

# (IN)VISIBILITY

FEMALE. MUSLIM. IMPRISONED.



## MUSLIM HANDS

Muslim Hands was established in 1993 by a small group of volunteers in Nottingham. Since then, it has grown into an international aid charity, currently working in over 40 countries and dedicated to tackling the root causes of poverty around the world as well as relief and emergency response work.

In 2012 the UK Programs Department was established, and the portfolio includes projects across the UK that centre on poverty alleviation, young people and education, interfaith relations, women's leadership and prisoner resettlement.

Muslim Hands' prisoner resettlement work consists of housing support upon release, engaging contact with Imams and mosques and 1-2-1 sessions to establish a prisoner's needs. There are many complex issues that come hand in hand with criminality, and we believe that supporting people to stop reoffending is an important area of our humanitarian work.

## BARROW CADBURY TRUST

The Barrow Cadbury Trust is an independent, charitable foundation committed to bringing about socially just change.



# :: (IN)VISIBILITY: FEMALE. MUSLIM. IMPRISONED.

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## :: FOREWORD

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This research succeeds in putting the underrepresented voices of Muslim women on the radar. Their pre-offending context, experiences of prison and resettlement barriers are disappointing, but unfortunately not surprising.

It makes for a fascinating yet troubling read, but ultimately this research should be understood as an example of systemic and cultural failure. Interviewees talk about direct discrimination from prisoners, racism from prison staff and feeling more targeted if identifiably Muslim. This is totally unacceptable and should be seriously dealt with as a failure of the prison service. Interviewees also detail that families and communities are unwilling or unable to support them, forgive them or forget that a woman has spent time in prison. This is a failure of our communities.

Women and girls consistently face intersectional inequality throughout their lives and it is imperative that our communities, our prison service, our faith institutions begin to address this. The causes and normalisations of many of these inequalities begin with our attitudes, systems and cultures and we must challenge our own norms, in order to promote change.

The Muslim Women's Network commends Muslim Hands for taking on this sensitive research and welcomes the recommendations. We have been tackling domestic violence and abuse and supporting survivors for many years, and that is what has stood out for us in this research. To read that there are issues of ongoing control whilst in prison and links between abuse and offending is concerning and clearly more work needs to be done. The experiences and issues that Muslim female prisoners face should not be viewed as acceptable by anyone. I therefore urge all stakeholders to take action to address the problems identified and respond to the recommendations in this report. We must also look in our own lives, our own communities and institutions and ask ourselves how we can contribute to helping women who face multiple disadvantage.

**Shaista Gohir, OBE**

Chair of Muslim Women's Network UK



## :: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**DISCLAIMER:** This report contains the views of individuals and agencies engaged with by members of the research team from which were duly interpreted. Responsibility for any errors lies with the authors

## **:: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

There are 254 female Muslim prisoners<sup>1</sup> across the 12 women's prisons in England, yet there is little existing research on this topic. In the last year there has been a national focus on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people's experiences of the Criminal Justice System, including prisons. However, where reports do address faith as well as ethnicity, they are often centred on male prisoners. There are also significant limitations to collating data on this subject. There is no data disaggregated by religion and ethnicity, and little data disaggregated by gender and ethnicity. Therefore, it is difficult to identify those that may be at risk of disadvantage or discrimination based on gender, ethnicity and religion, and this research has found many of the Muslim female prison population are.

Failure to understand the experiences and issues at play for female Muslim prisoners leads to their invisibility at multiple levels: in policy, research, family and communities. This research aims to increase the evidence base, bring the unheard voices of female Muslim prisoners to the forefront and address the often overlooked intersectionality of faith, ethnicity and gender.

- **79% of the sample reported experiencing Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA). In some cases violent, abusive and controlling experiences were linked to the offence**
- **Mental health challenges were reported from some as a result of violence**
- **Cultural expectations of women are often unrealistic and are a source of tension for many participants**
- **Cultural norms, such as shame and honour, can have a silencing and normalising effect for many of the hard-hitting issues, such as DVA and sexual violence**
- **Shame impacts on many female Muslim prisoners lives and can impact on family contact, acceptance or disownment**
- **Contact from families was reported as either very positive, supportive and present, or as negative, non-existent and judgemental, with very little in-between**

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<sup>1</sup> HMPPS, (Sept 2017), Offender Management Statistics, London: HMPPS

<sup>2</sup> Maslaha, (2016), Young Muslims on Trial, London: Maslaha

- Shame brings implications for resettlement, particularly for Muslim women, such as stigma from communities and having to serve a 'second sentence' in order to be forgiven by families
- Female Muslim prisoners face Islamophobia and racism from both prisoners and prison staff
- Stereotypes of Islam have an impact on female Muslim prisoners' experiences of prison and the Criminal Justice System more widely
- Female Muslim prisoners occupy a somewhat unique position in prison:
  - Their faith is strengthened, is often central to identity, and offers support. However, institutionally Islam has been found to not be viewed as an asset<sup>2</sup> and this makes people feel defensive and further marginalised
  - Their voices are often unheard, and they are somewhat invisible in policy, families and communities. However, there is an additional hyper visibility in media and public attitudes (including inside prisons) and this especially impacts those who are 'visibly Muslim' (i.e. identifiers such as hijab wearing or certain surnames)

## ◀ **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **:: MINISTRY OF JUSTICE & HER MAJESTY'S PRISON AND PROBATION SERVICE**

- There is a need for more and better data, especially data disaggregated by religion to be able to identify those at risk of discrimination based on gender, religion and ethnicity
- Further research is needed into the experiences of female Muslims in other areas of the Criminal Justice System
- Prison staff should be better trained in faith related identities and activities (e.g. Islamic celebrations such as Ramadan and Eid, Islamic childbirth, a woman's choice to wear a hijab or not), and this especially applies to prisons in rural areas
- Women's prison estates should seek to create links with specialist community institutions, such as mosques and faith groups
- Racism and Islamophobia should not be tolerated in prisons, and any reports of it should be taken seriously with a view of eradicating it
- Consideration should be given to the cultural competency of housing alternatives to prison, as well as hostels and temporary accommodation post release for Muslim women
- Culturally competent support should be available in prisons and throughout the Criminal Justice System for women, to allow them to disclose any important concerns in their home life - especially where this might impact on resettlement (e.g. controlling partners, family relationships deteriorating)
- Isolation, community ignorance or normalisation, and silencing should be considered as relevant risk factors in gender based violence (similar to the way alcohol might be) and steps, measures, legislation should be put in place to protect survivors from them (i.e. these factors should be included in risk assessments, understood at both policy and grassroots levels, and included in training)
- Further research is needed into the impact of control from a partner or family member whilst in custody and how to keep women safe
- Any future research must be intersectional, and representative of the female prison population, including minority groups
- Further to recommendations in the Lammy Review<sup>3</sup>, Judges and Magistrates must be culturally competent and trained on issues surrounding race as well as faith

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<sup>3</sup> Lammy, D., (2017), The Lammy Review: An Independent Review into the Treatment of, and Outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Individuals in the Criminal Justice System, London: Ministry of Justice

## **:: COMMUNITIES**

- Muslim councillors in various locations are well placed to address and advocate for issues raised in the findings. Including but not limited to criminality amongst women, the diversity of woman's place in community, gender inequality and DVA
- There is an opportunity for our communities (not limited to Muslim communities) to address issues brought up in the report, raise awareness and create supportive environments for women experiencing things such as domestic violence, being an ex-offender, mental health challenges, LGBT+ identities and many more
- There is a need for engagement with young Muslim women and girls, to increase awareness of gender inequalities, DVA, positive relationships and women's rights in Islam
- We suggest that our communities and families stop stereotyping and stigmatising female ex-offenders. This report has shown that there is much more at play than criminality and we must enable our women to make better choices and create a supportive environment for any mistakes
- Imams and Islamic Chaplains are underrepresented in Community Chaplaincy. This should be addressed so that Muslim females leaving prison have more support
- Negative public perceptions of Islam need to change. Stereotypes that link Islam with terrorism should be addressed by all communities, with a view to ending prejudice

## **:: CHARITY SECTOR**

- Mainstream criminal justice organisations should seek partnerships with faith-based and specialist organisations, to increase the awareness of faith identities and cultural competency of their services
- Faith-based organisations, particularly the Islamic charity sector, should address societal issues in the UK as well as internationally and offer support not only to those in need but to faith groups and mosques to enable to provide that support to others
- There is a need for more specialist, BAME and faith specific services, including but not limited to needs such as mental health, domestic violence, sexuality and mentoring
- Resettlement providers must consider how culturally competent their services are for Muslim females and address the cultural barriers, such as shame, that stop someone from accessing a service

## **:: FAITH GROUPS AND MOSQUES**

- Promote an increased awareness of the issues raised in the report amongst elected and non-elected faith leaders, including Imams
- Mosques are well placed to be able to raise awareness, promote open minds and change perceptions of offending amongst their communities. We suggest these changes can be achieved through activities, faith groups, drop in sessions and regular sermons
- Mosques should create a supportive and forgiving environment for all female (and male) ex-offenders, setting an example for communities
- There is a real need for Islamic faith based groups for female ex-offenders, to be able to continue learning, practising and strengthening their faith on release

## ◀ INTRODUCTION

This research captures the often unheard voices of female Muslim prisoners. These voices will enable us to better understand their experiences and increase the evidence base in this area. Muslim Hands was supported by the Barrow Cadbury Trust, to carry out a 15-month research study. Data was gathered via interviews and focus groups in seven women's prisons, with a total of 60 participants.

