



**glencree**

centre for peace & reconciliation

ionad síochána agus  
athmhuintearais gleann crí



*Dialogues  
with Muslim  
Communities  
of Ireland*



## ABOUT THE PROJECT

This project was developed by the **Glenree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation**, with support from **the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC)**, with the primary aim of reaching out to the diverse groups within the **Muslim communities** in the Dublin region, to engage them in **dialogue work** on the issues of **Human Rights and Equality**.

The secondary aim was to begin to facilitate dialogues on the key issues they identified between Muslim representatives and key stakeholders in Irish society.

An initial phase of outreach meetings with Muslim representatives consolidated Glenree's existing relationships with Muslims and expanded these to include a diverse range of Islamic Centres and Muslim women's family, youth and student organisations.

Preliminary discussions with key leaders

from these groups confirmed a clear need for the proposed dialogues and their detailed knowledge of the communities they work with, informed the development of project activities.

These involved a series of dialogues and other events from January to December 2018, engaging Muslim men and women and students, with a strand of specific activities involving women of Muslim, Christian and Jewish faiths and a series of creative human rights dialogues between women from Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds.

## THIS REPORT

This is a **brief summary of the key issues** and **spirit of those dialogues** and of the **relationships** which have been built up with a wide cross-section of women, men and young people from the **diverse** groups across the Muslim communities in the Dublin region.

Dr Bronagh Catibusic-Finnegan was the rapporteur at two of the major project events, recording the dialogue content and the input of expert speakers. She has also written this report summarising the issues that arose during the in-depth facilitated dialogues.

**Further detail of the issues and challenges raised, recommendations and future follow-up actions are available under the Refugee and Intercultural Programme section of the Glenree website at [www.glenree.ie](http://www.glenree.ie).**



# 'DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUALITY FOR THE MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF IRELAND' APRIL 2018

In April 2018 the initial training seminar '**Deepening Understanding on Human Rights and Equality for the Muslim Communities of Ireland**', was chaired by **Ms Fardus Sultan**, activist and entrepreneur, at the IHREC offices in Green Street, Dublin 1.

The attendees included **leaders** from the **main Islamic Centres** in the Dublin region, as well as representatives of **Muslim women's, family, community** and **youth** projects and some individuals from Muslim backgrounds or who **work closely with Muslims** living in Ireland.

As keynote speaker, **Ms Emily Logan, Chief Commissioner of IHREC**, welcomed the representatives of the diverse Muslim communities. She explained the role of IHREC as an independent public body that accounts to the Oireachtas (Dail and Seanad) and protects and promotes human rights and equality in Ireland.

**Mr Stephen Collins** from the IHREC Legal Unit, outlined the role of the IHREC in promoting equality and combatting discrimination. He explained how individuals who feel they may have been discriminated against under Irish Equality law or had their human rights infringed under the Irish Constitution or EU or UN Human Rights law, may complete an IHREC Section 40 application for legal assistance.

The applicant only needs to explain why they feel they have been discriminated against or have had their human rights violated, as IHREC has the expertise to know which law may have been broken. He explained that the 'race' ground under Irish Equality law includes ethnicity and nationality. Stephen is also responsible for IHREC's strategic litigation on Interculturalism.

**Dr James Carr** from the University of Limerick, author of Islamophobia in Ireland<sup>1</sup> gave a well-received account of the detailed research he has conducted in 14 towns and cities around Ireland on anti-Muslim racism. His presentation sparked much reflection and many questions among the Muslims present.

**Sergeant David McInerney, PhD** from the Garda Diversity and Integration Office, spoke about his positive experiences of working closely with all sections of the Muslim communities for the past 18 years.

He stated that the rights laid down in the Holy Qur'an preceded any written Human Rights legislation. He spoke about the 2016 Census figures which show that 11.6% of the Irish population state they are from ethnic minority backgrounds and the need for the Garda Siochana to learn about the cultures and life experiences of all of the diverse groups in Irish society including those from Muslim backgrounds. He also mentioned the need to avoid 'racial' or ethnic profiling in policing. He stressed the importance of the Garda Ethnic Liaison Officers in building relationships with Muslims and other minority groups at local level and the need to be aware of the concerns of the Muslim communities.

A lively questions and answer session followed the speakers' contributions.

