



# BRITISH MUSLIMS: GENDER AND GENERATIONS

This guide looks at gender identities in British Muslim communities, particularly among young people.



**“ Muslim women in the UK have been the subject of academic research and wider public debate, but discussion of their identities has too often focused around the subject of veiling. ”**

## KEY POINTS

- As a religion, Islam emphasises the spiritual equality of men and women, though it does differentiate their roles and responsibilities.
- First generation migrants who came to Britain from different countries imported their own cultural ideas about gender roles and women’s family. Patriarchal traditions about family honour, marriage practices and the seclusion of women had an impact on Muslim women’s participation in wider society.
- Muslim women in the UK continue to be less economically active than men, although their participation in the labour market is increasing. Nearly half of Muslim students are women.
- Muslim women in the UK have been the subject of academic research and wider public debate, but discussion of their identities has too often focused around the subject of veiling.
- Muslim women take roles as prayer leaders and teachers of other women, active civil society organisers, and charity fundraisers.
- Male gender issues are under-researched. Common stereotypes, of British Muslim men as gangsters or terrorists, mask diverse masculinities, based on religion, class, educational achievement and other variables.
- There are significant generational differences in British Muslim communities. Religiously-minded young people have often been attracted to a culturally unadulterated form of Islam, and often criticise their elders for a narrow focus on ethnic culture and traditions.
- Although some young people from Muslim families think of themselves as ‘Muslim first’, not all Muslims are overtly religious. There are many who see themselves as ‘cultural Muslims’, ‘secular Muslims’ or ‘ex-Muslims’.

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## MUSLIM WOMEN'S SPACES, PARTICIPATION AND ACTIVISM

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As a religion, Islam emphasises the spiritual equality of men and women, though it does differentiate their roles and responsibilities. Conduct between the sexes requires that men and women do not mix together in ways that are immodest or that contravene these roles. Although it stresses the importance of motherhood, it does not bar women from participating in education and work outside the home, or in choosing a partner or inheriting property. However, first generation migrants who came to Britain from different countries imported their own cultural ideas about gender roles and women's family lives which were often at odds with both Qur'anic teaching and with the liberal notions generally espoused in the UK. Patriarchal traditions about family honour, marriage practices and the seclusion of women (*pardah*) had an impact on Muslims' participation in wider society, but women often found ways of exercising power within the home, gaining a degree of independence and having an influence in both family and community affairs.

Across Muslim communities, in addition to mosques, there are a plethora of local groups – religious, political, cultural and social – which meet in other spaces, including homes and community or leisure centres. Given the male dominance of mosques, Muslim women have organised separately, often in one another's homes, to pray, read or celebrate together, or to do charitable work. Female members of the first generation, for example, prayed at home or in the homes of relatives or friends. Such gatherings enabled them to support one another and ensured against loneliness in the UK context. Since then, women have become more proactive, gathering together for Qur'an recitation, devotional singing, and celebrations.

Research has shown how this has not only empowered them personally, but has also led them at times to become ritual leaders and teachers of other women, active civil society organisers, charity fundraisers, and critical readers and commentators. They have also campaigned for better facilities. An

increasing number of mosques now have spaces for women and, in some, women have organised full programmes of prayer, study and even pilgrimage.

Muslim women in the UK continue to be less economically active than men, although their participation in the labour market is increasing. According to the 2011 population census, when compared with all women in England and Wales, fewer Muslim women of all ages were in employment. Of those aged 16-24 or 50 and over, around 30 per cent were employed, whereas of those aged 25-59, 57 per cent were in work (compared to 80 per cent of all women). Far more Muslim women of all ages were looking after home or family (18 per cent compared to 6 per cent of women in the general population). In most cases, whether they work or not, Muslim women are charged with maintaining the home and the family's cultural and religious traditions. As a growing number of women go out to work, however, older relatives often step in to assist with childcare and nurture.

