

## **Careers of Muslim Female Students: Perceptions and Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

For many years now, there have been calls for policymakers to appreciate the needs of ethnic minority groups in an employment context. Reportedly, there also is goodwill for change to this end by the employers. However, the lack of wider opportunities for ethnic minority students is a concern to this day. Within the ethnic minorities, there are subsets that have varying characteristics and therefore varying needs and challenges with regards to employment. This research aims to understand the employment challenges of one subset of the ethnic minority groups: Muslim female students. Qualitative data gathered for this research showed that the challenges faced by the female Muslim students fall into two categories: personal and family challenges, and job sector challenges. Based on the findings, suggestions for addressing some of these challenges are also highlighted.

*Keywords:* Muslim females, Employment challenges, BAME groups

### **Introduction**

Discrimination at the workplace, whether it relates to issues of gender, age, sexuality, race or religion, is not a concept that is unheard of. Over the years, the significance and severity of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups' disadvantages when it comes to education, employment and wider social mobility have been discussed numerous times both within academia and popular media. As McGregor-Smith (2017, p. 1) states, 'we should live in a country where every person, regardless of their ethnicity or background, is able to fulfil their potential at work'. Despite this wide exposure and efforts to address issues of racial and religious discrimination, for many of those from a BAME background, opportunities to attain their full potential remains restricted with BAME graduates being two and a half times more likely to be unemployed compared to their white counterparts (Stevenson, et al., 2019).

One of the main criticisms of initiatives and approaches to addressing the issues around BAME attainment and employment is the fact that a richly and extensively diverse group of people have been very narrowly and perhaps naively brought together under one umbrella label. This simplistic approach may have its advantages of encompassing a wide range of issues that impact BAME groups across the spectrum. However, the biggest disadvantage is that it has reinforced the incorrect perception of BAME as one homogenous group. Within the higher education context, access, retention and progression rates vary between different ethnic groups (Stevenson, et al., 2019). If we are to truly and effectively address this issue, we need to work on gaining a more detailed understanding of BAME as a heterogeneous group of people with a diverse set of characteristics, experiences, needs and challenges.

This research is one effort to provide this by understanding the employment challenges of one BAME group: Muslim Female Students. The research aims to explore the challenges perceived by Muslim female students with regards to future employability. Understanding these challenges will further our understanding of this subset of BAME audience and will also ensure effective strategies to deliver employability support.

## **Theoretical Background**

There have been calls for policymakers to appreciate the needs and diversity of ethnic minorities in an employment context (Dhaliwal, 1998) and researchers have reported that goodwill exists among employers to create change (Bowes & Sim, 2001). Yet, over a decade on and despite growing attention to the representation of BAME groups in the workplace, employment challenges for BAME groups still exist today (Hammond et al. 2017).

Widely held racial stereotypes and a lack of cultural awareness are only some of the issues facing BAME employees (Kim et al. 2010). Researching within the context of nursing, Brathwaite (2018) argued that although overt racism of the 1970s has diminished significantly over the years, the treatment and progression of female nurses from BAME groups still remains significantly different to that of their white counterparts. Stereotypes and lack of cultural awareness are explained by intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) and cultural distaste theory (Vallas, et al., 2009). Intergroup contact theory states that prejudice against another group is derived from stereotypes based on minimal information about the groups. This lack of contact, knowledge and stereotypes then can lead to developing cultural distaste. Cultural distaste theory proposes that minority groups present challenges to the identities, practices and worldviews of majority groups which may lead to negative opinions and attitudes towards minority groups. The consequences of these stereotypes and prejudices can be seen in many areas of daily life and also more specifically within the workplace. Some researchers have found that an ethnic name, regardless of one's nationality, is enough to generate unequal treatments (Drydakis, 2017).

As suggested by Brathwaite (2018), overt discrimination of the past has largely diminished in society and yet this does not mean that it has completely disappeared. Rather, we have more contemporary forms of discrimination. Contemporary discrimination rarely involves the intentional exclusion of minorities but it's a fluid process embedded in everyday interactions and workplace structures (Bielby, 2000; Hirsh & Lyons, 2010). This contemporary discrimination can manifest in the form of interpersonal contact and behaviour referred to as interpersonal discrimination by some researchers (Hebl, et al., 2002). Interpersonal discrimination can be described as biased behaviour that is displayed through verbal and non-verbal means such as eye contact, shortened interactions, rudeness and so forth (King & Ahmad, 2010).

