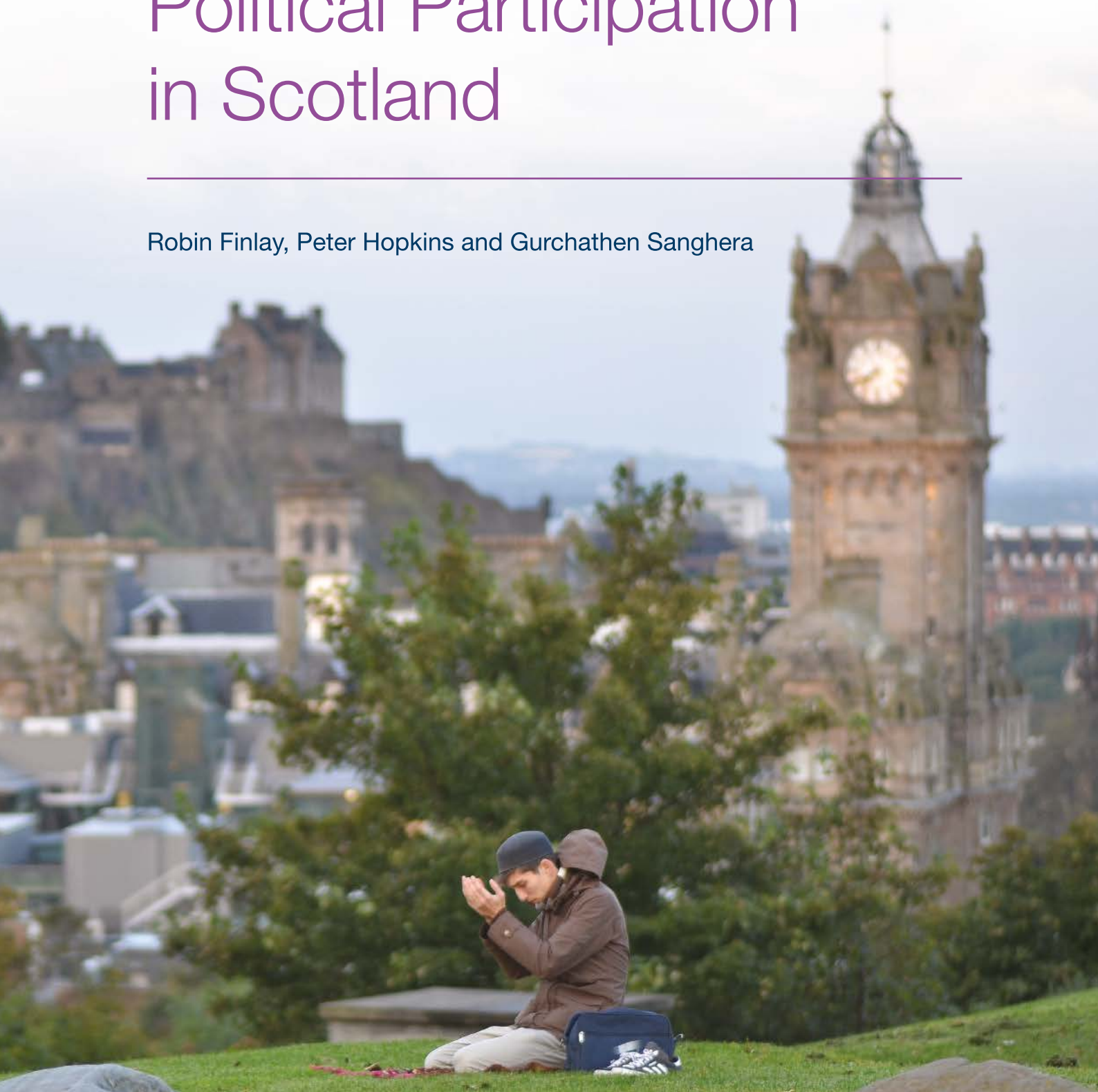




Muslim Youth and Political Participation in Scotland

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Contents

1: Summary of Key Points	1
2: Introduction	2
3: Methodology: How We Did The Research	4
4: Political Concerns and Interests of Young Muslims	6
4.1: Global Politics	6
4.2: Scottish and Local Politics	8
4.3: Media and Political Representations of Muslims	10
5: Political Participation of Young Muslims	12
5.1: Participation in Mainstream Scottish Politics	12
5.2: Social Movements and Activism	14
5.3: Charity, Community and Volunteering Work	15
6: Barriers and Challenges to Political Participation	16
6.1 Islamophobia and Media Representations	16
6.2: Gender Inequalities	17
6.3 Lack of Political Understanding	17
References	18
Research Team	18

1: Summary of Key Points

Methodology: How We Did The Research

- We adopted a qualitative approach and conducted 28 individual interviews and three focus groups with 11 people.
- 39 people participated in the research; 34 of these were young people and five were adults. Most of the participants live in Glasgow and the sample had a gender balance (20 men and 19 women).

