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MUSLIM YOUTH IN BARNET:

EXPLORING IDENTITY, CITIZENSHIP AND BELONGING LOCALLY AND IN THE WIDER CONTEXT

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(WITH MUSTAFA MANSURY AND FAIZA BASHE)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Faiza Bashe and **Mustafa Mansury** were the community researchers on this project.

The cover photos are by students at London Academy: Claudia Silva Lopes, Bahar Cakmak and Anthony Mario Louca

FOREWORD

This is the second piece of research commissioned by Barnet Muslim Partnership Board (formerly known as Muslim Youth Engagement) from Middlesex University. Building on the quantitative study published by Ryan et al (2008) which aimed to find out more about the lives, beliefs and aspirations of Barnet's Muslim communities, this second qualitative study aimed to explore the ways young Muslims in Barnet construct and negotiate their multiple identities to express their experiences in a local context but set against broader national and international settings.

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.

Our recent successes include the following:

- Winner of the 2009 GOL Preventing Violent Extremism Award for 'Best Project'
- Runner up at the same ceremony for youthwork on our citizenship work
- Cited in the Prevent Strategy for our work on Madrassa citizenship
- Used as the only case study by OPM for developing pan – London guidance on National Indicator 35
- Barnet Muslim Women's Network cited in the published OPM guidance
- Cited in the OSCT Good Practice Guidance on our work with Afghan young people
- Chief Executive for Somali Family Support Group is a member of the National Muslim Women's Advisory Network
- Somali Family Support Group received Community Leadership Funding for their work to build resilience amongst vulnerable Muslim women.
- The only local authority to host a visit by the Governor of Helmand

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 together[1] 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 recommendations made by the young people themselves about what they believe should be done to improve the position of Muslim people. These practical and pragmatic suggestions must serve as a powerful reminder to influential adults about the importance of remembering that whilst it is often convenient to group people together on the basis of a perceived shared common understanding, the reason why people feel positive about their locality is that it allows their individuality and vibrancy to flourish. These recommendations will feed directly into the programme as it develops and matures.

Jill Stansfield

Executive Director for Communities

London Borough of Barnet

Chairman

Barnet Muslim Engagement Partnership Board

July 2009

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[1] Barnet – Place Survey 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This qualitative research follows on from the quantitative study *Engaging Muslim Youth in Barnet* (Ryan et al, 2008) and forms part of a series of research by the Middlesex team, commissioned by the Barnet Muslim Engagement Partnership.

Barnet Muslim Engagement Partnership (BMEP) established in 2007 is a multiagency, multi-sector partnership with representatives from local public bodies and representatives from Barnet's multiethnic Muslim third sector 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 BMEP has 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.

AIM

The study aimed to explore the ways in which young Muslims construct and negotiate their identities within British society and how these were expressed and experienced in local contexts as well as in broader national and international settings.

METHODS AND DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

A total of 37 participants took part in the study. Twenty individual interviews were conducted by the community researchers. In addition, three focus groups were carried out by members of the research team, assisted by the community researchers. A total of 17 young people took part in the focus groups. Participants were aged between 17 and 28 years, with the majority in their early-to-mid twenties. There were 22 women and 15 men among the participants. The 20 interviews had an even gender balanced, with 10 male and 10 female participants. However, the focus groups had more female participants (12 female and 5 male). As this study is a qualitative approach to understanding complex processes of identity and belonging, we were not aiming to have a representative sample.

The social status of the participants – as reflected by the head of household's profession/ job and family's housing situation – is quite mixed, suggesting that the study participants were drawn from a wide range of different socio-economic backgrounds. Because two of focus groups were conducted in educational settings,

there were a large proportion of students in further and higher education among the participants.

Just over one third of the participants were born in the UK. Those born abroad came from a wide range of countries including Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey. Thus, unlike many other studies which have focused on South Asian Muslims, this research includes Muslims from a range of ethnic backgrounds. The diversity among the participants roughly reflects the range of the Muslim population in the borough as a whole (Census, 2001). Of those not born in the UK, most arrived as children in the 1990s. Despite the large proportion born abroad, the majority of participants were now British citizens.

KEY FINDINGS

- Self-defined identity emerged as complex and varied. We wanted to go beyond narrow Census and ethnic monitoring categories so we used open-ended questions to allow people to describe their own identity. The majority of participants used hyphenated categories to capture the complexity and multifaceted nature of their identities. These categories combined nationality (British), with religion (Muslim) and family background, though in varied sequences – such as 'Turkish/Muslim/British', 'Afghan/British/Muslim' and 'Muslim/British/Bangladeshi'.

