

## **Educational Opportunities for Muslim Girls in Britain**

*NIGHAT MIRZA*

When an ordinary girl from a subcontinent family enters a mainstream school she moves into an environment that is alien to her. There is a big gap between the system of the home and that of the outside world. It will take a lot of adjustment to understand and adapt to the new surroundings. This will inevitably leave an impression on her mind which will put pressure on her abilities and potential. The first generation who arrived here three decades ago had to struggle physically and cognitively to adjust to this new and strange style of living which was so very different to their cultural traditions and religion. When our parents and grandparents speak of their experiences they show sadness and hurt in their facial expressions; a child of five or six, though, cannot explain *their* feelings. They are left with permanent scars and weighty memories in their subconscious which may have profound effects on their future.

The unfortunate situation we are now in is that a large section of the Muslim community has spent most of its energy in the process of earning basic needs and has not, until relatively recently, thought about or even felt the need to educate their daughters so that they can be equipped for a better future. To facilitate this, not only individual but also collective effort is needed.

However, Muslim parents, instead of providing such educational facilities, have not even encouraged their girls towards that goal. These parents were the victims of the system. They have been caught in the current of the stream; many have drowned while only a few have survived to reach the river bank. It is those survivors who have, due to hard work and the use of intelligence given by *Allāh*, managed to think logically and sensibly in order to fathom the correct path to achieve the desired aim.

Most Muslims in Britain, instead of being determined to encourage and praise their daughters for their achievements, instill a strange fear in their minds. From the time of their first tentative steps outside the home these girls are made to feel that the education they will receive is going to harm them, as if there are unknown factors and forces which they will be unable to comprehend. As a result, the girls feel fearful and afraid and thus dread entering the system. This trepidation does not allow the space and freedom to develop as a strong, appreciative Muslim girl who can look, listen and praise *Allāh* for the beauty and delight which captivates the eye, ear and mind.

The Muslim community in Britain has set up many organisations under political, religious and professional umbrellas. However, there are very few organisations in existence which actually encourage positive thinking and guidance.

Mosques and *madrasahs* are set up in terraced house to give instruction to our youngsters but, sadly, due to a lack of any educational training, few basic resources and a limited knowledge of English (which does not meet with the expectations of children born and brought up in Britain), the teachers' expertise is neither acknowledged nor appreciated by the pupils. There is a practical reinforcement of their inferiority complex and the pupils cannot relate to their teachers and *madrasahs* when compared with the relatively high standard of the facilities in the state education system. This initiates and catalyses the lack of interest in their Islāmic studies; any learning that does take place under the sorry conditions of most *madrasahs* is often short-lived and is either easily forgotten or is put to that back of the child's mind and regarded as simply not worth remembering.

Such thoughts as these are expressed by young teenage girls when they are provided with an informal atmosphere, frank, open and free discussion can take place. These

youngsters ridicule the *madrakah* system and cannot find anything positive to be gained from it.

I feel that Muslim parents, no matter which part of the world they come from, need to move away from a third-world, third-grade mentality and begin to think in a positive, dynamic missionary way that is truly Islāmic. Such parents want to give a good education to their girls using modern methods and tomorrow's technology. They need to provide facilities which are of the highest standard, a pure environment reflecting the Islāmic way of life and teaching staff who are familiar not only with religious knowledge but also politics and world affairs.

The Muslim *Ummah* should make a new start and, instead of creating new issues for themselves, should expend energy, effort and money in an organised manner to obtain moral support and economic help from society at large.

The establishment of a Muslim school on a small scale does not solve the whole problem: from a population of two million Muslims, the fact that a few hundred girls obtain GCSEs or A-levels is not a great achievement. Such results (although individually commendable) are a drop in the ocean and do not even begin to address the task in hand.

In the past, many protests and meetings have been held but still, in the whole country, British Muslims have yet to run just one girls' school to its full potential so that it can serve as an example to all. In Britain it is hard to count even ten Muslim women of whom we can truly be proud for their achievements.

The time has come for Muslims to realise the need to educate girls but the message will take time to sink in: many Muslim parents still only want their daughters to stay at school until the statutory age of 16. However, in the not-too-distant future even GCSE and A-level qualifications will be considered a mere stepping-stones to good education. Is it not possible for a few Muslims in Britain to come forward and give female education the status of *jihād* so that the enormous gap existing at the moment can be bridged? This should be an issue discussed by *Imāms* in all mosques.