## ◀ BACKGROUND

### :: POPULATION SIZE & PROTECTED CHARACTERISTICS

According to prison population statistics, there are 254 female Muslim prisoners across the 12 female prisons in England<sup>4</sup>, amounting to approximately 6% of the total female offender population (3974 females)<sup>5</sup>. This has increased from 5% to 6% since 2014<sup>6</sup>.

However, there are significant limitations to collating data on this subject. There is no data disaggregated by religion and ethnicity, and little data disaggregated by gender and ethnicity. Therefore, it is difficult to identify opportunities for comparison, but also identify those that may be at risk of disadvantage or discrimination based on gender, ethnicity and religion, as many of the Muslim female prison population are<sup>7</sup>.

### :: EXISTING LITERATURE

There is very little research on this topic. Muslim Hands commissioned a small pilot study into the experiences of Muslim prisoners in two female prison estates in Yorkshire<sup>8</sup>, which inspired and formed the basis for this larger study. Themes identified in the pilot report included shame and dishonour and the impact of both on the experience and lives of Muslim women prisoners, a lack of family and community support and in some cases a community backlash resulting in a 'second sentence' or complete disownment when a female prisoner is released.

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4 HMPPS, (Sept 2017), Offender Management Statistics, London: HMPPS

5 Ibid

6 Prison Reform Trust, (2017), Counted Out: Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic Women in the Criminal Justice System, London: Prison Reform Trust

7 Ibid

8 Buncy, S. and Ahmed, I., (2015), Muslim Women in Prison, Nottingham: Muslim Hands and HPCA

In the last year there has been a national focus on BAME people's experiences of the Criminal Justice System, including prisons. However, where reports do address faith as well as ethnicity, they (particularly governmental reports) are often centred on male prisoners, not surprisingly, given the high disproportionality and increasing size of the population. Those limited publications have revealed that:

- Muslim prisoners (male and female) are more likely to report more negative experiences in prisons than any other group of prisoners and this is a more pronounced difference than the reported experiences between BAME prisoners compared to white prisoners<sup>9 10</sup>
- 18% of female prisoners are BAME, compared to 14% of the general population<sup>11</sup>
- Black and Asian offenders receive the longest average custodial sentence lengths of all offenders
- Asian women are the least likely of any ethnic group to plead guilty at Crown Court, however those that are tried at Magistrates Court are 42% more likely than white women to be convicted
- BAME adults are all more likely than white adults to receive custodial sentences at Crown Court
- Young adult Muslim male prisoners view their faith as a supportive and positive aspect to their lives, which conflicts with the 'often negative light' that the Criminal Justice System and its institutions view Islam<sup>16</sup>

In addition to a lack of data, in a time of economic and budget constraints, rehabilitation services and particularly BAME specific and women's services are some of the first to face cuts<sup>17</sup>, which is disappointing as there is a real need for authorities to understand issues that may be impacting on effective community reintegration, as well as provide data. Clinks 'State of the Sector' report states that 30% of specialist BAME organisations said they were at risk of closure, compared to just 5% of generic providers<sup>18</sup>.

The evidence available lacks in heterogeneity and cultural understanding and the Muslim prison population is 'far from being a homogenous group'<sup>19</sup>. This research aims to bridge some of these gaps and address the often overlooked intersectionality of faith, ethnicity and gender.

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9 Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP), (2010), Muslim Prisoners' Experiences: A Thematic Review, London: HMPPS

10 Lammy, D., (2017), The Lammy Review: An Independent Review into the Treatment of, and Outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Individuals in the Criminal Justice System, London: Ministry of Justice

11 Cox, J. and Sacks-Jones, K., (2017), "Double Disadvantage": The Experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Women in the Criminal Justice System, London: Agenda, Women in Prison

12 Ministry of Justice (MoJ), (2017), Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System 2016, London: Ministry of Justice

13 Prison Reform Trust, (2017), Counted Out: Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic Women in the Criminal Justice System, London: Prison Reform Trust

14 MoJ, (2016), Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Disproportionality in the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales, London: MoJ

15 ibid

16 Maslaha, (2016), Young Muslims on Trial, London: Maslaha

17 Said, I., (2011), Young British Muslims: Ex-Offenders and Resettlement Needs, London: Muslim Youth Helpline

18 Clinks, (2017), The State of the Sector, London: Clinks

19 ibid

## ◀ CRIMINOGENIC CONTEXT

Baroness Corston's 2007 Report<sup>20</sup> recommended a holistic, woman-centred approach to responding to the needs of women who have offended or at risk of offending, based on the effect that social isolation and victimisation can have on a woman's life. Therefore, whilst the criminogenic context is not a research question, it was decided that it should be included, in order to better understand the complex realities of participant's lives as well as some of the wider issues.

Nearly all of the participants reported pre-existing vulnerabilities and challenges. Experiences of historic and ongoing domestic violence, child abuse and rape were reported from interview participants, each of which is considered in more detail below.

### :: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

A recent report 'There's a Reason we're in Trouble'<sup>21</sup> highlights and reiterates the link between gender-based violence and offending for all women. The report makes recommendations for specific measures, such as ensuring the factors underlying women's offences are 'fully and fairly taken into account in decision making', to recognise cases where offending may be linked to controlling and/or abusive relationships.

It is well documented that women who have experienced DVA are over-represented in the criminal justice system in general<sup>22 23</sup>. The findings of this research support this. We found that DVA is prominent in people's lives prior to prison as well as continuing whilst in custody, and a high proportion of the interview participants reported being survivors or victims of DVA as well as offenders. 71% of interview participants reported experience of historic or ongoing DVA. This included physical and sexual violence, controlling behaviours, isolation and financial abuse; with different perpetrators such as husbands, partners, parents, in-laws and relatives. This is higher than reported in the general female prison population, where 57% report experiences of DVA as adults<sup>24</sup>, however this is likely to be an underestimate so it is not possible to conclude that DVA is more prominent in any one community.

**If I had to go to work, I had to get permission from him [husband], um, I had been in charge...of my own money, I lost that. You know, I lost so much and I didn't realise, because I thought that that's the way married life had to be**  
[Participant 3]

**And then I met my son's dad when I was 16 and he's got a very bad gambling addiction and he'd always take my money**  
[Participant 14]

**It was a love marriage that went completely wrong. It was domestic violence - that's why I'm partially deaf...**  
[Participant 13]

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20 Corston, J., (2007), The Corston Report, London: Home Office

21 Prison Reform Trust, (2017), "There's a Reason we're in Trouble": Domestic Abuse as a Driver to Women's Offending, London: Prison Reform Trust

22 ibid

23 ibid

24 ibid

**In the beginning of our relationship he never hit me, it was verbal abuse - calling me a hoe, calling me a slut, just calling me nasty names. Shouting at me, swearing at me. Obviously, you get used to it when somebody swears at you all the time, you just get used to it**  
[Participant 6]

**It would be, like dragging me from halfway down the stairs by my throat and I'd end up with like, l-like a tiger had scratched me all across my neck and I'd have bruises and cuts where he's just pushed me against things.[and] whenever it got to 'well you hit me', he'd be like 'well I never punched you'... even though I look like I've been beaten up.**  
[Participant 10]

**He said, if you tell someone then I'm going to cut your body in small pieces and bury you in garden. Yeah, and these type of things were going on and that's why, I- because of scaredness and everything - because I not born in this country, I don't know any rules**  
[Participant 21]

