REPORT

Fostering and adoption in the UK within British Muslim communities

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FOSTERING AND ADOPTION IN THE UK WITHIN BRITISH MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

Executive summary

This report examines the challenging relationship between Islam and fostering and adoption in the UK, and efforts currently being made to address it. Through an analysis of extant literature and data from a small-scale pilot study based on interviews with foster care agencies, this report firstly explains why an influx of immigrant children and a growing local Muslim population mean that it is important to focus on fostering and adoption in Muslim communities. It then considers the need for research in this area to look specifically at religion, before subsequently looking explicitly at current care policies and the recruitment and retention of Muslim carers. The report also discusses potential reasons why Muslim children enter care, and the challenges faced by those who become foster carers. It makes policy recommendations centred on the need to make the current system more transparent, and to provide more support to carers.

Policy recommendations

■ **A more transparent reporting system should be established:** Along with the early publication of migrant and refugee children estimates, it is proposed that religious background(s) be included within the national statistics on children entering care. This will enable care organisations to better plan carer recruitment, and understand the identities of children in care (thereby seemingly helping with placement decisions).

■ **A digital 'Muslim Care Network' (MCN) should be provided:** This proposed education programme and toolkit would seek to address Muslim carers' specific concerns. MCN would provide a forum for existing carers to discuss and exchange practical experiences and solutions to problems faced, which could feed back to education programmes and help in their continued development. The digitally-based national network would facilitate a national reach through a cost-effective medium. It could also be resourced to hold regular regional or national events, activities, conferences and/or seminars that additionally help to support its members, or it could potentially work in partnership with non-digital networks to do so, and/or some social and support events could be organised at local levels through member initiation.

■ **More support should be given to charity-driven education and training programmes:** Charities and organisations that have intimate knowledge and experience of dealing with Muslim carers and children could seemingly work as valuable intermediaries between carers and local authorities. They could therefore help more in the recruitment, selection and training of foster carers, as well as in aiding the education of local authorities about cultural and religious sensitivities and misunderstandings. It is proposed that their programmes receive greater funding so that they can be continuous, and ultimately more cost-efficient than investment in new recruitment drives. The charities should be resourced to work locally and deliver education programmes in conjunction with local community centres and mosques.

Introduction: the context of Muslim fostering and adoption within the UK

The forced displacement of people globally hit a record high in 2015. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR 2016) estimated that in 2015, one in every 113 people globally were affected by displacement. The UNHCR (2016) reports that three countries, Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia, account for over fifty per cent of refugees under its mandate, and that these countries are all predominantly Muslim, as are several others with the next biggest refugee outflows: Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Nigeria, and Sudan. Children comprised 51% of the world's refugees in 2015 and, in the same year, there were nearly 100,000 asylum requests from children separated from, or unaccompanied by, their families (UNHCR 2016). Large numbers of these refugees arrive in Europe each year, and in 2009 EUFRA (2010) recorded 12,210 unaccompanied minors arriving in the EU. This number escalated alongside the Syrian conflict, with 88,245 unaccompanied children applying for asylum in the EU in 2015, of which 3,045 applications were made to the UK (Great Britain 2016).

The British government agreed to resettle 20,000 Syrians in response to the crisis in that country, a substantial number of whom were to be children (STC 2016). The 'Dubs' amendment to the Immigration Act in 2016 pledged that the government would bring an additional 3000 unaccompanied child refugees to the UK from Europe, though in February 2017 the government began to retract the scheme, with only an estimated 350 children being transferred (Addley 2017). In 2015, Kent County Council, because of its proximity to large refugee camps on the French coast, reported that it was overwhelmed by the number of unaccompanied children in its care. The council had no more foster placements available and a shortage of social workers meant that the council had to look to the private sector to fill the gaps, causing a government funding deficit (STC 2016; McVeigh 2015).

