

# How do structural inequalities impact pupils' mental health and wellbeing?

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# Introduction

**Muslim Girls Fence (MGF) is a project collaboration by the charity Maslaha and British Fencing. Through fencing, creativity and conversation, we aim to challenge the barriers that Muslim women and girls face in light of the complex discrimination on the basis of faith, gender and racialised identities. MGF also challenges the wider perception that the sport 'belongs' to traditionally elitist white males, and by increasing its accessibility opens up the unique self-efficacy benefits of fencing to more communities.**

This document has been created to share the learnings from the Muslim Girls Fence project about factors that lead to poor mental and emotional wellbeing for young people and the gaps and failures in current services available to young people in schools. We spoke to teachers to discuss some of the barriers and issues prevalent in schools. Factors such as mainstream media and racism, which are spoken about by students in our project, all impact wellbeing, but the ways in which institutions enact and participate in these factors is being overlooked in conversations about young people's mental health. For meaningful services to be delivered to students, it requires schools and institutions to consider how they perpetuate and are also responsible for the harms that impact the wellbeing of students.

From past Muslim Girls Fence workshops, most of the girls who took part said they had experienced Islamophobia within their school and wider society which took a toll on them. For example, being called

a 'terrorist' in school or being targeted by specific teachers. While experiences like this are very common in school environments, it is very rare for students to be provided with a space and trusted listener in the same environment, where they can openly speak about their experiences and how it affects them without fearing repercussions.

Often students won't talk to white teachers or teachers that they know are unaware of racial dynamics, as they are aware their opinions may be 'meddled with', misunderstood or misrepresented.

As highlighted in a recent study, it's important to highlight that the number of young adults from marginalised communities seeking mental health support from the digital service Kooth, rose by 11.4%, in comparison to a decrease of 3% amongst their white peers. One of the key factors highlighted in the report was the higher number of deaths in their communities due to Covid-19.<sup>1</sup> More than ever, having

suitable, appropriate care available for young people from racialised communities is needed. However support must be given with a deep understanding of how structural inequalities like racism and Islamophobia lead to this state.

We produced this work which considers in depth the impact of structural inequalities on mental health, the experiences of school teachers and mental health professionals who work closely with racialised and marginalised communities and includes recommendations for school teachers and schools. Subsequent parts of this document will be produced as we gain input from pupils who take part in the Muslim Girls Fence project in the future. This may include guidance on increasing access to holistic services in schools for young people from marginalised backgrounds, involving young people in the development of services, and the ethics of creative delivery for mental wellbeing.

Muslim Girls Fence workshops will be delivered in schools over the next three academic years. Conversations with teachers, other school staff and young people will give us greater knowledge about what is needed. We hope this report and future resources will centre the voices of the young people and their teachers, as we know that for a service to be successful, it must take into account the voices and needs of the people it is catering for.

Thank you to all the teachers for their input (who have chosen to remain anonymous), and to Dr Sara Alsaraf, Dr Tarek Younis and other mental health professionals we have spoken with over the last few months to inform Muslim Girls Fence work.





# Islamophobia and racism as factors leading to poor mental health and wellbeing

From our own work on Muslim Girls Fence, we have learnt that experiencing distress is a normal reaction for people who face political violence living under structural racism and Islamophobia. This not only has detrimental impacts on mental health but also physical health.<sup>2</sup>

Islamophobic rhetoric in the media can lead to the daily fear of being verbally or physically attacked on the street for visibly Muslim women and girls. The 2019/20 data from the Home Office shows that 50% of religious hate crime recorded by the police was towards Muslims<sup>3</sup>, which we know does not fully give us an accurate measure as many incidents go unreported and unrecognised.

