



DIALOGUE
SOCIETY

A UK ANALYSIS:

Empowering Women of Faith in the Community, Public Service, and Media

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About the Authors

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About the Panellists

Women of Faith in the Community

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Dr Lindsay Simmonds is a researcher at the Religion and Global Society Department at the LSE, focussing on Women of Faith and Peacebuilding; she is also a Research Fellow at the London School of Jewish Studies. Lindsay received her PhD from the LSE's Department of Gender in January 2020 entitled, 'Generating Piety: Agency in the Lives of British Orthodox Jewish Women'. She is involved in several national and international interfaith and peacebuilding initiatives, including co-chair of her local Jewish-Moslem Women's Network Nisa-Nashim, a trustee for the Abraham Initiatives UK and Jewish Scholar-in-Residence for the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ).

Raheema Caratella is an experienced Community Development Coordinator with history of working in the non-profit organisation management industry, Raheema Caratella is a Student Cohesion Officer for De Montfort University.

Women of Faith in Public Service

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Chika Oderinde (nee Ashby) is a Legal Assistant for Transport for London and, as a Disputes Resolution junior, provides litigation support to TfL and the Greater London Authority group, under the Mayor of London.

Kiran Sandhu is a trained nurse, and a matron at Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust.

Women of Faith in the Media

Chine McDonald is head of community fundraising and public engagement at Christian Aid. Prior to that, she led the media and PR team for Christian Aid and previously worked at World Vision as head of influence and engagement. Chine is a regular contributor to BBC Religion and Ethics programmes, including Thought for the Day on Radio 4's Today programme, the Daily Service, Pause for Thought and Prayer for the Day. Chine is the author of 'Am I Beautiful?' – a book exploring body image among Christian women.

Dr Anna Piela is a scholar of gender and Islam, and her areas of expertise include feminism in Islam, Eastern European Islam, as well as Islam in popular culture and digital media.

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Manpreet Sachdeva is an output producer at Sky News, joining as an intern several years ago. Completing an apprenticeship with Sky News, Manpreet is now employed full-time.

The Dialogue Society is a registered charity, established in London in 1999, with the aim of advancing social cohesion by connecting communities, empowering people to engage and contributing to the development of ideas on dialogue. It operates nation-wide with regional branches across the UK. Through discussion forums, courses, capacity building publications and outreach it enables people to venture across boundaries of religion, culture and social class. It provides a platform where people can meet to share narratives and perspectives, discover the values they have in common and be at ease with their differences.

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A UK Analysis:

Empowering Women of Faith in the Community, Public Service, and Media

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FOREWORD

In the UK, belief and faith are protected under the legal frame of the Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA) and the Equality Act 2010 (Perfect 2016, 11), in which a person is given the right to hold a religion or belief and the right to change their religion or belief. It also gives them a right to show that belief as long as the display or expression does not interfere with public safety, public order, health or morals, or the rights and freedoms of others (Equality Act 2010). The Equality Act 2010 protects employees from discrimination, harassment and victimisation because of religion or belief. Religion or belief are mainly divided into religion and religious belief, and philosophical belief (Equality Act 2010, chap. 1). The Dialogue Society supports the Equality Act 2010 (Perfect 2016, 11). Consequently, The Dialogue Society believes we have a duty to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations within our organisation and society.

The Dialogue Society aims to promote equality and human rights by empowering people and bringing social issues to light. To this end, we have organised many projects, research, courses, scriptural reasoning readings/gatherings and panel discussions specifically on interfaith dialogue, having open conversations around belief and religion. To encourage dialogue, interaction and cooperation between people working on interreligious dialogue and to demonstrate good interfaith relations and dialogue are integral and essential for peace and social cohesion in our society, the Dialogue Society has been a medium, facilitating a platform to all from faith and non-faith backgrounds.

The Dialogue Society thrives on being more inclusive to those who might be overlooked in society as a group. Although women seem to be in the core of society as an essential element, the women who contravene the monotype identity tend to remain in the shadows. The media is not just used to get information but also used as a way of having a sense of belonging by the audience. The media creates collective imaginary identities for public opinion. It gathers the audience under one consensus and creates an identity for the people who share this consensus. Hence, a form of media functions as a medium for identity creation and representation. Therefore, the production and reproduction of stereotypes and a monotype representation of women and women of faith in media content are the primary sources of the public's general attitudes towards women of faith. In the context of this report, the media limits not only women's gender but also their religious identity. The monotype identity of women opposes the plurality of the concept of women. Notably, media outlets are criticised for not recognising the differences in women's identities. Women of faith are susceptible to the lack of representation or misrepresentation and get stuck between the roles constructed for their gender and religion. Women who do not fit in these policies' stereotypes get misrepresented or disregarded by the media. Moreover, policymakers also limit their scope to a single monotype of women's identity when policies are made, creating a public consensus around women of faith. As both these mediums lack representation or have very symbolic and distorted representations of women of faith, we strive to provide a platform for all women from faith and non-faith backgrounds.

The Dialogue Society has organised women-only community events for women of faith to have a bottom-up approach, including interfaith knitting, reading, and cooking clubs. Several women-only courses have informed women of the importance of interfaith dialogue, promoting current best practices, and identifying and promoting promising future possibilities. We have hosted panel discussions and held women-only interfaith circles where women from different faith backgrounds came together to discuss boundaries within religion and what they believed to transgress their boundaries.

