

# Raising Understanding of Islamophobia in Early Years' Settings

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## Introduction

The term 'marginalisation' can be defined as the social or political exclusion or neglect of a minority group in society (Brind, Harper and Moore, 2008). Groups within society can be marginalised as result of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. Children and families in marginalised groups across the United Kingdom (UK) face a number of challenges that impact all areas of their lives including education, health and living standards, their faith identity as well as community acceptance and participation. The aim of this report is to explore the Muslim community as a marginalised group, examining how Islamophobia affects the lives of children and families in the UK. Islamophobia is a term used to describe a person or society's fear of Muslims, or those who they perceive to be Muslim, as well as the prejudice targeted towards them (Younus & Mian, 2018; Zaidi, 2019). Since September 2001, after the devastating attack on the World Trade Centre in New York by an Islamic extremist group (commonly termed '9/11'), the use of the term 'terrorism' and prevalence of Islamophobia around the world has risen massively (Hossain, 2017). According to the Home Office in their Hate Crime report for England and Wales, 2018 – 2019, 47% of all religious hate crimes were targeted Muslims, demonstrating a clear need for academics and political figures to investigate the reasons behind the apparent prevalence of Islamophobia in Britain in order to combat this significant issue within society. While writing this report it became apparent that there is very little literature or research about how Islamophobia impacts upon Muslim children and families in the UK, despite the evidence of its prevalence in our society, making this report important in raising awareness among early childhood practitioners of the significance of this topic.

This report will begin by exploring the issues affecting Muslim children and families, considering the impacts Islamophobia has upon all aspects of their lives. It will then analyse how the Muslim community is portrayed in the British media and discuss how this representation has led to the marginalisation of Muslims in society, and the impact this has on the lives of children and families. Finally, the ideology of inclusive practice will be

considered, analysing the government policies and interventions in place to protect the Muslim community.

## **Issues affecting the Muslim Community**

### *Education*

Education is a significant aspect of life for young people; therefore, it is important to consider the role Islamophobia plays in this area, and the affect it has on Muslim children and families in Britain. Research has shown that Muslim pupils have lower academic attainment than their peers in non-marginalised groups, and many Muslim pupils leave school without qualifications or with relatively low grades (Shah, 2011). Shah (2018) argues that racism and marginalisation experienced by Muslim pupils plays a large role in their underachievement. This feeling that they are marginalised in society as well as within early years settings and schools can result in a lack of educational engagement as they feel excluded, which in turn results in lower academic achievement (Shah, 2018). Inman, McCormack and Walker (2014) claim that Muslim pupils remain behind their peers academically, as teachers have low expectations and therefore may not feel it is necessary to give them extra support.

Myers and Bhopal (2017) found that Muslim parents felt that early years settings and schools do not do enough to tackle the problems of Islamophobia and bullying, causing families to feel ignored and unvalued, resulting in some families taking their children out of school in favour of home-schooling. This claim is supported by Inman, McCormack and Walker (2014) who identify reasons why Muslim pupils feel excluded in schools and early years settings, noting the prevalence of bullying and the lack of action taken in addressing it, as well as feeling their identity as a Muslim is not recognised. Shah (2018) raises the issue surrounding Muslim identity, and how this is not considered in England's Eurocentric curriculum. The issues that Muslim children face in mainstream education has led to a rise in Islamic single faith schools in the UK (Shah, 2011). Research has shown that Muslim pupils perform better in schools where the percentage of Muslim students is higher, which could be a result of pupils feeling that their faith is valued, feeling accepted in the school environment, as well as being able to relate more to the curriculum as it incorporates their religious values (Shah, 2011). In order for Muslim children to reach their full potential in mainstream

education, it is vital that they feel valued and their faith is respected, and it is therefore the responsibility of early years practitioners and teachers to provide a safe environment for all children, addressing all forms of Islamophobia and discrimination in order to raise more tolerant and accepting individuals (Zaal, 2012).

### *Faith Identity*

The migration of Muslims around the world to non-Muslim countries has resulted in the desire for children and young Muslims to enhance their faith identity (Shah, 2011). 'Ummah' is a notion in the Quran which represents a Muslim's holistic faith identity, in spite of their differences to others, be they Muslims or non-Muslims (Shah, 2018). Shah (2018) argues that when Muslims migrate to non-Muslim countries, they feel encouraged to embrace their Muslim identity as a result of this concept of 'Ummah'. It is therefore apparent that despite living in a non-Muslim country like the UK, British Muslims still feel connected to and place great value on their faith.

Younus and Mian (2018) emphasise the importance of early childhood in developing faith identity, and argue that if young Muslim children experience Islamophobia early in life, this can have a negative impact on their identity formation, which can result in low self-esteem, which can impact on all aspects of a child's life, including education and mental health.

