

Teach Muslim women English - for their sake, not ours

The PM was wrong to link mothers' poor language skills with Islamic radicalism and terrorism



David Cameron speaks with women attending an English language class during a visit to the Shantona Women's Centre in Leeds Photo: OLI SCARFF/AFP/Getty Images

By James Kirkup

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“No one would expect or indeed want British Muslims, or any other group, to lay aside their faith, traditions or heritage. But they must not forget that for the child to prosper in Britain and to reach his or her full potential, he or she will also have to have fluent command of English.”

No, not David Cameron this week. Those are the words of John Patten, a Home Office minister under Margaret Thatcher in 1989. It is remarkable that we are still debating similar concerns, and especially the plight of the 22 per cent of Muslim women – almost 190,00 people – with little or no English.

And why should it just be Muslim women who have the opportunity to learn English? Why not anyone who lives in the UK and can't speak English

— Sayeeda Warsi (@SayeedaWarsi) January 18, 2016

Of course, some things have changed. Britain's 2.7 million Muslims include 330,000 full-time students, 43 per cent of them female; 18 per cent of all British Muslims are studying, almost double the rate for the population at large. Many of the boys and girls Lord Patten worried about are on the way to successful professional careers.

But many are not. Perhaps the most shocking thing about Mr Cameron's new figures is how they break down by age. More than half the 40,000 British Muslim women who cannot speak English at all are of working age, between 16 and 64.

These are not elderly grandmothers from the old country who never learned the words of their new home. These are younger women who could otherwise be enjoying all the benefits that work brings. Some 68 per cent of women who speak English fully are in work; but only 34 per cent of "non-proficient" speakers have jobs. And not only are those who work wealthier, they're also healthier too. Low participation in the workforce is one reason only 22 per cent of Muslim women over 65 are in good health, compared to 47 per cent overall.

Of course, there are reasons other than English that Muslim women are less likely than others to work. They're younger on average, so more likely to have young children. And some belong to families that strongly believe mothers should not work. Eighteen per cent of Muslim women are "looking after family" to the exclusion of paid work. It's six per cent overall.

Not least because of what we know about the advantages of work, should we accept that state of affairs without challenge? No. Some would argue that this is all part of the traditions and heritage we are not asking Muslims to lay aside. In fact we should want more Muslim women to work, and say so. This is what Mr Cameron means when he says he wishes to promote "liberal values" more assertively.

Those values are, of course, debatable. But surely one belief broadly held in Britain is that everyone should be able to work to advance themselves and receive the rewards appropriate to their talents and efforts. This is what "equal opportunity" means: the chance to compete on equal terms, to begin the race from the same starting-line.

Yet the phrase has been toxified, polluted by years of misuse by politicians on the Left and heavy-handed bureaucrats whose interventions have been aimed not at ensuring a fair contest where the best win but a fixed one where all must be helped to finish at the same time and share

the spoils according to whatever quota is deemed appropriate. Instead of trying to eliminate handicaps like poor English, the state has too often tried to compensate for them with abundant translation services. “Equal opportunities” has been debased to mean “equal outcomes”, a wholly different and far less desirable thing.

This is one of the most admirable and subtle aspects of what some are (sneeringly) referring to as Mr Cameron’s “bucket list” of social reforms that he wishes to begin before leaving office. Some traditional Conservative critics worry he’s following Tony Blair’s example, aping opposition policies in order to “triangulate” and capture votes. But look more closely and you see that the Cameron aim is rather different and quite Tory: setting people free to compete.

And today some Muslim women are being denied the chance even to enter the labour market’s economic contest of talent, much less win it.

Of course, the same is true of women of other faiths, but Muslim women face even more obstacles that Mr Cameron might help to remove. Language is one, but prejudice is another: as the PM himself noted last year, studies show CVs from job applicants with “Muslim” names are more likely to be binned than “white” ones. That should offend anyone who believes in meritocracy.

Likewise the barriers that block some women who want to re-enter the labour market and earn as much as men, another issue Mr Cameron is rightly pondering for action. He might look at helping to overcome the cultural barriers to men working part-time in order to share childcare duties. That would increase employment among women (of all faiths) more than any other single change

"Some British Muslim women don't speak English and even more don't have jobs. That's not a scandal because it breeds extremism"

If Mr Cameron struck a false note in his intervention, it was his attempt to link poor English to radicalism and terrorism. The evidence for that linkage is unclear. Many jihadists were fluent members of British society; indeed, white British Muslim converts are disproportionately represented among the Islamist

thugs.

Another objection is the message sent by framing the drive to speak English as counter-terrorism. That risks looking like helping Muslim women only as a means to an end – that of curbing terror. But helping Muslim women purely for our sake, not theirs, would be a gift to hate preachers who argue that the West doesn’t really care about Muslim lives.

Some British Muslim women don't speak English and even more don't have jobs. That's not a scandal because it breeds extremism. Radicalisation may be a by-product of segregation but it's not the best reason to address that segregation. It's a scandal because it leaves those women poorer and sicker and denied the chance to compete and make the most of themselves. Unable to become doctors and lawyers and bankers and politicians – if that is what they want. Excluded from a comfortable middle-class that is more than capable of accommodating their faith.

Mr Cameron has started a journey whose destination will not be reached until after his departure. Too many Muslim women today are trapped. Helping them to speak English is a first step to setting them free to make themselves rich: it is a very Conservative dream.

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