Consequently, we organised a panel series to focus on the roles of women of faith within different areas of society, aiming to highlight their unique individual and shared experiences and bring to light issues of inequality that impact women of faith. Although women of faith exist within all areas of society, we chose to explore women's experiences within three different settings to give a breadth of understanding about women of faith's interactions within society. Therefore, we held a panel series titled 'Women of

Faith', including three panels, each focusing on a particular area: Women of Faith in Community, Women of Faith in Public Service, and Women of Faith in Media.

In this report, following the content analysis method to systematically sort the information gathered by the panel series, we have written a series of recommendations to address these issues in media and policymaking. This paper has a section on specific policy recommendations for those in decision-making positions in the community, public service and media, according to the content and findings gathered.

This report aims to initiate and provide interactive and transferable advice and guidance to those in a position. The policy paper gives insight to social workers, teachers, council members, liaison officers, academics and relevant stakeholders, policymakers, and people who wish to understand more about empowering women of faith and hearing their experiences. It also aims to inspire ongoing efforts and further action to accelerate the achievement of complete freedom of faith, gender equality in promoting, recommending and implementing direct top-level policies for faith and gender equality, and ensuring that existing policies are gender-sensitive and practices are safe from gender-based and faith-based discrimination for women of faith.

Finally, this report is to engage and illustrate the importance of allyship, the outstanding achievement through dialogue based on real-life experience and facilitate resilient relationships among people of different religious positions. We call upon every reader of this report to join the efforts of the Dialogue Society in promoting an equal society for women of faith.

Dialogue Society

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Discrimination and inequality are real lived experience in the UK, in which women of faith report experiencing disempowerment.
- Further research into the lived experiences of women of faith from all social and religious groups is urgently needed.
- Patriarchal and biased representations of women and religion in the media lead to stereotypes that have a serious negative impact on public attitudes toward women of faith.
- Through an intersectional lens, the mixed effects of cultural, religious, and gender bias can further disadvantage women of faith in the society and deny their access to equality in employment. These combined negative effects further contribute to the disadvantaged position and underrepresentation of women of faith in society.
- Training regarding religious literacy and regulations addressing discrimination and sexism must be conducted for all staff in the media, public service, and community sector. Rules and regulations against discrimination and sexism must be identified and provide women of faith with due process and ensure the pursuit of legal entitlement does not carry undue career risks.

Policy Recommendations

Women of Faith in Community

- Increase academic studies about women of faith. There is a lack of investigation into the life and experience of women of faith as it is an area often obscured by studies on ethnicity, gender, and diversity, which have been major focuses in previous studies. It is necessary to focus on disaggregated data instead of integrated data, as it will yield unique results about the specific experience of women of faith.
- Use social media to promote an environment that welcomes friendly and inclusive dialogue related to religion and belief and enhance equal dialogue between individuals with (or without) faith and beliefs to celebrate the shared values different people have regardless of religions and beliefs.

Women of Faith in Public Service

- Facilitate continuous training on religious literacy in public service.
- Facilitate training on creating an inclusive and welcome environment at work, including training regarding equal opportunities at work, harassment, and discrimination.
- Policy reforms should be initiated to stop discrimination about clothing, or other visible features that can be associated with an individual's faith or beliefs. Rules and regulations must be clarified and put in place that genuinely provide women with due process and ensure the pursuit of legal entitlements does not carry undue career risk.
- Facilitate interfaith networks and dialogue among staff so as to encourage the forming of meaningful interactions based on personal experiences and shared values.

Women of Faith in Media

- It is essential to facilitate continuous training programmes about religious literacy in the media and journalism industry.

- It is essential to promote more depoliticised, de-sexualised, decolonized representation for the general society of what constitutes religion, and the value of religion as well as facilitating a decolonized, non-sexist, more inclusive and diverse narrative in media accounts of religion/ ethnicity/gender, etc.
- Empower women of faith with more opportunities to speak up for themselves on mainstream media platforms and social media and increase the accessibility of mainstream media to women of faith. In particular avoid the publishing of content about women of faith in which they are not represented as authoritative commentators.
- Establish fact-checking and careful editorial processes to avoid creating symbolic associations that are harmful for women of faith (such as using photographs of women in niqabs to illustrate articles about terrorism).
- Increase the representation of women of faith in media both in terms of staff diversity and media content and facilitate staff networks led by women of faith in the media.
- Facilitate training on equal opportunities in employment (including rules about harassment). Rules and regulations addressing sexism must be identified and put in place that genuinely provide women with due process and ensure the pursuit of legal entitlements does not carry undue career risk.

INTRODUCTION

Religion and religious practices are deeply entrenched in the fabric of society and significant in defining the culture of local communities. However, religious communities can be marginalised or misunderstood within society, with the media often perpetuating negative stereotypes of religion and particularly religious women. The role of women from all faith backgrounds, within their own religious communities and wider society should not be underestimated or overlooked; however, throughout this panel series on Women of Faith we have found that women from all backgrounds are often marginalised or discriminated against, in many areas of society.

Women have traditionally been to some extent excluded from many religious spaces or from leadership within many different religious communities (Leming 2007) However, sharing these experiences of marginalisation between women from different religious backgrounds can create a space for support and solidarity that crosses religious boundaries. Creating a climate of trust through genuine friendship and dialogue contributes to greater cohesion between women of different faiths living in the same local community. Therefore, interfaith networking led by women is central to creating thriving local communities that see women from all faiths and none come together to break down barriers and improve equality for women within all areas of society. Women of faith occupy significant and necessary roles in all areas of society, be it through local action projects in their communities, in their workplaces or in their own religious communities. However, these contributions to society are rarely central to narratives of social cohesion or communicated accurately within national media.

