

profile

minority
rights
group
international



Respect Festival 2001 Photo Ulrika Preuss/Format Photographers

Muslims in Britain

A mother's story

'I have become increasingly concerned about my sons' experiences at school. The teachers have negative attitudes about Muslims and Islam, and my sons seem to get harsher treatment than pupils who are not Muslim.

At a Christmas Fayre, within earshot of other parents, the teacher said that while her back was turned one of the pupils had shouted out 'Salman Rushdie'. She believed that it was my son – the only Muslim pupil. She said she would not tolerate such behaviour. It later emerged that another child had done it to annoy the teacher, whose prejudices were known.

I was embarrassed, then angry. The Head was prepared to back me if I wished to lodge a complaint. However, my son was still in this teacher's class and I didn't want his life to be made any more miserable.

My sons often refer to the racism they experience on a daily basis. We constantly have to decide whether it is worth challenging – the boys do not want to be labelled as "troublemakers". I believe this is a reality they have come to accept. This acceptance is perhaps the scariest thing of all.'

Shahnaz's experience

'A couple of days after the atrocities of September 11th, I

was waiting at a bus-stop in my home town, where I have lived for nearly 40 years. A man drove by in a car, slowed down and mouthed, to me "Fucking Paki". This made me very sad. I have worked for many years with people of all different backgrounds, and have been active in my local council. Suddenly, I felt as if I didn't belong and that I was right back to my experiences of childhood in the 1960s.'

Farah's testimony

'Soon after September 11th, staff in the office were sending jokes on e-mail about the Taliban to everyone in the office except me. They said they thought I might be offended by them, but they did not stop to think that I might be offended by hearing their laughter after reading the jokes. This exclusion left me with very little confidence and no will to stand up for myself. Eventually I was transferred to another department while the situation was investigated. Afterwards, I was told that staff had been spoken to and I would no longer have to work for the same manager, but I had to go back into the same office and work with the same people. This I could not understand and I resigned.

I felt completely let down. Life in that office goes on, but I sit at home depressed and financially strained. Friends tell me to put it down to experience.'

Introduction

Islamophobia, defined as 'dread or hatred of Islam and fear or dislike of Muslims' was expressed in a number of ways immediately after the events of 11 September 2001. Vandals attacked mosques and Asian-run businesses around the UK; firebombs and excrement were put through letterboxes; and death threats were made against Muslims.

The media's widespread prefacing with 'Muslim' of words such as 'extremists', 'terrorists', 'fundamentalists' and 'fanatics' perpetuates the view that Muslims and Islam are violent and frighteningly dangerous. This contributes to an Islamophobic atmosphere. In a survey of the coverage of Islam and Muslims in the British media before 11 September, persistent stereotypes relating to Muslims were that they are 'intolerant', 'misogynistic', 'violent' or 'cruel', and 'strange' or 'different'. The use of terms such as 'swamping' in relation to asylum-seekers by the Home Secretary, David Blunkett, or criticism of Muslims as 'isolationist' by Peter Hain, a Foreign Office minister, continue to create negative perceptions.

Soon after 11 September, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, seeking to clarify that the events had nothing to do with Islam or Muslims *per se*, stressed that Muslims should not be targeted in any way. This showed an understanding that, contrary to stereotypical and popular perceptions of Muslims as a monolithic, 'fundamentalist' group, one of the most striking aspects of Muslims living in Britain today is their diversity. This diversity challenges state policy on social and political issues, which is based on assumptions and stereotypes of Muslims as an undifferentiated community, and raises urgent issues of citizenship and identity.

Britain's diverse Muslim populations

Small, relatively permanent, Muslim populations in Cardiff, Liverpool, Manchester, South Shields and London's East End emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. Since the Second World War, Muslims have migrated to Britain in larger numbers, with the majority coming from South Asia (primarily Pakistan and Bangladesh). Smaller Muslim communities from parts of Africa and Cyprus, Malaysia, the Middle East and more recently Eastern Europe (primarily Bosnia), have also settled in Britain. Sunni Muslims are numerically predominant in Britain, but there are also Shi'a and a range of Sufi orders.

The largest group of British Muslims, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, grew from 640,000 in 1991 to an estimated 1 million in 2001. The total number of Muslims in Britain is now around 2 million. The vast majority of British Muslims live in England, but there are 40,000 to 60,000 in Scotland, and small numbers in Wales and Northern Ireland.

