

AT HOME IN
EUROPE

BEHIND THE VEIL

WHY 122 WOMEN CHOOSE TO WEAR
THE FULL FACE VEIL IN BRITAIN



Behind the veil:

why 122 women choose to wear
the full face veil in Britain

At Home in Europe



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The At Home in Europe project bears sole responsibility for the content of this report, including any errors or misrepresentations.

Foreword

Behind the veil: why 122 women choose to wear the full face veil in Britain examines an issue causing considerable debate and controversy throughout Europe: the relationship between religion and European identity or, more succinctly, Islam's compatibility with European values. The report offers the views of 122 women across the United Kingdom who wear the full-face veil, their reasons for doing so, and their experiences in public and private. It is an attempt to distinguish the real-life experiences and perspectives of the women who wear the veil from the popular myths and misperceptions promulgated by the media and national figures. This report follows an earlier study on France *Unveiling the truth: why 32 Muslim women wear the full face veil in France* (April 2011) which was based on the same premise in so far that it was an attempt to offer perspectives from the women who wear the garment and their reasons for doing so.

A central belief of the Open Society Foundations is that all people in an open society count equally and should enjoy equal opportunities. The Foundations work to mitigate discrimination, in particular harm done to minorities through discriminatory treatment, and to ensure that access to equal opportunities for all is an integral part of government social inclusion policies.

The At Home in Europe project, part of the Open Society Initiative for Europe, Open Society Foundations, focuses on research and advocacy activities that examine the position of marginalised groups in a changing Europe. Through its research, grant making and engagement with policymakers, civil society, and communities, the project explores issues involving the political, social, economic, and cultural participation of Muslims and other groups at the local, national, and European levels.

Whether citizens or migrants, native born or newly arrived, Muslims are a growing and varied population that presents Europe with one of its greatest challenges: how to ensure equal opportunities and demonstrate its principles of religious plurality and liberal values in an environment of rapidly expanding diversity. Europe is no longer – if it ever was – a mono-cultural and mono-faith continent: its emerging minority groups and their identities as Europeans are an essential part of the political agenda and discourse.

Since 2009, the project has issued a series of reports under its three research topics: **Muslims in EU cities**, **Somalis in European Cities** and, more recently, **Europe's White Working Class Communities**. All the studies examine city and municipal policies in select European cities that have significant minority and marginalised populations. The aim of the At Home in Europe research is to contribute to better informed policies and debate on diversity, inclusion and equality in Europe.

Glossary

ABAYA a loose, simple outer garment – it’s the same as a jilbab.

AQIDAH the core Islamic creed or articles of faith, including all matters related to the six pillars of the faith (God, his names, his attributes, the angels, the prophets, the Day of Judgement and predestination).¹

AZAN Muslim call to ritual prayer, traditionally made by a muezzin from the mosque’s minaret.

BURQA/BURKHA/BURKA loose outer garment that covers the entire body, including the face and eyes. It has a mesh screen covering the eyes.

DAW’AH the calling of individuals and communities to God, benefiting both those who are called and the caller, commonly understood as conveying the message of Islam to non-Muslims and inviting them to Islam.

DEEN religion.

FARD personal duty or obligation. See *wajid* below.

FATWA (plural *fatawa*) a specific legal ruling, a reminder of a prescription explicitly stated by the Islamic sources (Qur’an and ahadith) or a scholar’s ruling “on the basis of an inexplicit text, or in case of a specific situation for which there is no scriptural source”.²

FIQH Islamic jurisprudence or the science of religious law in Islam, covering all regulations of religious, political, civil and social life; and family, private, public and criminal law.

FITNA trial, test or temptation, used to describe actions that can cause controversy or chaos.

HADITH (plural **ahadith**) words and deeds attributed to the Prophet Muhammad; the second-highest source of authority in Islam after the Qur'an.³

HIJAB a piece of cloth worn by observant Muslim women to cover the hair, ears and neck, leaving the face uncovered.

HIJRAH historic migration of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions from Mecca to Medina (AD 622). Hijrah can be undertaken individually or collectively in response to a threat to survival; a withdrawal from secular and materialistic societies, sometimes in the form of a migration to a society perceived as more Islamic.⁴

JILBAB/JELBAB generic term for a woman's outer garment (shawl, cloak, coat, wrap), which covers the whole body except the face.

KAFIR unbeliever, term first applied to Meccans who refused to submit to Islam; implies an active rejection of divine revelation.

MADHAB (plural **madhahib**) Islamic juridical school. Sunni Muslims have four major schools of law, named after their founders: Hanafite (founded by Abu Hanifa), prominent in the Asian subcontinent; Malikite (founded by Malik ibn Anas), practised among Muslims in North and West Africa; Shaff'ite (founded by Muhammad b. Idris Shaff'i); and Hanbalite (Ahmad ibn Hanbal), the most conservative and predominant in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

MADRASSA (also spelt **MADRASSAH**) establishment for religious education. The studies may include courses such as Islamic law, the memorisation and the interpretation of the Qur'an, and Arabic and Muslim history. The school may also provide food and lodging.

MAHRAM a relative whom a Muslim man or woman cannot marry: one's parents, siblings, children, nephews and nieces. A Muslim woman who wears a hijab or niqab does not need to cover herself in front of mahram relatives. Respondents reported that wearing the niqab in front of their non-mahram relatives, i.e. uncles, cousins or brothers-in-law, had often triggered tensions in the extended families.

MASJID mosque.

NIQAB full-face veil that covers a woman's hair and face, leaving only the eyes visible. There are different ways of wearing the niqab. Most women interviewees wore a black jilbab with a black niqab to cover their faces.

PBUH "Peace be upon him" is a phrase used by practising Muslims when referring to the Prophet Muhammad in order to honour him.

REVERT a convert. In Islam children are seen as born with an innate sense of God, so by converting to Islam they are returning or reverting to their original faith.

SAHABIYAT women companions of the prophet who were intellectual and political supporters of Prophet Muhammed and propagators of Islam.

SALAT the act of prayer.

SALAT AL-TARAWIH recommended (not obligatory) prayers performed in the month of fasting, Ramadan. They must be carried out after the night prayer (salat al-isha) and before dawn and preferably in a group at the mosque.⁵

SHAFI'I SCHOOL one of the five Islamic schools of thought.

SIRA the life and work of the Prophet Muhammad.

SUNNA an established custom, normative precedent, conduct or cumulative tradition typically based on the Prophet Muhammad's example.⁶ A religious practice deemed sunna is considered as non-compulsory, but there are several degrees attached to it; for example, a practice can be qualified as sunna muakada (strongly recommended) or sunna mustahaba (just recommended).

TAFSIR Qur'anic exegesis: elucidation, explanation, interpretation and commentary carried out in order to understand the Qur'an and its commandments. Carried out in linguistic, juristic and theological fields.⁷

TAJWID art of reciting the Qur'an, also known as qiraah (reading, recitation). It is intended to be performed only by people in a ritually pure state.⁸ It is a discipline which teaches the

verbal methods (such as pronunciation and intonation) needed to recite the Qur'an according to Islamic traditions.

TAQWA a key concept in Islam, meaning God-consciousness or God-fearing piety. Also rendered as "god-fearing", "right conduct", "virtue" or "mindfulness".

TAWHID the defining doctrine of Islam: absolute monotheism, the unity and uniqueness of God as creator and sustainer of the universe.⁹

TURUQ refers to road or path. It is used in conjunction with spiritual journeys towards God.

ULAMA (singular is **alim**) refers to scholars who have received Islamic training (Qur'an, hadith, fiqh, etc.).

UMMA (or **UMMAH**) Arabic word meaning people, community or nation; commonly used to describe the community of faith, uniting all Muslim men and women in their attachment to Islam.

UMRAH the lesser pilgrimage to Mecca which can be performed at any time during the year.

WAJID in the jurisprudence of the four Sunni schools of thought, fard and wajib are interchangeable terms meaning compulsory. However, in the Hanafi school the terms are more nuanced, with wajib meaning an obligation of a lesser degree.

WALIMA marriage banquet.

WUDU ritual cleansing of the body in preparation for prayer.

1. Methodology

Behind the veil: why 122 women choose to wear the full face veil in Britain, an Open Society Foundations research report, draws upon our previous research, *Unveiling the truth: why 32 Muslim women wear the full face veil in France*, which was launched in April 2011 to coincide with the enactment of the niqab ban in France. The primary objective of each study has been to place at the centre of the debate the voices of those most affected, the women who wear it. Both studies aim to cast a light on the women's daily experiences and relate their testimonies as accurately as possible. The reports also represent an attempt to understand what is prompting Muslim women, living in predominantly Western European societies, to adopt the niqab.

The findings of this report are based on 122 interviews with women who wear the niqab in the UK. All 122 women were asked a common set of questions based on a questionnaire that took around half an hour to complete. In addition to the questionnaire, in-depth interviews were held with 43 of the women, which lasted up to one hour. This study is, therefore, primarily qualitative research.

The survey questionnaire requested the following: basic demographic information; family's religious background; interviewee's religious practice and knowledge; family's reactions to the niqab; the frequency and nature of any abuse experienced; the interviewee's relationship with non-Muslims and her perceptions of the UK.

The in-depth qualitative interviews explored the interviewees' backgrounds, the evolution of their religious practices, their Islamic references and their reason(s) for wearing the niqab. Questions were also asked about the interviewees' daily interactions in public and private spaces, with individuals and institutions alike, as well as their attitude

to reporting abuse to the police. A last set of questions enquired into the interviewees' sense of identity and belonging, their relations with non-Muslims, their perception of the British government's attitude towards the niqab compared with that of other European governments, and the way they envisaged their future.

Interviews were carried out over a five-month period between July 2011 and November 2011. Interviews were conducted in the three major urban centres of London,¹⁰ Birmingham¹¹ and Glasgow,¹² as well as the large towns of Luton¹³ and High Wycombe.¹⁴

Access to interviewees was secured through different channels: local and political activists; mosques; Islamic organisations and Islamic events. A number of women were also stopped and interviewed on the streets and in shops.

Chapters 4–6 examine the journeys that led interviewees to adopt the niqab, analysing the roles that family background and Islamic education in the respondents' formative years might have played in their adoption of the niqab, the influence of Islamic schools and the relationships with family and friends. A short overview of the main Islamic references and channels of knowledge cited by the respondents is provided.

Chapter 7 focuses on experiences of abuse and draws on the responses to understand the unexpected diversity of the women's experiences.