Political Concerns and Interests of Young Muslims

- A diversity of global issues interested the participants, demonstrating a strong awareness of international political affairs. Global issues that incorporated rhetoric against Muslims or the suffering of Muslims were especially concerning for many participants.
- Young Muslims demonstrated a knowledge and interest in a variety of national and local Scottish matters. Distinctive aspects of Scottish politics, such as the Independence referendum, Scottish nationalism and the SNP, were of particular interest to many participants.
- Young Muslims were concerned about media and political representations projecting a negative, sensationalist and biased image of Muslims. Greater participation by Muslims in politics and the media was frequently seen as way of countering such representations.

Political Participation of Young Muslims

- The majority of young Muslims actively engaged in politics to some degree, ranging from conventional electoral politics to less conventional forms, such as social activism and charity work.
- An active engagement with Scottish electoral politics was identified as a core form of political participation. Distinctive features of Scotland's political landscape, such as the Independence referendum, Scottish nationalism and the SNP, were integral to participation in mainstream politics.
- Social movements and activism were a salient feature of many participants' political engagement and incorporated a range of organisations, including international, grassroots and university groups.
- Charity, community and volunteering work was carried out by most participants, highlighting a widespread interest in this form of public participation.

Barriers and Challenges to Political Participation

- Everyday experiences of Islamophobia and racism are potentially very discouraging factors in the participation in politics by young Muslims.
- Negative media and political representations of Muslims and the interpretations of government policies, such as 'Prevent', are significant barriers to political participation, damaging the confidence of young Muslims.
- The reinforcement of gender stereotypes about Muslim women - both within Muslim communities and within society at large - present challenges to their engagement in politics.
- A lack of understanding about mainstream politics and the policies of political parties can put young people off engaging with politics and political issues.

The full reference for this report is:
Finlay, Robin, Hopkins, Peter and Sanghera, Gurchathen, (2017) Muslim youth and political participation in Scotland. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Newcastle University

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2: Introduction

This report explores the political participation and political concerns of young Muslims, aged 15 to 27, who live in Scotland. We investigate the different ways that young Muslims in Scotland participate in politics, what political concerns they have, and what barriers and challenges they encounter when engaging with political issues.

Political participation describes the different ways in which people can be political and engage in political matters. Traditionally, political participation has been understood as participation in institutional and electoral politics, such as voting and campaigning for political parties. However, in recent years, being 'political' is considered to incorporate a wider variety of engagements, including social activism, protesting, marching, boycotting, blogging, e-activism, volunteering, community work and mentoring, to name a few (O'Toole and Gale, 2010). Important in these emerging forms of participation are young people, who are frequently considered to perceive and engage in politics in ways distinct from their parents' and grandparents' generation. For Muslim young people, debate about political participation has typically revolved around disengagement

and apathy, or extremism and radicalisation, which, according to more recent research, neglects the complex and varied ways in which young Muslims often engage with politics (O'Toole and Gale, 2010; Mustafa, 2015).

There is still a shortage of nuanced understandings about the political concerns of young Muslims and how they engage (or not) in politics. Moreover, the vast majority of research that explores the political participation of young Muslims within the UK focuses on England. Given the distinct political, social and cultural context that Scotland provides, we contend that it is problematic to transpose experiences from England onto Scotland. First, Scotland has its own Parliament, distinct political parties and a different political history. Second, Scotland has a distinct



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history of Muslim migration and settlement (Hopkins, 2008). Third, it is frequently considered that Muslims find the Scottish context to be more welcoming and easier to identify with than that of other parts of the UK (Elshayyal, 2016). For these reasons, we consider Scotland an important site of analysis, thus conducted research on the political participation of young Muslims with a specifically Scottish focus.

In this report, we respond to the following four aims and present our key findings. We highlight how we did the research before examining the findings.

The project had four interrelated aims:

- To explore how the distinct context of Scotland influences how young Muslims participate and think about politics.
- To analyse the different and emerging ways that young Muslims in Scotland participate politically.
- To detail the core political concerns of young Muslims.
- To highlight the barriers and challenges that young Muslims face when engaging with political issues.



3: Methodology: How We Did The Research

Our focus in this project is the social and political worlds of young Muslims in Scotland. This warranted an approach to research that enabled young people to discuss their views and experiences, explain why they engage in politics or why they do not, and give their motivations for doing so. We therefore used focus group discussions and individual interviews in this research. In addition to our work with young Muslims, we interviewed politicians, local councillors and other Muslims who have significant roles in public and political life in Scotland. Our intention in these interviews was to explore their views about the engagement of Muslim youth in politics in Scotland. Overall, 39 people participated in the project during 2016, and there were 28 individual interviews and three focus groups that included a total of 11 people. Some 34 participants were young people (aged 15–27 years) and five were adults (aged 28 and over). With regard to gender, the sample had 19 women and 20 men. Glasgow dominated the residential location of the participants, and 33 were living in Glasgow/Paisley areas, three in Edinburgh and two in Dundee. Scotland was the country of birth of 24 of the participants, and 14 participants listed countries outside of the UK: Pakistan (seven), Iraq

(one), Azerbaijan (one), Somalia (one), Eritrea (one), Indonesia (one), Spain (one) and Malaysia (one). Some 65% of participants identified as having Pakistani heritage.

