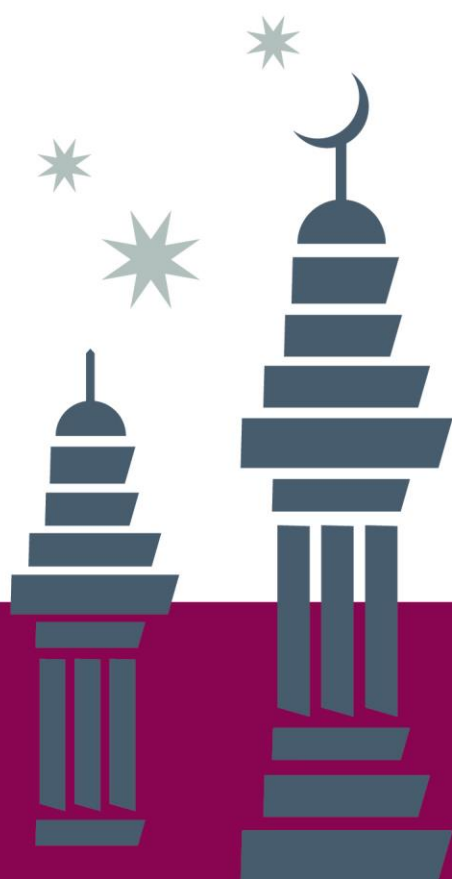


# Muslim women in education 2017-18

The National Union of Students' Black Students' and Women Students' campaign undertook a research survey of Muslim students, examining a range of issues relating to their educational experience as Muslims. The survey was analysed and compiled into a report, "The experience of Muslim students in 2017-18"<sup>i</sup>. This supplementary note examines the experiences of Muslim women, produced for the Women Students' campaign, and is designed to be read alongside the full report.

We received 578 responses to our research survey among UK-based Muslim students, and of these 386 were women, making 67 per cent of all respondents. There were three respondents who identified as non-binary, and a further four who preferred not to disclose this information. This briefing refers solely to self-identifying Muslim women and therefore all references to respondents and results relate specifically to this group unless otherwise stated.

Finally "The experience of Muslim Students in 2017-18" did not seek to compare Muslim students with all other students but sought to understand their experiences and their barriers to participation and inclusion. Similarly for the most part this briefing will not seek to compare women's experiences with men – indeed with the (albeit critical) exception of hate incidents, Islamophobia and Prevent there were not statistically significant differences between their responses – but will focus on Muslim women as a distinct group. There is already a solid evidence base demonstrating the grave and multi-faceted impacts of facing the triple penalty of being a women, Muslim and a person of colour<sup>ii</sup> and explored through NUS' Women's Campaign's recent extensive work in partnership with Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS)<sup>iii</sup>. This briefing intends to enrich our understanding of the intersections between race, gender and faith, contribute to this growing body of evidence and inform our campaigns as well as the activities of NUS' Race Equity Plan<sup>iv</sup>.



## Demographics

Almost all respondents (93 per cent) were in full-time education and aged between 16-25 years (89 per cent). While the majority were in higher education 11 per cent were from a further education background and 5 per cent were sabbatical officers. Approximately 65 per cent of respondents identified as Asian or Asian British, almost 10 per cent identified as Black or Black British and the remainder were mixed, other or preferred not to say. Eighty four per cent were UK citizens.

We asked women respondents if they wore any religious coverings, of those who answered this question, 235 (61 per cent) wore a hijab, 16 (four per cent) wore a jilbab, 4 wore a niqab (one per cent), and 125 (32 per cent) wore none of the above. This question allowed us to analyse any statistically significant differences between those women who wore a garment (255) and those who did not (125) and where relevant these deviations are detailed below.

## Findings

### Muslim women in their students' unions

- Whilst over 90 per cent of respondents have some level of involvement in the students' union only 38 per cent felt that their students' union understood their needs, 36 per cent felt represented by it and 32 per cent agreed that their students' union policy reflects their views as a Muslim student.
- Respondents' engagement in specific students' union activities such as volunteering, student media, sports and student politics highlighted barriers to participation. Depending on the activity between 14–34 per cent reporting feeling always feeling able to fully participate. Muslim women wearing religious garments were significantly less likely to feel able to fully participate in sports (7 per cent compared with 30 per cent of women who do not wear a garment) and student politics (17 per cent compared with 36 per cent).
- Forty per cent of women would feel comfortable running for leadership positions within their students' union. When asked about specific roles however only 36 per cent agreed they would feel comfortable running to be a sabbatical officer, 54 per cent for a part time or voluntary role yet 63 per cent would feel happy to run for a course rep.

**'There is already a solid evidence base demonstrating the grave and multi-faceted impacts of facing the triple penalty of being a woman, Muslim and a person of colour.'**



## Involvement in NUS

- Only 26 per cent of respondents felt that NUS understands the needs of Muslim students.
- In terms of participating in NUS events, there were varying levels of comfort depending on the type of event referred to; respondents were more comfortable attending campaign or training events (67 and 58 per cent respectively) than they were at a democratic event where only 48 per cent would feel comfortable.
- One in three respondents were not aware of NUS' work, this is somewhat lower than men who responded to the survey (only one in four were not aware) which suggests a need for NUS to undertake activities to engage Muslim women as a distinct group.