There are many Muslims in the UK who relate more to their British identity than their Islamic faith identity, however their everyday lives are still impacted by Islamophobia (Platt, 2014). Abbas (2019) asserts that discrimination and Islamophobia felt by Muslims in the UK, can lead to feeling of alienation and anger. In extreme cases, this can result in violence and even radicalisation of young Muslims (Abbas, 2019).

### *Health and Living Standards*

Ethnic minorities are identified as having a much lower disability free life expectancy and are more likely to have long-term illness than white British people (Nazroo & Bécares, 2017). It can be argued that one of the key factors causing this inequality is racism and discrimination (Nazroo & Bécares). Durrani, Hankir and Carrick (2018) explain that Islamophobia can lead to many mental health disorders including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and in some cases, suicide. Nazroo and Bécares (2017) support this claim, identifying that minorities who had been involved in a targeted racial attack were three times more likely to experience depression, as well as highlighting that stress and mental disorders can trigger or worsen existing physical diseases. Johnston and Lordan (2011) challenge this, stating health inequalities are more of a consequence of socioeconomic status, with lower socioeconomic status correlating to poorer health. As some ethnic minorities are more likely to be of lower socioeconomic status, this may explain the higher level of ill-health among the Muslim population. However, Johnston & Lordan (2011) have identified a direct link between increased discrimination and deterioration of health in Muslims. The negative health impacts that discrimination is evidenced to have on Muslims is a cause for concern for Muslim children in the UK. Poor physical and mental health has implications for all aspects of life; impacting upon social and cognitive development can lead to absence from early years' settings or school due to illness.

### *Community acceptance & participation*

Since 9/11, there has been an increase in anti-Muslim hate crime, causing tension and division between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, with rates of hate crime higher in more socially deprived areas (Ivandic, Kirchmaier & Machin, 2019). Bayrakli and Hafez (2017) claim that Muslim victims of discrimination or hate crimes are less likely to report incidents due to mistrust in authorities and the fear that they will be ignored or not taken seriously. Therefore, it is likely that many of these crimes go unreported and the perpetrators

go unpunished, leaving them likely to offend again, heightening the fear felt by Muslims thereby further excluding them from society.

Allen (2014), explored the views of visibly Muslim women, finding that they do not have to experience physical or verbal racial attacks to still feel the effects of Islamophobia in their everyday lives, stating that they struggle to feel fully integrated into British society. The marginalisation felt by Muslims in Britain has led to many parents enrolling their children in single faith Islamic schools in order to counter the segregation they feel in British communities (Shah, 2011). However, Myers and Bhopal (2017) suggest that non-Muslim parents within the community may see this as Muslims themselves wanting to detach from the community which could create animosity between the two groups. It is clear that Islamophobia can further marginalise Muslim communities, segregating them from the non-Muslim community around them. Paterson, Brown and Walters (2019) argue that Islamophobic hate crime or discrimination actually strengthens bonds within the Muslim communities and in turn, further reinforces their faith identity. It is important that Muslim children feel accepted and valued within the wider, non-Muslim communities to which they belong, as segregation and discrimination can have enormous long-term impacts on their life, such as low self-esteem, and has the potential to damage relationships with families as well as the wider community (Younus & Mian, 2018).

How a marginalised group is represented in the media plays a pivotal role in the way they are perceived by the public, often generating stereotypes (Saeed, 2007). Stereotypes create a generalised image of a type of person based upon what an individual believes to be true and can often lead to prejudice and discrimination (Dovido, Hewstone, Glick and Esses, 2013). Saeed (2007) states that in the UK media, Muslims are often 'othered', and 'represented as un-British' (p.444). This was stated by Saeed twelve years ago; however, it appears that little has changed (as the articles which follow demonstrate), and the Muslim community are still represented negatively in the British media.

## Media Representation



Article 1

**“Muslim worshippers cut heads of children open with knives in religious festival**

- Anthony Blair, *Daily Star*, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2019

Article 2

**“Nearly half of Tory members would not want Muslim PM – poll”**

- Jessica Murray, *The Guardian*, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2019

Article 3

Article 1 is the front page of the Metro newspaper following the Manchester Arena bombing in 2017, where 22-year-old British Muslim Salman Ramadan Abedi detonated a bomb at an Ariana Grande concert, injuring 59 and killing 22 people (Cobain, Perraudin, Morris & Parveen, 2017). The use of the words 'they' (in reference to Muslims) and 'our' (in reference to the British public) immediately has connotations that Muslims are to be seen as different to the rest of society. This example supports Saeed's (2007) observation that the media consistently portrays British Muslims as the 'alien other' (p.443), who we cannot trust. When Islamic terrorist attacks occur, the media often lead with the religion of the attacker, subconsciously placing the blame upon the entire religion, rather than the individual who carried out the attack (Driggs, 2018). Ivandic, Kirchmaier and Manchin (2019) state that the way in which terror attacks are reported by the media have a direct impact on the way British people view Muslims, also citing that the attacks do not have to occur in UK, with anti-Muslim hate crime rates increasing following British media reports of Islamic terrorist attacks around the world.