With specific regards to religious discrimination, researchers have argued that this issue has received relatively limited scholarly attention than other forms of discrimination (Wright, et al., 2013). Secularisation theory which refers to the privatisation of religion (i.e. religion is only for the private sphere of life and not for public displays, laws and decision making) has been linked to religious discrimination. Expressions of religious faith in the public arena can be viewed as deviant and evoke a negative reaction from employers (Wright, et al., 2013). Experimental research has found conclusive evidence to show that religious affiliation has a direct impact on discrimination when recruiting employees (e.g. Drydakis, 2010; Wright, et al., 2013). For

instance, the experimental research conducted by Wright et al. (2013) showed that job applications that mentioned any religious affiliation received about a quarter fewer responses from potential employers. This was most prominent among the applications that had the word 'Muslim' added to it and these applications showed weaker employer preference.

When it comes to equality in the workplace, females face challenges in certain roles which are well documented (Rattan et al. 2017). When one adds ethnic minority and religion to the mix, the challenges faced by female members of the workforce are exacerbated. Research conducted by King and Ahmad (2010) found that being dressed in traditional Muslim attire of Hijab reduced the amount of interaction potential employers had with applicants during interviews which provided evidence of interpersonal discrimination being prevalent in the workplace. Kamenou et al. (2013) found that there is low awareness of the unique position of ethnic minority women in employment and society and further research in this area is needed. In line with this, the current research project focuses on understanding the specific challenges experienced by Muslim female students from a BAME background.

## **Method**

A broadly interpretive based phenomenological research approach was used here in order to understand the world of careers through the perspective of the participants. Qualitative data were gathered through focus groups and in-depth interviews. In total, three focus groups (12 students in total) and three in-depth interviews of students were carried out. The students came from a self-selected sample who responded to a call for participants sent out via university internal communications. Participants were free to talk about their experiences and perceptions without judgement or questioning. Probes were only used as a means of gaining further clarification or information rather than questioning their understanding or experience. The data were transcribed verbatim and a thematic content analysis was carried out to identify the perceptions of the participants.

## **Findings**

The findings from this research showed that the challenges faced by the female Muslim students fall into two categories: personal and family challenges, and job sector challenges. The perception of the workplace was often one of hostility towards Muslim females.

### *Perceptions*

The students perceived the workplace as being hostile towards them and expressed preconceived notions of discriminatory behaviour by employers and potential colleagues. They perceived that they will be disadvantaged due to them not 'fitting-in' to the practices in the workplace. As one student mentioned,

*'I see all the people having networking events and I know this is important to get jobs and promotions. But these are all in pubs or bars and seems to involve a lot of alcohol. If I go and say 'sorry, I don't go to pubs or I don't drink' then they will think I am strange.'* (Focus group 1, participant 2).

It was clear that perceptions such as the one mentioned above stemmed from personal experiences as well as experiences of their friends and family members. One student explained an experience when applying for a job where she was offered the job on the condition that she does not wear the Hijab when working. This overt discrimination meant that she is very reluctant and anxious about future career opportunities.

It was clear that these negative perceptions of the workplace have led them to question whether most of the workplaces are for 'people like them'. It was also interesting to note that they expressed perception of their parents about certain professions. For instance, whereas a City-based financial career was seen as less desirable, the teaching profession was seen as being more desirable. The students also felt that some professions such as working for a charity or educational institution will be less risky for them in terms of being exposed to discriminatory behaviour as well as being easier to fit in.

The findings also revealed that, when it comes to perceived career opportunities, students fell into two broad categories which were in line with the findings of Hammond et al (2017): proactive self and fit in. Those who were proactive had an 'it's up to me' attitude. These students felt that, regardless of the challenges they may encounter, the locus of control with regards to careers is themselves. If they work hard and achieve well in their education, they believed that they can build a career for themselves. As one student expressed,

*'I mean its really about how I deal with it. I have always been someone who is highly motivated, and I know what I want to do when I graduate. I am working towards that.'* (Focus group 2, participant 4)

This is perhaps congruent with the general student population where those who are self-motivated tend to achieve a much more desirable outcome. This, however, relies on the individual to take the initiative and expects them to overlook all the challenges and keep working hard. Although this may be a desirable attitude to have, this does not address the issue of BAME students who are not high performers to achieve their full potential. As we often do in society, we celebrate the successes of individuals from BAME groups and tend to ignore the fact that their progress has been despite the tide against them rather than because of the inclusive and supportive systems and structures. Those with a fit in perception felt that they would need to change their ways and, in some ways, their identities if they are to build and maintain a career which was seen as a great challenge as discussed below.

### **Challenges**

The challenges expressed during the research stemmed from two areas: family and personal, and job sector challenges.

