

The impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on Muslim Women in the UK

December 2020

Findings Report

The Think Tank Programme

The programme is aimed at enabling Muslim women to represent their lived experiences and needs within research policy and practice. MWC endeavours, through this programme, to ensure that Muslim women of all backgrounds can seriously influence policy and decision making at all levels. Muslim women have been used by researchers when it has suited their research projects and government agendas, regurgitating the tired and reductive narratives about 'the Muslim woman'. Women we have worked with over the years have increasingly expressed their frustration with being used as 'subjects' for research agendas framed by others and now want their unmediated voices to be heard.

We aim to enrich and correct the knowledge landscape by ensuring that new relevant research is produced directly by Muslim women on issues that they feel are important to them & their communities, building trust between communities and research institutes. The evidence, recommendations and solutions generated by them will be used to show how the government and both the public and private sectors can help create conditions that allow Muslim women to thrive.

Through creating an army of community researchers who themselves have full awareness of the issues within their communities, women are being empowered to be authors of solutions that bring about societal change. We are creating a legacy of future leaders, community researchers and advocates who will inspire others around them.



What This Study Covers

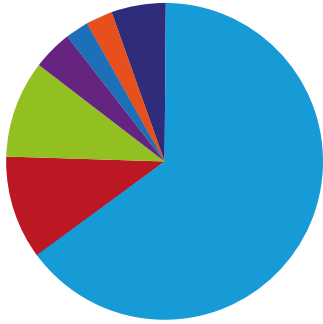
The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives. Everyone is worried about their security and that of their loved ones, their own health and the impact of the pandemic on their jobs and means of living. Since the start of the lockdown in the UK, a national debate is taking place about government measures to control the pandemic. Our aim was to understand the experiences of Muslim women in the UK during the lockdown, on issues ranging from home-schooling children and the impact on mental & physical health, to finances, views on government handling of the crisis and challenges to civil liberties.

With many pieces of research currently being undertaken about the impact of COVID-19 on the general population, the women researchers felt it was imperative to examine the impact of the pandemic on their lives as Muslim women, in a timely and relevant manner. The researchers formulated questions around distinct themes relating to the impact of the pandemic, ensuring questions were both easy to understand and open, to allow participants to express as many views as possible.

We published the online survey on our social media platforms, our website and by direct emails to our members. The survey was available to complete between 18 May and 27 July 2020, during which time 122 Muslim women undertook the survey from across the UK. The participants were aged between 16 and 69, with the three most common ethnic backgrounds being Pakistani (64.8%), White British (10.7%) and Indian (9.8%).

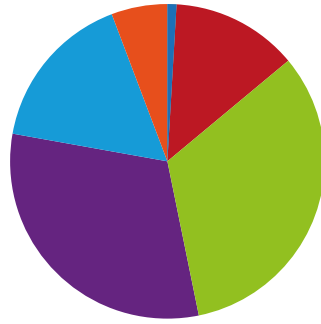
This is a preliminary report, the aim of which is to convey the views and voices of Muslim women about COVID-19. A further analytical reflection on these findings will follow.

Ethnic background



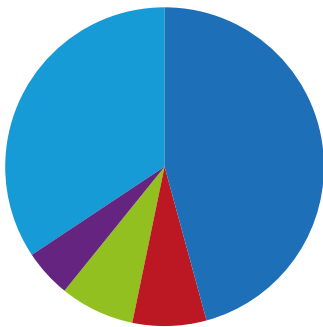
- Pakistani **64.8%**
- White British **10.7%**
- Indian **9.8%**
- Bangladeshi **4.1%**
- Other Asian **2.5%**
- Arab **2.5%**
- Other ethnic groups **5.6%**

Age



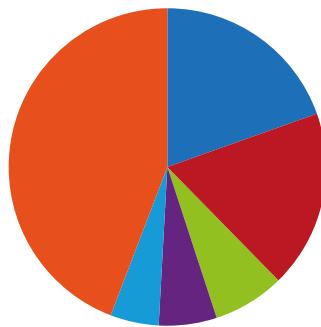
- 16-19 **0.9%**
- 20-29 **13.1%**
- 30-39 **32.8%**
- 40-49 **31.1%**
- 50-59 **16.4%**
- 60-69 **5.7%**

City of residence



- Bradford **45.9%**
- Leeds **7.4%**
- London **7.4%**
- Leicester **4.9%**
- Other cities **34.4%**

Profession



- Education **19.7%**
- Health/social care **18%**
- Homemaker **7.4%**
- Law **5.7%**
- Doctor **4.9%**
- Other **44.3%**

Key Findings

The following survey findings are indicative of common experiences and concerns amongst Muslim women across the country.

