



# The Inner Lives of Troubled Young Muslims



## Context and Framework

On September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the world experienced the first quakes of Islamicist nihilism and arbitrary violence. Three wars and various regional conflicts followed. No place on earth is safe from random terrorist attacks. Al-Qaeda guerrillas and satellite groups have killed thousands of civilians of every background. Most of the victims are Muslims. Isis, the most well organised Jihadi force, has swept through parts of the Middle East. In the last decade, western born Muslims have been drawn to the hard-line ideologues and their certainties. In 2016, three smart young British Bangladeshi schoolgirls from the east end of London ran away from home and ended up in Raqqa, Syria. One of them may have been killed in a bomb blast. There has been no other information about them. They vanished into a black hole. We all ask why; we all seek answers. Humza Arshad, a YouTube minor celeb who has many young Muslim fans, expresses the views of bewildered fellow citizens: ‘No one would ever have thought something like that could happen to them and it made me realise that if it can happen to families like that, it can happen to anyone.’ He thinks young people are being brainwashed online. (Financial Times, 18/10/16). So do the police, concerned Muslim organisations, politicians and intelligence agencies. Accumulating evidence confirms what is feared: real and virtual proselytisers are getting into young minds and turning them.

But hardly anyone is exploring fundamental, underlying questions: what makes these young recruits so gullible? What is their psychological state? How do they feel about their lives? Are disillusionment and unhappiness pushing them into death cults? When white Europeans or Americans go on killing sprees, their inner lives and hinterlands are investigated; when Muslims kill, the focus moves immediately to external authorities, the websites, and commanders promoting terrorism. It is as if Muslims are unthinking, unfeeling robots. We need to know more about the inner lives of radicalised Muslims, in order to save them from themselves and exploiters.

## Some Facts and Theories

Across the UK, the population of Muslims is around 2.71 million and growing. They are the least accepted of all the religious, racial and ethnic minorities in the UK (Abrahams and Houston, 2006). Muslim women are the most economically disadvantaged group in Britain.

Self-harming among the young in the total population is rising, so too depression and mental distress. Online porn is distorting sexual expectations in teenagers. (NSPCC 2016) To date there has been no ethnic breakdown of the figures available for these deep problems. When it comes to wellbeing, mental health and sexuality, there is a lack of awareness and inclusivity of those deemed too ‘different’. (Evans, E, Hawton, K and Rodham, K, 2005.) There should be but isn’t much national interest in the wellbeing of young Muslims. They have been collectively criminalised.

Key questions seem not to be asked. For example: Do frustration, poor family and community communication, sexual restrictions, the lack of autonomy, and cultural conservatism in an age of cultural liberalism lead to alienation and anger? And why does a young man or woman want to die and be killed or imprisoned? What makes them so devoid of hope or optimism or human connections?

Thousands of young Muslims are perfectly well adjusted, confident, happy and effective. More of them are succeeding in their chosen careers and becoming national role models. However, sporadic and anecdotal evidence indicates that a significant number of young Muslim men and women feel shame and guilt for being gay or sexually liberated, experience verbal or physical abuse and racism, and are disaffected. Disconnect with parents, family, faith and ethnic community is another serious problem. Dealing with these multiple issues can lead to disorientation and distress.

Heterosexuality is central within the proscribed Islamic tenets for life. According to scholars and believers. Homosexuality is forbidden in the Qu'ran, Islamic Law (Sharia) and the Hadith (teachings of the Prophet Mohammad). Furthermore, sexual relations are only permitted within marriage. Isolation, severe punishment and rejection are used to control these urges and behaviours.

Muslim men associated with Isis see women as sexual objects and use religious validation for these attitudes. British Muslim females are drawn into this web because they are impressionable. Their gullibility is partly the result of how they were raised, the absence of dialogue and an open environment within which there is a discussion about what sex, relationships, equality and family constitutes. (Singh, 2009, Gabb and Singh, 2015).

Prevent, the government's response to radicalisation is seen as suspect as well as punitive. The policies address symptoms not the deep roots of the problem. The mental and emotional states of young Muslims before they reach the point of no return remain unexamined. Most are never helped before they fall into extremism, self-destruction and psychotic behaviours. Such interventions are being developed in Germany and Scandinavian countries and most recently in Minnesota, USA.

### **The Need for Research**

Within this contextual framework, the need for pioneering research seems self-evident. From childhood to adulthood, countless South Asian Muslims seem to be unable to share their desires, needs, feelings or fantasies. Why, for example, are Muslim men more likely than others to form grooming gangs? What is going on in their heads? Why are young women forced into marriages? What is the cultural anxiety that underpins that practice? What does that do to the sense of self and autonomy? Few outsiders know that men are forced into marriages. The focus has always been on female victims. One hypothesis to explore; do such men who were denied basic choices, go on to vent their anger through violence and self-exclusion? Another aspect to investigate would be the stress of living between two cultures, two sets of expectations.

The focus of this preliminary study will be London and Bradford. London has a more diverse and mobile Muslim population than Bradford, where most Muslim immigrants have been settled for over half a century and come from a particular place. This will enable researchers to observe commonalities as well as deep variations in upbringing, attitudes and family values.

### **Aims and Objectives**

1. To explore family dynamics and personal autonomy in the selected sample
2. To explore the sexualities of young British Muslims, their values, practices and emotional hinterlands.
3. To explore how geopolitics, migration, racism and economic inequalities affect troubled young Muslims. What hurts or confounds them most? How they process the experiences? Are they resilient or not?