



Muslim Women and The Arts

MWC Think + Do Tank Report

Background

The way we do research to inform policy isn't working. Today, most community based/'led' research is done through collaborations between large science or specialist research institutes partnering with local organisations beyond their institutions. Whilst this is an attempt to enrich the quality of research and of bringing wider social benefits, it still lacks the true representation of the communities they are trying to help. Where such partnerships are formed the experiences are not always productive or conducive to drawing on the knowledge and expertise of all participants, as they remain the subject not the co-authors of the research.

There is a need for a process that places these individuals and communities as the authors of research that considers the issues they face; and develops practical responses and recommendations from the ground up. There is a need for a radical shift and movement in how authentic data and insights are collected from women of Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

In response MWC have developed an approach that focuses on the delivery of authentic and appropriate research to create better policy and practice that drive practical solutions that address these women's needs, issues and barriers.

Think + Do Tank

We hope to reverse the current trend of Muslim males and non-Muslims researching and advocating on behalf of Muslim women. Our approach will straddle the 'Think + Do Tank' between both policy and beneficiaries (Muslim Women) and will offer authentic insight and appropriate solutions, as it will be led by the beneficiaries. We focus on the relevance, credibility, legitimacy and utility of the research we do, ensuring that we position our research for use.

We focus on Muslim women from Bradford and surrounding areas. Within this group there is a climate of misogyny and patriarchy fuelled by public stereotyping and male-dominated interpretations of women's roles and positions. In short, society is denying these women their ability to think and act independently or contribute to the creation of policies and practices that affect them and their community.

For example, Muslim women have not been regularly engaged as contributors to research and policy reflective of them. It seems that most research is a male bastion, which undermines their effectiveness and puts them at a disadvantage and impacts on how they research and present the needs of women. This project will be women led and women governed, therefore putting these women at the heart of the research.



Introduction



With the internet, social media, and globally connected news we are beginning to see and hear about various Muslim women involved in the arts and doing creative practices. But still there is a scarcity of opportunities for Muslim women to participate in the arts or creative practices that offers them an opportunity to explore the benefits that art brings to people's lives.

There are very limited or short-term arts opportunities that give local Muslim women the confidence, opportunity, inspiration, and ability to explore various art forms and create art, either individually or within a cohort; without breaking any of their faith beliefs.

At Muslim Women's Council we have tried at various times to take local Muslim women and girls on an artistic journey of exploration and engagement. We have done this currently with the support of LEAP and earlier activities were developed with our board advisors Nuzhat Ali and Shabnam Khan. This has given us a long journey of involving not just Muslim women but the Muslim community with the arts and other creative practices.

With LEAP we have explored various creative activities for women to engage with and this led to the creation of Al Asma Al Husna, a series of new light installations that combines Arabic calligraphy and Neon lighting to share the Islamic Heritage (the 99 Beautiful Names of God/Allah).

Nuzhat Ali has been the main driver locally within the organisation and the community, encouraging local women and girls to be involved in creative writing. She won the Northern Writers Awards 2015 and developed scripts for TV and theatre.

Shabnam Khan is a professional vocalist and has been a role model to other women when it comes to stage presence and performing in front of audiences.

There is a need to help Muslim women transition from where they are currently to confidently explore and engage with ‘acceptable’ arts, without any fear or worry. To become ‘artists’ themselves by owning their own definition of art and creativity. If this can be achieved then we have a real opportunity to develop the artistic, leadership and cultural development skills of local Muslim women.

This insight paper presents the thoughts of 100 women we have worked with over the last 5 years of activity. These include barriers faced and recommendations to further develop Muslim women audiences and artists. For example, there are limited comfortable and safe spaces that exist for women to attend and pursue their artistic talents. Many Muslim women were, in general, reluctant to get involved in the arts because they felt it compromised their family, religious and cultural beliefs.

Islam

Many of the women we work with follow Islam and pursue action and opportunities based on its tenets.