Beyond the number of Muslims coming to the UK as refugees, Muslims make up an increasing share of the UK's population, representing 4.8% of the population at the most recent census (Muslim Council of Britain 2015). In 2016, the number of Muslims in the UK reached three million (Finnigan 2016). There are cultural norms particular to these communities (such as the stigma attached to children born outside of marriage), which mean that Muslim communities have a disproportionately high number of children needing care (Muslim Institute 2014). This trend can be seen across ethnic minority groups, and is one that causes fierce debate about racial integration, concern for the cultural identity of adoptees, the suitability

of parents from other backgrounds to care for these children, and the 'rejection' of 'suitable' white parents as a result of ethnic matching (Barn and Kirton 2012).

Indeed, the state had aimed to 'match' children from minority groups—who are overrepresented in the public care system and have low adoption rates—with families or carers who have similar ethnic and religious backgrounds (Barn and Kirton 2012). However, politicians and public commentators alleged that this caused delays in placing children in long-term care, and scholars such as Bullock et al (2006:17) argued that the policy represented a simplistic 'proxy for trying to optimise the chance of carers and child' to form a lasting and secure bond. From 2010, the Coalition government announced it would start reducing barriers to transracial adoption (Ali 2013b), thereby beginning the start of rhetoric that blamed social workers for seeking 'perfect ethnic matches' and thus denying children homes (David Cameron quoted in Harrison 2012: n.pag.). The Children and Families Act 2014 repealed previous statutory guidance that adoption agencies must give due consideration to religious and racial background (Gheera and Long 2014). Sir Martin told The Telegraph he will publish a fostering report at the end of the year which will make ethnicity and religion of carers a 'secondary' issue. Sir Martin Narey, the Government's official adviser on fostering, has recently stated that "'Skin colour and religion do not matter in 2017"', and that his upcoming fostering report will 'make ethnicity and religion of carers a "secondary" issue' (quoted in Mendick 2017: n.pag.).

Nonetheless, an increasing number of UK-based charities have been actively recruiting foster parents who are Muslim, or foster parents who are willing to care for Muslim children. *Penny Appeal* has made 'Muslim Fostering' one of its key appeals, estimating the need of 10,000 additional carers for Muslim children, who will ideally be placed either with Muslim families, or with non-Muslim carers whom the charity will give 'a better understanding of Islam, so that more Muslim foster children can feel at home' (Penny Appeal website: n.pag.). Similarly the *Muslim Foster Network* (MFN) has recently been launched in response to:

> [T]he shortage of Muslim Foster carers, [which means that] most children need to be placed outside of their faith group. MFN works with the local community, carers, national fostering agencies and local authorities to improve the chances of successful placements (MFN 2017a: n.pag.).

For example, MFN aims to support non-Muslim foster carers who may be unfamiliar with Islam, so that they can support the child in maintaining their birth identity (MFN 2017b).

Conversely, the government training, support, development and standards workbook (Department for Education 2012) provides general guidance about becoming a foster carer, but does not consider cultural sensitivities, which may act as barriers in successfully implementing a child care system. This report explores those sensitivities, considering why they act as barriers and how they could be overcome. Luke and Sebba (2013), for example, have argued that the selection criterion for foster carers needs to be more flexible and adaptable to cultural values.

This report also investigates why the recruitment of new Muslim foster carers remains low, in relation to the demand that exists. It considers why there is an increased need for fostering Muslim children in the UK, how the current foster system caters for these children, and what else might be done to address their specific needs and ensure Muslim children are fostered in environments where they are safe, healthy, and connected to their religious background and culture. The report asks: which issues surround foster care and adoption in the Muslim community and what are the ways in which foster care provision for Muslim children in the UK can become more sustainable?

After the following methods section, this report first considers what we know about Muslim fostering, focusing on reviewing literature relating to the increased need for foster care provision for Muslim children, current government policy, the relationship between religion and fostering, the complexities of placing children in care, and the perspectives of foster carers themselves. It then presents some data, taken from exploratory pilot study telephone interviews, which are discussed in respect of potential policy recommendations and suggested future research.

