

leadership is
about follow
up.

lead.



Women100
Women100
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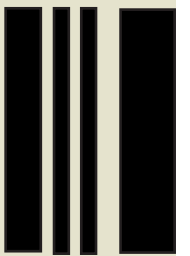
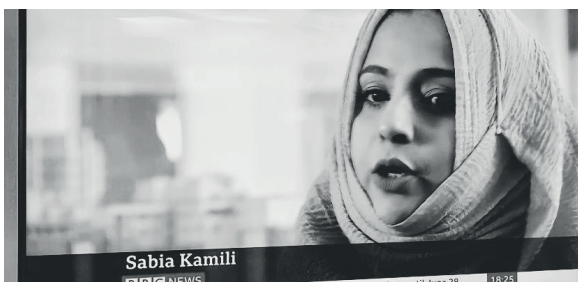




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“Leadership is about follow up”

As a Community Organiser, I often hear about the determination of institutions and organisations I work with that are committed to fostering social change and bringing justice to issues that matter to them personally but also to others. This requires responsibility and leadership, and one of the ways in which we develop leaders and leadership traits is through extensive teaching and development sessions that are designed to equip members of society with the skills and personal capacity required to take action. Although institutions and individuals walk away with essential skills in community organising concepts and skills, training alone does not create great leaders - leadership depends upon the commitment and follow-up to any given societal issue. This magazine contains stories of women from Tower Hamlets who have gone through a journey in leadership, by organising, taking action against injustices and bringing meaningful change to their communities.

- Afsana Salik (Community Organiser and Project Manager at Citizens UK)





Tower Hamlets Mayoral Candidate Assembly at Saint Mary and Saint Michael RC Church. An incredibly successful and insightful event attended by Women100 and numerous other civil society organisations and charitable institutions, in which constituents presented asks to Mayoral Candidates to secure change and be involved in direct democracy

“You are who you want to be”

My Resemblances with MP Rushanara Ali
By Yesmin Begum
Edited by Laura Kekuti

If “darkness is the absence of light,” then, I dare to say that “man is nothing without a woman!” For it is a woman who brings the man into the light from the dark womb. As a woman of colour and Islamic faith, I am forever curious about how women can create positive changes in the world while having a growth mindset and the desire to excel, feel optimistic, and enhance opportunities for others. ‘We’ as women are socially restricted to being homemakers and caregivers, expected to cook, clean, maintain a home and children, entertain guests, etc, etc. All while trying to take care of ourselves and focus on our own goals. As a mother of 5, I feel as though I can speak for many women out there that, it is very easy to lose oneself in trying to maintain a household and home. However, after many years of catering to my family’s needs, I began to venture into my own path and successfully completed 2 years of university, and now in my 3rd.

I have completed a diploma in Community Organizing, and became a member of the James Lind Alliance, Co-production Collective at University College London, a Patient Public Involvement Representative at the National Institute of Health Research Academy and many more. Observing these prospects paints a very simple picture to which I feel many women will agree, when given the opportunity, we women can achieve a lot more than we are made out to be! Through my personal findings, I came across a prominent figure in parliament who captured my amazement at how much a woman of culture and background can truly achieve. Reflecting on my own experiences, I find that I and the one and only Rushunara Ali share common ground. Rushanara Ali, winning her first seat as an MP in 2010, for Bethnal Green and Bow constituency, has become a phenomenal role model for aspiring leaders in the Bengali community and beyond.



She was among the first Bengali Muslim Women to be elected to parliament. As a child, I remember spending much of my time advocating, interpreting, and translating for uncles and aunties who could not speak or read English. Helping others came to me naturally and I was always happy to do so.



about what advice she'd give to aspiring women, as well as encouraging me and the other Women100 Leaders to stand as MPs or counsellors, Rushanara again highlighted the importance of networking and relationships. Perhaps not surprisingly, relationships are also a powerful building block of community organising. At Women100 we are encouraged to do 121 conversations with leaders and members of different institutions to build our relational power. This relational power has been very helpful in my own journey where I have been able to receive valuable advice and encouragement, motivation, and signposting. It was also, through relationships that I got to interview - a fellow Women 100 leader, Laura suggested the idea and she helped with the interview and the writing process. It was such a pleasure to be able to interview Rushanara and learn more about her inspiring journey. There were many similarities between us, especially, with the upbringing we had. Growing up as a woman of colour and Islamic faith, we both experienced similar challenges. However, despite the challenges, Rushanara still managed to stand strong amongst her party rivals and the opposition candidates. She tackled her challenges with diplomacy and integrity.