- The majority of participants described religion as important or very important in their lives. This is similar to the findings of the previous quantitative study (Ryan et al, 2008) and highlights the central role of religion in the lives of many Muslim young people. However, their views of what being a Muslim meant, and how Muslims should behave, were varied suggesting a spectrum of interpretations and constructions.

- Most of the participants were very positive about London as a city where they felt a sense of belonging and attachment. The majority of interviewees said they 'felt like Londoners'. Most also expressed a sense of attachment to their local neighbourhood. The participants enjoyed the diversity of London and appreciated the opportunity to get to know people of other faiths and cultures.

- Many interviewees were positive about living in Britain. For example one said: 'there are far greater opportunities for people to have a good life than in many other countries'. They all acknowledged the values, privileges and rights attached to being a citizen of Britain, and holding a British passport.

- While feeling generally positive about living in Britain, most participants did not 'feel' British. A small number of interviewees said they felt British but not English, more than half said that they felt 'neither British nor English'. In

giving reasons for their answers, most pointed to discrimination and racism: 'sometimes I feel I don't belong because of my religion & ethnicity'.

- Ironically, several people said that they felt more British when they visited other countries. While in Britain they often were made to feel like a foreigner or a migrant, when they travelled overseas they were treated and perceived as being British. This was particularly significant for young people visiting their own or their parents' country of birth.

- There was also a strong feeling that attitudes towards Muslims had become more negative in recent years. Several of the interviewees noted that discrimination occurs both on the grounds of race and religion. As one participant put it: 'Yes, race for being black, people say things such as 'go back to your country'. And being a Muslim, you are subject to major harassments when being called terrorists and extremists'.

- In the focus group discussions most of the incidents of verbal abuse or harassment were described by women and involved insults based on their identifiable symbols of religion – particularly the hijab. None the young men appeared to have had any such negative experiences and this may be because they wore Western dress.

- Dress was important in representing the complexity and fluidity of identities. It is also noteworthy that clothing took on different meanings in different social situations and locations.

- As in our previous research, a number of drivers to violent extremism were identified by participants. These included 'the war on terror' which was seen by some as 'a war on Muslims', attacks on Muslims in places such as Gaza, and the war in Iraq. In addition, several people referred to the disaffection and alienation among some Muslims in Britain. However, the vast majority of participants disassociated themselves from violent extremism and emphasised that Islam was a peaceful religion.

- Government policy was blamed by many participants for causing distrust and suspicion within Muslim communities. For example: 'I don't think Muslims trust the government.' Another participant said: 'Government should change their foreign policy'.

- Participants expressed concern that 'the police are putting down a lot of innocent people'. It was suggested that the police should 'treat people with respect and stop discriminating'. Another respondent argued for the need to 'promote a greater sense of interaction with the communities you police. Recruit more ethnic minorities into the areas you police, especially more Muslims'.

- It was suggested that young people need a forum, a place where they can have discussions and air their views in a positive and fruitful way: 'so that young people are getting their views out there, off their chest, so it is not building up to become something extreme. If you could have a meeting once a month where you can meet up and speak out'.

- There was a general feeling that Islam is very misunderstood by non-Muslim people. Several people said it was important to bring people from different faith/communities to get to know each other and discuss their differences. 'After all, they aren't so different'.

- All respondents believe that the media has fostered anti-Muslim sentiments by 'portraying Muslims as violent extremists', 'all part of al-Qaeda', 'war mongers and preachers of hate'. Almost all interviewees think Muslims are not fairly depicted in the British media. As noted in the previous study of young Muslims in Barnet (Ryan et al, 2008), young people are particularly aware of and concerned about the negative images of Muslims in the British media. In the focus group, one young woman explained that she found it hard to feel British because of the media: 'there is diversity in London but you don't see that on TV – you see Black and white, majority white, you don't see women with headscarves on TV. You watch TV and you see that is British, so I am not British'.

