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## **Does religious practice increase levels of economic inactivity among British Muslim women? a mixed methods examination**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter examines whether aspects of religious practice (specifically individual religious practice and hijab) can explain high levels of economic inactivity in the ‘looking after home and family’ category among British Muslim women. The author suggests that without a mix of quantitative and qualitative accounts, it is impossible to assess whether high levels of economic inactivity are a result of religious discrimination or religiously informed choices made by the women themselves. In this chapter, Asma presents findings from a mixed methods study which included statistical analysis of data from the Ethnic Minority British Election Survey (2010), alongside findings from an original qualitative study.

Triangulation of findings reveals that individual religious practice is not associated with ‘looking after home and family’ economic inactivity among Muslim women. The author finds that individual religious practice has a small, non-significant, association with this form of economic

inactivity and that Muslim women do not see religious practice as a barrier to economic activity in qualitative interviews.

The author concludes that whilst neither individual religious practice nor hijab is found to be associated with this category of economic inactivity, both are visible markers of socio-cultural difference which may well be a source of (unmeasured) labour market discrimination. These findings suggest that the well-established association between religious affiliation and economic inactivity may therefore result from discrimination or from structural or socio-cultural factors other than religiosity.

## **Introduction**

Labour market outcomes are an important way in which the successful socio-economic integration of ethno-religious minority groups in Britain is measured; economic inactivity is one among several of these outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Muslim women are more likely to face labour market disadvantage than women of other religious belongings, and this disadvantage is greater in the case of economic inactivity than in other labour market outcomes.<sup>2</sup> The economically inactive are those who are not in work, nor actively seeking work.<sup>3</sup> British Muslim women are the only religious group of women more likely to be economically inactive than active.<sup>4</sup> Labour market inequalities vary according to specific labour market outcomes.<sup>5</sup> The research presented in this chapter applies this insight by examining a sub-category of economic inactivity: 'looking after home and family' (LAHF).

LAHF is the modal labour market outcome for British Muslim women, explaining the economic inactivity of 57% of Muslim women.<sup>6</sup> It is the persistent and significant presence of Muslim women in the LAHF category that sets them apart from women of the White majority and ethnic-

minority women of other religious groups.<sup>7</sup> Other categories of economic inactivity (sickness or disability, retirement, being a student) cause far less social and political concern in relation to Muslim women.

High levels of economic inactivity among Muslim women attract policy and social concern for a number of reasons. First, low levels of economic activity are indicators of inequality and, specifically, unequal access to labour market opportunities. Recent research provides robust evidence that British Muslims are disadvantaged when applying for jobs.<sup>8</sup> Second, low levels of labour market participation are politicised, particularly when they are seen as the result of religiously informed choices by Muslim women and their families to conform to traditional gender norms. For example, the Casey Review, a UK government-commissioned review of social integration, expressed grave concerns that high levels of LAHF among Muslim women signalled a desire to remain apart from wider British society.<sup>9</sup> Finally, and most importantly, high levels of economic inactivity are likely to be significant drivers of higher levels of poverty among Muslim households than those of other religious groups.<sup>10</sup>

Quantitative studies show that despite rapid social change since the 1970s, rates of economic activity for this group of women remain stubbornly low. Qualitative studies have not kept pace with the ever more detailed statistical data available on the labour market outcomes of Muslim women. Narrative accounts from economically inactive British Muslim women are either absent from discussions, or at least a decade out of date, which is surprising, given calls in quantitative studies for greater qualitative insights.<sup>11</sup> Without a mix of quantitative and qualitative accounts, it is impossible to assess whether high levels of economic inactivity are a result of religious discrimination or religiously informed choices made by the women themselves. Whilst statistics

can help us to identify broad patterns and trends, we can only begin to understand the choices that Muslim women make when they explain these in their own words.

Using a mixed methods research (MMR) approach, in this chapter I investigate whether religious practice is a statistically significant variable in explanations of high levels of LAHF among British Muslim women. Beginning with a critical evaluation of the literature to explain patterns of economic inactivity, I then present an overview of the MMR approach, followed by my research findings. The statistical phase of the project involved bivariate and multivariate analysis of the LAHF outcome which included independent variables for religiosity, social capital, and socio-economic status. Statistical findings are then triangulated with qualitative data to understand whether and *how* those things that statistics cannot accurately describe religious practice increase the likelihood of economic inactivity. Interviewees were prompted to describe and give examples of religious beliefs and practices in their everyday lives and in relation to their decisions around economic activity; the main religious practices that they spoke about were *hijab* (modesty and ‘covering’ practices) and *salah* (daily prayers).