Hyper-visibility and being under constant unwarranted scrutiny is a very real and common experience that can contribute to poor mental health. Muslim women have spoken to us about the fear of being on train station platforms and worrying about being pushed into an oncoming train. This constant vigilance can lead to a higher level of daily stress. It is important to create spaces for young people to heal

and help them with their mental health whilst acknowledging and realising that inequality is built into the system they live in. By ignoring this, service providers will only be turning a blind eye to the factors that cause young people harm and lead to further distress:

**“If we’re talking about any trauma-informed practices and we’re not talking about naming and then eliminating injustices as they operate in schools, we’re not doing what we say we’re doing.”<sup>4</sup>**

An example of this in the UK is legislation such as The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 which imposes a legal obligation – known as the Prevent Duty – on every public sector employee to look out for signs of radicalisation in their students, clients, patients and others to whom they provide services, for the purpose of preventing extremism. Muslims are much more likely to be referred under the Act. Recently, a four-year old child was referred after talking about

2 Rae Ellen Bichell reviews scientific research that suggests racial abuse and harassment induce a stress response and when this physical response is ongoing and daily, the lingering cortisol and adrenaline may have an impact on the body, so not only does it negatively affect mental health but also a person's physical health: <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/11/11/562623815/scientists-start-to-tease-out-the-subtler-ways-racism-hurts-health>

3 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2019-to-2020/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2019-to-2020>

4 <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/summer-2019/when-schools-cause-trauma>

weaponry in the game Fortnite. They were one of 624 children aged under 6 to be referred between 2016-2019. The act has stigmatised behaviours and traits that are culturally ordinary e.g. praying may be seen as something suspicious when it is a normal part of life,, or teenagers changing their style of dress. This has led to Muslim communities being monitored in everyday situations and being unable to express themselves as others do because of the fear of being referred or reported.

**“I do think Islamophobia has affected young people’s mental health. I think that this is something that is rising sadly, some people don’t feel they are safe, or that they’ll be listened to or understood, which kind of makes it worse”**

- MGF participant

Often ‘extremism’ is not clearly defined, relying on the judgements of teachers and school staff. Of course we cannot expect to be innately free of prejudice or discrimination, especially given the overwhelmingly negative media narrative surrounding Muslim communities which is littered with tropes of ‘oppressed Muslim women’ who need saving, and derision and objectification of Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab and niqab.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally 87.5% of the teaching workforce in state-funded schools are White British<sup>6</sup>, whereas over a third of students in primary (33.9%) and secondary schools (32.3%) nationally are from minority ethnic backgrounds.<sup>7</sup> As many teachers do not come from the same backgrounds as their students, and importantly do not experience

Islamophobia or have an awareness of its impact, students may find it difficult to speak to teachers. It leads to students’ censoring themselves due to the fear of being referred to Prevent and the internalisation of thinking you are something to fear, or are a problem.



<sup>5</sup> <https://www.maslaha.org/Project/Muslim-Girls-Fence>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/school-teacher-workforce/latest>

<sup>7</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>

# **Conversations with teachers:** **How does racism and Islamophobia impact pupil wellbeing in school?**

# Discussing identity and structural inequalities

Through our work in schools, teachers have fed back that having safe and holistic spaces where students can express themselves on these topics (Islamophobia and racism) is important. They mentioned that it is vital to include mental health and wellbeing into the curriculum, but if this is done by using a 'generic' approach – meaning the approach does not consider structural and environmental factors and its impact on wellbeing – it won't address all the harms present, the distress that is caused, and how to repair and receive help in light of these structures.

It's important for students to think about their identities and backgrounds but this has to be linked to how certain identities have been historically and are presently marginalised and racialised, so that their experiences in the world are made sense of. One of the contexts we explore in Muslim Girls Fence is how Muslim women have been perceived by society, by analysing media reporting and politicians' words. For example, when Boris Johnson, the current Prime Minister, referred to Muslim women as bank robbers and letterboxes. The exploration of media bias gives them an understanding of why they may be feeling vulnerable or isolated.