In order to recruit young Muslims to participate in this study, we contacted different organisations and groups to help us to identify young people who might be interested in participating. This included university groups, colleges, secondary schools, mosques and refugee organisations. All of those who participated in the research openly consented to doing so. When we quote from research participants, we use a pseudonym in order to protect their confidentiality. We used a focus group or interview schedule when collecting data, but employed it flexibly to fit around the personal and political experiences of each interviewee. Key themes that we tended to cover were: general interest in politics; Scottish politics; local political issues; global politics; and online engagement. All of the data that we collected were fully transcribed before being analysed by theme. This report presents the key issues emerging from this analysis.

Summary

- We adopted a qualitative approach and conducted 28 individual interviews and three focus groups with 11 people.
- 39 people participated in the research; 34 of these were young people and five were adults. Most of the participants live in Glasgow and the sample had a gender balance (20 men and 19 women).

4: Political Concerns and Interests of Young Muslims

What are the political issues that concern young Muslims? How do specific political issues make young Muslims feel? In this section, we examine some of the key political issues and events that concern and interest Muslim young people living in Scotland. We analyse the significance of different political issues, including those framed as global, national, local and digital.

4.1: Global Politics

The research took place during a period when a number of global events (such as the war in Syria, the refugee crisis and the US elections) were creating an uncertain, complicated and unprecedented international political climate. The majority of the young Muslims who participated in the study were - to some degree - knowledgeable and concerned about a number of these issues. The global events and politics made participants feel a level of insecurity that was frequently cited as most concerning. For example, during interviews and focus groups, the 2016 US elections were often mentioned, and many participants asserted a concern about the politics of Donald Trump. For instance, during an interview at a school in Glasgow, Fahad, a Scottish-Pakistani Muslim in his late teens, said:

“And obviously now Trump is coming, if Trump actually wins the election it is going to be about issues that especially impact Muslim communities. Because he supports Muslims not entering the US anymore, and I also fear that he is going to start moving out the Muslims inside of America as well, slowly. And that might influence our politicians as well. Communities might start acting up in our country against Muslim communities, after seeing Trump’s reaction. Because you never know what can happen.” Fahad (Male, 16-18, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)

As this example illustrates, participants were aware of political debate surrounding the build-up to the American elections, and the rhetoric from the Trump camp was often seen as especially concerning. Participants were anxious about how Muslims were represented and talked about by American politicians, and the possible consequences for young Muslims in Scotland in terms of potentially legitimizing a political discourse that is hostile towards Muslims.

Global terrorism was a frequent topic in focus group discussions, with participants highlighting organisations such as the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

and overseas terrorist attacks, such as in Paris (November 2015), as very worrying for young Muslims’ sense of personal security and well-being. For example, many participants were especially concerned about how ISIS used the name of Islam, and that Muslims in Scotland and the UK were sometimes associated with its actions. Numerous participants felt that Muslims had to disavow themselves from the actions of terrorist groups, at which some felt frustrated, as they did not perceive terrorist groups such as ISIS as Islamic. Moreover, there was a sense of frustration that Muslims were often expected to speak out actively in opposition to terrorist attacks, as other denominations were not expected to do the same in similar situations. Consider the views of Sara and Fahad, a young woman and a young man from Glasgow, both of whom are in their late teens and of Scottish-Pakistani heritage:

“Like even during I think it was Friday prayer, which is such an important prayer, they bombed a mosque, during the Friday prayer. Like what right Muslim, what right religious person would bomb their place of worship? And that is what we are trying to say, we are trying to bring across the point that basically ISIS, they are not Muslims. Like they don’t follow Islam, because that is not what Islam teaches. So we are trying to, like, bring that out that ‘oh no, it is not Islam’.” Sara (Female, 16-18, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)

“But I believe people who have a lot of hatred; they just kind of relate us to ISIS. They relate our communities to ISIS, even though we have no link to them whatsoever. For example, if a Christian guy were to murder someone, they wouldn’t blame the entire Christian community for doing it. It is the same thing with ISIS... you can’t blame the Muslim community for it, because we don’t support them.” Fahad (Male, 16-18, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)

The wars in Syria and Iraq and the plight of refugees were other global issues that were commonly mentioned by our participants. While concerns about these issues were



