



Muslim Professionals Forum

Muslims in Britain today: economic disadvantage, civic and political engagement

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A Common Platform *for* Professionals

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The 2011 census shows that Muslims are Britain's second-largest religious group with 2.7 million members (4.8 percent of the population) in England and Wales. They are also the most ethnically-diverse religious group: while the largest component consists of Muslims with Pakistani backgrounds, there are also substantial numbers of Muslims with other South Asian, African and Middle Eastern backgrounds, together with white converts. 1.2 million of the Muslim population were actually born in Britain and can therefore be regarded as belonging to the 'second generation'. In understanding the situation of Muslims in Britain today, this distinction between generations is very important, though usually neglected in official statistics.

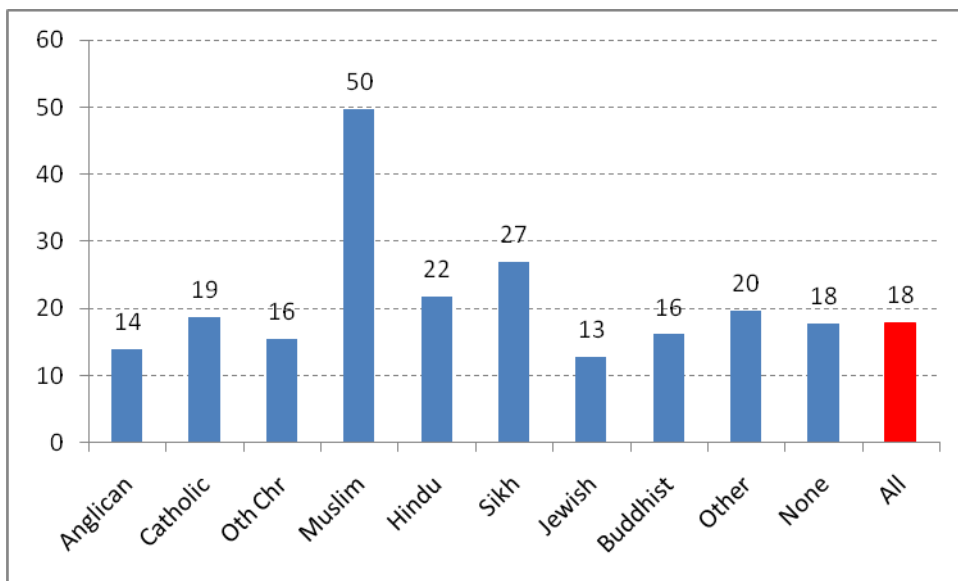
Given the diversity of Britain's Muslim population, it is naturally of interest to ask whether it is sensible to generalize about Muslims' economic situation or political engagement. Most previous research has focussed on ethnic differences and inequalities, comparing for example the situation of people of Pakistani or Bangladeshi background (two ethnic groups which are largely Muslim) with those of other ethnic backgrounds (such as Indian or Caribbean). Is it useful therefore to talk of Muslim disadvantage as opposed to documenting the different disadvantages that specific ethnic groups experience? Do Muslims share common disadvantages or advantages in Britain over and above specific ethnic disadvantages?

There is some research which addresses this issue, and in a nutshell the research does suggest that there may be some common patterns which are shared by Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds, and that it is therefore useful to talk of specifically Muslim disadvantage. For example, in a paper with Jean Martin (2012) I investigated ethno-religious differences in labour market activity and unemployment, using the pooled Annual Population Surveys for 2005 and 2006. We found that, although there were indeed substantial differences between different ethnic groups, Muslims tended to experience an **additional** disadvantage over and above their ethnic disadvantages. So Indian Muslims had higher unemployment rates than Indian Hindus, Black African Muslims had higher unemployment rates than Black African Christians, and so on. This pattern was most marked, and the Muslim disadvantage was largest, in the case of women's labour market participation but it was also present for men's labour market participation and both men and women's unemployment as well. (Table 1 in the appendix shows the results for male unemployment.) Other scholars, such as Nabil Khattab, have obtained similar results using different data sources.

