

BARRIERS TO MUSLIM WOMEN'S PROGRESSION IN THE LABOUR MARKET

*Position Paper from
Community Policy Forum*

September 2024



 www.communitypolicyforum.com

 research@communitypolicyforum.com

 PolicyCommunity

Introduction

According to the [Office for National Statistics](#), Muslims have the highest unemployment rate of any religious group in England and Wales, with discrimination against Muslim women being acutely compounded by gender and wider intersectional experiences, such as disability and parental status. Consequently, Muslim women face unique barriers in advancing their careers, including pervasive workplace discrimination, limited access to mentorship and leadership opportunities, and difficulties in accessing appropriate support regarding child and elder care responsibilities.

This position paper argues that without targeted interventions, these structural barriers will continue to prevent Muslim women from fully participating in the labour market. This paper utilises a human rights-based framework to address these challenges and calls for policy interventions that eliminate systemic bias, improve workplace inclusivity, and provide equitable childcare solutions to empower Muslim women and promote gender and religious equality.

Approaching the Challenges

Research demonstrates that, despite significant patterns of academic success amongst Muslim girls, this is failing to translate into similar success in employment in comparison to both their male co-religionists and non-Muslim women. The Social Mobility Commission [asserts](#) that Bangladeshi and Pakistani Muslim women earn less than those from other ethnic minority groups and female Bangladeshi graduates are less likely to gain managerial and professional roles in comparison to their male counterparts, despite generally achieving higher school qualifications.

In all spheres of recruitment, retention, and promotion, Muslim women face barriers to their progression. In particular, attitudes towards hijab and stereotypes surrounding the familial responsibilities of Muslim women have been shown to infiltrate workplace attitudes and hiring practices. The European Network Against Racism has [observed](#) that in the UK “one in eight Pakistani women are asked about marriage and family aspirations in job interviews whereas only one in thirty White women are asked such a question.” Meanwhile, our own [research](#) has demonstrated issues of Islamophobic workplace discrimination suffered by Muslim women and an inability of HR departments to adequately address these issues.

Meanwhile, women are known to disproportionately struggle to access appropriate employment or [progress](#) in their careers due to undertaking the [majority](#) of both childcare and elder care responsibilities across the UK and are [seven times](#) more likely to be out of work due to these responsibilities.

Section 14 of the Equality Act 2010 protects against [dual or combined discrimination](#) (two or more protected characteristics that interact in an inseparable manner). However, the provision has been dormant since the legislation was drafted and has not yet been brought into force. As such, Muslim women bringing discrimination cases on the basis of both gender and religion must currently show that there has been discrimination in respect of each characteristic separately. However, with respect to gendered Islamophobia, adverse

treatment cannot be solely attributed to gender or religion, rather, it is the relationship between the two characteristics when combined that often gives rise to discriminatory practices.

At the same time, there is not enough comprehensive disaggregated data surrounding intersectional characteristics, for example, unemployment by religion, gender, and disability. Such data must be made available in order to fully identify and in turn, address the structural inequalities faced by Muslims and other minoritised communities.

The right to fair and equitable employment without discrimination is encompassed within the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#), to which the UK is a party. For Muslim women, this right is central to preserving human dignity and psychological well-being, as well as providing economic independence, reducing poverty, and enhancing economic mobility.

Recommendations

To address the barriers to Muslim women's progression in the labour market, we recommend the following:

- 1. Enacting Section 14 of the Equality Act:** As previously mentioned, this would allow discrimination cases to be brought that better reflect the realities of intersectional discrimination against Muslim women and others who occupy multiple protected characteristics.
- 2. Disaggregated Data:** Initiatives to provide a greater range of disaggregated data must be undertaken to fully comprehend and address the scale of structural barriers facing minoritised communities.
- 3. Combatting Recruitment and Workplace Discrimination:** Employers must implement and monitor programmes that introduce meaningful action plans aimed at tackling racial, religious, and disability-based discrimination at all levels of recruitment, retention, and promotion.
- 4. Improving Access to Childcare:** The government must provide greater investment in affordable and flexible childcare solutions that will allow women to progress in their careers.

Conclusion

Addressing the barriers to Muslim women's progression in the labour market requires urgent and targeted policy action. A human rights-based approach highlights the inequalities Muslim women encounter and provides a framework for meaningful solutions. By combatting workplace discrimination and improving access to flexible childcare, we can ensure that Muslim women enjoy the same rights and opportunities as other citizens, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society.



Community Policy
Forum

www.communitypolicyforum.com

@POLICYCOMMUNITY