With women in 2011 constituting 43 per cent of Muslim university students, it is evident that many are now choosing to enter the public arena for education as well as for work. Simultaneously, they are becoming more involved in decision-making about when and whom to marry, how to engage publicly and on what issues, and how to express their religious and social identities outside the home.

Muslim women vary by ethnic background, country of birth, length of stay in the UK, sectarian identity, education and age, but they have all been subjected to a process of labelling and stigmatisation which masks their differences. This has often been focused around the *hijab* (headscarf) and *niqab* (face veil). These forms of covering have acquired multiple meanings in recent decades, from being seen as a sign of religious and cultural oppression at one end of the spectrum (by outsiders), to being a proud mark of personal identity at the other (by many Muslim women themselves).

The *hijab* acquired new meanings for Muslim women in the UK after 9/11, with some deciding to wear it as an act of solidarity or defiance, and others as an outward expression of their religiosity, at times against the judgement of more cautious or less religious family members. Although often described as a form of protection for women and a sign of self-respect and modesty, increasingly the wearing of *hijab* has become important as a statement of personal autonomy, choice and self-expression.

'Modern and modest' is how it is described by some young women. This is no less true for the *niqab* which, when worn by religiously conservative young women, is no longer simply part of a prescribed dress code, but a garment of choice for engaging in public, and sometimes a sartorial statement. What is clear is that the *hijab* and *niqab* mean different things to different people: to outsiders who observe and judge these forms of dress, but also to those who wear them.



## CASE STUDY

### YOUNG MUSLIM WOMEN, INTEGRATE-UK, AND CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM

Integrate-UK is a charity 'that works towards equality and integration by supporting young people with their learning'.

It began life in 2009 when a group of girls at a secondary school in Bristol decided to work together to help young people arriving from outside the UK to settle. It is now a UK-wide initiative whose projects have gained international recognition. Through projects, videos, music, and educational resources, Integrate raises awareness about gender-based issues, including female genital mutilation (FGM), grooming for radicalisation and right wing extremism, honour crimes, gang and drug culture and child sexual exploitation. Young people serve as trustees, and are involved in all aspects of the charity's work including campaign selection, video and film-making, public speaking and training. Integrate-UK's productions, many of which have won awards, include 'The Silent Scream' (film), the FGM Radio Project and 'My Clitoris' (a music video), all of which campaign against FGM, 'Islam Ain't that Scary Thriller', made for the tenth anniversary of 9/11, and 'Twin Track', a teen drama about being drawn into radicalisation and gang culture. Use of social media and online petitions have also formed part of the charity's campaigning strategy.

Integrate-UK was instrumental in informing Government about FGM, in the subsequent decision to send out a letter to all schools in the UK to remind them of FGM safeguarding issues, and in bringing about the mandatory reporting of FGM cases by teachers, doctors and health and social care professionals. Support for the campaign has also been expressed by Malala Yousafzai, the international education campaigner, and by Ban Ki Moon, the United Nations General Secretary.

Integrate-UK 2018. 'What We Do.' <http://integrateuk.org/what-we-do/>.  
Aleksandra Lewicki & Therese O'Toole, *Acts and Practices of Citizenship: Muslim Women's Activism in the UK* (2017)

British Muslim women's civil society activism needs to be understood within the context of public discourse about Muslim women's oppression as well as Government policy on counter-extremism, both of which contribute to shaping Muslim women's aspirations, attitudes and willingness to engage publicly. They do not confine themselves to mainstream politics or public protest, however, but find new ways to participate and get their message across, through art, film and drama, social media, and collaboration with statutory agencies and health care providers.

## MUSLIM MEN AND MASCULINITIES

By comparison with British Muslim women, the issue of British Muslim men and masculinity is under-researched. Given the presence in the UK of Muslim men from many different countries of origin over several generations, the general but unexplored landscape is one of a plurality of different masculinities, relating to length of stay, heritage and religious traditions, age, class and education.

