Integration in Ireland: A Focus on Muslim Teenagers

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Abstract

Despite the surge in numbers of ethnic minorities in Ireland in recent years there has been limited research conducted to explore their experiences in Irish culture. The experience of Muslim's in Ireland is no different, as there is virtually no research conducted to date on the topic. The research focuses on the experience of Muslim teenagers in Ireland addressing issues around dress, hobbies, school, racism, culture and religion. Interviews were conducted in the midlands and Cork with three female Muslim teenagers from cork, one resettlement co-ordinator and one youth worker working in the midlands. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants to give an insight into the experiences of the interviewee's, as the availability of secondary research is so limited. The research findings suggest that time spent in the country and the language fluency of the host country were prominent factors, in facilitating a positive integration experience for Muslim teenagers in Ireland. Contrary to our European counterparts, racism and Islamophobia were not central themes in the lives of Muslim youths in Ireland.

Key Words: Integration, Muslim teenagers, culture, religion, language

Introduction

As a result of the changing trends in migration combined with the success of the Celtic Tiger, we are now more than ever regarded as a multicultural society, boasting a broad spectrum of racial diversity which extends into areas of Irish culture religion, and values. Ireland's history has been dominated by a strong relationship between the state and Catholic Church, although this relationship has diminished in the past number of years it remains the most prominent religion and morally binding force in the country for many residents. However, contemporary Irish society exposes us to a vast selection of religions. Followed by approximately 21 percent of the worlds population, Islam is the largest single religion in the world (HSE: 2009:105) and is currently the fastest growing religion in Ireland (CSO 2009). With a culture that stereotypically opposes all that the West has become to represent, the intertwining of the two polar cultures has come to a head in Europe, resulting in Islam being inflated into a radical terrorist breeding cult.

As a religion, Islam plays a fundamental role in guiding its followers throughout their lives, outlining a set of strict guidelines that are to be found in the Koran. My research aim is to explore the experiences of Muslim teenagers in Ireland today. During the teenage years, emotions run high, tensions erupt and revolutions are common. How does the added label as being a Muslim contribute to this experience in Ireland?

Methodology

The aim of my research was to gather data that offered an insight into Muslim teenager's lives and experiences. To get a broad overview on possible issues facing Muslim teenagers, I focused on research from Britain and Western Europe. It was important to remember that however close Britain and Europe are to Ireland, no two countries are the same. As a result, my secondary research existed as a mere guideline into the possible areas of interest and experiences that might prevail in the Irish context. A number of newspaper reports made reference to my target group in the Irish context however; nothing was thorough or detailed enough to make any concrete assumptions.

The majority of my research was qualitative, using interviews to collect primary data. I conducted five interviews in total, three directly with the target group and two with

people that work in the area of Muslim integration; a resettlement co-ordinator and a youth worker. The reason I chose interviews as a means to collecting data, was the level of personal input it allows the interviewee to make. As the research previously conducted in this area was so limited it was necessary to give the interviewee the opportunity to portray their experiences and encounters, while providing a setting that gave them scope to elaborate on topics they deemed important.

The interviews were conducted in two separate locations in Ireland due to the geographical locations of the interviewees. The three teenagers are living in the Cork region while the two professional interviewees are based in the midlands. It is also important to note the different circumstances of both groups. Of the girls in Cork two of them have been living in Ireland for most of their lives with the average age of their moving to Ireland two years old, while the other girl was born in Ireland. The teenage participant's experiences were somewhat different to the accounts of the two professionals, whose work was predominately with Muslim immigrants who have been living in the country less than a year. In my research analysis, each teenage interviewee has been assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

Literature Review

Religion is, and has always been a source of diversity for people living around the world. Great difficulty exists in reaching a medium, where a combination of religions can practice together and live equally in a peaceful environment.

Religion is integral in the lives of Muslims. Laws must be adhered to and disobedience can result in severe punishment. There are many cultural differences as a result of this, with regards to dietary restrictions and in particular the differing roles of men and women. Constraints are placed on women and girls in the areas of dress and fashion. This can range from the 'niqab', where women have to cover the face completely, to wearing garments over their hair and loose clothing to conceal their figure and body (Yamani 1996). Conflicting to the roles of their western peers, Archer's research (2003:75) highlights defining factors of Muslim masculinity as a duty to 'patrol' their female peers. This patrolling involves maintaining a close 'surveillance of the acceptability and respectability of Muslim girls' clothing, appearance and sexuality'. With these cultural differences, Muslims in the West

experience high levels of obstacles and opposition in maintaining a life articulated by their religion.