1.1 Sample profile

Table 1. The sample's profile

Location	
London	82 (67.21%)
Birmingham	13 (10.65%)
Glasgow	9 (7.38%)
Luton	5 (4.10%)
High Wycombe	4 (3.28%)
East Midlands	3 (2.46%)
Other locations in England ¹⁵	6 (4.91%)
Distribution in London (82)	
East London	47 (38.52%)
North London	15 (12.30%)
South London	13 (10.66%)
West London	6 (4.91%)
Central London	1 (0.82%)

Neighbourhood		
Class	Working class	72 (59.02%)
	Middle class	38 (31.15%)
	Working to middle class	8 (6.56%)
	Upper class	2 (1.64%)
	Middle to upper class	1 (0.82%)
	Unspecified	1 (0.82%)
Ethnic composition	Mixed	72 (59.02%)
	Predominantly Muslim	27 (22.13%)
	Predominantly white	18 (14.75%)
	Predominantly black	2 (1.64%)
	Unspecified	3 (2.46%)
Country of birth		
Born in the UK		77 (63.11%)
Born outside the UK		45 (36.89%)
Born outside the UK	Pakistan	14
	Somalia	5
	Bangladesh	4
	France	4
	Algeria	3
	Kenya	3
	Egypt	2
	Netherlands	2
	Saudi Arabia	2
	Afghanistan	1
	Denmark	1
	Ireland	1
	Sri Lanka	1
	Thailand	1
Yemen	1	
Nationality		
British		103 (84.43%)
Citizens of other EU countries		11 (9.02%)
Pakistani		3 (2.46%)
United States		1 (0.82%)
Egyptian		1 (0.82%)
Indian		1 (0.82%)
Kenyan		1 (0.82%)
Somali		1 (0.82%)

Ethnicity		
Asian		78 (63.9%)
Black African		14 (11.48%)
Mixed race		9 (7.38%)
North African		9 (7.38%)
Middle Eastern		4 (3.28%)
White British		3 (2.46%)
White European		3 (2.46%)
Caribbean		2 (1.64%)
Asian (78)	Pakistani	35
	Bangladeshi	26
	Indian	6
	Mixed Asian	9
	Sri Lankan	1
	Asian (unspecified)	1
Black African (14)	Somali	9
	Kenyan	2
	Ghanaian	1
	Senegalese	1
	Mixed black African	1
North African (9)	Algerian	4
	Moroccan	4
	Egyptian	1
Age group		
14–17		5 (4.10%)
18–24		34 (27.87%)
25–34		61 (50%)
35–45		17 (13.94%)
46–60		5 (4.10%)
Marital status		
Married		82 (67.21%)
Single		36 (29.51%)
Divorced		4 (3.28%)

Employment status		
Housewife		47 (38.53%)
Employed and self-employed		40 (32.79%)
Student		32 (26.23%)
Jobseeker		3 (2.46%)
Work environment	Work in Muslim environment	19
	Work in mixed-faith environment	13
	Work in both Muslim and mixed- faith environments	1
	Work from home	7
Highest educational qualification achieved		
No formal qualifications		12 (9.84%)
O-level or GCSE		12 (9.84%)
Vocational qualifications		9 (7.38%)
Diploma (14–19-year-olds)		7 (5.74%)
A-level		33 (27.05%)
Bachelor’s degree		28 (22.95%)
Postgraduate		16 (13.11%)
Other		5 (4.10%)

1.2 Class and ethnic mix of respondents’ neighbourhood

Fifty-nine percent of respondents classified their neighbourhood as working-class and 31 percent defined their neighbourhood as middle-class.¹⁶

As for ethnic composition, 59 percent said they lived in a mixed area, 22 percent in a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood and nearly 15 percent in a mostly white area.

1.3 Citizenship

Sixty-three percent of respondents were born in the UK.¹⁷ Of the 45 interviewees (37 percent) who were born abroad, at least 14 came to the UK as infants or as children under the age of 10.¹⁸

A majority of the respondents (84 percent) were British citizens. Nine percent were citizens of (other) EU countries; with the remaining classified as British residents, most often women married to British nationals.

1.4 Ethnicity

Females of South Asian descent comprised 64 percent of the interviewees, which is consistent with the ethnic composition of the UK Muslim population, in which 73 percent of Muslims in England and Wales are of Asian descent.¹⁹ Eleven, or 12 percent, of the interviewees were of black African backgrounds (nine of whom were Somalis) and 10.6 percent were of Arab descent (predominantly North African).

Finally, 15 of the women interviewed were converts who grew up in non-Muslim households before embracing Islam (three white British, three white European, five mixed race, two Caribbean and two black African).

1.5 Age

The women in the study were very young. At the time of the study the youngest respondent was 14 years old (she was interviewed with her mother at an Islamic conference) and the oldest was 60. Thirty-two percent of respondents were under the age of 25 and more than 82 percent were under 35.²⁰

1.6 Employment

One-third of the interviewees were in either full- or part-time paid employment, while 26 percent were students. The largest group, 40 percent, were housewives. This included women with young children who indicated that they anticipated returning to paid work once their children were older. The employment profile of those interviewed is more positive when compared with the wider British Muslim population where in 2011 31 percent were in employment.

Nearly half of the women who worked (45 percent) were employed in the educational sector as teachers or teaching assistants, and many but not all of them in Muslim faith schools. Other jobs cited were: call-centre worker, child-minder, nurse, freelance journalist, graphic designer, political campaigner, interpreter, NHS employee, counsellor and dentist. Nearly half of the women employed worked in a Muslim environment, but one third (32.5 percent) worked in a mixed-faith environment, often wearing their niqab.

1.7 Educational qualifications

The poor level of educational achievement of Muslim women (on average) in the UK has been highlighted by many statistics, including the Annual Population Surveys, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Women's qualifications, by religion, Great Britain (%), 2004

	Degree or equivalent	Higher education**	GCE A or equivalent	GCSE A–C or equivalent	Other qualification	No qualification
Christian	15.5	10.1	18.3	27.9	12.1	16.1
Buddhist	23.4	7.8	13.2	10.6	23.7	21.3
Hindu	24.0	5.5	14.7	11.7	28.0	16.0
Jewish	35.0	9.6	22.3	16.6	11.1	5.4
Muslim	9.5	4.0	13.5	16.7	20.2	36.1
Sikh	15.3	5.3	18.1	19.5	20.7	21.0
Any other religion	22.6	10.6	15.5	22.1	15.2	14.1
No religion	21.5	7.8	18.8	26.3	10.6	15.0
Total	16.5	9.4	18.2	26.9	12.5	16.5

Notes: * As a proportion of all female working-age population (16–59).

** Higher education is below degree level.

Source: Office for National Statistics, Annual Population Survey, January 2004 to December 2004.

As Interviewee 90 (22 years old, Luton) said:

When I go out I want people to see that there is a woman, there is a personality, there's a character, there's a mother, there's a wife and there's all these things behind this piece of cloth. It's not just a woman who is uneducated, like the stereotypes of women wearing the niqab at the moment. There is an educated woman behind this niqab and she can do many of the other things that normal women can do.

The level of educational qualification of the respondents was higher than the female Muslim population in general. At the time of the interviews over a quarter of the respondents were still in education. More than 63 percent of the respondents had got at least A-levels (or its equivalent abroad): 36 percent held a bachelor's degree and 13 percent had a postgraduate qualification.

2. Key findings

The report begins by examining the journey(s) that led interviewees to adopt the niqab. It then looks at responses to their adoption of the niqab, in particular the abuse experienced by interviewees and their responses to this, highlighting the unexpected diversity of respondents' experiences.

The findings of the UK report are based on interviews with 122 women. During a five-month period (between July and November 2011 and September 2014) a total of 122 survey questionnaires and 43 in-depth interviews from the same group were conducted in three major urban centres of London, Birmingham and Glasgow, and the large multicultural towns of Luton and High Wycombe. Interviewees were contacted in various ways: through grassroots and political activists; mosques; Islamic organisations; and Islamic events. Nine women were also randomly stopped and interviewed in streets and in shopping areas.

2.1 Profile of the sample

- Sixty-three percent of the respondents were born in the UK. Of the 37 percent who were born abroad, at least one-third came to the UK as infants or children under the age of ten. Eighty-four percent of respondents were British citizens, 9 percent were holders of citizenship from another EU country and about 7 percent were British residents.

- Sixty-four percent of respondents were of Asian descent and 11.5 percent were sub-Saharan Africans, mainly Somali. Nearly 11 percent were of Arab descent, mainly North African. Another nine interviewees had a mixed ethnic background, six were white Europeans and two were of Caribbean descent.
- The women in our sample were overwhelmingly young. At the time of the study the youngest respondent was 14 years old. Eighty-two percent were under 35 and 32 percent were under 25. Only five respondents were over 45 and the oldest was 60.
- Eight-two respondents were married, 36 single and four divorced.

2.2 Work and education

- **One-third of the respondents held a full-time or part-time job.** 40 percent were housewives and 26 percent students. The employment rate in the sample is slightly higher than the national average (31 percent) for Muslim women of working age in England and Wales, according to the 2011 Census. The data on the labour market participation of the respondents counters the narrative of the (self-) marginalisation of Muslim women in general and niqab wearers in particular.
- **Nearly half (45 percent) of the women who worked were employed in the educational sector as teachers or teaching assistants.** Many worked in Muslim faith schools. Nearly half of the women employed worked in a Muslim environment and 33 percent worked in a mixed-faith environment, often wearing their niqab. The interviewees also included two call-centre workers, a child-minder, a nurse, a freelance journalist, a graphic designer, an interpreter, an NHS employee, a counsellor and a dentist.
- **Interviewees were well educated.** Twenty-six percent of interviewees were still in education; 63 percent of the interviewees had attained at least A-levels (or the equivalent abroad). Thirty-six percent of the interviewees held a bachelor's degree and 13 percent had attained a postgraduate qualification. Four respondents had been awarded certificates in Islamic studies from Muslim boarding schools. These high educational standards are not the result of the interview process, as university campuses were deliberately avoided. The statistics run counter to the dominant narrative of niqab wearers being marginalised.