It should be noted that, in more recent work, Khattab (forthcoming) has looked at religious differences in earnings among people who have accessed jobs in the salariat (professional and managerial occupations). He does not find convincing evidence of any general Muslim pay gap at this level of the occupational structure. (See also Longhi et al 2013 for similar conclusions.) This reinforces the view that the main barriers facing Muslims are in obtaining work, and that this should be the focus of policy interventions. Among Muslims actually in salaried employment (although not necessarily those in self-employment), the extent of ethno-religious disadvantage is not especially large.

In another piece of work for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Yaojun Li and myself have looked at the prevalence of poverty among Muslims. Not perhaps surprisingly, given the results for economic inactivity and unemployment, we found that Muslim households had very substantially higher risks of poverty than did members of other religions, such as Sikhs, Hindus or Christians. The overall differences between religions were very striking indeed as Figure 1 below shows:

Figure 1 Overall poverty rate by religious affiliation in the UK



Notes: Poverty defined as equivalized household income less than 60% of the median household income. Weighted analysis.

Source - respondents in the BHPS/Understanding Society with valid religious responses.

Following the same methods as in our earlier study of economic activity and unemployment, we found that there was once again a consistent Muslim risk of poverty over and above specifically ethnic disadvantages. In other words, Indian Muslims had a higher risk of poverty than did Indians belonging to other religions, Black African Muslims had a higher risk of poverty than did Black Africans belonging to other religions, and so on.

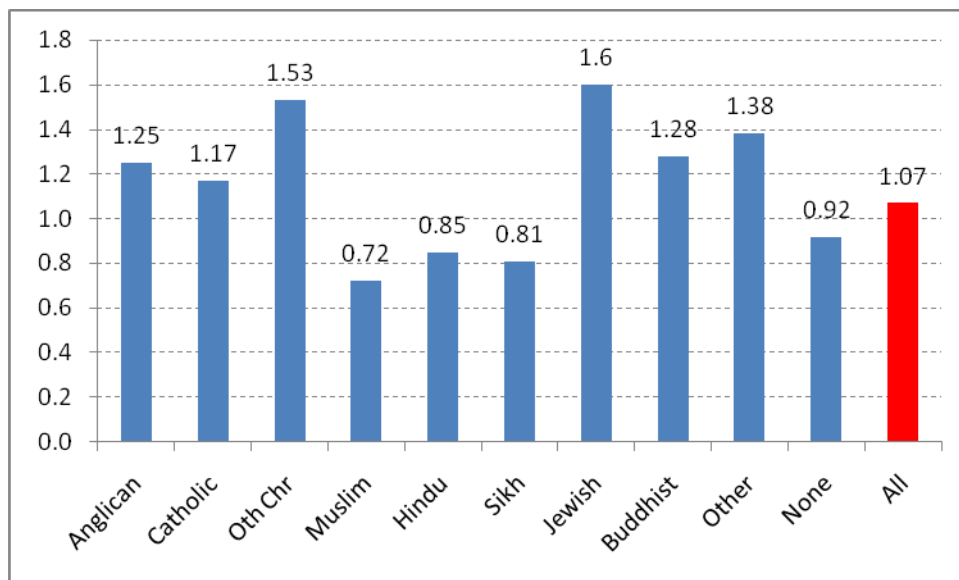
It is naturally of great interest to consider what might be the explanations for this Muslim disadvantage. In our piece for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation we suggested three main sorts of explanation:

- historically contingent factors such as low qualifications or lack of fluency in the English language, which largely reflect the Muslim community's migration history and which are likely to be mitigated across time or across generations;
- factors which may be more intrinsic to particular religious traditions, such as traditional family values which may encourage women to stay at home and look after children or care for other family members; and
- factors such as prejudice (Islamophobia) and discrimination reflecting how Muslims are treated by the wider society, potentially resulting in increased risks of unemployment or low pay. Prejudice may, for example, adversely affect the life chances of those wearing distinctive clothing associated with their religion.