Even though being in prison means that communication with people outside is dictated by the institution, some participants are still victims of controlling behaviours from husbands or partners during imprisonment. Participant 10, for example, continued to experience controlling behaviours from her partner while in prison. Here, she explains talking to him about moving out from their house when she is released:

**But then, when I was tryna say this to him [partner] the other day and he was like, 'you're not goin' anywhere' and I don't know whether it's like, are you saying that because it's a love thing or is it because it's a control thing and you can control me**  
[Participant 10]

Participant 16 similarly reported experiencing control from her husband while in prison. She explains wanting to separate from her husband but feeling unable to because he brings their child to visit her:

**And it's just.I don't think that.there is a relationship anymore. But purely.out of the fear of not being able to see my son.I'm keeping it on amicable terms right now.**  
[Participant 16]

**⚡ ⚡ If they [in laws] knew he was hitting me, they wouldn't come and get involved, they would turn the TV up. They would block what was going on. And, turn a blind eye to it ⚡ ⚡**

[Participant 13]

## :: SHAME AND DVA

The research found that feelings of shame intersect across cultures and has multiple impacts. Often called 'izzat' (broadly meaning 'honour') in South Asian cultures, it is understood as being somewhat attached to women, where a woman in the family holds the 'honour' and must therefore avoid tarnishing it<sup>25</sup>. In the context of DVA, participants spoke of either not disclosing violence or abuse due to shame, or calling the police but never pressing charges due to how they would then be viewed as a mother, wife or individual in their community.

**If you're arguin' with your partner and you tell your mum and stuff, it's very shameful.my dad was...like '...I don't care, don't get me involved', and you know.because I love my dad and, we're very close, it really hurt, because, he weren't takin' any sides and he shoulda took my side**  
[Participant 14]

**He was trying to stab me with a knife. So I did call the police...but I dropped the charges. Cos I said no... if he goes to prison, my kids are gonna say to me 'mum, you've sent dad to prison'. You know, and it's a shame, so.[I thought] doesn't matter, drop the charges**  
[Participant 11]

It seems that the unwillingness to acknowledge DVA, or discuss it 'outside the home' is having a normalising effect, and in turn leading to an unspoken cultural acceptance of domestic violence against women.

In terms of the criminogenic context, this finding is relevant as there are at least five participants charged with the murder or attempted murder of abusive husbands. In addition, many participants who have experienced DVA suffer from mental health issues (see below: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), which they perceive to have been a factor in the crime they committed.

**⚡ ⚡ If I was telling my stepmother...she was saying that you gotta...compromise, you gotta stop answering back or something, that's why the domestic violence is happening ⚡ ⚡**

[Participant 11]

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25 Gilbert, P., Gilbert, J. and Sanghera, J., (2009), A Focus Group Exploration of the Impact of Izzat, Shame, Subordination and Entrapment on Mental Health and Service Use in South Asian Women living in Derby, Mental Health, Religion and Culture, 2: 109-130

## **:: MALE INVOLVEMENT IN CRIME INCLUDING RETALIATION**

Poor relationships feature heavily as a factor behind participants' offences. Of all 27 interview participants, 12 report a partner, husband or friend being directly or indirectly involved, as co-accused, manipulator or victim, including retaliation against an abusive partner or husband.

These findings say a lot about gender based inequality (or violence). Some participants speak of 'covering up' for their (male) partner, being unaware of the criminal activity that their husband was involved in and therefore viewed as complicit, or being vulnerable and therefore feeling used by a (male) partner.

**And because I didn't, tell the police it was him [ex-partner], and I covered up for him, I was involved so I got 11 years**  
[Participant 14]

**But sadly, like, it was my husband... I'm in here because of him. But... it happened so I, I just think I have to deal with it and that's it**  
[Participant 8]

**Career-wise I was getting to my peak but within myself, I think emotionally I was broken. So I got involved with somebody and I think he actually manipulated the fact that I was vulnerable.**  
[Participant 12]

Retaliation against an abusive (male) partner/husband is reported from some interview participants. These participants report extreme and long-term domestic violence and abuse, including control, extreme physical violence, sexual violence and rape. Women who have survived years of DVA, combined with isolation, cultural 'normalisation' (at worst) or 'ignorance' (at best), and silencing, face sentences of up to 30 years. In addition, the lack of knowledge about, and prior involvement with the Criminal Justice System or police, meant that the extent of DVA was reportedly not taken into account in court.

## **:: POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)**

Five participants reported being diagnosed with PTSD following DVA or witnessing severe violence growing up. One participant in particular had been diagnosed once in custody but due to English being her second language she did not understand what it meant to have a 'stress disorder'.

**A lot of my [mental health] illnesses have come from the violence**  
[Participant 13]

## **:: HISTORY OF CHILD ABUSE**

Child abuse, including sexual abuse and neglect, is reported from some interview participants. Perpetrators include parents, and guardians, and family members.

**Like he'd [father] lock me in the chicken's cage, and I'd be eating raw eggs and stuff and he'd leave me in there for days and my mother'd try and sneak me food and then she'd get a beating for doin' that**  
[Participant 9]

**...we was gettin' beating with kettle cords, like she [guardian] would plug the kettle out the cord and beat us. You know, when me and my sister fight, like put us outside in the snow for 2 hours. You know, outside, no shoes no socks jus' a little shorts, a vest top and go outside in the cold shiverin'. You know, that wasn't a normal discipline...**  
[Participant 5]

## **:: RAPE**

Some interview participants reported histories of sexual violence, including rape by family members and husbands. Sexual violence and rape holds a particular shame for the victim in some participant's cultures. Both Participant 20 and Participant 9 report being criticised within their communities for not being virgins at marriage, because they were raped when they were teenagers:

**I was raped very young, an early age, 13-14, it was one of the family members who did it. Told my mum, my mum told my nan and my nan says well you can't do nothing... they thought 'well, this happened, [now] she has to get married in Pakistan'**  
[Participant 20]

**⚡ ⚡ If you don't bleed...in our culture it means you're not a virgin. And, I didn't bleed, cos I was raped when I was 14 ⚡ ⚡**

[Participant 9]

## ◀ FINDINGS - EXPERIENCES OF PRISON

### :: DISCRIMINATION

The Corston Report<sup>26</sup> highlighted BAME women in the prison system as a ‘minority within a minority’. In addition, an HMIP annual report<sup>27</sup> found that BAME prisoners (men and women) were more likely to feel unsafe in prison and more likely to be victimised by staff and other prisoners based on race or ethnicity, religion or nationality.

As mentioned previously, data and evidence on Muslim female prisoners is lacking. This makes it challenging to understand the population that could be at risk of discrimination based on three characteristics: gender, ethnicity and religion<sup>28 29</sup>.

### :: FAITH BASED DISCRIMINATION

Participants reported experiencing discrimination, from both prisoners and staff. Discrimination from other prisoners drew on narratives and stereotypes about the relationship between Islam and terrorism, whereas discrimination from prison staff focused on the recognition of visible Islam and them being Muslim (i.e. identifiers such as hijab wearing or certain surnames).

**So, they assumed because I wore a scarf, and, probably because I was Arab... they automatically assumed it was terrorism related and you were literally tarnished with the same brush. And that's what... got me a bit angry, that you're meant to be staff...**  
[Participant 13]

**After that, she [cellmate] took the bedsheet... she call me terrorist, she say 'bomb Allah', you know, this is painful**  
[Participant 7]

**Yes, I get discrimination from people a lot in 'ere, maybe from officers too. They might not say verbally but it shows in their action. They give us Muslim a hard time in here**  
[Participant 5]

**They would treat me differently to everybody else...I was constantly being dis-respected by staff. I would have staff say stuff like 'all of you should just die if you lot think it's alright to kill innocent people...' Discrimination's there and I've never experienced it until I came into prison**  
[Participant 16]

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26 Corston, J., (2007), The Corston Report, London: Home Office

27 Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP), (2017), Annual Report 2016-17, London: HMIP

28 Prison Reform Trust, (2017), Counted Out: Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic Women in the Criminal Justice System, London: Prison Reform Trust

29 Cox, J. and Sacks-Jones, K., (2017), "Double Disadvantage": The Experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Women in the Criminal Justice System, London: Agenda, Women in Prison

## :: RACISM

Interview participants reported experiencing racist insults from other prisoners as well as feeling that the prison system had a racist culture. Focus group participants speak at length about direct discrimination from prison staff. Many who took part in focus groups felt that racism is a problem in the prison establishments they are in.