Methods

This article is primarily based upon a review of pre-existing literature. Some empirical data was also collected, in the form of pilot semi-structured telephone interviews with senior personnel from five charities which focus on Muslim foster care. This research was exploratory and the literature review helped to ground the research questions (Yin 2013).

Qualitative research is not statistically generalisable or representative (Cohen et al, 2013), particularly when a snowball sample is used, as was the case here (Merkens 2004). Yet, for exploratory research there is no imperative to generate results that are replicable. Instead, this type of research focuses on understanding issues, working out which questions to ask, and finding directions for future research (Jupp 2006).

The data were thematically analysed (Rapley 2011), and grounded in the substantive literature. This article makes use of 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973) when providing narrative accounts of the pilot interviews. The emergent themes are proffered as stimuli for further research within the foster care sector, and some related policy recommendations are suggested.

Religion, race, and foster care/adoption

The Children and Families Act of 2014 rescinded the 2002 Adoption and Children Act's requirement that English adoption agencies consider 'a child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background' (Great Britain 2002: 1:5). The government explained that while this kind of 'matching' would sometimes be in a child's interests, a delay in homing them in order for a social worker to find a complete or partial ethnic match is not (Great Britain 2012). This change was based on research which found that fostering and adoption agencies struggled to find placements for children from minority ethnic backgrounds and to recruit prospective carers from these backgrounds, which lead to delays in placing children (Dance et al 2010). Other research highlighted that making decisions about which ethnic and religious backgrounds to match children to was difficult, given the complexity of many children's heritage and culture, and that this may have been a reason why children from minority backgrounds went on different—and longer—care pathways to white children (Selwyn et al 2010). Both reports focus on ethnicity over

religion, and this is common in research on fostering and adoption for minority children: transracial adoption is an increasingly studied topic both in the UK and globally (Sargent 2015; Perry 1998; McRoy and Griffin 2012; Ali 2013a). Yawar (1992) is a rare exception, in discussing how foster care agencies paid relatively little attention to the ongoing needs of Muslim children based on social and religious needs. Ali (2013a) argues that race and ethnicity are used as umbrella terms for a range of issues, including language, cultural heritage, and religion.

There is a need for further research on Muslim adoption in the UK, not only because of the increased number of unaccompanied Muslim children arriving in the UK, the burgeoning domestic Muslim population, and the overrepresentation of minority groups in the care system (as outlined above), but also because there are issues particular to Islam that may inhibit fostering and adoption in this community. The issue of adoption is complex. For instance, Gürtin et al (2015) argue that, while couples may foster an orphaned child, permanent adoption is not part of family law in most Muslim majority countries, with Turkey, Tunisia, and Iran being notable exceptions. This may influence British citizens considering becoming

placing' (Coram 2014). This included efforts to engage with reservations about adoption amongst the local Muslim community, holding an information session entitled 'Find out about adoption from a Muslim perspective' in November 2014 (Coram 2014). Coram's Managing Director of Adoption, Jeanne Kaniuk, said:

> Adoption in the British system is not always a familiar concept in more diverse communities. It can also be difficult to find adopters for children who have parents from different backgrounds. So for example, finding adopters for a child with one parent who is Pakistani Muslim and another who is White UK Christian will require prioritising the different strands of the child's identity …Coram is committed to going the extra mile to find more adopters from Muslim backgrounds… (Muslim Institute 2014: n.pag.).

This quote reflects the complicated nuances in children's backgrounds and a continued emphasis on placing children in environments that match their own, despite this event being held the same year that the British government changed legislation requiring ethnic matching and two years after they had indicated their intent to do so. The Muslim Institute (2014) publicised the event, and this is indicative of broader efforts to encourage wider dialogue about this contentious issue.

