

THE CONVERSATION

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Britain's 'missing' Muslim women

July 7, 2017 11.44am BST

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Muslim women pray behind men at mass prayers to celebrate Eid al-Adha in Birmingham. Joe Giddens/PA Archive

Whether British citizens with Muslim beliefs are sufficiently committed to “British values” and to a “British way of life” is a topic of intense political and media debate. Now a new report on “Missing Muslims” launched by the Citizens Commission on Islam, Participation and Public Life on July 3 has challenged the allegation that Muslim citizens are disengaged from the mainstream of British life.

It finds that “most Muslims in the UK are British citizens” and that a large majority of them actively identify as British. Muslim citizens have also been found to vote in elections at a higher rate than the general population, according to the report.

Such clear demonstrations of public engagement and belonging are set against a volatile sociopolitical context. A documented rise in Islamophobia, anti-Muslim prejudice and hate crimes make it increasingly challenging for Muslim citizens to feel they are equally valued as citizens. But the report also finds much wanting within Muslim communities when it comes to participation in British public life – with barriers particularly affecting Muslim women.

The Citizens Commission on Islam, Participation and Public Life was established in 2015 by Citizens UK, a charitable civil society organisation that represents various churches, mosques, synagogues, schools, trade unions and other voluntary associations across England and Wales. Chaired by Conservative MP Dominic Grieve, the commission has held a number of public hearings and received evidence from both organisations and individuals.

Based on my own research on Christian and Muslim women’s experiences of citizenship, I gave evidence to the commission’s hearing in Leicester. My focus was on the stereotyping and discrimination of Muslim women in wider society and on barriers to women’s participation in Muslim faith organisations.

The new report notes that, for Muslim women, “disadvantage in employment is particularly acute” and that Muslim women who wear headscarves are “more likely than men to feel unsafe” due to the verbal and physical abuse they suffer. In explaining Muslim women’s disadvantage in the labour market, the authors highlight discriminatory recruitment and hiring practices among employers.

Women’s role in mosques

The report also observes that Muslim women are missing from the governance structures of Muslim institutions. It says that many mosques “are not welcoming to women’s participation at any serious level”. Within this overall picture of male dominance, there is a growing participation of Muslim women in mosques around the country that have created designated women’s spaces. There is also a desire among many Muslim women to take on mosque leadership, management and teaching roles.

The commission makes a strong recommendation for all Muslim organisations to enable “equal access to leadership opportunities” for women. Whether this would include leadership of religious prayer is unclear, as the report falls short of recommending that women should be able to perform the role of an imam in a mosque. The issue of women leading Muslim prayer is controversial and the commission appears to have simply bypassed the issue.

It also fails to mention the slow but growing emergence of women-led mosques, such as the Inclusive Mosque Initiative in London and plans by the Muslim Women’s Council in Bradford to build a women-led mosque.

The report also ignores that sexual minority groups and individuals (LGBT+) are often excluded from faith institutions. Groups such as IMAAN in London and Al-Jannah in Scotland should be acknowledged for the support they provide to individuals and their contribution to raising awareness and tolerance.

A question of justice and equality

In neglecting such contested issues surrounding gender and sexuality, the report risks homogenising all Muslim communities as deeply traditional and conservative. It also risks minimising the progressive changes that some Muslim women and men are currently engaged in towards developing more inclusive practices within their faith communities.

In attempting to explain why Muslim women experience barriers to participation stemming from their own communities, the report suggests a distinction between “religion” and “culture”. But by blaming this gender inequality on culture, it fails to recognise the importance of men’s interest in maintaining the status quo in order to serve their own privilege and control. The Muslim Women’s Network UK has emphasised these patriarchal structures as the main hindrance to women’s participation in faith communities.

This isn’t just a problem that affects Muslim women. Elsewhere in British life women are underrepre-

sented in important political, economic and religious institutions ranging from the UK parliament to business boardrooms and churches. But gender discrimination within these institutions is rarely excused as resulting from “culture” – as it is within Muslim organisations. Instead, such discrimination in wider society is talked about as relating to justice, equality and human rights for women.

Secularism does not guarantee gender equality, but neither does religion necessarily promote gender inequality and we must pay attention to specific contexts. By making comparisons, such as between Christian and Muslim women, we can establish similarities and differences in experiences and views. Such comparisons are likely to reveal that, as the late MP Jo Cox said, there is more that unites us than divides us.

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