Most of the day was spent in small groups identifying the human rights and equality issues which are most relevant for Muslims. This prompted deep and inclusive conversations, in what one participant described as 'a unique event'. Education, the position of Muslim women in

Irish society, perceptions of Muslims as portrayed in the media, representation of Muslims in decision making and politics, and everyday Islamophobia were among the key issues identified. Some participants identified themselves as cultural but not practising Muslims.

As the Glenree IHREC funded project finishes in December 2018 the question now remains, how these issues can be followed up to effect changes to benefit the diverse Muslim communities living in Ireland and to further improve their relationships with Government Departments and statutory, voluntary and community agencies?

<sup>1</sup> Islamophobia in Ireland-Living with Racism in the Neoliberal Era, James Carr, Routledge, 2015

# ‘HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUALITY’ DIALOGUE AT GLENCREE MAY 2018



**EIGHT KEY ISSUES** identified at the April event were used to prepare a second day of dialogues, in Glencree in May, facilitated by **Mr Michael Donnelly**, an expert in facilitation work in relation to Northern Ireland and other conflicts.

In response to the wishes of attendees at the IHREC event in April, **Dr James Carr** of the University of Limerick spoke again at this event and sparked more discussion on the burning issue of anti-Muslim racism.

The process allowed each participant time to discuss four of the identified issues in small group discussions, involving further sharing and giving time for people to suggest solutions to some of the challenges identified.

Together with some of the original participants, new attendees came from Muslim communities as well as representatives of the Departments of Justice and Equality and Education and Skills and other individuals with experience in the education sector and the media.

## MAIN MESSAGES FROM THE DIALOGUES

The project focused on human rights and equality for Muslims in Ireland today. Three powerful messages emerged from its conversations:

- ✿ the need to **recognise the diversity within the Muslim communities** of Ireland.
- ✿ the need **for greater public representation of Muslims in decision making** positions in Irish society .
- ✿ the need for an **official response to Islamophobia /anti-Muslim racism** in Ireland.

The following summaries of these messages capture some key issues raised by participants in the two dialogue events.

## MESSAGE (I): DIVERSITY OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

Around 90% of Muslims in Ireland are followers of Sunni Islam, while about 10% belong to the Shi’a tradition.

Members of both Sunni and Shi’a communities, including those from the Sufi tradition, attended the Glencree dialogues. Representatives of Islamic Centres and Muslim organisations from Dublin city, Fingal county, South Dublin county, Dun Laoghaire Rathdown and county Kildare took part in these events.

This **inclusive approach** was important because, as Islam does not have a strict hierarchical structure, local mosques and Muslim communities have considerable autonomy in how they respond to the needs of Muslims in their areas and in how they respond to the media.

Participants stressed the **diversity of Ireland’s Muslim communities**. They include people from over 50 national backgrounds (55.6% of whom are Irish nationals) who have a wide range of language, cultural and social experience, who live in different parts of the country and have differing degrees of religious observance.

The issues affecting Muslims in Ireland are therefore very varied. While participants felt that Ireland compares favourably to other European countries regarding integration, they expressed concerns for second and future generations of Muslims in this country.

They pointed out that young Muslims, many of whom were born in Ireland, face considerable challenges in accessing education, employment, and accommodation while at the same time feeling entitled to have their Irish identity accepted.

The voices of Muslim women were also prominent in the discussions. The conversations explored issues of **identity** and the experience of being **Irish and Muslim**, with a participant raising the question:

*‘What does it mean to be Irish?’*

## MESSAGE (II): REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIMS IN IRELAND

### ‘Equality is a huge issue.’

The need to inform Muslims in Ireland of their rights and to ensure **representation** of Muslims as decision-makers at all levels in Irish society was another important message emerging from the conversations.

Participants stressed that Muslims must be represented in Irish politics. Equal **access to leadership roles** in the public service, on State Boards, and in other professional bodies is also required.

Muslim community leaders regularly **engage** in consultations run by government departments, for example, on educational reform. They also participate in community consultations with the Garda Síochána.

However, despite their contribution to these fora, they **feel excluded from policy-making**. This is contrary to the concept of integration as a two-way process which entails equal representation and which dialogue participants felt should involve:

*‘including minority groups not only in the consultation process, but also in the decision-making process’*

The current lack of diversity in the civil service and challenges in dealing with Government Departments that may have little awareness of issues affecting minority faith communities were highlighted.