### **Existing explanations for high levels of economic inactivity: a Muslim penalty or a religiously informed choice?**

A question related to religious affiliation was introduced in the Census for England and Wales in 2001 and has been included in most national surveys since, enabling closer examination of labour market disparities by religious belonging. The religious penalty refers to any unexplained differences in labour market outcomes among religious groups after controlling for age, qualification, and UK birth. Analysing data from the 2005 and 2006 Annual Population Surveys, Anthony Heath and Jean Martin found Muslim women were more likely to be economically

inactive than women of other religious belongings within all ethnic groups and that all ethnic groups of Muslim women were significantly less likely to be economically active than White British Christian women. These findings suggest a consistent and shared Muslim effect, or a ‘Muslim penalty’, on economic activity. Quantitative research has consistently shown that British Muslim women are more likely to be economically inactive than similarly aged, and qualified, Christian women.<sup>12</sup>

Within the labour market penalty literature, it is generally accepted that ethnic or religious discrimination explains a significant part of identified disparities in outcomes. However, because the extent of this penalty is greater for the outcome of economic inactivity (in comparison to, for example, unemployment), it is suggested that factors other than discrimination are at play.<sup>13</sup>

Some argue that higher levels of economic inactivity among Muslim women are caused by socio-cultural factors rather than discrimination. For example, in Koopmans’ analysis of data from the Eurislam Survey,<sup>14</sup> a comparative survey of Muslims and non-Muslims in six Western European countries, they found that socio-cultural variables explain most differences in labour market participation between Muslim and non-Muslim women, whilst variables measuring self-reported discrimination were non-significant.<sup>15</sup> Most often, however, socio-cultural factors, and other structural factors, are considered to act in *addition* to religious discrimination.<sup>16</sup>

In this chapter, I focus on individual (private) religious practice as a possible explanation for higher rates of LAHF economic inactivity among Muslim women. The inclusion of questions in relation to religious practice in national and international cross-sectional surveys is becoming more commonplace, because of increasing awareness of unequal socio-economic outcomes and wider concerns around integration among religious minority groups, for example in the Understanding Society (UK household longitudinal survey) and the Ethnic Minorities in British

Election Survey 2010. The impact of religiosity on labour market outcomes in quantitative studies is, however, an emerging field supported by a limited number of datasets.

Nabil Khattab, Roy Johnston, and David Manley make an important contribution: using the Understanding Society dataset of 2009, they compare economic activity rates between Muslim and White British Christian women and evaluate the impact of religiosity on the likelihood of economic activity.<sup>17</sup> They hypothesise that more religious Muslim women are more likely to participate in the labour market than the less religious, on the basis that Islam is a source of empowerment and negotiation of traditional family practices (based on qualitative research, discussed below). Their measure of religiosity combines the frequency of religious attendance at a service with a measure of religious salience, and they conclude that whilst higher levels of religiosity do not significantly increase the likelihood of economic activity, they do not increase the likelihood of economic inactivity either.

The selection of communal religious practice to measure levels of religiosity among Muslim women by Khattab et al. is interesting;<sup>18</sup> communal practice is not obligatory for Muslim women, and there are low levels of female attendance at mosques in Britain.<sup>19</sup> In their examination of generational changes in religiosity, Siobhan McAndrew and David Voas find that being female is associated with higher religious salience, lower communal practice, and higher levels of private practice in comparison to men.<sup>20</sup> I suggest therefore that the construction of the measure of religiosity might be improved with the inclusion of a measure of private practice as a better indicator of the effects of religiosity on economic inactivity among Muslim women.

Measures of religiosity in most datasets are self-reported and cross-sectional; whilst they give us information on the frequency of religious practice for individuals and groups, this is only a snapshot of a given point in time. Cross-sectional data cannot tell us how religiosity might

impact choices Muslim women make around economic activity throughout their lives, unless we make the rather simplistic assumptions that high levels of religiosity among Muslim women will necessarily entail adherence to the traditional patriarchal gender norms often associated with Muslim families, and that levels of religious practice remain constant throughout their lives. Recent quantitative research has found that the association between high levels of economic inactivity and preferences for traditional gender values is not upheld. In their analysis of the Worldwide Values Survey, Emma Abdelhadi and Paula England evidence that differences in employment rates between Muslim women and those of other religions do not result from differences in gender ideologies.<sup>21</sup>

The assumed association of high levels of religiosity with religiously informed gender ideologies risks playing into racialised stereotypes of Muslim families as deeply patriarchal and oppressive.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, it fails to consider significant ethnic and religious diversity in Muslim religious practice and interpretations, particularly around gender norms.<sup>23</sup> Also, qualitative research suggests greater variation in the impacts of religiosity on economic activity by migrant generations than quantitative analyses.<sup>24</sup>

