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Muslim Women: Communities, Identities and Aspirations

A study in the London Borough of Barnet

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

April 2011



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Foreword

This is the third piece of research commissioned by Barnet Muslim Partnership Board (formerly known as Muslim Youth Engagement) from Middlesex University. Building on the quantitative and qualitative studies published by Ryan et al (2008, 2009) which aimed to find out more about the lives, beliefs and aspirations of Barnet's Muslim communities, this third qualitative study examined the concerns, experiences and aspirations of Muslim mothers living in the London Borough of Barnet.

Barnet's 'Preventing Violent Extremism' programme has grown in both size, complexity and funding since we became a pathfinder authority in 2007. Barnet Muslim Engagement Partnership (BMEP) established in 2007 is a multiagency, multisector partnership with representatives from local public bodies and representatives from Barnet's multiethnic Muslim third sector. Formerly known as Muslim Youth Engagement, the partnership is responsible for delivering an innovative and ambitious engagement programme aimed at increasing the Muslim communities' confidence in statutory organisations but also enriching their skills and competencies to deliver a complex and varied programme of engagement with young people, women and public service providers committed to preventing violent extremism.

Through inclusive dialogue, passion and commitment we have used the Prevent agenda to fight violent extremism, enhance community cohesion and develop a new generation of diverse Muslim leaders committed to being part of mainstream society. In 2007 we had little understanding of the drivers and levers that persuade law-abiding citizens become attracted to violent extremism, but since then Barnet has emerged as a leading authority on increasing understanding of this agenda.

Barnet's Muslim community is different to many Muslim communities in London. Ours is not a homogenous community like those from northern cities but come from many different countries – Finchley Mosque has members from almost 70 countries attending Friday prayers. Barnet's Muslims are wealthier than many Muslim communities in other parts of the country and work in a range of professional and service sector jobs. The community play a significant part in making Barnet a desirable place to live. This study confirms this heterogeneity but also gives an insight into why 83% of Barnet's residents believe people from different backgrounds get on well together¹ and the commitment young people have in believing they can contribute to making the borough a better place.

I would like to draw your attention to the key findings of the recommendations made by the mothers in the Executive Summary. These illustrate the similarity of experience for women with children irrespective of their faith or other identity. A selection of recommendations have also been made which attempt to meet the aspirations of these mothers for themselves and their children.

As we move into the last phase of the Prevent programme, much of our energy needs to focus on the legacy of the Prevent programme in Barnet.

Cllr Joanna Tambourides
Cabinet Member for Community Safety and Cohesion
London Borough of Barnet

¹ Barnet – Place Survey 2009

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT:

Building on our earlier research with young people and the on-going work across the partnership with Muslim families, the aims of this research were to:

1. Examine the concerns, experiences and aspirations of Muslim women, specifically mothers, living in the London Borough of Barnet.
2. Explore women's active involvement within communities, identifying what barriers may inhibit their involvement and what could be done to encourage greater levels of civic participation.
3. Consider the role of Muslim mothers in building communities that are resilient to violent extremism.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. What does it mean to be a Muslim woman in Barnet/ London/ Britain today?
2. What are women's attitudes to and experiences of living in the London Borough of Barnet?
3. What roles do they play (or would they like to play) within communities?
4. What communities do they associate with and feel connected to?
5. What are their aspirations for themselves (such as education, training, employment)?
6. What are their aspirations for their families?
7. What do Muslim women see as the particular challenges facing them and their families?
8. As well as general concerns that all families face (around the economy, employment, cost of living, housing issues, health, education, fear of crime) are there specific issues that Muslim families face?
9. What are their experiences of discrimination/ abuse/ harassment?
10. What is the role of religion in their lives?
11. What role does ethnic identity play in their lives?
12. Are Muslim women worried about violent extremism in their communities?
13. Do Muslim women feel that families are given sufficient support? What additional support would they like to see?
14. What could be done to enhance a sense of citizenship and belonging among Muslims in Britain today?

Research Methods:

The research took place between September 2009 and May 2010. A combination of methods was used. Three focus groups were conducted with the support of local Muslim community organisations. In total, 23 women took part in the focus groups. In addition, ten in-depth interviews were undertaken with individual women. Two of the women from the focus groups also took part in individual interviews. Hence, 31 women took part in the research project as a whole.