Students talked about the changing attitudes of their parents and wider family on women's employment and career choices. As one student stated,

*'...I think some of my older cousins grew up in a different environment where they were expected to get married at a young age and start a family. My parents still expect this from me, but I don't feel the same pressure right now. My older brothers and some other cousins have gone onto work and got married later than expected and people have now come to accept this.'* (Focus group 2, Participant 1)

There was this acknowledgement that their families will accept their working and building a career but nevertheless, there was this subtle pressure to choose professions that were family friendly. For instance, teaching was widely viewed as a family-friendly profession for females. Some students, in fact, recognised that they know from the experiences of their friends and family that teaching is very time-consuming and not necessarily easier for work-life balance. Yet, they still felt that this would be a profession that they can get into without many perceived barriers such as having to change their values to fit in with the working environment.

Another major personal challenge was a lack of self-confidence amongst Muslim female students. Interestingly this was prevalent in students who were highly motivated and had a proactive attitude as well as those that did not, albeit to varying degrees. The former group of students felt that they may not have the skills and attitudes needed to progress in their careers as they ought to. The latter felt that they lack the confidence to go into certain types of job roles that may require them (based on their perceptions) to significantly change their values and identity. It was also evident that, with the students, these perceived challenges and lack of confidence is proving a barrier to them engaging with the university employment services. They often felt that their needs and views will not be recognised or understood. This is intensified by a lack of visible Muslim females in the workplace that they encounter. In most cases, industry speakers and mentors at the university tend to be white men or, in rare cases, women. This has contributed to confirming these students' perceptions of certain sectors and job roles not being the right one for themselves. These findings are also in line with previous research (e.g. Smith, 2017) where low confidence amongst BAME students has been identified as a key challenge that needs to be addressed.

With regards to the job sectors themselves, the students felt that they will not be viewed positively due to their dress-code and stereotypes about Muslim females. They strongly believed that their appearance will be a hindrance to them obtaining a job as well as progressing in their careers once they are employed. As mentioned above, some students have had experiences of overt discriminations due to their dress-code. However, as proven by research (e.g. King & Ahmad, 2010), interpersonal discrimination also plays a significant role in disadvantaging Muslim women of BAME backgrounds.

### **Implications and Future Research**

The findings from this research provide some insight into the challenges faced by Muslim female students when it comes to their future careers. The challenges identified here are often shared by women in general and ethnic minorities in particular. However, there are nuances to these challenges that are unique to this particular subset of BAME which need to be taken into consideration by careers services in Higher Education institutions. The research also shows that educational institutions have a key role to play in ensuring that the female Muslim students are coached to deal with the specific challenges they face in the workplace as well as actively providing them with role models from various industries. Smith (2017) claimed that universities have a long way to go before they become exemplars of ethnic equality and diversity. If we are to overcome some of the challenges and barriers to BAME attainment and employability, universities need to be at the forefront in working with BAME students as well as employers to address these issues.

Educating employers about the cultural differences within this group cannot be underestimated. This research showed that interpersonal discrimination stemming

from stereotypes and misinformation can be a real barrier for BAME groups in general and Muslim females in particular. McGregor-Smith (2017) called for organisations and institutions to stop hiding behind the mantle of unconscious biases. Reverse mentoring with employers and especially senior managers, as well as tailored coaching programmes for these students, are some ways to address these issues. Universities can also take the lead in providing unconscious bias training for their own staff as well as to external organisations (Stewart, 2016).

In the future, research needs to include a wider sample from specific subject disciplines to identify whether the challenges faced differ based on the respective industries. Widening participation of BAME groups in the employment market would also benefit from further research into challenges faced by specific subsets within BAME. This will help segment the BAME students based on the common challenges faced rather than ethnic groups (as is more common). Subsequently, this will aid in developing effective services for various BAME groups leading to enhanced career opportunities. Furthermore, informal roles and contributions of women in general and Muslim women in particular need to be understood and appreciated (Shahid et al, 2017) as this will help build self-confidence among BAME students.

## **Conclusion**

Attainment and employability within the BAME groups have been discussed for decades. Yet, there is increasing evidence that BAME students and employees do not achieve their full potential. In order to effectively address the issues around this, we need to gain a better understanding of subsets of BAME groups and identify specific challenges and barriers they face with regards to employability and social mobility. This research aimed to understand the challenges faced by Muslim female students with regards to employability. The findings revealed that Muslim female students' perception of the world of employment is that of a hostile and discriminatory environment. This has led to certain challenges that include a lack of self-confidence and the fear of losing their values and identities in order to fit in. Universities, as well as other educational institutions, have a key role to play in helping Muslim female students, as well as employers, address some of these challenges.

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