Thank you, Rushanara for setting such an inspiring example for us!

Finally, here is what I believe to be the biggest takeaway for me from the interview.



“Stay determined. It doesn’t matter who you meet, ask them for advice. I often did and I found that really valuable. You don’t have to take all the advice, but it can open other doors, they can introduce you to other people, and that can then take you into the career path that you are interested in. Self-belief and confidence are really important and make sure you have people to reinforce and encourage you but, at the same time it’s really important to listen to constructive criticism.”

MP Rushanara Ali



Why I Fight for Justice for Victims of Hate Crimes

*Sufia Alam - Head of
Programmes and
Maryam Centre*

My name is Sufia Alam, and I am an organiser and leader with The East London Communities organisations (TELCO), the founding chapter of Citizens UK, a community organising alliance. I have been working in the community in Tower Hamlets for the past 27 years, developing women's projects and services supporting vulnerable women and children. I am a mother of three teenage daughters, and I have always looked out for my children's safety and supported them in everything they want to do. My faith has taught me to co-exist in harmony with difference and that we should respect one another no matter what our heritage or background may be. It also teaches me to stand up and speak out for justice.

In my formative years, I experienced repeated acts of discrimination and racial abuse on my way coming home from school in Yorkshire.

These traumatic experiences made me suffer, they dampened my confidence and led me to live in fear. In one incident, someone I knew from school spat on me, told me to go back to my country and kicked me. The memories of this moment were stored away clearly in my mind as it was a traumatic experience, and it gave me so much pain. To this day I still remember the disgust I felt as I was trying to remove the spital from my face and how I remember that the tears that rolled rolling down my cheeks almost did that for me.



Another time, I was chased around the park by a man who set his dog on me, and he thought it was funny. The trauma of that day led to the fear for dogs I have to this day. Dogs are lovely, cute animals yet I fear them and cross the road. No one should have to experience this because someone chose hate! People have the right to be free and be and be who they are!

As a community leader I campaign against all hate crimes and racial injustice, and I stand up against racism and prejudices of all types. In 2018, when religious hate crime increased by 500%, I was worried for myself, my daughters, my community and especially women in my community, as I heard reports of Muslim women's scarves being pulled off and being pushed onto rail tracks. I witnessed the number of women attending their mosque during Ramadan night fall. The fear of attacks meant they didn't allow their children to travel alone. When women are scared to go out, the whole community suffers. Feeling unsafe prevents women from taking an active role in society and dampens their aspirations in education, employment prospects and overall social mobility.

To address the rise in abuse, I started what we call in community organising a listening campaign. I sat down with fellow Muslim women and listened to their experiences. They told me that they often are abused verbally and heard that many Muslim women don't report their experiences of hate crimes because they felt they had to prove their stories, or they didn't want to go into court. We listened to many women from Tower Hamlets who said that they didn't trust the police as they asked so many questions and didn't believe that attacks were religiously motivated and rather their experiences were often categorized as anti-social behaviour.

I was tasked to represent my organisation at the "No place for Hate Crime" forum, which was formed by the local authority after the 7/7 bombing to reduce tension in the community. The team had set up reporting centres in institutions, but they planned to dissolve them due to lack of reporting. However, I knew from speaking to fellow Muslim women that the lack of reporting didn't mean there was no hate crime happening.

To understand the lack of reporting, I started a 1-2-1 listening campaign with the support of Queen Mary University students to find out what the barriers to reporting were amongst Muslim Women. Women felt they needed safe spaces to talk about their experiences and to speak with people they know and trust. The women we spoke with expressed how they were victims of intersecting forms of oppression and discriminated against in many ways. E.g. as women, for being black or Asian, for being visibly religious and for disabilities they have.

