

# Inconvenient voices: Muslim women in the Labour Party

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Tackling the discrimination faced by Muslim women in the Labour Party requires a better understanding of the way gender intersects with ethnicity in maintaining power structures, inside and outside the party.

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In February 2016, a group of women led by the Muslim Women's Network UK spoke to BBC Newsnight about their experiences within the Labour Party. Foizia Parveen spoke of a smear campaign against her during a local government selection contest: Muslim men in her local Birmingham Labour Party had turned up to her parents' home and intimidated her mother to stop Parveen from standing for selection. They claimed that she was having an affair with an existing councillor. Shazia Bashir, a party member in Peterborough, spoke of how Muslim men in her local party made her step aside in a local selection process because, despite being 31 years of age, she didn't have her father's consent and support to stand. The Labour Party responded to the programme by issuing a weak statement claiming that its processes are 'fair, democratic and robust' and that it was committed to making sure that 'candidates are representative of the communities they seek to represent'. The party did not acknowledge the women's specific complaints and experiences. Soon the issue was forgotten, the press moved on, and nothing was done to support Muslim women who face misogynistic discrimination from Muslim men within the Labour Party.

My argument in this article is that if Labour wants to address this question it needs a much better understanding of the complex ways in which gender intersects with ethnicity and race.

## Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality, a theoretical framework that was developed by black feminists in the United States in the 1980s, is key to understanding Muslim women's experiences and the Labour Party's (lack of) response to them. An intersectional theoretical approach shows us why Muslim women face so much discrimination – and why no one has done anything about it.

First conceptualised by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality refuses to treat gender and race as mutually exclusive categories of analysis – that is, it shows that they intersect. Intersectionality demands that we question the idea of group homogeneity, and focus our attention on the least-privileged members of every group. Crenshaw argued that the experiences of black women in US society could not be explained by simply adding together the experiences of white women and the experiences of black men.<sup>1</sup> Instead, their lives can only be understood by analysing how gender and race interact with one another to shape their lived experiences. She employs the metaphor of a traffic intersection or crossroads to demonstrate how black women, standing where two roads intersect, are most at risk of injury as they face oncoming traffic from all four directions. The same metaphor can be used to describe the experiences of Muslim women in the UK. They stand at the intersection of race, religion and gender and, therefore, are at risk from multiple sources of discrimination.

Patricia Hill Collins's analysis of black organisations in the US, including civil rights organisations, shows that though such organisations claim to speak for all black people, black women have never held leadership positions within them, and much of US black thought has a 'prominent masculine bias'.<sup>2</sup> In such organisations, not only are women rendered secondary and invisible; when they do begin to question their subjugated position, they face opposition and hostility from male members. This adverse reaction is often characterised by claims that by fighting gender inequality within black spaces, black women are acting in a way that is counter-productive to the wider struggle for black empowerment. Women are forced to stay silent about the oppression they face from within their communities for fear that negative stereotypes might be strengthened, and black men, alongside whom they are fighting in the anti-racist struggle, could then face further racist discrimination. The interests of the community as a whole are interpreted in a way that does not allow black women to talk of domestic violence or patriarchal oppression, within their families or in the wider community.

British Muslim women are similarly placed in a difficult position. Muslim men dominate Muslim organisations and claim to speak for all Muslims. Simultaneously, Muslim men are also the victims of hostility and anti-Muslim sentiment in the post-war-on-terror West. Thus, Muslim women face the double problem of trying to find a way to make their voices heard and speak out against the oppression they face

from within the community while somehow not bringing additional negative attention to their male counterparts who are already viewed with suspicion by majority society.

By concentrating attention on the lives of the most marginalised in society, intersectionality shows us that feminist or anti-racist movements that view injustices through a single-axis framework forget those who are 'multiply-burdened', and create a distorted analysis of the problems they seek to tackle by erasing the complexity of these issues.

British Muslim women and their lives remain under-researched. While there has been an increased academic focus on Western Muslim communities since the 1970s, until recently these studies have taken Muslim men as the standard and the Muslim male experience as the normative experience of all Muslims, therefore rendering Muslim women invisible.<sup>3</sup> Applying an intersectional theoretical framework to the case of Muslim women in the Labour Party allows us a richer understanding of the mechanisms of power, exclusion and inclusion that influence political representation, and a more realistic appreciation of how Muslim women navigate democratic processes and institutions and the barriers that they face. Understanding Muslim women's experiences also shines a light onto the relationship between the Labour Party and ethnic minority communities more generally.