Detailed qualitative studies of the lives of British Muslim women (albeit now rather dated) have highlighted how their husbands and fathers have selectively interpreted religious texts to curtail their economic activity.<sup>25</sup> More recent qualitative studies have found that younger (second-generation) Muslim women use religiously informed argumentation as the basis for negotiating greater access to higher education and employment within families.<sup>26</sup> This is sometimes known as the 'religion versus culture' debate, where gender norms are associated with ethnic cultures rather than Islamic sources, noted most often among middle-class families.<sup>27</sup> Research has also

found that first-generation Muslim women hold different religiously informed beliefs around formal work than the second generation.<sup>28</sup>

Qualitative insights can help us to understand which religious practices are important in the lives of Muslim women and how these might impact economic inactivity. It may be the case that higher levels of religiosity are associated with lower levels of economic activity, and qualitative insights may reveal that high levels of self-reported religiosity are associated with adherence to traditional gender norms. It is important, however, that we come to this conclusion on an empirical basis rather than by assumption.

In what follows, I triangulate quantitative findings with qualitative findings to uncover whether, and how, individual religious practice impacts economic activity thus contributing to the limited empirical evidence in the literature on whether, and how, religious practice inhibits economic activity. I find that individual religious practice is not a significant predictor of LAHF among Muslim women in statistical analysis and that Muslim women themselves do not see religious practice as a barrier to economic activity. I suggest that because religious practices are often visible markers of socio-cultural difference, they may well be sources of (unmeasured) labour market discrimination.

## **Methodology: a mixed methods approach**

MMR bridges the theoretical and methodological divides between qualitative and quantitative paradigms and allows the articulation of different layers of explanation to create a holistic picture of the social phenomenon of interest.<sup>29</sup> Within the limited examples of MMR in the examination of the economic inactivity of Muslim women, the contributions of Angela Dale and colleagues are notable exceptions.<sup>30</sup> MMR is a pragmatic choice in light of the research question: whilst



statistical methods can establish whether high levels of religious practice increase the likelihood of economic inactivity, qualitative methods can reveal how these practices affect decisions about work and employment from the perspective of Muslim women. The specific MMR approach taken was ‘systematic QUANT-QUAL’: the quantitative research phase preceded the qualitative; methods and analysis from both approaches were given equal weight.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Quantitative methodology***

I undertook statistical analysis using data from the Ethnic Minority British Election Study (EMBES) of 2010. The EMBES 2010 was a one-off, nationally representative, cross-sectional survey of the political and social life of five major ethnic-minority groups in Britain. Described as an ‘authoritative’ dataset,<sup>32</sup> the EMBES 2010 includes an exciting range of questions for researchers of ethno-religious minority groups in Britain. The survey had 2787 responses in total, and 40% of the sample were Muslim.<sup>33</sup>

The sample for this analysis includes all EMBES 2010 survey respondents of working age who identified as female and were either LAHF or economically active. The LAHF category includes those unemployed for longer than six months; the economically active includes those unemployed for less than six months. Respondents who report other forms of inactivity are excluded from the analysis along with religious groups with fewer than ten LAHF cases.

Therefore, the sample is composed of 934 valid responses within the two categories of economic activity across the Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim religious groups.

First, the association of high levels of religious practice with LAHF is assessed in bivariate analysis, comparing religious practice among Muslim women with ethnic-minority women of other religious belongings. Second, the results of logistic regression modelling assess whether a

significant association between LAHF and high levels of religious practice exists among Muslim women when other relevant control and independent variables are taken into account. Alongside measures of religiosity, the models include control variables of ethnicity, educational level, age, marital status, migrant status, and presence of children, alongside additional independent variables: two measures of social capital and a measure of socio-economic status (source of household income). The results in relation to these additional independent variables are discussed elsewhere.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Qualitative methodology***

Qualitative fieldwork for this project was conducted between August 2015 and January 2016 in Cheetham Hill and Crumpsall, neighbouring urban residential areas in Manchester, UK. Both areas rank highly on the index of multiple deprivations and are ethnically diverse, with long histories of international migrations and dense concentrations of Muslims of Pakistani heritage. The Pakistani community is embedded in the area, both culturally and structurally: there are several long-established and purpose-built mosques and a range of local ethnic businesses providing goods and services catering for the communities.