More recently than Coram's efforts in Harrow, the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium has organised a series of events to recruit Muslim foster carers:

> These events raise awareness about the fact that in Islam Fostering and Adoption is not only permissible but a duty of the Muslim Ummah. An 'Alim is usually present to speak about Fostering and Adoption in the light of the Qur'an and Hadith (The Islamic Cultural Centre (ICCUK) 2016).

Events take place in mosques, reflecting that this is a joint effort on behalf of local religious and council leaders. ICCUK (affiliated with London Central Mosque Trust Ltd.) argued that this effort was needed because there was a broad lack of understanding of the place of adoption and fostering in Islam, and because:

> [T]here are a growing number of Muslim children coming into care. There are very few Muslim Foster Carers…Most children in care are looked after by non-Muslim families. This has meant that some children are losing their Deen (religion) along with knowledge of their Islamic identity and heritage (ICCUK 2016).

parents and who have links to these countries as their families' places of origin. There is, however, a moral duty and obligation in Islam to care for those—particularly children—who lack safety, security, and homes (Assim and Sloth-Nielson 2014). The combination of these two factors can lead to the Muslim system of kafalah—used primarily for migrant workers—being adapted to allow Muslim families to care for children on a permanent basis, without the child having the right to the family name or inheritance (Assim and Sloth-Neilson 2014).

In an attempt to navigate the complex environment where caring for children without parents is encouraged but adoption itself is complicated by religious instruction, several British organisations offer educational material for prospective Islamic carers. Coram (which is currently partnered with the British Association for Adoption and Fostering to provide a Fostering Academy) has introduced events, which specifically target Muslim families. For example, Coram worked with Harrow Council to create an innovative new partnership in 2006 aimed at 'permanence

Foster child placements

Over the last thirty years there have been significant changes to consecutive British governments' attitudes to, and policies about, fostering and adopting children (See Adoption and Children Act, 2002; Children Act, 2004). In the Labour led government era, there was less residential care, more fostering followed by adoption as a route out of care, increased professionalisation of workers in the sector, as well as a new focus on including children's views and maintaining birth family contact (Bullock et al 2006). Bullock et al (2006) argue that one of the most significant developments has been the increasing emphasis on recognising that children in care do not represent a homogeneous group and that their needs before and after entering care vary enormously. Waterhouse and Brocklesby (2001) found that three quarters of the children they surveyed were placed in temporary families without appropriate planning for the needs of the child. They emphasised that this approach could have negative consequences in terms of the child's experience of care, arguing that it was important to consider social and cultural factors when placing children in care. This view is shared by Mitchell et al (2010), who emphasise the importance of placing children in environments that meet their expectations of care, thereby easing their transition into a new home.

The correct placement of a child into care plays a significant part in achieving positive outcomes for the child and the carer, as James (2004) argues that placement changes (where a child is moved from one foster home to another) are most common as a result of behavioural problems that may arise in the early phase of a placement. Placement changes can be destabilising for the child (Herrenkohl et al 2003), but the number of these is significantly reduced when a child is placed in an environment where they feel a sense of belonging and integration (Leathers 2006). Across governments, foster placement stability is partly dependent on matching children to suitable foster carers (Redding 2000), and McDermid et al (2012) argue that demographics are important matching criteria. Government have consistently failed to present comprehensive information in relation to whether demographic profiles of foster carers match those of children. This makes it difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of the matching process from a demographic perspective. However, successful foster care placements rely on interaction between the child and carer (Sinclair and Wilson 2003) and similarities in demographics can play a significant role in determining the level of engagement between individuals (Orrell-Valente et al 1999). This makes it important to develop a better understanding of whether demographic considerations take place in matching processes and also to establish the proportionate availability of foster carers based on demographics.

Foster carers: recruitment and retention

Numerous studies have explored the reasons for why and how people become foster carers. These include: the impact of previous experience of working with children and of knowing existing foster carers (Sebba 2012); an inability to have children (Sinclair et al 2004); as well as extrinsic motivations, such as the financial incentives making it easier to commit to fostering (Geiger et al 2013). However, Sinclair et al (2004) also found that one in ten of the foster carers interviewed had stopped fostering that same year. Retention of foster carers is more likely when foster carers experience greater levels of satisfaction, and Eaton and Caltabiano (2009) argue that social support was an important factor in this. MacGregor et al (2006) also recommended additional support for foster carers, as well as a gradual introduction for new foster carers to the process.

