Introduction

This chapter has been adapted from the research report *The Experiences of Muslim Students in 2017–18* (NUS 2018), which was commissioned by the National Union of Students (NUS) Women’s Campaign, NUS Black Students Campaign and the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS) as the first comprehensive piece of work devoted entirely to capturing Muslim students’ and sabbatical officers’ experiences in colleges and universities throughout the UK. It is also based on *The Experiences of Muslim Women in Education in 2017–18*, a supplementary briefing to the report (NUS Women’s Campaign 2018).

As NUS Women’s Officer and NUS Black Students’ Officer, when we were first elected into our roles, it became increasingly apparent that the organisation, and by extension sector as a whole, failed to grasp the day-to-day realities of Muslim students on campus – and by extension, the needs of Muslim communities as a whole. With an estimated 150,000 Muslim students in higher education and thousands more in further education, there seemed to be little information or understanding about the ‘Muslim’ student experience. This research was therefore commissioned as an attempt to bridge this gap, and to resolve questions like ‘What does it mean to be Muslim in Britain today?’

Perhaps it is worth stating that the decision to roll out this survey began as early as October 2016 – a year before it finally launched – amid increasing concerns about the normalisation of Islamophobia in society, as well as the scrutiny and racism levelled at Muslims in public positions – including prominent and emerging student activists. One cannot deny, for example, that there has been a dramatic surge in anti-Muslim sentiment – both within our educational settings and in broader society as a whole. The last few decades are littered with stories of physical violence, the over-policing of minority communities and systematic inequalities.

For one, the Muslim community is described as the most economically disadvantaged group in the country – with almost 50 per cent of the Muslim population living in the ten most deprived local authorities. A 2017 report found that 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: they are more likely to drop out of their studies, less likely to acquire ‘good degrees’ (a 1st or a 2:1), and more likely to be unemployed (Social Mobility Commission 2017).
The daily realities of Muslim women go further in highlighting such patterns of discrimination. They are experiencing the greatest pay gap in the country, they are 71 per cent more likely to be unemployed than their white Christian counterparts (even with the same level of education and language skills) and they are experiencing the ‘triple penalty’ that comes with being a woman, a person of colour and a Muslim (Women and Equalities Committee 2017). We must not forget that these inequalities are rooted and reflected in every aspect of the British Muslim experience (and felt two-fold by those who have intersecting identities, e.g. Black Muslims). Muslim women in prisons for example, face a unique combination of stigma and discrimination from fellow prisoners, staff and from among their own communities (Muslim Hands 2017).

With the fallout from the EU referendum and Donald Trump’s election as president of the United States, Islamophobic attacks have taken on a particular visibility in the public imagination – ranging from attacks on mosques to the physical and verbal harassment experienced by individuals on public transport. One cannot overlook the fact that only a few months prior, ‘Punish a Muslim Day’ flyers were circulated in cities across the country which encouraged people to ‘butcher a Muslim using gun, knife, vehicle’, ‘burn or bomb a mosque’ and ‘pull the head-scarf off a Muslim woman’ (BBC 2018a). Just days later four Labour MPs were sent suspect packages and letters within a 48-hour cycle. Rupa Huq MP revealed that one of her staff members was sent to hospital after handling an ‘irritant substance’ but was later discharged (BBC 2018b).

These incidents have been replicated in universities and campuses across the country. In 2014, the prayer room signs at King’s College London were defaced in the wake of a vote in favour of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement (Roar News 2014). Two years later, a fellow student had her niqab (face veil) ripped off just steps away from the university entrance (Independent 2016). In both instances, the response from university administration was uninspiring at best. Alongside this, extensive measures are being introduced by further and higher education institutions to monitor the activities of Muslim students – from installing cameras in prayer rooms to tracking emails. In attempting to implement their Prevent policy to meet their legal responsibilities to prevent terrorism, universities are effectively placing Muslims under strict surveillance. Measures such as these both draw upon and feed Islamophobia, while also undermining education institutions’ ability to function as spaces of cooperation and learning.

