



Muslim Women and Employment

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 women's health and wellbeing.

Think + Do Tank

With the support of Wellcome Trust, we hope to reverse the current trend of Muslim males and non-Muslims researching and advocating on behalf of Muslim women, especially regarding issues of health, wellbeing and bioscience.

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 health, wellbeing and bio-science policies and practices that affect them and their community.

For example, Muslim women have not been 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.



Overview



With the continued growth of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity in the UK, the different parts of society must address and accommodate the expression of a wide variety of religious beliefs and practices in different social spheres in order to ensure social cohesion, equity, equality and inclusion for all.

Furthermore, there needs to be a real commitment to combating and alleviating inequalities and discrimination based on religion or belief. All of which can contribute towards reducing poverty, improve gender equality, improve employment prospects and help towards a more peaceful, just and inclusive society.

Among the main challenges for the UK in relation to the emergence of growing religious diversity, is its relationship with Islam, and the impact on the lives and prospects of Muslim women, especially regarding employment.

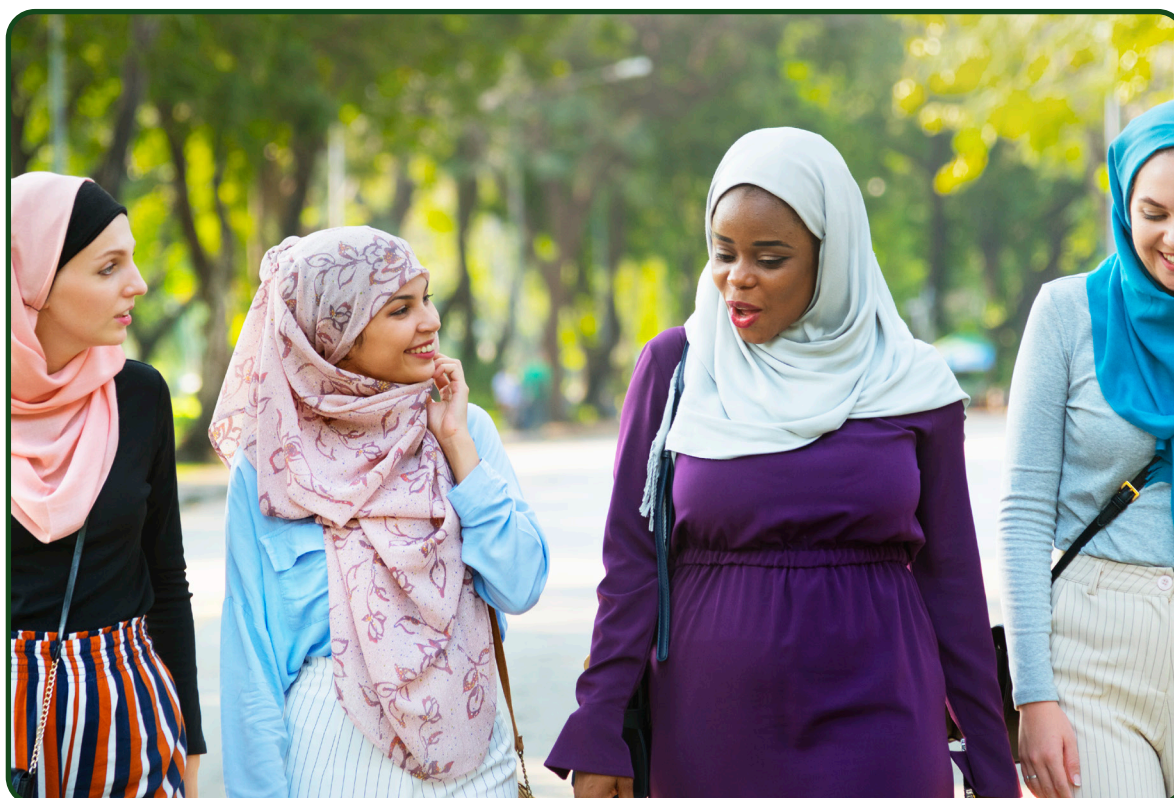
Religious expression in the workplace can take explicit forms, including speaking about one's beliefs, praying in public spaces, requesting accommodations for religious practice, abstaining from behaviours such as drinking or eating certain types of food, and wearing clothing or other distinctive religious symbols.

The experiences of Muslim women who wear the hijab or Muslim headscarf in public spaces and at work are many. Among the forms of discrimination that this group face when accessing job opportunities are lower incomes, longer periods of unemployment, lower performance of their qualifications, slower job advancement and lack of promotion.

Other situations of discrimination are related to receiving a perceived unfair treatment by supervisors and co-workers or setting stricter standards to assess the professional performance of Muslim employees.