Although women of faith exist within all areas of society, we chose to explore women's experiences within three different settings to give a breadth of understanding about women of faith's interactions within society.

The Dialogue Society aims to promote equality and human rights by empowering people and bringing social issues to light. Consequently, the Dialogue Society organised a panel series to focus on the roles of women of faith within different areas of society, aiming to highlight their unique individual and shared experiences and bring to light issues of inequality that impact women of faith. Although women of faith exist within all areas of society, we chose to explore women's experiences within three different settings to give a breadth of understanding about women of faith's interactions within society. Therefore, we held a panel series titled 'Women of Faith' with three

panels, each focusing on a particular area: Women of Faith in Community, Women of Faith in Public Service, and Women of Faith in Media.

Through this panel series, the Dialogue Society focused on women of faith as an often-overlooked group within society and aimed to explore the experiences, challenges and contributions of these women in different arenas of life whilst also extending our gaze to examine the perceptions of women from all faiths and none within the public realm and the media.

The first panel, Women of Faith in Community, highlighted the engagement of women of faith within their local communities and aimed to explore the different approaches, experiences and challenges women from different faith backgrounds encounter in their involvement and integration into the local community. Local communities around the UK are varied and diverse, many with a rich combination of cultures, religions and ethnic groups that create opportunities for meaningful interaction between people from different backgrounds. Specifically, women of faith's role in creating social networks within these communities is crucial to maintaining and building a cohesive community. Positive relationships between people from different backgrounds promote a climate of tolerance, trust, and respect on a local level and allow individuals to feel a sense of belonging within a community. Interpersonal dialogue,

therefore, is central to community development and often exemplified through collaborative projects between different faith-based or cultural groups. This panel explored the role of women of faith within their own religious communities, interfaith networks and within the local community.

The second panel, Women of Faith in Public Service, explored how faith interacts with public service work and the experiences and challenges of women of faith working within public service. Discussing the importance of representation within different areas of public service, and the relevance of faith to public service work, this panel explored issues of leadership, workplace culture and equality that impact women of faith in public service.

The third and final panel, Women of Faith in Media, extended our discussion on women of faith to the narratives surrounding women of faith that exist within the media and in the public realm more broadly. Personal identities such as one's gender or faith interact with and are impacted by an individual's immediate community, work environment, and current culture and political narratives. Indeed, the social climate of the UK is heavily affected by the predominant media stories that surround certain groups, including women from faith backgrounds. This panel discussion explored how women of faith are portrayed in the media and how far this impacts woman of faith's role in their local communities and their workplaces. Underlying narratives that impact how women of faith are seen within society were covered in this panel alongside specific experiences of women of faith working within media themselves.

With 10 respected speakers valuably contributing to discussions and a viewership of nearly seven hundred people, our Women of Faith panel series reached a broad audience. After the presentations from each speaker, every panel had a question-and-answer session in which the audience could raise questions and concerns about the issues discussed. Therefore, each panel ended with a very interactive and engaging dialogue, discussing arguments raised by speakers in greater depth and allowing panelists to share insights into each other's presentations. The panel series raised awareness amongst our audience and informed them about the varying experiences of women of faith in different areas of society and the primary issues that face women from many different faith backgrounds. Most importantly, the panel series created dialogue around the involvement of women of faith in society, and the issues that women of faith face within their local communities, work places and in the way they are portrayed in the media.

This policy paper continues the discussions that took place during these panels by highlighting the findings of each panel and expanding on issues raised. This paper begins with a literature review exploring topics covered during panel discussions and contextualising these arguments with academic literature. The paper then continues with policy recommendations that build on findings from our panel discussions to suggest changes and areas of improvement that would benefit women of faith in the community, public service and the media. This paper aims not just to cover the misrepresentation, discrimination and the challenges faced by women of faith, but also to create solutions for them. We wish to base the theme of this Dialogue Society publication on policy recommendations, as we know the potential impact these recommendations can have once implemented. It is our hope that this will further conversations around the role of women of faith within society and contribute to positive changes that address the issues and challenges that women of faith face within their local communities, their workplaces and in the way they are represented in media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women of Faith in the Community

Faith and religion remain among the most significant factors giving meaning to ‘human values, behaviours and experiences’ (Perry et al. 2008, 447) both on an individual level and more broadly within human communities. Women from different faith backgrounds are fundamental to the day-to-day fabric of both religious groups and broader local communities. Their contributions to social action projects on a localised level cannot be overestimated, and while women of faith represent their relevant religious groups, an awareness of intersectionality in their identity is also necessary. One’s identity extends beyond religious belief to aspects of identity including ethnicity, age, and sexuality for instance. Focusing on the intersection of gender and religion, however, highlights a group within society that shares many of the same challenges in their interactions with their local communities. During the panel discussion process, Julie Siddiqi emphasised the importance of interfaith networks within communities, speaking on the value of friendship between women from different faith backgrounds.