**the Governor walks past yeah, a group of us and said ‘it’s like a game of guess who’...  
what the hell do you mean by that? [laughs] get what I’m sayin’  
[Participant 2]**

**or they [staff] call you trouble.why are we trouble? What cos, we  
have a different colour skin?  
[Participant 28]**

Participant 2 compares two prison cultures based on the diversity of staff, whereas Participant 11 describes the direct racism she has experienced from another prisoner:

**...like here, they’re racist I don’t care what anybody says! [laughs]...like, [HMP \*\*\*]  
– calm. I’m not sayin’ it’s the best jail in the world, but in terms of like with your  
faith and stuff like that.you’re not judged cos it’s more multicultural  
[Participant 2]**

**...she [another prisoner] was calling me ‘P\*\*\*’ and all things like that...so I have  
corrected her and I said ‘you know, we don’t like the word ‘P\*\*\*’,  
it’s not ‘P\*\*\*’, it’s Pakistanis’  
[Participant 11]**

## :: STRENGTHENING OF FAITH

The Young Review<sup>30</sup> found that, for young Muslim men in prison, the strengthening of faith was central to desistance. Almost all interview participants said that their faith has strengthened since being in custody, largely due to having more time to pray and study, but also closely linked to the notion of forgiveness, betterment of self and motivation.

## :: STRENGTHENING FAITH VS. DISCRIMINATION

Recent reports have suggested that the Criminal Justice System, including prisons, perceives Islam as a risk factor rather than an asset<sup>31 32</sup>, given the current narratives relating to Islam, prisons and radicalisation. This institutional stance sits in stark contrast to how participant’s position their faith, and the support, peace, strength and calm it can provide.

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30 Young, L., (2014), The Young Review; Improving Outcomes for young, black and/or Muslim men in the Criminal Justice System, London: Clinks and BTEG

31 Maslaha, (2016), Young Muslims on Trial, London: Maslaha

32 Young, L., (2014), The Young Review; Improving Outcomes for young, black and/or Muslim men in the Criminal Justice System, London: Clinks and BTEG

...when things, you know, get tough, or when things are really bad, I've always  
sought refuge in Allah. And that's how I've always dealt with things  
[Participant 13]

.if I didn't have imaan [faith]. I wouldn't be the person I am today, you know I  
wouldn't have any motivation to get up. I wouldn't have anything to focus on  
[Participant 14]

I mean. I think. Islam's the only reason I'm alive today  
[Participant 1]

And I find that in Islam, like I don't feel alone, like I feel like getting somewhere  
d'you get what I mean?  
[Participant 2]

## :: OCCUPYING A UNIQUE POSITION

Some participants felt that practicing their religion, which gave them strength and support, was perceived negatively by staff and prisoners, which made it difficult to practice their faith and continue constructing a positive identity. This could have a subsequent impact on desistance. Participant 9 spoke of feeling like she was unable to fulfil her faith obligations:

At the minute, I feel...guilty, because I don't feel like I'm a Muslim anymore,  
being in 'ere. Cos...we get treated really badly in 'ere.  
[Participant 9]

Participant 7 spoke of how she felt about the discrimination she experienced from her cellmate:

But even [if], she was white, black, everybody have his own religion. I do nothing  
to her, she doesn't even try to know me. But, I cry a lot, and until now, you  
know, this affects me  
[Participant 7]

**“...BECAUSE OF ISLAM... I'M CONFIDENT. BECAUSE  
OF ISLAM...I'M SELF ASSURED. BECAUSE OF  
ISLAM, I LOVE MYSELF. YOU KNOW, FOR ME,  
ISLAM...ONE THING IT'S TAUGHT ME...IT'S  
TAUGHT ME PATIENCE AND IT'S TAUGHT ME  
SELF-CONTROL”**

[Participant 5]

Participant 10 spoke of the impact of the prison culture:

**I can imagine there's a lot of girls that probably do practice, they just don't  
say that they do because it's a easier ride  
[Participant 10]**

## **:: FAMILY CONTACT**

Contact with the families of prisoners is widely understood to be an important factor in helping transitions back into society<sup>33 34 35 36</sup>. The results from participants show instances where family contact is at best infrequent and at worst non-existent. A lack of family contact appears to be linked to shame and cultural ideas of tainting family honour. Consequently, it is imperative that we understand this.

**...they [extended family] don't support me, I don't hear from them.it's like I died.  
That's what I told my brother, it's like I died  
[Participant 3]**

**...like I said.the last time I spoke to my dad was.October in 2013  
[Participant 12]**

**...me and my dad have drifted apart quite a lot - I haven't seen my dad in 2  
and a half years  
[Participant 14]**

**...but the last 4 months I haven't spoken to my mum.You know, so.our relationship's  
non-existent at the moment  
[Participant 15]**

**...my oldest brother, he took on the role of lookin' after all of us after my dad passed.  
I was only 6, but...I always looked up to him. So for him not to speak to me is.yeah  
that hurts  
[Participant 18]**

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33 Williams, V., Papadopoulou, V., Booth, N., (2012), Prisoners' Childhood and Family Backgrounds: Results from the Survey-ing Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) Longitudinal Cohort Study of Prisoners, London: MoJ

34 Niven, S. and Olagundoye, J., (2002), Jobs and Homes – A Survey of Prisoners Nearing Release, London: Home Office

35 Niven, S. and Stewart, D., (2005), Resettlement Outcomes on Release from Prison in 2003, London: Home Office

36 May, C., Sharma, N., and Stewart, D., (2008), Factors Linked to Reoffending: A One-Year Follow-Up of Prisoners who took part in the Resettlement Surveys 2001, 2003 and 2004, London: MoJ

However, encouragingly there are also reports of strong family relationships and unexpected support from parents and family members. This contrasts with the findings from the Muslim Hands pilot report from 2015, where participants reported being disowned through the loss of family contact. This change could be attributed to communities changing attitudes and raised awareness of offending and imprisonment.

**I love the relationship that I have right now with my family, especially with my mum.our relationship wasn't perfect before I came to prison.but now, I'd say it's perfect**  
[Participant 6]

**...ever since I've been in prison, me and my mum have got a lot closer**  
[Participant 14]

**I didn't have a relationship with my dad.from about the age of 9, and then I've come in [to prison] and he's trying to.turn it around now and be a dad**  
[Participant 10]

**“...MY MUM SAID ‘YOU’RE A VERY STRONG PERSON TO GO THROUGH COURT’, AND ‘YOU’RE A EVEN... STRONGER PERSON TO GO TO PRISON...”**

[Participant 13]

## ◀ FINDINGS – INTERSECTION OF FAITH, CULTURE AND ETHNICITY

### :: FAITH VS. CULTURE

The separation of Islam from culture is something that appears to be developing in Britain alongside an increased awareness of rights. In this way, culture is being ‘redefined to include the customs and habits of Muslims from all over the world’ and thereby enabling Muslim women to embrace a new discourse of women’s rights via the management of faith and culture as two separate aspects of their lives<sup>37</sup>.

This was reflected in the findings, where faith and culture are often reported as being distinct concepts. Participants regarded Islam as offering acceptance, forgiveness and strength, at the same time feeling judgement or disownment from their cultures and communities. This resulted in a construction of rights and place in society that more often than not separated Islam from culture.

**Faith can come from all aspect of life, religion, culture, people, race, colour. Faith can come from anywhere, d’ya understand? I don’t think faith have a culture, I don’t think faith have...um...restriction...**  
[Participant 5]

**...the more I find...out about the religion.the more I get convinced that it’s [gender inequality] more...a cultural thing and I don’t know how to get them out of it but... to me there’s a massive massive, difference between culture and religion**  
[Participant 1]

**...if they actually looked into Islam, you shouldn’t really judge, whatever’s happened is-is because of the will of Allah. So.they’re not really, you know, followin’ Islam... if they do judge you**  
[Participant 18]

### :: CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS OF WOMEN

A woman’s place was spoken about by some participants as being an area of tension, especially when generational differences intersect with cultural and ‘value based’ ones. Strong culture combined with a strong sense of patriarchy, can result in unrealistic expectations of women, unforgiving ideals of what being a woman means within cultural boundaries as well as a double standard when it comes to certain behaviours for men and women. For example, many participants spoke of the expectation that they will marry, have children, cook, clean and not work outside of the home. At times, these can also be reinforced by certain interpretations of an individual’s faith.

