



**THE APPG ON BRITISH MUSLIMS'
INQUIRY INTO THE BRITISH MUSLIM
RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

Muslim engagement
& development

mend

The APPG on British Muslims' inquiry into the British Muslim Response to COVID-19

A Submission from Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND)

July 2020

MEND's contribution to the inquiry

This submission from Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) to the APPG on British Muslims' inquiry into the British Muslim Response to COVID-19 seeks to explore the contributions that have been made by Muslim communities, individuals, and organisations throughout the course of the pandemic.

MEND is a community-funded organisation that seeks to encourage political, civic, and social engagement within British Muslim communities through empowering British Muslims to interact with political and media institutions effectively. Our approach to achieving this involves a combination of community engagement (through education, community events, local campaigns to encourage voting etc.) and advocacy work (involving victim support, submissions to parliamentary inquiries, media analysis, election resources, briefings etc.).

Considering the often-overlooked nature of Muslim contributions to our society, MEND hopes that this submission may contribute to rebalancing public and political narratives that frequently present Muslims as a problematic social group. Within this submission, our aim is to provide insight into both the contributions of Muslims to frontline services and the work of MEND and its volunteers in supporting national and local efforts.

Muslim Responses to the Crisis

Studies have shown that, with 21 negative references to Muslims within the British press for every single neutral or positive reference,¹ the media plays an integral role in spreading prejudice, stereotypes, and xenophobic views of British Muslims. These negative representations of Muslims are incredibly detrimental to community cohesion and the subsequent ability of British Muslims to fully participate and engage as equal members of society.

In conducting a discourse analysis on over 200,000 newspaper articles from 11 newspapers mentioning "Islam" or "Muslims", a study by Paul Baker, Tony McEnery, and Costas Gabrielatos highlighted the frequency with which Muslims and Islam were associated with conflict, with "Islam" and "terror" co-occurring in more than one-third (37.9%) of the texts analysed. This led to the authors concluding that "[the] most salient finding is that the British Press most frequently positions Islam and Muslims in stories or contexts that relate to conflict".² Similarly, another study by Cardiff University found that the bulk of coverage on British Muslims was focussed on "Muslims as a threat (in relation to terrorism), a problem (in terms of differences in values) or both (Muslim extremism in general)". The study noted that

¹ See Baker, Paul, Costas Gabrielatos, and Tony McEnery. *Discourse analysis and media attitudes: the representation of Islam in the British Press*. Cambridge: University Press, 2013.

² Ibid.

in more than a quarter of the articles investigated, Islam was posed as being “dangerous, backward or irrational” and being in contrast to ‘British Values’.³

Meanwhile, in the fast-paced world in which we live, the majority of the public lacks the time and resources to go out of their way to thoroughly research, critically analyse, and evaluate every article that they read. At the same time, British Muslims constitute less than 5% of the UK population, meaning that large swathes of the UK population will have very limited opportunities for meaningful interactions with their Muslim co-patriots. Consequently, numerous polls have shown that the British public derives much of its information from the media and is generally quite ill-informed about the Islamic faith and Muslims. A YouGov poll conducted in 2018 by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) found that of the 1,629 Britons surveyed, 90% had not been inside a mosque in recent years.⁴ Another poll conducted by YouGov in 2002 found that of the Britons surveyed, 74% knew “nothing or next to nothing about Islam” and 64% stated that what they did know was “acquired through the media”.⁵ MEND’s commissioned ComRes poll, 2018, found that the majority of Britons also agreed that the mainstream media was a key source in perpetuating Islamophobia in our society. Therefore, the British press has considerable power over public narratives and perceptions surrounding important issues.

The inevitable consequence of the repeated negative presentation of Muslims within media discourse, combined with a very small Muslim population, inevitably leads to distorted understandings and, ultimately, the fostering of prejudices, with Muslims being considered to be a threat and negative force within society.

However, since the very beginning of the pandemic, British Muslims have been integral in the collective response, both in terms of serving on the frontlines, and in terms of volunteering efforts in support of their local communities. Recognising such contributions is an important mechanism for recalibrating perceptions surrounding Muslim communities and providing a much-needed rebalancing of public narratives regarding their place in society. As such, this chapter hopes to provide a cursory (and in no way complete) overview of some of the ways in which Muslim communities have positioned themselves in the centre of attempts to protect and serve their local communities throughout the crisis.

Muslim Contributions to the NHS

BAME and Muslim communities have had a long and significant history of valuable contributions within frontline services, and an especially proud tradition of serving in the NHS. From its very conception, the NHS has relied on the continuous contribution and services of BAME nurses, doctors, and auxiliary staff.⁶ As far back as 1961, Lord Cohen of Birkenhead told the House of Lords that, “the Health Service would have collapsed if it had not been for the enormous influx from junior doctors from such countries as India and Pakistan.”⁷

Amidst the current COVID-19 crisis, the frontline of the NHS has been indebted to the 44.3% of the NHS medical staff who are foreign-born or from a BAME background, with BAME doctors representing 41% of the medical workforce.⁸ Meanwhile, BAME staff make up

³ Kerry Moore, Paul Mason and Justin Lewis, “Images of Islam in the UK: The Representation of British Muslims in the National Print News Media 2000-2008”, *Cardiff University*, July 7, 2008, accessed 20.06.2018, <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/53005/1/08channel4-dispatches.pdf>

⁴ “90% of people haven’t been inside a mosque – change that this weekend!” *Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)*, February 13, 2018, accessed 20.06.2018, <http://www.mcb.org.uk/90-of-people-havent-been-inside-a-mosque-change-that-this-weekend/>

⁵ Chris Allen, “A review of the evidence relating to the representation of Muslims and Islam in the British media”, *University of Birmingham*, October 24, 2012, accessed 20.06.2018, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/1ASS/news-events/MEDIA-ChrisAllen-APPGEvidence-Oct2012.pdf>

⁶ Butler, Patrick. 2008. “How Migrant Workers Helped Make The NHS”. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2008/jun/18/nhs60.nhs2>.