Regarding history of Muslims in Western culture, integration and participation in society has always been a stumbling block. Ramadan (2004:217) gives an account of this in the French context, 'For first generations of immigrants the Western cultural universe was particularly disturbing. It appeared that no customs or tastes corresponded to those of their cultures of origin and, even worse that there was hardly any respect for the traditional rules of Islamic morality'. Assimilation is a fear for many immigrants and ethnic minorities in Western societies, maintaining cultural identity is central to their values, and Muslims are no different. In the past, Muslims isolated themselves as families, communities, and individuals and lived almost parallel lives, protecting their children from an environment that was considered morally and culturally dangerous. However, limiting their education to the Muslim way of life is not sufficient, as a varied awareness of the host culture is vital for successful integration. Still it's not only the immigrants that need to have an open mind to other cultures, host populations need to reciprocate this openness.

Many Europeans fail to understand that diversity exists within the Muslim culture. Islam is not just one homogenous group. AlSayyad & Castells (2002:10) argue 'some Western observers may speak of a monolithic Islam' however 'Islam has always been an ambiguous ethos from which different Muslims have drawn different meanings and contradictory inspirations'. Although Islam and male Muslims may be presented as this patriarchal, oppressive, violent, dictator, it is an exaggerated misrepresentation of the West's imperialist view of the East.

Islamophobia is a specific form of racism towards Muslims, manifesting itself in general negative attitudes, violence, harassment, discrimination and stereotyping of Muslims (NCCRI, 2009; Garner, 2009). It is mainly associated with male youths as most of the incidents recorded have been predominately associated with this cohort. 'The association of Muslim (male) youth with images of disturbance and concerns about poverty, crime, and disaffection has led to their representation as a 'demographic time-bomb of Pakistani and Bangladeshi youths' (Alexander 2000:7 cited in Archer 2003). She asserts that Muslim boys and men have not only been

conceptualised as 'dangerous individuals' with a capacity for violence and terrorism, but also 'culturally dangerous', threatening the 'British way of life and civilisation' (Archer 2003).

The media in Europe is further stimulating these views, according to Mosroor (2006:N/A), 'It has unfairly conflated the question of immigration, national security, and terrorism casting a shadow of suspicion on Muslims, where they are unfairly equated as terrorists'. Closer to home, Dr Shaheed Satardien, a South African Muslim who has lived in Ireland for four years claimed, Muslim leaders were "in denial" about what he called "an ocean of extremism" among young Irish Muslims, alleging Ireland had become a "haven of fundamentalism" (Fitzgerald 2006). In response to this, Muslim representatives angrily countered his allegations. According to the NCCRI (2009) the Gardaí constantly reject claims that extremism is rampant in Ireland.

The rise of discourse of 'Islamophobia' has been a widespread, global phenomenon that has also impacted on schooling. The planet Islam documentary (transmission date 02/08/1997 cited in Archer 2003) reported how the act of wearing the head scarf to school was viewed by some French white citizens and school staff as indicative of 'militancy' 'extremism' and 'fanaticism', and a 'refusal to integrate' among Muslim groups. Increasing influential ideas are portraying Muslim pupils as 'more problematic' than other Asian groups in relation to issues of school uniform and lack of participation in extra-curricular activities, and popular attention has identified religious, rather than 'cultural', values as the source of these differences (Ballard 1994 cited in Archer 2003). Educational qualifications are high on the agenda of assessing ability to participate in society and contribute to the economic and social development of the country. Pakistani/Bangladeshi 'believers' who are mostly Muslim are identified as being in the lower-achieving bracket further fuelling islamophobic ideas (Archer 2006 :36). Masroor (2006) also highlights the anti-intercultural education system in Europe, arguing the curriculum in general has made no place for diversity, with no relevance made to the history of Islam hindering inclusion for many Muslim students.

