FOREWORD

by Qaisra Shahraz MBE

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Dr Saskia Warren’s fantastic book pays homage to Muslim women and their achievements. It is a breath of fresh air, celebrating and exploring the growth of Muslim women-led creative arts. Dr Warren explores how Muslim creative arts are developing in Britain, and the changing landscape of the cultural and creative industries in relation to gender, faith and ethnicity. We learn how British Muslims are widely involved in fashion, media and visual arts, and other related fields, such as Islamic hip hop, calligraphy, fictional writing, film, comedy and so on. The striking and gorgeous cover by Azraa Motala celebrates diversity, which beautifully introduces the reader to one of the key themes.

Currently, I run an award-winning, internationally successful Muslim Arts and Culture festival (Macfest) and I will be launching Muslim Women’s Arts Foundation and Festival in 2022. Previously, however, my well-established writing career was the poor sister, playing second fiddle to my successful career in education. Why? The income gained from my novels and stories could not pay my bills. Sometimes, when I returned from my literary tours I would invariably be asked the same question by my father: ‘What have they paid you, or you did it for free?’
Dr Warren’s book is bursting with invaluable scholarly research, about Muslim women in the cultural and creative industries. I learnt a lot and found it riveting reading. The impressive thirty-five narratives of Muslim women of all ages and backgrounds provides us with a window into the world of their aspirations, insight into their personal journeys and the challenges faced both at home, within the community and in the work place. Wider social context is provided through public focus groups and workshops.

Often Muslim women are the subject of negative perceptions and stereotypes, including in the media. Dr Warren’s sensitive approach in capturing the women’s experiences, her in-depth knowledge about Muslim communities, Islamic values and cultural issues – for example relating to South Asian communities – are highly commendable. The book honours and celebrates not only the women’s achievements but delves into, with extreme understanding and sensitivity, the hurdles the women have faced and continue to face, in both entering and progressing in the cultural and creative industries.

The author clearly highlights how societal changes and discrimination impact the women creatives at a human level. In one chapter, writing that ‘Muslim women are subjected to multiple, intersecting and overlapping forms of discrimination’, she shows how persistent Islamophobia and sexism in Western-liberal societies can create barriers to accessing and advancing in mainstream employment. And also how art schools have brought special challenges for Muslim women. Of the women interviewed, some experienced the feeling of being ‘othered’ and others found it a challenge to fit ‘into a dominant white and liberal culture’.

Thus the case studies inform us that for many women it has not been an easy journey, in particular when their chosen interest or work in the arts field is either not taken seriously enough, or they are discouraged, including by their parents or family members. My personal artistic journey, which I also shared in the research project, mirrors a number of these challenges.
Long overdue, this book is of immense importance and a significant contribution, giving voice to a crucial segment of contemporary Muslim society. It leaves us with hope that social attitudes towards gender and work appear to be changing for British Muslims. And while there are concerns, there is much to celebrate.