Participants were recruited largely, though not exclusively, through the following community organisations: including, Somali Family Support Group, Paiwand Afghan Association, Barnet Muslim Women's Network, Hendon Mosque and Ayesha

Community Education (ACE). Working closely with these organisations enabled the research team to recruit women who may otherwise have been harder to reach. However, it is acknowledged that working through particular community groups may mean that some groups are under-represented in the sample. Although this is a qualitative study and makes no claims to present a representative picture of the Muslim population, the research team was keen to include a range of women. Hence, to increase the diversity of the study participants, personal networks were also used to access a wider range of women from across the borough. For example, particular efforts were made to successfully recruit women from Turkish and Iranian backgrounds. Nonetheless, it was not possible within the constraints of time and budget to include all the possible ethnic groups within the borough.

Summary of Participants:

Age: The participants ranged in age from 20s to 60s with the majority (over three quarters) clustered in their 30s and 40s.

Marital Status: The majority (over 70%) of participants were married.

Country of birth: most participants (77%) were born outside the UK. This reflects the large proportion of participants from recently arrived, refugee groups within the study sample.

Citizenship Status: Although, the majority of participants were born abroad, most (over 80%) were now British citizens. Among those who were not British citizens, it should be noted that several held citizenship from other EU member states.

Children: Between them, the 31 participants had 94 children, an average of three children each. Reflecting the age range of the mothers, the children ranged in age from babies to adults but the majority were aged between 5 and 15 years.

Education: Over half the women had completed further or higher education.

Employment: Over 1/3 of the women were employed (either full time or part time). Almost 20% were full time mothers, these tended to have young, pre-school children. 16% described themselves as students. Most of the other women described themselves as 'unemployed', but of course many of these were also looking after their school going children. Thus their actual status was more complex

Benefits: Over 1/3 of the women were claiming some sort of social welfare benefits.

Findings:

For the purposes of this study we have used a loose definition of ‘community’, recognising that it we can interpret in many varied ways (Alexander et al, 2007). For example, community can be defined spatially to mean a specific neighbourhood or local area. One woman spoke about her block of flats as a close community of good neighbours who help and support each other. Another woman spoke about her local area as a community where she had been brought up, where her parents and friends lived and to which she felt a strong sense of attachment. Community can also be defined ethnically. Women spoke about feeling part of the Turkish Cypriot community and the Iranian community.

One of the key findings of this research is that women participate at different levels within communities. Some are actively engaged in what we might call ‘micro’ communities, consisting of close groups of families and friends. These may take the form of quite localised neighbourhood networks. Other women had taken a step into more formal associations and organisations such as volunteering at schools, being involved in women’s groups, tennis clubs or faith groups. Some women had set up community groups, which started out fairly small and informal but have since developed into more organised associations.

The participants in this study expressed differing views about the extent to which one could talk about a Muslim community. A few women said they felt part of a Muslim community. But most women suggested that Muslims were quite diverse and it would be simplistic to speak of one, homogenous community. Ethnicity, country of birth, but also class clearly impacted on how people constructed their sense of community. The example of the Iranian community in Barnet is quite interesting as shared language and culture unite people from across different religious groups.

Many women said they would like to become more involved in different kinds of social activities. Lack of time was often identified as a barrier to wider civic engagement. Several women were combining childcare with part time employment and thus had very little spare time to commit to voluntary activities. School often provided an opportunity for women to network and become involved in social activities. While mothers of pre-school children could feel a bit more isolated, most of them availed of social activities such as Rhyme Time which is held in local libraries.

Many of the participants in this research were socially active which may reflect recruitment strategies as many were recruited through community organisations. This may skew the sample as there is a risk that the research team may not have been able to access the most socially isolated women. However, the focus groups did manage to recruit some women who were relatively isolated. In particular by working in close cooperation with community associations, both the Somali and the Afghani focus groups managed to include women who were quite socially isolated and would otherwise have been hard to reach.

Isolation is a main barrier to engagement – for different reasons, for example some newly arrived migrant women may be negotiating their readjustment to a new social environment. Some participants commented that their husbands were wary of

unfamiliar gender roles and opportunities for women in Britain. For other women overt racism, especially within some specific locations and estates was a cause of fear and wariness. Language could also be a barrier for some women.