Moreover, without this context, it does not answer questions about inequality that students will be experiencing. Discussing identities or

teaching that 'we are all equal' without an understanding of structural racism won't explain why some people are treated differently to others, nor will it explain real inequalities that exist which young people face.

A teacher mentioned that providing a service to upper/middle class white students struggling with anxiety is very different to doing the same for a student who is living in a deprived area, in poverty, who may also be working, and is therefore much more vulnerable to illegal activities to help make ends meet.

Students cannot be separated from their environments and any service that is provided for them must have an understanding of those wider structures e.g. 50% of Muslim families live in the top ten most deprived areas in the UK, which leads to lack of access to support and activities. Government figures also show that '30% of the Bangladeshi population live in over-crowded housing, compared with 2% of the White British population.'<sup>8</sup> In order for the support for people experiencing multi-layer inequalities to be appropriate – and not risk further exacerbating harm – organisations and practitioners need to have a layered understanding of how the broader contexts of people's lives impact their mental health.



# Impact of wider world events on pupils

There should be an awareness of how events that occur nationally and internationally impact the safety of students. It is important that schools and mental health providers think about how their Muslim students' safety is at risk when Islamophobic rhetoric is high and terror attacks are blamed on Muslims.

**Data from the Metropolitan Police show that Islamophobic hate crime has risen 268% since 2012/13, and the highest number of recorded Islamophobic hate crime recorded happened in 2017/18 which 'coincided with terrorist attacks in London and Manchester that year'.<sup>9</sup>**

One teacher we spoke to said that senior management did not consider Islamophobia as an issue and did not know how to discuss or address it. In the school sessions we've run previously, many of the students said that they had been called a terrorist either within or outside of the school, and the constant negative attention they got made them reluctant to discuss these things in classroom settings, especially when the teacher was unaware of this context. One teacher remarked that for the majority of white teachers, this context is invisible, so they jump to the conclusion that 'Muslim girls are shy' or 'disengaged'.

A teacher overheard a white teacher asking a student wearing a hijab "why are you wearing that thing on your head?" and though it was not directed at the teacher (who also wears a hijab), it was also passively

directed at her. She mentioned that this was a statement that may be widespread but not considered to be Islamophobic, or even rude by the teacher who said it. Yet statements like this have alienating impacts on both Muslim teachers and pupils. In this case, when taken to senior management, it was not followed up with.

The teacher who overheard this incident, considered the impact on the student. She felt that when students are criticised by teachers in that way, they start to self-criticise and feel they don't belong. They are made to feel unwelcome in their own contexts and cannot be their whole selves in a school environment. It also impacts teacher/student relationships as the students became aware that their Muslim teachers do not have a way to counter racist and Islamophobic comments, so how could they?

Another teacher told us that one of her white students asked her in a creative writing class, when writing a fight scene, could his character say "Allahu Akbar". His reasoning was that it was what he had heard on television. The teacher reflected that this white student's response was part of an environment that would discourage Muslim students from talking openly about their experiences. They are wary and hesitant, especially if they are the minority in the classroom, because they are aware of how prevalent mainstream perspectives about Islam and anti-Muslim attitudes can be adopted by their classmates.

# Impact of low teacher expectations

We know from research published by academics such as Christine Rubie-Davies, that whether consciously or not, teachers can have low expectations of pupils based on their class and cultural backgrounds. She found that pupils were highly aware of these low expectations.<sup>10</sup> This is supported by conversations we have had with MGF participants, who noticed that sometimes, white teachers favour high performing white pupils over high performing students of colour. One teacher we spoke to mentioned that though pupils were aware of these things, they can't raise it with the same teachers who are behaving in this way.



# Safeguarding leading to racialised stereotyping

We also heard from MGF participants how they have encountered racist assumptions from teachers such as being 'uncultured'. One student's teacher suggested that her parents were uncultured because they did not take her to many galleries or museums. Statements like this highlight the judgement and lack of insight into the lives of many working class families. Perhaps the student has not visited museums because they are inaccessible especially to working class families. Factors such as time, travel costs, ticketed exhibition costs and safety in the area should be taken into account before making conclusions about who is cultured and who isn't. Furthermore, the judgement itself suggests that increased knowledge and awareness of White British or White European culture defines who is deemed 'cultured'.