A critique of integration policy in Ireland

As the numbers of immigrants swell significantly, a concise history on related policy is needed to understand and analyse the developments and progress of the Irish situation in relation to areas of immigration. It was not until the late 1990's and early 2000's that integration policy and legislation was on the agenda for Irish politicians. The rapid change in migration trends, and the scale at which this took place, saw the beginning of integration policy in Ireland. Since then there have been three main policies published in the area of integration in Ireland.

The first document was produced in 2000 by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform entitled *Integration: A Two- way Process*. Integration was defined as 'The ability to participate to the extent that a person needs and wishes in all the major components of society without having to relinquish his or her own cultural identity' (2000:11). According to the document 'Until the early 1990's the number of persons seeking refugee status in Ireland was 20 to 60 per year, however by 1998 that figure had grown to 4,626 applications' *A Two-way process* (2000:2). It is essential to note the differentiation among immigrant groups, and the strong emphasis that is placed on refugees as the main group at whom the policy is directed.

The policy that followed in 2005 was entitled *Managing Diversity: The National Action Plan against Racism* (NPAR). This report attributes the increased levels of non-nationals in Ireland, primarily to economic growth and a growing demand for skilled and un-skilled workers (NPAR 2005). The overall aim of the NPAR (2005:41) is to 'provide strategic direction to combat racism and to develop a more inclusive, intercultural society in Ireland'. It is important to recognise the small changes that have taken place since the previous policy, as the report focuses on a broader category of people, incorporating asylum seekers, economic migrants and international students. It also recognises that racism can occur in many different forms.

The most recent policy document, published in 2009 that focuses on integration is: *Migration Nation, Statement on Integration Strategy and Diversity management*. A broad approach to integration and immigration is taken in this policy, looking to European models to facilitate swift and successful policy implementation. It also identifies community organisations supported at a national level as a source to

promote integration, allocating funding for sporting bodies, faith based groups, and political parties, (Migration Nation 2009:45). Gilligan et., al. (2009:4) highlights the importance of assisting 'migrant young people in accessing appropriate leisure activities' to improve integration prospects.

Integration policy & Muslims

Against this backdrop of integration policy, the main focus lies in this process related to teenage Muslims in Ireland. However, there is very limited information on Muslims in general with specific relevance to the target group almost absent. As policy slowly develops we can see an emergence of a certain degree of differentiation within the general groups. According to the NPAR (2005:52), 'Between 1991 and 2002, the number of Muslims in Ireland quadrupled to 19,000 due to inward migration' this gives us the inclination that our policy makers are starting to recognise the diversity that exists within the immigration process. Additionally the 2006 census figures show that the Muslim population in Ireland increased form '19,147 in 2002 to 32,539 in 2006 a significant increase of 69.9%'. Despite this dramatic increase in immigration levels, the definition for integration established in the very first policy stated previously, remains unchanged, suggesting that integration is still the same as it was more than ten years ago. It is also notable that the majority of references made to the Muslim community and integration has been in relation to the dramatic increase in immigration and acknowledgement that Muslim radicalisation does not pose a threat to the Irish nation, as has been alleged in many other Western European countries (Migration Nation 2009).

It is unavoidable to analyse integration policy without making reference to the category of immigrants that the Irish government are trying to attract. These are highly skilled professionals which the government feel will integrate into Irish society with little help or policy implementation. This is supported by Fanning (2007:245) who states 'The problem is that Irish policy responses to immigration must contend with the 'Celtic Tiger' perception that these are (or should be) solely economic actors'. However, in contrast to this concept, economic success equals integration success, in her research Feldman (2008:3) argues that 'Although migrants may have achieved low levels of economic success, they may have achieved high levels of social integration, depending on their circumstances and plans; and vice versa'. This

contradicts the consistent government assumption that, low- skilled migrants are immediately going to be a burden on society.

There are certain areas that can be asserted as exclusive to Muslim teenagers in Ireland, such as the global debate on the hijab. Should young Muslim women be allowed to wear this in schools and universities? In the experience of the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) (2009), there have been very few complaints from Muslims or schools in relation to this matter. Official policy in Ireland on the wearing of the hijab has been left to the boards of management of individual schools. Some would argue that this resembles the '*laizze faire'* approach with others suggesting it recognises diversity enabling those dealing with the issue make the most appropriate decision.