The findings of this research highlight the important role of community organisations and mentors in giving women the confidence and opportunities to take that first step into social activity. Schools also have a key role to play in providing women with networks, opportunities and the necessary skills to develop their wider role in society. It is quite remarkable that so many women spoke about how volunteering at a school had provided them with the opportunity to become more socially engaged.

Volunteering had also provided some women with a route into paid employment. The participants had varied educational and employment experiences. Several of the women were university graduates. For some migrant and refugee women, having overseas qualifications recognised in Britain had delayed their career development. Many women had had professional jobs but taken career breaks or switched to part time work while their children were young. However, some of the more marginalised women spoke little English language, had no childcare support and faced a range of obstacles in accessing the labour market. This diversity of experience prevents any simplistic conclusions on the needs of Muslim women in the labour market.

Although violent extremism was a concern for the women, most of the study participants had no direct experience of young people becoming radicalised. They were worried about the potentially corrupting influence of the internet, and felt that parents, especially mothers, needed to be more aware of what their children were doing, who they were socialising with and what internet sites they were accessing. The participants were highly critical of extremists whom they tended to regard as a 'crazy' minority.

The demonisation of Muslim people especially by the media, construction of a suspect community, the creation of stereotypes of terrorists and religious extremists, serve to further alienate and divide communities.

The Muslim mothers cited here vary enormously in terms of age, ethnicity and socio-economic class. They also vary in the extent to which they practice their faith. Several women would not classify themselves first and foremost as Muslim. Nonetheless, as many of the women have emphasised, being Muslim has become highly politicised in recent years for a whole range of complex reasons. Islam has come under the spotlight. As one woman remarked, Muslims are continually being asked to explain and justify themselves. This may have the effect of fuelling an identity politics in a way that did not exist in the past.

One of the most important findings from this research is that the women were very positive about living in Britain and London in particular. Despite some experiences of racism, London was perceived as a reasonably safe place. The ethnic and religious diversity of the city was especially appreciated. In particular, all the women mentioned the freedom they enjoyed in Britain which they contrasted either with other European countries where Muslims were persecuted or with oppressive regimes which abused the rights of women.

Many of the key findings from the research would resonate with women from other communities particularly those currently juggling childcare responsibilities with other commitments.

Summary of Key findings:

Diverse Communities:

- Many women are involved in communities at different levels, especially in their local neighbourhoods.
- Getting along with their neighbours was regarded as a key element of Islamic faith.
- Muslim communities are varied and diverse, intersecting with ethnicities in complex ways. For example, several women felt more attached to their ethnic group than to a wider notion of '*a Muslim community*'.
- Within these different ethnic groups attitudes towards Islamic faith and practice also differ. For example, there are different attitudes towards women's attire.

Opportunities and Obstacles to Engagement:

- Community organisations have a crucial role to play in enabling women to become more actively involved in society. Specific groups have a good track record of encouraging and supporting women's activities.
- Mentors, community leaders - both male as well as female - were praised by several women as particularly inspiring and encouraging.
- While some women wanted to give their time to help specific Muslim or ethnic groups, others wanted to broaden the focus to engage with a wider range of people.
- Schools are often a key entry point for women into wider social and civic engagement. Volunteering at schools could be used as a route into paid work.
- Many women identified obstacles to wider social engagement, in particular pressures of time, childcare and family commitments, which are common to other women with young children.
- Language was also an obstacle for several refugees and recently-arrived migrant women. The need for more language classes, especially for women, was highlighted. Schools could be involved in providing more language classes for parents as part of the extended schools programme.

Employment:

- Obstacles to employment were varied but could be summarised as cultural, practical and social.
- Most of the women observed that Islam does not prevent mothers from working outside the home, but that traditional cultural beliefs may erroneously attribute this practice to religious teaching.
- Women's employment opportunities varied according to their qualifications, skills and experience. However, women with overseas qualifications struggled to get them recognised in this country felt this had impeded career development.

- Many women with younger children wanted to work time part. Women with higher qualifications seemed to have more opportunities to combine childcare with well paid, part time employment.
- Within the workplace Muslim women, particularly those wearing the hijab, may encounter stereotypes and prejudice. Office culture, such as outings to the pub, may also be a source of tension for some women.

Racism:

- Many women said they did not experience any overt racism in London, though several had an occasional experience of unpleasant comments particularly in the street or on public transport. However, it is clear that some women are more susceptible to racism. Within particular pockets of the borough, women from specific ethnic backgrounds reported high levels of on-going racist abuse.

