

Written evidence from Dr Fatima Khan, Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Head of Youth Development, Manchester Centre for Youth Studies [GIS0003]

Policy Brief: Addressing the challenges faced by Young Muslim Women

Context and Background

In a climate marked by widespread Islamophobia, young Muslim women's voices and experiences are neglected or unheard in policy, public and academic discussions. This policy brief is based on a study conducted by Khan and Akram (2025) that captures the testimonies of 22 Muslim women, aged 16-24, residing in Greater Manchester. Through an arts-based participatory qualitative study, the research sheds light on the lived realities of these women and identifies four key findings, each with significant policy implications.

1. Silenced Voices in Policy and Public Discourse

The experiences of young Muslim women remain underrepresented in both public and policy discussions, effectively silencing their concerns and needs. This exclusion not only hinders the understanding of their challenges but also limits the development of policies that address the issues they face.

Policy Implication: There is a critical need for the inclusion of young Muslim women's voices and experiences of Islamophobia in public policy and social life. Their insights are essential to shaping effective and relevant interventions.

2. Triple Penalty: Intersectional Disadvantages

Mancunian Muslim women experience a "triple penalty" due to the intersecting discrimination they face based on their gender, race, and religion. This intersectionality places them at a disadvantage across multiple domains, including education, employment, and everyday interactions.

Policy Implication: Gender-focused interventions do not account for the intersecting forms of racism and Islamophobia faced by Muslim women. These single-issue gendered frameworks are therefore not simply inadequate; they actively erase the complexities of power and silence the claims of non-white women. For Muslim women patriarchy is not the only, or even primary, form of oppression. We must offer intersectional policy interventions that address the experiences of all women.

3. Racial-Colonial Literacy and Historical Context

Young Muslim women possess a racial-colonial literacy, reflecting their understanding of contemporary racism and Islamophobia within a broader historical and geopolitical framework. This awareness is shaped by a global legacy of anti-Muslim sentiment and systemic injustices. However, they also recognize that confronting these issues often leads to backlash and minimal transformation.

Policy Implication: Policies addressing Islamophobia must explicitly recognize it as a form of racism and formally adopt the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British

Muslims' definition: *"Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness."* Furthermore, public and policy discourse must acknowledge colonial histories and the citizenship rights of Muslim communities, countering a form of racism that seeks to exclude Muslims based on nationhood.

4. **The Need for Knowledge and Leadership from Muslim Communities**

The study emphasises the importance of leadership in policymaking being led by those who are most affected. Muslim women have a unique understanding of their lived experiences and the systemic barriers they face, making them best placed to inform and guide policy development.

Policy Implication: Policy development and scholarship must be led by those with direct experience and knowledge of the issues at hand. Policymakers should engage with young Muslim women as experts, incorporating their perspectives into the formulation of policies aimed at addressing Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination.

Conclusion

The experiences of young Muslim women in Greater Manchester highlight significant gaps in policy and public discourse, and this research underscores the importance of incorporating their voices into decision-making processes. By focusing on the four key findings and their corresponding policy implications—representation in policy, a multi-layered approach to racism, intersectionality in gender-focused policies, and leadership from affected communities—policymakers can begin to address the complex realities these women face.

Policymakers are urged to prioritise the inclusion of young Muslim women in the policymaking process, recognise the global and historical context of Islamophobia, and adopt a more nuanced, intersectional approach to addressing the needs of Muslim women. Only then can we ensure that policies are effective, relevant, and truly transformative for those most affected by discrimination.

Author Biographies

Dr Fatima Khan is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Manchester Metropolitan University, specialising in the study of racisms and anti-racisms, with a particular focus on British Muslims and Islamophobia. Her research adopts a critical race approach, aimed at advancing racial justice or, at a minimum, rigorously exposing and challenging racial conditions that should not be tolerated. Dr Khan has extensive expertise in conducting arts-based qualitative and participatory research with these communities across Greater Manchester. Her work frequently involves collaboration with grassroots organisations to address and mitigate issues adversely affecting these communities. She has been awarded

the Independent Social Research Fund Early Career Fellowship to investigate the impact of white supremacy on the mental health of young Muslims.

Dr Sadiya Akram is an Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of Birmingham, specialising in the politics of race. Her research explores the varied ways in which racially marginalised groups mobilise. To date her research has explored race-rioting and the politics of the incarcerated. Central to Akram's research is a conceptual critique of the core concepts relating to debates on racism, and she has published on unconscious bias, institutional racism in The Metropolitan Police, and decolonisation. She has also written about the implications of a long-standing neglect of racism in both the discipline and practice of British politics.

The Problematic Stereotypes that Legal Actors Impose on Muslim Women

Context and Background

Legal and political actors including judges often contribute to or perpetuate harmful stereotypes of Muslim women which feed into wider perceptions of them in media and society. These stereotypes objectify and lead to the heightened scrutiny and criticism of Muslim women that can advance their mistreatment and suffering gendered Islamophobic abuse. What is less apparent is just how pervasive and subtle these harmful legal discourses are and the messages that they convey.

Evidence: Naqvi ZB. (2023) The racialising effects of non-marriage in English Law: A critical postcolonial analysis. *International Journal of Law in Context*.19(4):578-596

Naqvi undertook a review of dozens of judicial decisions relating to the judicial concept of 'non-marriage' or 'non-qualifying ceremony' which is used to describe Islamic Nikah ceremonies that are not considered legally binding in England and Wales. During this exploration, she discovered evidence of Muslim women being portrayed in problematic ways in the courts:

'Although a traditional Muslim and naïve in some respects she was not fundamentalist. I think she was quite meek. The husband in contrast would be dominant. Although intelligent and university educated there is still a strong streak of traditionalism in the wife's attitude to roles in marriage.' (*Akhter v Khan* [2018] EWFC 54, p.596).

Evidence: Naqvi ZB. (2023) *Polygamy, Policy and Postcolonialism in English Marriage Law: Critical Feminist Perspectives*. Bristol: Bristol University Press

In another example, Naqvi carried out an empirical interview study with 26 women around the UK from various religious and ethnic backgrounds who shared their experiences and

opinions on polygamous marriages, a relationship which is disproportionately associated with Islam. Some of the Muslim women that participated in this study repeatedly expressed their frustration with the ways that they are portrayed leading to negative stereotypes about them and their relationship choices.

Policy Implication: Any consideration or measure to address gendered Islamophobia must first engage with how powerful institutions and actors are embedded in and spread harmful assumptions about Muslim women and their communities. Without foregrounding this, there is a greater risk that policy and law can contribute to gendered Islamophobia.

Naqvi's research further emphasizes the need for policies that:

- **Recognize the impact of legal frameworks** on Muslim women's personal and social lives, particularly in relation to marriage and citizenship rights.
- **Incorporate intersectional approaches** to law and policy that take into account the layered discrimination faced by young Muslim women, including racism, sexism, and religious bias.
- **Affirm the cultural and religious practices** of Muslim communities while ensuring that these practices are not used to marginalise or exclude Muslim women from mainstream societal benefits.
- **Empower young Muslim women** by creating legal and policy environments where their cultural, religious, and social identities are acknowledged, respected, and supported.

Author biography:

Dr. Zainab Naqvi is Reader in Critical Feminist Legal Studies at Manchester Law School. Her research expertise focuses on legal and judicial responses to racially minoritised women and communities in the UK. Her work engages with the areas of family, immigration and antidiscrimination law amongst others. She undertook the first interview-based study on women's experiences and perceptions of polygamous marriages in the UK and has also undertaken further research on legal responses to minoritised marriage practices including Muslim marriages in English family law.

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