Adding to the already complex policy environment of fostering and adoption is the fact that the UK, like the US, struggles to place children from minority backgrounds in care (McRoy and Griffin 2012) and apparently has a

shortage of 'non-white' couples wanting to adopt (Pidd 2010). Colton et al (2008) argued that ethnic minorities have a distrust of the recruitment system, explaining difficulties in retention and recruitment. Yet McRoy and Griffin (2012) critique 'colourblind' adoption for inadequately preparing families for potential challenges, arguing that successful transracial adoption sees race 'infused' into child-rearing through a celebration of difference in culture and open discussions of race. Both of these strategies need to be taught to prospective transracial carers through pre- and post-placement support (McRoy et al 2012). The British government infused its recent reforms of adoption with language about race, ethnicity, and the challenges of multiculturalism, yet there is very little research that explores ethnic and cultural variation, what it means, and to which identity markers it is attributed (Ali 2013a). This is problematic in a policy environment where the government tells social workers not to focus on cultural matching, whereas indications suggest that ignoring culture and background produces bad outcomes for carers and children (MFN 2017b).

It appears that there needs to be more consideration— on a national policy, and also agency, level—of how the care system can accommodate the reality of Britain's multicultural society: racial and religious differences are visible and frequently vocalised. It has been argued since the 1980s that a care system needs to be designed and implemented in a manner which is 'culturally competent' (Cross, 1989:62) and that practitioners received necessary training to enhance cultural awareness adapting practice skills and processes to suit the cultural context (practitioner level); and empowering families to flexibly develop their own support networks using family, friends and advocacy groups (consumer level).

The proposals by Cross (1989) would help to deliver outreach programmes, but policy initiatives that have an outreach agenda can often fail and be rejected by minority communities if they are not considerate of cultural norms (Sargent 2015). Greenfield and Cocking (2014) argue that community insiders (people from within a community) can offer a perspective that helps external agents to understand cultural norms and values. This would help to address the problem identified by Sargent (2015) and also strengthens the argument for greater community involvement and empowerment in foster care.

Greenfield and Cocking's (2014) work focussed on regional and ethnic cultures and made implicit references to religion. Religion has been an important influence in the shaping of culture (Dawson 2013) and this makes it a relevant point to focus on, as it can also impact on the family environment. This does not mean that religious discourse directly influences family discussions

and decision-making, but it can have an impact on the family dynamic and on approaches towards child care (Edgell 2006). For example, referring to Christianity, King (2003) found that fathers displaying more 'religiousness' were generally more involved in the upbringing of their children, and Mahoney et al (2001) linked greater parental religiousness with more positive parenting techniques and easier child-adolescent adjustment.

However, relatively little is understood within the UK about the religious backgrounds of foster parents and how these might influence their perspectives on foster care. Fostering guidelines provide broad strategies and advice for foster carers but it could be argued that the omission of religious understanding has contributed to a narrow perspective.

Emergent themes from the pilot interviews

Reasons for Muslim children entering care

One of the foster agency employees interviewed stated: *'I would say that 1 in 10 of the children we are receiving at the moment are of Muslim descent' (R2).* When asked how they would explain the increase in Muslim children needing care, respondents identified some issues that were exclusive to sections of the Muslim community and others that were more generically evident across foster care. The generic issues cited were domestic violence, marital breakdowns, drug-related causes, and orphaned children.

