

Immigration, faith and cohesion

Findings
Informing change

March 2008

This research analyses new data from three local areas, Birmingham, Bradford and Newham, where relatively large numbers of recently arrived Muslim migrants and established Muslim residents are living alongside people of other faiths and of no faith. It is based on 319 interviews with individuals from 40 countries of origin, including the UK.

Key points

- Racial and religious discrimination were key barriers to a sense of belonging in Britain. Race discrimination was reported by nearly 50 per cent of minority ethnic established and new residents, including Muslims. Thirty per cent of recent Muslim migrants had experienced religious discrimination.
- A vast majority of recent migrants, including Muslims, placed the highest value on democracy, fairness, justice and security in Britain.
- In areas with large Muslim populations, Muslims – including women – interacted with people from other religious and ethnic backgrounds in schools, colleges, workplaces and other public places.
- All interviewees' closest relationships were with family and others from similar backgrounds.
- Established Muslim communities provided vital support and advice to new Muslim migrants. Other recent migrants in these localities felt more isolated.
- Fifteen per cent of Muslims and 25 per cent of other interviewees were active in local organisations involving people of diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. Lack of time, poor English, insecure immigration status, and not feeling welcome were barriers to participation. Interviewees had little confidence that they could have an impact on decisions (particularly at national level).
- There were common local concerns among established and new residents around crime, drugs and pollution.

The research

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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, including those who have newly arrived to live and work in the UK.

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.

“I went to a couple of interviews and they actually [told me] ‘maybe you can just take off your headscarf and we’ll give you the job’. But, actually, I got a very good job after that, with my headscarf.”

(Recent migrant from Iraq, applying to be a shop assistant in Birmingham)

“It used to be because you’re Pakistani but now it’s because anyone who’s that colour is Muslim, apparently.”

(Established Muslim, female, Birmingham, on verbal abuse in the street)

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. Extension of the duty on public bodies to address discrimination on those grounds in the forthcoming Equality Bill would ensure that service providers are proactive in addressing this issue. Some interviewees were unsure whether the treatment was on grounds of race or religion, emphasising the importance of law reform to enable individuals to challenge the ‘intersectionality’ of discrimination.

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 recent 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. 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.

“ESOL [English for speakers of other languages] classes are one platform where people from different backgrounds and different religions come together. Asians are there and people from other religions. There one can meet them or at least one learns how people are like.”
(Recent Muslim migrant, female, 18–24, Bradford)

Those most likely to interact with people from other backgrounds were women, those in the middle age range, born in the UK, educated to secondary level, employed or students, with family responsibilities and fluent in English.

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 living elsewhere in the UK and abroad.

“I mostly mix with my own ethnic and origin background people except in the university where I do spend some time with multicultural people.”
(Recent Muslim migrant, female, 25–44, Newham)

In contrast, other recent migrants were almost as likely to interact with friends from other backgrounds.

Established Muslims had most contact with people from the same backgrounds but had developed broader friendship networks. UK-born non-Muslims had the most diverse networks.

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.

The ethnic/religious mix of neighbourhoods did not have an impact on involvement in organisations. Recent migrants cited lack of time, insufficient English, feeling unwelcome or insecure immigration status as reasons for non-participation. For some established Muslims, a lack of relevance of local organisations to their lives, and negative attitudes within their community to participation of women in organisations, were factors in non-participation.

“We are not given the chance to show ourselves. Everyone looks to us as foreigner and stranger with no welcome, so you don’t feel you can do anything like this.”
(Recent Muslim migrant, male, 18–24, Newham)

There was little confidence amongst all interviewees that they could have an impact on decision making at the local, and particularly at the national, level.

Low participation in local organisations did not reflect indifference to local issues. There was a common concern among interviewees about aspects of their neighbourhoods including crime, drug-use and pollution.

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.

“It has to be stability, and...an order of law and everything...It’s secure compared to where I come from originally...And there is a relative freedom of speech...you don’t have that in other places, so that kind of makes it...I mean I wouldn’t say unique, but different...And there is also peace between different cultures, so the coexistence of different cultures.”
(Recent Muslim migrant, male, 25–44, Birmingham)

“Individual freedom. I very much like the nature in this country, British culture in general...I grew up under Communism and I find British culture very liberating and open-minded.”
(Recent non-Muslim migrant, male, 25–44, Birmingham)

For Muslims, negative feelings about Britain related to discrimination, the weather and to aspects of social behaviour.

Most migrants, including Muslims, felt there was little conflict in a feeling of belonging to both their country of origin and to Britain. As one Muslim woman said, ‘I got my life here but I got my memories there’; and a Polish man commented, ‘You don’t have to make a choice between the two.’

For established Muslims born outside the UK, transnational identification was less than for the recent migrants: 60 per cent said the people most important to them were in Britain – but information about and visits to their country of origin remained important. Those with the most transnational involvement were also most likely to be employed, financially stable, have voted in the general election and to meet more people of different ethnicity and religion and in more places (although least likely to participate in mixed organisations).

A sense of belonging in Britain for all migrants, recent and established, was negatively affected by their perception of lack of acceptance in the UK.

The evidence suggests that it is this perception of being unwelcome and of discrimination rather than attachment to their country of origin that diminishes a sense of belonging in British society, and there is thus a need to address public attitudes towards Muslims and towards migrants as a key component of cohesion strategy.

“Even though we’re born here and we’re brought up here, we’re still outsiders.”
(Established Muslim, female, Bradford)

“When I get a job in an office or in my area here then I guess I really can feel belonging to England. But in this moment, no, because I know that this kind of job I’m doing, that my husband is doing are foreigners’ jobs.”
(Recent non-Muslim migrant, female, 25–44, Newham)

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.

The research supports the importance of a capacity to communicate in English for social interaction and participation in local organisations. The researchers suggest that this needs to be reflected in the funding arrangements for English language classes that ensure migrants can get access to tuition at times and at a cost compatible with work or family commitments. Such national policy issues would benefit from community cohesion impact assessment. Government should consider the support that may be given to encourage these assessments to be carried out at the national level.

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.

The research team found concern among policy makers and practitioners about the linking of ‘cohesion’ and ‘counter-terrorism’ agendas – in particular, that this risks stigmatising and alienating Muslim communities; and detracts from funding initiatives that might not fit within a counter-terrorism agenda, but which would build local cohesion (e.g. around shared local concerns).

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. Interviews were conducted between January 2006 and June 2007 with 155 Muslim and 44 non-Muslim migrants in the UK for less than five years; 74 established Muslim residents (born in the UK or with more than 10 years residence) and 46 UK-born non-Muslims. In total, 72 per cent of the sample was Muslims. Recent migrants included work permit holders, marriage partners, asylum seekers, refugees and students. Fifty four per cent had the unrestricted right to remain and work in the UK, including the majority of Muslim recent migrants who had entered for family union. Interviews were also conducted with 28 policy makers and service providers in Newham, Birmingham and Bradford, and with four policy makers at the national level.

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.jrf.org.uk.

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