After further listening, I found that a key problem was that some women felt they had to remove their niqabs in court and that they were not confident to do this, further limiting the reporting of hate crimes. An action I took was to meet with people in power and to share these findings, to build relationships that could affect a change in policy. I arranged a meeting with the Head of the Crown Prosecution services (CPS) and invited other Community





leaders, as well as victims of crimes to come and speak about their experiences from the community. As a result of the listening campaign and relational power we built, the CPS changed its policy to allow women in niqab to keep wearing them in court after being identified.

We found out that women are more likely to report to a person or institution they know and trust. I also found that women victims lived with fear for many years, and it influenced their decision making, which I could relate to. I acted again and applied for grant money to get Hate Crime Ambassadors trained to raise awareness about reporting all types of hate crime. The ambassadors were trained to understand what a hate crime is and how to support anyone who is a victim of Hate crime. The ambassadors also held stalls in community settings to raise awareness and get people to sign pledges to end hate crime of all types. This gave confidence to the community and encouraged women to travel safely. Imams address this issue at least twice a year through sermons.

In 2019, I co-chaired the Law Commission review on hate crime, and we heard about victims' experiences from all parts of the community. This included schools, mosques, churches, women, men, teachers, takeaway delivery people and general people who used public transport. They expressed their experiences of hate crimes and intersectionality in the hope that law and policy will change to give Justice to people. I actively campaigned to include hate crime in the Citizens UK Manifesto for the Mayoral Election in 2021, and we challenged our Mayoral London candidates to work with us to make travel safer by having more reporting and support on the Transport for London services so that victims are not alone.

My self- interest, and the reason I am doing this work, is that I do not want to live in fear and know I get justice refusing to live in fear

and by challenging the system and those in power, so we all get justice. For example, we got justice in 2021 when the government announced misogyny would be recognised as a hate crime. It was of course a collective effort by men and women, but I was motivated by my experience and to make London safe for my daughters and for my community. In 2021 I pledged as to work with the Mayor of Tower Hamlets and Leaders from the community to make Tower Hamlets an anti-racist borough by 2025. I have won some things, but we have a long way to go. Structural and systemic racism and misogyny still exists, but we can eliminate it when we call it out!





Leaders from the Tower Hamlets Community and Council pledge to make Tower Hamlets an anti-racist Borough by 2025



One-to-ones within Community Organising is vital in finding self-interest, sharing and understanding personal stories and using them for motivation



COMMUNITY ORGANISING

The secret tool that creates long term-change

by Rafea Khan - Maths Teacher and and Leader from Darul Ummah

My name is Rafea Khan and I am a mum of two children, living and working in the great borough of Tower Hamlets, East London. Since I was a teenager I have been interested in working for the betterment of my community, because the Prophet Muhammad (Peace & Blessing be upon him) said "The best of people are those that bring most benefit to people" Since seeking to instill the teachings and meanings of that powerful quote in my life, I have been involved in the community one way or another. My faith inspires me to continue to strive for a better society as I feel it's my duty.

I have been involved with Darul Ummah Mosque which has been one of the strongest member institutions in Tower Hamlets Citizens, a community organising alliance. Darul Ummah has been involved in many actions and campaigns, including leading the City Safe campaign, which aims to create safer parks for all.

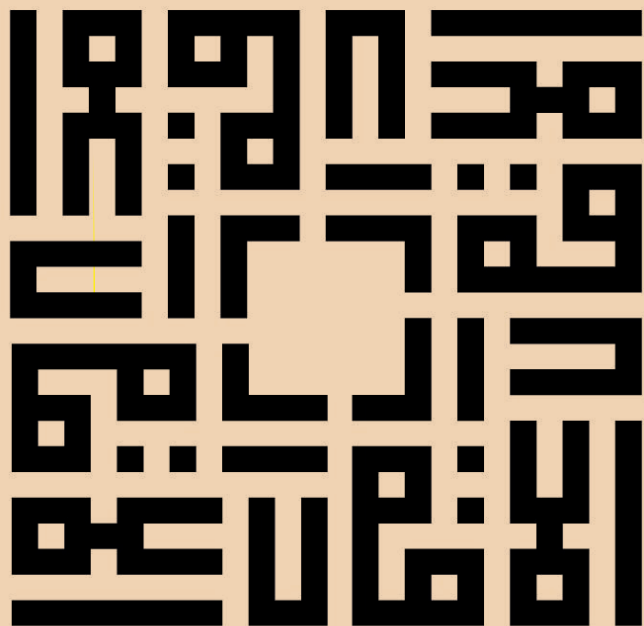
Darul Ummah gave me the opportunity to attend Citizens UK's 6-day training which was where I learnt about the power of community.

