

## Activity 7

### Living and learning

– interviews, biography and oral history

#### Summary

Young people are given about six short extracts from biographical writings by or about British Muslims, and draw up lists of questions they would like to ask if they had the opportunity to meet the people who are featured in the writings. They then convert these into real interview schedules and use the schedules to interview certain individuals. They may then write similar pieces themselves, or create video diaries.

#### Why?

The benefits that young people gain from this exercise include the following. They:

- use their imaginations to consider other people's experiences in order to think about, express, explain and critically evaluate views that are different from their own
- gain a sense of issues affecting British Muslims at the present time
- are motivated to learn about issues affecting British Muslims by seeing them illustrated within the lives of particular individuals
- practise listening skills, skills in understanding views different from their own, and skills in reaching consensus
- develop knowledge and understanding of the teachings, values and wisdom of Islamic traditions, and appreciation of Islam's diversity as well as of its unity, both in the present and in the past
- feel they are respected and trusted, and that they are recognized as having views and opinions which are worth attending to.

#### Preparation

You need some extracts from interviews and biographical writings. There are examples in Handouts 11–16. These have been included here as reminders of the wide range of perspectives and experiences amongst British Muslims. They are provided for discussion and disagreement, not as points of view which should be endorsed without criticism.

#### Procedure

Young people read one or more of the extracts and:

- identify the three main points being made and re-state these in their own words without saying whether they agree or disagree
- then and only then say which points they agree with or disagree with
- find similar passages from other sources
- draw up a list of questions they would ask if they could meet the authors face to face
- conduct some interviews with British Muslims in their locality
- write or speak similar pieces themselves.

## Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 11

### Muslim by Name and Nature

I'm female, 15, Black (Nigerian) and Muslim by name *and* nature.

I had to say both because it's what I am, and it really gets on my nerves when you ask some people about religion and they say 'I'm Muslim, but I don't pray or fast or read Quran....' And yet, these are the same people who take a week off school for Eid. I know myself that I'm not the perfect example of a Muslim, especially when it comes to my dress sense, but I'm taking it step by step to become a better Muslim and I pray that Allah continues to make it easier for me. I pray and wake up early for Fajr (morning prayer), I fast in Ramadan, go to the Mosque when I can and I've been learning the Quran from early days.

I go out, party and have fun with my friends, but I know my limits. It doesn't make me feel left out knowing that I can't enjoy some of the things others are into, because I understand exactly why Allah has prohibited some things.

When I first started wearing my headscarf, my perspective on life was slightly clearer. I became more confident in Islam and I was more aware of how simple temptations could really mess up someone's life. The Hijab had an opposite and sometimes funnier effect on me than I was expecting. People complimented me a lot and it was really strange getting more attention from random boys greeting me on the road. Truly quite confusing (and tempting). I've been able to joke about my religion with people because I've got a really calm but good understanding of Islam.

I've dressed up as my friend's mum in a Niqqab to try and get her phone back from school, I've made up funny songs with my friends and a little film with my sister about a Quran teacher who wants to be a model.

What it means to me to be Muslim is recognizing my purpose in this life, which is to submit myself to God alone. I believe that I have a strong relationship with Allah, which is most important to me. I understand that this life is the test for eternal happiness with Allah, not for fun and games. I try to confidently ask myself before I do anything whether it's something that will please God and get me to Al-Jannah (heaven) in the end. I think this is the reason why I don't get jealous or intimidated by other people because I know that I have the best gift of all - Islam - and absolutely nothing compares.

My religion has definitely helped me through the little I've gone through and I have faith that it will continue to help me deal with everything in my future – INSHALLAH!

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## Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 12

### We Are Just People

My parents came from Pakistan in the 1960s. My dad first worked in a mill and then as a postal worker until he retired. I consider myself to be a British Muslim but I don't like to be pushed into defining myself; it has a dislocating effect. To some, as a Muslim I am either a fanatical terrorist or a victim of Islam, and I am neither of those; we are just people.

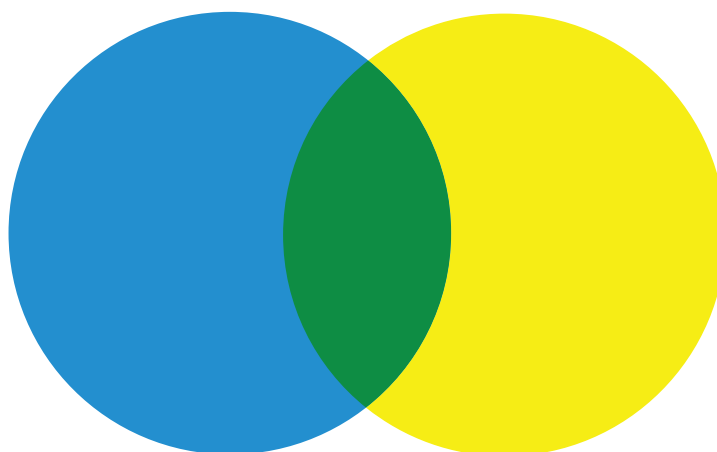
I became politically active within two weeks of the September 11 attacks. I was in Birmingham city centre when this man came up and spat on me. To me, Birmingham was a great place, and I had never experienced any racism or given it a second thought. I began to wonder, where was this all going to lead?