- However, despite or perhaps because of rising Islamophobia since 9/11 and 7/7, and 'the war on terror', there appears to have been renewed interest among young people in finding out more about their religious heritage. 'Yeah there is a curiosity, because it is surprising how little people know about Islam'. 'There was a lot of negativity around Islam. Then people wanted to go and find out, to read the holy book, they saw that it is a peaceful religion'. Although many of these young people were children at the time of 9/11, it has clearly impacted on them and shaped their experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

This report is based on the views of ordinary young people growing up in a North London borough. They do not constitute a homogenous group. Their backgrounds, attitudes and experiences are varied. Their diversity points not only to the heterogeneity of the Muslim population but also to the variety of views and experiences included within that broad category.

In the years since 9/11, Jonathan Birt (2009: 223) argues, there has been a tendency to construct 'a sharp bifurcation of British Muslims into loyal moderates and disloyal radicals'. This simplifies the diversity of perspectives and experiences among Muslims in this country. As this research shows, young Muslims have a genuine commitment to living in Britain, appreciate British citizenship and feel a strong sense of attachment to cities like London, while at the same time sharing a sense of frustration about discrimination, injustice and the oppression of Muslims in places such as Palestine. Birt (2009) goes on to argue that Muslims should avoid internalising a victimhood mentality and withdrawing from mainstream society, instead they should engage with issues as active citizens. Much of the work of the BMEP has been about encouraging active citizenship among young Muslims so that energy can be channelled in positive and fruitful ways. In taking this work forward, more research is needed on inter-community and inter-cultural dialogue so that we can identify how best this area of work can be developed to meet the needs of all the varied and diverse people who make up our communities.

Most of the participants were either born in Britain or had come here as children. For many, this is the only society they know. As several noted, they tend to realise how British they are when they travel abroad in other countries. Despite the emotional attachments that many of them feel to other places, such as their parents' birthplace, 'motherland', country of origin, London is also their home. Many of these young people are clearly building their identities in ways that combine religion, nationality and ethnic background. Britain is not simply a backdrop to that process. British government, national and local, British institutions, including the media, the police, colleges and universities, and community organisations are all active players in that process of identity-making and have a role to play in creating the possibilities for the emergence of new ways of being both Muslim and British.

> *I have lived here all my life, I really don't know any different, you know. I haven't lived away from here. Like this is my home as well, if I go away on holidays I am dying to come back. This is home, this is what I know. You are attached to where you know and I know this place best. It is where I feel comfortable* (participant who came to Britain from Somalia as a small child).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increasing social interaction

In celebrating the diversity of London, it is also important to increase the opportunities for social interaction between people of different backgrounds. Thus, there is a need for statutory and community organisations to find ways of enabling more inter-community dialogue. It is important though to ensure that while different faiths are included, ways are also found to include people of no faith, so that inter-cultural dialogue is not simply inter-faith dialogue.

2. Giving young people a forum

It is important for statutory and community groups to recognise that young people need their own forums which reflect their particular interests and concerns. The work already being done within communities needs to be supported and developed so as to enable young people to air their concerns and frustrations in positive and fruitful ways. As one participant said: 'bring it out into the open, let's talk about it'.

3. Promoting an understanding of Islam

There was a strong feeling among the participants that Islam is very misunderstood and many myths and stereotypes abound. More work could be done in schools and colleges, for example, to promote a wider understanding of different faiths and cultures.

4. Government Policy

Although we recognise that government foreign policy is beyond the remit of local agencies, it is important to acknowledge the impact of these policies on local attitudes and experiences. It is necessary for central government to take on board the interconnections between local concerns, national policy and international events.

5. Building trust with police

We acknowledge that the balance between maintaining community safety and improving community relations is not always easy. Thus, we recommend that community liaison continue to be developed.

6. A fairer depiction of Muslims in the British media

All the respondents think Muslims are not fairly depicted in the British media. They claim that media tend to portray Muslims in a stereotypical way, for example, as terrorists. Thus, we recommend that initiatives are undertaken to bring together media producers, at national and local level, and young people from across the communities as a way of developing more understanding and awareness.

7. Tackling discrimination

The majority of interviewees said that they had experienced some form of discrimination. However, it is apparent that discrimination may manifest itself in different ways with, for example, overlap in 'racial' and religious discrimination. Hence, it is necessary for policy and law makers to address the complexity of multiple-discriminations.

8. The heterogeneity of Muslim communities

The participants in this study were heterogeneous and suggest the range and diversity of the Muslim population. One participant highlighted the need to 'understand that the Muslim Community is in fact Muslim Communities'. We recommend, therefore, that policy makers at local and national level take the necessary steps to engage with the whole spectrum of Muslim population.