# Grassroots Muslim Women in Leadership

Rountable Report, April 2025

**Prepared by**
Nadiya Khair

ROSEBUDS SISTERS

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# Executive Summary

The '***Grassroots Muslim Women in Leadership***' roundtable convened community leaders, policymakers, and representatives from national organisations to examine the contributions of Muslim women driving change across the United Kingdom.

Discussions highlighted the scale and impact of grassroots leadership, the challenges of visibility, funding, and sustaining initiatives, and the resilience and innovation demonstrated by women working at the frontline of community engagement.

Participants explored strategies to strengthen collaboration, amplify recognition, and support sustainable leadership pathways.

# Introduction

The '***Grassroots Muslim Women in Leadership***' roundtable was hosted at the House of Lords and organised by Rosebuds Sisters. The event brought together grassroots organisers, community leaders, and national organisations to recognise the work of Muslim women leading initiatives across the UK.

The programme featured opening remarks, a keynote address, and two panel discussions exploring three key themes of grassroots leadership: frontline leadership, competition for attention and funding, and strategies for building sustainable influence.

It provided a platform for participants to share experiences, reflect on the skills and approaches developed through grassroots work, and consider ways to strengthen networks and collaboration across communities.

# About Rosebuds Sisters

Rosebuds Sisters is a grassroots organisation committed to the empowerment of women, with a particular focus on fostering leadership within the British Muslim community.

The organisation is guided by the principle that when women are empowered, they become catalysts for positive change in their families, local communities, and across the wider society in the United Kingdom.

# Speakers & Contributions

The roundtable brought together a diverse range of leaders from grassroots organisations, national charities, and community initiatives, reflecting the collaborative spirit of the event. The diversity of speakers and contributors highlighted the breadth of experience and expertise across grassroots leadership, community engagement, and national advocacy.

The mix of professional, voluntary, and civic leaders reinforced the event's focus on collaboration, shared learning, and amplifying the impact of Muslim women in leadership across the UK. Participants included:

**Baroness Manzila Uddin**
*Member of House of Lords - Host*

**Aysha Bosher**
*CEO ,Rosebuds Sisters*

**Shaki Hussain**
*Director, Rosebuds Sisters*

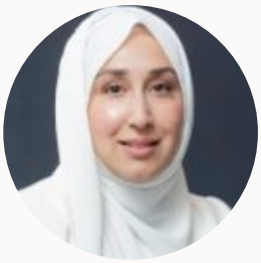
**Atiya Fazalbhai**
*Strategy & Operations Director, Rosebuds Sisters*

**Shaykha Saleha Bukhari**
*Scholar, Rosebuds Sisters Islamic Advisor*

**Lucy Bushill-Matthews**
*Director at Shepa & Associate for Equi*

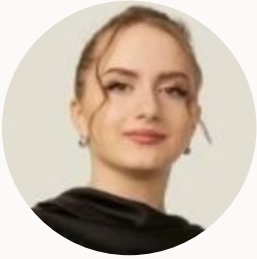
**Zara Mohammed**
*Former Secretary General, Muslim Council of Britain*

**Safia Jama**
*CEO, Women's Inclusive Team*



**Sabah Gilani OBE**
*CEO, Better Community Business Network & Founder of Muslim Women Foundation*

**Rahima Begum**
*CEO Restless Beings*



**Diana Hysenaj**
*Director, Muslim Leadership Foundation*

**Lamees Hafeez**
*Director of Strategy & Communications, Muslim Aid*

# Opening remarks by Baroness Manzila Uddin

The roundtable opened with remarks from Baroness Manzila Uddin, who welcomed participants to the House of Lords and reflected on the role of Muslim women in shaping their communities.

Baroness Uddin noted the often unrecognised leadership of Muslim women within their communities:

> *In every community, women are moving and shaping what happens around them. Often this work is not sufficiently recognised. While recognition is welcome, it is not why women do this work – they do it because of their commitment to their communities and the impact they want to create.*

Drawing on her experience in local government and grassroots activism, Baroness Uddin reflected on the significant but often overlooked roles Muslim women play in sustaining and supporting their communities. She also emphasised the importance of strengthening solidarity and collaboration across different communities in order to support and sustain this leadership.

