

RAPID REVIEW OF EXCESS BURDEN ON MUSLIM COMMUNITIES FROM COVID-19

21st MAY 2020

Faith as a determinant of health

Faith is an **important and overlooked** determinant of health, mediating risk from Covid-19 on faith communities through various mechanisms and providing unique opportunities for intervention:

- **Decreased vulnerability- religious teachings** on healthy lifestyle, hygiene, quarantine, and charity, and **faith institutions** providing emotional, spiritual, social and practical support to elderly, vulnerable and isolated individuals **promote the principles of health protection, prevention of illness and maintaining wellbeing.**
- **Increased vulnerability-** religious and cultural **misconceptions and misunderstanding** of teachings such as Divine Will, preference for **traditional faith healers** and faith-specific media outlets separate to mainstream **communication channels, performing rituals** without specialist consultation such as fasting during Ramadan, communal prayer, burial and grieving practices which allow for adaptation under conditions of necessity and prevention of harm, **facilitate community transmission** and form **barriers to accessing evidence-based health information and clinical care**

Impact on Muslim communities

Reports from the Muslim community and published data on ethnicity indicate that it is **over-represented in morbidity and mortality.**

- Individuals from **Pakistani and Bangladeshi** backgrounds are 2-3 times more likely to die from Covid-19, with the risk for **Black Africans** being almost 4 times as high¹.
- There are reports from the **British Somali community** being disproportionately impacted as well as Sudanese, Arab, Afghan, Iranian and Turkish communities with large numbers of Muslims, but there is **no published data specifically capturing this**, leading to **misclassification and/or underestimation of the true impact**
- Muslim communities have reported that they have **struggled to cope with excess deaths and burials.** Under-preparation caused by the **delay** in declaring a national emergency and **lack of clear communication by authorities** on funeral and burial rites caused heightened anxiety amongst the British Muslim community at the beginning of the pandemic, undermining trust. Higher deaths increase the risk of **bereavement and other mental health disorders**, and of developing long term **post traumatic stress disorder** accentuated by restrictions on hospital visitation especially for end of life patients, funerals and isolation of grieving households disrupting cultural and religious norms.
- Muslim community organisations **responded early with insights into risk**, suspending congregational activities and adapting burial and funeral practices ahead of government advice, organising networks **providing mental health support** including bereavement counselling and providing **social support** to elderly, vulnerable and isolated households by delivering food, medications and essential items and running helplines through community volunteers
- Muslim **health and religious organisations have collaborated** on multiple information campaigns and engagement events to provide up to date evidence-based and holistic advice to communities to protect them against the risks of Covid-19
- A large number of Muslim organisations and institutions **depend on donations**, which have declined due to suspension of routine services and economic impact on communities, **pushing many organisations into financial hardship**

Longstanding intersecting inequalities and institutional discrimination

Members from the Muslim community are at the centre of **multiple and long standing intersecting and institutionalised inequalities, marginalisation and discrimination**, placing them at a higher risk of adverse health outcomes from Covid-19:

- **50% of Muslim households live in poverty** and Muslims are more likely to experience insecure employment, income and housing². The Covid-19 crisis has **exacerbated economic vulnerability and occupational hazards**, as Muslims are over-represented in shut-down industries and in the informal sector with **inadequate health and safety protection at work**. This has pushed many Muslim families into **financial hardship and increased stress, anxiety and depression**.
- The **legacy of colonialism and slavery, alienation by politicians and the media and marginalisation by policies** especially around security, austerity and immigration³ have contributed to **mistrust of authorities and public health advice** and the generation of **conspiracy theories**, alternative facts and **fake news**, undermining public health efforts.
- **Increased Islamophobia** (linking Muslims to the spread of Covid-19, anti-Muslim memes and fake news theories⁴ threaten social cohesion, safety, security and wellbeing, on a background of a year-on-year increase in hate crimes experienced by Muslims.
- Muslim families are more likely to live in **overcrowded multi-generational households** facilitating transmission to high-risk vulnerable individuals, and the **delay in lockdown** enabled families and communities to continue holding large events and congregations, contributing to **widespread community transmission**.
- A large proportion of **refugees and migrant communities** in the UK are from Muslim backgrounds⁵, experiencing difficulties with **accessing healthcare and lower health literacy**. These result in **delayed presentation** to health services and **increased the risk of complications** and death from Covid-19 and other acute medical conditions (collateral health damage).
- There are reports of Muslims experiencing **racial and religious discrimination by care professionals** on structural and interpersonal levels⁶, **creating barriers in accessing healthcare**.
- Our research has highlighted that Muslim-majority ethnic communities in the UK are more likely to experience **underlying chronic diseases and nutritional deficiencies**, as well as lower uptake of **preventative health screening services and engagement with healthy lifestyle behaviours**, in part exacerbated by structural and social disadvantage; these are all known to increase the risk of serious illness and death from Covid-19.