2.3 Routes to the niqab

- **Wearing the niqab was uncommon before the early 1990s.** Of the respondents, 101 (82 percent) started wearing the niqab after 2000; no respondents had adopted it before 1990. As more than 80 percent of the interviewees were under 18 in 1995, the likelihood of any women wearing the niqab before 1995 was remote. However, those interviewees who did adopt it in the 1990s commented that the practice was then unheard of in their circles. By contrast, many of the respondents who adopted it in the 2000s said that it was part of their surroundings. Thus, before the late 1980s and early 1990s, the wearing of the niqab was at best a marginal practice, but has significantly increased since then.
- **Seventy-five percent of respondents were 16–25 years old when they started wearing the niqab.** Since the early 1990s the average age at which respondents adopted the niqab has been relatively constant at around the early 20s. There are indications that Muslim women are adopting the niqab at an increasingly younger age. For example, five of the six women who started veiling themselves in their early teens adopted it in the 2000s. But this trend may not drive down the average age at which the niqab is adopted, as the testimonies showed that the younger generation influenced older respondents, in particular their relatives, in adopting it.
- **The respondents came from religious households where parents wanted their children to grow up knowing the basic tenets of Islam.** Fifteen of the women were converts while more than 100 women had spent their childhoods in Muslim households. Nearly 80 percent of the interviewees' mothers and 65 percent of the fathers were described as "strongly practising" or "fairly practising"; 56 percent attended classes at the mosque and 30 percent had received Islamic tutoring during childhood. Many said that the extra religious education they received was very basic and stressed the differences between their own understanding and practice of Islam and those of their parents, whose beliefs they saw as infused with cultural traditions from the societies where they were born (rather than strictly based on Islamic tenets).
- **In most cases there was no evidence to suggest that the instruction from parents and external educators during childhood led to the adoption of the niqab later.** On the contrary, for most the decision to wear the niqab represents a point of departure from the past, but not necessarily an abrupt one or one rejected by family members. This is also true of respondents who described their parents as "fairly" or "strongly" practising in childhood. However, for a minority of interviewees, a group that was on average aged nearly five years younger than the other interviewees, the adoption of

the niqab was more of a natural evolution and appeared to be partly the result of their early Islamic upbringing: for example, 15 young women reported that their mothers had been wearing the niqab prior to them. Most of these started adopting the niqab from 2007 onwards, which suggests that this may be a new trend.

- **There was no evidence that parents forced their daughters to wear the niqab.** The in-depth testimonies showed that when parents applied pressure, it was always to convince a daughter to remove the niqab. One testimony revealed that the tensions between a father and his daughter had spilled over into violence. Severe conflicts between parents and daughters were rare.
- **Some husbands** were very influential in their wives' decision to adopt the veil; others opposed their partners' choice. Most of the married women interviewed had taken to the niqab before meeting their husbands and those who adopted it after their marriage were overwhelmingly supported by their husbands.
- **Two-thirds of the interviewees had at least one close friend and over one-third had at least one relative who had started to wear the niqab before them.** Thus the niqab is a visible part of the environment of most of the respondents. This environment is conducive to the increasing uptake of the niqab among the UK Muslim female population, as friends and relatives influence or inspire one another. A quarter of the respondents had no friends or relatives who were wearing the niqab before them.
- **Decision-making on the niqab is based on multi-dimensional and dynamic relationships,** not hierarchical power structures privileging male over female or parent over child. Inside family units and friends' circles the interviews found female friends encouraging each other, mothers influenced by daughters, younger sisters inspired by older sisters, etc. Narratives unveiled a broad range of feelings: parents pressing their daughters to remove it; the tension inside extended families in relation to male relatives; the embarrassment felt by some husbands over the reproving looks in the street; the awkwardness felt by unveiled mothers over their daughter's devotion; and the U-turns made by fathers and husbands.
- **More than three-quarters of the interviewees wore the niqab permanently when they were outside their homes.** Of these, some wore it indoors in the presence of their non-mahram male relatives (49 percent) and some did not (27 percent). The most common reason for removing the niqab in front of male relatives was to avoid family tensions, since the niqab often introduced an Islamic ethos inside Muslim households, clashing with established cultural practices. **A quarter of interviewees wore the niqab selectively, believing it commendable but not compulsory practice.** Both the motivation and the frequency of wearing the niqab varied greatly. Some women, for

example, did not wear it in certain places for fear of abuse. Two respondents would unveil their faces when they felt the niqab would constitute a barrier to communication and interaction with non-Muslims. Another interviewee had essentially stopped wearing the niqab because of her children's hearing impairment.

- **A majority of respondents (54 percent) did not believe wearing the niqab was compulsory; one-third thought it was compulsory; all respondents believed that the niqab was, if not compulsory, then at least highly commendable.** When surveying Islamic literature and pronouncements it takes little effort to find divergent opinions on the issue. But even among the scholars who do not consider the full face veil compulsory, there are differences over the degrees of importance ascribed to wearing it. And because there is no single source of authority within Sunni Islam (all the interviewees were Sunni), the various opinions which prevail among the Muslim communities on the niqab are based on many complex factors: the transmission of particular traditions, the international and national contexts, and the mindset and personal situation of every Muslim.
- **More than three-quarters of the respondents thought they had a firm grasp of Islamic knowledge on the niqab before wearing it.** Less than 20 percent of respondents admitted to having a small amount of Islamic knowledge about the niqab before donning it, and a handful of interviewees reported they had barely any or no Islamic knowledge of it. Knowledge was acquired through a variety of channels: books; Muslim websites; Islamic lectures and courses; Islamic institutions both in the UK and abroad; and Muslim peers.
- **A substantial proportion of the respondents said that they adhered to the Hanafi Deobandi and Salafi traditions.** Some respondents rejected the Salafi label or insisted that they did not want to be pigeonholed. The most commonly cited authorities were classical scholars of the early generations usually linked to the Salafi tradition, such as Sheikh Bin Baz, Sheikh Albani, Sheikh Uthaymeen and Ibn Taymiyya.
- **For niqab wearers religious practice is central in their daily lives, as is the amount of time many of them dedicate to deepening their knowledge of Islam:** 52 percent of the interviewees went to the mosque at least once a week and only 7 percent stated that they never went to the mosque.
- **There are four other channels through which respondents acquire Islamic knowledge.**
 - **Sisters' circles and Islamic lectures:** around 70 percent of the respondents attend sisters' circles and Islamic lectures at least sometimes, and more than 40 percent on a regular basis or often.

- **Islamic institutions:** the many institutions and teaching models have made it easier for Muslim women to enrol in Islamic classes, attend Islamic school full-time, follow online courses or take intensive courses.
- **The internet:** most respondents used the internet to access knowledge on Islam, from websites such as YouTube to Islamic websites, including consultation websites such as IslamQA.
- **Satellite Muslim channels:** Islamic programmes on satellite channels such as Peace TV, Islam Channel and Iqraa.
- **There was a consensus that the practice of the niqab was a growing phenomenon.** Three general reasons were proposed by the interviewees:
 1. The perceived anti-Muslim climate in the media has led Muslims to learn more about Islam, which has resulted in an increase in the level of practice and the number of conversions. It has also led some Muslims to assert their Islamic identity in a more visible manner. Some respondents argued that it was Western values such as the freedom of choice that facilitated the adoption of the niqab.
 2. The settling of Muslims in British society. Some respondents explained that since the first-generation migrants had been preoccupied with ensuring that the basic requirements to practise one's faith were met, following generations could focus on the next steps, the deepening of Islamic education and its proliferation.
 3. Interviewees pointed out that the proliferation of Islamic institutes, satellite TV and online education centres were a contributing factor. The explosion of global communication and the increasing availability of English translations of Arabic Islamic literature had made Islamic knowledge much more accessible.
- **Freedom was the value most commonly associated with the niqab.** A few interviewees alluded to their earlier life as a form of imprisonment, whereas wearing the niqab liberated them from the domination of physical appearances.
- **Adopting the niqab was and still is primarily a religious statement, although there was no one single path that led to the niqab.** Interviewees explained that wearing the niqab is an act of worship that brings a person closer to God and represents a higher level of faith than the hijab or jilbab. The respondents remembered feelings of pride, happiness and accomplishment when they first put on the niqab, though some were anxious about their relatives' reactions. The motivation was to emulate the Prophet's

wives, who were perceived as the ultimate role models. Other factors were the need to avoid male attention and the environment in which they lived: most moved in surroundings where Muslim women were wearing the niqab.

- **The decision to adopt the niqab was overwhelmingly an individual choice** although the surroundings of the interviewees often facilitated it. However, for a quarter of respondents the journey to the niqab was a solitary affair, independent of their immediate environment.

2.4 Experience of abuse

- **The respondents' testimonies on abuse showed many contrasts.** Niqab wearers in the UK are not particularly exposed to harassment from state and non-state actors. The frequency of the abuse varied greatly not only from one location to another, but even within the same area from one individual to the next. A number of factors were identified that might influence the frequency of the harassment: the ethnic, religious and class composition of a location, and the respondents' daily routines (mode of transport, main activities and places visited). The variations over time were generally perceived by respondents to be a result of national and international events involving Muslim issues and their media coverage.
- **Nearly 80 percent of our interviewees reported that they had been abused as a result of wearing their niqab;** 13 percent of respondents said they had been both verbally and physically harassed.
- **A majority of respondents (67 percent) had experienced verbal abuse** and 8 percent of respondents reported being exposed to verbal abuse "often" and 29 percent "sometimes". A majority of respondents had never (20 percent) or rarely (40 percent) faced verbal abuse. Respondents commented that they would not report verbal abuse either because there was little the police could do or because they considered it harmless.
- **Fifteen (13 percent) of the women surveyed reported that they had been physically harassed.** The most frequent assaults were by passers-by who would violently push a niqabi or try to pull off her veil. Some women were also spat at and had objects thrown at them (eggs, water, a plastic bottle). Many respondents accepted a certain level of abuse as part of their normal daily routine.
- **The most frequent insults aimed at respondents were "ninja" and "letterbox".** Comments in relation to terrorism, such as "Bin Laden's wives", were also common.

- **The great majority of interviewees reported having never faced any problems with staff at customs, GPs, hospitals and on public transport.** Those who did generally considered their experiences as either not serious or possibly unrelated to their appearance. One grievance, expressed by several women, concerned the attitude of some bus drivers.
- Seventy respondents were questioned on the age, gender and ethnic backgrounds of the abuser(s) (the results from the question on the age of the abusers were inconclusive):
 - **A majority (54 percent) of respondents described the abusers as more likely to be male than female,** while 43 percent reported that both men and women abused them.
 - **The attitude of fellow Muslims** was clearly not a source of concern for UK-based respondents. Unlike their French counterparts, none of them spontaneously criticized British Muslims or recounted any incidents.
 - **Nearly 80 percent of the respondents said that their abusers were predominantly white** and 15 percent reported that it was predominantly both white and black people who harassed them.
- **Some women said that they always responded to abuse, while some preferred to ignore their abusers, but most respondents fell somewhere between both reactions.** Respondents invoked various reasons to remain silent in the face of abuse. Some thought that replying could escalate the situation while others believed that such a response was in line with their Islamic ethics. The respondents' attitudes also depended on whether they believed that they could change the perception of the abusers. The accounts of the few women who had no misgivings in replying reveal that many abusers assumed that the niqab wearer did not speak English or was unlikely to fight back.
- **Eighty-six percent of interviewees said that they would report a physical assault to the police.** The high propensity to report physical abuse did not, however, necessarily reflect faith in the police and the legal system. The main motivation was to ensure that their experiences would at least be logged and could not be ignored.

3. Introduction: the full face veil in the British context

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s the UK remained largely unaffected by the headscarf debates which were raging in neighbouring France.²¹ There has nevertheless been passionate public debate on this issue in recent years, sparked off in 2006 by comments from the former Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw member of Parliament (MP). There is no demand from the government or the mainstream political parties for a general ban on the full-face veil along the lines of that found in France. A ban is supported by the anti-EU United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and in 2010 a backbench Conservative MP tried unsuccessfully to introduce a bill banning the full-face veil. Restrictions on wearing the full-face veil in particular contexts, such as a witness giving evidence in a criminal trial and for classroom assistants teaching young children, were upheld.