The discussion set the tone for the roundtable, underscoring both the scale of women's contributions and the need for greater recognition of their role in shaping civic and community life.

# Leadership Insights from Rosebuds Sisters

Prior to the panel discussions, the roundtable featured contributions from key members of Rosebuds Sisters, offering insights into grassroots leadership, faith, and community strategy.

The speakers underscored the significance of Muslim women's leadership in shaping communities across the United Kingdom. They highlighted the dual role of faith and action, emphasising that women operate as both nurturers and agents of societal change, balancing personal, spiritual, and civic responsibilities.

**Aysha Bosher, Rosebuds Sisters CEO and founder**, reflected on the origins of Rosebuds Sisters in Bedfordshire and its growth into a network of forty-nine branches across England, Wales, and Scotland, as well as international connections. Operating as a voluntary, unregistered organisation, the network emphasises authenticity, independence, and accountability, providing culturally competent spaces where women can develop leadership skills and collaborate across sectors.

She noted the importance of recognising and formally supporting bottom-up leadership that stabilises communities and cultivates the next generation of British Muslim female leaders, while also fostering partnerships that may not naturally occur in everyday professional settings.

# Leadership Insights from Rosebuds Sisters

**Rosebuds Sisters' Islamic Advisor, Shaykha Saleha Bukhari** framed leadership from an Islamic perspective, highlighting moral responsibility, justice, and balanced participation as central tenets. Drawing on Quranic teachings and historical examples of women scholars and community leaders, she articulated how spiritual grounding, knowledge, and nurturing capacities underpin effective leadership. She emphasised that Muslim women are full participants in civic life, contributing ethically, intellectually, and socially, and that their empowerment must respect and incorporate faith to be meaningful and authentic.

**Rosebuds Watford Leader, Atiya Fazalbhai** reflected on the experiential growth of women into leadership roles, highlighting how authenticity, personal character, and diverse skills enable community-rooted change. She emphasised the creation of safe and genuine spaces where women's voices are heard, fostering networks that strengthen families and communities and leave a lasting legacy.

The **organisation's director, Umm Mujahid** outlined the strategic vision for Rosebuds Sisters, detailing a dual approach to leadership development: expanding grassroots presence while providing accredited training to ensure leaders are both passionate and professionally recognised.

# Leadership Insights from Rosebuds Sisters

With a ten-year plan to grow chapters and a long-term focus on nurturing young women as future community organisers, the strategy prioritises sustainable impact, professionalisation, and generational continuity.

Collectively, these contributions highlighted the distinctive model of Rosebuds Sisters, demonstrating how grassroots networks, grounded in faith and authenticity, can equip women with the skills, confidence, and collaborative infrastructure to effect meaningful change across communities.

# Panel 1: Grassroots to Governance – Power and Realities of Muslim Women

Panel 1 contributors:

- Zara Mohammed, Former Secretary General, Muslim Council of Britain
- Diana Hysenaj, Director, Muslim Leadership Foundation
- Sabah Gilani OBE, CEO, Better Community Business Network and Founder of Muslim Women Foundation

The first panel explored the realities, challenges, and opportunities of Muslim women's leadership, from grassroots initiatives to national influence. Speakers highlighted the intersection of faith, identity, and leadership, stressing the importance of authentic representation, strategic collaboration, and nurturing future leaders.

**Sacrifice, Visibility, and Role Modelling**

Leadership can carry personal sacrifice. Panellists reflected on the sacrifices often required to navigate public scrutiny, male-dominated spaces, and societal expectations. Taking up space and being visible were framed not as self-promotion but as vital for inspiring the next generation and creating environments where young women feel empowered to participate. Leaders stressed that role modelling and mentorship help younger women understand that their presence matters and that leadership is attainable.

**Grassroots Responsibility and Community Leadership**

At the community level, leadership often emerges through responsibility rather than formal authority. Leaders are expected to translate between communities and institutions, address immediate needs, and sustain programs under constrained resources.