In one sense, a great deal is already known about the activities and achievements of Muslim men in the UK, their migration history, and involvement in community organisation and religious practice. However, until recently, their roles, experiences and identities were rarely presented or understood as *gendered*. Muslim women and children were marked out in the literature, but men were not. For example, although it has been recognised that mosque management committees privilege male participation and leadership roles (only 15 per cent of management positions are held by women), there is far more discussion about women's involvement and experience than men's, despite men being in the majority. Furthermore, discussion of the patriarchal and traditional nature of South Asian and Arab cultures and their impact on how Islam is understood and practised in the UK has tended to focus more on how they affect the activities, roles and experiences of women than men.

With greater academic and public awareness of gender issues, this has begun to change. However, it has resulted in an uneven picture emerging in which young Muslim men and masculinities have received some attention, but older men's roles, activities and needs have not.

In the case of younger men, public perceptions have often been in tension with the diverse ways in which they see themselves and act as young Muslim males. A common stereotype is of young Muslim men as members of gangs. According to one researcher, they have been seen as 'youths wielding weapons, alienated from their families, their communities and the wider society, locked into a cycle of inevitable but meaningless violence, low self-esteem and self-destruction' (Alexander, *The Asian Gang*, 2000). Since 9/11, public discourse has cast young Muslim males in other ways too, as extremists and terrorists. One young South Asian man astutely recognised another key shift, from racial to religious stigmatisation: 'In the past the word 'Paki' was the stereotype. Now people say Muslims are called terrorists but the real stereotype now is to be called a Muslim.' (Quoted in Mac an Ghail & Haywood, 2015)

Despite this being part of their own self-description, young Muslims are aware that this is a stereotype which takes no account of the differences between them, and incorporates other negative identities: Muslim extremist, Muslim gangster, Muslim drug dealer. Another young man noted that, 'we're both using the same word. But they use Muslim and they don't even know us, or they mean something bad. For us it's a definite good thing or just a normal thing' (quoted in Mac an Ghail & Haywood, 2015).

Whilst these young men are routinely represented as 'Muslim' rather than with reference to other forms of identity, they are nevertheless acutely aware of class-related issues – such as poverty, unemployment, criminality and local deprivation – which connect them to those of other religious and ethnic backgrounds.



## DIVERSE MUSLIM MASCULINITIES

Social research with young British-born Muslim men has begun to get behind the stereotypical labels to find out more about how they see themselves, relate to one another and to others, and negotiate their Muslim masculinity.

After interviewing young Pakistani-heritage Muslim men from Bradford and Slough, one team of researchers found that some of them focused primarily on fulfilling family expectations and being good Muslims, some on educational attainment and personal progress, and others on territorial loyalty, being hard, and working your own way up. A final group exploited social networks in pursuit of alternative futures in which they could contribute to the community or help others. All these young men had different priorities, referred to by the team as 'religious', 'middle-class', 'rebellious' and 'ambivalent' masculinities. What this showed was how these young Muslim men, from varied social classes and educational backgrounds, expressed differing norms, values and goals, and how even for those 'most disengaged with the wider social order, religion and family expectations continue[d] to have significant influence in shaping their gender identities'.

Claire Dwyer, Bindi Shah, & Gurchathen Sanghera,

*From Cricket Lover to Terror Suspect: Challenging Representations of Young British Muslim Men*  
(2008)

As in all social groups, there are some Muslims in the UK who are drawn into criminal networks or gangs, who commit offences, hold extremist views, act violently or even participate in terrorism. A number are arrested and convicted; some serve jail terms. However, in light of the commonly-held stereotypes of young Muslim men, it is important to get this into proportion. Taking the prison context as an example, at the end of 2015, half of the inmates in England and Wales identified themselves as 'Christian', 30 per cent as 'no religion', just under 15 per cent as 'Muslim', and the remainder as 'other religion'. Whilst the proportion of Muslim prisoners is increasing, and is high compared to the percentage of Muslims in the population as a whole (under 5 per cent), about one-third of Muslim prisoners in 2015 were not.