It was after the 7 July 2005 (7/7) bombings in London that the full face veil became a newsworthy item. The Cardiff School of Journalism, analysing the representation of British Muslims from 2000 to 2008 in the national print news media, revealed that 2008 was the first year where the stories on “religious and cultural differences” (such as dress codes, forced marriages and Sharia law) began to outweigh those on terrorism.²² The reporting on the face veil was emblematic of this shift and as in France, the interest and passion generated by the veil in the UK seemed strikingly disproportionate to the numbers of women actually wearing it.

In the wake of the London 7/7 attacks carried out by four British Muslims, the University of London’s Imperial College introduced a ban on “clothing that obscures an individual’s face”²³ across all its campuses. Students and staff were alerted that the

changes to its security procedures were made “in the light of security concerns raised by the terrorist incidents”, implicitly linking the face veil to a potential terrorist threat. Several student and teachers’ organisations unsuccessfully expressed their opposition to the university’s new dress code.²⁴ But despite assertions in the media that Imperial College’s action was in response to a government initiative to tackle radicalism in the educational system,²⁵ the policy aroused little political interest.

In the year following 7/7 there was increasing media scrutiny of British Muslims through stories ranging from freedom of expression to radicalisation and terrorism.²⁶ These included the Danish cartoons controversy, which led to protests in London in February 2006 outside the Danish embassy, with a number of demonstrators displaying placards with inflammatory slogans, and a large number of arrests made in August in response to evidence of a plot to blow up transatlantic flights. In September 2006 John Reid, the Home Secretary, writing in the *Sun*, argued that the “Muslim community ... must choose between accepting the propaganda of the terrorists and taking on would-be terrorists at every opportunity”,²⁷ while urging Muslim parents to check for signs of radicalism in their children.

It is in this context that Jack Straw MP, a former Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary, became the first high-profile politician to raise the issue of the full-face veil. In an article for his local newspaper, the *Lancashire Telegraph*, Straw told readers of his uneasiness when talking to Muslim women whose faces he could not see.²⁸ Recollecting an earlier encounter in his constituency advice bureau, with a fully veiled woman who spoke “in a broad Lancashire accent”, Jack Straw argued that the face veil was a “visible statement of separation and of difference ... bound to make better, positive relations between the two communities more difficult.”²⁹ Straw emphasised that while he “would rather” Muslim women did not wear the full face veil at all, he was not calling for a legal ban.³⁰

Straw’s comments triggered reaction and debate across the British media, with some tabloids calling for the face veil to be removed or banned outright.³¹ The *Sun*, the UK’s largest-selling newspaper, carried articles about the veil on a daily basis for more than a month and associated the practice of veiling the face with numerous social ills, including the imposition of a foreign ideology on British values.³²

The *Sunday Times* columnist Simon Jenkins argued that it was “reasonable to ask” veiled women who were unable to understand Jack Straw’s discomfort why they would “want to live in Britain”.³³ In the *Observer*, journalist Henry Porter asserted that the face veil had no place in a liberal secular society.³⁴ The former *Daily Telegraph* editor, Charles Moore, also argued that the full face veil had no dignified religious meaning, adding: “for a few Muslim girls, wearing the veil is a form of oppression imposed by their families; for more, it is a form of teenage rebellion—a religious version of wearing a hoodie.”³⁵

A number of female commentators denounced the face veil as a backward step which struck at the heart of women's rights. Journalist Allison Pearson argued that the full face veil "implies a submission that is upsetting when women here fought so hard to be free".³⁶ The feminist *Independent* columnist Joan Smith claimed that she couldn't "think of a more dramatic visual symbol of oppression, the inescapable fact being that the vast majority of women who cover their hair, faces and bodies do so because they have no choice", associating the plight of the face veil wearers in the UK with those in Afghanistan and Iraq.³⁷ In the *Daily Mail* journalist Suzanne Moore wrote, "I object to the veil because I am a feminist not because I am phobic about anything. If a woman cannot get on a bike, smile at her children or have a cup of tea in public, it's oppressive."³⁸

Other commentators condemned Jack Straw's public intervention. Peter Osborne in the *Daily Mail* accused New Labour of "the nastiest and most irresponsible politics I have seen from a mainstream political party in my life, and we will all pay a horrible price for such cynical opportunism", arguing that it would "encourage extremism, whether from white supremacist parties like the British National Party (BNP) or within Islam itself".³⁹ Interestingly, the feminist argument was also deployed by pro-choice journalists such as the *Sunday Times* columnist India Knight who accused "old feminists" of being prejudiced against Islam, pointing out that a piece of fabric could not be an indicator of unhappiness and that veiled women had "every right to their modesty, just as their detractors have every right to wear push-up bras".⁴⁰ *Guardian* columnist Madeleine Bunting argued that "one of the impulses for women who choose to take the niqab is how highly sexualised public space in this country has become". She accused Straw of unleashing "a storm of prejudice that only exacerbates the very tendencies which prompt some Muslims to retreat".⁴¹ There were also reports that attacks on Muslims had increased since "the veil row".⁴²

The reaction from Straw's colleagues in the Labour Party was mixed. Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer, backed Mr Straw, arguing that Britain would be better off if fewer women wore the face veil.⁴³ Harriet Harman, MP claimed that "the veil is an obstacle to women's participation on equal terms".⁴⁴ There was also some support for Mr Straw from backbench Conservative politicians.⁴⁵

John Prescott, then deputy prime minister, expressed concerns that the debate "might damage relations rather than improve them", adding that he would not follow Mr Straw's example in requesting women to remove their veils.⁴⁶ The Labour Health Secretary, Patricia Hewitt, stated that she would not ask a veiled woman to take it off "or to change a decision that she has made as an adult" explaining that she had reversed her opinion on the face veil after discussing the matter with a Muslim woman at her constituency.⁴⁷ "That a powerful man can say to a completely powerless woman, I think you should take your veil off, I think is completely and utterly wrong and insensitive," commented the then mayor of London, Ken Livingstone.⁴⁸

There was generally little appetite on the Conservative front benches to intervene robustly against the face veil. In fact Oliver Letwin, the Conservatives' policy chief, declared that it was "dangerous" to suggest women should not be allowed to wear the veil.⁴⁹

The public debate on the full-face veil was amplified when the case of Aishah Azmi, a bilingual primary-school support worker who was suspended from her employment after she refused to remove the full-face veil in front of male colleagues, received media attention.⁵⁰ Ms Azmi's claim for religious discrimination was eventually dismissed.

The prime minister, Tony Blair, not only endorsed Kirklees Council's stance in Ms Azmi's case but also stated that he considered the veil "a mark of separation", which raised the larger issues of "how Muslims integrate with our society" as well as "Islam, and its future, and its relationship with the modern world".⁵¹ Reproaching "the Muslim community" for being "excessively sensitive to criticism", the Conservative shadow home secretary, David Davies, wrote a column in the *Telegraph* explaining that the veil raised "the fundamental issue of whether, in Britain, we are developing a divided society" implicitly blaming Muslims for self-segregating.⁵²

At the end of 2006, Channel Four took the decision to have its "Alternative Christmas Message"⁵³ delivered by a niqab wearer whose personal story, perspective and even accent and assertive tone challenged the cruder stereotypes of veiled women that had been circulating during the previous two months. "To look at me you would never guess that my great-grandmother was actually a suffragette," noted the fully veiled Khadija. She had converted to Islam ten or eleven years before and believed that the UK was the best country to live in if one wanted to freely practise one's religion. Khadija extolled the niqab, explaining that although it might be hard for people to understand it, she felt "much more liberated" since wearing it and she refuted the idea that she wanted to separate herself from society.

Throughout the first veil controversy in the UK, and despite the fact that many British politicians expressed strong feelings of antipathy towards it, no mainstream political parties revealed any intention of imposing government legislation to ban the full face veil.⁵⁴ It was only a few years later when attempts to ban face covering in France and Belgium were in advanced stages, that calls for similar bans to be introduced in the UK became more vocal. In January 2010 UKIP's⁵⁵ only peer and then party leader, Lord Pearson of Rannoch,⁵⁶ declared that his party was considering implementing a UK-wide burka ban affecting public spaces and buildings.⁵⁷

The UKIP's member of European Parliament (MEP) and leader, Nigel Farage, justified the party's position by characterising the full face veil as being emblematic of the fragmentation of British society as well as representing a threat to British culture.⁵⁸ Mr Farage claimed that 200,000 Muslim women in the UK were wearing the full-face veil; this would have amounted to 15 percent of Muslim women in the UK.⁵⁹

UKIP's call for a ban on the full-face veil was dismissed by mainstream political parties. The Schools Secretary, Ed Balls, commented that it was "not British" to tell people how to dress.⁶⁰

However, in June 2010, a Conservative backbench MP, Phillip Hollobone, became the first politician to attempt to ban the full face veil when he presented a private members bill, the face coverings (regulation) bill to the House of Commons.⁶¹ The bill opened with the statement that "a person wearing a garment or other object intended by the wearer as its primary purpose to obscure the face in a public place shall be guilty of an offence".⁶² The bill covered public spaces like streets, squares and thoroughfares,⁶³ encompassing any providers or receivers of public services, and also allowing a private owner or worker to request members of the public to remove face coverings on their premises. Not merely satisfied with presenting his bill, Hollobone also declared that he would refuse to speak to any veiled constituent who refused to lift it up at his surgery.⁶⁴

Without support from the main political parties, Mr Hollobone's private member's bill made little progress.

New veil controversies resurfaced in the years following Mr Hollobone's unsuccessful attempt to have it banned, most noticeably in September 2013, when a veiled student was prevented by college authorities from enrolling at Birmingham Metropolitan College,⁶⁵ while around the same period the refusal of a defendant, later identified as Rebekah Dawson, to lift her veil to testify in a courtroom triggered an outcry.⁶⁶

The U-turn made by Birmingham College within 48 hours of the story coming to light triggered an outrage of Mr Hollobone and the UKIP MEP, Gerard Batten, who called it a "cowardly surrender to Dark Ages values".⁶⁷ The decision also drew the ire of Sarah Wollaston, a southwest Conservative MP, who in a series of tweets called for a total face veil ban in schools and colleges.⁶⁸ But the most effective intervention came arguably from the senior Liberal Democrat home office minister, Jeremy Browne, described as one of the first Liberal Democrats to discuss a veil ban. Like some others calling for a debate, Mr Browne favoured the possibility of a targeted ban over a blanket one. In questioning "whether girls should feel a compulsion to wear a veil when society deems children to be unable to express personal choices about other areas like buying alcohol, smoking or getting married", he suggested that students under 18 needed the protection of the state.⁶⁹

In June 2013, Mr Hollobone's face covering bill was included in a list of 40 legislative measures put forward by a group of Conservative backbenchers as an alternative right-wing legislation programme.^{70, 71} Mr Hollobone's bill progressed a stage further than his 2010 bill, receiving its second reading in the House of Commons in February 2014.⁷² But again he failed to win significant political backing to progress the bill any further.⁷³

The European Court of Human Rights Grand Chamber's decision to uphold the French veil ban in July 2014⁷⁴ was an opportunity for Mr Hollobone to once again argue

for the implementation of a similar ban in the UK now that a legal obstacle had been removed, but again his call fell on deaf ears.⁷⁵ Thus over an eight-year period, despite the growing hostility towards the veil, successive British governments have moved little in the direction of adopting a blanket ban on the full face veil.