I used in-depth interviews to capture rich and nuanced data on the multi-faceted and fluid nature of religious belief.<sup>35</sup> Interviews can provide insights about everyday practices; these regular, normative, and often taken-for-granted activities can be of social scientific significance.<sup>36</sup>

Twenty-seven economically inactive Pakistani Muslim women took part: 13 first generation and 14 second generation. I interviewed Pakistani women only, to reduce the complexities of separating ethnic culture from aspects of religiosity.<sup>37</sup>

Interviews took place in the interviewees' preferred location; this included private homes or settings such as local community centres. Interviews with second-generation women were conducted in English and in either Punjabi or Urdu with first-generation women. As a fluent speaker of these languages, I was able to conduct, translate, and transcribe these interviews myself. Rather than using a structured interview schedule, I developed a thematic interview guide. This afforded greater flexibility to translate questions into other languages and greater responsiveness to the dynamics of each interview whilst providing prompts where required. The interviewing strategy was simple and effective, and followed the following principle: 'simple designs that are parsimonious and well-focused are among the best'.<sup>38</sup>

## **Quantitative phase: does individual religious practice increase the likelihood of 'looking after home and family'?**

I now present findings from the quantitative phase of research, beginning with the bivariate analysis and then moving to the results of statistical modelling using logistic regression analysis. Although my focus is the impact of individual practice on economic inactivity, I also include results related to the other two measures of religiosity examined (communal practice and salience) to assess which measures of religiosity are most useful.

Alongside a question about religious affiliation, the EMBES 2010 included three questions: individual practice, communal practice, and religious salience; all three questions had high response rates of 99%. The questions and response categories are shown in Table 12.1.

<COMP: Place Table 12.1 Here>

To compare levels of individual practice between religious groups, bearing in mind small sample sizes for Hindu and Sikh women in some of the response categories, 'daily' versus 'less

frequently' proved an appropriate point of comparison. For communal practice, those who partake in group religious activities once a week are compared with all those who do so less frequently. For comparisons in levels of religious salience, those who see religion as extremely or very important are compared with all others.

Individual prayer can mean rather different things for different religious groups. *Salah* (Islamic prayer) requires mental and physical preparation, including ablutions, specific clothing requirements, a clean space, and a prayer mat. Each of the five daily prayers takes place according to the position of the sun, marking sunrise, noon, evening, etc., and the prayer times change throughout the year. It is acceptable to make some adjustments if required; for example, it is possible to 'make up' missed prayers at the next opportunity to pray. This is likely to be different from meditation, which may involve simply finding a quiet moment and space to reflect, which Muslims might also do regularly throughout the day. Individual daily practice can signify a personal commitment to faith and prioritisation of the ritual aspects of faith, not least because of the personal organisation or adjustment required to undertake such activities at frequent points throughout the day.

I found that Muslim women tend to exhibit considerably higher rates of individual religious practice than members of other faiths. 66% of Muslim women undertake daily religious activities by themselves five times a day and are more likely to undertake daily individual religious practice than women of other religious belongings. High levels of individual religious practice among Muslim women may be inflated because the survey question is subject to social desirability bias;<sup>39</sup> respondents may have selected this response because it was the 'correct' response for a Muslim, but it may not be an accurate reflection of their practice. The question may also have been interpreted as religious activities other than ritual prayer – for example,

beginning everyday tasks with a *dua*, or short verse in remembrance of Allah, is an aspect of Muslim religious practice.<sup>40</sup>

The measure of individual daily religious practice is significant when cross-tabulated against LAHF for Hindu and Muslim women only. Of the 88% of Muslim women who practice daily, more are likely to be LAHF than economically active; the LAHF percentage for Muslim women who pray daily is 65%. Muslim women are more likely to be LAHF than women from other religions who undertake some form of individual practice daily. All women who practise infrequently are less likely to be LAHF than those who practice daily, yet there are at least two times more LAHF Muslim women than for other religious groups in the infrequent category. Across all three measures of religiosity, Muslims are the most religious group in the sample, followed by Christians whose religiosity appears not to impact their economic activity. Neither religious salience nor communal practice is significantly associated with LAHF for Muslim women. Although religious salience is not found to have a significant association with LAHF for Muslim women, it is associated with LAHF for all women. Therefore, both individual religious practice and religious salience are included in the modelling stage, and communal practice is excluded from the modelling stage.

The results of logistic regression modelling showed that neither measure of social capital (high co-ethnic density in neighbourhood and friendship group) emerges as a significant variable that affects the likelihood of LAHF. In contrast to socio-cultural variables, the measure of socio-economic status (source of household income) emerges as significant and with greater explanatory potential for LAHF than measures of religiosity.

This model is based on a relatively small sample, with missing values on some variables.

