

Why do so many Muslim women find it hard to integrate in Britain? - “Economic, social and cultural barriers”

Sunday 27 November 2016, by [TOWNSEND Mark](#) (Date first published: 27 November 2016).

Ahead of a crucial report, we report on the battle faced by Britain’s most excluded demographic.

As gender politics go, it was unquestionably a modest step, but in Bradford’s Carlisle business centre the development felt seismic.

For five years Haniya had been striving to secure a job in digital marketing. It seemed not to matter that the 28-year-old had the qualifications, the aptitude, the ambition. Friends watched her confidence drain away. Haniya considered removing her hijab, the Islamic headscarf. Burying the fact she was a Muslim became the final option.

In front of 50 women at the centre in Bradford’s Manningham district, Haniya announced she’d finally entered the workplace. “That was great news, but for many discrimination within the labour market, along with a lack of opportunities, creates a fatigue that eventually erodes self-esteem,” said Bana Gora, chief executive of Bradford’s Muslim Women’s Council .

Haniya had triumphed where most peers had failed. Being a Muslim woman in Brexit Britain offers few advantages but does guarantee membership to the most economically disadvantaged group in UK society [1]. In Manningham, where the last census found three-quarters of its 20,000 population were Muslim, the prevailing concern is that emboldened bigotry and Islamophobia unleashed in the wake of the Brexit vote threatens to marginalise Muslim women to the point that they are effectively excluded [2].

Seven miles from the business centre, past Bradford’s central mosque and south along the A651, lies the west Yorkshire market town of Birstall. Here, outside its library at 12:53pm on 16 June, Labour MP Jo Cox was fatally attacked by an extreme rightwing terrorist as the EU referendum campaign approached its finale.

Cox’s murderer Thomas Mair was sentenced to prison for the rest of his life [3]. The 53-year-old is a white supremacist [4] who considers immigration anathema to British values and who hoped his crime would inflame multicultural tensions.

The government’s forthcoming report into integration – the first state-backed exploration of the issue for 15 years – arrives against a febrile backdrop. Conceived in July 2015, the report’s lead author, Louise Casey [5], appreciates that the debate on race, the self-identity of Britain itself, has shifted dramatically since its inception.

Casey’s team are acutely sensitive to how the rightwing media will articulate its contents, particularly new Home Office research confirming that pockets of London, Birmingham and other

cities are increasingly mono-ethnic with immigrant populations larger than 50%, confirming a steep rise over the last decade. "It'll be seized upon by Brexiters, who'll want to close the border, while the left aren't able to talk about it," said a source close to Casey's review.

But the report's main thrust remains unaltered, namely attempting to improve "opportunity and integration" for ethnic minorities who largely remain on the outside looking in. Issues of segregation and inequality remain, factors identified in the wake of the 2001 race riots that engulfed Manningham and prompted a Home Office report that identified parallel lives between ethnicities that "do not touch at any point, let alone overlap".

Gora says things have improved vastly in the period since, but the shift of Islamophobic rhetoric into the mainstream has perturbed Bradford's Muslim women [6].

"These are scary times, there's a heightened fear and anxiety over what the future holds. The Muslim community feels it's under a magnifying glass. The rhetoric in the media, constant negative messages being disseminated. It's unsettling," she said. Even in Manningham, racist attacks have happened. "We've had women with their headscarves ripped off," said Gora nodding to Carlisle Road, lined with charity stores and a green-domed masjid.

Casey's 17-month investigation across the UK, which included a visit to Manningham's business centre, found that Muslim women were being squeezed further from mainstream society. Many had given up trying to find a job. Acquiring economic independence, pursuing a career, meeting new people had become a pipe dream for the majority. A three-tiered system of discrimination was discovered: being a woman, being from an ethnic minority, and finally being a Muslim.

In a briefing note to Casey, the Runnymede Trust said that Pakistani and Bangladeshi women encountered "discrimination at every stage of the recruitment process".

Selina Ullah, chair of the MWC, said the cumulative rejection from prospective employers allied to horror stories from friends meant that many felt unable to land a job. "They don't really believe they can do things, they start automatically screening themselves out of certain positions, subconsciously thinking they are not worthy. They know they're not on a level playing field to start with."