Yao Hui, care of the Alwaleed Centre (www.alwaleed.ed.ac.uk)

not limited to any particular demographic of the Muslim population, and both Scottish-born participants and those born elsewhere regularly discussed these political issues, nonetheless it was particularly significant to those who had themselves been through the experience of migration and asylum. For the majority of participants, there was a sense of concern for and solidarity with those affected by war or seeking refuge in other countries, including Scotland. For instance, during an interview in Glasgow, Amira, a Scottish-Muslim woman in her early twenties, said:

“A lot of people obviously leave their countries, their home because of war, because of you know dictatorship, and they don’t feel safe being threatened by their own governments. So I completely understand that. What has happened in Syria with the wars and the terrorism they are experiencing. I am not surprised that they want to leave their home. I mean I have never known a Syrian wanting to leave their home and seek asylum in another country until three years ago. It is the same with Iraqis as

well. It wasn’t until the first Gulf War that people started leaving Iraq. So yes, wars and imperialism in those countries have caused people to leave their homes.” Amira (Female, 22-27, Scottish-Iraqi, Glasgow)

Other global issues concerning participants included environmental matters, global poverty, global inequality, corruption and concern over the uncertain future of the European Union (Brexit).

Overall, the global issues concerning the participants were diverse and demonstrate a strong awareness about international political affairs. However, the global issues and events that incorporated rhetoric against Muslims, and the suffering of Muslims were especially concerning for many participants. These global issues can engender a sense of anxiety in young Muslims, who may be fearful about experiencing racism and concerned about the impact on their sense of security in Scotland and the wider world (Botterill et al., 2016).



4.2: Scottish and Local Politics

In addition to global political issues, Scottish politics has been going through profound developments in recent years (Rosie, 2015), and the majority of participants conveyed knowledge of and interest in various aspects of Scottish politics. Distinctive features of Scotland's political landscape such as Scottish nationalism, the Independence referendum and the Scottish National Party (SNP) were frequently mentioned during interviews. The Scottish Independence referendum of 2014 was often cited as engendering an interest in mainstream Scottish politics in many participants. For example, Adair, a Scottish-Pakistani Muslim young man in his late teens who lived in Glasgow, said:

“Well initially I wasn’t really into politics to be honest, when I was in S4. But then with the whole campaign about independence and stuff, it actually caught my attention. So, I started researching about it, and I went ‘yeah it’s interesting and important’ because it is a decision that effects us all. Some people think ‘oh the elderly should be making the decision’, but the young people have to have their voice as well.” Adair (Male, 16-18, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)

Issues relating to the referendum, such as Scottish nationalism and the possibility of Scotland becoming an independent country, captivated the interest of many participants. For instance, during an interview in Edinburgh, Aiza, a young Muslim woman in her early twenties, commented:

“Well I actually believe nationalism has generally been exclusive of people but I think Scottish nationalism, we have kind of redefined nationalism, and that is why I feel kind of proud of the movement if you will. I find it has been really inclusive, it’s not about the colour of your skin, and it’s not about where you come from, it’s about what you want for Scotland.” Aiza (Female, 22-27, Scottish, Edinburgh)

This sense of Scottish nationalism as being inclusive was conveyed by a number of participants, demonstrating that it is often perceived as a progressive, civic and liberal form of nationalism, rather than one that is conservative and ethnically defined. For many participants, then, a core political concern is creating an inclusive and open Scotland, with independence - for some - being a way of achieving this. This is linked to a common concern about racism, Islamophobia and general intolerance in Scottish and British society.

Of those who were concerned about the possibility of Scottish independence and Scottish nationalism, a minority were against the idea of independence and splitting up the UK. This was often because they had doubts about the economic viability and security of an independent Scotland. For example:

“I would never [vote to leave the UK], I couldn’t ever, and you know I am proud to be British. Economically we are better, security-wise we are better, in pretty much every way we are better together, to use the slogan.” Derrick (Male, 16-18, British, Glasgow)

At a more localized level, such as the city and neighbourhood that one lives in, issues to do with poverty, inequality, and general security and safety were frequently mentioned during discussions. For example, in a conversation with one school student, he discussed his concerns over safety in his local area of Glasgow:

“I would definitely tell the government to get more patrols in the parks, have more cameras and that. Like when you are walking outside, like I go to the gym late around eight o’clock until ten o’clock at the latest. So I see a lot of people walking behind me, and it gives me a kind of anxiety, if you know what I mean. And you are thinking like you are going to get robbed or jumped or something.” Momo (Male, 16-18, British-Somali, Glasgow)

In another interview, a participant discussed his concerns about poverty and food banks in Glasgow:

“There are a lot of food banks, and we know that this is one of the main problems in Glasgow. And there is I think one in five children in Glasgow living in poverty, so we are really concerned about that.” Raza (Male, 19-21, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)

For some participants, their engagement and interest in UK, Scottish and local politics were considered especially important, as they felt that there was a perception that Muslims were concerned about only international politics. Thus, through having a more visible engagement with

national and local politics, there is a sense that they can counter certain media and political narratives. For example, Linzi, who identifies as an Arab-British young woman, lives in Glasgow and is in her late teens, said:

“With regard to British politics, I think there is also a narrative there that is missing, where Muslims are normally seen as only being concerned about international politics. Like we are not really seen as people who engage within British politics, I think. Obviously we are now getting more into it, where you have got your first Muslim mayor, the first Muslim NUS president, stuff like that. You know... we are getting a bit more heard and seen.” Linzi (Female, 16-18, Arab-British, Glasgow)

Overall, the majority of participants demonstrated a knowledge and interest in a variety of national and local Scottish matters. Distinctive aspects of Scottish politics, such as the Independence referendum, Scottish nationalism and the SNP, were of special interest to many young Muslims.

4.3: Media and Political Representations of Muslims

The way that Muslims are represented in media and political narratives was a pervasive concern articulated by many of the young Muslims in Scotland who took part in this study. Most participants felt that the media in general represented Muslims in a negative light, and that this contributed to everyday Islamophobia and racism. Reporting about terrorism was often seen as one of the most problematic aspects of the media, as many felt that it perpetuated problematic stereotypes by making Islam synonymous with terrorist acts. A number of participants also felt that there was a clear bias against Muslims, and that the religion of people from other denominations was rarely mentioned when they committed a crime or atrocity. For example, Raza said:

“I am, like, ‘Okay, if somebody were to set off a bomb in a town centre, probably they would have mental issues as well.’ But they [media] make it seem like when it is a Muslim; it is a sort of well thought out strategy to kill people. When it is a non-Muslim terrorist attack, it is this whole kind of, this person was unwell, and they had mental problems. That is very frustrating because people always say now when you hear the word terrorism, and even for Muslims I think... For me, when I hear terrorist attack, the first thing I think is that it was probably a Muslim that has done it. Because the media has sort of painted this image of it. So that is really frustrating.” Raza (Male, 19-21, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)

Social media - such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube - were frequently cited as some of the most common places that young Muslims experienced overt Islamophobia and stereotyping. For instance, during a focus group, Fahad stated:

“Yesterday I was watching a YouTube video and it was just a pretty harmless video of people trying Pakistani snacks. And obviously I just randomly went to the comments section just to see what people wrote about. And loads of people were just kind of against Muslims and saying how Muslims should be thrown out of America, thrown out of UK, all kinds of racist comments that you just kind of feel... You just kind of feel scared knowing that people like that are out there. You never know, you might meet somebody like that when you are walking down the street. Obviously I don't think I will meet somebody like that in Glasgow, definitely not. But you never know.” Fahad (Male, 16-18, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)

Young Muslims frequently see and receive Islamophobic and racist comments on social media, which can engender a sense of insecurity and fear in their everyday lives.

In addition to the media, political narratives were mentioned by some participants as spreading anti-Muslim feeling and Islamophobia. The UK government's 'Prevent' strategy was seen as especially problematic, with a number of participants asserting that it contributed to a general suspicion of Muslims and put young people off from engaging with politics. For instance, Azam, a British-Pakistani Muslim young man from Edinburgh, said:

“So ‘Prevent’ comes in, you will have heard a lot about it in the press? And that is, sort of, creates this toxic climate of fear, one where you can't say certain things because they might be labelled as extremist.” Azam

Because of these perceived negative representations, many participants wanted to see more balanced representations being conveyed in the media and politics. Some wanted Muslims to be simply shown as 'normal people', rather than fanatics or terrorists. For example:

“We just want to show we are normal people like the rest. We just want to have a family and job, that is it. We don't want to go bomb a place... we know that is not what our religion teaches us.” Duz (Female, 16-18, Asian-British, Glasgow)

A number of participants felt that the positive contributions of Muslims in Scottish and UK society were rarely reported, and this is something that they would like to see more of in media and politics. A way of achieving this for many participants was having more Muslims who are involved in politics and the media. For instance, during two different interviews, Raza and Anna observed:

“One of the things that the present generation is trying to do is to get involved in media, to get involved in film, to get involved in politics, to get involved you know not just your usual science, technology, engineering and maths. To branch out. I think that is really important for Muslims and for how they are seen.” Raza (Male, 19-21, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)



“I think there should be more Muslim reporters and journalists. Because obviously they will be writing from their point of view and they would be going in with less bias and be more representative of each side of the community.” Anna (Female, 16-18, British-Pakistani, Glasgow)

Overall, media and political representations are often perceived to project a negative and sensationalist representation of Muslims, engendering Islamophobia and racism, and this is a major concern for many of the young participants. Greater participation of Muslims in politics and the media is frequently seen as way of countering problematic representations.