Islam is a monotheistic and Abrahamic religion articulated by the Qur’an, a book considered by its adherents to be the verbatim word of God (Allah) and the teachings of Muhammad (pbuh), who is considered to be the last prophet of God. An adherent of Islam is called a Muslim.

Most Muslims are of two denominations: Sunni or Shia. Its essential religious concepts and practices include the five pillars of Islam, which are basic concepts and obligatory acts of worship, and the following of Islamic law, which touches on every aspect of life and society.

The five pillars are:

- 1- Shahadah (belief or confession of faith)
- 2- Salat (worship in the form of prayer)
- 3- Sawm Ramadan (fasting during the month of Ramadan)
- 4- Zakat (alms or charitable giving)
- 5- Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime)

Islamic Art



Islamic art encompasses the visual arts produced from the seventh century onward by both Muslims and non-Muslims who lived within the territory that was inhabited by, or ruled by, culturally Islamic populations.

It is not art of a specific religion, time, place, or of a single medium. Instead, it spans some 1400 years, covers many lands and populations, and includes a range of artistic fields including architecture, calligraphy, painting, glass, ceramics, and textiles, among others.

Islamic art is not restricted to religious art, but instead includes all the art of the rich and varied cultures of Islamic societies. It frequently includes secular elements and elements that are forbidden by some Islamic theologians.

Islamic religious art differs from Christian religious art in that it is non-figural because many Muslims believe that the depiction of the human form is idolatry, and thereby a sin against God, forbidden in the Qur'an. Calligraphy and architectural elements are given important religious significance in Islamic art.

Islamic architecture, such as mosques and palatial gardens of paradise, are also embedded with religious significance. While examples of Islamic figurative painting do exist, and may cover religious scenes, these examples are typically from secular contexts, such as the walls of palaces or illuminated books of poetry.

Other religious art, such as glass mosque lamps, Garih tiles, woodwork, and carpets usually demonstrate the same style and motifs as contemporary secular art, although they exhibit more prominent religious inscriptions.

Islamic art was developed from many sources: Roman, early Christian art, and Byzantine styles; Sassanian art of pre-Islamic Persia; Central Asian styles brought by various nomadic incursions, and Chinese influences appear on Islamic painting, pottery, and textiles.

Muslim Women and Art



Today much of Islamic art is defined by religious art. And many of the women we work with see any form of creativity (sewing, knitting, mehndi, rangoli, singing, music, poetry, etc) as art. But still considered it more for others to do rather than them as they have other responsibilities around family duties.

The women and girls we work with are not one-dimensional people. There are lots of different wonderful things that make them whole and sometimes it can be challenging for them to explore and navigate. Their culture, religion, faith and belief can present great comforts, but also great challenges to their identities.

We know that art as a creative outlet can support and enable them to become both confident and comfortable with regards to their own identity and culture in relation to those around them. It can give them a way of expressing the colour, depth and richness of their life. An outlet through which to navigate and present their opinions and thinking on beliefs, ethnicity, religious/faith and cultural identities.

The women we worked with highlighted the reluctance they had being involved in art, but once engaged they expressed a great joy and wonder, but with an undercurrent of constant worry. Our work highlighted various barriers and issues they have faced, which have led to them presenting recommendations advising how best to engage them and develop their talent:

- Environmental barriers (lack of accessible information)
- Systematic barriers (segregated provision)
- Attitudinal barriers (individuals being seen as useless or needy)

Art is open, subjective, debatable. There is a clear need for Muslim women to own a definition of what they consider as art, to have a form of human expression of a creative nature that they are individually comfortable with. Rather than a definition that they must conform with.

Barriers

Art is compelling. Art is beautiful, sure. But mostly, art is work. And in that way, it's no different than being a doctor or a lawyer or an Indian chief. Most importantly, it serves to pursue happiness, not as something we can take the time to appreciate once we achieve it.