Nevertheless, it is a robust predictor of LAHF among Muslim women. Despite the inclusion of

socio-cultural and socio-economic variables, the models provide incomplete explanations for high rates of LAHF for Muslim women; this is unsurprising because unmeasured discrimination is likely to form part of the explanation for this labour market inequality.

Although individual religious practice emerges as a stronger predictor of LAHF than religious salience or communal practice in the bivariate analysis, it is not a significant predictor of being economically inactive in the LAHF category. Data from qualitative interviews, presented below, provide insights into whether religious practice impacts economic activity from the perspectives of Muslim women.

### **The impact of everyday religious practices on economic activity**

Drawing on Muslim women's understanding of the relationship between religion and economic activity highlights the value of supplementing quantitative analyses of cross-sectional data with qualitative insights, demonstrating the value of bringing a longitudinal perspective to understandings of employment trajectories.<sup>41</sup> The qualitative data show that the experiences of Muslim women are better described in terms of changes over time and life-stage, rather than in static and simplistic binary terms. However, the 'big picture' provided by statistical analysis remains essential to understanding the extent of the ethno-religious penalty and to identifying themes and research questions for qualitative inquiry.

Interviewees were prompted to describe and give examples of religious beliefs and practices in their everyday lives, as well as in relation to their decisions and choices around economic activity; this allowed comparisons to be made about levels of religiosity among the women in the sample. The main religious practices that the women spoke about were *hijab* (modesty and 'covering' practices) and *salah* (daily prayers).

Hijab is the covering of the head and hair with a scarf from forehead to chin. It is a visible symbol of Islamic belonging; both a source of empowerment and a source of discrimination for Muslim women.<sup>42</sup> In an environment of potential prejudice and Islamophobic hostility for Muslim communities, including in the labour market, British Muslim women are subject to stereotypes wherein they are regarded as passive or oppressed.<sup>43</sup> The hijab is also considered to be an indication of the level of religious salience and practice. Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor suggests that Muslim women who wear the hijab and pray are ‘practising Muslims’, whilst those who state Islamic affiliation but do not undertake either of the two practices are ‘believing Muslims’.<sup>44</sup>

Interviewees included 27 British Pakistani Muslim women, half of them first generation and half second generation. These women displayed a range of covering practices: from wearing hijab with an *abaya* (loose cloak, usually black), to women who did not choose to cover their head at all. Some women wore traditional Pakistani clothing in the form of *shalwar kameez* (loose-fitting tunic with trousers); wearing ‘ethnic’ clothing is an additional visible marker of cultural distance from British majority norms, in addition to the hijab. I asked all interviewees an explicit question about their covering practices; this meant that I did not make assumptions about individual covering practices – it is not required in Islam for one woman to ‘cover’ in the presence of another so the way in which they were dressed during one-to-one interviews might not represent how they normally dress in public. The question also led to interviewees talking about their religious choices and preferences in a way that seemed conversational.

All first-generation women wore hijab, usually in combination with the ethnic dress of *shalwar kameez* with a loose-fitting outer garment. There was greater diversity in covering practices and dress among the second generation. Three of the second-generation women did not wear hijab,

four combined hijab with ethnic clothing and four with ‘Western’ clothing, and the other wore hijab with abaya. Hijab-wearing first- and second-generation women spoke about a point in their lives at which they had made a conscious decision to adopt hijab, as opposed to covering their head with a light veil or not covering at all; for most, this was in adulthood and after marriage:

I didn’t even wear the scarf when I used to work [...]. If my husband saw an Arab lady he would say, ‘I like the way these women look, they cover their head outside’. I would say, ‘Allah will give me the *hidayat* [guidance] too’ - but I would say this just to silence him [laughs]. He never said to me that I should, never, he has never forced me to do anything. So I performed Hajj [in 2007] and then I covered my head, and then after that I wore the abaya [...].

(Maqsooda, first generation)

None of the women interviewed saw wearing hijab as a barrier to their economic activity, and there was no evidence of women being forced to cover in specific ways by their families or husbands. Second-generation women spoke about how their first-generation husbands had influenced their religious practice. Most second-generation women spoke about becoming more religious (praying daily, learning more about Islam, wearing the hijab) after marriage to a Pakistani-born husband. Second-generation women had discussions about Islam with their first-generation husbands and felt encouraged to increase their religious practice. Halima, a second-generation interviewee, describes how her covering practices, and level of practice, have changed over time and with the encouragement of her first-generation husband:

[Before marriage] I was just like wear a part-time scarf [...] read the Quran now and then and pray the *Jumma* *salah* [Friday prayer] that was it [...]. He’s [husband] been very religious, he has always been close to Allah kind of thing and then he started saying to me Halima you



know you need to read your namaaz, [...] he used to say it with *laad* (affection) and *pyaar* (love) you know he didn't say Halima you need to do this. And then there used to be a study circle in [the] *Masjid* (mosque) and then I started going to that because I didn't even know what Islam was [...]. I started finding out about Islam, I started studying more about it, researching about things. I started to wear scarf first and then the abaya came later and then since then I have been practising and I've been praying my five times salah.