There are a lot of injustices happening around us every day and sometimes we do not know how to solve the problems. Community organising simplifies that process, helps to identify which cause to pick and how to achieve the maximum impact for the best result. Also, through community organising I came to know where I was positioned as a community leader and what I can contribute to in this process to accomplish the journey.

At the time, I had a young child and later that year welcomed my second. Hence, I wanted to dedicate my time and energy to raising and nurturing my children which meant there was a limit to how much I could contribute to community organising.

Some years later I was encouraged to join Citizens UK's new initiative: the Women100 training. Women100 is a programme for women in East London to increase women's participation in public life, providing leadership and community organising skills for women from all backgrounds. Women100 also inspires women to take leadership roles in their institutions and beyond, so their voices are heard and taken into the decision making process to bring justice for women in the community, by equipping them with tools to make change in the community. The training was also accessible as it provided training at times that suited me: during weekends or weekdays during school hours.

Being a woman from an ethnic minority background and a mother of two young children my passion has always been youth safety, as I always worry about my children growing up in the area with the challenges many modern day youth face, such as identity crisis, peer pressure, bullying through social media, knife and gang-related crime.



I am also concerned about faith-based hate crime especially towards women which has seen a spike in the past four years. Being a visible Muslim, as I wear the hijab and niqab, I worry about my own safety too. I am also passionate about encouraging women to participate and increase their involvement in the community. In September 2019 I attended the Law commission meeting with London Citizens, where participants were sharing their experiences of hate crime. I heard personal testimonies of women who had been on the receiving end of hate for being a woman and in many cases a Muslim woman. Hearing women who were like me sharing similar experiences made me feel heard and empowered. Sometimes society does not hear the testimonies and experiences of people with harrowing and quite often traumatic moments. The Law Commission meeting provided the space for all to share their experiences, which could be collated and then used to help create change.

Between 2011 and 2018, racist and religious hate crimes recorded by the Met increased by 107%.
7,989 offences in 2011 and 16,528 offences in 2018.


Source: Metropolitan Police, Hate Crime or Special Crime Dashboard

Bringing together my training, experiences, and the support I've received from Citizens UK my confidence has grown, and I have learnt more about my community and the challenges it faces. I used my experiences and roles to develop new leaders, especially women. Working closely with my



institution Darul Ummah Mosque, we are in the process of building a core team of women and have delivered two cohorts of training for women in English and Bangla to make it accessible for all. The training developed many of the women in local community work such as organising coffee mornings, but I want women to become more organised and use their skills to tackle injustices and not just arrange coffee mornings.

Community organising teaches individuals how to create long-term change rather than short-term solutions. For example, in 2019, Tower Hamlets Citizens asked John Biggs, the Mayor of Tower Hamlets, to install electric points for Ice cream vans in a local park which means less pollution in the park and a healthier park for the users, who tend to be young children and mothers.



I hope we can organise more women to get involved and show them how by organising they can make small yet significant differences in their community.

In many ways, women in our community already do a lot for the community, however, due to a lack of organising and apprehension we do not see the long-lasting change we hope to see. For example, women are very good at looking after the young and old in our community, giving emotional support and feeding the homeless. However, many times we do this in a scattered way, so it doesn't create a long term impact. Whereas when we work together as a team in an organised way through community organising, we can create greater and longer lasting provisions such as food banks or counselling provisions where local people can go when they need support.

Citizens UK equipped me to organise and also gain confidence to work for the wider community, and there are many like-minded women who would benefit from community organising and developing themselves in order to impact the society in a positive way. As the Qur'an says, "Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves" (Surah Ar Ra'd 13:11).