## **Another example of a racist assumption students may face from teachers is the suggestion of being 'uncultured'.**

One teacher had overheard many comments in classrooms relating to the cultural and racist stereotype of young Asian Muslim girls being naturally shy and unwilling to participate. Rather than being seen through the lens of political structures and events which lead to young people being wary of voicing their opinions and engaging with certain teachers, they are called 'shy', 'quiet' and 'unenthusiastic'.

The teacher we spoke to wondered whether these types of conversations happened in departments staffed predominately by white teachers without being questioned or challenged, especially with the lack of knowledge about structural racism.

Another teacher mentioned a big issue with safeguarding and the problems with the training itself. She reflected on the way safeguarding is taught, certain harmful practice such as forced marriages are represented as being more likely to happen within Muslim or South Asian communities. Whereas in fact harmful practices are not exclusively the preserve of one specific culture.

# Points of consideration for schools and teachers

**Mental health professionals recommend centering the embodied experience of students'. For teachers, this could involve considering:**

- 1** How do pupils feel when speaking to teachers?
- 2** Who do pupils choose to speak to and why?
- 3** Why might a pupil decide not to speak to a member of staff or keep an issue to themselves?

A secondary school teacher we spoke with said that often students won't talk to white teachers or teachers they know who are unaware of racial dynamics, as they are aware their opinions may be 'meddled with', misunderstood or misrepresented. Therefore, the students' expression is straight away limited and there is an element of self-censorship knowing that they may be watched under the lens of 'radicalisation' and the Prevent programme, or made fun of or have their concerns dismissed.

**It might be useful for teachers to reflect on the following:**

- 1** Muslim students can't be vulnerable and open if their teachers and other school staff are looking out for signs of radicalisation and extremism – terms which remain undefined.
- 2** Services for wellbeing do not work when students have to rely on the same system that hurts them, to support them.

If a student feels discriminated against under Prevent, there is no way for them to voice this to the same system that is implementing it. Mental health provision must consider the power dynamics present in the school system when thinking about how to be of service to young people. Instead of taking into consideration the impacts of external forces like racism, Islamophobia, structural and systemic inequalities, there is a danger of students' identities being pathologised. This means that a student's faith, culture, ethnic background, family and community are blamed for mental health issues, instead of looking for the root causes which often lie in structural realities that exist outside of the individual. As clinical psychologist Dr Tarek Younis says: "When a building is on fire, we shouldn't say people have a 'breathing crisis', but focus on the fire and try to understand its causes."<sup>11</sup>



## Further points to consider

### 1 Review current services

Reflect on the counselling service that is currently available in your school and whether the people and organisations you are working with represent the student demographic and are aware of structural racism and inequalities the students face.

### 2 Anti-racist approach

Consider the approaches and methods that are used in light of these structural realities; are practitioners applying an anti-racist lens to their approaches?

### 3 Consultation and feedback

The first step to improving services within the school for students is to get their feedback. They should be consulted about who they feel comfortable with and why, what services they require, and what prevents them from speaking about issues such as Islamophobia and racism, which they face inside and outside of the school.

### 4 Create suitable environments

Consultations and feedback from students must be done in an environment that is comfortable for them so that they can express themselves without fear of being reported, ridiculed or dismissed. It should be done either anonymously, or with adults/teachers that the students trust to have these conversations with.

### 5 Extended sessions

It could also be done in more than one session so that there is more time for the conversations. This is especially important if the school has not had set discussions about racism, Islamophobia, media, structures and environments and how they impact the way the students feel previously. It will take time for pupils to be comfortable talking about such topics in a space that has not previously welcomed these conversations.