Muslim identities in Britain

Muslims in Britain span the religious spectrum – from devout adherence to orthodox Islamic practice, to nominal affiliation. Young British Muslims are developing differing perceptions of national, ethnic and religious belonging, and are negotiating new ways of being Muslim in Britain in which the British element of their identity often forms an important part of the equation. There is still a dominant view that Britishness depends on a shared sense of (post)-Christian, cultural and racial unity, and imperial history, however, Muslims in Britain have had to think about themselves in reaction to being rejected and constructed as the 'Other'.

Muslim women

A current trend among Muslim women in Britain is to assert their religious identity as a means of addressing their concerns. Young professional Muslim women educated in British schools and universities have led moves to question the position of women in Muslim societies, referring back to the Quran and the Sunnah to fashion arguments in pursuit of their agendas. This strategy has been relatively successful, not only in challenging Muslim communities' demands for adherence to customs and traditions on gender issues, but also in helping young Muslim women to extend their personal choice. The popularity of the *hijab* among young economically active women has symbolized this assertion of female Muslim identity. However, by no means all Muslim women are convinced of the liberating qualities of the *hijab*; some argue that it is an exercise in control of women's bodies.

One cultural, rather than religious, practice, which attracts controversy and reinforces prejudices, is arranged marriage. Arranged marriages are often confused with forced marriages, which are conducted without the consent of one or other of the parties. Forced marriages are not viewed as valid in Islam and there is evidence of growing pressure within communities and from wider society to end this practice.

Socio-economic position

The majority of Muslim immigrants entered Britain at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Many (mostly Pakistanis and Bangladeshis) are still concentrated in semi-skilled and unskilled sectors of industry. These communities suffer from unemployment, poor working conditions, poverty, overcrowded housing, poor health, and low educational qualifications.

The 2001 disturbances in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford highlighted how multiple social deprivation leads to deep disaffection, alienation and frustration. The areas most affected suffered from relatively high levels of youth unemployment, inadequate youth facilities, and a lack of

strong civic identity or shared social values to unite the diverse local communities. Those communities remain strongly polarized along ethnic, cultural, religious and economic lines. A feeling of 'us' and 'them' developed between communities, enabling divisive racist organizations such as the BNP to exploit anti-Muslim feelings among many white people.

However, a degree of social mobility exists within British Muslim communities. In the early 1990s the proportion of Pakistanis in professional occupations already exceeded that for white people; successful business ventures in property, food, services and fashion have continued to expand. Many Pakistanis have moved to affluent suburbia. There is a high proportion of skilled Arab settlers employed in professional positions as engineers, professors, doctors and businesspeople. Currently, there are over 5,000 Muslim millionaires in Britain.

Religious discrimination

Muslims have been subject to religious discrimination, as well as wider racial discrimination. Asylum-seekers are particularly vulnerable. Among the issues resulting in discriminatory treatment or exclusion have been the lack of *halal* food; a denial of time-off for religious festivals; refusal to allow time-off for daily prayers; lack of or inadequate prayer facilities; difficulties in obtaining planning permission for mosques, schools and burial sites; and conflicts about dress and language in a range of settings (the wearing of the *hijab* has proved problematic in schools and the workplace).

Participation of Muslims in public life

Beyond disadvantage and discrimination, there has been considerable exclusion of Muslims from public life. However, for the first time, a Muslim, Mohammad Sarwar, was elected (from a Scottish constituency) to Parliament in 1997. A record 53 Muslim candidates stood in the 2001 general election, and there are currently two Muslim MPs and one Muslim MEP. There are also four Muslim peers. Participation in local politics has also expanded and 160 Muslim local councillors were elected in 1996. By 2001 this figure had risen to 217.

However, while Muslim influence and involvement at the grassroots level has gradually increased within mainstream parties, by the late 1990s there were still no Muslim leaders of local councils, and only a handful of deputy leaders. Muslims have faced resistance in selection processes because of negative stereotypes. Muslims have been accused of opportunism, illegal recruiting practices, bribery, corruption and using politics for personal gain, though there is little evidence to show that their conduct is any more open to suspicion than that of their white counterparts.



Muslim barber, Hackney, London Photo Paul Mattsson

Matters of law

In some specific areas of English law, Parliament has legislated to exempt Muslims from certain statutory provisions – for example Muslims can slaughter in abattoirs according to their religious methods.

At present there is an anomaly in the Race Relations Act of 1976, as it covers Sikhs and Jews but not Muslims. While the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 has extended and deepened safeguards against racial discrimination, it still leaves Muslims vulnerable to religious discrimination. Moreover, Sikhs and Jews are also protected from exposure to material and physical harm under the Public Order Act 1986 (subsequently strengthened by the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998), while this is not the case for Muslims.