Indeed, interfaith dialogue contributes towards development of ‘good relations and mutual trust’ while people retain their individual life principles (Ramli and Awang 2015, 23). Likewise, Sener et al. (2016, 79) argue that dialogue tends to ‘loosen the grip of stereotypes’, encouraging more trusting relationships. This process allows for understanding between neighbours. However, Balmer (2005) asserts that interfaith activities surpass a typical social gathering, being crucial for peace making and justice-building with a climate of trust created through interaction leading to the resolution of real issues (Mir et al. 2010). In the UK, clustering of religious groups within local areas creates a need for multifaith activities where individuals and leaders can form respectful and effective relations with those from different backgrounds (Balmer 2005). Indeed, the Dialogue Society aims to advance social cohesion by connecting communities through engaging people in discussion forums, courses and outreach. Many of these projects targeting the grassroots of society alongside academics and community leaders, are led by women of faith and reflect the increasing role of dialogue between different groups in maintaining community cohesion (Sleep et al. 2013).

With the term ‘community cohesion’ increasingly featured in UK government policy, such positive relationships and meaningful interactions between those of different backgrounds are vital in creating an integrated and cohesive community (Mir et al. 2010). Indeed, Mir et al. (2010) asserts that such a depth in connection between diverse communities is necessary to ensure social cohesion where groups feel understood, respected and can expect equity and equal citizenship. Within this process of improving social cohesion, Nyhagen and Halsaa (2016) argue that women of faith’s role in bettering the position of women in society has typically been marginalised within mainstream feminist movements and theory. The voices of these religious women must therefore be recognised as legitimate within the public sphere (Ibid). Indeed, Mir et al. (2010) emphasises that women’s personal experiences of addressing issues of social cohesion are an ‘important resource’ for local communities with potential to impact future generations, particularly as women’s involvement in community activity is often motivated by concerns for children’s experiences and future (Mir et al. 2010).

Additionally, all our panellists spoke on the impact of stereotypes of women of faith from inside religious groups and from wider society. Dr Lindsay Simmonds and Julie Siddiqi demonstrated the challenge that many women face in fighting for their right to leadership within their community, pointing to scripture to support their argument. Correspondingly, Herzog and Braude (2009, 41) argue that in Abrahamic faiths, there is ‘no gender discrimination in the eyes of God’ who is the model of ‘equitable...fairness to all’. Indeed, both Jesus and Muhammad seemed to break with the patriarchal norms of their respective societal contexts (Ibid.). Despite such origins, Herzog and Braude (2009) argue that many such religions have since routinised patriarchal principles, with a gendered division of religious roles becoming institutionalised. Therefore, women of faith can experience difficulty in creating space

within their own religious communities for themselves while simultaneously their valuable contributions to wider society can be marginalised.

Identified gaps in literature

The role of women of faith in the community is explored in significant depth in literature. However, much of the research depicts specific faith communities or groups of women and analyses their involvement within either their faith group or their local communities. Greater research is needed on the overall impact of women from many different religions within their local communities, primarily through interfaith dialogue, networking, and social action projects. Furthermore, specific focus comparing and contrasting the position and treatment of women within their own faith communities and within their wider local community would expand on themes raised within the panel discussion that lack particular attention in academic literature.

Women of Faith in Public Service

Many areas of the public sector exist both as a vital service for the public and as an everyday work environment. Women form a large part of the workforce, particularly in public service, and for many, personal beliefs, values and religion are central to motivations and decisions at work. Houston et al. (2008) finds that individuals in public service occupations possess more religious attitudes than those in non-public service occupations, with Lewis and Gilman (2005, 21) stating that public service jobs are rightly 'entangled in ethics' as ethical standards are often highly relevant and necessary to such roles. Indeed, religious values influence a range of behaviours and decision making, with Houston et al. (2008) arguing that religion is important for promoting civil society and social capital.

During panel discussions Kiran Sandhu expressed admiration for the values of equality practiced in her NHS workplace, noting how they echo her own religious values. Indeed, public service workplace values often provide a foundation for the working environment and contribute towards attracting greater diversity in the workforce. Sharma (2016) reaffirms the importance of values stating that organisations able to embed cultural, societal, and individual values will ultimately succeed in attracting diverse groups including women and minorities.

However, for religious minorities, workplace values may not be sufficient to create a positive working environment, with Hambler (2015) arguing that religious expression is controversial in many workplaces and often contested. For instance, employees whose personal dress may indicate religious affiliation, or whose religious obligations impact on working hours, may have negative experiences of the public service workplace. Within a secular environment, overtly religious behaviour or attire may result in stereotyping and create divisions between employees. Despite, Lewis and Gilman's (2005) assertion that many public service employees will be motivated by personal beliefs, those who visibly demonstrate their beliefs are more vulnerable to stereotyping and consequently social exclusion. Ryan et al. (2001)

argues that 'in-groups', typically being formed of a majority, are often perceived less stereotypically with others comparing themselves to the 'in-group'. According to social identity theory, individuals strive to attain membership of the 'in-group' and therefore attempt to assimilate with others.

This process of social assimilation proves challenging for religious minorities, particularly women, whose appearance, culture or behaviours may prevent complete assimilation with the 'in-group' or majority and encourage others to draw on stereotypes.

The process of social assimilation proves challenging for religious minorities, particularly women, whose appearance, culture or behaviours may prevent complete assimilation with the 'in-group' or majority and encourage others to draw on stereotypes.

Indeed, several panellists mentioned the impact of stereotyping in their work environments, and therefore highlighted the importance of religious representation within workforces. Liu and Xu (2020) argue that such stereotyping leads to discrimination against female and minority public servants in the workplace. Awareness of social dynamics and the vulnerability of women of faith to stereotyping and discrimination within the workplace, therefore, combined with knowledge of the benefits that beliefs and religion can have for those in public service is necessary to encourage positive experiences for women of faith in the workplace.