**....he [ex-partner] said, ‘well who’s gonna bring the money home?’ I can bring money home you know! Like women have jobs now! You know, and I just think, where are you stuck?**  
[Participant 22]

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<sup>37</sup> Brown, K., (2006), Realising Muslim Women’s Rights: The Role of Islamic Identity among British Muslim Women, Women’s Studies International Forum, 29:417-430

women are supposed to be in the kitchen basically. That's the way they see it. But like my Albanian friends, like they don't like me, because I always they say one thing I say the opposite. Like, they say 'women should do' and I say 'well why can't men do it?' ... why should women have to be, like, in the kitchen? we're not in like, back in the day,  
[Participant 19]

## :: STEREOTYPES

The external construction of Muslim female identities is largely based on a homogenous image and narrative perpetuated by the media, public attitudes and policy makers<sup>38</sup>. The stereotype is that Muslim women, especially visible Muslim women, are somehow disempowered, meek and unlikely to get in trouble or commit crime; or on the other hand are associated with extremism and dangerous. Many participants described the stereotypes that they feel impact on the way they are treated, perceived and discriminated against, some of which are outlined below from interview participants, each of which is considered in more detail below.

## :: MUSLIM WOMEN ARE 'TOO GOOD' TO COMMIT CRIME

As mentioned in the introduction, Asian (not necessarily Muslim) women offenders are more likely than white women to receive a custodial sentence at Magistrates Court. Research has suggested that the stereotype of Asian women being 'demure and compliant' could influence sentencing, and mean that they are punished more severely<sup>39</sup>. Participants report being singled out in prison, especially when visibly Muslim, but also felt they experienced a harsher stigma, both in prison and from communities, for defying the stereotype of a 'good Muslim female'.

So they get a bit shocked when I tell them what I'm in here for, they're like 'huh you're a Muslim' and I'm like 'yeah'. Muslim [women] do bad stuff as well you know...  
[Participant 4]

...on the wing that I was on, I was the only one, with a scarf on, in prison. And people were coming up to me, saying to me things like 'what you in for sister?', 'what have you done to be in prison?'  
[Participant 13]

**“ ...THEY THINK THAT MUSLIMS DON'T OFFEND...AND THE FACT THAT I'VE GOT HIJAB, THEY JUST THINK THAT I'M PERFECT [LAUGHS] ”**

[Participant 1]

38 Šeta, D., (2016), *Forgotten Women: The Impact of Islamophobia on Muslim Women*, Brussels: European Network Against Racism

39 Prison Reform Trust, (2017), *Counted Out: Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic Women in the Criminal Justice System*, London: Prison Reform Trust

## **:: ASSOCIATIONS OF ISLAM WITH TERRORISM**

Over the past two decades, the association of Islam and terrorism has become increasingly commonplace in public and political discourses. Shown to have an impact on the everyday lives of Muslims from all walks of life, the same was true of the participants. While they spoke about how there existed a perception that links their faith to their crime, they also expressed how their conduct can be viewed with suspicion whilst in prison.

**So when you're a Muslim, you come into jail, automatically people have this thing in their head, like 'ahh, you're one of those, you're one of those extremists'**  
[Participant 4]

**...when you wear headscarf, a hijab or a burqa, I think there's a lot of racism, straight away. And I think straight away a lot of people are stereotypical...and make a joke about bein' a terrorist, a bomber...**  
[Participant 14]

**...like I can't remember what I was even talkin' about, but someone overheard the conversation I had, went and told [staff]...next minute they all come... crazy like it was a like a big thing**  
[Participant 2]

**I mean Friday [main day for prayer], it's ridiculous. [the] Officer...Yeah? Ok I've got up and I've come out the room, yeah, and you're following me. Why you following me?**  
[Participant 5]

## **:: BEING BAME AND MUSLIM IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM**

In 2017, there was a national focus on the experiences of BAME people's experiences in the UK and particularly the CJS<sup>40 41 42 43</sup>. The Lammy Review<sup>44</sup> briefly highlighted experiences for Muslim prisoners, but only on the grounds of ethnicity. In November 2017, the Ministry of Justice published the Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System and results show that in 2016/17 non-white ethnic groups are overrepresented at most stages in the Criminal Justice System. The sample is 79% BAME, therefore it is important to address the intersectional position that those participants exist within. Focus group participants said they felt that there was a prejudice against them in, based on being Muslim, in court:

**can I also say something else, you know the courts yeah, when they see you wearin' a headscarf, they completely take it to next level they gon' say 'oh in a couple years you gon' get caught for something bigger they think 'oh well, [a] Muslim's done this, gonna do it again'**  
[Participant 38]

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40 Lammy, D., (2017), The Lammy Review: An Independent Review into the Treatment of, and Outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Individuals in the Criminal Justice System, London: Ministry of Justice

41 Cox, J. and Sacks-Jones, K., (2017), "Double Disadvantage": The Experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Women in the Criminal Justice System, London: Agenda, Women in Prison

42 Prison Reform Trust, (2017), Counted Out: Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic Women in the Criminal Justice System, London: Prison Reform Trust

43 Cabinet Office, (2017), Race Disparity Audit: Summary Findings from the Ethnicity Facts and Figures 44 Website, London: Cabinet Office

44 ibid

**.It's a prejudice, and I'm sorry to say that, but modern Britain today, as soon as they see you wearing a scarf, it identifies you to a particular group and all the negative connotations that are in the media, actually is stuck. Whether you are there for that, whether you're not there for that. It sticks with you. And the prejudice is there.**  
[Participant 3]

Participants felt that there was a lack of ethnic and religious diversity amongst prison staff and in the Criminal Justice System. It was felt that this in turn led to poor cultural understanding, and in some cases impacted on their legal representation.

**...they just don't understand in the court, because they just don't know what it's like in... Asian culture. And they just find it really strange that a woman actually can't say anything to her husband, because they don't understand what some, like, Asian men are like**  
[Participant 6]

**...cos my barrister, he said to me... 'just to play the good Muslim wife' you know, 'make sure you wear your hijab, you're not gonna speak in the witness box'**  
[Participant 8]

**...that's a major thing in the judicial system, there's not enough ethnic people there, at all**  
[Participant 8]

**I think the court system has to start addressing some of the differences that Black and Asian minority, ethnic minorities are challenged with**  
[Participant 3]

## **:: THE NEED FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCE**

Based on experiences of discrimination, and also misunderstandings about faith and culture from staff and other prisoners, especially at significant times of the year (for example during Ramadan or at Eid) participants identify a need for training and increased knowledge of Islam.

**I would like to see officers trained to deal with mental health, I like to see them train how to deal with sisters [Muslim women], I would like to see them understand religion. Not stereotype.**  
[Participant 5]

**You know...officers don't really know much about our faith either**  
[Participant 9]

**So there isn't any support you know, we had to have an officer present when we were choosing what we wanted to eat during Ramadan, who isn't a Muslim...some of the comments made from her like 'well we don't get to choose what food we wanna eat'**  
[Participant 10]

**...the only thing that I have found difficult is people actually understanding- like during Ramadan, some people...didn't quite understand what we were doing**  
[Participant 3]

## ◀ FINDINGS – IDENTITIES AND (IN)VISIBILITY

### :: IDENTITIES

Participants' identities are diverse and this is important to note. It is not the intention of this research to expect an individual's identity/ies to challenge stereotypes, however, the range of ethnic, personal, gender and sexual identities of the participants do challenge common misconceptions, prejudices and stereotypes of female, Muslim identities.

Participants talk about a lack of understanding of the complexity of their identities. This can make people defensive, misunderstood and stereotyped.

**It's about people being knowledgeable and people distinguishing from other cultures... and EastEnders hasn't helped! Because, they put a scarf on a girl and they think it's Muslim, but she [is] Asian Muslim, like British Asian, or British Arab, or British Somalian...it's different.**  
[Participant 13]

**Yeah I used to go to mosque but people used to think I was a convert [laughs]. And I used to say 'no, I'm not', and they'd be like, 'wow', like, 'you don't seem like you're Arab or Muslim', like...what is a Muslim, what seems like a Arab?**  
[Participant 15]

In addition, a lack of awareness or understanding of the diversity within some minority communities has meant that some issues are left unresolved or not talked about, such as gender and sexual identities.