Impact on Muslim healthcare workers

There is also concern about the **impact on healthcare workers, both physical and mental**. Despite making up 10-15% of the workforce, **over 50% of doctors who have died have been Muslim**. Several factors are thought to contribute to this:

- BAME healthcare workers are more likely to experience **bullying, harassment, disciplinary procedures** and more serious sanctions at work⁷.
- A large King's Fund study in 2015 highlighted that **Muslims in the NHS are the most discriminated religious group**.⁸
- From our qualitative work there is evidence that **Muslim doctors experience discrimination, prejudice and exclusion at work**, through stigma, stereotypes, a lack of belonging, career and workplace support, and limited opportunities to progress reflected in **under-representation** in senior roles.
- There is documentation of Muslim women facing a **"Triple Penalty" of discrimination** in multiple employment sectors.⁹
- There is emerging evidence of BAME doctors being **pressurised to work in frontline roles without adequate PPE** compared to their White colleagues as reported in a large ITV survey of 2000 healthcare workers, of which 39% were Muslim.¹⁰
- These factors translate into **difficulties raising concerns at work**, such as around unsafe working conditions and access to appropriate PPE, **increasing infection risk**. This is particularly relevant to

Muslims with specific **dress code requirements**, such as men with beards and women wearing the headscarf.

- Muslim health care professionals report feeling **stressed, anxious and burnt out** both because of their working conditions and risks to themselves, as well as onward transmission to their families, consistent with a large survey on BAME doctors conducted by the Royal College of Psychiatrists.¹¹
- Muslim health care professionals have had to go **above and beyond their NHS work in a voluntary capacity to support, educate and inform their communities** on health risks from Covid-19, accentuated during Ramadan. Sometimes they have found themselves as **targets of abuse** from the community with wide ranging accusations **undermining their professionalism and integrity**.

Recommendations

- **Collection and publication of data disaggregated by ethnicity and faith** to further understand distribution and impact of risk and protective factors and health outcomes including death, hospital admissions, primary care access and community transmission
- Collection and publication of data on **wider social, economic, demographic, ecological and clinical risk factors** including income, employment, education immigration status, language, disabilities, neighbourhood characteristics, household structures, pollution, social deprivation indices and co-morbidities, as well as **research on healthcare access and discrimination** experienced by Muslim and other faith groups
- **Early multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary stakeholder engagement and consultation** across a range of community, faith, academic, professional and third sector organisations to understand risk and implement mitigation **strategies that are specific, timely, accessible and relevant** to Muslim and other faith and non-faith communities
- **Collaboration and co-production of public health strategies** that are **faith and culturally sensitive** ensuring adequate funding and resources, evaluation of impact, and dissemination of best practice
- **Comprehensive occupational risk assessment** which includes faith and wellbeing as part of psychological safety at work and guaranteed **income, health and safety protection** for all key workers
- Adequate **support and resources for Muslim healthcare staff** to be able to perform their duties in a safe and sustainable way in order to safeguard them both from the high risk of Covid-19 exposure, poorer outcomes and onward transmission to their families, as well as the mental health impact from burnout, stress, abuse and discrimination that they face

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