Concerns were expressed regarding the **Migrant Integration Strategy**, launched by the **Department of Justice and Equality in 2017**. The sole mention of Muslims in this strategy refers to them in terms of the ‘risk of radicalisation’ of second generation Muslims. This statement **stigmatises young Muslims** as a potential threat and could deter them from seeking public employment and from participating in Irish politics and public life.

Hence raising awareness about **political participation** among Muslim communities were recommended. This would include encouraging Muslims to register to vote and ensuring they **use their vote** in elections.

It would also involve encouraging Muslims to **take part** in local community groups and Public Participation Networks (**PPNs**). They stressed the importance of getting involved in election campaigns and seeking nomination as candidates, for example, in the upcoming local elections.

They also spoke of the specific need for young Muslims to participate in Irish politics, while recognising that Muslim community organisations have been trying to promote political engagement among Muslims in Ireland.

Other initiatives, such as training provided by groups such as ‘Places of Sanctuary’, to enable people from minority ethnic communities to understand how the Irish political system works and how to get involved in politics were also considered positive.

## 2016 CENSUS SHOWS

THERE ARE OVER 63,000 MUSLIMS IN IRELAND

ISLAM IS ONE OF IRELAND’S FASTEST GROWING RELIGIONS – THE NUMBER OF MUSLIMS IN IRELAND HAS ALMOST DOUBLED SINCE 2006

MOST MUSLIMS IN IRELAND (55.6%) ARE IRISH NATIONALS

ALMOST HALF OF MUSLIMS IN IRELAND (47.3%) LIVE IN DUBLIN CITY AND COUNTY AND THE REMAINDER IN COUNTIES ACROSS IRELAND

MUSLIMS IN IRELAND ARE A YOUNG POPULATION: AVERAGE AGE 26 YEARS (STATE AVR. 37.4 YEARS)

CSO Source: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8rnc/>

## MESSAGE (III): RESPONDING TO ISLAMOPHOBIA

Research by **Dr James Carr** involving over 300 Muslim men and women from diverse backgrounds living in towns across Ireland (Carr, 2015) found that:

- ❁ **47%** experienced hostility including **THREATS, VERBAL ABUSE** and **PHYSICAL ASSAULT**
- ❁ **36%** had experienced **HOSTILITY BASED** on their **MUSLIM IDENTITY**
- ❁ Muslim **WOMEN EXPERIENCE HOSTILITY 1.6 TIMES MORE** than Muslim men
- ❁ **WOMEN** often **TARGETED DUE** to their **ISLAMIC DRESS** – incidents such as the pulling of hijabs, having beer thrown over them and verbal insults were reported
- ❁ **44%** also experienced **DISCRIMINATION IN** accessing **EMPLOYMENT** or **SERVICES**
- ❁ **30%** believed they were **DISCRIMINATED AGAINST SPECIFICALLY** because they were Muslim
- ❁ **30%** felt discriminated against at **WORK** & **36%** in seeking **WORK**
- ❁ **22%** in or accessing **EDUCATION**

Research into attitudes towards diversity in Ireland conducted by the IHREC and ESRI (2018) shows that:

**ONLY 41%** of Irish people who took part in this study expressed **POSITIVE ATTITUDES** towards Muslim immigrants.

This rate is lower than the average level of support for Muslims in ten other Western European countries.



The need to **act against Islamophobia** in Ireland was expressed strongly. Muslim women often experienced being targeted due to the 'visibility' of their Islamic dress.

Incidents of hostility on the street and on public transport, and how these **spread fear** among Muslims and could lead to further isolation were discussed. Cases of discrimination against Muslims in the workplace, in accessing education, and in prisons were highlighted and the intersectionality of Islamophobia with gender, race, and socio-economic factors was raised. The growth

of secularism in Ireland was acknowledged as a 'tool for freedom', although some concerns were expressed regarding possible intolerance towards religion in general, including Islam, in contemporary Irish society.

Participants called for the introduction of **'hate crime' legislation** to combat all forms of racism in Ireland and for more support for victims of Islamophobic abuse.