(Halima, second generation)

Younger first-generation women, who were married to second-generation men, were less likely to talk about sharing religious knowledge and having discussions around practice and belief with their husbands. This may be related to a socio-cultural expectation that first-generation women are better-versed in Islamic knowledge due to their upbringing in Pakistan, which has an explicitly Islamic state and educational system.<sup>45</sup>

Hijab is not a static symbol of oppression; covering practices vary between women and over life-stage and between women within the same family. Shameem is second generation and adopted the hijab at a young age; she chose not to wear it in early adulthood and returned to wearing it in her mid-20s; her elder sister does not wear hijab, and her younger sister has only recently begun wearing hijab. She was nervous about how she would be treated in the public-facing role she worked in by non-Muslim clients and colleagues but found that she was not treated differently. She stated that her first-generation husband is ambivalent towards the hijab and is not convinced when she tells him that it makes her more confident when using public spaces in Cheetham Hill, where wearing hijab is common:

I said to my husband, 'Do you know, there is a massive difference in the way people look at you'. He was like, 'How is that?' I was like, 'Because they look at you with respect, they do'.

And he said, 'You're just paranoid'. I said, 'No I'm not'. I said, 'Seriously, they'll say *baji* [sister] or they will address you differently', and so from there I was like 'Yeah this is for me, this is what I like'.

(Shameem, second generation)

Overall, hijab is a conscious display of Islamic identity and a declaration of commitment to the value of modesty in behaviour and dress. Interviewees spoke about the confidence and comfort they felt in wearing hijab and modest clothing that did not reveal their figures. Hijab gave the interviewees greater confidence in their interactions in mixed-gender settings, particularly in their interactions with Muslim men, as a visible symbol and reminder of the boundaries of their physical and social interactions for themselves and others.

In contrast to literature that associates the wearing of hijab with greater religiosity, not all women who wore the hijab prayed regularly. Shabana (second generation) stated that she did not qualify herself as a 'religious person' but she was dressed in a black hijab and abaya whilst being interviewed by a female interviewer in her own home. If religiosity was measured by observations of dress, then Shabana would personify a very religious Muslim woman. She said 'if you see the way I dress, you would think I pray all the time'. Shabana explained that her choice to wear an abaya during the interview was because she was wearing her pyjamas under her abaya; she usually wears hijab with traditional Pakistani clothing in public. Shabana has worn modest dress since childhood and feels most comfortable in shalwar kameez. She began to wear the hijab at the age of 26, although her husband had asked to wear hijab a few years before that:

I wear the hijab because I want to cover myself [...] and I know it's a good thing and that's it. But I want to cover myself, I don't like being on show basically. Like some women can wear tight fitted clothes, I can't - I have to feel comfortable.

(Shabana, second generation)

Shabana does not think that whether a woman wears the hijab or not is an indicator of religiosity in terms of ritual prayer: 'because I wear it and I know I'm not [religious], and I know!' When I asked Shabana what she thought about the EMBES survey results, which show high levels of daily prayer among British Muslims, she did not believe the statistic was accurate. Like Shabana, Zara, another second-generation interviewee, did not think that hijab is a marker of religiosity but that some young women in Cheetham Hill wear it to please their parents and to give the impression of being 'clean and pure'.

Interviewees did not see wearing hijab as an indicator of a Muslim woman's preference to work, but it may be a barrier because it can make them subject to religious discrimination. A number of second-generation interviewees remarked on an increase in religious discrimination from the 1990s onwards and most associated this with the Gulf Wars and the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States:

I got a lot of abuse from young children, across the road we had a family, they'd only newly moved in and one of the kids was shouting for the upstairs window, and said that I was Bin Laden's wife, he says, 'Where's your husband?' He said, 'What, can't you find your husband?' I said, 'Who?' He said, 'Bin Laden'. I said, 'That's not fucking nowt to do with me!'

(Amina, second generation)

The amount of racism that's happening now, I have never seen the like. I think more so when we were growing up it was all about being a Pakistani, nothing to do with Islam [...] it wasn't racism about your religion, it was more you're a brown face, you're from Pakistan, you're a Paki [...]. Now it's everything is about Islam, everything is ... its hard [...] from what I'm seeing there is a lot of change and a lot of hatred towards Islam.