The increase in the numbers of refugee children from war-torn areas such as Syria was repeatedly raised by interviewees as being a specific reason for Muslim children entering the care system. This response is not unique to the foster agencies interviewed for this report: some charities have requested that the UK should accept several thousand more unaccompanied children (Refugee Council 2016). However, there was real concern expressed by an interviewee about how fostering agencies would cope with a continued increase in the number of Muslim children in care as a result of forced migration, with one interviewee asking: *'Are we going to be able to meet the needs of the children from Syria[?]' (R2).* This question echoes the struggles that local councils are facing in dealing with this influx of unaccompanied children, as outlined earlier.

This report's pilot research found that foster care agencies did not only identify external emergencies—such as the current refugee crisis—as reasons for large numbers of Muslim children entering care. Respondents also talked of British-Muslim and Muslim migrant children being removed from the care of their parents by local authorities, and not simply because of alleged neglect or abuse. Although rare, there were a number of cases highlighted by interviewees where children were taken into care because of a parent's inability to communicate with hospitals and social services when children suffer minor injuries through accidents. As one respondent stated: *'there are also a lot of misunderstandings that happen…there was one family that became very defensive about a common injury occurring while the child was playing….[T]he social worker came around and the family were not natural in their behaviour' (R1).* The same interviewee also suggested that some Muslim parents may not have enough social awareness: *'…a lot of migrant parents are unaware of the [potentially negative] social influences on children…they are out of touch with the culture' (R1).* This apparent issue could be significant, as it is little talked about in extant literature, regarding Muslim adoption specifically.

The socially conservative views held by some sections of the Muslim community have seemingly also led to some instances where children have been removed from their home environment and placed into care: *'There are a high volume of teenage (Muslim) girls going into care…issues cited are differences in opinion between the family and the child' (R4).* This assertion is noteworthy in terms of this article, as it has apparent implications for where these children should be placed. In these instances, 'matching' the children with families of similar backgrounds may not be the best solution. This relates to Ali's (2013b) empirical research, which found that matching children risked homogenizing religious and ethnic groups and that children with 'mixed' heritage, such as those brought up in wider British culture but with Muslim migrant parents, are not easily placed into similar cultural backgrounds, being as their own may cut across several categories.

Shortage of Muslim foster carers

One of the interviewed foster care agencies (R2) estimated that approximately 1 in 10 children in their records were from a Muslim background. However, there were no official statistics that the fostering charity participants said they could rely on, due to religious information not being included within the current databases. This issue also apparently applies to foster carers: *'We are looking to identify how many Muslim foster carers there are in the UK…statistics mention ethnicities but there is no mention of religion' (R4).*

Due to the lack of clarity about the religion of a child in care and the number of refugee children expected to enter the country, some interviewees emphasised the role of the government in communicating with local authorities and care agencies:

> Given that it takes 6 months to train and approve a carer[,] the government needs to communicate official data of children coming into care or into the country. Without this information it is difficult [to estimate] how many carers will be needed in the future (R2).

Apparently then, the shortage of carers is partly based on perception and internal increases in the number of cases where Muslim children were coming into care. One interviewee (R5) was working with several boroughs to provide suitable foster parents for Muslim children, in order to address a shortfall of foster carers. The same participant expressed a concern that there was not enough collaborative activity between agencies and boroughs because they were competing against one another: *'There are a lot of foster providers with good marketing but they*

do not have a good database of carers…They are working competitively against each other' (R5).

Some participants additionally asserted that a high number of potential carers did not succeed in the application process, which then contributed to the lack of carers in the Muslim community. One respondent explained:

> I would say that approximately 95% of potential… Muslim foster carers fail the criteria required to be a foster carer. This is not because of a lack of parenting ability, but because of…a general misunderstanding of how the foster care system is intended to operate (R1).

The above quote infers the availability of Muslim foster carers, but their failure to become carers due to their limited understanding of the processes involved.