# Panel 1: Grassroots to Governance – Power and Realities of Muslim Women

Diana Hysenaj highlighted the unseen labour of grassroots leadership, noting that trust and relational engagement are central to its practice. Community leaders frequently balance emotional and organisational responsibilities, navigating short-term funding, limited infrastructure, and structural barriers while delivering meaningful impact.

**Collaboration, Capacity, and Sustainability**

Panellists emphasised the power of collaboration and shared infrastructure. By pooling resources, knowledge, and expertise, grassroots organisations can strengthen impact, ensure sustainability, and reduce the burden on individual leaders. Saba Gilani discussed initiatives such as the Muslim Women Founders platform and the Muslim Community Business Network, which foster collaboration, upskill community members, and create platforms that support women's leadership and professional development. Strategic partnerships and capacity-building programs were identified as essential for long-term sustainability and systemic change.

**Faith, Values, and Ethical Leadership**

Leadership was described as rooted in service, values, and integrity. Panellists stressed the importance of aligning actions with ethical and faith-informed principles while fostering collective ownership. Muslim women leaders occupy unique positions, using their lived experiences, community trust, and networks to influence both local initiatives and policy discussions. They highlighted the responsibility to leave doors open for future leaders, passing on knowledge, opportunities, and mentorship.

# Panel 1: Grassroots to Governance – Power and Realities of Muslim Women

**Entrepreneurial and Systemic Impact**

The panel also highlighted the role of business acumen, strategic thinking, and data-informed approaches in community leadership. Projects such as grant-giving initiatives, incubators, and leadership programs illustrate how grassroots work can influence systemic change. Panellists stressed that cultivating skills, professionalism, and cultural competency within the community strengthens both immediate community outcomes and long-term organisational sustainability.

**Key Takeaways Across the discussion, three central themes emerged:**

1. **Authentic Representation**: Muslim women must see themselves reflected in leadership spaces to inspire participation.
2. **Collaborative Infrastructure**: Sharing resources, knowledge, and partnerships is crucial for sustainable impact.
3. **Future Leadership**: Passing on skills, guidance, and opportunities ensures the longevity of effective, values-driven leadership.

The panel demonstrated that Muslim women leaders navigate complex challenges with resilience, creativity, and commitment. By integrating grassroots insight, ethical stewardship, and strategic collaboration, they are shaping sustainable, inclusive, and impactful leadership pathways for current and future generations of Muslim women.

# Panel 2: What Muslim Women's Community Work Teaches Us About Real Change

Panel 2 contributors:

- Rahima Begum, CEO, Restless Beings
- Lamees Hafeez, Director of Strategy and Communications, Muslim Aid
- Lucy Bushill-Matthews, Director at Shepa & Associate for Equi
- Safia Jame, CEO, Women's Inclusive Team

The second panel explored how community work led by Muslim women drives tangible change. The discussion opened with reflections on the importance of grassroots action and the unique contributions Muslim women bring to leadership and social impact.

**Building from Lived Experience**

Speakers highlighted how personal and community experiences shape effective solutions. Growing up in Tower Hamlets, one panellist emphasised how understanding local challenges allowed her to create culturally sensitive spaces for youth and women, ensuring safety, opportunity, and support within the community.

**Grassroots Leadership in Action**

The panel showcased examples of practical initiatives, from charity cafés and youth clubs to refugee advocacy and humanitarian projects. These projects demonstrate that leadership does not always require formal titles and that small, locally led actions can contribute to broader social change

**Skills Development and Capacity Building**

Through community engagement, Muslim women cultivate critical skills such as negotiation, advocacy, emotional intelligence, and strategic planning

# Panel 2: What Muslim Women's Community Work Teaches Us About Real Change

**Collaboration and Mentorship**
Speakers stressed the importance of peer support and collaboration across organisations. Sharing skills, coordinating efforts, and mentoring others amplifies impact and builds sustainable networks of leadership.

**Faith, Conviction, and Courage**
Commitment to faith and ethical values emerged as central to Muslim women's leadership. Panellists reflected on how courage, conviction, and service guide decision-making, inspire others, and enable women to occupy spaces where they can effect change.