Mental & physical wellbeing

- ▶ 42.6% (52 participants) reported a significant negative impact on personal relationships during the lockdown period.
- ▶ The lockdown impacted the mental and emotional wellbeing of nearly two thirds of participants (61.5%), with the most common effects being stress, anxiety and loneliness.
- ▶ A similar number of participants (65.6%) saw a negative impact on their physical wellbeing. Weight gain due to lack of exercise, physiotherapy appointments being cancelled and restrictions on movement were the biggest factors.
- ▶ 86.1% of participants felt lockdown impacted their experience of Ramadan (the Muslim holy month of fasting) this year. Positive impacts included closer family interaction, more focus on spirituality and on personal reflection, while the lack of community interaction, no iftar get-togethers with friends/family and mosques being closed has been negative for others.

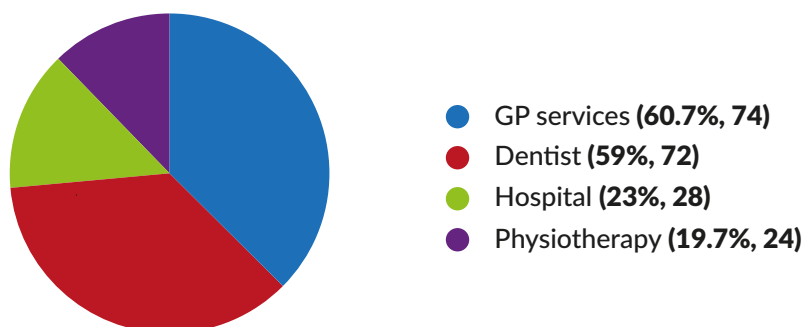
Employment/finances

- ▶ Lockdown negatively impacted the employment status of nearly 1 out of 5 participants (17.2%), with many losing their jobs, having to cope with reduced salary due to company issues and being placed on furlough leave.
- ▶ Just over a third of participants (39.3%) experienced a negative impact on their finances, due to work being limited, higher costs with children being at home, reduction in salary and losing jobs.

Challenges

- ▶ A large proportion of the women (86.1%, 105) faced significant challenges during lockdown; separating work & home life, being unable to see family members, home schooling, lack of exercise, depression, isolation, lack of coping mechanisms, anxiety about returning to the workplace, adapting to virtual meetings & social distancing.
- ▶ 26.2% of participants required support with shopping and other tasks during lockdown, with the majority of help (82.3%) provided by family and friends.
- ▶ There was also an increase in dependency on foodbanks, mental health services and financial support services.

Impact on access to services as perceived by women:



Education

- ▶ For the 71.3% of participants with children, the areas that presented the most challenges were home schooling/education (64.8%), emotional wellbeing (62%), keeping children occupied (59.2%) and physical wellbeing (50.7%).
- ▶ The parents struggled with issues such as lack of understanding with schoolwork, difficulty in enforcing lockdown rules with older children, lack of motivation in children, boredom and behavioural issues.
- ▶ When asked about sending their child/children back to school/college/university, many did not feel comfortable: “[I am] not happy as there is still a very big risk at the moment, as a lot of the children have key worker family members and although they may not have COVID-19 they could be carriers.”
- ▶ Others felt children should go back: “It's crucial children get education or otherwise they will struggle [with] future exams”.

Government handling of the crisis

- ▶ **9 out of 10 women felt dissatisfied with the way the Government has handled the crisis in the UK:**



Information is confusing & strategy doesn't make sense.

I feel our government has let us down at many levels.

Misinformation and changing rules has been frustrating and worrying.

Government has been slow and unclear.

Too little too late.

Action to stop the virus was taken too late and is being eased too soon. The early abandonment of test and trace was disastrous and the added risk to BAME groups was ignored for too long.

Delayed lockdown and lifting too many measures too quickly. Delayed review on impact in ethnic minorities.

VERY confusing messages initially and lots of people struggling financially.

It's just a joke. One rule for them another for us. Too little too late. And now lifting too fast. It's just a mess.

Death rate, the lies around testing and PPE and our key workers being exposed to COVID. The lack of clarity around easing of restrictions. High death rate of BAME. The demonisation of certain sections of society like false claims around Muslims and our places of worship. Yet nothing said about Congo to celebrate VE day. The double standards are sickening.

No confidence in this government.

Lack of firm direction.