Perhaps it is worth emphasising that the violence and discrimination Muslim students experience in universities and colleges is connected to the violence they experience elsewhere. Media platforms are unrestrained in their Islamophobia with Muslim activists and student officers regularly facing the force of racist smears and attacks. In the last year alone, countless sabbatical officers as well as the former NUS president Malia Bouattia have been systematically targeted by a hostile press that sees Muslims engaging in politics (and by extension, all people of colour engaging in politics) as inherently suspect. The institutionalised nature of Islamophobia is equally pernicious. NUS’s own Racism: a Light Sleeper report, published in 1999 and touted as its ‘first ever anti-racist handbook’, reiterated damaging conspiracies about the ‘threat of Islamic extremist organisations’ and abusive ‘Muslim extremists’ on campus, rather than the very real threats facing Muslim students (NUS 1999, p. 3). Meanwhile, incremental improvements in Muslim student representation in students’ unions and NUS have been accompanied by venomous pushback and attacks in the media and from peers, which impede Muslim students’ current and potential political involvement. This means that the opportunities for personal growth and civic engagement offered by our movement is increasingly limited for our Muslim peers. There is often a tendency within activist spaces to explain Islamophobia as a recent political phenomenon – one
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that emerged with the election of Trump and the resurgence of the alt-right. However, it is worth stating that anti-Muslim attitudes have existed for as long as Islam has existed. We cannot afford to explain Islamophobia without grasping this fundamental truth.

The Muslim Students’ Survey aimed to capture these experiences. It addresses a whole spectrum of issues faced by Muslim students in further and higher education – from their everyday interactions in lecture theatres to involvement in their students’ unions and student societies, their feelings of safety on campus and their perceptions of media representations of their fellow Muslims. As NUS elected leaders it is worth mentioning that this research was the product of the deep-seated racism that we personally experienced and witnessed during our time in the student movement. Building on the experiences of former Muslim NUS officers and volunteers, it also sought to understand how NUS can better support Muslim students’ participation in the student movement, enable successful Muslim leadership and challenge Islamophobia in all its forms.

Methodology

The Muslim Students’ Survey was launched in 2017 as part of Islamophobia Awareness Month. The research was commissioned to better understand the Muslim further and higher education student population in the UK and their experience of their educational institutions, students’ unions and of NUS. It was developed in consultation with Muslim student representatives from both higher and further education and the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS). The survey comprised questions with defined, multiple choice answers – primarily yielding quantitative information – but respondents also had opportunities to add comments, providing some qualitative data.

We received 578 responses to our research survey among UK-based Muslim students. Almost all respondents (93 per cent) were in full-time education and 82 per cent were UK citizens. We also received a small number of responses from sabbatical officers, accounting for 5 per cent of all responses. 67 per cent of respondents identified as women, a further 2 per cent defined as non-binary or preferred not to disclose their gender and the remaining were men. We asked women respondents if they wore any religious coverings, of those who answered this question, 61 per cent wore a hijab, four per cent wore a jilbab, one per cent wore a niqab and 32 per cent wore none of the above. This question allowed us to analyse any statistically significant differences between women who were ‘visibly Muslim’ and those who were not.

The research did not seek to compare Muslim students with all other students. Instead, it sought to understand Muslim students’ experiences and their barriers to general involvement in their learning environment and community. While *The Experiences of Muslim Students in 2017–18* covers a broad range of issues from participation in student union activities to political engagement and student democracy in this chapter we have chosen to focus on the findings related to Prevent; hate crime, harassment and Islamophobia and the gendered perspective on each of these. As these experiences are most widely felt across the Muslim student population they pose the gravest threats to our education and our ability to engage in the student movement.

Prevent and the stifling effect of counter-terrorism

The Prevent duty has been a legal requirement for further and higher education institutions and staff since the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015. It is designed to combat exposure to ‘extremism’, which the programme states can lead to individuals being ‘radicalised’ into
committing crime intended to make political change. The Prevent duty requires education institutions to identify and report students who they deem to be vulnerable to ‘radicalisation’ or ‘extremism’. This may involve referring students via Channel, one of many local multi-agency boards with broad powers, which can recommend that a student must attend a variety of programmes. NUS believes that this approach is fundamentally flawed and discriminatory. The Black Students’ Campaign has for the past three years run the ‘Students Not Suspects’ campaign opposing Prevent stating that it needs to be abolished (NUS 2015).

**Awareness and understanding**

One-third of survey respondents felt negatively affected by the Prevent strategy. This included participating less in political activity or debate; having events they have organised being restricted or cancelled; or being reported through Prevent. Whether a Muslim student has been affected by Prevent is a significant indicator of whether they are involved in a wide variety of student activities and their opinions on a variety of matters. As such we noted throughout the survey where these answers significantly differed from the rest of the respondents, had they been affected by Prevent.