**Authenticity and Storytelling**
The panel emphasised authenticity as a cornerstone of leadership. Sharing real stories of impact, rather than relying solely on data, can be a powerful tool in advocacy and fundraising, helping to influence policies and mobilise communities.

**Sustaining Change**
Finally, speakers highlighted that community work is both an act of service and a strategy for systemic influence. By addressing needs at the grassroots level, Muslim women create pathways for long-term social impact, ensuring their communities are represented and empowered.

**Key Takeaways**
Across the discussion, three central themes emerged:

1. **Grassroots action drives real change** – Muslim women's community work, from youth programs to humanitarian projects, shows that

meaningful leadership often starts locally, addressing immediate needs while building broader social impact.

2. **Skills, collaboration, and authenticity are essential** – Through hands-on work, women develop negotiation, advocacy, and leadership skills, while collaboration and mentoring strengthen communities. Staying authentic and using storytelling enhances influence and inspires others.
3. **Faith, conviction, and courage empower leadership** – Commitment to ethical values and belief in the mission guide decision-making, encourage resilience, and help women occupy spaces where they can create tangible, sustainable change.

# Closing Remarks

Baroness Manzila Uddin thanked the speakers for their contributions, highlighting how effectively the discussion had captured the key issues affecting Muslim women in leadership and community work. She encouraged attendees not to let this event be their last engagement, noting that conversations about women's roles extend beyond leadership to areas such as health, education, and the criminal justice system.

A recurring theme she emphasised was authenticity. The Baroness observed that Muslim women remain underrepresented in public spaces, noting that authentic voices - women rooted in their communities and able to advocate confidently for community needs - are often absent from decision-making platforms.

She highlighted the pivotal role of women volunteers, who consistently sustain and uplift organisations without necessarily seeking personal gain, and acknowledged the responsibility this entails.

Baroness Uddin concluded with a call to channel feelings of frustration into positive action, encouraging women to use their voices and experiences to influence change and hold institutions accountable.

# Voices from the Roundtable

**Leadership and Representation**

Rahima Begum, CEO of Restless Beings
*"Muslim women's change and community leadership led by Muslim women comes with faith, comes with commitment, comes with courage, and it comes with conviction."*

Rahima Begum, CEO of Restless Beings
*"We occupy spaces now. We have to create these dreams and show what Muslim women can do in leadership."*

Safia Jame, CEO of the Women's Inclusive Team
*"All of us are leaders in the community. What we need is to build our capacity and awareness to support each other."*

**Community Impact and Grassroots Action**

Safia Jame, CEO of the Women's Inclusive Team
*"When we create safe and supportive spaces for women, we're not just helping them—we're helping their children, their families, and the wider community."*

Lucy Bushill-Matthews, Director at Shepa & Associate for Equi
*"We do more with less... we are the grassroots. We know what is needed at the community level."*

# Voices from the Roundtable

**Authenticity and Values-Based Leadership**

Lucy Bushill-Matthews, Director at Shepa & Associate for Equi
*"Authenticity is key. Allah put you in that space and gave you that opportunity because of who you are."*

Baroness Manzila Uddin
*"The only reason you don't see enough women in the public space is because authenticity- women who believe in themselves and are rooted in the community."*

***Collaboration and Collective Change***

Lucy Bushill-Matthews, Director at Shepa & Associate for Equi
*"We should stand for collaboration, consultation, and long-term change, not short-term heroism or self-promotion."*

Lucy Bushill-Matthews, Director at Shepa & Associate for Equi
*"A good story of real impact can win more support than numbers on a spreadsheet."*

***Responsibility and Action***

Baroness Manzila Uddin
*"When you feel a sense of anger, don't take it out in the public space - channel it constructively so that institutions behave better next time."*

# Thank You

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Rosebuds community, Baroness Manzila Uddin , and all our supporters for their continued encouragement, trust, and collaboration throughout the year.

## For More Information


info@rosebudssisters.org

rosebudsisters

www.rosebudssisters.org