⁷ Snow, Stephanie, and Emma Jones. 2011. “Immigration And The National Health Service: Putting History To The Forefront”. *History & Policy*. <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/immigration-and-the-national-health-service-putting-history-to-the-forefront>.

⁸ “NHS Workforce”. 2020. *Ethnicity-Facts-Figures.Service.Gov.Uk*. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/nhs-workforce/latest#data-sources>.

around 20% of the overall NHS workforce,⁹ and 58.6% of all senior doctors,¹⁰ with Asians constituting the majority at 40.6%.¹¹

The first doctor to die in the COVID-19 crisis was Dr Habib Zaidi, 76, who came to the UK nearly 50 years ago. Dr Zaidi came to the UK in response to the UK Government's call following the Conservative Health Minister, Enoch Powell's, campaign to recruit trained doctors from abroad to fill the labour deficiencies brought about by NHS expansion and to particularly fill a shortage of doctors in deprived inner-city areas and rural communities.¹² This call was heeded by an estimated 18,000 doctors from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) – countries with large Muslim populations.¹³

While he would later become a driving force behind calls for stricter controls on migration, at the time, these migrant doctors were applauded by Powell, who declared that they “provide a useful and substantial reinforcement of the staffing of our hospitals and who are an advertisement to the world of British medicine and British hospitals”.¹⁴



*Adil El Tayar, Alfa Sa'adu, Habib Zaidi and Amged el-Hawrani.*¹⁵

By 1971, 31 per cent of all doctors working in the NHS in England were born and qualified abroad.¹⁶ Doctors from abroad remained fundamental to NHS staffing in the latter decades of the twentieth century, filling vacancies in areas and specialties that were not very popular with the UK trained doctors, such as psychiatry and geriatrics.¹⁷

Data from 2018 reveals that the NHS continues to be supported by health professionals drawn from countries with large Muslim populations, with Government statistics revealing that 28.8% of all doctors working in the NHS were Asian or Asian British (Indian, Pakistani,

⁹ "NHS Workforce Statistics - September 2019 - NHS Digital". 2019. *NHS Digital*. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/nhs-workforce-statistics/september-2019>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Butler, Patrick. 2008. "How Migrant Workers Helped Make The NHS". *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2008/jun/18/nhs60.nhs2>.

¹⁴ Francis, Rohin. 2018. "Raj Of The NHS - How Doctors From India And Pakistan Saved The NHS". *The Health Care Blog*. <https://thehealthcareblog.com/blog/2018/08/14/raj-of-the-nhs-how-doctors-from-india-and-pakistan-saved-the-nhs/>.

¹⁵ Khan, Aina. 2020. "Muslim Minority Doctors First To Die On Front Line Of UK Pandemic". *Aljazeera.Com*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/muslim-minority-doctors-die-front-line-uk-pandemic-200401082454308.html>.

¹⁶ Snow, Stephanie, and Emma Jones. 2011. "Immigration And The National Health Service: Putting History To The Forefront". *History & Policy*. <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/immigration-and-the-national-health-service-putting-history-to-the-forefront>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Bangladeshi, or of Middle Eastern origin).¹⁸ As such, Asian and Asian British individuals are the largest minority group in medical roles.

The contribution of migrant doctors to the NHS was highlighted in an exhibition at the Royal College of General Practitioners in 2018, entitled *Migrants who Made the NHS*,¹⁹ which was based on a book by Dr Julian Simpson who noted that, "Doctors from the Indian sub-continent were therefore not just contributing to the NHS, they were its very lifeblood. We should acknowledge they were amongst the architects of the NHS."²⁰



An exhibition at the Royal College of General Practitioners in 2018, entitled Migrants who Made the NHS²¹

Data from NHS trusts and Clinical Commissioning Groups in England shows that, as of September 2019, 124,715 doctors were employed in the NHS, of which nearly 13,000 were Muslim, comprising approximately 10% of the total medical workforce, and approximately 17% of doctors who declared a religion.²² For a community that makes up 5% of the national population, Muslims are clearly over-represented in the medical workforce.

This overrepresentation is sadly reflected in the deaths in the NHS and medical workforce due to COVID-19. Amongst the first Muslim medical professionals to die during the pandemic were Dr Adil El-Tayar,²³ a 63-year-old surgeon from London; Dr Amged El-Hawrani, a 55-year-old ENT consultant from the Midlands;²⁴ 68-year-old Dr Alfa Sa'adu who was an NHS doctor for nearly forty-years and, despite being retired, continued to work as a locum until his death;²⁵ and nurse Areema Nasreen who was just 36-years-old.²⁶

The general overrepresentation within the NHS is a factor in understanding the disproportionate exposure of BAME communities to the coronavirus. However, it is important to also consider structural inequalities within the NHS itself that may place these individuals at a further heightened risk of exposure. Indeed, Carol Cooper, head of equality, diversity and human rights at Birmingham Community Hospital, recently reported that BAME healthcare workers feel they are being made to work on COVID-19 wards more than their white counterparts.²⁷ The NHS has since issued updated guidelines to hospital trusts, providers of mental health care, ambulance services, and organisations providing

¹⁸ "NHS Workforce". 2020. *Ethnicity-Facts-Figures.Service.Gov.Uk*. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/nhs-workforce/latest#data-sources>.

¹⁹ "Migrants Who Made The NHS: College Pays Tribute To Gps Who Served Patients - And The Profession - During Difficult Times In The History Of General Practice". 2018. *Royal College Of General Practitioners*. <https://www.rcgp.org.uk/about-us/news/2018/april/migrants-who-made-the-nhs-college-pays-tribute-to-gps.aspx>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ @RCGP". 2018. *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/rcgp/status/987372793443602432>.

