



AGENDA
alliance

SPOTLIGHT:

Muslim Women in Prison Project

YOUNG WOMEN'S JUSTICE PROJECT

For our Young Women's Justice Project, focusing on young women aged 17-25 in contact with the criminal justice system, we have commissioned a series of guest blogs from organisations across the country delivering vital, tailored support to young women at risk of or in current contact with criminal justice system.

Across our Alliance, our members and partner organisations support women from a diverse range of ethnicities, faiths and cultural backgrounds. It's crucial that we listen to and amplify what they're telling us about the experiences of women from their communities, and what works to support them.

This deep-dive into the work of the Muslim Women in Prison project shows that where young women have access to specialist services – including those led by and for communities they identify with – key opportunities can emerge to disrupt cycles of disadvantage, supporting girls and young women to lead healthy, positive lives, free from trauma and abuse.

This first guest piece is co-authored by Dr Sofia Buncy, Founder and Director of the Muslim Women in Prison project, and Dr Alexandria Bradley, a Senior Lecturer at Leeds Beckett University's Centre for Justice, Law and Policy.



YOUNG WOMEN'S JUSTICE PROJECT

The Muslim Women in Prison Project (MWIP) was established in 2013 under the leadership of Dr Sofia Buncy. It was created in response to the 'invisibility' and lack of understanding of Muslim women's experiences within the criminal justice system both by statutory services as well as wider communities.

In some ways, the issue of Muslim women in prison was very much steeped in social stigma and taboo. In order to prise this open, MWIP undertook the first ever piece of research in the country to explore the unique challenges faced by this group of women, both in custody and after release.

The resulting report revealed some unfortunate truths: that Muslim women entering the criminal justice system were unable to avail timely help and support in the community, and many came from difficult backgrounds of domestic violence, sexual violence and coercion. It was also evident that the ripple effects of incarceration and the subsequent shame of this quickly spread to other members of the family and community, and that this particular group of women may be subjected to 'shunning' or ostracisation.

MWIP's work

A key feature of MWIP's work is education and awareness raising, ensuring services are aligned with cultural and faith sensitivities in their response to the specific experiences of Muslim women. It also plays an important advocacy role by working with the criminal justice system to raise awareness, influence policy, and amplify the voices of Muslim women. Much of the work of MWIP is documented in the three award winning reports they have developed over the last decade.^{1 2 3}

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1. Sofia Buncy and Ishtiaq Ahmed (2014) Second Chance: Fresh Horizons – A study into the needs and experiences of Muslim women at HMP and YOI New Hall & Askham Grange prisons during custody and post-release. Available online at https://wearenwjc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/MWIP_Report.pdf
 2. Sofia Buncy and Ishtiaq Ahmed (2019) Sisters in Desistance: Community-based solutions for Muslim women post-prison. Available online at <https://wearenwjc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Sisters-in-Desistance-report.pdf>
 3. Russell Webster (2018) Giving a voice to Muslim women in prison. Available online at <https://www.russellwebster.com/invisible-muslim-women/>

Young Muslim women

In 2022, MWIP supported and consulted on the development of Agenda Alliance's report on young women in the criminal justice system. It quickly became apparent there was no particular evidence or witness testimonies on the experiences of young Muslim women, and MWIP worked closely with the team at Agenda Alliance to facilitate those fragile and often frightened voices, with the outcome being both powerful and eye-opening. MWIP then realised there was a need for a more in-depth exploration of the experiences of young adult Muslim women which had not been researched previously. As a result, MWIP was commissioned by Barrow Cadbury Trust in 2023 to work alongside Dr Alexandria Bradley and Dr Sarah Goodwin to shine a light on this invisible area.

The emerging research led collaboratively by Dr Sofia Buncy, Dr Alexandria Bradley and Dr Sarah Goodwin through MWIP, Leeds Beckett University and Sheffield Hallam University highlights that young Muslim women in contact with the criminal justice system are a "minority within a minority": significantly under-researched, frequently invisible in official data, and experiencing overlapping inequalities connected to gender, race, faith, age and class.

The research identifies recurring themes of sexual violence, exploitation, abusive relationships, trauma, shame, isolation, and barriers to engaging with statutory services. Bradley, Goodwin and Buncy's work particularly emphasises the role of "transference of shame" and stigma in shaping Muslim women's experiences of criminalisation and desistance. Women describe how offending is often experienced not simply as an individual issue, but as something perceived to impact the honour, reputation and marriage prospects of entire families and wider communities.