(Rizwana, second generation).

## Individual religious practice

Individual religious practice is the most stringent test of religiosity.<sup>46</sup> There was wider variation in levels of practice among interviewees greater than would have been expected from the EMBES 2010 data, supporting the suggestion that individual religious practice was overstated in the survey. All interviewees who adopt stricter covering practices of wearing hijab and abaya also pray five times a day; some women who wear hijab pray five times a day, whereas others do not pray at all. Women who prayed daily but not five times a day stated that the prayers they missed were *Fajr* (sunrise prayer) and *Isha* (nightfall prayer) because of tiredness; these were usually older women or those with young children.

Shabana describes her husband as 'religious'; for Shabana, being religious requires praying five times a day. Shabana does not regard herself as 'religious' or 'practising' because she prays three or four times a week, if that. Her husband encourages her to pray, and she wants to pray more regularly:

I don't know what you mean by religious, it depends, but to me if you ask me are you religious I would think you are asking me do I pray, am I practising. And I don't pray five times a day so I wouldn't qualify myself as a religious person ... you have to pray five times a day to be

religious, that's why I say my husband is religious, he takes his religion very seriously which is good, I think it's brilliant and I need that in my life.

(Shabana, second generation)

None of the interviewees saw individual religious practice as a barrier to economic activity. There is an accepted Islamic practice of making up missed prayers (*Qaza*). Additionally, many women recognised the willingness of workplaces to accommodate the prayer requirements of Muslim employees.

I can still pray namaaz and read my Quran. I can think whatever I like in my mind. I can still make *dua* in my mind. Allah has commanded that we pray, he has not forbidden us from working, we should work and you can pray alongside, it makes no difference.

(Kishwar, first generation)

Overall, the accounts women gave of everyday religious practice in their households indicate that higher levels of religiosity are not indicative of oppressive patriarchal regimes. Instead, they described the sharing of knowledge and a shared desire for higher levels of religiosity as an act of self-improvement for the benefit of themselves and their families (particularly their children). These findings support those of Joanne Britton,<sup>47</sup> and Katherine Charsley and Anika Liversage,<sup>48</sup> who suggest that negative stereotypes of Muslim men, particularly first generation, are not always borne out in everyday interactions in households and families. The ways in which interviewees spoke about the supportive nature of first-generation husbands around religious practice presents a more positive view of spousal relationships within Muslim households, particularly those involving transnational marriage, and contradicts views that these relationships are frequently coercive and unsupportive.

Religious practice did not emerge as a barrier to economic activity from the perspective of Muslim women themselves. Although overt religious practices such as wearing hijab and praying in workplaces may be sources of discrimination in the labour market, they were not seen as deterrents to economic activity from the perspectives of the interviewees.

### **Conclusion: triangulating quantitative and qualitative findings on the impact of individual religious practice on economic inactivity**

The statistical analysis presented here supports the findings of Khattab, Johnston, and Manley, who found that religiosity does not increase the likelihood of economic inactivity among Muslim women.<sup>49</sup> Individual religious practice emerged as a non-significant predictor of economic inactivity for Muslim women. The lack of significance for individual religious practice having a negative impact on economic activity is upheld by the qualitative analysis, as none of the women felt that prayer would, or should, prevent them from being economically active. There are accepted practices of making up missed prayers in Islam, and most women felt that workplaces would be accommodating of their religious needs.

The proposition that the question on individual religious practice in the EMBES was subject to high social desirability bias (overreporting of socially desirable behaviour) was upheld in the qualitative phase, where there is greater variation in the qualitative data related to individual religious practice than the EMBES data reveal. Importantly, the qualitative data suggest that the association of higher levels of religiosity among Muslim women with adherence to traditional and patriarchal gender norms in relation to their economic inactivity should not be assumed.

Overall, the research findings presented in this chapter provide evidence that religiosity, in the form of individual religious practice, is not a barrier to economic activity for Muslim women.

Prayer and hijab are both visible markers of socio-cultural difference; whilst these religious practices are not found to be associated with economic inactivity from the perspective of Muslim women themselves, they may well be a source of (unmeasured) labour market discrimination. The well-established association between religious affiliation and economic inactivity (the Muslim penalty) may therefore result from discrimination or from structural or socio-cultural factors other than religiosity.<sup>50</sup>

Socio-economic status was a significant predictor of economic inactivity in the LAHF category in the quantitative analysis, whilst religious practice was not. The findings presented here therefore indicate that the structural factor of socio-economic status, or social class, is a more fruitful line of enquiry for understanding high levels of economic inactivity in the LAHF category than religiosity. Certainly, the consistency of the penalty in relation to LAHF across ethnic groups and migrant generations would suggest that the explanation is most likely to lie in structural, rather than socio-cultural, explanations.