She added: "If you have a CV fit for purpose and you've been rejected for similar jobs on many occasions, it affects you. Issues of low aspirations and confidence combined with a degree of racism start in the education sector." Various studies quantify the marginalisation of Muslim women. MPs in August revealed that white women are three times less likely to be unemployed (6.8%) than black women (17.7%). Bottom of the pile [7] were Pakistani and Bangladeshi women (20.5%). Last year the Office for National Statistics found almost two-thirds of Muslim women aged 16-64 were out of work. By contrast 69% of British working-age women had a job. Numerous reasons are cited, including insufficient role models, along with cultural pressures on women to focus on their families rather than build careers.

Casey's research found that in some parts of the UK, particularly Birmingham, even when women turn to the local mosque they can be sidelined. "Many don't have a voice; when they go to volunteer at the mosques the men don't give them any opportunities. They're locked out," said Fiyaz Mughal, director of Faith Matters, which contributed to the integration review. He says the recruitment process itself can prove a tortuous affair riddled with bias. Women recount illegal forms of interrogation at job interviews like being asked if they are married or if they will contemplate removing their headscarf. "They keep saying: 'I can't get a job, I've applied hundreds of times.' Others tell us: 'When I turn up I get questions like would I wear that all the time?'" In August the parliamentary women and equalities committee [8] urged ministers to introduce "name-blind

recruitment” to stop employers dismissing names that were not white-sounding.

“There’s a subconscious bias against foreign-sounding names, names that are hard to read. Secondly, recruitment panels like to recruit people who look like themselves. If you are a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf it depends on whether the panel buy into it,” said Ullah. Considerable evidence indicates that a minority are willing to “buy into” the hijab.

On Tuesday, Bradford’s MWC will unveil a new book on the heritage of the hijab, noting its similarities to head coverings connected to Judaism and Christianity. More than 300 people have been invited to its launch at the city’s National Media Museum, an event designed to strengthen bonds between the Abrahamic faiths. Gora hopes the book’s message might dampen hostility towards the hijab which has become deeply politicised over recent years [9].

Mughal says women are frequently targeted in the street for wearing the headscarf. New police figures obtained by the Observer reveal that incidents of anti-Muslim hate crime are eight times higher this year in Bradford than Rotherham, the South Yorkshire town where the grooming scandal has prompted racial tensions [10].

West Yorkshire police recorded 40 incidents in Bradford between January and September, the highest number for any town and city in the force area. Of the 137 cases recorded in West Yorkshire, 60 were violence against the person and 47 harassment.

The anti-Muslim hate crime hotline Tell Mama [11] recorded another 23 incidents in the region during that period. a new national anti-hate crime campaign will be unveiled in parliament with a focus on ensuring ethnic minority communities feel more protected. Another welcome development, according to Gora, is if Casey’s review helps precipitate a change in the language used: “There needs to be more positive language, the government’s rhetoric needs to be looked at. We cannot continue with this language of Muslims as the enemy within.”

Few are holding their breath. Critics say the principal word in Casey’s review – integration – is clumsy and loaded, giving the impression that unless ethnic minorities commit to total assimilation they have failed.

Yet in this corner of West Yorkshire there is also hope. Concerned that the buoyant textile industry near Bradford was employing low levels of Muslim women, the council introduced initiatives to entice its local Pakistani and Bangladeshi workforce into a sewing academy. Mark Clayton of Bradford council said: “Women are by far the largest group adversely affected directly by inequality, which can be compounded by economic, social and cultural barriers.”

It is a truth that affects most of the UK’s estimated 1.5 million Muslim women, a societal bias that Casey’s report hopes to start addressing.

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P.S.

* The Guardian. Sunday 27 November 2016 00.05 GMT:

Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/aug/11/uk-confusion-integration-counter-terrorism-hinders-muslims>
- [2] <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/sep/07/hate-surged-after-eu-referendum-police-figures-show>
- [3] <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/23/thomas-mair-found-guilty-of-jo-cox-murder>
- [4] ESSF (article 39592), [Britain's far right in 2016: fractured, unpredictable, dispirited ... and violent.](#)
- [5] <https://www.gov.uk/government/people/louise-casey>
- [6] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/mar/12/nigel-farage-british-muslim-fifth-column-fuels-immigration-fear-ukip>
- [7] ESSF (article 39593), [Great Britain: For Muslim women life had been getting better. No longer.](#)
- [8] <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/women-and-equalities-committee/news-parliament-2015/employment-opportunities-for-muslims-in-uk-report-published-16-17/>
- [9] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/apr/14/sadiq-khan-question-to-be-asked-about-hijabs-veils-london>
- [10] <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/oct/17/rotherham-eight-men-convicted-of-sexually-exploiting-teenage-girls>
- [11] <http://tellmamauk.org>