British nationals, and a number had converted to Islam during their time in prison. Furthermore, only a very small minority of Muslim prisoners had been convicted of offences relating to terrorism.

The changing nature of young Muslims' needs and interests – for example, their use of English over and above community languages, and their turn from ethnocentric to Islamic identities – has also influenced who they socialise and identify with and where they do so, whether in new Islamic reform movements, alternative arts spaces, on the streets or in university societies. Their approach to Islam often differs to that of their parents. The quest to find an authentic and culturally unadulterated form of Islam and Islamic identity has overtaken older ethnic traditions of Islamic practice.

## MUSLIM FIRST

Three quarters of Muslims in the UK consider British to be their only national identity. But for some, they are 'Muslim first', with their religious rather than ethnic or national identity being of most importance to them. This is especially true for young Muslims. Islam is their principal orienting identity, not only

for reasons of piety, but also because it overrides cultural and national differences.

*[I chose] Muslim first because it is my most strong identity and I think it breaks down all barriers of every other identity. As a Muslim, I don't have a colour, I don't have a language, I don't have a nationality. It kind of bonds me to billions of people without those barriers.*

(Young British Bangladeshi woman, quoted in Daniel DeHanas, *London Youth, Religion and Politics*, 2016)

*Being a Muslim is my religious belief. Being British is the society in which I've grown up and helped me form into the person I am now. Being a Muslim is more important to me than anything, whether that's family, ethnicity, or nationality.*

(British Muslim student, male, quoted in Miri Song, *British Muslim Students and Islamic Student Associations*, 2012)

This is in contrast to their parents' generation, for whom religion and ethnic culture were tightly interwoven. Religious identity became more important during and after *The Satanic Verses* controversy in the late 1980s, when Muslims rose up in the defence of the Prophet Muhammad. Many British Muslims began to see themselves primarily in terms of Islam and religious discrimination rather than race and racism. A new and more assertive Islamic identity began to develop among British Muslims.

## CULTURAL, SECULAR AND EX-MUSLIMS

Although some young people think of themselves as 'Muslim first', not all Muslims are overtly religious. There are many who see themselves as 'cultural Muslims', 'secular Muslims' or 'ex-Muslims'.

The term 'cultural Muslim' refers to members of the Muslim community who are non-practising but may retain a degree of attachment to Islamic culture and family traditions. Cultural Muslims are in the majority,

perhaps as high as 75-80 per cent of all Muslims. Some within this category may identify specifically with secularism ('secular Muslims') or with atheism (in which case they may think of themselves as 'ex-Muslims').

Secular Muslims include those whose primary allegiance is to secularism though they may retain an ethnic and even nominal religious identity. One group that represents their interests is British Muslims for Secular Democracy, established in 2006.

A minority see themselves as 'ex-Muslims'. Some of these are non-believers or atheists; other have converted to another religion. The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, founded in 2007, offers them support through self-help. Its online forum provides a space for doubters to hear from others, reflect on their own position, and share their thoughts and feelings.

*I joined the forum after I saw a YouTube video of one of the members. He chronicled his process of becoming an ex-Muslim. And it was one of the most powerful moments in my life because this was the first time I'd actually heard another ex-Muslim's voice.*

(Quoted in Simon Cottee, *The Apostates: When Muslims Leave Islam*, 2015)

Those who choose to leave Islam (technically referred to as 'apostates') are frequently judged harshly by more conservative Muslims and even by family members, leading some to keep their new identity and views hidden. Those who make the decision to come out as apostates experience a range of emotions: relief, excitement, guilt, anger, anxiety and confusion. The impact of disclosing this to others may generate in them an equally strong emotional reaction, of shock, hurt, anger, shame and vilification.

## READ MORE

This is one of a series of CREST guides on British Muslims. Download and read the full series at: [www.crestresearch.ac.uk/BritishMuslims](http://www.crestresearch.ac.uk/BritishMuslims)



### READ MORE

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