While lack of appropriate data meant that it was not possible to assign definitive numbers to the size of these three components, statistical analysis of the available data suggested that all three play substantial roles. Important specific predictors of poverty which we were able to measure include lack of fluency in English (a historically-contingent factor), number of dependent children (which may reflect family values), economic inactivity, and low pay (which may reflect discrimination). These predictors did not fully account for the higher risks of poverty among Muslims (although they did largely explain the higher risks faced by Sikhs and Hindus).

One potential additional explanation for Muslims' higher risk of poverty is lack of 'bridging social capital'. There is evidence that membership of some Christian churches may offer a degree of protection against poverty, perhaps because church members are more likely than non-members to belong to and participate in a range of voluntary and civic organisations. Theory suggests that membership of voluntary organisations and associated activities may foster the development of social capital (especially bridging social ties with people outside their own immediate social circle) which in turn may be associated with greater information flows, personal support and professional development, leading to greater success in the labour market. As we can see from Figure 2, the data show that Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus are less likely to belong to voluntary organisations or to take part in civic activities than are Christians, and that this may contribute to their higher risks of poverty, particularly among Muslims.

Figure 2 Civic participation (number of memberships or activities)



Notes: Data refer to the number of civic membership of or activity in any of the 16 types of organisation specified in the survey.

Source: The BHPS/USoc.

We have also carried out work, using the 2010 Ethnic Minority British Election Survey, on ethno-religious differences in political participation. Do we find the same story of Muslim disadvantage that we found with employment, poverty and civic engagement? (We should note that the 2010 EMBES only includes people with an African, Bangladeshi, Caribbean, Indian or Pakistani background and therefore omits white British or middle-Eastern Muslims.)

Our major finding here is that electoral registration was lower among Muslims than among other groups. Possibly this reflects in part what we termed above 'historically contingent factors', reflecting the relatively recent arrival in Britain of many Muslims, especially from Somalia, and their lack of fluency in English. But our research also suggests that, over and above these contingent factors, marginalized groups in British society continue to be less likely to register to vote, even in the second generation.

However, among those who actually were registered to vote, we found that turnout was little different from the turnout of other faith groups. We also found the same pattern for Muslims to be less likely to be active in a voluntary organisation as we reported above, but with respect to other forms of political engagement – signing a petition, giving money to a

political cause, or participating in a protest or demonstration – there was no clear pattern of lack of Muslim participation.

There has of course been a great deal of attention focussed on the issue of Muslim extremism (although ‘extremism’ tends to be very loosely defined). We did in our survey ask some questions about support for violent protest, for example if ‘the British government were about to start a war which you didn’t agree with’. Here we found evidence of modest generational change, with members of the second generation (born and brought up in Britain) showing greater support for protest. However, our analysis also showed that “there are no significant ethno-religious differences in support for violent protest: in particular Muslims show no greater support for violence than do other south Asians or blacks. Nor is there any sign that rates of generational change differed between ethno-religious groups However, support for violent protest is associated with perceptions of group discrimination [which were also increased in the second generation]’ (Heath and Demireva 2014.)

Conclusions

We would not claim to have definitive conclusions, but at the very least there is considerable evidence that Muslims do share various disadvantages in the labour market over and above disadvantages which can be attributed to ethnic background. Muslims also appear to have lower levels of civic engagement, and possibly of political engagement, although only in relation to electoral registration not with respect to turnout or other non-electoral forms of political engagement.

In part these disadvantages can be explained by historically-contingent factors, such as the fact that many Muslims are recent migrants who lack fluency in the English language. We can expect these contingent factors to be mitigated across generations, and there is ample evidence that the second generation differ markedly from the first with respect to language fluency, educational levels, and so on. We therefore can be confident that these disadvantages will be mitigated in time and across generations, although there is evidence that they are still present, albeit often of reduced magnitude, among the second generation.

However, there is also evidence that second-generation Muslims are actually more aware of Islamophobia and prejudice than were the first, migrant, generation. Perceptions that one’s group is unfairly treated in British society are probably linked to other forms of disaffection as well. Social inclusion, not exclusion, is of crucial importance for the future of young Muslims growing up in Britain today.