Summary

- A diversity of global issues interested the participants, demonstrating a strong awareness of international political affairs. Global issues that incorporated rhetoric against Muslims or the suffering of Muslims were especially concerning for many participants.
- Young Muslims demonstrated a knowledge and interest in a variety of national and local Scottish matters. Distinctive aspects of Scottish politics, such as the Independence referendum, Scottish nationalism and the SNP, were of particular interest to many participants.
- Young Muslims were concerned about media and political representations projecting a negative, sensationalist and biased image of Muslims. Greater participation by Muslims in politics and the media was frequently seen as way of countering such representations.



5: Political Participation of Young Muslims

How do young Muslims participate in politics? What are the different ways in which young Muslims engage with political issues? Here we look at how young Muslims in Scotland actively participate in politics. We analyse three core forms of participation that we identified in the research: participation in mainstream Scottish politics; social movements and activism; and charity, community and volunteering work.

5.1: Participation in Mainstream Scottish Politics

An active engagement in Scottish electoral politics was identified as a core form of political participation for many young Muslims that counters - to some extent - the notion that young people are disengaged from mainstream politics.

We found that the distinctive features of Scotland's political landscape have been integral to the participation of many young Muslims in mainstream politics. For example, the Independence referendum of 2014 and the lowering of the voting age to include 16- and 17-year-olds were seen as the catalyst for participation in electoral politics for numerous participants. For example:

"I think the referendum did wonders here. Because I wasn't as interested in politics until the referendum came about. You know, this is a major decision for people to make, so you think 'Okay, I have to start reading about politics here, to figure out what is going on, so I can make my decision'." Raza (Male, 19–21, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)

The majority of participants who were eligible to vote said that they had voted in the referendum, while many of those who were too young said that it had still engendered an interest in politics for them. In addition to voting, the referendum was an incentive for some participants to engage in campaigning and canvassing in their local area. For instance, during an interview in Glasgow, a participant talked about his political engagement during the run-up to the referendum:

"Oh, we were campaigning, we were going door to door and everything over here. Even my parents, everyone was involved. Especially in Glasgow, it is a really political site I think, so there were a lot of people getting involved with it." Raza (Male, 19-21, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)

Issues and movements pertinent to the referendum such as Scottish nationalism and the SNP were also cited as aspects of Scottish mainstream politics that a number of participants engaged with and supported. For example, during an interview in Edinburgh, a participant talked about his support for Scottish independence and the SNP:

"So I am in the SNP, I am part of that party. I have been in the party since I was 16 years old. I came to the SNP, as I liked their politics. So I was quite young, I was only 15, 16 but I was really interested in independence and how we shouldn't be letting someone else in England dictate our future, it should be us. So I got involved with the Yes Scotland movement, when I was 15, 16. And I joined a group called SAFI. I don't know if you have heard of them? Scots Asians For Independence. So with them I became Youth Officer, so I was doing different things engaging young people. Going to a mosque, handing out Yes leaflets. Engaging with the Muslim community." Azam (Male, 16-18, British-Pakistani, Edinburgh)

For many participants, then, the referendum and political parties, movements and associations that campaigned for or against independence were integral to their active political participation in mainstream Scottish politics.

This demonstrates that many of the young Muslims were politicized - to some degree - as a result of distinctive features of Scottish politics such as the 2014 referendum and Scottish nationalism.

In addition to more conventional forms of participation such as campaigning and voting, participants engaged in debate about mainstream political issues through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The majority of participants gained information about politics through social media, while a number also engaged in debate through posting and commenting online on political issues. For instance, during an interview in Glasgow, Adair talked about his use of social media:

"I think there is a lot of political awareness through social media as well. And that parties campaign through Facebook and Twitter. That actually makes it more attractive, because stuff like hash tag, it is short and simple. I have been more engaged in political parties, because I feel I know what the different parties want." Adair (Male, 16-18, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)

Some of the young Muslims who participated in this research were members of the Scottish Youth Parliament and played an active role in politics through this. The Youth Parliament assists members to engage with politics and political debate through a number of activities, such as campaigning about youth issues (i.e. mental health, poverty) and lobbying politicians about them. For example, Khan, a young Scottish-Pakistani Muslim, talked in an interview about the activities that he carried out as a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYP):

"So some of the things that we do is meet our local MSP and MP and councillors and update them on our work in the Youth Parliament and what the national campaign is. So recently we met Humza Yousaf who is the MSP for Glasgow Pollack about our mental health campaign called 'Speak Your Mind' at SYP. So we delivered a leaflet about all the facts and how NHS waiting times are terrible and they need to improve. And that young people feel that there is not enough high quality services across Scotland. So what we did was update him on the work and ask him to push the parliament to obviously listen to our concerns." Khan (Male, 16-18, Scottish Pakistani, Glasgow)

