THANK YOU LETTERS

Dear Sofia, Uncle Magsood and Shah Saab

I have finally been released from prison and I would like to say a massive thankyou from the bottom of my heart for the help that Sofia and muslim hands gave me while I was in prison. Because of your visits, advice and unrelenting support we were able to arrange for my unborn daughter to be placed with my mother at home at the time of birth while I completed my sentence.

Because of you my daughter did not get the stigma of being a prison baby. Her izaat is now safe. It was me that made the mistake not my baby! Please continue to support muslim women in prison. Do not forget us as the community already writes us off for the mistakes we have made.

If Allah forgives I'm sure we can too as humans.



I am indebted to you,  
you will always be in my  
duas.



## THANK YOU LETTERS

TO, MUSLIM HANDS

AssalamuAlaikum

Hope you are well.

All the Muslim Sisters here at  
HMP New Hall would like to  
Thank You all at Muslim Hands.  
For your support and for thinking  
of all the Female Prisoners  
on Eid.

The Eid packs were very nice,  
everyone liked them and most  
importantly they were much  
appreciated by us all.

By being remembered by our Muslim  
brothers and sisters @ Muslim Hands  
we felt accepted, after all the  
hardship we are going through  
and by being in Prison.

Being in prison as an Asian Woman,  
is very difficult especially with  
the stigma that is attached within  
our Asian Communities.

We hope Allah forgives  
us all for our mistakes  
and be accepted back into  
our communities.

Thank You for all your  
Love and Support.

Resident of HMP New Hall



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