²² NHS Workforce Statistics - September 2019 - NHS Digital". 2019. *NHS Digital*. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/nhs-workforce-statistics/september-2019>.

²³ MacKintosh, Thomas. 2020. "First Working NHS Surgeon Dies From Coronavirus". *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-52064450>.

²⁴ "Consultant Dies After Contracting Coronavirus". 2020. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-52084915>.

²⁵ MacKintosh, Thomas. 2020. "Passionate Doctor Dies After Contracting Virus". *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-52126029>.

²⁶ "Nurse Who Died With Coronavirus 'Helped Everyone'". 2020. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-52182994>.

²⁷ "NHS 'Puts More Pressure On Ethnic Minority Staff To Work On Coronavirus Wards' | Metro News". 2020. *Metro.Co.Uk*. <https://metro.co.uk/2020/04/21/nhs-puts-pressure-ethnic-minority-staff-work-coronavirus-wards-12589058/?ito=article.desktop.share.top.facebook>.

community-based healthcare suggesting that BAME personnel should be “risk-assessed” and reassigned to duties away from the frontlines due to the higher risk they face.²⁸

However, recent revelations seem to confirm that BAME workers in the NHS face significant disadvantages in the workplace, including a lack of representation in senior positions and evidence of significant salary disparities between BAME workers and their white colleagues. In 2018, an analysis of 750,000 staff salaries in the NHS in England revealed that Black doctors in the NHS are paid on average, almost £10,000 a year less than their white counterparts, while Black nurses received £2,700 less.²⁹ The disparity in salaries between white and BAME workers within the NHS is underlined by a lack of BAME representation in senior positions. As previously stated, BAME staff make up around 20% of the overall NHS workforce³⁰ and 58.6% of senior doctors. However, they constitute just 6.5% of senior managers.³¹

Insecurities regarding pay, seniority, and leadership may influence the confidence of individuals to raise grievances, particularly in terms of controversial issues such as shortages of PPE or perceptions of discriminatory processes for assigning duties in high risk wards. This may be exacerbated by heightened fear of disciplinary action. Indeed, evidence clearly suggests that BAME individuals are more likely to face disciplinary proceedings than their white counterparts due to “closed culture and climate; subjective attitudes and behaviour; inconclusive disciplinary data; unfair decision making; poor disciplinary support; and disciplinary policy misapplication.”³²

As such, it is important that a holistic examination is undertaken to investigate all potential disparities between BAME and white staff in the NHS, including how differences in pay and seniority may place BAME staff in positions requiring them to undertake duties that may involve a higher risk of exposure during outbreaks such as the one we currently face.

MEND’s National Work During the Pandemic

As for countless organisations and individuals across the country, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed MEND to a new range of challenges, and we have endeavoured to adapt and respond to these new challenges. Ever since the beginning of the crisis, MEND has been working across both policy and community channels to represent the needs and concerns of the Muslim communities we seek to serve.

Local organising to avoid cremations



MEND produced a position statement offering practical advice on how mosques and burial committees should seek to organise themselves and liaise with local councils to avoid cremations by ensuring that both religious beliefs are upheld, and that public health is assured. This was disseminated throughout Muslim communities via our working groups and networks.

At the same time, MEND’s volunteers across the country were mobilised to assist

²⁸ Denis Campbell, “NHS Looks into Taking BAME Staff off Frontline for Their Safety,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, April 29, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/30/nhs-bosses-say-bame-staff-should-be-risk-assessed-to-cut-covid-19>

²⁹ “Black Medics In NHS Paid Thousands Less Than White Medics”. 2018. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/sep/27/black-medics-in-nhs-paid-thousands-less-than-white-medics>.

³⁰ “NHS Workforce”. 2020. *Ethnicity-Facts-Figures.Service.Gov.Uk*. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/nhs-workforce/latest#data-sources>.

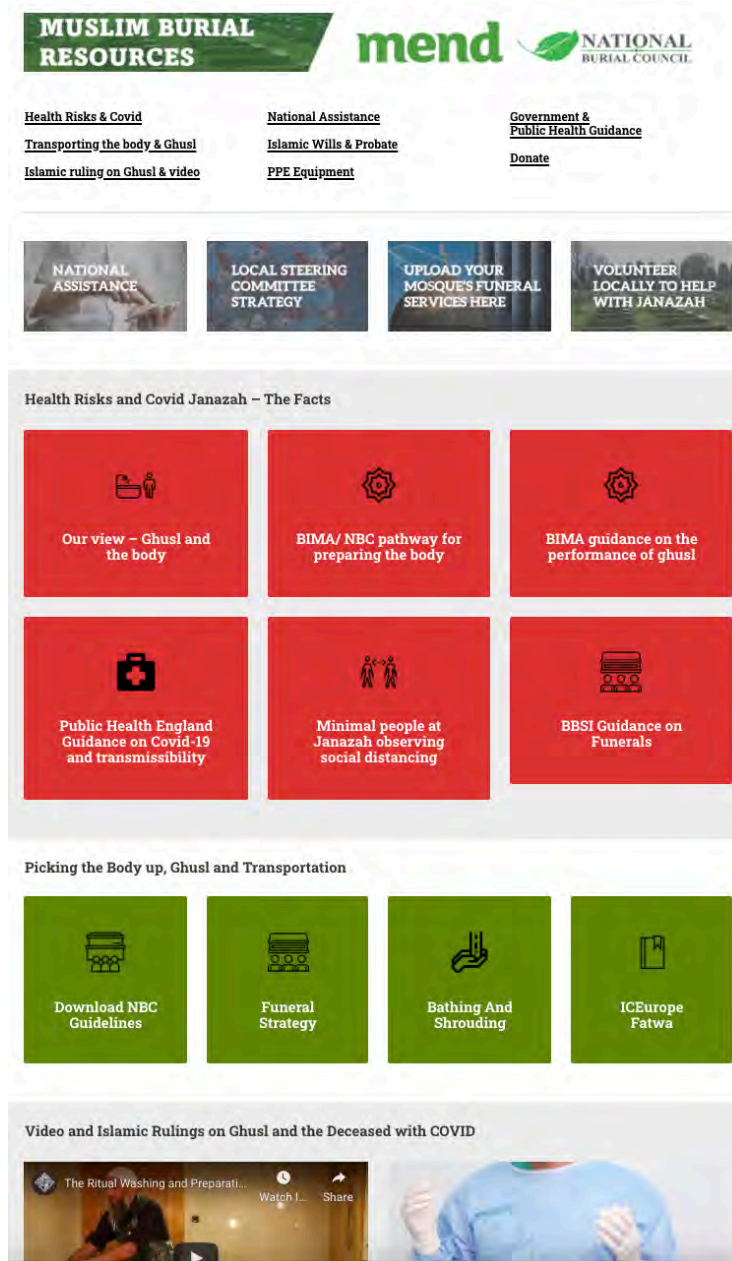
³¹ NHS Choices (NHS, February 13, 2020), <https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/workforce-race-equality-standard-data-reporting-2019/>

