

Press release: Young Muslims in the UK face enormous social mobility barriers

Young Muslims living in the UK face an enormous social mobility challenge and are being held back from reaching their full potential at every stage of their lives, a report by the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) has found.

The report uncovers significant barriers to improved social mobility for young Muslims from school through university and into the workplace – with many reporting experience of Islamophobia, discrimination and racism.

Previous analysis by the Social Mobility Commission, an independent advisory body, found that young people from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds are more likely than ever to succeed in education and go on to university than other groups – particularly girls.

Despite their successes, however, this did not translate into the labour market and Muslims experience the greatest economic disadvantages of any faith group in UK society.

Based on in-depth focus groups and interviews conducted by a team of academics led by Sheffield Hallam University, the new research explores the attitudes and reasons behind this broken ‘social mobility promise’ by examining young Muslims’ perceptions and experiences of growing up and seeking work in Britain.

Within the economically active population (age 16 to 74 years) only 1 in 5 (19.8%) of the Muslim population is in full-time employment, compared to more than 1 in 3 (34.9%) of the overall population (in England and Wales).

Muslim women in the UK are more likely than all other women to be economically inactive with 18% of Muslim women aged 16 to 74 recorded as “looking after home and family” compared with 6% in the overall population.

Only 6% of Muslims are in ‘higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations’ compared to 10% of the overall population. They also have slightly lower levels of qualifications, with approximately a quarter of Muslims over the age of 16 having ‘level 4 and above’ (degree-level and above) qualifications (The Muslim Council of Britain, 2015).

Moreover, nearly half of the Muslim population (46%) live in the 10% of the most deprived local authority districts. This has implications for access to resources, school attainment, progression to higher education and the availability of jobs, including those at postgraduate or managerial levels. These inequalities vary by region, with the Midlands experiencing the largest margin of inequality and the South the smallest.

The body of the report’s findings, however, is based on the views of young Muslims themselves expressed through structured and in-depth focus groups.

Participants expressed a strong sense of work ethic, high resilience and a desire to succeed in school and beyond. But many felt they must work 'ten times as hard' as non-Muslims just to get the same opportunities due to cultural differences and various forms of discrimination.

The young Muslims who were interviewed reported that teachers often had stereotypical or low expectations of them. They argued there are insufficient Muslim teachers or other role models in schools and they are given insufficient or inadequate individual tailored support, guidance and encouragement at school. The services available to them were not enough to fill a parental gap particularly if parents were educated in a different system, were less able to support them in their studies or lacked the capital, knowledge or access to social networks to help their children make informed choices.

Some said they avoided asking for help for fear they will be targets for bullying and or harassment. This then impacted on confidence which they said resulted in some young Muslims 'giving up'.

In higher education, young Muslims are more likely to drop out early or to gain fewer 'good degrees' (1st or 2:1s) than their non-Muslim peers. Interviewees felt their choices were more constrained because of inequitable access to high status universities (often because of geography), discrimination at the point of entry or self-limiting choices for fear of being in a minority.

The research finds that young Muslims feel their transition into the labour market is then hampered by discrimination in the recruitment process. Some interviewees reported that discrimination could take place due to applicants with ethnic-sounding names being less likely to get interviews with some employers.

Once in work, young Muslims in the focus groups said that racism, discrimination and lack of cultural awareness in the workplace had impacted on their career development and progression. Some reported feeling obliged to defend their faith with workplace colleagues in the face of negative discourses in the media.

Muslim women in the focus groups also felt that wearing the headscarf at work was an additional visual marker of difference that was perceived and experienced as leading to further discrimination.

The research suggested that many of these issues were worse for women. The report finds that within some communities, young Muslims felt that parents held high but different expectations for boys and girls concerning their educational and employment outcomes, with boys seen to be afforded more freedom. There was also an explicit recognition that within some communities, women are encouraged to focus on marriage and motherhood rather than gain employment. In particular, it was acknowledged that more traditional views of girls' roles were sometimes reinforced by teachers within private Islamic schools.

Overall the research suggests that young Muslims feel a real challenge in maintaining their identity while seeking to succeed in Britain. They felt worried about being different and unsure about whether getting on was compatible with their identity as Muslims. Some responded by asserting their Muslim identity, although in some cases this constrained the career choices they made. Others felt there was a pressure to hide their Muslim identity and so avoid the issue that way.

The Rt Hon Alan Milburn, chair of the Social Mobility Commission, said:

The British social mobility promise is that hard work will be rewarded. Unfortunately, for many young Muslims in Britain today this promise is being broken.

This report paints a disturbing picture of the challenges they face to making greater social progress. Young Muslims themselves identify cultural barriers in their communities and discrimination in the education system and labour market as some of the principal obstacles that stand in their way. Young Muslim women face a specific challenge to maintain their identity while seeking to succeed in modern Britain.

These are complex issues and it is vital they are the subject of mature consideration and debate. It is particularly important to hear from young people from the Muslim community and respond positively to them.

There are no easy or straightforward solutions to the issues they have raised. But a truly inclusive society depends on creating a level playing field of opportunity for all, regardless of gender, ethnicity or background. That will require renewed action by government and communities, just as it will by educators and employers.

Professor Jacqueline Stevenson, from Sheffield Hallam University, who led the research, said:

Muslims are excluded, discriminated against, or failed, at all stages of their transition from education to employment. Taken together, these contributory factors have profound implications for social mobility.

Young Muslims in the UK come from a wide range of backgrounds and life situations. Muslims from low socio-economic backgrounds lack sufficient resources and support to enable them to reach their potential. This is exacerbated by their parents' experiences of higher levels of underemployment and unemployment, particularly where their qualifications were not recognised in the UK.

The report makes several key recommendations. These include:

- mentoring and other support programmes for young (school aged) Muslims should be established to include sessions or provision for parents to ensure they are provided with support and information about post-16 choices
 - the Department for Education should put in place a careers strategy that promotes informed and inclusive choices by pupils, free from stereotypical assumptions. These should be piloted in areas with high rates of unemployment for people from Muslim communities and include routes for involving parents in understanding these choices
 - teacher training should include sophisticated and practical diversity training with a focus on religious diversity
 - business bodies should promote greater awareness and take-up of good unconscious bias, diversity, religious literacy and cultural competence training by employers
1. The Social Mobility Commission is an advisory, non-departmental public body established under the [Life Chances Act 2010](#) as modified by the [Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016](#). It has a duty to assess progress in improving social mobility in the United Kingdom and to promote social mobility in England. It currently consists of 4 commissioners and is supported by a small secretariat.
 2. The commission board currently comprises:
 - Alan Milburn (Chair)
 - Baroness Gillian Shephard (Deputy Chair)
 - Paul Gregg, Professor of Economic and Social Policy, University of Bath
 - David Johnston, Chief Executive of the Social Mobility Foundation
 3. The functions of the commission include:
 - monitoring progress on improving social mobility
 - providing published advice to ministers on matters relating to social mobility
 - undertaking social mobility advocacy
 4. The [‘Social mobility challenges faced by young Muslims’ report](#) is available on the Social Mobility Commission website.
 5. Case studies and interviews are available on request.
 6. Note on the methodology: a total of 58 Muslims between the ages of 18 to 35 took part in the focus groups; a three-stage Delphi study was used to draw out perceptions in relation to key causes of low social mobility and a one-day summit event was held to present the draft findings to 43 stakeholder participants.
 7. Data on ‘higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations’ is sourced from Nomis/Office for National Statistics, 2013.