## Institutions

- Responses relating to their institutions' accommodation of Muslim students' needs suggest that respondents consider them fairly inflexible and incompatible in this respect. Seventy one per cent disagreed that their place of study avoids scheduling classes and exams during Ramadan and 76 per cent disagreed that these were scheduled around prayer times.
- Provisions for Muslim students was seen more positively by respondents as 69 per cent offered halal food and 89 per cent provided a prayer space. Respondents wearing religious garments were much more likely to be aware of such provisions including the presence of an Imam.

## Participation in discussions about Muslims and Islam

- One in four respondents disagreed that they would feel comfortable engaging in debates about Prevent and this discomfort increases when it comes to debating Palestine and terrorism where one in three would not feel comfortable. Debates on racism or provisions for Muslim students were considered much more accessible.
- Only 24 per cent felt comfortable with the way issues relating to Muslims and Islam are discussed in class and only 52 per cent

agreed that they feel comfortable engaging in these discussions themselves. Findings indicate they felt similar levels of comfort with the way that terrorism is discussed in class but it is telling that they felt less able to participate in these discussions (34 per cent). It is also important to note that women wearing a religious garment are less likely to feel comfortable both with the way these issues are discussed and also engaging such debates than those who do not wear a garment.

- Only 24 per cent of respondents felt there was a safe space to discuss the issues affecting them on campus.

## Hate and Islamophobia

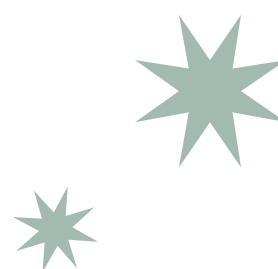
- Findings indicate women were consistently more worried than men about being attacked, particularly being targeted as a result of their faith, but this is much more pronounced for women who wear religious garments; while 10 per cent of all respondents reported being very worried about being subject to a hate incident or abuse, this increased to 15 per cent for women who wore a garment. When looking specifically at the differences between women who wear a covering with those who do not 10 per cent were very worried compared to 2 per cent respectively.
- Out of those who had experienced an attack or abuse at their place of study 83 per cent of women agreed that these were motivated by prejudice towards their Muslim identity (90 per cent for women wearing a religious covering). This belief was held primarily due to gestures and statements made by the perpetrator, hate words or symbols being present and the incident coinciding with a recent terror attack.
- When looking at how respondents would deal with such incidents women were less likely than men to report it to a number of options given apart from a member of academic or students' union staff. They were also less likely to go to the police and it is of concern that they were more likely to not report it at all. Women wearing garments are significantly more likely to report it to

an Islamic society (Isoc) than those who do not which potentially highlights a gap in how Muslim women who wear garments feel supported by established services, which elevates the significance of Isocs as alternative providers.

- Considering the widespread fear of abuse it is concerning that 76 per cent of respondents were not sure if there was a local hate crime reporting centre (whether on their campuses or nearby) that they could access.
- In terms of institutional Islamophobia, for example respondents' work being side-lined or devalued, or not being treated the same as non-Muslims, women were generally more likely than men to report such incidents. They stated students' union staff (62 per cent) as who they would be most likely to take this to, followed by institution staff and sabbatical officers. However less than half (46 per cent) agreed that the students' union would properly respond to such allegations and this was even lower for institutions (39 per cent) and NUS (35 per cent)
- Regarding online hate specifically almost half of women (48 per cent) have been abused online 2-3 times with a further 19 per cent reporting 4-6 times. Whilst it is positive that the majority of respondents do not report reacting to this abuse by changing their behaviours online women wearing a covering are significantly more likely to feel directly affected by it; 45 per cent of them felt this way compared to 62 per cent who do not wear a covering.
- In dealing with social media abuse, there were mixed levels of confidence in different organisations' abilities to respond appropriately but this followed a similar pattern as institutional Islamophobia (with students' unions being most trusted, albeit at 43 per cent followed by institutions and then NUS). Women wearing religious garments were significantly less likely to agree their institution would respond appropriately (one in three compared to one in two for women who do not wear a covering).

## Prevent

- The survey shows mixed levels of awareness of Prevent however women were significantly less likely than men to consider themselves very aware of it (30 per cent compared with 19 per cent).
- In relation to attitudes about Prevent while respondents generally disagreed with facets of the duty significantly more women who wore religious coverings felt this way compared with those who do not. For example women wearing garments are more likely to disagree that lecturers should be reporting to the government on their students' views and opinions (69 per cent of women who wear a garment versus 53 per cent for those who did not), or that institutions should be monitoring recording student emails and internet/web usage (72 per cent versus versus 56 per cent respectively).
- This group of Muslim women are also significantly more likely to be affected by Prevent during their time in education than women not wearing a covering; 40 per cent compared with 26 per cent. This kind of correlation may raise further questions regarding how the Prevent duty functions to highlight specific Muslim students relating to their demographics, rather than their behaviour and in turn amplifies existing biases and stereotypes of Muslims.