If they had acted more quickly perhaps less lives would have been lost . If they had been less obsessed with 'saving money' = making sure that profiteering was good for their friends we might well have been better prepared.

Response was late. Hypocrisy with Dominic Cummings. Unclear guidance. Scientific data unclear. Not much done for the most vulnerable in our society. NHS staff are praised verbally but not in practice.

I've lost complete trust in any of the information. Feels like we're going round in circles.



- ▶ 6 out of 10 women felt their human rights/civil liberties are being challenged at this time by Government policy:



We are not being told the truth.

Nothing is clear and guidance not right for us and not enough.

The easing of lockdown has been too soon and too open.

I find it remarkable that we are living under state control without the use of military intervention. We have volunteered to give up our freedoms and are only policed now by our own fears and social pressure. This is astonishing for such a low mortality virus. I don't dispute its severity in those affected but its influence has been far too pervasive.

I just feel our liberties are being taken away. Time will tell especially when vaccines are made available. Whether we have a free will to choose or it will be made mandatory.

The whole country is on lockdown and there is too much scaremongering.

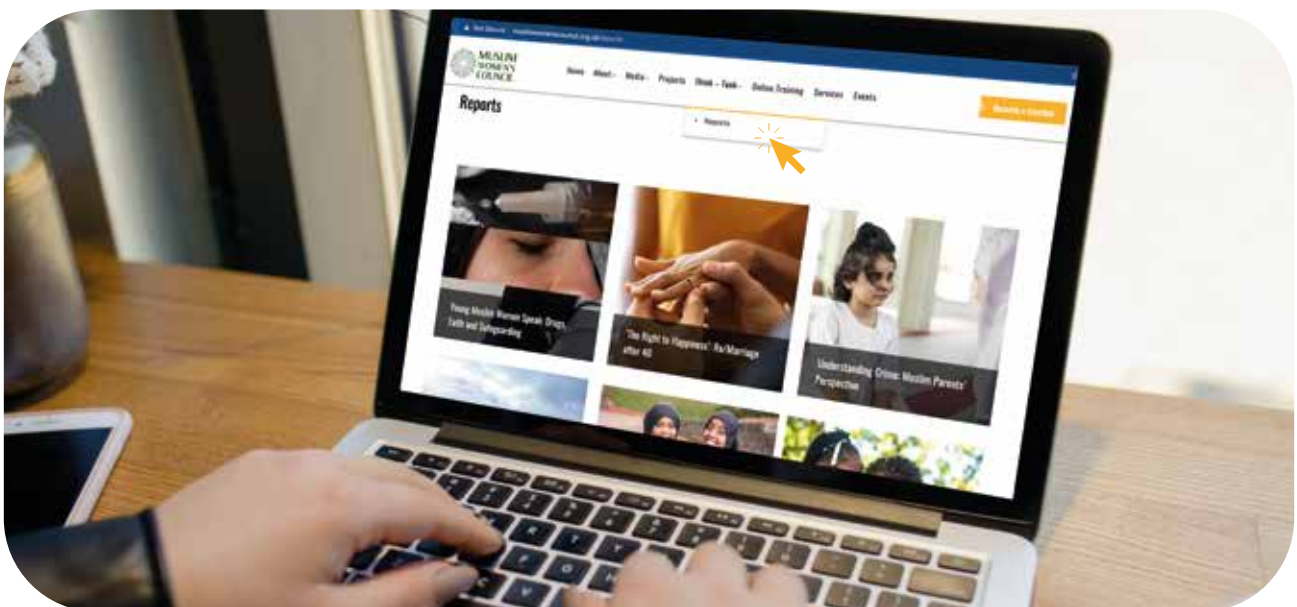
They have put restrictions on everything without clear guidelines and taking into account religious beliefs.

Government is not being transparent in their policy making.

We are being controlled in all aspects of our lives.

Because of the Government's hesitation and lack of clarity, tougher restrictions might have to be brought in, to ensure the application of the lockdown, but also some of the restrictions didn't make sense and caused people to break them.

I feel that certain laws are being passed that will take away our civil liberties. We're being pushed towards a cashless society. I think there's a lot of scaremongering which will cause people to give up their rights because they're being told what they have to do in order to, literally, survive this virus. Fear will control.

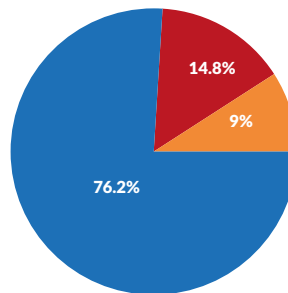


New skills and perspectives

► Our participants learnt many new skills during lockdown!