## **The Labour Party and ethnic minorities**

The Labour Party has long been regarded as the party of ethnic minority communities in the UK. This pattern of electoral support is also observed within the Muslim community: 87 per cent of Muslims voted for the Labour Party in the 2017 general election.<sup>4</sup>

As well as having this large ethnic minority voting base, the Labour Party has also been the political party most successful at electing non-white candidates to both Parliament and local councils. Despite the Conservative Party also implementing a strategy to increase the number of minority MPs elected under its banner, the Labour Party remains the 'leader in minority representation in Britain'.<sup>5</sup> Yet despite this, the number of ethnic minority candidates Labour selects and the number of ethnic minority Labour MPs elected remain low relative to the support the party enjoys from minority communities;<sup>6</sup> this has led some observers to accuse the party of taking minority votes for granted.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the party has been openly accused of discrimination against ethnic minority members and Muslims in particular. In one study, 73 per cent of Muslim Labour Party local councillors interviewed stated they were aware of discrimination within the party, and 60 per cent stated they had personally experienced prejudice; this

partly explains the higher rate of turnover amongst Muslim local councillors and their shorter than average term of office.<sup>8</sup> Asian members of the Labour Party have in the past complained to the Commission for Racial Equality alleging racial discrimination;<sup>9</sup> for example, during the 1980s and 1990s Birmingham was an arena for open and public disputes between some Asian members and Labour Party officials.<sup>10</sup> Saggar and Geddes have argued that the representation of minorities in the UK has occurred *despite* 'non-intentional forms of discrimination and exclusion' by political parties, not *because* of active encouragement.<sup>11</sup>

In the face of such discrimination, Muslim members of the Labour Party have had no choice but to organise along ethnic lines to ensure 'strength in numbers', particularly in local party selection meetings.<sup>12</sup> To do this they have used the networks that were formed in the early days of Muslim migration to Britain, when shared culture and heritage played a crucial role in forming community identity.<sup>13</sup> When new migrants first arrived in the mill towns and cities of the 1960s and 1970s, the community based on 'kinship, village and friendship networks' was the source of support and solidarity. These networks endured, and became an asset to members of the Muslim community who involved themselves in local politics. Known as *biraderi*, they are mostly associated with people from Pakistan and Kashmir, who, along with Bangladeshis, form the vast majority of Muslims in the UK. *Biraderi* is an Urdu and Punjabi term which literally translates as 'brotherhood'. It describes a system of networks based on kinship within which members support one another in their aspirations and endeavours.<sup>14</sup> In British politics, the term is now closely associated with voting behaviour which gives preference to a candidate not just of the same ethnic origin as oneself, but also from the same clan or village.<sup>15</sup> And it is the *Biraderis*, and their role in the Labour Party, that account for many of the problems of discrimination within the party about which Muslim women members have complained.

Kingsley Purdam's interviews with Muslim councillors revealed that 74 per cent of those questioned stated that they had witnessed individuals attempting to use *biraderi* loyalties to appeal to other Muslims. A further 13 per cent refused to comment, which may mean that the true figure is even higher.<sup>16</sup> The introduction of One Member One Vote has created incentives for the use of *biraderi* networks during candidate selection processes. The change provided a key incentive for those seeking political office to ask and encourage individuals in certain geographical areas to become party members for the sole purpose of supporting them for selection. For those of Pakistani or Kashmiri background, with access to large networks of people willing to support their ambitions, mobilising the *biraderi* in support of one's candidature is an 'obvious move in the political game'.<sup>17</sup>

Although the use of *biraderi* has led to internal party disputes and the suspension of local branches where the practice was thought to be taking place, the Labour Party has in the past engaged with these networks and patronage politics to gain support

in constituencies with large Muslim communities.<sup>18</sup> Politicians have in the past forged relationships with biraderi leaders where they are promised bloc community votes in exchange for status and localised power.<sup>19</sup> There is also evidence of party selectors using their assessment of a candidate's potential ability to tap into biraderi networks when making selection decisions.<sup>20</sup>