Women Not Allowed

by Nacima Khan - Women 100

When I hear the phrase ‘female empowerment’, I don’t imagine a strong, suited and booted group of women pushing their way through society, or a once oppressed woman having found her voice and power through some sort of heroic inner and outer journey. Instead, I see my mother - a quietly spoken and humble Bangladeshi woman with broken English, whose life is layered with story upon story of breaking the status quo.



In one such instance, she fought alone against a body of traditional Bangladeshi men, many of whom believed women should take a subservient position in community decisions. My mother challenged these men and achieved what many deemed out of the question – persuading a local Mosque to open its doors to women for the first time.

My mother's approach was neither bullish nor was it a domineering exclusionary process. She used a rational approach, with language peppered with grace. She showed these men the utmost respect, gathered the support of local young men whom she had seen grow up from a young age, and empowered them to become her voice in circles and rooms where women were not seen nor heard. Her work didn't stop there – she sparked the interest of local women, particularly those who had not ventured beyond school runs and GP appointments. Visits were made to their homes with a simple knock on the door whilst holding a tupperware box filled with home-cooked food. My mother would be invited to take tea with the mothers-in-law, winning the trust and respect of their husbands and in turn inviting them over for a visit to our home. She warmed the heart and stomachs of these women and their families and won their trust. I watched all this with a certain degree of disinterest at the time, not quite appreciating until years later, the magnitude of what my mother had managed to achieve. I am now forever in awe.

But how did my mother attempt to defy the traditional status quo upheld by the men who presided over the local mosque with an iron fist, and achieve exactly what she had intended to do? My mother's vision was simple - to gather local women in a safe community ground and teach them the Quran. Simple though it was, it became almost impossible when she set her eyes on a potential place to host these gatherings – the local Mosque. It was a makeshift Mosque – a porta cabin Mosque, hanging on to the distant promise of future funding which would turn it into the grand building it would one day become. It sat empty and derelict at most times and only came to life during the five daily prayers when a handful of men would shift themselves in and out of the doors. My mother naturally started to make enquiries, but to no avail, as the door was shut on her, the response being: "no women allowed".

Fast forward a couple of weeks after this incident, and if I recall correctly my mother, stood in front of the porta cabin Mosque.

She reads the sign:

“xxxxxxx Mosque and Cultural Centre”.

She repeats the words:

“Cultural Centre...Cultural Centre...”

She copies down these words onto a piece of scrap paper and goes home to seek me out.

“What do these words mean?”

I remember her asking me this question and I don't know if I gave any kind of useful information, but it was enough for my mother to know that something wasn't adding up here.

“Why call it a Cultural Centre and not just a mosque?”

She posed this question to one of the young men from the community. After a few enquiries were made and with some prodding here and there, my mother got the answer. It transpired that the Mosque had received funding to also have designated space for community use which included both men AND women, hence the name, 'Cultural Centre'. The 'penny' dropped (no pun intended) and after petitioning to the board of men governing the Mosque, a set of keys was begrudgingly given to my mum.

And so it began, a weekly women's gathering taking place every Saturday morning, at which women from all over the locality gathered. A group made up of mother in laws, in hand with their grandchildren and daughter in laws, mothers with their daughters, husbands dropping off their wives, was all proof of how much my mother's tea invites had worked. Every Saturday morning, I would watch through a sleepy haze at my mum rattling around our shared bedroom, as she hoisted a small karaoke machine and mic for the presentations she would deliver in one hand, floor mats to keep the women warm, stuffed in a carrier bag held in the other hand. Her presentation notes would be carefully folded up inside her side bag which she would shake every now and then to confirm the jangling noise of the





precious set of keys to the Mosque.

Why am I telling this story? Because for me, this embodiment of female empowerment is something I have always aspired to reach but often failed to match. Quick results and fast deadlines often push us into a rat race where we have no time to take tea or learn the names of our neighbour's children. Instead, we prefer the safety of a whatsapp message and emails to get what we want, and to justify that we have no time for anything else.

My mother also showed me that female empowerment does not need to evoke hostility, raised voices or aggression to get results. Her desire was to serve others in need by taking the opportunities available, reaching out to those around her and then quietly putting in place all of the pieces needed, she achieved what she had set out to do.