Identified gaps in literature

Academic literature on women of faith in public service covers the impact of religious beliefs in many different workplaces and legal attitudes towards encouraging religious diversity within the workplace. However, specific focus on the experiences of women from different religions within varying public service workspaces is lacking within literature. Therefore, research that centres the voices of women themselves and seeks to understand the different pressures, experiences, and challenges that women of faith face within secular work environments, including public service, would add to existing narratives on workplace diversity and religious integration into society.

Women of Faith in the Media

Gender and religion are distinct aspects of media representation requiring particular attention in understanding the impact of media on women of faith in society (Lövheim 2013). With the media becoming increasingly significant in 'religious socialisation' (Lövheim 2017, 151) for young people rather than traditional religious institutions or family groups, media representation of religion impacts greatly on women of faith's interactions within the community and the workplace.

Indeed, Byerly and Ross (2008) argue that the media's gendered framing of public issues and discourses defines public opinion about women's role and place in society. Correspondingly, Ahmed and Matthes (2017) emphasise that mass media articulates dominant social values and ideologies, often leading to misrepresentation or stereotypical portrayals of minorities in the media. As such, the media's framing of women is 'highly restricted' and often negative (Byerly and Ross 2008, 8), with Ahmed and Matthes (2017, 233) exemplifying the portrayal of Muslim women in the media as 'victims' and a 'threat to the modernization of women...in developed countries'. Our panellist Dr Anna Piela highlighted the distinct lack of voice Muslim women are given in the media, while representations of women wearing the niqab or burka remain overwhelmingly negative, perpetuating the victim narrative specified by Ahmed and Matthes (2017) or a newer extremist narrative (Piela 2021). However, Asad (2009, 20) conceptualises Islam as a 'discursive tradition' where continually discussed practices are a reflection of how the past relates to the future, rather than simply repetition of an old form. Depictions of Islam in the media more broadly, characterise Muslims as 'others' and portray Islam 'as a violent religion'. This relates to Said's exemplification of how the West wrongly understands the East, considering it the 'other' and portraying it as the negative inversion of Western society (Said 2003). Within the media, therefore, we see this concept extended to the portrayal of religion.

Panellist Rehena Harilall argued Buddhism typically is portrayed positively in the media, highlighting western appropriation of Buddhist culture and practices such as yoga and meditation. Media representation therefore differs between religions. However, Wakelin and Spencer (2015, 233) argues it is in 'religious illiteracy' that treatment of religion in the media is similar across all religions. Media representations demonstrate low levels of understanding of religion from varying perspectives and lack exploration of religion 'from the inside' (Wakelin and Spencer 2015, 232). Such 'religious illiteracy', Wakelin and Spencer (2015, 233) argues, allows religion to be 'renarrated' or 'othered', controlling public perception of religion and consequently women of faith. Indeed, Ahmed and Matthes (2017) finds that the media is representative of white supremacy in depicting minority religions as an unknown, threat or problem.

Media as a workplace

The media exists, for women of faith, also as a workplace, with women from faith backgrounds increasingly taking space in media and journalism industries. With panellists Chine McDonald and Manpreet Kaur emphasising the lack of representation of women of faith within the media, Lück et al. (2020) finds that the percentage of women in top editorial positions in UK media brands is 29%, signifying an

Hostile environments for women and minorities working within the media industry is reflected in the portrayal of women of faith in mass media.

issue of representation within media companies. Furthermore, Massey and Elmore (2011) argue that barriers including irregular working hours and social expectations push women into freelance journalism or public relations over senior executive jobs in the newsroom, with sexism in journalism newsrooms deterring women from leadership roles. Indeed, Harrison (2018) asserts that harassment for women working in media is normalised with women expected to manage the emotional impact of harassment as 'part and parcel' of their job. Such a hostile environment for

women and minorities working within the media industry, therefore, is reflected in the portrayal of women of faith in mass media. The prevalence of inaccuracies and stereotypes in media representations of religion exacerbates the lack of agency attributed to women of faith in mass media and continually impacts the interactions that women of faith have within different arenas of society, be they at a local community level or in public service.

Identified gaps in literature

Academic literature on media representations of religion for the most part does not focus specifically on the depiction of women of faith within the media, and where it does it is limited to one religion, for example the depiction of Muslim women in the media. Research on the impact of depictions of women from different faith backgrounds in the media would be beneficial in understanding the impact of the media on attitudes towards women of faith within society. Furthermore, the experiences of women of faith working within the media should be centred in literature, with most research focusing specifically on women working in sports media or commentating, rather than the experiences of women of faith in journalism, broadcasting, and TV.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Existing Policies

In the UK, belief and faith are protected under the legal frame of the Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA) and the Equality Act 2010 (Perfect 2016, 11), in which a person is given the right to hold a religion or belief and change their religion or belief. It also gives them a right to show that belief as long as the display or expression does not interfere with public safety, public order, health or morals, or the rights and freedoms of others (Equality Act 2010, chap. 1). The Equality Act 2010 protects employees from discrimination, harassment and victimisation because of religion or belief. Religion or belief are mainly divided into two parts: religion and religious belief, and philosophical belief (Equality Act 2010, chap. 1)

Existing measures have been implemented to improve the experience of women of faith from many perspectives. For example, the UK Civil Service designed a toolkit to help everyone fully participate in the workplace and facilitate interfaith networks among its staff to create a friendly environment and amplify the dialogue about faith and beliefs in the workplace (Civil Service 2019). For the NHS, guidance on how to equip NHS staff to understand the needs of all people and take full account of the equality agenda was applied (Department of Health 2009) and the NHS Chaplaincy Guidelines 2015 were implemented to promote better pastoral, spiritual and religious care for patients (NHS England 2015).

