

Speech by Assistant Secretary General Unaiza Malik at the Respect conference, 6 November 2003 at City Hall, London

The Muslim community itself is trying to do its part. We feel that in order to challenge some of the discrimination we have to actually make it known to people and to tell people what the Muslim community stands for. We need, in some way, to give them a truer picture that is not the sort of picture they see every day on the television screens and that link Islam with people being blown up all the time.

On 3 November the Muslim Council of Britain launched an Islamic awareness week at the House of Commons and we have created a web site called the virtual classroom for the children and adults to teach them what Islam is all about. Our attitude is that by making people understand each other, we are more likely to create the bridges and to counteract Islamophobia or any other discrimination by taking the protection of the law.

I think the understanding should create those bridges and a lot of the work being done towards that should help. Respect Islam, which is part of the respect Conference, is a way of celebrating the diversity.

I would say that as leaders, as people with influence, we can make a difference, not just by hiding behind the law or by skirting the margins, and saying we have to stay within the law, but rather to go that extra mile and to make sure that we do engage and we do offer people our trust and the best respect we can.

The Muslim Council of Britain, for instance, is a very young community and most of us have come from very diverse areas so unity is even more difficult to attain because we speak between us more than 100 different languages. It is an extremely difficult thing to achieve, even internally within the Muslim community, and with all the other faith communities as well.

I believe that the capacity problems within the organisations, even within umbrella bodies like my own, are extremely acute and a high priority reason why that community does not come easily. It is a very chicken-and-egg situation. We apply for grants, like the connecting communities grant.

However, because there is a lack of capacity within the organisations, we are not very au fait in doing that work and the majority working in the organisations are volunteers, like myself, who fit in all the work after doing a full eight hours a day at work. We do not have paid staff.

The Muslim community has a specific issue in that we are not a race and are not recognised as a race. Muslims in Britain cut across a lot of different racial divides.

There are Somalis, Bengali Muslims, Pakistanis, Indian Muslims and people from Albania, Turkey and Arabs. It is very difficult, therefore, to define the Muslims as a race and as such Muslims have not until recently been covered by any form of discrimination legislation which makes it difficult to identify or to challenge it.

Also until recently there was no way of measuring, easily, the number of Muslims in this country. In the last Census it has been shown that about three per cent of Britain is Muslim, and the majority of them reside in and around London or in the very large cities.

Three per cent of the British population means that Muslims therefore form the largest minority community group and are larger than all the other faith groups put together. We define ourselves by our faith and faith is something that is a little bit of an unfashionable thing at the moment. It is not very fashionable to be a person of faith or to proclaim your religion. However that is what the majority of the Muslims do.

We have been working very hard therefore to try to work towards achieving religious legislation. The Muslim Council of Britain is an umbrella body and the majority of the Muslim organisations in Britain are affiliated to us.

However, we have a fairly uphill task in the absence of that legislation. There has been some new legislation introduced recently but it still has to go pretty far in order to become mature.