Male respondents were more likely to be very or extremely aware of Prevent. Students affected by Prevent highlighted that their experience of Prevent has led to them taking part in less political activity. Muslim students feel strongly about what Prevent entails. An overwhelming majority of respondents disagreed that lecturers and education institutions should monitor and report students’ attitudes and behaviours, prayer room activities and email/online activity. Three in five respondents disagreed that lecturers should report on their views and opinions. Having personal experience of the impact of Prevent heightens these responses. Significantly more women who wore religious coverings disagreed with facets of the duty 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 56 per cent respectively).

Two out of five respondents (43 per cent) who reported having been affected by Prevent told us that this experience made it harder to express their opinions or views. Nearly a third of students (30 per cent) who have been affected by Prevent reported experiencing barriers to organising speakers and events on campus.

In lessons I found myself not speaking my true opinion because of fear of being misreported as a result, just for saying my opinion, and I worry that others will just comment.

*(Woman, aged 22–23, Masters student)*

[When I was] getting a certain speaker for an event, Prevent were involved and had to be present for the talk, in addition to police as well, shockingly.

*(Man, aged 22–23, higher education student)*

Muslim students most likely not to have been affected by Prevent include those not involved with their students’ union, international students and women who do not wear religious garments (eg hijab or niqab). Muslim women who wear a covering are significantly more likely to be affected by Prevent during their time in education than those who do not; 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.

**The impact of Prevent on participation in civic life**

Our research findings suggest that Muslim students follow a similar pattern to other students in terms of their general levels of participation (both passive and active) in student union activities, including a small percentage who have no involvement whatsoever. Respondents who reported a complete lack of involvement in these activities are more likely to have reported being unaffected by Prevent. Conversely, students who reported an acute awareness of their students’ union’s work are more likely to have reported being affected by Prevent. Muslim students affected by Prevent are more likely to disagree that their students’ union understands their needs or reflects their views.

These findings are reflected in Muslim students’ engagement in, and attitudes towards, NUS. Respondents who are not involved with their students’ union and/or not affected by Prevent were more likely to report being unaware of NUS’ work. Respondents’ awareness of Prevent tends to accompany a lack of comfort attending NUS events (with 30 per cent of those affected by Prevent not feeling comfortable by contrast to 17 per cent of those not affected). This group also disagreed that NUS understands the needs of Muslim students (comprising 35 per cent in comparison with 20 per cent of those unaffected). Students affected by Prevent are also more likely to have attended NUS events. Negative feedback on NUS events focuses on access and the politicised nature of Muslim identity at policy and democratic events rather than the organisation’s position on key political issues such as Prevent however. While participation in these kinds of events was low (eight out of ten respondents had not attended any kind of NUS event) it is of note that 38 per cent of respondents’ comments relating to experiences of attending NUS democratic or policy events expressed a feeling that these were not supportive of Muslims or that attendees had experienced anti-Muslim comments. One in three of these respondents said they were made to feel unwelcome in such NUS spaces.

**Feelings of safety and political disengagement**

Muslim students reported being generally relatively happy to be involved in discussions on racism, Islamophobia and provisions for Muslim students. They were more likely to report being uncomfortable or unsure about debating terrorism (43 per cent of respondents would not feel comfortable), Palestine and the Prevent duty, although half of the respondents would still feel comfortable engaging in debates on these issues. Forty four per cent do not feel comfortable about the way issues relating to Muslim people or terrorism are covered in class. Reasons cited included general feelings of discomfort, how others view them, and concerns about being misunderstood or not knowing enough about the topics. One in ten students who would not get involved specifically cited fear of being reported to Prevent.

> Being under the radar. Potentially reported to Prevent. Being misunderstood.
> (Man, aged 20–21, higher education student)

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 one.
Only a quarter of Muslim students felt that there is a safe space or forum on campus where they can discuss issues that affect them. Over half of this group highlighted their Islamic society (ISoc) as that space, indicating the importance of those societies. It is concerning that it is primarily Muslim-only spaces that are considered safe spaces for these students, which may highlight a need for more cultural competency in other forums and services. Students affected by Prevent are significantly more likely to believe there is no safe space or forum on campus to discuss issues that affect them.

It is notable that Prevent causes discomfort for students engaging in politicised aspects of student life. For example, students affected by Prevent reported being less likely to feel comfortable running for voluntary or sabbatical roles within the student movement, as opposed to academic roles such as course representatives. Qualitative feedback from respondents who reported being less willing to run for any roles explicitly highlight their Muslim identity as a factor, but it is awareness of Prevent that correlates with a lack of comfort running for political roles.