Has lockdown changed your perspective on life?



● Yes
● No
● Not sure

Changing perspectives on life

► A large majority of women (76.2%) felt lockdown had changed their perspective on life.



I feel more happier and grateful for my friends and life.

Who matters and who doesn't. How to make yourself feel happy. How little we actually need to survive and even to thrive.

I feel that I have started to appreciate technology, relationships, physical and mental health and spirituality more. I am more appreciative of what I have and am not as consumed by superficial and materialistic things anymore.

Away from other Muslims and the mosque I have had to work harder on my spiritual growth and feel it's been of great benefit.

I like the slower pace and quality family time.

It has taught me to be more grateful for the small things and valuing time with family and friends.

We all live on borrowed time, life is a blink and we need to make the most of it.

I feel more grateful for the things I was able to do before lockdown. It has made me realise that places such as Palestine, Syria, Kashmir, Rohingya have no choice but to experience lockdown on a daily basis which they have no control over.

It has made me aware of what is important in life and what I should be doing and paying attention to.

New perspectives on valuing time, family, good health, finances - closer to my religion.

Will value blessings more than ever before.

We plan and He plans and He is the best of all planners.

Lockdown has been decreed by the Will of Allah SWT - but it is how we tie our camel that we can really face any situation.

More aware of my age and limitations.

Do the things that you want to do sooner rather than later. Appreciate all the good things.



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Going forward



Enjoy nature more, enjoy the simple things in life.

Do the things you've always wanted to do while you have freedoms to do it.

Focus more on relationships.

I will devise more creative aspects of my self-employment to bring in an income in sha Allah.

Yes, I would appreciate the time with my friends and family more. I would also try to make the most of video calling and get to know my neighbours better.

I would like to become more involved in my community and to use the skills and abilities I've been blessed with to better effect for my community.

I will not do anymore commuting in the future. I will work from home which will improve my health.

Live modestly and give lots of happiness to others.

That fear/anxiety/worry should be used as a motivating factor to make changes rather than paralysing you.

It's made me realize I need to be more proactive in social action in my community. It is important to give back to my community in different ways.

Taking each day as it comes, learning to embrace the unknown, spend more time with family and friends- make more time for them.

Try and achieve a better work/life balance.

Less consumerism and wastefulness.

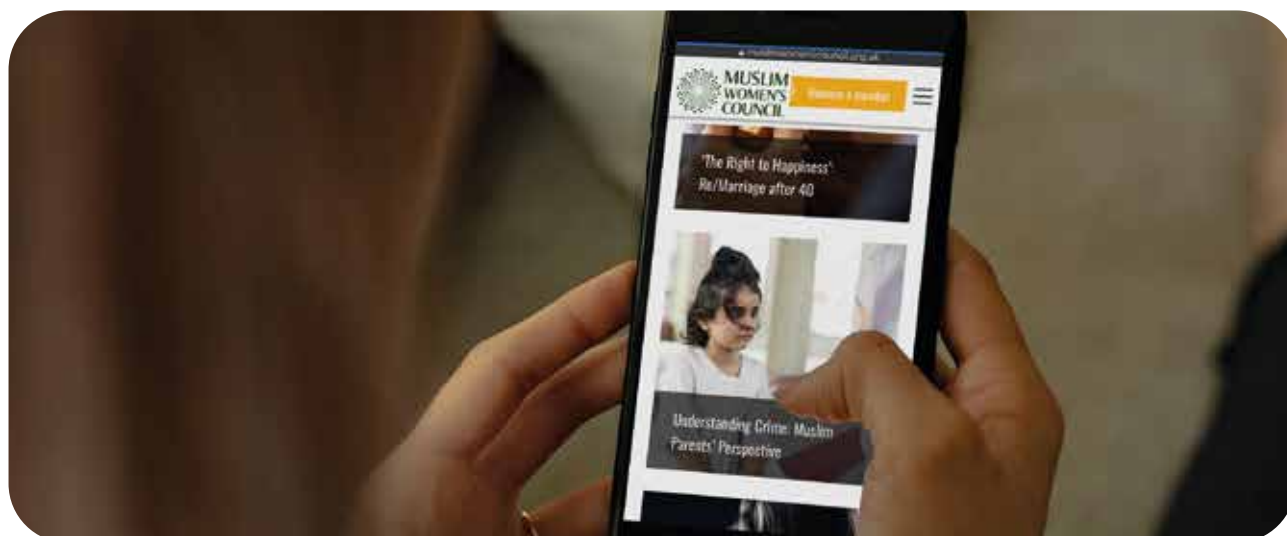
Don't take our freedom for granted. And don't stop praying.