Their research also demonstrates how young Muslim women can face distinct forms of silencing and invisibility. Young women describe fears around disclosure, community judgement, family rejection and being misunderstood by professionals unfamiliar with faith and cultural dynamics. Some women reported having to relocate to entirely new cities following criminal justice involvement due to gossip, threats, social exclusion or concerns for personal and family safety. Bradley, Goodwin and Buncy note that these experiences appear qualitatively different from those commonly reported by Muslim men or non-Muslim women in desistance research.

These findings further highlight how mainstream criminal justice services frequently lack cultural and faith literacy. Young women spoke about experiences of stereotyping, assumptions about language or extremism, limited understanding of Muslim women's lives, and support services that were not designed with their realities in mind. Emerging findings strongly suggest the need for age-appropriate, gender-responsive, culturally competent and faith-sensitive approaches that are shaped directly by the voices and lived experiences of young Muslim women themselves.

CASE STUDY: NIYA'S* STORY

**Name has been changed*

Content warning: contains descriptors of sexual violence and suicidal thoughts

Niya came from a very challenging family background. In her teens, she was removed from the family home following her father's incarceration for involvement in the supply of Class A drugs. There was also a significant level of violence within the household, which led to Niya being placed into care.

Her experience of entering the care system came as a shock. She initially believed that her stay would be temporary, and recalls looking at other girls and thinking she would not be there for the 'long stay' like them.

Niya was the only person of colour in the care home, and found it extremely difficult to fit in. She says that this was partly due to her cultural and faith needs not being properly understood, and partly because established friendship groups already existed.

Niya's time in care was marked by severe bullying, and she repeatedly asked staff for support, particularly around the discrimination she faced as a Muslim Pakistani girl, but received very little help.

CASE STUDY: NIYA'S* STORY

Wanting to fit in, she began spending time with some of the other girls and experienced peer pressure, leading her to drink alcohol and use cannabis for the first time in her life.

During this period, Niya was introduced to male friends of the girls at the care home, and was subsequently raped by a white male. The experience was horrific, and Niya felt deeply ashamed as this was also her first ever sexual experience. She did not disclose what had happened to her friend.

Throughout her time in care, Niya longed to be reunited with her family, as in her culture it was highly unusual for an unmarried girl to be separated from her family. When she reached adulthood, she returned to the family home. Shortly afterwards, her family took her to Pakistan, where she was forced into a marriage against her will. She was subjected to intense pressure and emotional blackmail to comply. During this time, she also experienced marital rape.

Niya pleaded with her family to allow her to return to the UK. Once back, she told them that she no longer wished to remain in the marriage. This led to further conflict and violence within the home.

Over time, Niya became increasingly depressed and emotionally fragile, experiencing suicidal thoughts.

CASE STUDY: NIYA'S* STORY

A serious altercation later took place at home, during which the pressure on her to remain in the forced marriage became overwhelming. In desperation, she jumped out of a window. When the police arrived, Niya tried to explain the pressure she had been under and why she had taken such drastic action. Instead of believing her account, the police listened to her mother who maintained Niya was difficult and aggressive and that she felt under threat from her daughter, an allegation that Niya vehemently denies.

During the arrest, Niya resisted, which resulted in a charge of assaulting an emergency worker. The police ultimately accepted her mother's version of events, and Niya was sentenced to one month in prison. Her account was not taken seriously, and her history of vulnerability, including her experiences in care, exposure to risk, and the forced marriage was not fully recognised.

This left Niya feeling, once again, unseen, unheard, and struggling to comprehend the treatment she had received as a victim of so many injustices.

Looking forward

Niya's story is one of many, a stark reality of the hidden but troubling experiences that many young Muslim women in the criminal justice system face, and a demonstration of the devastating repercussions of a system that responds too late to be able to offer timely, tailored support. However, MWIP's work means that young Muslim women do not have to struggle alone. MWIP's interventions show the value of support provided by professionals that can meaningfully engage with young women's ethnicity, faith and experiences of entrenched, systemic racism and gendered Islamophobia whilst raising awareness with decision-makers in challenging harmful policies and practices, and helping young women make sense of the trauma and disadvantage they have experienced.

MWIP offers a wide range of community-led practical services designed to support Muslim women holistically. This includes through-the-gate support upon release from prison, helping women prepare for release and reintegrate into society. On release, MWIP supports with practical affairs, such as securing safe accommodation, accessing benefits, and meeting basic needs, alongside faith-sensitive family mediation to rebuild relationships and support women with children. In addition, MWIP supports access to education, training, volunteering, and employment opportunities, helping women build independence and stability within their own communities.

MWIP is proud to say that two of their women with lived experience now work for probation services themselves.

You can find out more information about the Muslim Women in Prison Project [here](#).

A decorative graphic in the bottom left corner consisting of a series of white diagonal lines of varying lengths that intersect to form a complex, woven geometric pattern.

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