**Fostering intercultural understanding** among children was also recommended as a means of preventing racism.



## CONVERSATION THEMES

During the group discussions at the seminar in IHREC, participants identified issues which they felt are important in relation to human rights and equality for Muslims in Ireland. Eight prominent themes emerged from these conversations:

**EMPLOYMENT | EDUCATION | WOMEN | MEDIA | DECISION MAKING & POLITICAL REPRESENTATION | ISLAMOPHOBIA AND RACISM | RELIGIOUS FREEDOM & FAITH ISSUES | COMMUNITY INTEGRATION**

These eight themes were discussed further at the second dialogue event in Glencree. To illustrate the nature of these conversations, we have focused on participants' views regarding four of the eight themes: **employment, education, women**, and the **media**. Further information about all eight themes is available on the Glencree website: [www.glencree.ie](http://www.glencree.ie).

### THEME 1: EMPLOYMENT

Challenges facing Muslims in accessing employment in Ireland and the importance of 'social capital' in finding work were discussed. Many felt that their employment opportunities are limited because Ireland is a small country and **'you need to know somebody'** to get a job. Even young Muslims who have progressed through the Irish education system, often achieving high qualifications, encounter considerable difficulties when seeking employment. Women **wearing the hijab** are exposed to further discrimination, both in interviews and in the workplace. Inequality in access to appropriate employment impacts severely on Muslims and their families and can lead to serious financial difficulties.

Further challenges arising within the workplace were identified such as **lack of prayer facilities** and incidents of Islamophobic abuse at work. However, positive initiatives were also mentioned, for example, some employers provide a place for prayer or allow Muslim employees time to pray if physical space is limited. Regarding access to work, participants recommended greater provision of advice to young Muslims on career paths beyond traditionally popular roles such as medicine and engineering. They also emphasised the need to improve access to opportunities in the public

sector especially in fields where the representation of ethnic minorities is very low, such as the civil service and teaching.

### THEME 2: EDUCATION

Access to education in Ireland was a key concern for Muslim parents. There are only two Muslim primary schools in Dublin and most Muslim children attend schools run by other patron bodies. Many children attend non-denominational Educate Together schools and one participant spoke about her experience of being the only Muslim at a rural Gaelscoil.

Challenges in **securing school places** for children were also discussed. School ethos was identified as a **major barrier** to admission as, according to the Department of Education and Skills (2013), 96% of schools in Ireland have religious patronage, predominantly Catholic (90%).

The use of faith-based enrolment criteria has meant that Muslim children **seldom get their first choice** of secondary school. They felt that, especially in Dublin, this **exclusionary practice** had increased in recent years and that lack of access to suitable school places has had a **negative impact on outcomes** for Muslim children.

### **‘Second level education – lack of educational attainment due to second choice of schools.’**

The announcement on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2018 that Catholic schools will not be able to use religion as a criterion for admission was welcomed by participants. This lifting of the so-called ‘baptism barrier’ came into operation with the commencement of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2018 and will affect the 2019-2020 school admissions.

### **‘Hijab – differing school rules.’**

However, school enrolment policy was not the only educational concern. Participants shared their experiences of Muslim children being **required to attend Catholic religious classes**. In some schools, Muslim girls were **forbidden to wear Islamic headscarves**. The Department’s decision not to make a national policy on the wearing of the hijab, which leaves decision-making power with school Boards of Management, was felt to facilitate discrimination rather than inclusion.

They expressed concern at the **lack of diversity in the teaching profession** and the obstacles faced by young Muslims who are interested in becoming teachers. It was recommended that Muslims should join Parents’ Associations and school Boards of Management to add their voices to decision-making in education at local level. Participants also called for greater support for children acquiring English as an additional language and for more multilingual **resources** explaining the Irish education system to parents.

## **THEME 3: WOMEN**

Women’s rights were discussed as a key aspect of human rights as well as Muslim women’s inclusion and equality in their diverse roles in Irish society. It was felt that attitudes in Ireland reflect the dominant ‘Western’ narrative that Muslim women are oppressed; **a perception which denies women’s agency, skills and intelligence**. Gender-based Islamophobia, from discrimination to physical attack, emerged as a major concern.

Participants spoke of how women who wear Islamic dress have been targets of abuse in public places. Muslim women have also faced discrimination in the workplace and when seeking work with prejudice experienced in superficially ‘innocent’ questions about dress or marital issues. Social media was mentioned as another common context for Islamophobic comments. The impact of these forms of racism on Muslim women’s **mental health** and **social mobility** was also raised.