³² Uduak Archibong et al., “Disproportionality in NHS Disciplinary Proceedings,” *British Journal of Healthcare Management*, April 15, 2019, <https://www.magonlinelibrary.com/doi/full/10.12968/bjhc.2018.0062>

local burial organisations in ensuring that procedures were in place through liaising with the local councils, funeral directors, cemeteries, and mosques. They were also essential in organising training on how to wash bodies, arranging transport to collect the deceased from the hospital, and transporting the deceased to the cemetery for the final burial rights. These efforts resulted in hundreds of families being supported through the emotional time of the burial of their loved ones.

Burial Website

Since COVID-19 has sadly disproportionately affected BAME communities, including Muslims, we found there was a need for people from Muslim communities to be able to access information on burial committees, performing ghusl, obtaining PPE, and a range of other issues relating to the death and burial of their loved ones. In conjunction with the National Burial Council, we produced a website (<http://burial.mend.org.uk/>) that brought together information on these issues. This website has been accessed over 11,000 times and we believe is an invaluable resource for bereaved families.



MEND's burial website

COVID-19 Action fund

In these difficult times, MEND have recognised that many families are going through financial hardship. We have thus made available a fund to assist such families by giving grants of up to several hundred pounds to help our aid partners on the ground. To date we have helped organisations such as Huddersfield Community First, Southern Women's Aid Network, the NHS Wellness Box project, and Period Poverty Manchester.

Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU)

DISCRIMINATION SUPPORT LINE

Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU) **ICEC**

UNFAIRLY TARGETED AT WORK DUE TO YOUR RELIGION AND HAVE NO ONE TO TURN TO?

WE ARE HERE TO HELP.

ICEC is partnering with MEND's Islamophobia Response Unit to help and provide support to our local Muslims who have been discriminated at their workplace. Support can also be given to those who may be experiencing Islamophobic hate crime.

Contact: Imam Safwaan Hussein - 07426 064024

mend.org.uk **mend**

The Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU) was founded by MEND in response to rising anti-Muslim attacks across Europe and a growing tide of anti-Muslim sentiment. The IRU offers a platform for victims of Islamophobic hate crime and discrimination to report and share their experiences and serves as a source of free advice, support, and referral services.

While many may assume that lockdown measures may have limited the opportunity for Islamophobic abuse to materialise, the IRU has seen a continued pattern of reporting, whilst also noting several cases of past abuse being compounded by lockdown measures and actually getting worse.

As but one example, Kamran (not his real name) and his family had been subjected to criminal damage, verbal abuse, and harassment from their neighbour for five years. Unfortunately, lockdown saw an increase in this abuse. Speaking of the IRU's support, Kamran stated:

"At a time when I felt completely let down by the authorities, notably my housing officer and the police; IRU were always supporting me...I feel assured knowing the IRU will leave no stone unturned and will fight tooth and nail for me, my family"

Meanwhile, due to the economic impacts of COVID-19, many workers have been negatively impacted by either being made redundant, being put on furlough, or simply having their salaries cut. Ongoing issues around discrimination have, therefore, become particularly acute during this time. As an example, Battersea Mosque began to receive calls from local residents who were concerned about the financial troubles they are facing. Many of these people felt they were being discriminated against by their workplace as employees from other backgrounds had reportedly been treated differently. As a result, Battersea Mosque reached out to MEND's IRU for help with these cases. The mosque now operates as a referral service and anyone who reported hate crime or discrimination to the mosque can now get direct help and support from our legal team in the IRU.

Let's Talk About...

At the outset of the global crisis, MEND's volunteers wanted to put together a project that would support their communities through this huge adjustment. As such, MEND developed a webinar series entitled 'Let's Talk About...' to help inform the public about issues relating to COVID-19 by using local expertise within the group. As an example, one session looked to address questions of healthcare surrounding COVID-19 and was presented by Dr Jawad Amin. He gave his advice on how those who live with vulnerable people can best protect themselves, how useful face masks are, and explaining technical concepts such as 'the curve'. Other sessions included mental health, working from home, end of life care, burials, and the Black Lives Matter movement.

MEND's Local Work During the Pandemic

The vast majority of MEND's grassroots work is achieved through a network of 30 working groups and a number of satellite groups across the UK. These working groups deliver MEND's national strategy on a local level through their work with delivery partners such as the police, councils, schools, and inter-faith organisations, to name but a few.