Nevertheless, public and media debate is likely to continue. It is important that the voice and experience of women who wear the full-face veil is part of this debate. This report, based on interviews with 122 Muslim women interviewed in 2011 and 2014, explores the experiences of women in the UK. The report seeks to place at the centre of the full face veil (niqab) debate the voices of those most affected by it, the women who wear it. It aims to shine a light on the women's daily experiences and relate their testimonies as accurately as possible. The report builds on previous research by the Open Society Foundations At Home in Europe programme on Muslim women in France who wear the niqab, *Unveiling the truth: why 32 Muslim women wear the full face veil in France*, published in April 2011.

Chapter 4 explores the levels of religious practice in the participants' families and their educational experience. It also explores the role and reactions of family and friends in supporting and affirming or rejecting and challenging the participants' adoption of the niqab.

Chapter 5 focuses on the women's understanding of the niqab in the context of Islam, in particular whether they view wearing the niqab as a compulsory religious obligation. It explores the women's level of religious knowledge prior to adopting the niqab and tries to understand the sources or religious knowledge and authority from which they draw their views.

Chapter 6 discusses the women's perception of why increasing numbers of women are choosing to wear the niqab as well as their own motivations and experiences of wearing the niqab for the first time.

Chapter 7 focuses on society's reaction to women wearing the niqab, exploring in particular experiences of verbal and in some instances physical abuse. It examines the context in which they have faced abuse as well as how they have responded to it.

4. Routes to the niqab: early influences

4.1 The niqab in the UK: an emerging trend?

The niqab is an increasingly visible presence in many British cities. There are no precise figures on the number of women wearing it, nor is much known about the women who wear it. This chapter explores the experiences of women who wear the niqab, seeking to understand why women, most of whom were born or grew up in the UK, have adopted a religious practice which is mostly absent from the religious tradition of their parents and grandparents. The interviews suggest that before the late 1980s and early 1990s wearing the niqab was a marginal practice among the UK Muslim population and that it has greatly increased since then.

The study found that none of the respondents had adopted the niqab before 1990. In fact, the majority of respondents (82 percent) began wearing the niqab after 2000.⁷⁶

Table 3. Year when niqab was adopted

1991–1995	4 respondents
1996–2000	17 respondents
2001–2005	41 respondents
2006–2010	44 respondents
2011	16 respondents

This could reflect the age profile of interviewees. Over 80 percent of interviewees were under 18 years old in 1995. But some of the older women who had adopted the niqab in the 1990s commented on the practice as one that was unheard of in their circles at the time. By contrast, many respondents who adopted it in the 2000s indicated that the niqab was familiar to them and was worn by others in their social circle. This point is well illustrated by the contrasting experiences of two respondents who live in Luton: Interviewee 46, a 41-year-old, who adopted the niqab in 1992, and Interviewee 52, a 31-year-old who began wearing it in 2006.

I think [my relatives] found it really strange and unheard of because nobody wore niqab in those days. It was really quite hard to buy them as well—you just had to make them ... If somebody went to Saudi you'd ask them, "Bring me a niqab back!" (Interviewee 46)

Asked how she had heard about the niqab, Interviewee 52 replied: "It wasn't that you heard [about] it, you saw it around."

4.1.1 Age of the respondent when she adopted the niqab

Table 4. Respondent's age when she first adopted the niqab⁷⁷

Age, years	No. of women
12–15	6
16–20	54
21–25	38
26–30	11
Over 30	13

Table 5. Average age of respondent per period

Period	Average age, years
1991–1995	21.75
1996–2000	21.47
2001–2005	23.49
2006–2010	21.68
2011	23.44

The data from the survey show that the majority of respondents first adopted the niqab either as teenagers or in their early 20s. Three-quarters of the women first wore the niqab between 16 and 25 years old (44 percent were aged between 16 and 20 years old and 31 percent between 21 and 25 years old). And since the beginning of the 1990s

the average age at which the women in the survey adopted the niqab for the first time has been relatively constant, in the early 20s.

The survey results also suggest that the adoption of the niqab by girls aged 12–15 years old is a more recent trend: five of the six women who started wearing the niqab in their early teens (aged 12–15 years) adopted it in the 2000s.

4.2 Parents’ backgrounds and religious practice during respondents’ childhoods

As wearing the niqab is a practice that is being adopted at a young age, this section examines the religious background of the respondents’ parents and their own practice in the formative years of their childhoods.

The interviews with respondents suggest three main sources of Islamic knowledge during their childhood: parents, mosques and personal tutors. A small number of respondents attended Islamic schools, where they gained formative knowledge.

In the Open Society Foundations sample, 105 women had grown up in Muslim households and 15 were converts (13 from a Christian background and two with atheist parents).⁷⁸ Respondents who grew up in a Muslim household were asked to indicate the levels of their mothers’ and fathers’ religious practice during their childhood years. The interviewees were offered the following options: “strongly practising”; “fairly practising”; “practises a little” and “not religious”.⁷⁹

Table 6. Parents’ religious practice

Mother’s religious practice		Father’s religious practice	
	No.		No.
Strongly practising	29	Strongly practising	34
Fairly practising	52	Fairly practising	33
Practises a little	17	Practises a little	27
Not religious	3	Not religious	6
Deceased	2	Deceased and other	3
Did not answer	2	Did not answer	2

The evaluation of practice differed between mothers and fathers. A greater proportion of fathers, compared with mothers, were identified as either “strongly practising” or “practising a little”. Mothers were more likely than fathers to be identified as “fairly practising”. Half of the respondents described their mothers as “fairly practising”,

28 percent described them as “strongly practising” and 17 percent described them as “practising a little”. The evaluation of the father’s religious practice was more evenly spread across these three categories: 33 percent were described as “strongly practising”, 32 percent “fairly practising” and 26 percent “practising a little”.⁸⁰ Nearly 20 percent of interviewees said that both their parents were “strongly practising”, while only one said that both parents were “not religious”.

We were brought up to pray from a very young age. So we’ve been praying since seven or eight. (Interviewee 64, 22 years old, Birmingham)

My dad wasn’t too practising. He didn’t pray often, but then he started to later on while we were young. My mum used to be quite forceful with things like fasting, and praying and stuff ... Prayer? I probably didn’t when I was out and about. But when I was in the house, my mum made sure we prayed. (Interviewee 24, 29 years old, Birmingham)

I grew up in a very Western sort of upbringing. My parents were both educated so they were very liberal ... hijab was something that Shi’a wore as far they were concerned ... Islam for us was Ramadan (fasting), Eid, don’t smoke, don’t drink and don’t have physical relationships with anybody until you get married. These were the five pillars of Islam in the Moroccan household. (Interviewee 30, 36 years old, West London)

4.2.1 Mosques, madrassas and Islamic tutoring in childhood

Attendance at mosques and madrassas for religious education are a feature of the lives of most young Muslims. It has been estimated that over 250,000 young Muslims attend madrassas in the UK. Research by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)⁸¹ suggests that British Muslims “attend madrassas for most of their young lives for up to two hours on evenings after school and weekends”. So it is not surprising to learn from the study results that 75 percent of the respondents received some form of religious education other than that provided by their parents.

Table 7. Religious education in childhood

Mosque attendance in childhood		Islamic tutoring in childhood	
Yes	58	Yes	31
No	45	No	71
Did not answer	2	Did not answer	3

Over half (56 percent) of the women born in a Muslim household attended classes at the mosque and 30 percent received Islamic tutoring during childhood.

The figure on mosque attendance masks significant differences in experience, ranging from attending classes sporadically to spending two hours each day at the mosque over many years.

When I was very young, from the age of seven until about ten, we did go to a local masjid to learn how to read the Qur'an ... Most of it really came from the home where my mum would teach us things. (Interviewee 20, 22 years old, East London)

I had a traditional upbringing. We went to a supplementary school. After school, six days a week, we went to the masjid and we learnt the Qur'an and the Tajwid ... on weekends and after school. Every day we went from five till seven and Saturday and Sunday we went from ten till twelve. (Interviewee 08, 32 years old, East London)

Some of the respondents also received private religious tutoring. In general, this was provided by neighbours, family acquaintances or relatives who would either visit the respondents' home, or receive them at their home. These tutors would teach how to read the Qur'an and impart knowledge about Islam. Whether an individual attended a mosque or received tutoring also depended on the circumstances. In parts of the UK with small numbers of Muslims, parents did not have the option of sending their children to the mosque or using a personal tutor.

Respondents who had grown up in majority-Muslim countries (Pakistan, Somalia, Saudi Arabia and Algeria) did not require supplementary religious education as this is delivered in local schools in the mainstream educational system. This may be why half of the respondents who did not attend mosque or have tutoring were born abroad. Interviewee 29, 19 years old, from Birmingham, who had grown up in Somalia, had been to the madrassa there but not the mosque: "We used to pray at home and do everything at home."

Analysis of the data does not find any relationship between additional religious education, whether in mosques or through tutoring, and the respondents' perceptions of their parents' religious practice. Most of the interviewees who had not received any extra Islamic education beyond that taught by their mother or father categorised at least one of their parents as "fairly practising" or "strongly practising". Children of parents who were not viewed as practising much at home were still sent to the mosque to develop a better grasp of their religion. The responses suggest that Muslim families send their children to the mosque regardless of the level of their religious practice.

Interviewee 03, East London, identified both parents as "practising a little": "Generally, even Muslims that perhaps might not be that practising ... one thing they do want their children to learn is how to read the Qur'an—the basics: how to do the wudu, and normally they send them somewhere to learn those things in this country."

The 43 in-depth interviews provide a more nuanced picture of the respondents' religious backgrounds and their own levels of practice when they were younger. When asked about the nature of the extra religious education they received, for example, many women pointed out that it was very basic, often limited to learning to recite the Qur'an, often without even fully understanding its meaning.

Interviewee 10 (30 years old, East London) (mother "practises a little"; father "fairly practising" in childhood) recalled having a tutor who taught her "how to read Arabic, Qur'an. He was Pakistani ... He didn't teach us correctly ... He didn't give us Islamic studies, he didn't teach us Tafsir, or he didn't teach us the meaning of the Qur'an or the words, or what the Qur'an was."