## Media

- There was consensus in respondents' views on representation of Muslims and Islam in the media; 91 per cent agreed that neither are portrayed positively in the media and 90 per cent disagreed that attacks on Muslims are reported equally in the media.
- There was significant difference in how such reporting impacts them however as women wearing a religious covering are more likely to disagree that the reporting of recent terrorist attacks in the national media has no effect on how other people treat them (69 per cent compared with 52 per cent who do not) and are also significantly more likely to agree that such negative portrayals would dissuade them from seeking a high profile position in their students' union. This highlights that the very real consequences of anti Muslim sentiment in the media disproportionately affects those who are visibly Muslim.

**'It is therefore incumbent on students' unions, NUS and institutions to ensure that Muslim women in all their diversity are able to access, engage and lead in our movement.'**

## Conclusion

These findings highlight grave concerns with Muslim women's abilities to fully participate in numerous aspects of student life, from sport through to politics and democracy. It is particularly important to note the distinct ways that visibly Muslim women, those wearing a religious garment, are further marginalised in the classroom and in political debate by being both less comfortable with and less able to engage in debates on Prevent and terrorism, key issues that impact them and their communities. This may point to a heightened awareness of and concern about how others perceive them, especially if understood in line with Prevent findings that demonstrate higher levels of self-censorship and disengagement for fear of being reported.

The propensity of visibly Muslim women to be directly impacted by social media abuse and representations of Muslims in the media must also be addressed. When coupled with their higher levels of fear of being attacked we can begin to understand and demonstrate how both serve to inhibit, oppress and silence them, discouraging them from being vocal, politically engaged and in leadership positions. This is no doubt aggravated by the simultaneous erosion of safe spaces to discuss and organise around the issues that most impact them, with Isocs considered as the last vestige and also the most trusted source of support.

In the broader context of rising Islamophobia and its normalisation at every level, from government policy to rising hate crime and socioeconomic inequalities, the need for young Muslim leadership to shape the counter-narrative has never been more urgent. With gendered Islamophobia a sombre reality for the student movement and the triple penalty proven to impact their employment opportunities rendering them the group most likely to be economically inactive in the UK<sup>v</sup> Muslim women must be front and centre of this fight. It is therefore incumbent on students' unions, NUS and institutions to ensure that Muslim women in all their diversity are able to access, engage and lead in our movement.



# Recommendations

"The experience of Muslim students in 2017-18" outlines a number of recommendations for students' unions, further and higher education institutions and NUS to address the issues raised, which are also relevant to this briefing. These range from improving support services and reporting mechanisms to increasing Muslim leadership and civic engagement, creating healthy spaces for political and academic debate and positive media representation. The findings outlined here point to some supplementary recommendations;

- NUS should develop a programme of activities to specifically engage Muslim women and deliver its Muslim Women in Leadership conference or alternative networking and leadership development opportunities tailored to Muslim women.
- Support services for victims of hate crime should assess their engagement practices with Muslim women and identify how their services can be improved to address Muslim women's needs.
- Students' unions must ensure Isocs are sufficiently supported and resourced to provide the level of support that is relied upon by their women members. This includes training Isocs to be more inclusive and accessible for Muslim women

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/the-experience-of-muslim-students-in-2017-18>

<sup>ii</sup> "Employment Opportunities for Muslims in the UK", Women's and Equalities Committee, 2017 and "Muslim Women in Prisons: Second chance, fresh horizons", Muslim Hands and HM Prison Service, 2014.

<sup>iii</sup> NUS Women's Campaign and FOSIS co-hosted the Muslim Women in Leadership conference and two Gendered Islamophobia tours in 2017-18

with multiple intersecting identities (eg. disabled, LGBT+, parents and carers).

- Isoc policies and practices must ensure that women are represented and fully involved in their decision making processes at all levels, possibly through reserved places on committee.
- Students' unions and Isoc's programme of activities must specifically create spaces to address gendered Islamophobia through workshops, panel discussions and other forms of engagement.
- Students' unions and NUS should undertake further qualitative research with visibly Muslim women to understand how to better support their activism, political participation and leadership.
- Students' unions and NUS should, in their campaigning to oppose Prevent, highlight the acute impact that counter-terrorism policies have on visibly Muslim women.
- Students' unions, NUS and institutions should highlight in their debates on free speech how government policy in the form of Prevent stifles free speech and this is most keenly felt by visibly Muslim women.

<sup>iv</sup> In 2017 NUS launched this five year plan to tackle institutional racism and create lasting organisational change

<https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/nus-race-equity-plan>

<sup>v</sup> "Employment Opportunities for Muslims in the UK", Women's and Equalities Committee, 2017