

## Enhancing spaces for Muslim women's engagement

Nura Aabe  
Suad Abdullahi  
Adeela ahmed-Shafi  
Kalsoom Bashir

Sheila Joy el Dieb  
Tasleem Kaurser  
Shabana Kausar  
Aleksandra Lewicki

Therese O'Toole  
Ruby Raja  
Nazmi Rana  
Sadia Rana

Farzana Saker  
Tamadour Salim  
The Productive  
Margins Collective

### About the research

What are the mechanisms for Muslim women's effective engagement in democratic and community spaces? How well are Muslim women's concerns and needs addressed by statutory and community organisations? These questions were at the heart of an eight-month research project co-produced by researchers at the University of Bristol with a steering group of Muslim women from the city of Bristol.

Through a series of discussions, a major public event on the role and contribution of Muslim women in public life, and eight interactive workshops with over 70 Muslim women from diverse ethnic backgrounds, holding a range of occupations and/or caring roles, the project explored the roles and skills that Muslim women brought to public and community life. It asked: how can participatory spaces more effectively include Muslim women?

The research established that many Muslim women in Bristol have a strong vision for how public, community and religious spaces could be more inclusive.

**This Bristol-based research project explored how opportunities and spaces for Muslim women's engagement can be enhanced.**

Dr Therese O'Toole: [Therese.O'Toole@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:Therese.O'Toole@bristol.ac.uk)

Dr Aleksandra Lewicki: [Aleksandra.Lewicki@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:Aleksandra.Lewicki@bristol.ac.uk)

Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship,  
University of Bristol

### Policy implications

- **Representation of Muslim women in leadership roles:** Statutory and community organisations should proactively encourage women to apply or stand for leadership posts. Organisations where women have not previously had leadership roles cannot expect women to 'fight their way in'.
- **Networking:** Statutory and community organisations should facilitate networking opportunities for Muslim women and create spaces for exchange of experiences and views.
- **Acknowledging HERstory:** Statutory, educational and community organisations should promote knowledge of the diverse roles and contributions of Muslim women historically and to contemporary public life.
- **Spatial organisation:** Women wish to be 'in the midst' of events, and spaces of worship should include women in events and prayers. Consideration of how to balance needs of modesty with better participation of women is required (e.g. exploring creative options – such as a gallery above spaces of worship, to allow women to share the space and follow the imam).
- **Transparent governance:** Governing committees and boards should be accountable to their constituency or congregation, and provide space for critical and open debate with the wider community.

## Key findings

- Discrimination in public life in Bristol persists; in particular, women who veil reported daily discrimination, including on public transport or in delivery of services.
- The availability of English language tuition (ESOL) was important for reducing isolation and barriers in everyday life.
- Women's vision of the mosque had a spiritual core with a variety of social activities around it. It was envisaged as a communal, religious, recreational, supportive, multifunctional space, attended by women and men, of all ages and ethnic backgrounds, which offered support to those in need and opportunities for interfaith exchange. We welcome the activities of the Hazrat Bilal Centre, Easton Islami Darasgah, and other development projects across Bristol's mosques and other organisations, which respond to this desire that mosques and community spaces be social, welfare, recreational, educational, as well as religious spaces.
- There is a need to support and encourage women to take on social roles beyond wives, mothers and educators in the community, for instance in fields of science, sports, politics and theology. There was a desire for a comprehensive debate on the role of women in the interpretation and delivery of Islamic teachings and ceremonial leadership in religious gatherings.
- There was support for establishing a seminar space in Bristol to enable men and women to study the teachings of Islam and discuss Islamic ethics in a Western context (e.g. on issues such as IVF, with knowledge exchange that included Islamic scholars and medical experts).
- Women wanted to be involved in decisions about the physical, visual and aesthetic design of community spaces to make them welcoming, hospitable spaces.

You can visit the project website:  
[productivemargins.ac.uk/projects/building-the-bridge/](http://productivemargins.ac.uk/projects/building-the-bridge/)