Many respondents highlighted the differences between their own current understanding and practice of Islam from those of their parents, often viewing their parents' beliefs to be infused with cultural traditions from the societies where they were born, rather than based on what the respondents viewed as proper Islamic knowledge.

Interviewee 08 (32 years old, East London), who viewed both parents as "fairly practising", said: "They did the basics: my mum and dad and my uncles never missed their prayers ... we were told not to lie; or to eat haram [food] and those kinds of things. The way we do it now we do specific research ... we read up on aqidah, etc. Theirs was ... more practice-based than a debate, a discourse."

Interviewee 03 (34 years old, East London), who qualified both her mother and father as "practising a little" in her childhood, contributed: "To be honest Islamic knowledge or cultural knowledge is all quite mixed up ... we were told we weren't allowed to cut our hair and, Islamically, now I know there's no reason why you can't cut your hair."

4.2.2 Conclusions

The interviewees' accounts of their religious background during childhood and the results from the quantitative data indicate that there is little evidence to suggest that the religious education respondents received during their childhood, from parents or mosques, led them to adopt the niqab in later life. On the contrary, for a majority of respondents the decision to wear the niqab, rather than being a logical outcome of early Islamic education, represents a point of departure from the past, albeit not necessarily an abrupt one or one that was rejected by family members (see Chapter 4). This evolution of Islamic practice is clearly demonstrated by respondents from less religious backgrounds such as Interviewees 14 and 46:

[My parents] were liberal to some degree in that they respected our individualism and they just were happy in our⁸² decisions [to wear the niqab] compared to some other people in our same community who were rebelling against their parents in a bad way. We were rebelling

against our parents in a way that they couldn't really criticise. (Interviewee 14, 31 years old, High Wycombe, mother "fairly practising"; father "practises a little")

I was brought up traditional Pakistani, not particularly Islamically, but with lots of tradition ... But then ... I went to university, that's when I started learning about Islam. (Interviewee 46, 41 years old, Luton—mother "fairly practising", father "practises a little")

However, this evolution also concerned many women, like Interviewee 09, a 28-year-old American citizen of Somali descent, who said that both parents were either "strongly practising" or "fairly practising" in her childhood (see Chapter 4).

For a few interviewees the adoption of the niqab seems to have been a more natural evolution that may have been connected to their early Islamic education and environment. Interviewee 18, a 34-year-old from South London, would be an example of someone whose family surroundings were conducive to her decision to adopt the niqab in 2004, when she was 17 years old. Her mother was not wearing the veil but her aunt, who provided her Islamic education during her mid-teens, was wearing it (see Chapter 6).

4.3 Islamic schools

Schools are another important influence on the lives of young people. Respondents were asked about the type of school they attended.

Table 8. School(s) attended in childhood⁸³

Type of school	No. of respondents
State	99
Public	7
Muslim ⁸⁴	2
State and Muslim	9
State and public	2
Did not answer	3

An overwhelming majority of respondents (83 percent) went to (or were attending) a state school. A few of the interviewees considered that the religious education classes they attended at these schools contributed to the Islamic knowledge they gained in their childhood. For instance, Interviewee 52, who went to a state school, said: "In their religious education classes they did quite a lot about Islam and in years ten and eleven you could choose which religion you wanted to do, Islam or Christianity. We all chose Islam ... we had quite a lot of Islamic education."

The school uniform policy in (non-Muslim) state schools regarding the niqab and even the hijab differs greatly from one school to another.⁸⁵ While the wearing of the hijab is generally accepted in British state schools, at least one respondent was advised by her school not to wear the hijab and a few others were not allowed to wear the jilbab. Some interviewees could wear the niqab at their local state school.

According to Wassim Riaz of the Association of Muslim Schools, there are 170 Muslim schools in the UK, of which 15–20 are Muslim boarding schools mainly based in Lancashire and Yorkshire. Most Muslim schools are privately funded (only 12 are state-funded).⁸⁶ Although no official figures exist, the niqab forms part of the dress code of only a handful of Muslim day schools and boarding schools in the UK. The *Daily Telegraph* identified three Islamic schools in which the niqab was reported to be a part of the uniform.⁸⁷

Only 11 respondents had attended an Islamic school, of which two had only been at Muslim schools. The average age of these interviewees, 21.4 years, is noticeably lower than the entire sample's average age of 28.5 years. In addition, all 11 women adopted the niqab in the 2000s, and nearly half of their mothers were wearing the niqab before they did. The nine other respondents shared their school career between state and Muslim schools, including five who initially attended their local school before enrolling at Muslim boarding schools miles from home (in Lancaster, Bradford and Blackburn).

CASE STUDY 1: A Muslim boarding school

Interviewee 57, a 27-year-old from Glasgow, was sent at around the age of 13 to a Muslim boarding school in the late 1990s.

She spent six years here, describing it as subscribing to the “Hanafi Deobandi” tradition.⁸⁸ According to the school, the niqab is not strictly speaking part of the school uniform, but it is strongly encouraged and it is widely worn by the pupils.⁸⁹ Interviewee 57 said: “We were told it was fard. Obviously the people that want to do it do it, the ones that don't, don't.”

Interviewee 57's mother (Interviewee 56, 46 years old, Glasgow), who was not wearing the niqab, did not welcome her daughter's decision. “[The school] encouraged it and [my daughter] accepted it wholeheartedly. I wasn't for it at first. She was very young and she insisted on wearing the full jilbab and the niqab ... For a 13-year-old I wouldn't have thought she was mature, but she was very set in her ways. We did have a lot of ups and downs about it at the very beginning.”

Her mother's opposition meant that she had to wait a few more years before being able to wear it full-time. Her five younger sisters do not wear the niqab (including one who attended the same school).

Like her siblings, Interviewee 57 was initiated into Islam by her grandfather who was tutoring them. She explained that she had been drawn towards religion from a very young age: “Some kids want to play with their toys. I wasn’t like that. I liked to pray. I started ages ago. I can’t remember when I started.”

She had come across the niqab many years before. “When I was at primary school there was a mother that used to wear niqab. That was the first time I came across niqab and I thought, “When I grow up I want to do that” ... She had a very good character ... she inspired me.”

The school played a significant role in Interviewee 57’s adoption of the niqab, but her decision cannot simply be reduced to it.

The reaction of Interviewee 56 did not reflect that of the other 10 respondents’ parents, who welcomed their daughters’ decision to take to the niqab, even when they decided to wear it at a very young age. Interviewee 56 did not consider the niqab compulsory and would certainly not have known before sending her child to the school that she would be taught differently. She sent her daughter to the school because she wanted a thorough Islamic education for her.

Interviewee 57’s cousin attended the same school in Lancashire and the Islamic education she received at the school also contributed to her adoption of the niqab.

Different feedback came from some of the other respondents who had attended Muslim schools. Interviewee 61, a 25-year-old from Glasgow, went to a Muslim school in Birmingham when she was younger. She “only” started donning the niqab at the age of 24 and it was clear that the school had played no significant role in her adopting it. Similar information came from two other respondents, who had started wearing the niqab in their 20s, well after leaving school.

4.4 Family and friends

“A good number of these women are warned of the wrath of Allah unless they succumb to life behind the veil; they are told by their fathers they are whores; they are told they will have no friends in the community—and worse still—end up spinsters. And so these women do wear burkas against their will.” Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, “The burka empowering women? You must be mad, minister,” *Daily Mail*, 21 July 2010

Like the rest of us, the respondents’ beliefs and practices have been shaped by what they read, watch and study, and also by their friends, relatives and personal circumstances. The role that relatives and friends played in respondents’ adoption of the niqab is very diverse.

Although mainstream narratives explain the niqab phenomenon in terms of the coercion of youngsters by adults, a number of the testimonies revealed that youngsters had influenced older respondents, in particular their relatives, in adopting the niqab. Of the women who had adopted the niqab in their 30s and over, all but one interviewee had close family members and friends who had been wearing the niqab before they themselves decided to wear it.

4.4.1 Inspired to wear the niqab or told to take it off?

Respondents were asked the following two questions: “Did anyone inspire you to wear the full-face veil? Did any close friend(s) or relative(s) try to convince you to take the full-face veil off?”⁹⁰

Table 9. Influences over wearing the niqab

Did anyone inspire you to wear the full-face veil?		Did any close friend(s) or relative (s) try to convince you to take the full-face veil off?	
Answer	No. of respondents	Answer	No. of respondents
No	65	No	66
Yes	55	Yes	55
Did not answer	2	Did not answer	1

Forty-six percent of respondents reported being inspired by another person in their decision to wear the niqab. An almost identical proportion of 45 percent reported that one or more people had tried and in some cases were still trying to convince them to take the niqab off.

Table 10. Personal influences over wearing the niqab

Who inspired you to wear it?	No. of respondents	Who tried to convince you to take it off?	No. of respondents
Female friends	27	Mother	18
Scholars and teachers	8	Father	10
Sister	5	Sister	6
Husband	4	Brother	6
Daughter	3	In-laws	6
Ex-husband	1		
Mother	1		
Jack Straw	1		

Respondents were also asked to identify the individuals who inspired them to wear the niqab and those who tried to dissuade them from doing so. More respondents identified female friends as inspiring them to adopt the niqab than all the other categories combined.

In most cases opposition to wearing the niqab came from parents, in particular mothers who kept encouraging their daughters to remove it. Reports of severe tensions between parents and children were rare. Family members voiced their concerns either because they considered the niqab too extreme, or due to worries over the respondent’s personal safety. The research produced little evidence to suggest that relatives or friends exerted overt pressure on respondents.

Only two respondents suggested that pressure being applied had been, or was still, causing distress. A 30-year-old British woman of Pakistani descent had to deal with her father’s fierce opposition, first to her hijab and later her niqab, and another young woman was struggling to cope with her husband’s insistence that she wear the niqab on a permanent basis, whereas she would have preferred only putting it on in places where she felt comfortable doing so.

4.4.2 Fathers’ reactions

Table 11. Fathers’ reactions

How did your father initially react? ⁹¹	No. of respondents
Strongly agreed	13
Agreed	24
Disagreed	11
Strongly disagreed	15
Was indifferent/neutral	25
Unaware she was wearing it	4
Not applicable	30

The reactions of respondents’ fathers to their decision to adopt the niqab were mixed: 27 percent were reported to be indifferent or neutral, 26 percent “agreed” and 14 percent “strongly agreed” with their daughter’s decision; 12 percent “disagreed” and 16 percent “strongly disagreed”.