# Recommended questions for students

- 1 Do pupils feel their mental health needs are supported by what is currently available in school?
- 2 Do pupils feel their school is approaching and teaching mental health in a holistic way that takes into account context?
- 3 Do pupils feel safe expressing themselves and their identities in school? Why or why not?
- 4 What do pupils want included in their learning about mental health in the PSHE curriculum?
- 5 Do pupils feel mental health services understand racism, Islamophobia, social media and the way that impacts them? Why or why not?
- 6 Do pupils feel their school understands racism, Islamophobia, social media and the way that impacts them? Why or why not?
- 7 What would pupils like to see in their school to support their wellbeing?

In upcoming resources, we look to produce guidance on increasing better access to services in school for marginalised and racialised students, how to increase the involvement of young people in the development of school services, the ethics of creative delivery for mental wellbeing, creative delivery as a vehicle for consultation with students, and as a step towards co-creating services that centre pupils' voices.

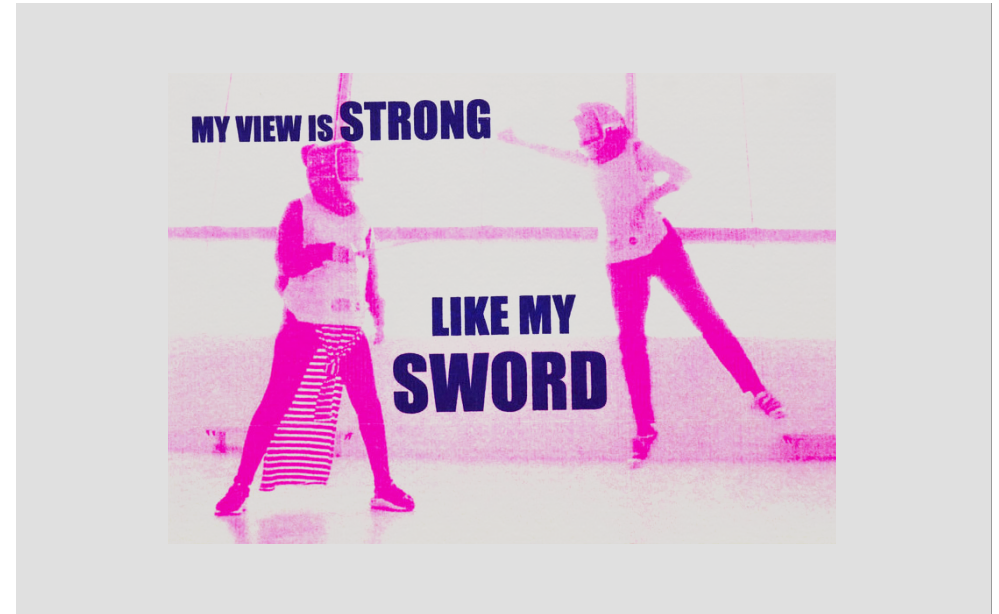
# More about Muslim Girls Fence

**Muslim Girls Fence (MGF) is a project collaboration by the charity Maslaha and British Fencing.**

Through fencing, creativity and conversation, we aim to challenge the barriers that Muslim women and girls face in light of the complex discrimination on the basis of faith, gender and racialised identities. Muslim Girls Fence also challenges the wider perception that the sport 'belongs to' traditionally elitist white males, and by increasing its accessibility opens up the unique self-efficacy benefits of fencing to more communities.

The images used in this report are of the postcards and posters created by pupils from Wapping High and Harlington school, who took part in previous Muslim Girls Fence workshops. The creative workshops explored intersectional feminism and performative means of protest.

The girls made their own postcards inspired by postcards produced by women's suffrage organisations. They chose a powerful fencing stance and a compelling phrase to share messages they felt passionate about.



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To know more about our different strands,  
past projects, research and further resources,  
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[www.muslimgirls\\_fence.org](http://www.muslimgirls_fence.org)

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