**me personally. I struggle with that myself because of my sexuality. You know, it's something that I've struggled with for years. It's something that I've prayed on, I've worked on [accepting] it**  
[Participant 5]

### :: FAITH AS CENTRAL TO IDENTITY

Moreover, when asked what is the most important part of their identity, over half of interview participants said that being a Muslim, being a follower of Islam, is central. It is possible this could be based on the sampling and access criteria, but is still worth noting.

**Cos, my faith is me...that's...who I am, I'm a Muslim, so, I'm not a 'prislīm'<sup>45</sup>**  
[Participant 2]

**“ WELL, I AM MUSLIM AND I'M PROUD OF IT... ”**

[Participant 1]

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<sup>45</sup> Meaning someone that converts to Islam only whilst in prison

## **:: [IN]VISIBILITY**

In addition to the invisibility in research, participants report not being able to tell family or friends that they are in prison, leading to an absence in the community or family circles and in some cases, isolation and disownment.

**I have to lie to them [children]. They don't know I'm in prison. Only the oldest, and my husband. The other ones they think I'm in Africa somewhere...**  
[Participant 7]

**And if they [extended family] found out that I was in prison, it would be like, the biggest embarrassment for my mum. And it's like, just, respect, shame, pride, the family name and everything. Yeah so that's why...they haven't told anybody**  
[Participant 16]

Focus group participants spoke of how the invisibility within their families, often based on shame, made them feel during their time in prison:

**it is upsetting when other people are ashamed, but they're not even the one in prison you know?...**  
[Participant 45]

**it makes you, well for me, it's made me doubt myself that, I must be a really bad person, a really bad mum and a really bad daughter to have let down absolutely everybody that I've landed myself in here...**  
[Participant 16]

**and I think when, um, it comes down to shame and nobody knows that you're here, you lack a lot of support, so you can't call your friends when you want or you can't call certain family members...think the journey is a bit harder than it should be.**  
[Participant 15]

In stark contrast to this however, is an almost hyper visibility within the Criminal Justice System and media. This is especially applicable to those that are 'visibly' Muslim.

**I don't wear the hijab...or whatnot but I do worry for sisters who do. Um, cos... it's hard for them...because they're the ones getting targeted. They're not treated the way they should be treated**  
[Participant 18]

**....if I was to wear the hijab...I think you probably would receive discrimination here, off some of the girls. You would.**  
[Participant 8]

## ◀ FINDINGS - PERCEIVED RESETTLEMENT BARRIERS

### :: RESETTLEMENT

All women face multiple barriers in their resettlement. However, research has found that BAME women face further disadvantage due to stigma, cultural differences, discrimination, and for some, language barriers<sup>46</sup>. In addition, some Muslim women (whether BAME or white) experience specific cultural hurdles when it comes to resettlement and family acceptance<sup>47</sup>, and a lack of awareness of the intersectionality has an impact on the ways they are treated, perceived and stereotyped.

### :: CULTURAL BARRIERS, SHAME/HONOUR

Shame was an important factor across the sample and across cultures to varying degrees. In the context of resettlement barriers, shame is an obstruction; forcing participants to lie about where they are, destroying or damaging family relationships and in some cases participants feel they will be subject to another 'sentence' in the home or community when they are released.

**. mosques, let's say, they can speak about it...It shouldn't be such...a touchy subject, where nobody speaks about it. Because we still speak about sex.so why can't we speak about women who've gone to prison?**  
[Participant 15]

**I need to ask my father for forgiveness, you know... I need to, because...I don't think I will completely feel that I've been able to complete my sentence until my dad forgive[s] me**  
[Participant 12]

**...the community won't forgive for these kind of things, you know. Allah [says]... 'I know why you went to prison'... 'ok then I forgive you', you know. But, the community, no. All they will do is just talk**  
[Participant 11]

**Instead of them [community] thinkin like 'oh how can I help my fellow... sister' or how can they help my mum...there's certain people who will go round an' be like 'oh my God did you hear what happened to bla bla bla's daughter! She's in jail!...'**  
[Participant 4]

Many participants who report shame also perceive there to be a difference in the way it is realised for men and women who have a conviction. Participants of a South Asian ethnic background (Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian and Mixed Ethnicity) in particular speak of how shame is a factor for women, and participants of many ethnicities and cultural

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<sup>46</sup> Prison Reform Trust and Women in Prison, (2016), Home Truths: Housing for Women in the Criminal Justice System, London: Women in Prison

<sup>47</sup> Buncy, S. and Ahmed, I., (2015), Muslim Women in Prison, Nottingham: Muslim Hands and HPCA

backgrounds speak of how defying the gender expectations can impact on marriage prospects, and reduce respect from in-laws. The resulting rejection and condemnation on these grounds of being a woman could have severe impact on those who are already facing multiple disadvantage.

**...he's a man, he's ok, he's gone to prison, he's ok, he can come outside and it's no shame, he can start goin' back in the community, sitting in mosques...You know, its ok. But a woman.I won't be able to go back to the same city.  
If I do.it's gonna be very shame  
[Participant 11]**

**I think for them [brothers] it's more of a dignity respect kinda thing.if it was.one of them instead of me in prison it would've been alright. But because it's me and because I'm a female, it's like putting a disgrace on the family  
[Participant 1]**

**It's a shame to do with the culture. Because women are meant to be always good.I. think that like in my own community, society's less forgiving when a woman makes the same mistake that a man would make  
[Participant 3]**

**...when people found out...that their [in-laws] son was in.prison, there's shame on the family, totally. And then they found out that I came inside...it was even worse, cos it's a girl  
[Participant 8]**

**if a man goes jail it's a normal thing, it's not nothin' shameful...But then if the woman goes to jail, that's shameful, like.it's just because of the women is a woman, and a man's a man. A...man's got a card to do anything he wants [laughs], and it's not a problem, but women.it's a different story  
[Participant 19]**

**...[people say] 'oh my God, only bad people go to prison', 'no-one's gonna marry your daughter'...  
[Participant 15]**

**...I think it's more of culture thing rather than the religion its like.yeah who you gonna get married to? People are gonna know your business and stuff like that...  
[Participant 4]**

## **:: A LACK OF TAILORED SUPPORT**

In Said's <sup>48</sup> study into resettlement for Muslim prisoners (majority male), the importance of community acceptance, including from mosques and Imams, was highlighted as an area that would improve resettlement for Muslim offenders and help them to feel

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<sup>48</sup> Said, I., (2011), Young British Muslims: Ex-Offenders and Resettlement Needs, London: Muslim Youth Helpline

supported as they reintegrated<sup>49</sup>. This is mirrored in our conversations with prison chaplains. According to the chaplains spoken to, there is little tailored support available for female Muslim offenders leaving prison, outside of the mainstream (i.e. national service providers and/or providers that do not focus on intersecting inequalities and identities), and for many this is a source of frustration. Investing in individuals whilst they are inside prison and knowing that the support will cease when they are released is disappointing. The community chaplaincy that is set up around resettlement is lacking in Islamic representation and Islamic charities are slow to address UK social issues in general, although this is improving, and faith-based ex-offender work is growing (e.g. Muslim Aid, National Zakat Foundation, Muslim Women's Network). However, it appears it is often male-centric or only available at significant times of the year (for example during Ramadan or at Eid etc.). Muslim Hands has a prisoner rehabilitation programme for both men and women<sup>50</sup>, and will endeavour to continue strengthening this work and contributing to the subject area via research. Participants commented on the lack of support:

**I've heard about so many organisations.it's the first time I have actually heard about, a Muslim organisation that wants to help sisters**  
[Participant 5]

**Like, because I feel like with women prisoners, there's not a lot of things available...I think bein' Muslim and a woman, it's different to jus' bein' white and a woman or Chinese an' a woman, it's very different...it's a cultural thing, there's a lot of culture influence**  
[Participant 4]

**And I think it'd be nice to have somebody like...yourselves and you know, have a group on the community for practicing Muslims to go to and learn more**  
[Participant 9]

**...what I feel from my experience is that when you actually come into prison, it's not just the financial support that you need, it's the emotional support, you know. And at the moment, unfortunately, I don't think there is anything out there**  
[Participant 12]

**...like if I go back into community, I should have like Imam or somebody...to help me and say, ok we understand, she's done a wrong thing. and they should speak to the community and do some...you know.[tell them] we should accept it and give her a chance...**  
[Participant 11]

## **:: THE REALITY OF FAMILY SUPPORT**

Research from Clinks and The Prison Reform Trust found that there was a cultural stereotype, assumed by prison staff, that people from Muslim backgrounds would be more likely to have family support on release<sup>51</sup>. This is reflected in this research findings, where

<sup>49</sup> ibid

<sup>50</sup> <https://muslimhands.org.uk/latest/2015/06/prisoner-rehabilitation-and-resettlement>

whilst there are examples of good relationships and supportive families, some participants said that prison resettlement teams sometimes misjudge the extent of family support. Whilst it might seem that families are available and supportive, a few participants said that in reality they are not, which means alternatives need to be on offer.