I will stress less about work!

More appreciative of things I have. Will use technology more to connect rather than travel to meetings.

Turn to Allah a lot more.

Appreciate the education system and the need to maintain physical and mental wellbeing.





End of survey reflections

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The lockdown has made me reflect on things which really matter in life. It has allowed me to look into all the reasons necessary in being emotionally ,mentally and physically happy.

We needed this time out- we were killing our planet.

The lockdown has highlighted the fragility of the human race and exposed many aspects of human life that requires investment and resources, particularly amongst the poor and most vulnerable populations of society.

I feel that we should remember how powerless we can be as humans sometimes, as a small virus has managed to change the world in a matter of weeks. These changes are something that no person would ever be able to make. We have all had to succumb to its dangers, which shows that we as humans are not as superior as we thought.

Our fear is of the unknown. That's what creates panic. Do the best you can and leave the rest to Allah SWT.

If this doesn't change us as a society than it will be very big loss. We need to do better , to review our relationship with our planet and with each other , between rich and poor including other creatures and how we use resources.

I feel grateful to Allah SWT for giving us time to become reconnected with our families, and with Him. Grateful for all the beauty surrounding us.

As a family you need to all play your part. It's not one person's job!

Extend your hand of friendship, learn to live with the basics.

Spend time with those you love, ask about your neighbour's wellbeing, give time to others.

This too shall pass. Insha Allah.

I'm less concerned with materialistic worries and realise I just need my faith, health and family to be happy.

Most distressing thing for me other than the fatalities from COVID has been the inequality highlighted by the whole pandemic: BAME deaths higher, people with lower income suffering more and having to return to work earlier. Shows failure of government and capitalist system.

Contentment comes from inside, faith can help you cope with anything.

”

Developing The Think Tank Programme

We recruited women from the community through our various networks and partners in the Bradford area, such as the Women's Health Network, voluntary organisations such as Sharing Voices and Womenzone Community Centre, and MWC's social media platforms. The response was overwhelming, reassuring us that there is a dire need for this ground-up approach to research. We selected women between the ages of 18 and 55, who are mostly of Pakistani background. The women have come from different professional fields, including law, community outreach, interfaith work, mental health, activism, civil service, journalism, education and media.

Over a period of 3 months, the women attended a training and development programme with six modules covering a broad range of transferable skills, such as confidence building, communication skills, critical thinking, debating skills, verbal reasoning and basic research skills. In addition, there were two academic modules on developing interview schedules, conducting fieldwork, and applying research ethics, such as obtaining consent and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality.

This training and capacity building were overseen by a Project Coordinator, who designed and delivered the Think Tank programme, facilitated the process and offered a constant point of reference and guidance during fieldwork preparation and implementation. The programme also facilitated the emergence of a personal network of intellectual and emotional support between the women on the Think Tank programme, that would prove crucial during the fieldwork stage.

The process of writing-up reports involved consulting the women researchers and was supported by Dr Shuruq Naguib (Lancaster University) and Dr Ghalia Sarmani (University of Central Lancashire).

Muslim Women's Council

MWC is unique in its local, national, and international reach. We deliver services to the most marginalised members of our communities; the homeless, the excluded and disadvantaged. Our initiatives have addressed community issues ranging from mental health, child sexual exploitation and food poverty.

At the other end of the spectrum, we provide thought leadership and we facilitate and enable change. For example, we have initiated a project to transform and lead discourse on women's access to, presence in, and involvement in Mosques. This initiative has gained national and international support and has been reported globally.

Looking ahead in a context of political turbulence and uncertainty, we have prioritised empowering Muslim women to narrate their lived experiences and make an intervention into policies impacting their lives. With this in mind, our mission is to address the socio-economic imbalance within Muslim communities that needs urgent attention.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our funders The National Lottery Community Fund Lived Experience Leaders Pilot Programme, the Smallwood Trust & Welcome Trust for believing in our vision and supporting us to achieve it.

We wish to convey our sincere thanks to our community research teams for their sustained commitment, passionate dedication and insightful input into developing the research themes and questions and implementing this timely study. We would like to express sincerest gratitude to all our interviewees, without whom this would not have been possible.



"The Muslim Women's Council core team provided highly professional support to the Think Tank project, with excellent administrative and research coordination throughout the process. The final reports are the fruits of genuine and outstanding commitment to the vision of community-based research and to the process of co-production with the women researchers."

Dr Shuruq Naguib (Chair, Muslim Women's Council)