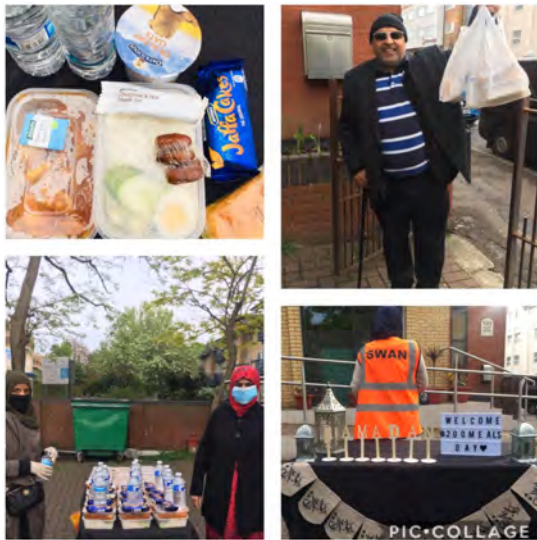
What makes these working groups unique is that they are almost entirely comprised of local community volunteers. As such, working groups function on the basis of enthusiastic and dedicated individuals. Consequently, almost 800 people across the country freely give their time and expertise to MEND because they believe passionately in the causes and principles we espouse.

Below is a brief overview of just some of the work our volunteers have engaged with in recent months as part of national and local COVID-19 efforts.

London and the South East

South Women's Aid Network (SWAN)

A volunteer from our South London Working Group led a COVID support project with South Women's Aid Network (SWAN) where she would create essential food packs with donations received from the local community. Everyday a list would be sent to her detailing vulnerable people who are in need of these food packs. She would then coordinate local volunteers who would pick up food packs and deliver them to vulnerable individuals in the area.



MEND has also supported the SWAN project by donating £300 towards the cost of creating food packs.

The project has made a huge impact on the lives of vulnerable South Londoners. Mohamed, one of the recipients of the food pack shared his feedback

"You are helping us in a very critical time that is difficult for us to cover our Ramadan Iftar. You have sacrificed yourselves to assist us seeing as we are facing very difficult time in which every person has go away to protect themselves."

NHS Wellness Box Project

A volunteer from our Central London team partnered with one of his colleagues to bring the NHS Wellness Box initiative to the heart of the City. They sourced and created wellbeing packages, including motivational cards, energy bars, coffee, hand cream, and toothpaste to name but a few useful items. They delivered these to NHS staff at various hospitals in Central London. MEND volunteers from across London came together to put together these boxes for our NHS heroes. This turned into a weekly effort with over 100 boxes made and



delivered every week since the beginning of lockdown to the first week of July. MEND further supported this initiative by donating £350 towards the cost of the contents in these boxes. Our volunteers received very positive feedback from the NHS staff who were blown away with their generosity.

Nadi Park Royal Food Parcels



MEND volunteers from across London were involved in supporting the vulnerable during the pandemic to ensure these people were getting the food and essentials that they needed. In West London, a MEND volunteer partnered with Nadi Park Royal, a Muslim community centre, to put together Ramadan food parcels which were sent out to families who were struggling to buy food to break their fast. Food was donated by kind donors which was packed by volunteers at the community

centre and then delivered safely to locals who needed it most. A large number of boxes were also delivered to Lady of Willesden Church to help support vulnerable individuals from the local Christian community.

Hot Meals in Basildon

Despite restaurants being forced to close to the public, a volunteer from our East London group used the opportunity to cook over 100 hot meals daily in his restaurant based in Basildon, Essex, to feed the hard-working staff at Basildon Hospital. He encouraged healthy employees to participate in cooking and delivery of the meals. His efforts were mentioned in a local newspaper.



Ilford Muslim Society



Ilford Muslim Society teamed up with local restaurants who would cook hot meals and a team of volunteers would pack them and deliver them to vulnerable members of the community so that low income families did not have to worry about their next hot meal whilst being unable to work. The meals were also sent to NHS hospitals across East London to keep the NHS staff going on their life saving shifts. The backbone to all of these efforts was one of our volunteers from the East London group who drove the delivery van tirelessly to ensure those in need received a hot meal.

“Thank You NHS” banners

A volunteer from MEND’s East London Working Group organised a large banner to be displayed across the entrance of Musalla An Noor Mosque in Hackney reading ‘Thank You NHS’ followed by verses from the Quran. This began to be replicated across a number of mosques in London. In order to show our support for the NHS, MEND sponsored the printing of these banners for mosques across the South East, including SLMCC (Harrow), Sri Lanka East London Mosque (East Ham), Essex Islamic Academy (Barking), Sri Lanka Muslim Community (East Ham), Camberley Mosque, IANL (Finchley), Masjid Al Jannha (Slough), Purley Mosque.



Muslimah Voices



Prior to the COVID lockdown, female volunteers across London had planned a large event for International Women's Day, which unfortunately had to be cancelled. However, this did not stop the volunteers from bringing forth creative solutions to celebrate Muslim Women. MEND volunteers from West London decided to create a podcast series dedicated to celebrating the achievements of Muslim women. The Muslimah Voices podcast has been hugely successful in giving a platform to the voices and experiences of Muslim women across the country.

The Midlands

Path 2 Success Series & Phone Listening Service

During lockdown there has been serious national concern surrounding spikes in domestic violence and abuse. MEND’s Birmingham working group have thus worked tirelessly in collaboration with Birmingham Central Mosque to conduct a weekly webinar series by the name of ‘[Path to Success](#)’ to support women in turbulent times who are in need of self-development and empowerment tools in order to ensure that their voices are heard. This project was then complimented by the development of the Phone Listening Service to ensure that no one must suffer in silence.

Christ the King Foodbank

MEND's Leicester volunteers joined the Leicester East COVID Support Community Group created by Claudia Webbe and other community initiatives responding to the local needs of the community. Through their community contacts and links, our volunteers identified a key opportunity to support Christ the King food bank in Beaumont Leys. MEND's Leicester working group members organised a refrigerated van and, with the support from local businesses, organised four-weeks-worth of frozen food for delivery to those in need.