While previous studies suggest current policies are effective in offering support (Perfect 2016), in the most part, these policies show limited ability in helping women of faith who have been suffering from less explicit discrimination and other issues caused by the lack of representation of women of faith in the public arena and biased representation in the media (Seta 2016), which has led to hate crimes and less explicit targeting of Muslim women or women bearing other signs of their religion or beliefs (Ipsos MORI 2018; Seta 2016). Besides, women of faith, especially Muslim women in the UK, suffer multiple forms of discrimination due to cultural bias or sexism, and they are also the least likely of all religious groups to hold professional or managerial jobs and the most economically inactive group in the UK (Reynolds and Birdwell 2015).

While there is rich empirical evidence indicating the disadvantaged socioeconomic and cultural status of women of faith, there is a lack of data and studies on the experience of women of faith, such as data related to the education level of women of faith in all religious groups, the wellbeing of women of faith before or during the COVID-19 pandemic, descriptions of necessary working and language skills and labour force participation of women of faith, etc. (Moore 2021; the House of Commons 2016b, 16–20; 2016a, para. 7).

Previous discussions suggest that while existing policies have made some progress in protecting the rights of women of faith, there is still plenty of work to be done to achieve equality from every perspective. At the same time, it is noteworthy that women of faith have made great contributions to advance gender and religious equality through meaningful dialogue based on their own life experience and shared common values (Sleap et al. 2013). The following section will discuss the problems women of faith encounter at the media, public service, and community levels, and policy recommendations to address them, based on previous discussions, the experiences of the panellists at the ‘Women of Faith panel series’ organised by Dialogue Society, and empirical evidence of the accomplishments and efforts of women of faith in society.

Women of Faith in Community

The panel examined how women of faith have been actively engaging in their local communities and explored the different difficulties and challenges women from different faith backgrounds encounter in their involvement and integration into the local community. Women of faith have made great progress in this field through actively engaging in or taking the lead in interfaith groups (Simmonds 2021). Their experiences suggest friendship and meaningful interactions and dialogues between women of different

Friendship and meaningful interactions and dialogues between women of different faith backgrounds and their personal experience are vital in creating a cohesive community.

faith backgrounds and their personal experience are vital in creating a cohesive community (Mir, Lawler, and Godfrey 2010; Dialogue Society 2021) and essential for the formation of respectful and resilient relationships between people of different religious backgrounds as these dialogues come from women's life stories and shared common values (Sleap et al. 2013).

Despite this, women of faith's role in advancing the status of women in society has typically been marginalised within mainstream feminist movements and theory (Ashmeet Kaur Bilkhu 2018).

Furthermore, all panellists spoke about the impact of gender stereotypes on women of faith from inside religious groups or the general societies. Panellists Dr Lindsay Simmonds and Julie Siddiqi shared their experience of women of faith fighting for their right to acknowledgement of their achievements and leadership in a faith community, arguing for empowering women of faith so as to let them speak for themselves against the institutionalised patriarchal principle and gendered division of religious roles, in which they have also experienced certain challenges. For example, the chances for women of faith to gain access to mainstream media may be limited. Besides, media representations of the life and experience of women of faith may also be a burden for them to actively speak for themselves.

In this case, to stimulate and empower women of faith to engage in community affairs and speak for themselves, the local community should cooperate to carry out these actions:

- Increase studies about women of faith. There is a lack of investigation into the life and experience of women of faith as it is an area often obscured by studies on ethnicity, gender, and diversity, which are major focuses in previous studies.
- Focus on disaggregated data instead of integrated data, as it will yield unique results about the specific experience of women of faith.
- Use social media to promote an environment that welcomes friendly and inclusive dialogue about religion and belief and to enhance equal dialogue between individuals with (or without) faith and beliefs to celebrate the shared values different people have regardless of religions and beliefs.
- Provide access to mentoring schemes for women of faith in leadership roles within their local communities, both to champion the role of women in the social fabric of their communities and to encourage female leaders to grow in the confidence and skills needed to further develop their leadership roles.

Women of Faith in Public Service

Public service has long been an area that encourages and promotes values of equality, aiming to provide the best service for all. In this area, existing policies supporting women of faith have been classified under the legal framework of laws on diversity and inclusion.

However, the experience of one of the panellists, Councillor Rakhia Ismail, Islington Council (Women of Faith in Public Service – Women of Faith Panel Series 2021) suggests the lack of women of faith in the public service sector in grassroots or senior positions leads to a lack of appropriate provision of services for faith communities, as those in office are unaware of the specific needs of these communities (Women of Faith in Public Service – Women of Faith Panel Series 2021). Besides, media representations also impact the experience of women of faith in public service or in daily life, whose typical influence might be implicit discrimination against clothing with certain religious significance, or ‘microaggressions’ based on sexism or discrimination against women of faith (Javed 2021). These ‘microaggressions’ are often not reported as studies on experience of women of faith suggest a lack of understanding about what constitutes discrimination under the law and how to report it (Seta 2016).

