

Female conversion to Islam in Britain examined in unique research project

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Narratives of Conversion to Islam - Female Perspectives. Credit: University of Cambridge / Homepage picture credit: Beth Rankin

A ground-breaking report examining the experiences of nearly 50 British women of all ages, ethnicities, backgrounds and faiths (or no faith) – who have all converted to Islam - was launched in London yesterday by the University of Cambridge.

The report (bit.ly/12tv0YM), produced by the University's Centre of Islamic Studies (CIS), in association with the New Muslims Project, Markfield, is a fascinating dissection of the conversion experience of women in Britain in the 21st Century.

The first forum of its kind held in the UK, the study concludes with a series of recommendations for the convert, heritage Muslim, and wider British communities. The 129-page report also outlines the social, emotional and sometimes [economic costs](#) of conversion, and the context and reasons for women converting to Islam in a society with pervasive [negative stereotypes](#) about the faith.

Project Leader and Director of CIS, Yasir Suleiman, said: "The consistent themes flowing through the report is the need for increased levels of support for the convert community – and the converts' own potential to be a powerful and transformative influence on both the heritage Muslim community and wider British society.

"Another of the recurring themes was the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam in the UK media and what role the convert community might have to play in helping to redress the balance.

This report seeks to dispel misapprehensions and [misrepresentations](#) of female converts to Islam."

A key revelation of the study was the heavily disproportionate attention, bordering on obsession in some cases, given to white, female converts to Islam by both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities alike.

This is often to the detriment of African-Caribbean converts, thought to be the largest ethnic group of converts to Islam, who are often ignored and left feeling isolated by both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

Added Suleiman: "White converts can be regarded as 'trophy' Muslims and used in a tokenistic fashion by various sections of society, including the media. African-Caribbean converts remain largely invisible, uncelebrated and frequently unacknowledged. They can feel like a

minority within a minority and this is something that must be addressed. I found this part of the conversion narratives hardest to bear."

Meanwhile, the project also reveals the complex relationship between female converts and their families, ranging from exclusion, disbelief and denial - to full and open acceptance of their faith. It also brings to light responses of converts to issues of sexuality and gender including homosexuality, 'traditional' roles of women and transgenderism.

Project Manager Shahla Suleiman said: "Considering the stereotypical and largely negative picture Islam has in the media and society at large, and considering that quite a lot of this revolves around the position of women in Islam, we wanted to understand the seemingly paradoxical issue of why highly educated and professionally successful Western women convert to Islam.

"The basis of conversion is faith and spirituality - but conversion is also a social phenomenon that has become political. In this sense, conversion concerns everyone alike in society.

"The debate is just starting and we need to have more informed studies about conversion to Islam that directly address public interest and concern. The struggle for a better future relies on overcoming the politics of exclusion and absolute difference based on an ideological dislike for multiculturalism, not just multiculturalism. Fear of immigration, Islam and conversion to it are a proxy for views on race, prejudice, anxiety and fear."

The converts explored the issues of women's rights and dress etiquette at some length, with the issue of wearing the hijab and other Islamic forms of dress heavily discussed. Although all views were represented in the debate, a common approach among many converts was the adaptation of Western style dress to accommodate Islamic concepts of modesty and

decency.

Women's rights are a highly charged political issue within Muslim communities and while participants were not unanimously supportive of feminism as defined in the West, the need to raise the status of women within Muslim communities was fully acknowledged. Attempting to realise the practise of these rights has proven more difficult to achieve. Participants were especially critical of the concept of Sharia Council/courts operating in Britain in terms of the courts' potential to jeopardise the rights of women.

The report says: 'Converts serve to confound and challenge negative racist or clichéd narratives depicted in the media of heritage Muslims because their culture and heritage is intrinsically reflective of British culture.

'But we also find that not all conversions are equal socially in the eyes of some members of the heritage [Muslim community](#). The conversion of white women seems to be more socially valued than African women by some. There is also greater depth to the hijab than is thought to be the case among heritage Muslims and the non-Muslim majority in Britain. There is a distinction to be made between wearing the hijab and being worn by it. This puts the convert [women](#) in control. The hijab signals modesty, but it is not intended to hide beauty.'

Provided by University of Cambridge

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