**Table 12.1** EMBES 2010 Survey questions on religiosity: Saliency and practice

<b>EMBES question [survey question code]</b>	<b>Response categories</b>
How important is your religion to you? [eq4]	1 Extremely important 2 Very important 3 Somewhat important 4 Not very important 5 Not important at all DK REF

<p>In the past 12 months, how often did you participate in religious activities or attend religious services or meetings with other people, other than for events such as weddings and funerals?</p> <p>[eq106_4]</p>	<p>1 At least once a day</p> <p>2 At least once a week</p> <p>3 At least once a month</p> <p>4 Occasionally (but less than once a month)</p> <p>5 Only on festivals</p> <p>6 Not at all</p> <p>DK REF</p>
<p>In the past 12 months, how often did you do religious activities on your own? This may include prayer, meditation and other forms of worship taking place at home or in any other location</p> <p>[zq106_5]</p>	<p>1 Five times a day</p> <p>2 At least once a day</p> <p>3 At least once a week</p> <p>4 At least once a month</p> <p>5 Only on festivals</p> <p>6 Not at all</p> <p>DK REF</p>

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<sup>2</sup> Cheung, ‘Ethno-religious Minorities’; Anthony Heath and Jean Martin, ‘Can Religious Affiliation Explain “Ethnic” Inequalities in the Labour Market?’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 6, (2013): 1005–1027; Nabil Khattab, Ron Johnston and David Manley, ‘Human Capital, Family Structure and Religiosity Shaping British Muslim Women’s Labour Market Participation’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 9, (2017): 1541–1559.



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<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics (ONS), *Religion, Education and Work in England and Wales: February 2020: Statistics and Analysis of Education and Employment Outcomes of People of Different Religious Identities in England and Wales*, accessed 26 February 2020, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religionandeducationandworkinenglandandwales/february2020>.

<sup>4</sup> Heath and Martin, 'Can Religious Affiliation Explain'; Khattab, Johnston and Manley, 'Human Capital'.

<sup>5</sup> Heath and Martin, 'Can Religious Affiliation Explain'; Khattab, Johnston and Manley, 'Human Capital'.

<sup>6</sup> ONS, *Religion, Education and Work*.

<sup>7</sup> Heath and Martin, 'Can Religious Affiliation Explain'; Alison Shaw, *Kinship and Continuity: Pakistani Families in Britain* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000).

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<sup>10</sup> Anthony Heath and Yaojun Li, *Review of the Relationship Between Religion and Poverty: An Analysis for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, CSI Working Paper 2015–01, (2015), accessed 22 March 2022, <http://csi.nuff.ox.ac.uk/>.

<sup>11</sup> Heath and Martin, 'Can Religious Affiliation Explain'; Khattab, Johnston and Manley, 'Human Capital'.

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<sup>12</sup> Cheung, 'Ethno-religious Minorities'; Nabil Khattab, "'Winners" and "Losers": The Impact of Education, Ethnicity and Gender on Muslims in the British Labour Market', *Work, Employment and Society* 26, no. 4 (2012): 556–573.

<sup>13</sup> Heath and Martin, 'Can Religious Affiliation Explain'; Ruud Koopmans, 'Does Assimilation Work? Sociocultural Determinants of Labour Market Participation of European Muslims', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42, no. 2 (2016): 197–216.

<sup>14</sup> Koopmans, 'Does Assimilation Work?'.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Heath and Martin, 'Can Religious Affiliation Explain'; Khattab, Johnston and Manley, 'Human Capital'.

<sup>17</sup> Khattab, Johnston and Manley, 'Human Capital'.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Katherine Brown, 'The Promise and Perils of Women's Participation in UK Mosques: The Impact of Securitisation Agendas on Identity, Gender and Community', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 10, no. 3 (2008): 472–491; Siobhan McAndrew and David Voas, 'Immigrant Generation, Religiosity and Civic Engagement in Britain', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 1 (2014): 99–119.

<sup>20</sup> McAndrew and Voas, 'Immigrant Generation'.

<sup>21</sup> Eman Abdelhadi and Paula England, 'Do Values Explain the Low Employment Levels of Muslim Women Around the World? A Within-and Between-Country Analysis', *British Journal of Sociology* 70, no. 4 (2019): 1510–1538.

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