Education remains a key player in implementing successful integration policy as the government increases its commitment to this area. Migration Nation (2009:59) states language support teachers will increase from 1450-1800, teacher training is to be improved and further supports are to be offered to schools with high immigrant populations. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment have published two guides to promote and improve intercultural education. One has been directed at primary level, entitled *Intercultural education in the primary school,* and the other at post-primary called *Intercultural education in the post primary school* identifying a broad spectrum of issues that need to be addressed in relation to multicultural Ireland. However, implementation of these guidelines needs to be further addressed.

The overall assumption after analysing the previous policies is the lack of action taken by the government in facilitating the integration process for all marginalised new minority ethnic groups in Ireland. A bleak outlook is on the horizon for Ireland's immigrants as 2008 saw the office of integration's budget cut by 25% (Immigrant Council of Ireland 2008). If we ever hope to achieve an intercultural society in Ireland the government needs to play a more pro-active role in answering the calls of its immigration population.

Research findings

The research explored the experiences of the target group and the data will be analysed under four main headings relating to themes which were most prominent throughout the interviews: dress, language and education, racism and gender. There were five interviewees in total, three female Muslim teenagers and two professionals.

One of the most prominent themes that were evident in the research was the hijab, which is central to teenage Muslim girls dress style. In the interviews conducted directly with the teenagers, it was apparent that this was central to their identity as a Muslim and as a female. The hijab is worn with a sense of pride by the girls and they feel it does not exclude them from their peers or from any extra-curricular activities. Fatima described her experience '*I came in one day with no hijab I came in the next with a hijab and nobody treated me differently so I was happy'.* Most of the girls interviewed in Cork were involved in sports such as hockey, basketball and other activities such as girl-guides and art. Despite the fact that some of these are very active sports, they wear the hijab at all times.

School was identified as the place where wearing the hijab is most important, and is accepted by both the school and their peers. In the midlands, wearing the hijab in school was a more controversial issue. It seems the schools in question have no overall policy but, as evident from the interviewees, dealt with the issue in an ad-hoc manner. However as some families were stricter in their requests, alternative arrangements had to be made as commented by the youth worker, *'One girl would have had difficulty because she wanted to wear her black dress over her uniform, they had to negotiate that she could wear it at break times and after school and before school, but while she was in class she was not allowed to wear it'.* The newly arrived Muslims were very strict in wearing their hijab when they arrived in Ireland first, but this seems to have relaxed. As noted by the resettlement co-ordinator '*They're in jeans now so they've kind of changed their clothing to a small degree'.* In contrast to this, the teenagers in Cork remain rigid about their dress, even in spaces where they would spend a lot of time like in the Arabic school. They asserted the hijab and the jelbab (A long jacket/dress that covers the whole body) must be worn at all times, Fatima explains that '*we can't be wearing short and tight jeans in front of men and boys'.*

In relation to integration issues, language was seen as a huge barrier. This was obviously not apparent in the Cork based research due to the fact that the girls had been living in Ireland for the majority of their lives and spoke fluent English. However, in relation to the newly settled Muslims, the research shows that this was the main factor that prohibited integration, as stated by the youth worker,

'It's hard just to engage in regular 'banter' with an English speaking person. It's not that they're not willing to get involved with other groups, it can be hard work to have a laugh and understanding what's going on'. They predominately hang around with their Muslim friends in school and it seems that language is the factor preventing them from further involvement with other non-Muslim peers. In effect, until a steady fluency is achieved in the English language, full integration cannot be achieved. This is exemplified in the contrast in peer relations between the two groups; the Muslim girls in Cork display no characteristics of marginalisation or difficulties in integration. All of the girls stated that they were either the only Muslim girl in the class or there were less than five Muslims in the whole school. They all like going to school and have many friends.

Racism and Islamaphobia has, to a very limited extent, been apparent in my research. As the girls in Cork have being living here for so long, their friendship networks and relations had been established. Coming to terms with cultural differences seems to become easier or at least more accepted over time. This is also supported by the youth worker who has experience in working with Muslim teenagers that have been in the country for over eight years.

The participants also made references to some bad experiences, but in general they felt that they were accepted and welcomed by Irish society. The youth worker explains '*They have had people sneering them across the street but they would say that their experience is very positive'.* The majority of references made by the Cork teenagers about racist experiences relate to peers making silly remarks and suggestions as to why they were different. However, it seems there was no evidence of malicious or vicious attacks.