From the Mosque Governing Board, to the mother in laws sipping tea – my mother earned respect and warmed hearts. Despite moving away from the area nearly a decade ago, my mother still walks back into the area like a celebrity, welcomed home by the locals still living there. The young men insist on giving her lifts if they see her walking around, and on carrying her shopping if she was burdened with bags. But being the person she is, my mother looks back with a sense of longing and regret – she could have done more, pushed a bit more, reached more women, drank more tea. And this is the biggest lesson which I have taken away from this part of my mother's life – to spend time with others, drink some tea and never accept that “women are not allowed”.





My Journey to Learn more about the World

By Laura Kekuti

I moved to London in 2014. As with every immigrant, there were many reasons for my decision, but one of them was that I really wanted to get to know different cultures and people from different backgrounds - *to learn about the world.*





Hungary after all is very Hungarian majority, and although Budapest, the capital, is more diverse and cosmopolitan, I still vividly remember my first visit to London with my parents when I was just totally amazed by the diversity the city offered. People from all over the world sit on the tube, people in suits alongside others in colourful traditional cultural clothing and others wearing the most unusual outfits and hairstyles which in Hungary would result in loud remarks and mutterings of the phrase “This is not how things are done here.”

But in London people didn't even raise an eyebrow about it. I loved it. Compared to Hungary, London seemed to be the centre of the world.

So after moving here, I tried to approach everyone with an open mind and an open heart, even after occasional setbacks in non-inclusive environments (I remember being invited to an English acquaintance's house for a barbecue where seemingly no one talked to us except the only other non-English person). Upon moving here, I ended up living in Tower Hamlets - not by deliberate choice but drawn in by its cheap-ish rent prices and proximity to Central London, and I quickly discovered that it's one of the most diverse places in the UK.

I still vividly remember my first visit to London with my parents where I was just totally amazed by the diversity the city offered

However, I was struggling to find ways to connect with the borough. Not being religious, it was hard to find community groups that were welcoming and representative of the borough. I was particularly keen to connect with Muslim communities - the area being home to one of the UK's biggest mosques after all. Hungarian media sadly followed many Western media in portraying Muslim communities in a biased and stereotypical way, with Hungarian media even labelling the area where I lived a no-go zone for non-Muslims. Muslim women, in particular, were only talked about, as no Hungarian political commentator or so-called thought leader ever bothered to give them a voice.

The media kept talking about how oppressed they are by Muslim men. However, if you think about it, isn't not giving people a voice and reinforcing harmful stereotypes a form of oppression? I was eager to listen to their stories. So I started looking for ways to get involved in the community and came across the brilliant new community organising initiative called Women 100, bringing together women from various institutions including churches and mosques and community groups based in East London.

Community organising is the work of bringing people together to take action around their common concerns and overcome social injustice. One of the pillars of community organising is relationships - through relationships you can create meaningful positive change. We learned how to do 121s to enable deep and meaningful conversations that build relationships, to get to know what drives the other person and also what makes them angry about the world as it is. And then we can identify common themes, what unites us - and that's how we can start building campaigns to create positive change.

So, I started listening.

I got to know some of the most inspiring women I have ever come across. I got to know a university professor who completed her PhD whilst raising four children and being a pillar of her community. I got to know the community leader who had been campaigning for misogyny to be turned into a hate crime for a decade. I got to meet the charity founder who supports women experiencing domestic abuse and educates men about the issue. I got to meet the young woman who managed to bring together two local mosques despite historical differences and is one of the fiercest advocate of gender equality I've ever met (and I'm secretly hoping will together two local mosques despite historical differences and is one of the fiercest advocate of gender equality I've ever met (and I'm secretly hoping will become PM one day).

I got to know so many women who successfully balance demanding jobs/studies, and family while offering so much for the community - not despite being Muslim but on the contrary - how their faith inspires them to serve the whole community. I got to learn about the institutional and everyday racism these women and their families face, ranging from remarks from strangers



street, physical assaults to more insidious but just as damaging or even more so incidents of racism and deliberate exclusion. I have learned how the majority society creates so many barriers to Muslim women's participation. Despite the barriers they are still doing incredible work. As well as listening to their stories we campaign to create a positive difference. We organise Women's days events together, we respond to government consultations to speak up about the issues that affect us. Becoming part of Women 100 opened my world and my eyes to the amazing achievements of these women despite all the adversities they face.