When asked why misunderstandings about processes were seemingly so common in the Muslim community, interviewees offered a number of explanations. One foster care agency expressed that potential carers could be better prepared before entering the application process: *'A change in idealistic perceptions of fostering are needed before contacting the agency…once they are with us they can cope…but people can drop out after the first contact once they realise something is different to what they expected' (R2).* However, the process itself was identified

by the same agency as being unnecessarily lengthy and possibly contributing to fewer applications from carers in general being approved: *'The approval process itself takes about 6 months when it could be done in 4' (R2).* Further concerns were raised about the level of administration involved in becoming and remaining a foster carer: *'The bureaucracy can be difficult to manage…especially when you think that English might not be the first language of some carers and that they are good parents but not used to reading a lot and filling out forms for everything' (R1).*

These views about the overly bureaucratic application process are a reflection of the polyphonic nature of organisations within the social care system (Villadsen 2008), where fostering and adoption agencies must operate within legal, child welfare, and political systems (Sargent 2015), as well as engage with cultural and social norms. There is research that provides a systems-based analysis of transracial adoption in the UK (Sargent 2015), but none that specifically deals with religion or Islam: given the complicated organisational and bureaucratic processes involved, this is perhaps an area worthy of further research.

Many interviewees also felt that discriminatory practices within the care system were partly at fault for a seemingly low success rate of Muslim applicants. For example, one respondent commented: *'[I]t is not that Muslims don't come forward. A large number of them don't succeed in getting through the process [of becoming carers]. Is there some reason?….is there discrimination?' (R4).*

Another interviewee relayed a personal anecdote about her sister-in-law:

> [She] contacted the local authority and was told there is no problem with shortages of Muslim foster carers…they were later reprimanded as it was established that there were no Muslim foster carers in the area. I worked for the local authority and knew there was a horrendous shortage of Muslim foster carers…the problem is that of every 100 enquiries they [foster agencies] get from a recruitment drive…they end up with 3 approved carers. This is before prejudice and local authorities come into effect (R3).

These accounts were not uncommon in the interviews carried out within this pilot study, and they correspond with the problems other scholars (Ali 2013b; Patel et al 2004) have found with attempts to de-racialise the care system. These researchers found that race and religion both played important roles in decisions about whether someone was suitable to become a carer. This links to findings from America (where transracial adoption

research is more prolific), that ignoring the background of children or their prospective carers was not only unlikely, but also damaging (McRoy and Griffin 2012).

Other interviewees discussed the problems with the screening process and felt that there was a bias and lack of consistency that prevented potential Muslim foster carers from being successful in their applications. One said: *'Often (potential) Muslim foster carers feel quite challenged by questions that are presented to them…whether it is on the current political climate or views around so-called Islamic state[,]…homosexuality, and…diet' (R3)*. Indeed, the same participant stated that the questioning encountered by potential Muslim foster parents was seen as a deterrent to others coming forward: *'Most Muslims do not realise how many children are in care and fear of intrusiveness of the local authority….fear of being judged, prevents them from wanting to become carers' (R3)*.

The types of questions potential Muslim carers had to answer were not seen as difficult in themselves, but some interviewees expressed their supposition that these questions were reserved for Muslims and not members of other religious groups:

> There seems to be a consistency of Muslims entering this process, where questions [are] being raised that would not necessarily be posed to other religious groups…The answers are quite simple because it's no different from the Christian or Jewish perspective. Homosexuality is seen as a sin but ultimately the child will make their mind up about what they do (R4).

However, one of the interviewees said the official response a foster carer applicant received was: *'We think that if your son or daughter became homosexual…this would be a problem for you' (R3)*. This attitude is not surprising in light of the aforementioned foster care agency employees' assertion that diverging views between Muslim children and their parents was a reason that some Muslim children enter care. Nonetheless, it was a common theme in the pilot interviews that other pre-assumptions are made by local authorities, in terms of how Muslim foster carers would manage sensitive situations with children.

It was, however, acknowledged by a number of the interviewees that the Muslim community should be appreciative of the need for local authorities to perform due diligence on potential foster carers: *'…Muslim families also need to be aware of local authority needs to vet people' (R3)*. Another interviewee provided a balanced overview:

> We support the efforts made by social workers and the local authority to ensure that they identify the best people who will then successfully become foster carers. At the same time we don't accept and we don't think it's fair that Muslims should feel frustrated or victimised in any way when they go through this process (R4).