Article 2 discusses a group of Muslims celebrating the Islamic festival 'Ashura', containing distressing images of Muslims of all ages bleeding and cutting their heads with large knives. The headline "Muslim worshippers cut the heads of children" is clearly intended to shock and cause an emotional response from the reader, a technique also adopted in the headline of Article 1, with the use of "kill our little girls". Muslims all over the world celebrate 'Ashura' in different ways, with some Muslims engaging in the activities depicted in the article, cutting their foreheads (Chelkowski, 2019). According to Chelkowski (2019), this ritual is intended to honour and mourn the death of Husayn, who was a grandson of prophet Muhammad. However, it is important to note that many Muslims reject this practice as they believe it is a form of self-harm, which according the Quran is forbidden or 'Haram' under Islamic Law (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2019). This idea of harming children is obviously considered abhorrent in British society, and therefore this is a clear example of Hamid's (2017) idea that the media attempt to represent Muslims as holding totally opposing values to the average

British person. Without context, articles 2 and 3 give the impression that Muslims feel harming and killing children is accepted practice in the religion of Islam. Hamid (2017) goes on to raise the issue that the anti-Muslim scare stories in the media are now so normalised that it is difficult to distinguish between what is true and what is not, which can massively impact upon the prevalence of Islamophobia in the UK.

Article 3 is from The Guardian, which reports that almost half of the Members of the Conservative party would not want a Muslim Prime Minister. Abbas and Awan (2015) note that at a Globsec conference, the Prime Minister at the time David Cameron suggested that Muslims themselves had not done enough to combat Islamic extremism within their communities, implying that the blame was on them. Current Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson has also compared 'veiled women' to 'letterboxes' in an article for The Telegraph, with a 375% increase in Islamophobic incidents occurring in the week following the column's release (Dearden, 2019). The comments made by Boris Johnson about the way some Muslim women choose to dress seem to be reflected in the views of British society, with some teachers and Ofsted inspectors questioning young Muslim girls about wearing religious dress for school (Kallis, 2017). Being singled out because of their religion can result in Muslim children feeling marginalised in their learning and social environment.

According to Nazroo and Bécares (2017), Muslim people are the social group most frequently discriminated against, with prejudice towards them seen as more socially acceptable than towards any other group. One explanation for this normalisation of Islamophobia could be attributed to the fact that if past and present Prime Ministers and members of the political party in power have been seen to make Islamophobic comments or hold anti-Muslim sentiments, then the general public may believe their Islamophobic thoughts are justified.

From analysing just a few articles it is clear to see the anti-Muslim bias in the British media. Esposito (2019) found that in a study of Western media, over 50% of news reports featuring Muslims were negative, adding that before the World Trade Centre attacks in 2001, just 2% of all Western media regarded Islamic extremism, compared to 25% by 2011. The British public's exposure to negative representation of Muslims is evidenced to have resulted in increased marginalisation of Muslims in the UK (Shah, 2018). It is generally accepted that young children's attitudes and behaviours are learnt from role models, commonly parents, but also early years' practitioners and teachers (Brown, 2007). Brown (2007) states that young children can easily absorb discriminatory and prejudiced views held by others around them. Furthermore, with such high levels of Islamophobic media bias, many children are at risk of developing Islamophobic thoughts and attitudes, and therefore it is vital that practitioners and teachers educate young children about the true meanings of Islam and the concept of Islamophobia, challenging any potentially harmful stereotypes that children may already hold, and encouraging children to think beyond media representations (Zaidi, 2019).

## **The Challenges of Inclusive Ideology in Practise**

There are a number of government policies in place in order to attempt to tackle Islamophobia in Britain. For example, the Equality Act 2010 aims to protect every person from any form of discrimination in work, school and society due to age, disability, gender, race, religion, sex or sexual orientation (Government Equalities Office, 2010). The Equality Act (2010) sets out the definitions of discrimination, adding that any perpetrator of any discriminatory act can be reported to the appropriate authorities and must be held accountable. However, Bayrakli and Hafez (2017) found only 12% of Muslims in Europe who have experienced discrimination have actually reported it, therefore making any official figures for anti-Muslim discrimination unreliable. It is therefore apparent that despite the Equality Act (2010) giving individuals the right to report and challenge Islamophobic discrimination, many Muslims choose not to do so, therefore this legislation alone is not enough to tackle Islamophobia.