This is why I was so keen to share my story, together with the other leaders. Two quotes spring to my mind: a classic community organising one: "If you are not at the table then you are on the menu." and Plato's quote "Those who tell the stories rule society." Muslim and ethnic minority women (including Eastern European women for that matter) are still mostly only spoken about in the mainstream British media. This magazine is an attempt to give ourselves a voice. So that if you are interested in how we see the world and what are the challenges we experience, you don't need to go out of your way to find spaces to listen - you can just sit back and read our stories.



“Although speaking out of experience - I’d also really encourage you to go out and find spaces where you can surround yourself with different people and listen. Recognising yourself and your values in another human being who on paper should be so different is one of the greatest joys of being alive. It’s the best way to remind ourselves of our shared humanity and build bridges in this increasingly polarised world”.



“Community organising is the work of bringing people together to take action around their common concerns and overcome social injustice”





My faith motivates me in Community Leadership

O mankind, indeed we have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Surah Al-Hujurat [49:13]

By Ouafa Choufanio- Brent / Women 100 Citizens

This is the teachings from the Holy Quran, which was instilled into me by my parents from an early age, and motivates me to do what I do today. The most honouring thing that has fulfilled me in my life, in addition to being a mum of three (2 boys and a girl), is also the precious time I have spent accompanying people, often in Healthcare and Schools / MPs and community settings, through dark and troubled times, through difficulties and hardship. I really enjoy serving them and sharing some of the lessons I have learned of with all. Few years ago, when I lost few loved ones from my family, I received a lot of help and support from the people around me and relatives abroad, and also I found comfort in the Quran which has kept me going with being patient and accepting. From young age, I have my grandparents and parents love for the community and this has stayed with me until today.

This has also helped me in my personal growth and development as well. I had many great years of

multifaith setting, and I'm very grateful to Allah and glad that this is still continuing.

As a Community leader, along with using my experiences as a professional Multilingual bereavement advisor, COVID-19 has brought all my skills to the forefront working within communities who have been affected by this deadly pandemic. However, I have also seen it has brought a good sense of community into our neighbourhoods. It is absolutely amazing to see how people are doing everything in their power to help the community, for example, the leaders from Women100 Citizens are cooking foods for NHS staff, some are delivering the food, some buying the cutlery and some leaders are helping financially. It is the small acts of kindness that strengthen relationship with others.

As a mother and as a woman, the experience we are all going through is empowering us. Being part of Women 100 - Citizens has been very empowering for us. It teaches us that anyone can

be a leader and pushes us to demand a space in the decision-making process. Women 100 Citizens made leadership more accessible for everyone, regardless of race, faith, gender, profession and age. I have seen how women have quickly adjusted with change in order to organise their communities. WhatsApp groups have been created for their street, institutions, and community, sharing pictures of togetherness, and sticking with each other in this time to provide unity in an uncertain period.

Citizens UK teaches us about the relational leader, and as a woman I can say we are naturally very relational, in the way we share experiences and learnings with people around us. Women 100 Citizens allowed me the opportunity to meet women who were rooted in their communities, with much inner knowledge about their community and neighbours. Many women are organising all the time whether they are leaders, wives of Priests, Imams and Rabbis. There are many mothers, daughters, and sisters who carry their own individual stories and dealing with Covid 19, and those stories and experiences have been invaluable. I have seen Muslim women working closely with local churches by providing hot meals to their old and vulnerable parish members and neighbours. I have seen how a sister from East London asked another sister in North London do to shopping for their friends in North London as she knew people who were self-isolating and needed shopping done. Another Muslim woman used her sewing skills to make masks for the NHS staff. The wives of an Imam and Priest in Tower Hamlets worked together to make surprise bags for children in the community for Easter and Ramadan. We came to know each other and each other's talent through community organising.