I feel confident that there would be no discrimination or any judgement when it comes to being a course rep. I’m somewhat confident my class would be supportive.

(Woman, aged 22–23, Masters student)

There is a high level of consensus among respondents that media portrayals of Muslims and Islam are not positive (91 per cent agreed with this) and that attacks against Muslims are not reported in the media to the same extent as those on other groups (90 per cent). However, the impact of these portrayals on students is influenced primarily by two things; their experience of Prevent and their being visibly Muslim. Students who have been affected by Prevent and women who wear religious coverings are more likely to cite media representation of Muslims as a reason not to seek a high-profile position within their students’ union than those who do not belong in either group. These respondents are also more likely to believe that media coverage of terrorism influences how other people treat them. Sixty-nine per cent of women wearing a religious covering for example disagreed that the reporting of recent terrorist attacks in the national media has no effect on how other people treat them compared with 52 per cent of women who do not. This highlights that the very real consequences of anti-Muslim sentiment in the media disproportionately affects those who are visibly Muslim.

Experiences of hate crime, Islamophobia and representations of Muslims

We asked respondents about their attitudes towards, and experiences of, hate crime and harassment, including online. We were interested in a variety of experiences, including verbal abuse, physical attacks, vandalism, property damage and theft. When these actions are motivated by religion or belief, they are hate crimes.

Experiences of hate crime and harassment

One in three respondents were fairly or very worried about experiencing verbal abuse, physical attacks, vandalism, property damage or theft relating to their religion or belief at their place of study. One in three respondents said they had experienced some type of abuse or crime at their place of study, with one in five experiencing verbal abuse in person.

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 of the former were very worried compared to 2 per cent of the latter.

The vast majority (79 per cent) of respondents who have experienced abuse or crime believed that this was motivated by prejudice relating to their Muslim identity, with seven out of ten of these respondents citing prejudiced statements or gestures made by perpetrator/s before, during or after the incident as their reason for doing so. Hate words or symbols, and the event coinciding with a recent terror attack, were also noted by respondents as reasons for believing the perpetrator’s actions were motivated by religious prejudice. Of those who believed an incident related to prejudice, 28 per cent stated it occurred while they were engaged in activism that challenged Islamophobia.

The experiences of LGBT+ Muslim students were particularly concerning. While the number of responses from this group was fairly low, out of the 29 received 15 had experienced an incident at their place of study and 11 were fairly or very worried about being targeted. This suggests that students with intersecting identities may be attacked both as result of defining as, in this case, Muslim and also LGBT+. This is supported by existing studies (Meyer 2010).

Survey respondents’ views on reporting Islamophobic incidents were mixed. More than one-third (36 per cent) said they would report an Islamophobic incident to a member of academic staff and 29 per cent would report to the police. Similarly, 29 per cent of respondents said they would report such incidents to their ISoc, and 21 per cent would report to a hate crime reporting centre. Less commonly selected reporting options included sabbatical officers, students’ union and institutional staff. Notably, a quarter of all respondents said that they would not report an Islamophobic incident. Other options selected by respondents included reporting to FOSIS, their ISoc and NUS.

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. Students with an understanding of Prevent also react to incidents of Islamophobic abuse or hate crime differently to those unaware of the duty, being more likely to report it to their student sabbatical officer or Isoc, although there is no significant change in the likelihood that they will report it elsewhere.

Considering the widespread fear of abuse, especially among visibly Muslim women, it is concerning that a quarter of respondents were not sure if there was a local hate crime reporting centre (whether on their campuses or nearby) that they could access. Our previous research into student experiences has indicated low levels of trust regarding reporting mechanisms (NUS 2012). It would be of benefit for victim support services to assess their engagement practices with Muslim women and identify how they might better address Muslim women’s needs. This is likely to include extending training to those who are likely to receive disclosures of hate crime, including ISoc committee members and academic staff.

Institutional responses to Islamophobia

Muslim students’ levels of trust in the ability of their students’ union, educational institution or NUS in relation to handling allegations of Islamophobia were mixed, although 45 per cent would trust their students’ union and 42 per cent would trust their institution. However, nearly a quarter
of respondents did not believe their institution would respond appropriately. Respondents were the most unsure about NUS’ ability to respond appropriately to Islamophobia – two-thirds were unclear on this or did not believe NUS would respond appropriately. Although only indicative due to a small sample size (29 respondents), 44 per cent of sabbatical officers disagreed that NUS would respond appropriately to allegations of Islamophobia if they arose, which contrasted with 20 per cent of the student respondents to the question.