Discussions about women of faith in public service suggest the issues encountered are related to intersectionality and involve multiple forms of discrimination as different dimensions of the social structure. To make public service a more inclusive sector, the government and public entities must:

- Facilitate training on creating an inclusive and welcoming environment at work, including training on equal opportunities at work, harassment and discrimination. This mirrors the policy recommendations in the Dialogue Society’s previous policy paper on ‘Women’s Empowerment’ which suggests that unconscious bias training and an overall focus on workplace culture should address normalised assumptions and stereotypes that become barriers to women of faith.
- Put in place policies to prevent discrimination about clothing, or other visible features that can be associated with an individual’s faith or beliefs. Rules and regulations must be clarified and put in place that genuinely provide women with due process and ensure the pursuit of legal entitlements does not carry undue career risk.
- Facilitate interfaith networks and dialogue among staff so as to encourage the forming of meaningful interactions based on personal experiences and shared values.
- Facilitate continuous training on religious literacy in public service.
- As previously stated in the Dialogue Society’s policy paper on ‘Women’s Empowerment’, the government should take action to enact section 106 of the Equality Act, which requires political parties to report the diversity of their candidates. Over a decade since the creation of this law, it remains unimplemented and its enactment would be highly beneficial to improving diversity of representatives within government.

Women of Faith in Media

It is widely acknowledged that media serves as the main source of the attitudes of the public, as well as their attitudes towards certain religion or certain group of people within a religion (Douglas 2021). However, studies on religious representation in the media imply serious ‘religious illiteracy’ in the media, which leads to a high probability of unintentional misunderstanding or misrepresentation of religious content (Seta 2016; Douglas 2021; Nicholls 2020; Hanif 2019; Wakelin and Spencer 2015). Some studies also suggest religious content is sometimes intentionally misread for political and commercial reasons (Wakelin and Spencer 2015).

In addition to these studies, the experiences of women of faith working in journalism and media industry suggest the representation of women of faith in media content is highly politicized with sexism and characteristics from colonial ideologies. While representations of Christian or Buddhist women of colour in media content are often favourable, they are usually placed in the subordinate position in the dominant narrative of white supremacy (Women of Faith in the Media – Women of Faith Panel Series 2021). Besides, the lack of representation of women of faith in the journalism and media workforce has led to the neglect of the voice of women of faith in a media environment as the free expression of wo-

The lack of representation of women of faith in the journalism and media workforce has led to the neglect of the voice of women of faith in a media environment as the free expression of women of faith may not be accepted.

men of faith may not be accepted. Furthermore, certain elements in religion are commercialised or politicised under the social framework of patriarchy or populism (Carrette and King 2005; Borup 2020).

The problematic representation of women of faith in media content reflects the hostile environment for women of faith working in the media and journalism industry, who may be subjected to multiple forms of systemic discrimination and are deterred from leadership roles or realising equal opportunities in the workplace. Data shows while there is an increasing number of

women of different socio-religious backgrounds joining the media and journalism industry, there is still a serious lack of representation of women of faith in senior positions (Lück et al. 2020; Robertson, Selva, and Nielsen 2021). Furthermore, irregular long working hours in the media and journalism industry make women unlikely to take up opportunities for ‘professional socialising’ (McCracken et al. 2018, 60) or even push women into freelance or marginal positions in the newsroom (Massey and Elmore 2011), as well as creating boundaries for women of faith whose religious obligations and practices might conflict with the practices and norms in the media and journalism industry.

Besides, women in the media and journalism industry suffer from sexism and discrimination that may be ‘insidious’ and considered as ‘normal’, and therefore not covered by rules protecting employees from discrimination (McCracken et al. 2018; Lück et al. 2020). In this case, women are usually required to carry the socio-emotional impact at the expense of their wellbeing and treat such discrimination and harassment as a necessary part of their work (McCracken et al. 2018; Lück et al. 2020). For example, ‘freewheeling’ as a pervasive informal drinking culture, often associated with blurred lines between banter and sexism, exacerbates implicit discrimination against women in media and journalism. (McCracken et al. 2018, 61), as well as creating negative experiences for women of faith who also suffer discrimination against their beliefs and ethnicity.

In light of the above, media representations of women of faith serve as the foundation and major resource of public attitudes to women of faith. To achieve an equal, unbiased, and fair representation of women of faith in the media, the media must:

- Facilitate continuous training programmes on religious literacy in the media and journalism industry.
- Promote more depoliticised, de-sexualised, decolonised representation for the general society of what constitutes religion, and the value of religion.
- Facilitate a decolonised, non-sexist, more inclusive, and diverse narrative in media accounts of religion/ethnicity/gender, etc. (Women need a safe place to speak for themselves.)
- Empower women of faith with more opportunities to speak up for themselves on mainstream media platforms and social media and increase the accessibility of mainstream media to women of faith.
- Encourage women of faith to tell their experiences in the media through media companies and journalists actively facilitating group discussion between women of faith centred around their unique experiences, providing a support network while simultaneously allowing women of faith to control the narrative that surrounds them.

- Increase the representation of women of faith in the media, both in terms of staff diversity and media content.
- Facilitate staff networks led by women of faith in the media.
- Facilitate training on equal opportunities in employment (including rules about harassment). Rules and regulations addressing sexism must be identified and put in place that genuinely provide women with due process and ensure the pursuit of legal entitlements does not carry undue career risk.