Over the 5 years of creative engagement, access to the arts (audience/artist) has been limited by a "triple penalty"; of them being women, being from an ethnic minority and being Muslim.

*'I feel uncomfortable going to the museum ... as I looked different'
'As a woman we are not encouraged to think about art and crafts, instead we are encouraged to be mothers and wives.'*

'I was lucky my parents encouraged my imagination and encouraged me to explore arts'

'We need to ensure that we do not create a negative image regarding arts, art is beautiful... but the men have made it bad ... its in their own heads'

'The stereotype from both our people and English people does not allow us to grow in anything we want to do, including arts'

'Thank God for Muslim Women's Council... we can meet and do arts with them without anyone questioning what we do.'

'I need to do more than housework and look after the family... I don't like TV... I like music and reading ... I like drawing'

Some of the barriers highlighted by the women we engage and work with include:

- Affordability in accessing artwork but also working as an artist is not seen as being a lucrative or respectable career.
- Accessibility to art venues and activities, it seems an opportunity for others, even though they may watch Bollywood actresses it is not something they think they could do.
- Not considered as something for Muslims let alone Muslim women, more for white middle-classes. They felt they could only access what was done for the community by the community.
- Physical constraints within art venues which do not make it comfortable for Muslim women to attend, as no one looks like them.
- Location of art venues that are in the 'wrong' part of town.
- Lack of confidence and/or understanding in the women themselves.

- The community attitude towards them (Muslim women) attending or participating in mainstream arts, which limits them from even trying.
- Lack of understanding of Muslim women and their needs by art venues and those that teach art.
- Lack of information regarding what is on in a way that they can access.

Recommendations

From the past 5 years we have the following recommendations:

- Venues and art producers need to be more aware and informed of the cultural, traditional, and religious needs of Muslim women
- Offer financial incentive to access art venues or to practice art forms
- Acceptance and appreciation of diversity, not putting a label on them
- There is a need to consult with marginalised communities
- Arts organisations working in partnership with specialist service providers to help offer increased information/awareness of events
- More research leading to evidence-based policy within and across the arts to reduce elitism in the industry as a whole
- Valuing work created by Muslim women, no matter the format, as it their expression of their own personal basic human emotions and lived experiences, such as happiness, sadness, tragedy, ecstasy and so on.

Conclusion

It is important that we enable Muslim women with the ability to present their lived experience through 'art'. Especially as it is a vital component of how we can better understand their culture, economic and social experiences.

It is an opportunity for them to have an alternative 'voice' to transmit their ideas and values with others. Not stuck in either an aesthetic component or a socio-educational function only but both.

MWC Response



Building on the momentum of our online resources helping women learn basic arts and crafts – https://www.muslimwomenscouncil.org.uk/resources/art_creativity

We developed Al Asma Al Husna: The Beautiful Names of Allah (God), which was a series of 3 new light installations that combined Arabic calligraphy and neon lighting funded by LEAP Bradford. Please note the first leg of the project reached tens of thousands of people that viewed the artwork, and over a million online as it was picked up by newspapers such as The National.

We are now delivering workshops hosted by Arabic Calligrapher Razwan UI-Haq, for 60 local Muslim women to discuss and experience art and culture, without compromising their faith through calligraphy.

We hope to create 30 pieces of work which will be exhibited around Bradford offering local people an arts trail to follow, so they can experience and enjoy various aspects of Bradford's colourful culture as well as the art. Locations will include places of worship, shops, community organisations, restaurants, etc.

We hope that the images displayed across Bradford will offer the opportunity for Bradfordians from all communities to have the chance to engage in a creative experience, develop understanding of living heritage and share our own experiences of showing love, and spreading peace within our communities.

We want to create engagement spaces in everyday life for families, children and communities to reflect on the qualities that underpin the names, the heritage and create new conversations surrounding intercultural lived experiences across one of the most diverse cities in the UK.

**Report created by the Think + Do Tank
participants supported by the MWC team.**