An intersectional approach enables an understanding of how Labour's apparent embrace of biraderi could discriminate against those who do not have access to these networks, such as potential candidates from a different ethnic background or women. While the number of Muslim women elected for the Labour Party has increased since May 1996, when only four out of 156 Muslim councillors were female,<sup>21</sup> Muslim women are often the victims of bloc voting against them at selection meetings.<sup>22</sup> During the 2004 local elections in Birmingham, it was argued by some Muslim men in the party that women would not be able to win against male candidates because men in the Pakistani community just would not vote for women; this was despite the national party implementing policy changes to ensure that at least a third of all local councillors were women.<sup>23</sup> As discussed, in 2016, further allegations of 'misogynistic practices' within the Labour Party by Muslim men against women from their own communities were brought to light by BBC Newsnight and the Muslim Women's Network. In fact, such accusations have been around for at least thirty years, and have been related both to parliamentary selections, such as that of Naz Shah MP for Bradford West, and local government selections.<sup>24</sup>

## Questions for Labour

The relationship between the Labour Party and the British Muslim community is an enduring allegiance with its origins in working-class solidarity and the party's reputation as *the* political party for ethnic minorities in the UK. Muslims overwhelmingly support Labour – but a sizeable minority did switch allegiance to the Liberal Democrats in response to the 2003 Iraq War. While it would be wrong to make assumptions about how the memory of this switch has affected the party's decision-making since then, it is clear that the party has known since the 2005 election that it cannot rely on the unconditional support of the Muslim community, and it is likely that it may make decisions accordingly. My research explores whether the party's electoral dependency has affected its reaction to reports of Muslim women being discriminated against by biraderi-linked men.

First-hand interviews carried out over a number of decades show that clan politics and biraderi networks have been used, and continue to be used, by Pakistani and Kashmiri Labour Party members to assist with their selection as candidates. There is evidence that these networks have in certain areas taken over local Labour Parties,

allowing them to make key decisions during selections for local councillors and MPs; this has included men blocking the selection of female Muslim members. My research uses an intersectional approach to help find out whether this reliance on biraderi networks to 'get out the vote', and the memory of the 2005 general election, have meant that the Labour Party has decided to ignore Muslim women's complaints of discrimination in favour of continued support from Muslim men who position themselves as 'community leaders'. I also aim to explore whether the rise in anti-Muslim discrimination in recent years has made the party reluctant to tackle the issue in case it is used to further alienate and disadvantage the wider British Muslim community.

Although many questions remain about the way Muslim women have been treated within the Labour Party, it is clear that an intersectional approach is vital in seeking to understand and tackle the long-standing problems that clearly exist, and make Labour truly the party of equality for all.

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## Notes

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- 3 Danièle Joly and Khursheed Wadia, *Muslim Women and Power: Political and civic engagement in West European societies*, Palgrave 2017.
- 4 Nicole Martin and Omar Khan, 'Ethnic minorities at the 2017 British General Election', Runnymede Trust 2019.
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- 6 P. Norris, A. Geddes and J. Lovenduski, 'Race and parliamentary representation', *British Elections and Parties Yearbook*, Vol 2 No 1, 1992.
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- 12 Kingsley Purdam, 'The political identities of Muslim local councillors in Britain', *Local Government Studies*, Vol 25 No 1, 2000, p61.
- 13 Salima Bouyarden, 'Political participation of European Muslims in France and the United Kingdom', in Jorgen S. Nielsen (ed), *Muslim Political Participation in Europe*, Edinburgh University Press 2013, p107.
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- 15 Nicole S. Martin, 'Do ethnic minority candidates mobilise ethnic minority voters? Evidence from the 2010 General Election', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol 69, 2016.
- 16 'Democracy in practice'.
- 17 'Ethnic minorities in British Politics', p5.
- 18 'Do ethnic minority candidates mobilise ethnic minority voters?'.
- 19 'Ethnic minorities in British Politics'.
- 20 Ibid; Rafaela Dancygier, 'The left and minority representation: the Labour Party, Muslim candidates and inclusion tradeoffs', *Comparative Politics*, Vol 46 No 1, 2013.
- 21 'The political identities of Muslim local councillors in Britain'.
- 22 'Ethnic minorities in British politics'.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.