CONCLUSION

The extensive research compiled by the Dialogue Society within this policy paper provides a vital contribution to the discourse surrounding the life experience of women of faith in the UK. Inspired by the panel series held over the course of two months, the findings stem from a variety of sources including the contributions of academics, practitioners, and volunteers from the community: this bottom-up evolution of the paper and contributions from diverse participants further strengthen it. Thus, this policy paper is an example of the impact of dialogue in action. Specifically, this policy paper identified barriers women of faith encounter in their life and work experience and how women of faith understand and overcome these barriers in three areas: community, public service, and media. To address these issues, this paper has a section to specify policy recommendations for those in decision-making positions.

As previous discussions suggest, representations of religion, women, and women of faith in media content are the major source of the public's general attitudes to women of faith; therefore, stereotypical, and patriarchal representations of women and religion in media content are extremely harmful. Apart from their representation in media content, women of faith also experience intersectional discrimination and inequality in opportunities in employment in the media industry, which eventually lead to the underrepresentation of women of faith in the media, thus further disempowering women of faith and placing them in a disadvantaged situation.

In light of the above, the necessary reforms within the media industry must be imposed in the areas of facilitating training in religious literacy, regulations addressing equal opportunities in employment, and increasing the representation of women of faith in senior positions in the media industry. Rules and regulations addressing discrimination and sexism must be identified and put in place that genuinely provide women with due process and ensure the pursuit of legal entitlements does not carry undue career risk.

Within the public service sector, women of faith also experience intersectional forms of discrimination and inequality in employment. In this case, the concrete policy recommendations identified for the public service sector comprise advocacy of policy reforms addressing one's clothing or visible features that may be related to religions and beliefs, facilitating training in religious literacy in public service bodies, and the reinforcement of support schemes within organisations and facilitating interfaith networks among staff.

Within the community sector, while women of faith are also experiencing lack of recognition in male-dominated religious groups, they have also made great progress through their dialogue based on real-life experience and facilitated resilient relationships among people of different religious positions. Recommendations in this field make reference to the need to facilitate interfaith dialogue based on real-life experience and the 'common good' among people of different religious positions and to empower women of faith through social media.

Limitations of the report

The Dialogue Society seeks to understand the lived experiences and burdens of women of faith in society, and this report is a key attempt for that purpose. Although this report attempts to address this topic through a combination of panellists' experience, empirical evidence, and academic research, it has several shortcomings. One of the most prominent is that this report fails to include all faiths and religions in UK society or women of faith working in areas other than public service, community, and media. Moreover, as an online panel discussion held during a pandemic, it was relatively difficult to facilitate meaningful interactions between panellists and the audience, which could have greatly enriched our understanding of the issue. What is more, various constraints made us unable to conduct in-depth research into the meaningful topic of women's dialogue.

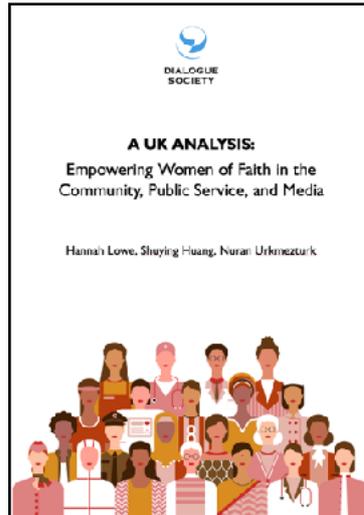
Despite this, this report is still an attempt to identify issues within the specific area as well as issues which overlap across the work and life of women of faith. The Dialogue Society understands the deep-rooted patriarchal history which contributes to all modern-day issues of gender inequality. It would, therefore, be comical to assume these recommendations alone will dismantle the structural inequalities in society. Thus, we call for further research with an intersectional lens (qualitative studies incorporating sexuality, faith, race and socio-economic status and quantitative studies using anti-categorical methods, and mixed-method research) to ensure a thorough understanding of the lived experiences of women of faith, as well as the causes and resolutions of issues they encounter. The Dialogue Society calls for strengthened bottom-up approaches which incorporate dialogue as a means to further the cause of gender equality.

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Religion and religious practices are deeply entrenched in the fabric of society and significant in defining the culture of local communities. However, religious communities can be marginalised or misunderstood within society, with the media often perpetuating negative stereotypes of religion and particularly religious women. The role of women from all faith backgrounds, within their own religious communities and wider society should not be underestimated or overlooked, however throughout this panel series on Women of Faith we have found that women from all background are often marginalised or discriminated against, in many areas of society. The Dialogue Society aims to promote equality and human rights by empowering people and bringing social issues to light. To this end, this policy paper aims to focus on women of faith as an often-overlooked group within society. The extensive research compiled by the Dialogue Society within this policy paper provides a vital contribution to the discourse surrounding the contributions and experiences of women of faith within the United Kingdom. Inspired by a panel series held over the course of three months, the findings stem from a variety of sources including the contributions of academics, practitioners and volunteers from the community. Thus, this policy paper is an example of the impact of dialogue in action. The policy paper explores the challenges and experiences of women of faith at the community level, within public service and in the media, and ends with a section dedicated to listing specific policy recommendations for those in decision-making positions. The paper aims to highlight the unique individual and shared experiences of women of faith and bring to light issues of inequality that impact women of faith. Simultaneously, this paper aims to create solutions and recommendations that could increase allyship, opportunities, and accurate representation of women of faith in all areas of society, contributing towards women's empowerment and gender equality more broadly.