The National Curriculum in England names Religious Education as a statutory subject for Key stages 1 – 4, however, it does not contain specific subject content, therefore making the teaching of Islam in primary and secondary schools optional (Department for Education, 2013; 2014). Both policy documents note that it is teachers who are responsible for conducting inclusive practice, ensuring that every child is given equal opportunities (Department for Education, 2013; 2014). It is vital children are taught about other cultures and religions such as Islam, as Zaal (2012) argues that teachers must ‘provide counternarratives’ (p.557) to Islamophobia seen in society, which will in turn challenge Islamophobic perspectives early in life before they become deep-rooted in a person’s world view. Shah (2018) demonstrates the importance of inclusive practice, stating that Muslim pupils underperform when they feel marginalised and undervalued. Incorporating Islam, not only into Religious Education lessons, but also in the everyday practices in nursery and school life, such as celebrating their festivals and allowing time for prayer will normalise it

and make Muslim pupils feel like a respected part of the nursery or school community, thus improving their quality of education as well as quality of life.

In 2014, the Department for Education released a non-statutory, advisory document called 'Promoting fundamental British values as part of SMSC in schools'. All schools are required to 'promote spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of pupils' (p.3) under the 2002 Education Act and this document sets out guidelines for teachers to follow in order to achieve this. It places significant focus on promoting fundamental 'British values', which include taking responsibility for your own actions, understanding that people believe in different religions and being tolerant of that, as well as identifying and combatting discrimination (Department for Education, 2014). This is a step in the right direction in terms of government initiatives to reduce Islamophobia, however, it is only advisory. Therefore, many children could be missing out on these important life skills. According to Lander (2016), when studying the views of Muslim teachers, there is little disparity between 'British values' and 'Islamic values', thus the idea of promoting 'fundamental British values' in schools and early years settings can make Muslim children feel included and less marginalised, as they will see similarities between the two groups.

'Prevent Strategy' is a framework produced in 2011 (last updated April 2019) by the Home Office, with an aim to 'stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism' (p.6), giving early years practitioners and primary and secondary school teachers a responsibility to identify warning signs and challenge extremist views before they can escalate. The document has been widely criticised by Muslims in Britain they feel it isolates Muslims as the group who are most at risk of being radicalised (Home Office, 2011). Lander (2016) reports the perspectives of some Muslim teachers who found the legislation called for Muslims in early years settings and schools to be viewed as 'suspects' (p.278). Myers and Bhopal (2017) assert the Prevent strategy has played a role in demonising Muslims, arguing that it plants the idea in people's minds that if a Muslim child is being home educated or attends a

single faith Islamic school, then they must be being radicalised – thus strengthening the media’s narrative that Muslims should be feared. Hamid (2017) argues it is the Islamophobia that is already deeply engrained in British society through the media, that allows Muslims to become the scapegoat for political discussion surrounding terrorism, as well as crime and immigration.

## Conclusion

It is clear to see that the media has a profound impact on the way Muslims are perceived by the British public. The news articles discussed in this report show just a few examples of the anti-Muslim narrative adopted by the British media. In 2019 the Home Office reported that nearly half of all reports of religious hate crime over the last 12 months has been targeted at Muslims. This shows the contribution the media has played in inciting fear and hatred towards Muslims among the British public. However, it is not just the media that has fuelled the levels of Islamophobia in the UK, Government policies have also played a part, with their counter-terrorism legislations seeming to single out the Muslim community, further marginalising them from society (Abbas & Awan, 2015). The constant anti-Muslim headlines and news stories and the reported comments and views held by members of the political party in power, as well as counter-terrorism legislation have all contributed to the normalisation of Islamophobia in the UK.

Islamophobia and discrimination has devastating impacts on the lives of Muslims in Britain. Research shows Muslims in mainstream education tend to perform lower academically, feel that their faith identity is not valued, have poorer mental and physical health and feel segregated from society. In order to combat these issues, early years' practitioners and teachers can practice inclusive education, which will make Muslim children feel valued, while simultaneously educating non-Muslim children about the true meaning of Islam. Practitioners should also promote acceptance and tolerance of *all* religions and cultures. This could be done by celebrating festivals across a range of religions, rather than just Christianity, the use of Persona Dolls, and on a larger scale, early years' settings and schools could attempt to hire more Muslim staff so that there are role models in the setting.

As long as the media continue with an anti-Muslim agenda, it is likely that there will always be Islamophobia in Britain. It is therefore important that the young children of today are

taught to be open-minded and to accept and respect others in spite of their differences, in order to reduce marginalisation of minority groups and create a more tolerant society.

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