**...then they always say like ‘oh but you’ve got family’ and stuff like that. How are they supportive? What because they’re law abiding citizens?...Doesn’t mean they’re supportive, they don’t support me in the slightest**  
[Participant 2]

**...you’re not asking me like ‘have you eaten?’ ‘have you got clothes on your back?’  
...yeah, I’m in a hostel but I still need to EAT, d’you get what I mean, I still need to LIVE.They’re [family] so wrapped up, in their little...worlds.trying to be supportive  
would make a big difference [to me] but they’re not**  
[Participant 2]

**.[knowing that] I’m back to square one again? You know, having no family, nothing.  
And I think that was more scary, knowing that I’m gonna be leaving from here, I don’t  
have any support mechanism in the sense of family?**  
[Participant 12]

**...what I’ve seen [in] my family, they like to punish you more...But I think they  
should be there for you more and look at the wider picture**  
[Participant 15]

## **:: SYSTEMIC BARRIERS**

Similar to women of all faiths, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, participants report systemic barriers that have impacted on their resettlement (based on previous times in custody).

**I got released from court with nowhere to live, can you believe it?...I got  
found guilty, and I was released with nowhere to live**  
[Participant 5]

**...the catch is.L...go there [supervised accommodation] and then after the three  
months.you have to find somewhere to live and if you don’t find somewhere  
to live you get recalled, like ‘what?!’**  
[Participant 2]

## **:: HOUSING**

According to the Corston Report<sup>52</sup>, housing is described as “probably the most significant resettlement need” for women prisoners. Ten years later, a review published by Women in Prison<sup>53</sup> states that “the housing situation for women leaving prison is even more desperate today than when the Corston report was published ten years ago”, and is compounded by the fact that many women are deemed ‘intentionally homeless’.

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51 Jacobson, J., Phillips, C., Edgar, K., (2010), Double Trouble?: Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Offenders’ Experiences of Resettlement, London: Clinks and The Prison Reform Trust

52 Corston, J., (2007), The Corston Report, London: Home Office

53 Women in Prison, (2017), The Corston Report: 10 Years On, London: Women in Prison

In cases where there is a history of or ongoing experience with DVA, especially coercion and controlling behaviours, extra consideration should be given pre-release to avoid women returning to abusive partners<sup>54</sup>. On this note, the Alliance for Women and Girls at risk, Agenda, argues that women experiencing DVA should be granted housing automatically, without having to meet extra tests of vulnerability<sup>55</sup>. This is particularly relevant for any pre-release assessments and those women who are still experiencing controlling behaviours from a partner whilst in custody.

Participants report one of their main sources of anxiety for release as being either finding or maintaining housing. Some suggested a faith-based housing solution could be provided post-release.

**So I've gone out, I've rent private but at the same time...that little bit o' money that I'm getting from job centre...that's shoppin' and gas. I have to do a side hustle to pay for my rent private. So then again, I'm doin' criminal activity**  
[Participant 5]

**I dunno, if they would do like housing anything, but...sometimes like you know, you can get hostels with Muslim people ...Things like that you know...we should.[get] support from the community**  
[Participant 11]

**Do they have like Muslim hostels? Like Muslim run hostels? You know cos they have like Christian run hostels...**  
[Participant 2]

## **:: DEPORTATION**

Some participants are not born in the UK, and based on serving more than a one year custodial sentence, are faced with the threat of deportation upon release. These individuals are anxious, unsure about how to proceed or progress in areas such as education and employment among others. While some have not lived in their country of birth since they were 2 or 3 years old.

**I'm gonna have to restart everything from beginning.I don't wanna get too excited and say yeah, I'm not gonna get deported and then I end up do.getting deported so, I'm just like, in the middle**  
[Participant 19]

**I will do until May next year. And they will deport me**  
[Participant 7]

**...they say if you are born outside of the UK, if you do more than a year you're subject to be... deported back to your country. So I don't know if that will happen to me... And that...makes it very difficult even to decide what to study and what to do while in prison**  
[Participant 3]

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54 Prison Reform Trust and Women in Prison, (2016), Home Truths: Housing for Women in the Criminal Justice System, London: Women in Prison

55 Agenda, (2016), Agenda's response to the Communities and Local Government Committee's Inquiry into Homelessness, London: Agenda

## CONCLUSION

This research has revealed that female Muslim offenders continue to experience the same criminogenic contexts, including violence and abuse, experiences in prison and resettlement barriers as those in the pilot study<sup>56</sup> highlighted previously. However, in increasing the evidence base, broadening the diversity of participant voices, and exploring a wider range of issues and experiences from a better-informed understanding of criminal justice policy and its relation particularly to BAME individuals ensures that understanding is deepened and thereby better evidenced. Where possible, comparisons have been made to female offenders in general, and in some cases to male Muslim offenders. This is deliberate, as the report was looking at what distinct needs Muslim women have, and what similarities in experiences with the general female prison population exist, where the female Muslim voice is often lacking.

Key findings centred on often violent or controlling backgrounds, the cultural complexity of experiences pre, during and post custody and the issue of shame, invisibility and gender expectations. A lack of awareness amongst prison and Criminal Justice System staff of the complexity of Muslim female prisoners and stereotyping made rehabilitation difficult.

Female Muslim offenders occupy unique positions in the Criminal Justice System. Based on current policy and societal context, combined with a lack of data and evidence, stereotyping is common, and the findings indicate that the result is either invisibility or hyper visibility and intersectional discrimination. Faith-based discrimination, racism and a general lack of understanding from other prisoners and Criminal Justice System/prison staff were frequently reported by participants. Those who are 'visibly' Muslim feel they are targeted in prison and court, and this is reflected in other literature and statistics regarding Islamophobia and hate crime in wider society<sup>57</sup>.

In contrast, participants felt the strengthening of faith had a positive impact on them, and Islam is spoken of in the context of forgiveness, bettering oneself, finding peace and providing structure. Being Muslim was reported by many as central to their identity. The triple disadvantage of gender, faith and (often) race, puts this group in a particularly unique position, but also reinforces how important a faith-based network can be for this minority.

When it comes to shame and honour, these concepts have been labelled as the 'cornerstone of the Asian community'<sup>58 59 60</sup>, and the concept of 'izzat' (honour) originates in Indian and Pakistani cultures<sup>61</sup>.

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56 Buncy, S. and Ahmed, I., (2015), *Muslim Women in Prison*, Nottingham: Muslim Hands and HPCA

57 Tell MAMA, (2017), *Annual Report: A Constructed Threat: Identity, Intolerance and the Impact of Anti-Muslim Hatred*, London: Tell MAMA

58 Gilbert, P., Gilbert, J. and Sanghera, J., (2009), *A Focus Group Exploration of the Impact of Izzat, Shame, Subordination and Entrapment on Mental Health and Service Use in South Asian Women living in Derby*, *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 2: 109-130

59 Takhar, O., (2005), *Sikh Identity: An Exploration of Groups among Sikhs*, Aldershot: Aldershot

60 Gunasinghe, C., (2015), *Understanding how Izzat Impacts the Lived Experiences of Young Muslim Pakistani Women in the UK: A Phenomenological Approach*, University of East London: School of Psychology

61 *ibid*

62 *ibid*

Although shame in some form was present across the whole sample, it arguably is perceived to be stronger form in South Asian cultural backgrounds. It has been suggested that shame can dictate the social obligations and expectations of women<sup>62</sup>, especially in South Asian culture, and the findings of this research support this.

Shame has been shown to be having a complex and wide-reaching impact on women's lives. The findings show that shame enshrouds any issues 'of the home'; and this includes telling family and friends that they are in prison, reporting or speaking out about DVA, the normalisation of harmful experiences such as rape and violence, in some cases losing touch with family all together, and not feeling able to return to the home that has been shamed.