Further reading:

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- Heath, Anthony, Stephen Fisher, Gemma Rosenblatt, David Sanders and Maria Sobolewska (2013) *The Political Integration of Ethnic Minorities in Britain*. Oxford: OUP.
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- Heath, Anthony (2014) 'Muslim Integration and disadvantage' .Pp 16-20 in *Integration, Disadvantage and Extremism*, edited by David Feldman and Ben Gidley. Essays arising from a symposium held at the House of Commons 8 May 2013 organised by Pears Institute for the study of Antisemitism, Birkbeck, University of London, and Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), University of Oxford.
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- Khan, Omar, AkileAhmet and Christina Victor (2014), *Poverty and Ethnicity: Balancing Caring and Earning for British Caribbean, Pakistani and Somali People*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
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- Lindley, J. (2002) 'Race or religions? The impact of religion on the employment and earnings of Britain's ethnic communities', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 427_42
- Longhi, S., Nicoletti, C. and Platt, L. (2009) *Decomposing Wage Gaps Across the Pay Distribution: Investigating inequalities of ethno-religious groups and disabled people*. Report commissioned by the National Equality Panel. ISER Working Paper 2009-32. Colchester: Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex.

Appendix: supplementary tables

Table 1: men's unemployment (log odds)

Ethnic group	Main effects of ethnicity	Combined ethno-religious groups						
		Christian	Muslim	No religion	Buddhist	Hindu	Sikh	Other religion
White British	0.00	0.00	0.65	0.28	1.32			0.43
Other White	0.20	0.19	0.96	0.44				0.90
White and Black Caribbean		0.59						
Indian	0.14	0.64	0.28			0.64	0.61	
Pakistani			0.67					
Bangladeshi			1.20					
Chinese	0.24			0.81				
Other Asian	0.26	0.35	1.09			0.86		
Black Caribbean/other black	1.40	1.42		1.61				
Black African	1.23	1.12	2.06					
Other ethnic group	0.93	0.52	1.66	0.52				
Main effects of religion		0.00	0.63	0.29				

*Note: Models include controls for age, age squared, qualifications and generational status
Source: Heath and Martin (2012)*

Table 2 **Poverty by ethnicity and religious affiliations**

	Angl	Cath	O C	Musl	Hind	Sikh	Jew	Budd	Other	None	All
Ethnicity											
White	14	18	14	30			12	11	20	18	16
B Car	20	23	30						21	19	23
B Afr	36	37	33	56					40	21	37
Indian		24	16	38	20	26				18	23
Pak				57						60	57
Bang				49						22	46
Chinese			13					30	33	27	26
Other	19	16	22	50	30	31		18	14	22	27

Notes:

1. Cell values refer to percentages being poor in each of the ethno-generational-religious combinations.
2. No data are reported for cells with Ns less than 30.
3. Overall religious and ethnic effects are also reported.
4. The ethnic categories are: White, Black Caribbean, Black African, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, and Other. The religious categories are Anglican, Catholic, Other Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish, Buddhist, Other and None.

Sources: The BHPS/USoc



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Anthony Heath, CBE, FBA is Director of the Centre for Social Investigation at Nuffield College, Oxford and Professor of Sociology at Manchester University. His research interests cover social stratification and mobility, ethnicity, electoral behavior, social and political attitudes, national identity and social cohesion.

He has published many books and scientific papers. His most recent books include *The Political Integration of Ethnic Minorities in Britain* (OUP, 2013), *Hard Times: The Divisive Toll of the Economic Slump* (Yale University Press, 2014) and *Migrants and Their Children in Britain: generational change in patterns of ethnic minority integration* (Routledge 2014). He is currently leading a team designing a module of questions on attitudes to immigration for the European Social Survey.

Professor Heath has carried out work for many government and international bodies, including work for UNDP in Bosnia and Herzegovina on social capital and human development, for OECD on racial discrimination, for the Department for Communities and Local Government on ethnic diversity and social cohesion, for Lord Goldsmith's Citizenship Review on national identity, for the Department for Work and Pensions on employer discrimination, for the Cabinet Office on social mobility, for the National Audit Office, and for the Equality and Human Rights Commission on ethnic and gender inequalities. He was a lead expert for the Government Office for Science on a Foresight Project on the future of identity.