The law on blasphemy in England does not recognize vilification, ridicule, defamatory language, and contempt of Islam or other non-Christian faiths. In protecting only Christianity, it is undoubtedly discriminatory and British Muslims have felt that they are being treated unequally.

Muslims in Britain have felt increasingly vulnerable since September 2001. For some, this vulnerability has been accentuated by the introduction of legislation to deal with suspected terrorists. There has been substantial criticism from Muslim and non-Muslim individuals and organizations about the government's Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act, which allows internment without trial and suspends certain obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights.

Unless the British state addresses the root causes of Islamophobia, any further events in Britain or the wider world that expose Muslims to criticism are likely to result in further expressions of antagonism directed against British Muslim communities.

working to secure the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples

minority
rights
group
international

Recommendations

1. Currently no comprehensive legislation exists to protect Muslims from religious discrimination. We recommend that the government consider introducing legislation to tackle religious discrimination both as an effective tool to address concrete cases of religious discrimination and as an awareness-raising measure.
2. The Northern Ireland experience shows that strong religious anti-discrimination legislation (Fair Employment and Treatment Order) and Northern Ireland's Equality Commission can have a real impact in confronting discrimination. The law itself must be adequately enforced and in Northern Ireland the Equality Commission has very strong regulatory, investigative and enforcement powers, alongside a tribunal system which can award compensation to people who have experienced discrimination on the grounds of their religion. We recommend that the government consider introducing a strong regulatory/legal framework enforced by adequate resources to tackle religious discrimination, including an anti-discrimination Ombudsperson, thus extending the protection afforded to religious groups in Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK.
3. MRG recommends that the government and local authorities investigate the causes of the high rate of unemployment and economic exclusion among certain Muslim communities, and take remedial steps. In addition, Muslim NGOs should be strengthened by increasing their participation, at both local and central government levels.
4. MRG recommends that the role of the Press Complaints Commission is reviewed in order to broaden its mandate to include Islamophobia and the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media. In addition, MRG recommends that the National Union of Journalists and media organizations offer diversity training to their members. Journalism courses should include components which demonstrate the impact and consequences of religious/ethnic stereotyping by the media.
5. MRG recommends that the blasphemy law should either be abolished or extended to other religions in order to provide full and effective equality.
6. MRG recommends that the British government should revoke the UK's reservation to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and release all children and their parents held in 'detention' centres. Moreover, the detention of adult asylum-seekers should only be justified on the basis of the behaviour of the individual. The present government's policy proposals in this regard do not reflect this position, and it is recommended that these proposals should be reviewed.
7. Conditions should be created within Muslim communities, and British society more generally, which would enable/encourage Muslim women to further pursue their aspirations and to establish control over their lives in the domestic and public spheres. Religio-cultural practices which may violate individual human rights, such as female genital mutilation and forced marriages, should be discouraged. Those Muslim women's groups that are engaged in upholding and supporting human rights require resources and should be supported by both local and central government.
8. A number of Muslim groups have significantly lower levels of educational attainment. Additional efforts are required to reduce Muslims' alienation from school, and efforts are also required to raise Bangladeshi and Pakistani pupils' school attainment levels. In addition, Muslims are over-represented in the prison population. MRG recommends that the Home Office institute an inquiry into this problem to include looking at the judicial and penal systems, and the socio-economic factors.

This Profile is a summary of the report Muslims in Britain by Humayun Ansari. Published August 2002, 40 pp., £5.95/\$10.95 + postage. ISBN 1 897693 64 8. Additional copies of this Profile are available from MRG at 25p each or 10 for £2 from the address shown below.

Minority Rights Group International (MRG) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) working to secure the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples worldwide, and to promote cooperation and understanding between communities. Our activities are focused

on international advocacy, training, publishing and outreach. We are guided by the needs expressed by our worldwide network of partner organizations, which represent minorities and indigenous peoples.

MRG works with over 130 organizations in nearly 60 countries. The governing Council, which meets twice a year, has members from 10 different countries. MRG has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). MRG is registered as a charity, no. 282305, and a company limited by guarantee in the UK no. 1544957.

Minority Rights Group International 379 Brixton Road, London SW9 7DE, UK

Tel +44 (0)20 7978 9498 **Fax** +44 (0)20 7738 6265

E-mail minority.rights@mrgmail.org **Website** www.minorityrights.org