For Muslim girls it is essential to have single-sex schools and, more importantly, Muslim schools providing a stable Islāmic ethos if they are to receive a truly good education. Good quality Muslim schools must be established in cities which have a sizeable Muslim community. The building should be of a good enough standard to match those in the mainstream of education; Muslims and non-Muslims alike should be satisfied that the infrastructure of the Muslim schools make it possible for them to provide the best for their pupils.

Parents must be convinced that it is not only a requirement of English law to educate girls but also of Islām itself. Our inspiration should be the saying of Prophet Muḥammad (peace and blessings be upon him): "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim."<sup>1</sup> 'Muslim' in this case refers to both male and female.

We need dedication and determination. Without such commitment it is difficult to achieve first-class facilities. Let us work towards the future of our nation and invest in our children.

In England, most of the Muslim schools (of which there are only a handful, perhaps 44 or so) are in converted accommodation. There are, therefore, immediate limitations on what they can achieve. Despite such limits, though, progress has been made. These prototypes give direction and guidance to other schools so that they can expand, develop and improve on the existing model. By building on this foundation we can accomplish our main aim, that is, to provide the best education for our young girls within the guidelines of Islām. Muslim schools do not offer the dimension of religion alone; they foster strong faith, moral values, a sense of responsibility for the family unit and confidence in individual girls to participate as full and equal members of society.

In such institutions Muslim girls are encouraged to express their religious convictions

without fear and they set a positive example. They have given young girls confidence so that by the time they leave school they are good judges of right and wrong, not only on a superficial level but also with a deeper appreciation of life and its aims. There is within Muslim schools and environment where the extension of knowledge makes them aware of and appreciate the existence of *Allāh*.

At the moment, Muslim girls' schools cater only for students up to the age of eighteen. There is a need for single-sex colleges of further and higher education which will provide an environment where ex-pupils of Muslim schools can progress and excel. Parents of pupils who attend Islāmic schools are satisfied with those schools, and the Muslim community is confident that the present position can be improved with additional financial support and further personal involvement of community members.

Muslim schools encourage academic achievement so that students will have solid qualifications to pursue suitable careers and girls have opportunities to study all subject areas in order to broaden their experience. Most Muslim schools have a purpose-built laboratory to cater for science subjects, and it never ceases to amaze that many non-Muslims have reached the conclusion that a Muslim school will be unable to offer science to the students. This is despite the fact that a study of history reveals that Islām has promoted knowledge in all spheres, especially science. *Alḥamdulillāh*, our students tend to do well in this area of the curriculum.

English is important in Muslim schools and is the main language of communication. Students should be encouraged to master the language and study it in depth to examination level. Literature should be taught up to A-level standard. Arabic, French and Urdu can also be taught so that students can communicate well and develop qualities of tolerance and acceptance of diversity. It is great to see positive achievements in these subjects. Students attending Muslim schools come from diverse cultural backgrounds and are multilingual; this enriches the school and strengthens the bond of sisterhood in Islām.

The teaching of Islāmic history in a positive way tries to undo much of the damage done by stereotyped teaching which has in the past depicted Islām as the 'religion of the sword'. Such teaching has left embarrassment and shame on Muslims and so our schools can do much to encourage probing study for a balanced picture of history, thus enhancing self-esteem.

Islām emphasises physical education and in a Muslim school students feel confident and take part in these activities enthusiastically.

With such a broad curriculum to follow our girls have a sense of educational achievement which their mothers share and enjoy with pride.

In spite of all the limitations and hardships, Muslim schools have undoubtedly accomplished much. Their communities praise *Allāh, subḥānahu wa ta'alā*, for giving them the strength to initiate this process. Parental involvement is often 100%, unlike in many state schools. This is because the parents identify with the Islāmic ethos of the school and can thus blend into the school environment with ease. They participate in fund-raising functions to raise funds for the school and other worthy causes. This develops the sense of unity that we must care for others as part of a global society.

There are obvious opportunities for exchange visits between Muslim schools and for educational trips to museums and suchlike. Again, parents often give their full support for this; consultation meetings, 'Īd parties and other Islāmic celebrations serve to strengthen the bonds between home and school.

Although the state schools provide up-to-date technology, without a sense of belonging and peace of mind, active learning cannot take place. Muslim schools provide such an environment and there are fewer pressure on the girls to conform to different standards of 'normality'.

The provision of educational opportunities for Muslim girls is a vitally important issue.

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I believe that the Muslim *Ummah* has the means and ability to provide such facilities. May *Allāh* help us to do so and grant us success. *Āmīn*.

REFERENCES

1. *Sunan Ibn Majah* and *Mishkat Al-Masabih*.