Women and community organising go hand in hand – no doubt about that - I find community organising is a great way to serve my faith and humanity. The Quran states how Allah says “peoples and tribes that you may know one another”. Well, through my 121 relational meetings I have got to learn about so many vibrant diverse women, who all have rich experiences of community organizing, but also I got to learn that they are

teachers, students, nurses, civil servants, and faith leaders. Most of them are full time mothers too, yet they are so perfect in fulfilling all the relationship and responsibilities. Women 100 Citizens can be source of learning something new each day and an opportunity for forming individual friendship. I have made many friends since I have become a part of Women 100, with Alison , Frankie, Sufia, Dr Mahera and of course Afsana, who is younger than me and gives me a sense of freshness and new learning. Sister Nabila introduced me to Women100 Citizens last year, together with Nabila I would like to bridge that gap between East and West or North West London, through Community Organising.

My involvement as a community leader has no doubt broadened my mind and knowledge about our diverse communities, yet we are one community. However, there is still more to be done so we can learn from each other and show others there is so much we can do if we unite and organise.

And surely us women can lead the way, Insha'Allah. We have Rumana, Lucie, Razna, Kolsuma, Alanna Salma, Victoria, Aysha, all often attending training and meetings with their young children. This gives me hope that community organising will continue, as their kids are observing this every day. What their mothers are doing as a duty will become a habit for the children. These women are raising leaders for the future.

Thank you, Women 100 and Citizens UK for all these memories.



Be a Change Maker!

“O you who believe! Stand firmly for justice, as witnesses for God, even if you must testify against yourselves, parents, or close relations, and whether it be against rich or poor.” (Qur’an 4:135)

By Sajeda Ahmed

(Muslim Chaplain, Early Years Educator, Community Leader, Winner, Community Leader of the Year, 2021)



I am inspired by my faith to be a change-maker. Providing beneficial services to others is something to which I’m committed, as is making a real difference in people’s lives. And it’s all about the people’s power. Whatever good we see in society is from the collective efforts of people who care and are willing to do something about it. People like you and me.

One principle is that true change comes when we first change what’s within ourselves. And most importantly, we must believe that change is possible. When planning to set sail, towards adventure and better horizons, it’s clear that you’re going to at least need a map and nautical know-how. Similarly, we must learn to extract, utilise, and channel our best skills toward a shared goal — working for the common good.

We’re all one great family, like a flower bouquet; different colours, types, fragrances, and shapes. That’s why we’re beautiful, and we support each other and bring vibrancy.

Community work has always been special to me. When I see a situation that doesn’t seem just, I notice it and plan how best to bring about the necessary change. There are all sorts of ways to do this. Naming a few, you could do listening campaigns, hold awareness-raising workshops, lead programmes, organise public events, or even at a very local level have a cup of tea with your neighbours and discuss what needs to change. Collaborating with like-minded gives us the ancient adage, “United we stand, divided we fall,” and helps us achieve more, but I also remember an African proverb: “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.”

In secondary school in the 1980s, I campaigned ardently alongside a group of girls against a school’s rule which forbade Muslim girls to wear the Hijab.

To us we were simply exercising our own choice to wear it or not; we saw it as from our faith, a faith we chose and loved. Ironically, it was a “religiously-inspired” institution, yet they needed someone like me from another faith so they’d learn about respecting these fundamental values about freedom of choice and diversity issues. Eventually, working collectively we convinced them about the importance of respecting cultural and religious values. The outcome pleased me, and thousands of girls have benefitted since. That’s what I call real change; it happens organically, gradually, and peacefully through debates and discussions.

President Biden, in June 2020, spoke to galvanise positive change in a video message addressed to Muslim Americans, quoting a Hadith (saying) of the Prophet Muhammad:

“Whomever among you sees a wrong, let him change it with his hand; if he is not able, then with his tongue; if he is not able, then with his heart.”

Islam teaches me, and us all, to stand up for justice. The above-mentioned teaching of Prophet Muhammad also teaches us the methodology for change. Most people tend to go with the flow and collude with others in doing wrong. We are taught to work with others to bring about positive change. During Covid-19 a number of us from different faith communities allied together and managed to achieve amazing results which brought about positive change in the lives of one or two individuals, yet some changes impacted millions of people e.g.our campaign to include Iceland in the government’s free school meals voucher scheme.

We need to work on ourselves but also work with others to bring about positive change.





It has been an honour to compile and design these powerful individual stories from the Women 100 cohort. I hope these stories have inspired you just as much as they have for me.

- Asad Hussain

