

Executive Summary



Recently released census data shows us that Muslims make up 6.5% of the population of England and Wales at 3.9 million strong. This is an increase of 1.2 million since the last census.

In major cities, the proportion of Muslims is especially high, with 30% of Birmingham, 22% of Manchester, and 15% of London's populations being Muslim. Alongside the growth of the British Muslim community, British Muslim civil society has expanded into an impressive array of organizations and institutions that have emerged as significant contributors to modern British society.

They include mosques and Islamic centres, educational institutions, youth associations, student organizations, national umbrella bodies, advocacy groups, and media organizations. Muslims bring a distinctive ethos into civil society which is often inspired by their faith. As the focus groups that have informed this report indicate, most Muslims are driven to contribute to civil society out of a sense of civic duty that arises from their Islamic commitments. Muslims feel that Islam calls on them to serve their communities and their neighbours of all faiths and none.

Islam's sacred scriptures in the form of the Qur'an and the Prophet's teachings call on Muslims to perform regular acts of charity. This is captured in the exhortations of the Prophet Muhammad.

"An act of charity is due for every joint in each person's body for every day that the sun comes up: to judge fairly between two people is an act of charity; to help a man with his mount, lifting him onto it or hoisting up his belongings onto it, is an act of charity; a good word is an act of charity; and removing a harmful thing from the road is an act of charity." (Statement of the Prophet Muhammad narrated by Bukhari and Muslim)

This and many other Prophetic traditions concerned with social welfare, education, the environment, family and so much more, makes it inevitable that many Muslims interested in their religious heritage will also be deeply invested in civil society.

In recent years, Britain has seen a proliferation of Muslim civil society organizations that have enlivened public life and contributed crucial services to communities up and down the country. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was an important period

during which Muslim organizations stepped up to help Britain cope with a crisis on a scale that has not been seen since the Second World War. More generally, relatively severe post-pandemic and post-Brexit economic challenges, a serious cost-of-living crisis, and repeated political crises alongside the passing of Queen Elizabeth II, the longest-serving monarch in British history, have all accentuated the sense of uncertainty and instability in contemporary Britain.

But even before this, over the course of a decade of austerity, Muslim communities have sought to plug shortfalls in the social safety net by establishing soup kitchens and food banks. Young Muslims have established initiatives to support children in some of the country's most deprived areas to successfully pursue higher education. Crucially, British Muslim charities that first established their reputations through world-class contributions in international emergencies and crises have started to recognize that challenges faced by Muslims and their neighbours in Britain also deserve our attention.

Several studies of British Muslims have highlighted that this community suffers from exceptionally high levels of household poverty. **Recently published Census data indicates that 30% of British Muslims live in the poorest 10% of local authority districts in the country.** This has knock-on effects on health, education and future opportunities for a population that has the youngest age profile of any religious or non-religious group in Britain. A positive finding of this report is that there is an emerging effort within British Muslim communities to take poverty and social inequality within Britain more seriously alongside the important international relief efforts that British Muslim civil society institutions have long shown themselves committed to.

Another arena that has been highlighted in our focus group research was the need for women and young people to have more of a voice and influence in many British Muslim institutions, perhaps most notably in mosques and Islamic centres, of which there are over 2,000 in Britain today. The need for more representative institutions has been a repeated concern of reports on British Muslims over the years, and while there has been some progress, much remains to be done. Women and young people make up a majority

of our communities, and their voices need to be structurally integrated into Muslim civil society institutions. Women and girls' contributions to civil society has been a consistent feature of British Muslim communities, but there is too often insufficient accommodation of this half of the Muslim population into the decision-making processes of their institutions. This requires a significant shift in cultural attitudes towards Muslim women, a recognition of the barriers and exclusion that they face in our communities.

The 2021 election of Zara Mohammed to head the UK's largest and most representative Muslim umbrella body, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), reflects a bold move on the part of the country's Muslim leadership. As secretary-general of the MCB, Ms. Mohammed was the first woman, the first Scot, and the first person under thirty to be elected to this post. Through its most prominent public body, Britain's Muslim leadership can be seen as trying to signal the importance of putting forward a voice representative of the frequently underrepresented, much like the Muslim community as a whole in relation to wider British society. This appointment appears to reflect steps towards real change in the leadership of the Muslim community. Thus, women are today starting to lead important and impactful Muslim organizations in the UK.



Zara Mohammed Elected Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain.
Source: mcb.co.uk

The research underpinning this report has uncovered remarkable success stories of a vibrant British Muslim civil society that contributes in significant ways to social dynamism, inter-communal relations, youth and women's empowerment, educational initiatives, poverty relief, and much more. Yet, it is to be expected that a community with such a young profile and which is concentrated in deprived areas of Britain will have many challenges. These challenges include those that are poverty-related and have disadvantaged large sections of the Muslim community, and disproportionately impacted the young as has been illustrated in the Social Mobility Commission's 2017 report on young Muslims as well as *The Missing Muslims* report from the same year. The challenges faced by Muslim youth also include problems of structural racism and Islamophobia that hamper their integration into mainstream society. In particular, they reflect ongoing institutional weakness within Muslim organizations that often have the best of intentions, but lack the experience, expertise and resources to grow into self-sustaining change-making institutions in British civil society.

This notwithstanding, the conclusion of this report is decidedly optimistic. British Muslim civil society is on an upward trend as this deeply civic-minded community grows into maturity, experience, and financial independence. Surveys from the past decade have shown British Muslims to be among the most generous donors to charity in contemporary Britain, despite their own poverty. This is in keeping with their faith's strong encouragement of philanthropic giving. In recent years, this has developed into an emergence of charitable foundations set up by Muslim philanthropists that seek to "give back and contribute" to their communities.

It is our hope that this report and its recommendations will serve as a spur to accelerate efforts to further strengthen British Muslim civil society and thus contribute to a more prosperous future for Britain in these uncertain times. This report is therefore intended to be an annual or biennial exercise through which community stakeholders can gain insights, reflect on progress, explore challenges and cooperate for a stronger, more united Britain.



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