We are living in challenging times. For Muslims it's important to hold a firm and dignified line, between not being reactive to what's happening, but I do think there's injustice. There is a disproportionate response from the government and political ambitions are being put before what is good for humanity.

As Muslims, we have to be confident and not be defensive, we have to be open and not be afraid to say what we feel. Non-Muslims have also to look at why they are living in a climate of fear. I feel my eyes have been opened. I was very passive before. Now I am vice-chair of Respect, the anti-war alliance. In one sense, ignorance is bliss but I couldn't go back to the way I was before 9/11. I would rather live in a better world than the one we do today.

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## Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 13

### On My Mother's Lap

I grew up reading the Qur'an on my mother's lap. It's an experience shared by most Muslim children. It's usual, once children are about four or five, for mothers to start reading the Qur'an and getting the child to repeat the words, again and again, till they become familiar and can be easily recited from memory.

Actually, I started a little late - when I was pushing six. In those days, we lived in a small town on the Pakistani side of the Punjab. After dinner every Thursday evening, my mother would shout: 'Sipara time!'. I would stop playing, run to her, jump on her lap, and put my left arm around her neck. She would open a slim, rather torn booklet, and start reading: Bismil-Lahir-Rahmanir-Rahim. In the name of God, the beneficent, the merciful. I remember how she would pronounce each word distinctly and separately. I would repeat each word after her and then she'd have me repeat them again to make sure I pronounced each word correctly.

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## Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 14

### A Lot of Kids Are Angry

*Frustrated with the direction that mainstream Hip Hop was taking, Tony 'Bilal' Ishola decided to set up a magazine that would reflect a new wave of consciousness among Muslim Hip Hop artists after 9/11. He is interviewed here by Yahya Birt. The interview was published on Yahya Birt's website <http://www.yahyabirt.com>*

**YB:** When and how did Islamic influences come into popular music in the West?

**TI:** It's always been there ever since black people came to the West. They brought their culture and their music. Hip Hop is just poetry spoken over beats really. Rhythm and poetry, that's basically what rap music is.

**YB:** Do you think there was a Muslim influence there, even if it wasn't seen that way?

**TI:** Yes, there always has been. And even when Hip Hop music started with people like Afrika Bambaataa in the 1970s, they used samples of Malcolm X. So there's always been some form of influence in Hip Hop.

**YB:** How about Muslim rappers?

**TI:** In the 1990s when I began to get conscious of these sorts of things, I noticed Moss Def for example. He's one of the best Muslim rappers that I know. Though he sings about lots of things, he doesn't hide the fact that he's Muslim.

**YB:** When did a Muslim Hip Hop scene kick off in the UK?

**TI:** I'm not too aware of when it kicked off in the UK as I spent my teenage years in Nigeria. As for those in the UK who didn't hide their religion in their music I would say that this is something new. It's something that came in the 2000s. It came as a result of other people telling young Muslims what to think about their religion. They felt they had a different opinion to express and they just decided to use their talents to express it. It's not just in Hip Hop, it's in other forms of culture and art, and in business, film and broadcasting too. Muslims are now expressing themselves more, expressing their religion more, using whatever gifts Allah has given them for *da`wah*.

**YB:** The Muslim Hip Hop scene in the UK seems to be getting bigger.

**TI:** The internet has helped a lot of Muslim artists from Morocco, from Amsterdam, from America, from the UK, from South Africa, from everywhere. People have set up various websites, and artists have used MySpace to get their music out there. It's out there, but it's not been getting the attention that it deserves, but people who are into this type of Hip Hop know where to find it.

**YB:** It seems that there are many different messages that Muslim Hip Hop in the UK is sending out, particularly political ones because of the current situation. It's quite a political, socially-conscious form of Hip Hop isn't it?

**TI:** Yes, yes. I'm all for freedom of speech. It's no hidden fact that a lot of kids in the West are angry, and they have opinions and they want to express them. I don't think these opinions should be suppressed. At one point I think we should all sit down and discuss our differences. That's my opinion. A lot of these kids have chequered pasts — some of them have been to prison, and some of them discovered Islam while in prison. Islam has given them a different perspective on life, and a lot of them are angry about the angle the war on terror is taking, what's going on in Palestine and issues like that. Muslims feel this affects them personally and these kids feel they have something to say. Instead of meeting in secret to discuss these issues, why shouldn't they express themselves openly so long as they are not harming anybody? The Platform Magazine is out to encourage that sort of thing.