Midlands Langar Seva (PPE)



As the UK began to experience a shortage of PPE equipment, MEND's volunteers and local community members mobilised to support NHS workers and grassroots organizations to continue to provide essential support to those vulnerable within communities. As one example, a MEND volunteer kindly donated PPE masks and gloves to be distributed across Leicestershire's community groups and organisations in need during the crisis.

One of the receivers of the PPE masks was Midlands Langar Seva, who were extremely appreciative of the support provided by the team as it ensured that their foodbank services were able to continue to support those who are vulnerable and in need during these difficult times.

Himmah Foodbank

MEND has partnered with HIMMAH Foodbank in Nottingham to provide support to the most vulnerable during the COVID-19 crisis. The foodbank had been experiencing a shortage of donations and required support to enable them to continue to serve people and families who are struggling to access basic food and essentials because of the current pandemic.



Funeral Services UK, Coventry

MEND donated to the Coventry based grassroots organization, Funeral Services UK. The organisation also undertook MENDs burial strategy and training services to aid their own burials process.

Virtues of Lockdown

The Virtues of Lockdown series was introduced by the MEND Leicester Working Group to celebrate the very British quality of making the best of the COVID-19 situation. It aimed to be a platform through which to bring together the local community and explore the impact of COVID-19 on our families and friends. In particular, the series was highly successful in showcasing issues surrounding supporting and empowering our young people to gain new skills, find their voice, and inspire others during the lockdown.

The North West

The Period Poverty Project

MEND's Manchester working partnered up with The Period Poverty Project. The project was set up by Ghazala Tehseen, a 4th year medical student, and works to address a lack of access to menstrual products for women and girls, especially within the Muslim community. Prior to the pandemic, the project ran a service where they delivered sanitary products to organisations and individuals. Within the confines of the pandemic, the team shifted to providing supplies to local organisations, community hubs, and food banks.

MEND donated to the cause and supported them in purchasing supplies. Through this work, more than 1000 products were distributed to those who needed it.

To further this work, MEND also organised a webinar, entitled "MENDTalks: What Muslim women want you to know", for which Ghazala Tehseen spoke on the panel.



Homeless Aid UK



Homeless Aid UK, based in Bolton, have around 300 volunteers across the North West. COVID-19 has exacerbated many issues that Homeless Aid UK have been dealing with, and to support the excellent work, MEND donated to their cause. The money was used to distribute hampers to the most vulnerable in Bolton and to provide meals for 600 to 700 homeless people each week.

Deepdale Community Association

Deepdale Community Association (DCA) are a collective set up in Preston who work to support the vulnerable individuals and families in the locality. MEND's Preston volunteers partnered with DCA by providing financial donations that would allow the group to purchase the necessary items to create food packs to those in need of support in the local community.

Wales

Social Media Training

Due to COVID-19, many of MEND's partners and local stakeholders have transferred much of their daily work to online platforms. These partners and stakeholders were thus keen to increase their outreach and highlight their work on social media. MEND provided social media training, where participants learnt about the importance of utilising social media, the differences between social media platforms, and their benefits and drawbacks. Finally, the participants learnt how to plan a successful social media campaign.



Radio Ramadan Cymru



MEND hosts its own radio show "Let's MEND it!" on Radio Ramadan Cymru, every Sunday from 6:45pm until 7:30pm. The show explores what it takes to become proactive Muslims during this divisive time. As but two examples, in the first show, the guests discussed whether Islamophobia exists and if so, whether it is exaggerated within discourse. Meanwhile, in the second show, Faiza Mukith, an employment lawyer and head of MEND's Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU) touched upon several topics including discrimination in the workplace and gendered Islamophobia.

Headbands for the NHS staff

After seeing photos of NHS workers with painful bruises behind their ears from wearing surgical masks for long hours due to the COVID-19 pandemic, MEND volunteers and their children decided to buy headbands and sew colourful buttons on them. These buttons helped to hook the surgical masks' straps instead of hooking them behind the ears in order to prevent bruises. The children also made "Thank You" cards which were distributed with the colourful buttoned headbands to the NHS staff, working at the intensive care unit (ICU) of Heath Hospital in Cardiff.



A Meeting with ITV News

MEND attended a meeting organised by ITV news to review ITV coverage of COVID-19. The purpose of the meeting was to put forward suggestions to improve its coverage, ensuring it is inclusive and informative. In the meeting, MEND emphasised the importance of accuracy in reporting, as well as diversifying reporting to include positive stories from Muslim and BAME communities.

Yorkshire



Huddersfield Community First

MEND partnered with Huddersfield Community First to support their community in a number of ways, including deliveries of food, medicine, and other supplies to local people in need. These simple but caring tasks have greatly alleviated the struggles of many in Huddersfield during these challenging times.

Purpose of Life



MEND partnered with the Muslim charity, Purpose of Life, to support them with their community work across Kirklees, as well as surrounding areas during the early stages of the COVID pandemic. For over five years, Purpose of Life has been working as a children's charity to provide aid overseas, as well as support for local communities through the 'Our Soul Food Project'. During the current Coronavirus crisis, Purpose of Life worked tirelessly in Kirklees to support the homeless and vulnerable through providing food parcel deliveries and

COVID related information to those who were self-isolating.

The work of the organisation achieved recognition from local MP, Tracy Brabin, who said that the commitment of Purpose of Life in supporting the vulnerable was "inspiring". During Ramadan and Eid, Purpose of Life delivered over 800 food parcels and celebrated the end of Ramadan with an Eid party where 100 parcels were given to the needy.