When looking into the situation of Muslim women we need to pay attention to the unique barriers they face, while simultaneously ensuring a greater visibility of the efforts and contributions to today's society.

Research



We worked with 25 local Muslim women who fell into two categories. Stay-at-home mums/grandmothers/carers who are socially isolated, struggling with the English language, and have little understanding of British culture, their rights, and services available to them. The other group was women who have good levels of language and education, but struggle to attain decent employment due to various barriers.

All these women face what has been referred to by the government as a “triple penalty”; for being women, for being Muslim and, for the majority, being BAME. Their disadvantages include health inequalities, poverty, islamophobia, sexism and racism.

We have found Muslim women are more educated in comparison to the general population but suffer higher unemployment and inactivity levels. Some of the reasons for this are:

- many want to look after their children before they start full-time schooling
- multiple discrimination barriers created by society, the community, and employers
- limited recognition of skills, qualifications and experience
- lack of understanding and over complication by employers

Findings

- “I feel I have betrayed my principles and my religion by giving up my hijab to get a job... I still do not have the guts to start wearing it again in the job now I have it.”

- “My hijab has benefited me in finding employment as a teacher, as I seem to be ticking a box for the school I work at ...”

- “I feel ignored and made to feel invisible ... I think it is because I am Muslim as I am always friendly, but they never bother with me. I feel that it is not us Muslims who are failing to integrate but others and their ignorance about other cultures that is causing this gap.”

- “I see the disapproval on the interviewers' faces at my headscarf when I go for interviews... I can get past the application stage, but not the interview ...”

- “My confidence has been affected and I feel like no matter how much experience I have and how good my education is, there are just some jobs I won't get because I am a Muslim.”

- “I have been completely put off from applying for any corporate jobs where I just know the culture does not support a Muslim lifestyle.”

- "My own community and culture frowned upon me and restricted me from getting the job I wanted... we are facing problems from all sides."
- "The women in my community who I thought would be supportive of me have asked me why am I getting a job ... Your husband should provide for you or what about your children... I can't be a good wife/mother/housekeeper as well as have a job."
- "Society should not dictate how people live. As Muslims we often live more traditionally than the rest of society... It is our choice if we want to work or not, no one else's."
- "We are not more complicated than a non-Muslim woman."
- "We as a community do not do ourselves any favours and do not present ourselves in the media in the best light."
- "I have never wanted to believe that my being a Muslim woman would in turn have an impact on people's perceptions of me as an individual, but it is there."
- "We should not be judged by how we look but by what we can do."

Conclusion



It is important for people in positions of responsibility and decision-making having an open and respectful attitude towards the life and experiences of Muslim women, away from any assumptions and stereotypes.

It is about creating a level playing field based on skills, ability, experience, and ambition, where the 'other' can strive equally.

We all need to recognise that Muslim women are part of this country and are not here to be a hidden part of the Muslim community. They have skills, knowledge and ability to contribute to society both socially and economically when given the chance. And if those who are from here care about Bradford or the UK, then they should invest in us by giving us a chance to contribute to creating new things that help improve the country.

Recommendations

The focus of the following recommendations suggested by Muslim women presents ideas to help mix of work and family, increase their employment and progression levels, and help address the low employment knock-on effects of child poverty and social exclusion:

- Tackle misconceptions regarding the educational levels and career aspirations of Muslim women in the community, held by employers and society head-on through information and awareness workshops for employers and employment service providers. This should include promoting the abilities, willingness to work and aspirations of Muslim women.
- MWC and other grass root organisations to work with employers to reduce both gender and religious discrimination.
- Produce guidance to help employers openly address faith in the workplace and ensure they have in place effective measures to support reported cases of religious discrimination.
- Produce information and communication tools to ensure employers can effectively communicate to their employees that they will not tolerate direct or indirect forms of religious discrimination, and that religious dress and religious practice of Muslims in the workplace is protected by legislation.
- Provide support to employers to reach and connect women to job opportunities. Muslim women do not regularly use employment services such as Jobcentre Plus because they do not or are perceived not to cater to their needs. A much more targeted and holistic approach is required, one that reaches out to the community and tackles the multiple barriers these women face.

- Provide workshops to engage Muslim women, provide one-to-one job preparation, job-search, and career advice, and tackle the multiple barriers to employment to help them find suitable employment.
- Increase awareness among Muslim women of the benefits of childcare, the eligibility of tax credits, etc, for them to use while they look for work.
- Help graduates and other skilled women progress in their careers – and build their soft skills and networks through volunteer work experience placements.
- Need research that monitors employment outcomes by religion and ethnicity.
- MWC and other Muslim organisations partnering with employer organisations to support initiatives to address faith actively and openly in the workplace, remove barriers and discrimination, dispel myths through open dialogue sessions and Muslim or inter-faith networks between Muslims and non-Muslims.

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

