

A Critical Analysis of How the Role of the Imam Can Best Meet the Changing Social, Cultural, and Faith-Based Needs of Muslim Families in 21st Century Britain

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Abstract : This paper draws together the findings from two research studies, each undertaken with cohorts of South Asian Muslim respondents located in the North of England between 2017 and 2019. The first study, entitled Faith Family and Crime (FFC), investigated the extent to which a Muslim family's social and health well-being is affected by a family member's involvement in the Criminal Justice System (CJS). This study captured a range of data through a detailed questionnaire and structured interviews. The data from the interview transcripts were analysed using open coding and an application of aspects of the grounded theory approach. The findings provide clear evidence that the respondents were neither well-informed nor supported throughout the processes of the CJS, from arrest to post-sentencing. These experiences gave rise to mental and physical stress, potentially unfair sentencing, and a significant breakdown in communication within the respondents' families. They serve to highlight a particular aspect of complexity in the current needs of those South Asian Muslim families who find themselves involved in the CJS and is closely connected to family structure, culture, and faith. The second study, referred to throughout this paper as #ImamsBritain (that provides the majority of content for this paper), explores how Imams, in their role as community faith leaders, can best address the complex - and changing - needs of South Asian Muslims families, such as those that emerged in the findings from FFC. The changing socio-economic and political climates of the last thirty or so years have brought about significant changes to the lives of Muslim families, and these have created more complex levels of social, cultural, and faith-based needs for families and individuals. As a consequence, Imams now have much greater demands made of them, and so their role has undergone far-reaching changes in response to this. The #ImamsBritain respondents identified a pressing need to develop a wider range of pastoral and counseling skills, which they saw as extending far beyond the traditional role of the Imam as a religious teacher and spiritual guide. The #ImamsBritain project was conducted with a cohort of British Imams in the North of England. Data was collected firstly through a questionnaire that related to the respondents' training and development needs and then analysed in depth using the Delphi approach. Through Delphi, the data were scrutinized in depth using interpretative content analysis. The findings from this project reflect the respondents' individual perceptions of the kind of training and development they need to fulfill their role in 21st Century Britain. They also provide a unique framework for constructing a professional guide for Imams in Great Britain. The discussions and critical analyses in this paper draw on the discourses of professionalization and pastoral care and relevant reports and reviews on Imam training in Europe and Canada.

Keywords : criminal justice system, faith and culture, Imams, Muslim community leadership, professionalization, South Asian family structure

Conference Title : ICIPSR 2023 : International Conference on Islam, Peace and Social Relations

Conference Location : Auckland, New Zealand

Conference Dates : December 04-05, 2023