MENDtalks: What Muslim Women Want You to Know

To kick off our series of local online events, MEND's Yorkshire team transformed an International Women's Day event into the first of our 'MENDtalks' webinars, where six Muslim women from across the UK gave short speeches on a number of topics. Our speakers, Hina Junejo, Ghazala Tehseen, Saiqa Riad, Salma Al-Arefi, Andrea Hunt and Madiha Ansari, spoke on a wide range of issues from period poverty to the struggles of entering academia as a Muslim woman.

Scotland

Glasgow Muslim Aid

Glasgow Muslim Aid set up food distribution throughout the month of Ramadan when they provided over 200 hot meals per night to asylum seekers, destitute individuals, and those in need. The initiative was self-funded by the organisers, friends, family, the wider community, and MEND, who donated £500 from their action aid fund. MEND's team in Scotland also organised a delivery scheme with seven drivers working on a rota system to deliver over 100 hot meals and other donated items every other night throughout Ramadan.



Volunteering database

MEND's volunteers in Scotland developed a database of mosques, Muslim charities, and organisations around Scotland that are working to support communities and front-line staff at this time. This allowed other volunteers to access up to date information regarding the opportunities to contribute in their local area, whether they are able to volunteer their time, provide funds, or even if they are looking for signposting to support that is available for themselves or others in their local area.

Webinar Panels

MEND's volunteers in Scotland initiated a series of webinars to highlight key issues and discuss topics that have specific relevance for people in Scotland during lockdown. We were delighted to have been able to host a series of excellent speakers, including Humza Yousuf MSP, Anas Sarwar MSP, and Zara Janjua, an award-winning broadcaster and journalist. These webinars focussed on a wide range of issues in relation to lockdown, as well as topics such as Islamophobia, the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Bill, how communities can effectively engage with the media, and celebrating Eid in lockdown. The webinars were greatly received not only in Scotland, but throughout the whole of the UK.

STOP THE PRESS!

MEND initiated an open letter that was signed by 36 Muslim and equalities organisations and called on all political parties in Scotland to sign a commitment to work towards increasing Muslim representation within Scottish politics, and specifically to place more Muslim candidates in winnable seats for the Holyrood elections in 2021, as part of the fight against Islamophobia. The open letter received a great deal of media attention in Scotland and served an important role in highlighting Islamophobia in Scotland, particularly in the context of findings from the Scottish Parliament's Cross-Party Group on Islamophobia, who found that 83% of Muslims had experienced Islamophobia in Scotland, with 79% of Muslims feeling Islamophobia in Scotland is getting worse. Meanwhile, a study carried out by Newcastle University and the University of St Andrews found that everyday Islamophobia is a deterrent for young Muslims engaging in the political process in Scotland.

Conclusions

Pandemics often present a uniquely opportune moment for the spreading of misinformation amidst public nervousness at a time when public information is frequently slow to be disseminated. The coronavirus pandemic itself has been associated with the spread of misinformation at such a scale that the World Health Organisation termed it an "infodemic" before the outbreak was even considered a pandemic; "an over-abundance of information

(some accurate and some not) that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance”.³³

At the same time, the Online Far-Right Space (OFRS) has often acted as the producer, sustainer, and propagator of conspiracy theories that are used to substantiate far-right thought. It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that the current pandemic has been utilised by far-right forces to disseminate dubious information that fuels a far-right ideological worldview at the expense of minority communities. In recent months, the OFRS has been particularly active in capitalising on the current crisis to further themes of perceived threats posed by Muslim communities. Traditionally, popular far-right narratives surround images of Muslims as threats to security and public safety. These themes have been furthered by theories that Muslims are also a unique threat to public health in relation to COVID-19.

International conspiracies connecting Muslims to the spread of the coronavirus continue to abound.³⁴ In India, where the persecution of the minority Muslim community by the Hindutva agenda has now been well documented, evidence has emerged demonstrating how the pandemic is being used to spread further Islamophobia. The term “corona-jihad” has gained particular momentum, denoting the theory that Muslim communities in India are actively undermining the Government to spread coronavirus as a form of warfare and terrorism.

At the same time, groups in the UK have popularised these conspiracies on social media, with counter-terrorism police recently investigating far-right groups accused of “trying to use the coronavirus crisis to stoke anti-Muslim sentiment”.³⁵ Specifically, social media sites are replete with insinuations that Muslims are flouting lockdown measures, with mosques featuring prominently in unsubstantiated claims that Muslims are continuing to hold communal gatherings.

A report produced by members of the Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group (AMHWG) investigated posts from major social media platforms during the pandemic and noted several key themes emerging amongst anti-Muslim narratives. In particular, these themes include:

- Associating mosques with continued communal gatherings and the spread of COVID-19;
- Claims that Muslims are failing to observe social distancing rules and are “super-spreaders” of the virus, including the assertion that the “UK’s Muslim population is responsible for a quarter of the country’s COVID-related deaths”;
- Arguments that the police are giving favourable treatment to Muslims due to fears of being accused of racism.³⁶

Professor Imran Awan, co-author of the report, noted that: “The COVID-19 crisis has been used to create ‘others’ of Muslims, blaming them for the spread of the virus. The spread of fake news online is contributing to this extremely worrying trend”.³⁷

Indeed, a variety of fake stories and images have circulated online depicting Muslims as flouting social distancing measures by attending mosques for congregational prayers.³⁸ Many

³³ World Health Organization. 2020. “Novel Coronavirus(2019-Ncov) Situation Report - 13”. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>.

