

Immigration Faith and Cohesion

Background

A lack of 'community cohesion' in parts of the UK was identified in a series of official reports as an underlying factor in urban disturbances in northern towns in 2001. More recently, concerns about radicalisation associated with terrorist attacks ensured that the debate on cohesion increasingly focused on Britain's Muslim communities. The report of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion in 2007 sought to rebalance the agenda. Even so, Muslims remain a significant focus of interest.

At the time of the last census (2001), there were 1.6 million Muslims in the UK, some 3 per cent of the population. Forty six per cent were born in the UK. While nearly three-quarters of the Muslim population has a South Asian background, the communities are diverse, including Arabs, Afghans, Iranians, Turks, Turkish Cypriots, Kurds, Somalis, Europeans, and North Africans. This research project was carried out in Birmingham, the local authority area with the highest number of Muslims, and in Newham and Bradford, two of the five local authorities with the highest proportion of Muslim residents. Within all of these areas Muslims are disproportionately represented in the most deprived communities. The research was carried out between January 2006 and June 2007.

Inequality

Recent migrants of all faiths were more likely than established residents to be unemployed or to have undesirable, low paid, insecure jobs. Skilled migrants were not always gaining access to jobs that matched their qualifications. Race discrimination was reported by minority ethnic residents, regardless of length of residence or birth in the UK. Overall, almost 50 per cent of minority ethnic interviewees said they had experienced unfair treatment because of their colour or ethnicity. For established Muslims, the perception of less favourable treatment in employment, housing and services had included a stronger 'faith dimension' since the terrorist attacks of recent years and religious discrimination was as prominent as race discrimination. Thirty per cent of recent Muslim migrants said they had personally experienced religious discrimination.

Muslims' reported experiences of discrimination in housing, health care and shops highlight the need to effectively implement the provisions in the Equality Act 2006 to protect individuals from discrimination on grounds of religion or belief in these areas and to ensure that they and service providers are aware of those rights.

Locality

For Muslims, family ties and the presence of people with similar ethnic or religious backgrounds and the services they provide were important reasons for moving to and valuing the locality in which they lived. Informal interactions within networks of family and friends fostered a sense of security for Muslims. For female migrants who have come to Britain to join their family, these networks, in providing access to social support, gave some protection from financial hardship. In contrast, other non-muslim migrants appeared relatively socially isolated in the localities studied.

Places of Interaction

Muslims were considerably more likely than non-Muslims to meet people of similar religious and/or ethnic origins in more places. Nevertheless, there was considerable evidence of meaningful, informal interaction across religious and ethnic boundaries in a variety of places visited in the course of daily life.

Places of Interaction cont ...

This was particularly the case for women with family responsibilities, and those who were working or in education. This challenges perceptions of economically inactive Muslim women as isolated from wider society. Recent migrants and established residents stressed the role that local organisations play in bringing people together, including sports and leisure facilities, residents' associations and Sure Start, and particularly schools and colleges. In contrast, the home remained an intimate space where interaction was largely with relatives and friends from similar backgrounds, particularly for Muslims.

Support and friendship networks

Among recent migrants, Muslims were more likely than others to rely on extended kinship networks for advice and support. Other new migrants, less likely to have moved to the UK for family union, were most likely to have turned to organisations for help. More than three-quarters of recent Muslim migrants spent most of their leisure time with relatives and friends with similar religious or ethnic backgrounds, including phone and electronic contact with people in the UK and abroad.

Participation

Interviewees eligible and registered to vote reported relatively high levels of involvement in mainstream elections. In contrast, there were low levels of participation in local organisations, including ethnic and religious organisations. Two-thirds were not involved in any organisation. Twenty five per cent of non-Muslims and 15 per cent of Muslims were active in mixed organisations. Highest participation was found among UK-born non-Muslims (39 per cent), with 20 per cent of established Muslims contributing in this way. Women were more likely than men to be involved in mixed organisations, despite low participation rates amongst those looking after families.

Belonging in Britain

When asked which aspects of British life interviewees liked, a vast majority of recent migrants, including Muslims, placed a high value on democracy, fairness, justice and security, followed by opportunities for education, a good standard of living and access to services. For Muslims, negative feelings about Britain related to discrimination, the weather and to aspects of social behaviour.

Recent Migrants

The financial insecurity of recent migrants and relative isolation of the non-Muslim migrants reinforces the importance recently attached in public policy towards addressing the issues raised by new migrants at the local level. The value recent Muslim migrants obtain from social networks suggests consideration could be given to ways in which the contribution of established groups could be enhanced within a broader strategy towards newcomers. Those who sponsor migrants under the new immigration rules could be given a greater role in supporting the induction of migrants into employment and community life, and given access to accurate information on rights and responsibilities to provide the advice needed.

Cohesion Framework

The government definition of cohesion acknowledges the importance of equal life chances. This research reinforces the importance to a sense of belonging of addressing experiences of discrimination; and the constraints that unemployment and low income impose on capacity to participate in organisations and other places of social interaction. The research challenges the assumption that residential clustering of people from particular ethnic or religious backgrounds is necessarily a barrier to social interaction across those boundaries.

About the Project

The study was undertaken by Hiranthi Jayaweera at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), University of Oxford, and Tufyal Choudhury, University of Durham, working with Sarah Spencer and Steven Vertovec (COMPAS). The fieldwork was conducted in Newham and Birmingham and in Bradford in collaboration with a team led by Yunas Samad, University of Bradford.

For more information

The full report, **Immigration, Faith and Cohesion: Evidence from Local Areas with Significant Muslim Populations**, by Hiranthi Jayaweera and Tufyal Choudhury is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.compas.ox.ac.uk or www.jrf.org.uk