My father was very happy because I became very practising. (Interviewee 28, 26 years old, Birmingham)

Deep down they thought, “Who’s going to marry her now?” [Laughs] I think my mum must have found it strange, but secretly I think my dad was really proud of me and I think he really, really liked it (Interview 46, 41 years old, Luton)

My Dad didn't take it too well. He didn't say anything to me initially but one day I was going somewhere with him and he did express that he wasn't happy about me wearing the niqab ... So when I'm with him I don't actually cover my face, but it's not often that I go out with him. (Interviewee 53, 26 years old, Luton)

A few interviewees reported that even though their fathers initially agreed with their decisions they were worried about their safety.

After the 7/7 bombings, my dad got really worried and he said, "You know you are going to university now. Maybe somebody will attack you, or they will harm you because of the backlash against Muslims." He said: "Look, you don't have to wear this! Maybe it would be better if you don't." (Interviewee 22, 24 years old, Birmingham)

None of the fathers whose daughters had converted to Islam had agreed with their decision.

My dad has always said, "If you're going to do something, do it properly! Otherwise don't do it at all." ... His response was, "You've gone from one extreme to the other! You've gone from wearing no clothes to being fully covered." ... "Why couldn't you cover your hair like normal people?" But now he's fine. (Interviewee 19, 25 years old, South London)

The attitudes of many fathers turned out not to be set in stone. Some who had initially strongly opposed their daughter's decision in time accepted it, and some fathers grew to take pride in their daughter's niqab:

I think it was a bit too much for him at the time. He would say, "Why is your abaya dragging on the ground?" Now if you were to take your niqab off he wouldn't be very happy. So he was very opposed to the idea at first. I think as he became more and more spiritual he came more and more into Islam. He gradually took some pride about it. (Interviewee 25, 33 years old, from South London)

There was no evidence that respondents' fathers had pressured or even mildly encouraged their daughters to wear the niqab. In fact, when fathers applied pressure it was always to dissuade their daughters from wearing it.

CASE STUDY 2

Interviewee 09 is a 28-year-old American woman of Somali and Ethiopian descent who lives in North London. During her childhood her parents were “strongly practising”, but they were also relaxed about her Islamic education and she only started praying when she was about 16: “My first class in reciting the Qur’an was at the age of 16, so I was very behind from a Muslim family perspective.” It was at the same age when she also started to wear the hijab and study Islam.

She recalled: “At first I was just wearing the hijab and just my trousers and tops and trying to get used to that.” She found it difficult to explain to her classmates and teachers that she wanted to wear it, after learning more about Islam and Islamic history. They believed she had been forced to wear it. Some of her friends had been completely unaware she was a Muslim, because she had never talked about it in the past, or wore Islamic clothing. She progressed quite rapidly from just a hijab to the abaya and then to the jilbab. During this period people made a lot of hostile comments, so she decided to leave school.

At the age of 17 she went to an Islamic boarding school. Only two girls there wore the niqab. They inspired her to study the meaning of the niqab and then she decided that she would also wear it.

Interviewee 09 said: “So I wore the veil when my dad picked me up ... He was quite shocked. I had to explain to my dad what I was doing and he wasn’t for it, because I think he was worried about my safety and things like that ... being so young.” Her father thought it unnecessary and she had a serious argument with both her parents, although her mother was more acquiescent.

It took a long time for her father to accept her decision, but she said: “Stubbornly, he did. He wasn’t really happy about it, but he couldn’t... because I gave him tough questions about it which made him question whether he was going to stop me or not, because I told him that at the end of the day and from what I understood about the veil (I read a lot about it) that the Sahabiyas, especially the Prophet’s wives, wore it and why would he pay this much money to send me to Islamic school ... if he didn’t want me to emulate the Sahabiya and the Prophet’s wives, and if he didn’t want me to be like them then he shouldn’t pay for all of these things. He should keep me at home.”

CASE STUDY 3

Interviewee 10 is a 30-year-old former teacher, of Asian descent, from a middle-class background, living in East London. Her father was “fairly practising” in her childhood, while her mother “practised a little”. Although she began to seriously practice her religion at an early age, she was not familiar with the hijab.

She said that her curiosity had been aroused when her father went to do Umrah and brought her back a headscarf, which he explained was what Muslim women wore. When she was around 13 she said she started “having this burning desire [for] self-identity”. A lecture on the hijab by Imam Siraj Wahaj,⁹² an American convert, persuaded her to put it on. “At that age you want to rebel ... I put the hijab on.”

Her parents disapproved. Her father used to hit her because of it and her mother “wasn’t happy—she said bad words to me”. She kept the hijab on, nonetheless, and attended a Muslim school. What triggered her decision to go from wearing the hijab to the niqab was an incident involving a young Muslim man, who followed her all the way to school and pestered her. The experience left her frightened and she thought that the only way to stop men from harassing her was to wear the niqab. She related the incident to her mum and the latter supported her decision, but both of them kept it a secret from her father:

Interviewee 10 said: “I wore it for a year and then when my dad found out he burnt it ... and then he ... gave me warnings and threatened me: ‘I’ll burn you as well if I ever find out!’ Then I had to take it off.”

By the time she started attending university, her father and relatives were growing increasingly worried over her behaviour. To keep her in check her father decided she should get married. She said: “My family as a whole ... were all saying, ‘What is wrong with her? ... She’s going to run off to Afghanistan. She’s going to become the wife of a Mujahideen. Get her married! Stop her university!’ So they tried putting an end to my education.”

So her family looked for a husband for her. When her mother asked her who she wanted to marry, Interviewee 10 replied, “Anybody who has a beard and prays five times a day.” Her mother went to Pakistan and met her future husband, who was her cousin. So she came back and told my dad. My father agreed.” Some of Interviewee 10’s friends urged her to run away from home and said they could help her out, but she didn’t want to upset her parents and accepted her parent’s decision.

She went to Pakistan and got married: “Allah had a plan for the best.” The pleasant surprise was that her husband was practising and she got along with him. At the walima (second wedding reception after the marriage ceremony), her father had suggested to him, “You know you have to shave this off. No more beard.” But her husband replied, “I’ll leave your daughter but I’m not going to leave my beard.” Her father was very upset. Interviewee 10 had to wait until after her marriage to wear the niqab again.

Through time her father’s attitude changed. Although Interviewee 10 continues not to wear the niqab in front of her non-mahram male relatives to avoid any conflict with her father, the latter had not only come to accept her religious practice but has also become supportive. “My dad knows I wear the niqab, he’s respectful now. He praises me in front of others as well now, ‘This daughter of mine: she’s the best.’”

4.4.3 Reactions and roles of husbands

In our sample, 36 women were single, four were divorced and 82 respondents were married. The numbers were fairly evenly split between those who wore the niqab before they were married (41 women) and those who adopted the niqab after getting married (39 women). The figures suggest that for a majority of respondents husbands did not have a significant influence on their decision to adopt the niqab.

When asked if anyone had inspired them to wear the niqab, four respondents cited their husbands, and another woman her former husband.

To assess the role that husbands might have played in the adoption of the niqab, the interviewees were asked the two following questions: “How did your husband initially react when you adopted the niqab?” and “How would your husband react if you were no longer convinced of the necessity of wearing the niqab and took it off?” The first question was only asked of the women who adopted the niqab after getting married and the second question concerned all married interviewees (82 women).

Table 12. Was the niqab adopted before or after marriage?

Response	No. of respondents
Before	41
After	39
Before/after ⁹³	2

Forty-one women were not wearing the niqab when they married and decided to wear it afterwards. In 33 cases, husbands “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with their spouse’s decision to don the niqab. Only four husbands “disagreed” with their wife’s decision, while none of them “strongly disagreed”.

Table 13. Husbands’ reactions to adoption of the niqab

Response	No. of respondents
Strongly agreed	24
Agreed	9
Disagreed	4
Was indifferent/neutral	2
Did not want to answer	1

A majority of the married respondents (55 percent) said that their husbands would “disagree” or “strongly disagree” if they were to take off the niqab, 26 percent reported that they would be “indifferent/neutral” and 15 percent of women said their husbands would “agree”.

Table 14. Husbands’ reactions to respondents taking off the niqab

Response	No. of respondents
Would agree	12
Would disagree	28
Would strongly disagree	16
Would be indifferent/neutral	21
Other ⁹⁴	2
No answer ⁹⁵	3

With an overwhelming majority of husbands identified as supporting their wives’ decision to wear the niqab, and a smaller majority opposed to their wives removing their niqab, the question of whether any of the women had been pressurised to wear the niqab by their husband needs to be carefully considered.

A diverse picture emerges from the data on the husbands’ behaviour. Interviewee 64’s testimony suggests that her husband was exerting direct pressure on his wife, forcing her to wear the niqab. Two other husbands had also openly encouraged their wives to wear the niqab. But a number of women wore it against their partner’s will. Furthermore, the husbands’ attitudes towards the niqab were not always unwavering: some revealed their opinions had either changed or were ambiguous.

CASE STUDY 4

Interviewee 64, 22 years old, from Birmingham used to wear the niqab selectively when she was single, in places where there were many Muslim men, in particular at the mosque. She adopted it in her late teens. To avoid harassment, she never donned her niqab when visiting “predominantly white areas” but this changed when she met her husband.

She said: “Before we got married he said that he would prefer me to wear niqab. [So] I started wearing it full-time when I got married ... I didn’t realise how much negative attention I’d get.”

Her husband considers the niqab compulsory and although she does not agree she feels compelled to accept his decision: “I feel it’s a struggle but ... it represents to me being obedient to my husband, and sometimes obedience is something that you don’t like to do but you have to do it and I hope Allah accepts it from me ... In the same way I don’t see cooking three-course meals is obligatory but I would cook nice food and make it presentable—to please him so that I’m pleasing my Lord as well. It’s different with an obligatory act for salat or to do extra salat. It’s between me and my Lord.”

The family dynamic of Interviewee 64 is worth mentioning as it highlights the diversity of male attitudes and the religious practice of members of the same family.

She said: “My dad doesn’t like it now anyway and whenever I go out with him the first thing he’ll say to me is, ‘Look, your husband’s not here. You can take it off now.’ But obviously I still have to wear it. But it does attract—especially in the area we live in—a few negative remarks.”

Interviewee 64 argues that her husband does not, strictly speaking, force her to wear the niqab. “I’m still not convinced that I have to wear it but he says, ‘It’s your choice to wear it but I’ve asked you to wear it.’ But I know that it would upset him if I was to take it off. More of me is saying to keep it because obviously I love my husband, I don’t want my husband to be upset with me and it’s something that I struggle with but one day it will get easier. I say to my husband, ‘Can’t I just be a moderate? Can’t I just wear it in the places where there is a need to wear it? For example this morning I had a hospital appointment and it was [early] in the morning ... it’s a woman’s unit and there’s only women here and he still said no. That made me upset because I think there should be a place where a woman can lift up her niqab.”

Interviewee 64's original decision to wear the niqab was not linked to her husband as she started wearing it before she met him. They might not have married if she had refused to constantly wear it. Under his pressure she was reluctantly wearing the niqab full-time. The situation was all the more regrettable because she suffered frequent verbal abuse from white people and had on one occasion been physically harassed.