Social Isolation and Abuse:

- There were some instances of domestic abuse which were exacerbated by social isolation. Women did not know how to access help.
- Some of the more socially isolated women also spoke about experiencing high levels of depression.

Living in Britain:

- Overall, the women were very positive about living in Britain, particularly London. They appreciated its multiculturalism and religious freedom. They compared Britain very favourably with other European countries.
- Several participants were born in Britain, felt British, and had only weak attachments to their parents' countries of origin.
- Among the women who had come to Britain in recent years, particularly refugees, attachments to their homeland were more complex. But overall, these women felt Britain was a much safer place to live and rear their children.

Violent Extremism:

- All the participants regarded violent extremists as a dangerous minority who were damaging the peaceful image of Islam. Several women dismissed these people as 'crazy' with no real understanding of Islamic teaching.
- The women were concerned that the media tended to focus on this minority of extremists ignoring the many ordinary decent Muslims.
- Some women suggested that economic disadvantage and British foreign policy may be fuelling disaffection among some young people.

Parenting and Families:

- Mothers were concerned that their children may be lead astray by negative influences but they felt that gangs and street crime posed a more real and present danger than extremists.
- Several mothers said their children were caught in a clash of cultures and that it was a delicate balancing act to avoid being overly strict while at the same time giving their children a set of sound moral values.
- For some parents, access to good schools was a primary concern. There was a feeling that while Barnet had many excellent schools, most of these were faith

schools which Muslim children could not access. There was a call for more publicly funded Muslim schools.

- A few women had some problems in schools over music and religious assemblies which left them with the feeling that Muslim mothers were not taken seriously.

Recommendations

It was not the intention of this research to make sweeping statements about Muslim women. In fact, on the contrary, the research has found that the diversity of women, even within this small qualitative study, warns against generalised conclusions. Nonetheless, some practical recommendations can be made.

1. **Increase the number of English language classes** for women through the extended schools model. However, crèche facilities may need to be provided for women with pre-school children. There are also resource implications for this.
2. **Establish Inclusive** literacy and numeracy skills development which will be of benefit to the wide community. This has the advantage of promoting local social cohesion and reducing feelings of resentment and exclusion.
3. **More volunteering opportunities for women** - Schools could also play a greater role in encouraging mothers to become more actively involved, for example, as volunteers.
4. **Public service providers** need to have a richer understanding of Barnet's Muslim communities on a similar level to understanding about the Jewish community. This would be of particular benefit in relation to primary school children's observance of Ramadan or the role of music in the curriculum.
5. **Office Culture** – employers need to be sensitive about the ways in which office culture (such as pub lunches) may alienate and disadvantage some members of the staff team.
6. **Need to recognise diversity of communities** – not all Muslim women are the same or share the same interests, thus statutory and voluntary sector services need to ensure that they are engaging with all Muslim communities.
7. **Refugees** – migrant and refugee women need to be enabled to fulfil their potential and have opportunities to contribute to society.
8. **Overseas qualifications** – Work with local employers to identify ways of accrediting overseas formal qualifications and offsetting them against actual or potential paid employment capabilities.
9. **Voluntary and Community organisations** can play a key role in supporting women to become more actively involved in civil society

10. **Mentors** – Develop a pool of local mentors both across the private, public and third sector to encourage Muslim women to develop their leadership potential.
11. **Over coming social isolation** – there is a demonstrable need for more opportunities for women to get out of the home and socialise. It is also important that social activities bring women together from across different communities.
12. **Health Issues** – healthy living initiatives provide an opportunity of tackling issues related to physical wellbeing such as obesity but also mental wellbeing. Swimming and yoga classes for women were identified as particularly valuable.
13. **Befriending programmes for isolated women** – it has been noted that very isolated women may not respond to invitations to attend events but may benefit from a befriender to bring them along and help ‘break the ice’.
14. **Sensitive means of tackling domestic violence** – as in all communities in society, Muslim communities need to recognise the problems of domestic abuse and provide support for those wishing to flee abusive relationships.
15. **Identify opportunities** for Barnet’s diverse Muslim communities to take greater responsibility for their individual well-being.
16. **Training for Imams** – current initiatives for training imams need to be rolled out so as to develop more effective communication between mosques and young people.