Cultural gender norms, including inequalities, are justified by shame dictating a woman's obligations. Participants perceived Muslim male and female offenders to be treated differently within their families and communities, in terms of the support offered and the subsequent 'punishment'. Many participants felt that they will be subject to a 'second sentence' upon release, where the onus is placed on them to find forgiveness from family and community, and they need to 'prove' they are a good person. It is widely believed that family contact is important for integration into society<sup>63</sup>, which means that those who have minimal to no contact are at a further disadvantage. Although there are encouragingly good examples, of families supporting and understanding participants, those who have no contact with family report feeling isolated and having to start from scratch when they are released.

Furthermore, the denial of the woman's crime and acceptance that shame is a normal part of the process is regarded by the participants as not only unjust, but also not in line with Islamic practice.

Findings indicate that, similar for many women in prison, far too often a male (partner, husband, friend, family member) is either involved in the crime committed or reported as being the reason behind it. In addition, the findings reveal high levels of DVA, which appears to be going unreported. Participants report feeling unable to speak out, out of fear, family reputation and in some cases because of a perception that violence and control are normal within marriage. Violence and abuse should not be reaching a point where a woman feels like she needs to kill her husband or partner to survive, and yet this still happens.

Austerity has meant that the support available for survivors is sparse, underfunded and overstretched<sup>64</sup>, but there also appears to be a real need for communities (not limited to Muslim communities) to support and create enabling environments for survivors to speak out and raise awareness, and we hope that this research can be one of the tools to enable this.

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62 *ibid*

64 Corston, J., (2007), *The Corston Report*, London: Home Office

64 Prison Reform Trust, (2017), "There's a Reason we're in Trouble": Domestic Abuse as a Driver to Women's Offending, London: Prison Reform Trust

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **:: OVERARCHING RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- What are the main issues experienced by female Muslim prisoners both in prison and on release?
- How does faith, culture and ethnicity impact on Muslim females' experiences in prison?
- What support exists for female Muslim prisoners, and how can rehabilitative support be improved for them?

### **:: RESEARCH AIMS/OBJECTIVES**

- To map out the ethnic, social and cultural diversity of Muslim women prisoners
- To understand how faith, culture, and ethnicity intersects and impacts on Muslim women prisoner's experiences in custody and on release
- To find out what existing support there is and how that informs post release rehabilitative support with an emphasis on religious and cultural diversity

The research will add to the existing discussions of BAME experiences in the criminal justice system, to better understand the specific criminogenic context for Muslims in England & Wales and to strengthen and inform resettlement support for and community attitudes towards Muslims in prison.

### **:: RESEARCH DESIGN**

Qualitative methods were selected based on gaining a rich understanding of the needs of Muslim female prisoners and putting the participants' voices at the centre of the narrative. In total, 27 semi-structured in-depth interviews and 4 focus groups were conducted with prisoners across seven women's prisons in England, encompassing 60 separate participants and 24% of the total recorded Muslim female prison population<sup>65</sup>. It is worth noting that interest in participation was far greater than anticipated and unfortunately due to resources and time restraints, not everyone that expressed interest was interviewed (45 people expressed interest in interview).

### **:: SEMI STRUCTURED, IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS**

The research questions address experiences, opinions and perceptions; therefore, semi structured, in-depth interviews are well suited for the exploration of such a subject matter. In this research, we wanted a sample that reflects the heterogeneity of the group, therefore women spoke different languages, were from different areas of the UK/World, with differing levels of education, different ethnic backgrounds etc. This discourages the assumption that every word means the same thing to each participant and allows for further explanation and framing of questions. Furthermore, semi-structured, in-depth interviews allow for the exploration of unexpected topics, which is especially useful when we are asking about cultural experiences or attitudes<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> HMPPS, (Sept 2017), Offender Management Statistics, London: HMPPS

<sup>66</sup> Barbour, R., (2001), Checklists for Improving Rigour in Qualitative Research: A Case of the Tail Wagging the Dog?, British Medical Journal, 322:1115-1117

It is worth noting that we had factored the use of a translator into the budget and ethical considerations (in this context this pertains to factors such as confidentiality and, DBS checks for entry to prison and working with potentially vulnerable people). However, we did not end up using one. All of the potential participants that expressed interest spoke English, but it is not possible to say whether there was a lack of interest from those that didn't based on language or on other factors such as disinterest or lack of trust.

## **:: FOCUS GROUPS**

Focus groups are commonly used as an 'adjunct to other research methods', and that is how we used them<sup>67</sup>, alongside interviews. Using a combination of interviews and focus groups makes good use of the range of identities, ideas and opinions that the cohort has. It is important to acknowledge the issues of [diminished] power that female Muslim prisoners may face, due not only to being potentially vulnerable, experiencing language barriers and/or marginalisation, but also to being a minority group in the setting. In this context, focus groups can be particularly valuable in researching 'sensitive' issues and people whose experiences are not often heard<sup>68</sup>.

## **:: DATA COLLECTION**

### **Access and Sampling**

This research received National Offender Management Service (NOMS, now HMPPS) national research approval in April 2017. Subject to individual Governor's additional permission, we were subsequently granted research access to seven of the twelve women's prison estates in England (there are no women's prisons in Wales). Data collection was coordinated by the chaplaincy or equalities teams and therefore access to participants took place largely within a multi-faith room, chapel or pastoral setting.

We aimed for a diverse sample, including people of different ethnicities and ages. Whilst the inclusion criteria was only based on sampling a broad age range and different ethnicities, in actual fact other identity variables ('protected characteristics') will have just as much of an impact on a person's experience, including but not limited to: sexuality, gender, immigration status, Islamic 'sect', race and offence type, highlighting the need for an intersectional approach in work such as this.

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67 Puchta, C. and Potter, J., (2004), *Focus Group Practice*, London: Sage

68 Pollack, S., (2003), *Focus Group Methodology in Research with Incarcerated Women: Race, Power and Collective Experience*, *Affilia*, 18: 461-472

The final sample composed of 60 prisoners serving custodial sentences in women's prisons in England. Aged from 19 to 50, with an ethnicity breakdown as seen below:

Ethnic Group	Ethnic Background	Number of participants
White	1. English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British	5
	2. Irish	-
	3. Gypsy or Irish	1
	4. Any other white background, please describe Traveller	5
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups	5. White and Black Caribbean	3
	6. White and Black African	-
	7. White and Asian	1
	8. Any other mixed / multiple ethnic background, please describe	5
Asian / Asian British	9. Indian	-
	10. Pakistani	11
	11. Bangladeshi	5
	12. Chinese	-
	13. Any other Asian background, please describe	-
Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	14. African	11
	15. Caribbean	3
	16. Any other Black / African / Caribbean background, please describe	1
Other ethnic group	17. Arab	3
	18. Any other ethnic group, please describe	-

*Self selected ethnicity, using the ONS GB Ethnicity Card*

Two focus group participants did not wish to disclose their ethnicity, therefore theirs is not recorded. This means that, 32% of participants identify as Black, 27% as Asian, 18% as White, 15% as Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups and 5% as Other ethnic groups. This is not quite representative of the total female Muslim prison population, as can be seen below in the table.

Ethnic Group	Research Sample (%)	Whole female Muslim prison population (%) <sup>69</sup>
White	18%	30%
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups	15%	10%
Asian / Asian British	27%	36%
Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	32%	21%
Other ethnic group	5%	3%
Undisclosed	3%	0

#### NOTE ON PRONOUNS:

Not all participants identify as women, therefore throughout the paper we have chosen to use either gender neutral sample identifiers or refer to the sample as 'female' as opposed to women. When women are referred to in the findings, it is to do with societal gender constructs as opposed to individual identities. We thought it important to include those voices still, because all participants regardless of gender identity are treated as female throughout the criminal justice system and are in custody in 'women's prisons'. Therefore, the issues and experiences are either similar, or just as worth highlighting.

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69 FOI Request: 171211011, (2018), Prison Population by Religion, Ethnicity and Sex, 30 September 2017

# (IN)VISIBILITY

## **Female. Muslim. Imprisoned.**

The voices of female Muslim prisoners are unheard in policy, communities and research. The purpose of this research is to bring those voices to the forefront and address the often-overlooked intersectionality of gender, ethnicity and faith.

This report uses empirical data from interviews and focus groups with female Muslims in prison to identify distinct needs and experiences as well as similarities to the general female prison population. Recommendations have been made to the Ministry of Justice and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service to better understand intersecting inequalities and the impact they could be having on someone's resettlement, as well as recommendations to communities, to work towards ending stigma, increasing support and challenging negative stereotypes for female Muslims in prison.



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