**YB:** What kind of reception has Muslim Hip Hop had from the Muslim community here in the UK?

**TI:** From the Muslim community in the UK, it's been mostly positive, but you do get a few who come up to you and say that Islam and Hip Hop shouldn't mix. I think fair enough, no problem, fine, if you think that Hip Hop is *haram*, then simply don't listen to it. Spread the da`wah the way you know best and I'll do what I can do.

Source: <http://www.yahyabirt.com/?p=117>. The Platform Magazine has a MySpace site at <[myspace.com/theplatformag](http://myspace.com/theplatformag)>.

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## Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 15

### Full of Admiration for the British

I came to Britain in 1961, full of admiration for the British. In the early days I used to fear that the superiority and attractions of the West would prove too much for a simple-minded people and that we sell our faith for a share in the obvious advantages of Western civilization. Thirty years on I no longer have this fear.

Early in the 20th century Muhammad Abduh, a distinguished religious leader and scholar at Al-Azhar, the centre of Muslim learning in Cairo, wrote after a visit to Europe: 'In Europe I saw Islam but not Muslims; in Egypt I see many Muslims but no Islam'.

Even today the standard of public service, rule of law, democracy, freedom to dissent and equality in Britain far exceed anything that is found in a Muslim country, where dictatorship, brutish coercion, bribery, nepotism and deceit are usual. Yet familiarity with the West increasingly reveals to us – through the many stories in the media about child abuse, rape of the elderly, routine sexual greed and exploitation – the rottenness that lies at the core of this civilization, contact with which makes us embrace our faith with greater certitude and welcome British converts.

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This extract is from *My Faith and I Rest Here* (2003), privately published.

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## Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 16

### Responding to Hostility

*Extracts from an interview in The Times with Shahid Malik MP. The interview was conducted by Helen Rumbelow and Alice Mills. It can be accessed in its full version at [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article\\_2237461.ece/](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article_2237461.ece/)*

Mr Malik's path ... has been marked, from an early age, by learning how to respond to hostility – often racist, and on many occasions violent.

His father came to Burnley in 1965, a time and place that Mr Malik described as 'probably the most racist environment anybody could ever be brought up in'. He had been tempted from his post as headmaster of a large school in Pakistan by an offer from someone at the British Embassy, who said that Britain was looking for teachers. They lived in one of the poorest wards in the country, said Mr Malik, who was sometimes the only non-white boy in his class. 'That sometimes used to feel like thirty against one,' he said.

'This concept of Paki-bashing was something that was in vogue and a few times a week it would take place. Teachers were oblivious. Completely disinterested in it.'

Was he 'Paki-bashed'? 'I certainly was,' he said, reeling off incidents that ranged from being beaten 'pretty badly' by four skinheads in his first week at secondary school, to being stabbed in the leg with a chisel during woodwork after an argument about race. He had to go to hospital to get stitches. 'But nothing was done – quite incredibly.'

The reaction – or lack of it – from the school authorities was 'a real kind of eye-opener', but so, interestingly, was the reaction of Mr Malik. 'You just accepted it, and looking back on it I don't bear any grudges towards any of those people. The truth is that they were ignorant. And so really it wasn't their fault, they were just children.'

Did he ever wish that he could live in Pakistan instead? 'Never. No, I always thought of myself as very much British, very much that this is my country . . . I still say it's the best country in the world to live.'

It is obviously important for Mr Malik to show that he remains determinedly positive, that he tries to tolerate and understand – or at least not to generalize about – those who are against him. The day after he left hospital, during the unrest in 2001, he was out patrolling the streets with the police 'to show that the police aren't bad'.

In the years that followed, he struggled to find a seat. During this time he was the victim of a hit-and-run incident in a Burnley petrol station, his parents' family car was firebombed and, while walking the street, he was surrounded by 20 members of the extreme-right group Combat 18, who said that they were going to kill him.

Although his father was once Mayor of Burnley and was appointed, in the late-1960s, on to what was then the Race Relations Board (a precursor of the Commission for Racial Equality), his parents wanted him to give up politics.



They think it's thankless. In the autumn of 2003, the family were just saying to me, 'Listen, you've been through quite a lot, just stop it. You're not going to get a seat'. And I just thought, 'These people are mad. Of course I'm going to get there'.

Now, as one of the most powerful Muslims in the country, he faces attack from radical Islamists as well as racists. 'There are extremists who think of themselves as Muslims who see me as a hate figure, as the enemy.'

To say that his Dewsbury constituency is divided is something of an understatement. It has the highest British National Party vote in the country and was also the home of the leading suicide bomber from 7 July 2005, Mohammad Sidique Khan. 'It doesn't matter what I do, I'm going to annoy somebody,' he said. 'I have just got to do what I believe is right on these big issues, these issues of extremism and morality.'

Once he made it to the Commons, was there an end to his racist encounters? Not quite. He described one incident at Westminster. 'We're on the terrace, there was me and there were two female colleagues, white. And one of the security guys ignored both of them and came up to me and said, "Sir, have you got any ID?" I think you learn through experience to just be very patient and just be very relaxed about these things . . .'