These quotations suggest that religion (and religious identity markers) may still play an important role in the foster care/adoption process, despite the government's directive that this should not be the case. This is worrying given Patel et al's (2004:12) assertion that 'exclusion and hostility to those with different identities are relatively common and can have major effects' on the social work process when it comes to placing children in care. The presented data also connect to broader concerns that transracial adoption provides a breeding ground for racial politics and ethnic prejudices to grow (Kirton 2000).

Participants additionally raised concerns about the consistency of advice given to potential foster carers within the Muslim community, particularly between regions. One interviewee stated that different local authorities react variably to foster carers who express a preference to take in a child from specific religious backgrounds (usually their own):

> [T]here is no consistency in what is acceptable between [boroughs/] regions…Some carers may stipulate they only want children of [a] certain age or only Muslim…Certain local authorities frown upon that…they are looking for foster carers that are flexible…[I]n other areas it is acceptable for you to…make clear you would prefer a boy or a girl or children of a certain age (R4).

This implies that a clear national standard is not present, or is not being applied. Furthermore, age and gender issues were identified by the participants as one of the biggest barriers to Muslim foster parents taking on more cases. These were cultural interpretations of religious etiquettes that made it difficult for families to accept children beyond the age of 11.

> The hardest to place children are teenagers. Babies are easy to place and toddlers even. Once the kids get an attitude…by the time they are teenagers they have been through a lot of carers and people don't want them (R3).

Relatedly, a foster charity commented that if a parent declines to take on a child because that child is a teenager, they are *'less likely to be asked again' (R2)*, due to a perception of them as inflexible: thereby reducing the existing pool of available Muslim carers.

Difficulties with retaining Muslim foster carers

Retention of foster carers was perceived as a problem by the participants, as they suggested that a lack of understanding about the fostering system would quickly leave many foster parents disenfranchised and lead

them to stop fostering in the future. Rhodes et al (2001) also established that a lack of continued support was a determining factor in foster carers leaving the system. Indeed, one interviewee suggested that Muslim foster carers were often under-prepared as a result of unrealistic expectations about fostering, stating that the recruitment campaigns which targeted Muslim foster carers had a focus on the rewards, and not the challenges, of fostering. Whenan et al (2009) relatedly discussed the importance of refining and evaluating foster care training to help ensure the welfare and efficacy of carers. They further argued that foster carer wellbeing is under-researched.

Conclusion

This report has highlighted the significance of considering religion (specifically Islam) in relation to fostering and adoption. The national foster care statistics include demographic data that help to identify trends in the ethnicity of children, but not their religious affiliations. It is necessary to establish the latter, as literature and the pilot study findings have suggested that placing children in environments that are familiar to them can facilitate an easier transition into a new home (this is not to imply that religion should be a defining factor in the placement of a child).

It additionally appears that fostering and adoption organisations require quicker access to more accurate data pertaining to the number of children anticipated to enter care (particularly in relation to refugee children). This information is seemingly crucial in care agencies' planning and recruitment cycles, which have limited resources.

There is also an apparent need for more research, which particularly considers Muslims' perceptions of fostering and adoption, and issues around the recruitment and retention of Muslim carers: including the bureaucracy of, and potential discrimination involved in, the application process. Contrary to the government's position, it seems that carers' religion may matter in the fostering application process and carer retention rates.

Furthermore, the pilot study suggested that social workers and those involved with the selection of foster carers were, in a number of cases, inconsistent. Moreover, potential and existing Muslim carers were described as being unprepared for the care system and anxious when dealing with local authorities. Whilst there are currently a number of excellent support networks for foster carers within the UK, this report has suggested that some Muslim carers may have concerns, which are exclusive to the Muslim community, and may need special provisions.

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