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### Want to volunteer in Malawi with Global Xchange project?

YOUNG Scots are being offered the chance to work with Malawian volunteers under an exchange scheme.

The Global Xchange programme is working with the Scottish Executive to recruit nine people, aged 18-25, to work with volunteers from Malawi on three-month joint projects in Caithness and Malawi. It is the first time the Global Xchange programme has run a Scottish exchange.

Applications are being sought now and the deadline is December 15. For an application form e-mail enquiry@globalxchange.org.uk

### Charity calls for two annual grants for poorest families

A REPORT by Save the Children claims 60% of low-income households believe they will never have enough to live on. The charity says that despite government initiatives on child poverty, Scots parents will struggle desperately this winter with cost such as rising fuel prices.

Over a quarter of parents interviewed by the charity said their children often miss out on basics such as essential shoes and clothes. Save the Children is calling for the Government to introduce two seasonal grants a year for families to lift 440,000 children in the UK out of poverty.

### Friday's positive parenting conference is sold-out

THE work of a groundbreaking scheme for troubled families will be highlighted at a major conference this week.

The charities Quarriers and Children in Scotland are hosting the sell-out event on engaging with parents and protecting children, in Falkirk this Friday. Speakers will examine successful approaches, and tackle issues such as working with dads, and promoting positive parenting.

The Quarriers Family Resource Centre in Greater Easterhouse will be used as an example of a successful approach.

### Prince's Trust honours Scots

SCOTTISH young people and volunteers will be honoured by The Prince's Trust at an awards ceremony in Glasgow on Thursday.

Celebrities including Sandi Thom and Karen Dunbar will present the Celebrate Success awards to winners.

# 'I got more phone calls in the veil than in a week on

**Mona Siddiqui doesn't mind being a 'rent-a-gob on Islam'. She just wishes we would focus on the bigger political issues.**  
By Emma Seith

**H**ASINA Khatoon had three daughters. She decided they would be an academic, a doctor and a barrister. Several decades later and her vision is a reality. Today the academic daughter – Professor Mona Siddiqui – has risen as high as she can in her chosen field. Recently appointed professor of Islamic studies and public understanding, she is the first female Muslim chair in Islamic studies in Scotland.

Siddiqui says: "My mother wanted us to be independent, both intellectually and financially, but, in parallel, she wanted us to do be married and have children."

How her mother managed to bend all of her daughters to her will Siddiqui isn't sure. "Maybe we were too obedient, too ignorant or too naive to question," she ponders.

So, did her mother get it right? For a time Siddiqui thought she might like to be a spy but concedes that was something of a romantic notion. More realistic, however, was her desire to be a journalist.

Her mother didn't approve. Journalism would have meant a move to London. "a cesspit of all sorts of things in her eyes," says Siddiqui. Then, at Manchester University, where she did a masters in Middle Eastern studies and then a doctorate in classical Islamic law, Siddiqui "developed a love for some sort of academia" and both mother and daughter were satisfied.

But she attributes the enjoyment she now gets from working with the media to

those early leanings towards journalism. Since setting up the Centre for the Study of Islam in Glasgow University's department of theology 11 years ago, Siddiqui has frequently been asked to comment to the press on Muslim issues. She believes theologians have a role when it comes to increasing public understanding of religious issues but this is more of a hobby. Her work at the university revolves around academic publications and teaching. Muslims have not always known such prominence in Britain. There was a time, says Siddiqui, when they were largely ignored and what wider society knew about Islam could have been written on the back of stamp.

Siddiqui says her first memory of Islam being thrust into the limelight was when Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ordered the death of Salman Rushdie for writing the novel *The Satanic Verses*.

At that time Siddiqui was asked to speak to the BBC. Not having read *The Satanic Verses*, however, she felt ill-equipped to comment, and was intimidated by the prospect. Now, in changed days, Siddiqui jokingly describes herself as a "rent-a-gob on Islam". Hence, when Jack Straw called for devout Muslim women to discard their veils, Siddiqui's phone rang off the hook. "I got more calls in one morning about the veil issue than in a week about the London bombings," says Siddiqui. "For me, that's a travesty of where we are when it's this kind of stuff that makes the headlines. I think it's easier to latch on to these culturally controversial issues rather than the big political problems that underlie terrorism."

"It's a fallacy that if you dress a certain way you are really integrated. You could be completely western in all sorts of visible ways but you may not feel this is your home."

Nevertheless, she understands why the veil has become so prominent. "The veil has become an image of everything the west has struggled against: a lack of transparency, gender equality, open communication."

Undoubtedly, some women will be pressurised into wearing the veil, says Siddiqui. She chooses not to cover her head or face but she, too, faced pressure to adopt a less western-style of dress from the Muslim community in Glasgow when she was first



appointed at the university. "The way they saw it was if I did not wear Muslim clothing or the veil, how could I teach Islamic studies?" she says.

She resisted the demands because she interprets her religion differently but would not deny other women the choice. However she balks at descriptions of wearing the veil as a human right. "I believe that the women calling this a human right are abusing the term. Human rights are a serious issue and I think it's an affront to human dignity to say that. It's outrageous."

But Siddiqui is tired of talking about veils. Instead she would prefer to debate the big issues she feels Muslim communities need to resolve, such as forced marriage, divorce and gender equality. "Muslim communities react to the global agenda set upon them but they are not looking internally and trying to think about how can we make society better."

She even advocates government intervention and calls on ministers to stop tiptoeing around Islam. "How else are we going to move on?" she asks. "The government has to bite the bullet. They might have to do so sensitively but a lot of Muslims want these discussions because they know they will be good for their own communities."

But already some Muslims claim they feel under siege. Siddiqui doesn't accept

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**ON THURSDAY**  
**Melanie Reid**

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