5.2: Social Movements and Activism

Participation in social movements and activism were salient features of the political engagement of a number of participants, demonstrating that young Muslims also engage with politics through informal and less institutionalized routes. The activism of participants incorporated both global and local issues, and involved international as well as local and grassroots organisations. The most frequently mentioned forms of activism included protesting, protest marching and awareness-raising events. A cause that participants commonly campaigned about was the plight of refugees and asylum seekers, as this was especially apparent to the young Muslims who had migrated to Scotland or had fled persecution in their countries of origin. For instance, during an interview with Fvodo, he stated:

“I have been strongly engaged with activism in Scotland, I mainly work with refugees, well that’s probably what I’m mainly known for, but I wouldn’t say I only do refugee stuff, but I do mainly work with refugees, immigration topics. I’m a strong supporter of human rights and disability rights, too. I’m also very much anti-Trident, anti-nuclear. As a result, I started to do convoys [trips to support refugees in France and Greece] as well and I just broadened my horizons. On September 15th in Glasgow, an event happened regarding Alan Kurdi, the child who unfortunately drowned near Syria. My friend said let’s make an event about that and that went viral, like, global viral. We gathered 12,000 people in Glasgow to raise awareness and overall 40 cities participated.”
Fvodo (Male, 22-27, Azerbaijani-Scottish, Glasgow)

A catalyst for a number of participants to become involved in campaigns and activism was joining university societies, especially Islamic societies. This highlights that attending university was significant to the engagement in political activism of many young Muslims. For example:

“When I went to university I got involved with the Islamic Society. So what we do is, the main thing was to provide prayer facilities for the Muslim students at the university, but we also tried to get them politically active and to campaign as well. So we organized events as well. We really want Muslim students to have their voice heard within the university. So that is kind of where I have gotten involved with student politics and so on.”
Raza (Male, 19-21, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)

It is important to note that many of the participants who engaged in political activism and social movements also had an interest in Scottish electoral politics. Thus, participants frequently engaged in politics through both conventional and non-conventional routes.

5.3: Charity, Community And Volunteering Work

Another significant form of political participation that overlaps with social movements and activism is charity, community and volunteering work. These types of engagements are considered to function as an alternative public sphere of political participation, and contribute to new and emerging patterns of young people’s political actions. The majority of participants had carried out charity, community and volunteering work, highlighting their widespread interest in this form of public participation. For some, charity work was an important component of the work by their mosque and involved community work in local areas. For instance, consider the views of Shakir:

“So the young community do a lot of charity work, we do a lot of clean ups working with the local community, that’s what we try and do, a lot of sports, too. Basically, we try to engage the younger generations from six onwards. So for instance, we did a cleanup on New Year’s Day, which was in Glasgow and Dundee at the same time, so do you know Dundee Law [a key hillside landmark in Dundee]? It’s sort of the peak point in Dundee, so we went there, did a lot of cleaning up there, and in Glasgow we did a clean up.”
Shakir (Male, 22-27, British-Asian, Dundee)

The holy month of Ramadan often involves Muslims contributing to charity work and, for numerous participants, this was a period when they participated in volunteering and community work:

“Yeah like our Central Mosque, that is in Glasgow, they will usually do charity work for the poor people and like particularly in Ramadan, near Eid, I have participated in that and we gave what we can to get help out the poor people who can’t afford to celebrate Eid. Or... so they have food at Ramadan.” Fahad (Male, 16-18, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)

For others, charity work was a key aspect of their political activism, assisting in raising both awareness and money for certain local and global causes. Volunteering also functioned as a practice that raised the political awareness of some participants. Consider Aiza’s views:

“So, from like 15 I was volunteering in different charities back home in Glasgow. It was kind of women’s groups, kind of Water Aid, you know all sort of student groups, nuclear disarmament, you name it. Kind of really actively involved. And that kind of increased my awareness of the political reasons behind social injustice, if you will? So

that’s kind of how I got involved, and how, basically, there was so much poverty and actually so many hidden issues in Scotland that weren’t being addressed.” Aiza (Female, 22-27, Scottish, Edinburgh)

Overall, we identified a variety of ways in which participants undertook charity, community and volunteering work, allowing them to engage with a range of local, national and global issues.



Summary

- The majority of young Muslims actively engaged in politics to some degree, ranging from conventional electoral politics to less conventional forms, such as social activism and charity work.
- An active engagement with Scottish electoral politics was identified as a core form of political participation. Distinctive features of Scotland’s political landscape, such as the Independence referendum, Scottish nationalism and the SNP, were integral to participation in mainstream politics.
- Social movements and activism were a salient feature of many participants’ political engagement and incorporated a range of organisations, including international, grassroots and university groups.
- Charity, community and volunteering work was carried out by most participants, highlighting a widespread interest in this form of public participation.

6: Barriers and Challenges to Political Participation

What barriers do young Muslims encounter when engaging with politics? Are there issues that make political participation difficult for Muslim young people?

Here we analyse the principal barriers and difficulties associated with the political participation of young Muslims in Scotland. We examine three core barriers to participation: Islamophobia and media representations, gender inequality and lack of political understanding.