Muslim women spoke of the spiritual significance and personal meaning of Islamic dress. They compared attitudes towards it in Irish society to the prevailing patriarchal censure of women’s appearance. A social gaze which only sees the religion, not the individual woman, was identified as problematic. Hijab-wearing participants talked about the **pressure** of having to behave ‘perfectly’ because they are perceived to represent all Muslim women.

Positive examples were shared including that Irish law specifically criminalises Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Other initiatives were discussed, such as the ‘*Hijabs and Hat-tricks*’ project set up by Sport Against Racism in Ireland (SARI), which promotes the inclusion of Muslim girls in football. This was viewed as a success story for young Muslim women and, more widely, for women’s sport in Ireland.

It was also felt that **campaigns** against Islamophobia should portray Muslim women in **empowering** roles, rather than as victims.



## **THEME 4: MEDIA**

The lack of positive representation of Muslims in the media and how journalists tend to focus on negative **stereotypes**, such as the portrayal of Muslims as ‘terrorists’ was discussed. Many felt that the media **ignore the diversity of views within Ireland’s Muslim** communities. Some pointed out that journalists only ever contact a few well-known spokespeople whose opinions do not necessarily reflect those of all Muslims in Ireland.

The need to challenge stereotypical images of Muslims in the Irish media was emphasised. Participants said it was important to create more opportunities for Muslims from different backgrounds to **access the media** and to enhance diversity within Irish journalism, a profession in which Muslims are severely under-represented. **Training for journalists** in reporting on issues involving Muslims was also recommended. Journalists were invited to visit Muslim communities and engage with their members’ perspectives in a sensitive, non-tokenistic way.

The association of FGM with Islam in the Irish media is problematic as it is a cultural issue practised in Christian as well as Muslim communities and Muslim women have been prominent in the campaigning efforts which led to the enactment of the Criminal Justice (Female Genital Mutilation) Act 2012 in Ireland.

Participants highlighted the importance of **‘good news’** stories featuring Muslims, for example, reports about women such as Somali-Irish activist Ifrah Ahmed, a leading international campaigner against FGM, and the Nobel Peace Prize winner, Malala Yousafzai, who is a courageous example of a young Muslim woman who risked her life to obtain an education. Promoting the work of Muslims in film and the creative arts was also regarded as vital. Pointing out that the arts can bring people together, participants recommended including Muslims as **‘normal’** characters in TV shows and drama as this could impact positively on a wider audience.

## ABOUT GLENCREE

Based in the Wicklow Mountains in a beautiful, remote and peaceful valley only 22km from Dublin City Centre, the Glencrec Centre for Peace and Reconciliation is a **non-profit, non-governmental** organisation committed to **peacebuilding** and **reconciliation**.

Founded in 1974, Glencrec's work focused on responding to the conflict in Northern Ireland and it continues to facilitate 'under the radar' dialogue between groups affected by violent conflict. It also shares the lessons learnt from the Northern Ireland Peace Process with groups coming from other conflict zones.

In its international work to prevent and transform conflict, Glencrec has also engaged in peace building with individuals and groups from conflict situations across the world, including Palestine and Afghanistan. Glencrec also works specifically with women and young people as key voices within societies emerging from conflict, respecting UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 (2000) and 2419 (2018).

Glencrec believes in a **shared world** where **human rights** are **protected**; where **diversity and different identities** are **cherished**; where all can live with **dignity** and **respect**, free from the fear of violence and abuse; and where differences and conflicts are transformed peacefully. Glencrec uses its extensive experience in creating and facilitating **safe spaces**, to **enable** people who hold **differing viewpoints**, to **engage** with each other and have their voices heard.

## ABOUT IHREC

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), is an **independent** public body, appointed by the President and directly accountable to the Oireachtas. The Commission has a statutory remit set out under the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act (2014) to **protect** and **promote human rights** and **equality** in Ireland, and build a **culture of respect** for **human rights, equality** and **intercultural understanding** in the State.

IHREC is Ireland's **national human rights institution** and is recognised as such by the United Nations. The Commission is also Ireland's national **equality body** for the purpose of a range of EU anti-discrimination measures.

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