NUS Muslim representatives have faced disproportionate abuse over recent years and the NUS has not dealt with it adequately.

(Woman, aged 22–23, higher education student)

Awareness of Prevent correlates with students having less trust in the ability of their educational institution, students’ union and NUS to respond appropriately to allegations of Islamophobia.

We additionally asked respondents who are positions of responsibility, such as president of an ISoc or a sabbatical officer, how they would deal with institutional Islamophobia. Half of these respondents said they would report it to another member of student union staff, and four out of ten would report it to institution staff. It is notable that even among this group of student leaders, one-fifth would not report institutional Islamophobia to others. Women were generally more likely than men to report such incidents.

Experiences online

Half of all survey respondents had experienced some form of abuse or harassment online, primarily religious attacks and attacks against their personal views. The two online spaces where a majority of respondents had experienced abuse and harassment were Facebook (61 per cent) and Twitter (53 per cent). While respondents predominantly responded that they would not allow online abuse to prevent them from standing in student elections (two-thirds) or prevent them from using social networks (seven out of ten), there was an even split on whether or not they tried to keep a low profile online to avoid abuse or harassment. Women who wear a religious covering are significantly more likely to feel directly affected by social media abuse.

Respondent’s levels of trust in organisations’ ability to handle online abuse followed a similar pattern to dealing with in-person Islamophobia, with four in ten believing that their students’ union or educational institution would respond appropriately to an incident of online abuse, but nearly half unclear whether NUS would do so. 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). Sabbatical officer responses were clearer, as 46 per cent did not agree that NUS would respond appropriately to allegations of social media abuse, by contrast to 19 per cent of the student respondents to the question. Similarly, regarding their institution, 52 per cent of sabbatical officers did not agree that allegations of social media abuse would be dealt with appropriately, compared with 27 per cent. The lower levels of confidence among those most engaged within these organisations is deeply concerning and constitutes a trust deficit that, understood in line with respondents’ concerns around political activity and Prevent, may be in danger of leading to disengagement and disillusion.

Conclusion

Prevent is a key issue for respondents’ ability to engage meaningfully with the structures of their institutions, unions and NUS, in particular around democratic engagement. It is particularly
notable that being affected by Prevent has a negative impact on respondents’ engagement with political debates. This negative impact persists whether or not respondents articulated that fear around Prevent was the cause. This correlation demonstrates the chilling effect of Prevent, and that being affected by Prevent accompanies an erosion in trust of institutions who have responsibility to combat Islamophobia.

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 data clearly demonstrates that experiences of hate-motivated incidents or crimes are widespread and under-reported. The amount of reporting needs to increase so that the scale of the problem can be understood and addressed. Pathways to reporting incidents vary, and NUS and student union interventions to tackle hate crime should reflect this. The impact of media portrayals on Muslim students and their willingness to take on leadership roles cannot be underestimated and an action plan to tackle negative representation that combines campaigning and also internal training for NUS and students’ union staff handling press and media contact for Muslim student leaders should be implemented as the unchecked Islamophobic rhetoric they face is seen to have a ripple effect across the movement.

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. The levels of discomfort and self-censorship felt across all respondents is no doubt aggravated by the simultaneous erosion of safe spaces to discuss and organise around the issues that most impact them, with Isoccs 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. Gendered Islamophobia is a sombre reality for the student movement, and the triple penalty has been proven to impact their employment opportunities, rendering them the group most likely to be economically inactive in the UK (Women and Equalities Committee 2017). Muslim women must be front and centre of this fight and there is a specific need for leadership development opportunities for this demographic.

The interplay between feelings of suspicion and targeting via Prevent, persistent challenges to their Muslim identities and a perceived inertia by their institutions to meaningfully tackle Islamophobia presents a very real risk to the educational, civic and political participation of Muslim students. It is therefore incumbent on students’ unions, NUS and education institutions to ensure that Muslims in all their diversity are able to access, engage and lead in our movement.

Notes

1 The definition of Islamophobia used in the survey is from Islamophobia: Still a Challenge for Us All, Runnymede Trust (2017, p. 1): ‘Islamophobia is any distinction, exclusion, or restriction towards, or preference against, Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.’
2 For further discussion on the terminology of Prevent please see Preventing Prevent Handbook (NUS Black Students’ Campaign 2017).
3 While we did not define institutional Islamophobia, the question suggested that institutional Islamophobia included incidents ‘such as your work being sidelined or devalued, or not being treated the same as non Muslim officers’.

References