6.1: Islamophobia and Media Representations

For the majority of participants, Islamophobia and racism were seen as some of the most significant barriers to participation in politics. Most participants believed that a greater presence of Muslims in mainstream politics would be positive for society but, because of Islamophobia, politics was often seen as a challenging career path. For example, during a focus group, the participants stated:

“I think that it would be a good thing if there were more Muslims in the political community.” Abida (Female, 16-18, British-Pakistani, Glasgow)

“I think we have got a few but not that many.” Salma (Female, 16-18, Moroccan-British, Glasgow)

“I feel like you would probably get a lot of hate if you were a public Muslim figure.” Anna (Female, 16-18, British-Pakistani, Glasgow)

“You would have to have a lot of confidence and you would have to be thick skinned.” Salma (Female, 16-18, Moroccan-British, Glasgow)

“I don’t think everyone is put off, but there is less Muslim people that are involved, because it is more difficult. Like a lot of Muslims don’t really get involved in politics and stuff like that, because they are scared in a way.” Lara (Female, 16-18, British-Lebanese, Glasgow)

As a result of government and media fears of Muslim radicalisation, there is considered to be a general suspicion of young Muslims in the UK that has meant that it is a difficult climate in which to express political opinion, according to a number of participants. There is a fear

that voicing political feelings may be misconstrued or result in Islamophobia. The impact is that it discourages some young people from engaging in politics and in political debate:

“I feel like I can’t voice my opinion, because I feel like I am too scared of the reaction I am going to get. There will be things that I feel strongly about but I won’t write anything because I know that there will be someone out there that has something to say. It kind of discourages you, but then obviously there are people who are more proud and they can say it. But I feel, like, for a young teenage girl... the controversy of her voicing her opinion.” Anna (Female, 16-18, British-Pakistani, Glasgow)

As highlighted earlier, the way that Muslims are represented by the media and certain political discourses was a major concern for many participants. A feeling that Muslims were frequently represented negatively was considered another barrier to engaging in politics:

“One [barrier] of them would be the media. The way the media might portray Muslims that could deter some young Muslims from getting involved in politics. Like being portrayed in a negative light or the media could pick up on this or that, you know young Muslims might feel they can’t open up, they can’t say everything. They can’t even talk about their own history of the religion, because they are going to be blamed for something.” Azam (Male, 16-18, British-Pakistani, Edinburgh)

Everyday Islamophobia, a suspicion of Muslim identities, and negative media and political representations create significant societal barriers for young Muslims, making engagement in politics potentially challenging and intimidating.



6.2: Gender Inequalities

A number of women participants felt that they had to deal with multiple prejudices, based not only on religion but also gender. Issues such as gender norms within communities, the stereotyping of Muslim women and everyday sexism were emphasized as potential barriers to political participation by a number of participants. This highlights that young Muslim women encounter distinctive challenges in their engagement with politics and public life. For instance, when one participant was asked if she thought it was more difficult for young women to get involved in politics, she stated:

“Oh yeah, without a doubt. Without a doubt! Within the BME [black and minority ethnic] Muslim community there is a school of thought that would probably say ‘should she be at the forefront’. There is that school of thought you know. And there is the indigenous population that will look at me and think well actually ‘Have you got a voice as a Muslim women? There is that image you know about Muslim women.’” Bahija (Female, 28+, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)

The quote underlines that Muslim women often have to deal with multiple stereotypes and prejudices that can create particular difficulties when publicly engaging with politics. Nonetheless, we also observed a growing confidence in some young Muslim women, with a number of participants engaging in politics and taking on prominent public roles. There are positive signs, then, that young Muslim women are challenging and rejecting gender prejudices, and becoming more visibly involved in politics and campaigning.

6.3: Lack of Political Understanding

For some participants, a lack of political understanding, especially with respect to mainstream politics and political parties, was considered a main barrier to participation in



politics. There was a sense that political parties did not communicate their policies clearly to young people and it was difficult to know what the different parties stand for. Therefore, better communication between political parties and young people was considered to be an important way to engage young people in politics. For instance:

“I think perhaps the key thing for me is a lack of understanding. I think that is what is putting young people off. I don’t think young people always have information to engage with it. So a main barrier must be the lack of understanding and not knowing about different parties and stuff. I think they could involve young people more, speak with them more. So the main one [barrier] would be understanding.” Adair (Male, 16-18, Scottish-Pakistani, Glasgow)

Summary

- Everyday experiences of Islamophobia and racism are potentially very discouraging factors in the participation in politics by young Muslims.
- Negative media and political representations of Muslims and the interpretations of government policies, such as ‘Prevent’, are significant barriers to political participation, damaging the confidence of young Muslims.
- The reinforcement of gender stereotypes about Muslim women - both within Muslim communities and within society at large - present challenges to their engagement in politics.
- A lack of understanding about mainstream politics and the policies of political parties can put young people off engaging with politics and political issues.

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