In the interviews about the newly settled teenagers there were a number of issues raised indicative of different experiences for males and females. The Muslim religion

and culture places importance on patriarchal relations, protection of the female and in general a dominant male persona. This is reflected in areas such as school, where girls are reported to be more willing to integrate, whereas boys were quick to cease association with somebody who was seen as troublesome. The research suggests a strong sense in which boys are less willing to engage in school and interact with their peers. The youth workers highlights the prevailing problem with the boys; '*Attendance has been fairly low with guys, there are a few single parent families with the mother being the head of them, in their culture teenage boys would be considered men at a younger age.. They are independent and given more freedom and they'll take that and they'll assume that role'.*

Cultural preservation was highlighted in almost all aspects of their experiences with Irish culture. The Cork girls obtain clothes from their native countries to remain faithful to their dress code. Food was identified as a central concern in adhering to the values of their religion. Meat was established as the main problem. Muslims can only eat 'halal' meat which was explained by Fatima and Habida '*It's up to the person that's slaughtering the sheep, they have to say Bismillah first which means 'in the name of Allah'.* The girls mainly bring their own lunch to school. Alternatively they have the vegetarian option to be certain that they obey the guidelines of their religion. The importance of returning to their countries of origin or their parent's country is clearly identified by the teenager interviewees. It could be suggested this is a means of retaining their cultural practices from their home countries.

Conclusion

We can see very clearly through the analysis that there are significant differences between the experiences of the teenagers who have been in Ireland for a lengthy period of time in comparison to those who have been here less than a year. This had not been discussed in the literature as it was not apparent, and so the idea was not brought to light until the primary research was conducted. This signifies the importance time plays in the integration process and how situations can alter over time.

It was clear that a number of my original perceptions and assumptions were not as dominant as I previously thought. It is also significant to note my primary research is

based on a small sample and points to tentative, rather than 100% accurate findings. The literature discussed developed a rather radical appearance of Muslims in the West, although there was equal attention paid to all aspects of the arguments that prevailed. It was apparent that the experience of this group in the West differed greatly for many writers and researchers. The difficulty in creating an accurate profile based on evidence outside the country in question must again be identified.

As discussed previously, integration policy assumes a casual role in the lives of Muslim teenagers in Ireland. Although the teenagers interviewed felt they were fully integrated into society, it must be recognised that they have been in the country for the majority of their lives. In relation to Muslim immigrants, integration policy seemed to play a more important role than expected. Their limited experience of Irish culture was highlighted as requiring all the support available to assist in their integration. It must be acknowledged that in inviting programme refugees, the government would almost be required to facilitate the integration process in every way possible. If they had come to Ireland independently, it would seem the government response would be inefficient; lacking the commitment necessary to provide the essential services that promote integration, i.e. language supports, integration programmes and counselling services, to name a few. If these had not been established prior to their arrival into Ireland, integration and participation into Irish society would be slow, if not absent altogether. It would be almost impossible for this vulnerable group of young people to survive, and so raises questions about the thousands of immigrants entering the country every year that are being forced to live this reality.

Education has a leading role to play in the future of integration and cultural diversity within Ireland. At the moment we are only beginning to address the issues facing minority groups. It is vital that measures are taken to facilitate the integration of this group into the educational sphere as well as wider society. Language supports and recognition of cultural restrictions are essential to promote success. Implementation of the revised curriculum for both primary and secondary schools is critical for changes to occur.

The relationship between religion and integration problems relevance was surprisingly low. In relation to the studies on Islamophobia, and cultural differences,

religion seemed quite significant as an obstacle to integration. However this was not dominant in my research. . While Racism and prejudice were minor in the lives of the teenagers strands still existed. The biggest issue hindering integration was identified by the youth worker and resettlement co-ordinator as language. It seemed that once the language barrier was overcome, the main obstacle to participation in society was no longer present. This was also supported by the teenagers in Cork who in general reported no integration problems.

The experiences of Muslim teenagers in Ireland included in this research project have been prominently positive. They are happy living in Ireland and believe that they are accepted for who they are as Muslims and as Irish teenagers. They remain loyal to their cultural beliefs and participate in Irish life and society as mush as they wish. It is apparent that they have been successful in striking a balance between Irish culture and Muslim beliefs and values, and enjoy life like the majority of Irish teenagers.

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