³⁴ Omar Suleiman, “Like India, Sri Lanka Is Using Coronavirus to Stigmatise Muslims,” Coronavirus pandemic | Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, May 20, 2020), <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/india-sri-lanka-coronavirus-stigmatise-muslims-200519134939934.html>

³⁵ Nazia Parveen, “Police Investigate UK Far-Right Groups over Anti-Muslim Coronavirus Claims,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, April 5, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/05/police-investigate-uk-far-right-groups-over-anti-muslim-coronavirus-claims>

³⁶ Roxanakhanwilliams, “CORONAVIRUS, FEAR AND HOW ISLAMOPHOBIA SPREADS ON SOCIAL MEDIA,” Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group, April 20, 2020, <https://anti-muslim-hatred-working-group.home.blog/2020/04/20/coronavirus-fear-and-how-islamophobia-spreads-on-social-media/>

³⁷ Lizzie Dearden Home Affairs Correspondent @lizziedearden, “‘Dangerous’ Conspiracy Theories Could Spark Wave of Islamophobic Attacks When Lockdown Lifts, Report Warns,” The Independent (Independent Digital News and Media, April 19, 2020), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-muslim-lockdown-conspiracy-theories-tommy-robinson-katie-hopkins-a9471516.html>

³⁸ Vikram Dodd, “Fears of Rise in UK Terrorist Recruits as Anti-Radicalisation Referrals Collapse,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, April 22, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/apr/22/fears-of-rise-in-uk-terrorism-recruits-after-anti-radicalisation-referrals-collapse-coronavirus>

of these stories include historic images and videos of mosques in operation prior to lockdown measures being enforced. Such misinformation has led to police being inundated with false complaints by members of the public, with some posting messages online calling for the demolition of all mosques to “cure” COVID-19.³⁹

These conspiracies have been given further impetus by far-right voices and commentators, including Daily Mail commentator, Andrew Pearce, who suggested that “If families gather for holy month of Ramadan will there be a huge spike in Covid cases. Doctors are very worried”.⁴⁰ Similarly, Katie Hopkins inferred that the UK police should follow the example of India in deploying violence against Muslims during lockdown. In a video she shared on Twitter Muslim worshippers in India can be seen being beaten by police using a ‘lathi’ (a wooden stick that can measure up to 1.8m). This was accompanied by a comment suggesting that Humberside Police force should perhaps aspire to the same measures.⁴¹



A tweet from Katie Hopkins' account.⁴²

Meanwhile, Tommy Robinson shared a video on his Telegram channel allegedly showing British Muslims attending prayers at a “secret mosque” in Birmingham.⁴³ The West Midlands police subsequently dismissed these claims, however, the video had been watched more than 14,000 times⁴⁴ and continues to be shared as evidence of Muslim communities allegedly undermining the British state.⁴⁵

³⁹ Lizzie Dearden Home Affairs Correspondent @lizziedarden, “Dangerous! Conspiracy Theories Could Spark Wave of Islamophobic Attacks When Lockdown Lifts, Report Warns,” The Independent (Independent Digital News and Media, April 19, 2020), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-muslim-lockdown-conspiracy-theories-tommy-robinson-katie-hopkins-a9471516.html>

⁴⁰ Aina Khan, “Anger as Right-Wing UK Voices Suggest Ramadan Virus Spread,” News | Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, April 13, 2020), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/anger-wing-uk-voices-predict-ramadan-virus-spread-200413170844190.html?xif=>

⁴¹ @KTHopkins, *Twitter*, March 2020. Accessed: 20th May 2020. <https://twitter.com/kthopkins/status/1243625444139769858>

⁴² @KTHopkins, *Twitter*, March 2020. Accessed: 20th May 2020. <https://twitter.com/kthopkins/status/1243625444139769858>

⁴³ Nazia Parveen, “Police Investigate UK Far-Right Groups over Anti-Muslim Coronavirus Claims,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, April 5, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/05/police-investigate-uk-far-right-groups-over-anti-muslim-coronavirus-claims>

⁴⁴ Imran Awan, “Coronavirus: Conspiracy Theories and Fake Videos Fuel Rise in Islamophobia,” The Conversation, May 7, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-and-fake-videos-fuel-rise-in-islamophobia-137107>

⁴⁵ Lizzie Dearden Home Affairs Correspondent @lizziedarden, “Dangerous! Conspiracy Theories Could Spark Wave of Islamophobic Attacks When Lockdown Lifts, Report Warns,” The Independent (Independent Digital News and Media, April 19, 2020), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-muslim-lockdown-conspiracy-theories-tommy-robinson-katie-hopkins-a9471516.html>

The activity of OFRS has very tangible consequences and as mounting conspiracy theories are given life on online spaces during the current pandemic, there are concerns that Muslims and mosques may be vulnerable to a wave of Islamophobic attacks as lockdown measures are increasingly lifted.⁴⁶ Any Government response should therefore be mindful of the potential for misdirected frustration (which is currently largely contained to online spaces as a consequence of lockdown) to be violently targeted at minority communities once public restrictions are eased.

Perhaps one of the most effective ways to counter such distorted narratives is to highlight the positive contributions of Muslim communities in an attempt to counterbalance the damaging narratives being portrayed, and to provide the public with a more complete picture. It is for this reason that MEND fully supports the work of the APPG and would like to once again recognise the inspirational sacrifice, generosity, tenacity, energy, and community spirit of our volunteers who have dedicated so much time to supporting their local communities.

How MEND can assist parliamentarians, policymakers, and community stakeholders

- Providing briefings, information, analysis, and expertise on issues impacting Muslim communities.
- Arranging opportunities for parliamentarians, policymakers, and community stakeholders to engage with their local Muslim communities.
- Conducting research within Muslim communities.
- Connecting parliamentarians, policymakers, and community stakeholders to other local stakeholders.

If MEND can be of any assistance to your work, please feel free to contact info@mend.org.uk

⁴⁶ Lizzie Dearden Home Affairs Correspondent @lizziedearden, "Dangerous' Conspiracy Theories Could Spark Wave of Islamophobic Attacks When Lockdown Lifts, Report Warns," The Independent (Independent Digital News and Media, April 19, 2020), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-muslim-lockdown-conspiracy-theories-tommy-robinson-katie-hopkins-a9471516.html>