The story of Interviewee 64 was the most extreme example of coercion to wear the niqab reported by a respondent.

The interviews also reveal fluidity and changes of attitudes among family members towards the decision to wear the niqab. Some women, whose husbands were initially supportive, said that their partners would now prefer them not to wear it. Another husband who initially opposed his wife's decision was now supportive.

"He'd actually said once 'I would like it if you'd wear it', but he hadn't forced or even pushed the issue. However, now he'd be happy for me to take it off. Because of all the media and I think he just feels that I'm more ... the focus of attention. So now I think if I took it off he wouldn't mind: he'd actually be happy. He joked. "Oh why don't you take it off?" Just jokingly, but I know he's serious as well. (Interviewee 03, 34 years old, East London)

Some women noted that their husbands were self-conscious or embarrassed when they were going out together.

I notice the difference in him ... I'm like, "You know what. If you can't take it I don't need to be out with you because my sisters are girls and they handle it better than you do." We went to the Aquarium and the London Eye and he's very aware. If I talk in my normal voice he'll get embarrassed, like I'm drawing attention. And I'm like, "You're embarrassed because of the way I'm dressed. When the bus comes up to East London you're not embarrassed anymore ..." When we're up north-east, we used to live near Manchester, if I came out of the house first and I was standing on the street waiting for him he'd be, "No. No. Let me go first!" Or he'd go out first, open the car door and I'm supposed to get in like Mrs Invisible because people will notice, they might say something and he'll have to step in and he doesn't want to be in that situation. We do have tensions and we do have arguments when we go somewhere else. It's better for us not to go to white areas. (Interviewee 08, 32 years old, East London)

Funny thing is that my husband didn't feel comfortable. When we got married he admitted that he found it difficult going out with me with my niqab on, and I was really surprised ... He felt very, I wouldn't say embarrassed, but self-conscious, very aware. Which is very strange as it's a very different way of looking at it that husbands, men, struggle with it too. (Interviewee 25, 33 years old, South London)

4.4.4 Reactions and roles of female relatives

A majority of respondents (61 percent) were the first in their family to adopt the niqab, and for 39 percent of interviewees the niqab had already been introduced into the family circle by at least one relative.

Table 15. Female relatives' roles

Family member(s) wearing the niqab before respondent?	No. of respondents	Family member(s) who wore the niqab before respondent? ⁹⁶	No. of respondents
Yes	47	Immediate family	31
No	74	Extended family	8
Did not answer	1	In-laws	5
		Unspecified relatives	3

When asked which family members had worn the niqab before them, 15 respondents mentioned their mothers and 14 their sisters. Six interviewees cited their cousins and four their sisters-in-law. Eight respondents had more than one family member who was wearing the niqab before they decided to wear it themselves. Thus, before they adopted the niqab a significant proportion of respondents (39 percent) were familiar with it.

The 15 respondents, whose mothers had been wearing the niqab before they adopted it, only participated in the short survey questionnaire, so the information available from them is more limited. In particular it is not clear when their mothers started wearing the niqab. However, two facts which did emerge from the data are of particular interest. First, the average age of these 15 women was nearly five years younger than the average age of all the women in our sample (23.7 years compared with 28.5 years), and 14 of them had adopted the niqab from 2003 onwards.

Table 16. Mothers' initial reactions

Response ⁹⁷	No. of respondents
Strongly agreed	17
Agreed	40
Disagreed	17
Strongly disagreed	16
Was indifferent/neutral	20
Unaware she was wearing it	3
Not applicable	9

Fifty percent of respondents reported that their mother initially “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with their decision to wear the niqab, while 29 percent “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with it. A remaining 17 percent were “indifferent/neutral”. Three

young women, two of them single, said that their mothers were unaware they were wearing the niqab.

The 15 women noted above were not selected for the longer in-depth interviews. The testimony from those who did provide longer interviews did not suggest that any of the respondents' mothers had applied pressure on their daughters to wear the niqab. Indeed, some of the young respondents influenced their mothers to wear the niqab, for instance, Interviewee 28, who said:

My family were very happy, even my Mum she wears the niqab now ... because my Mum's very good, very religious, but she never had the time to practise because of her children. But she sees me and we all go to the Salafi masjid as well, so that encouraged her as well to wear it.

Several of the older respondents also confirmed that they had been inspired to wear the niqab by their daughters.

CASE STUDY 5

Interviewee 26, aged 60, South London (our oldest respondent), became more practising through the influence of her daughter and other children. She had come from Pakistan to the UK when she was 16, following her father. When she was married in her early 20s she moved to South London with her husband and started raising a family. Practising little herself, she sent her children to the local mosque. Interviewee 26 and her daughter Interviewee 25 both participated in the research.

Interviewee 25 (33 years old from South London) said she had told her mother there was a class at the mosque for older women: "And then she started going. Then I started wearing the scarf. ... I think my mum thought, "How can I not be wearing the hijab if my daughter is?" So she felt that she had to be a good role model to me. Therefore she started taking it on. And it just went on from there in degrees really."

Interviewee 26 said: "I was in my mid-thirties. It's more my children started going to classes and they would tell me to come because there were some mothers' classes there."

Asked if she had been encouraged by her children to practise more, she replied: "Yes. I was always God conscious and I tried to encourage my children to believe Allah is watching us ... Sending my children to masjid to learn Qur'an and salat was part of our upbringing." She had not been able to go to classes at

the beginning because she had two very young twins and her husband refused to look after them for her. He said, "I'm not going to look after them because I work six days a week!" When his wife insisted she was going, saying Allah would reward him, he agreed.

Interviewee 26 explained that her relatives and Asian friends were displeased when she adopted the hijab and were convinced that she was the one forcing her daughters to wear it. And sometimes even to the girls they would say, "Your mum is not here, so you don't have to wear the hijab!" And my daughters would wear it and say, 'It's not our mum who's imposed it on us!'" It was the other way round.

Where tensions did exist between mothers and daughters, it was always the result of a mother's opposition to the niqab and the daughter's insistence on wearing it. But the situations never triggered serious conflicts between mothers and daughters.

When I first told my parents that I wanted to wear it, they said, "No, don't do it." But then once I just put it on they couldn't say anything really. But it met with a lot of resistance from my mum, especially. She didn't like it. She says there's no need to wear it. (Interviewee 01, 18 years old, East London)

Many respondents told us that their mothers, like their fathers and husbands, were concerned for their safety.

The reaction and experience of different female siblings varied significantly. For instance, Interviewee 20, 22 years old, East London, said:

What happened was my sister was looking into niqab, and I have extended family who also used to wear niqab. Only after I started wearing hijab for a few years, I started to think, "They wear niqab. Why is it they wear niqab?" And then my sister began to wear niqab [...] and I felt like I actually liked it when my sister was wearing niqab. It felt like she was very comfortable: she felt very protected and had a new kind of freedom. So I started looking into it as well and she said don't wear it until you are convinced and then you can wear it. So I started wearing it as well.

Interviewee 64, 22 years old, Birmingham had a different experience:

My sisters all had different reasons why they wore it and took it off. My eldest sister wore it because she was going through a hard time with her husband and stuff and she wanted to wear it to get closer to God. Another one of my sisters wore it because she believed that it was obligatory and she wore it for about six or seven years and then after a while she got quite a few negative remarks so she took it off. Another of my sisters did the same thing.

4.4.5 Non-mahram relatives

An issue raised by respondents concerned non-mahram relatives.⁹⁸ Wearing the niqab meant that some respondents not only covered their face whenever they left their houses but continued to do so in front of all male relatives who were non-mahram (cousins, uncles, brothers-in-law). This practice did cause tension with relatives and in-laws, testifying that the wearing of the niqab often introduced an Islamic practice which clashed with the old, established cultural practices.

In spite of family opposition a few interviewees continue to wear the niqab in front of all non-mahram relatives, but other respondents considered it pointless, given that they had known some of their relatives a number of years before veiling.

When I go to relatives' houses I put the niqab up before I go into the house. Everybody knows I wear it and they all know why I wear it. (Interviewee 10)

Asked if she wore the niqab in front of her cousins or not, Interviewee 10 said:

No I'm not wearing it, just to avoid that fitna, because I know my dad will kill my husband as well. He will really... go mad with my husband as well.

There were various other reactions from other interviewees.

The in-laws don't like it, and my family, because it limits your interaction with the family, because when families get together, specially as a daughter-in-law, they want you to socialise. With the niqab it limits people. The men think: "OK she's wearing a niqab." I think also when we go around, because we've got brother-in-laws in the house, they have to knock and say, "*Bhabhi*,"⁹⁹ I'm coming," and I'll quickly put it down. So my mother-in-law has said she is not keen on it. (Interviewee 03)

Some extended family members were horrified. But generally people had seen our family becoming more religious. They thought we were well-mannered, educated, family-orientated, obedient children, and couldn't be critical as they didn't have anything they could put their finger on. Instead they would say things like, "Oh, you'll never get a job!" or "You'll never get married!" "You'll have a life of sadness and misery." Our mother forbade us to say anything back. (Interviewee 14)

If you were asking me about the relatives I think we'd have a problem there. If I was to wear my niqab and go to a relative's house and keep it on some of them would be offended ... They've known us from childhood and they'd say, "What's the need now?" (Interviewee 60, 51 years old, South London)

The problem only started when I started to cover in front of my older cousins or cousins' husbands (on my mother's side) because I was one of the youngest cousins and all the older cousins knew me as a baby so they found it hard to understand. "We are 13, 14, 20 years

your senior, so why are you wearing the niqab in front of us?” They would say, “Why do you need to cover as we are just like your brothers? They could not say anything else when I chose to ignore them but there was some disliking.” (Interviewee 05, 32 years old, Croydon)

4.4.6 The role of friends

Respondents were asked if they were the first in their circle of friends to wear the niqab or whether it was already worn by close friends.

Table 17. The role of friends

Were friends wearing niqab already?	No. of respondents	No. of friends already wearing niqab	No. of respondents
Yes	72	Yes, unspecified number	2
No	49	Yes, a few (2–5)	29
Did not answer	1	Yes, many (5+)	26
		Yes, one friend	15

Most respondents (nearly 60 percent) had at least one close friend who was wearing the niqab before them, and 45 percent of respondents had more than one close friend who had adopted it before they had. Female friends were the most commonly cited source of inspiration. While there was no evidence that friends had applied direct pressure on respondents to adopt the full face veil, many friends played a significant role.

I had sisters around me that would always explain and say that to please Allah we should cover ourselves up etc. They didn’t force the niqab on me, they would just advise me. I wanted my intentions to be purely to please Allah. And not do it because everyone else is doing it. Or have to do it because this is what is expected of me. I’ve never felt like that. I always do things when I want to. (Interviewee 17, 29 years old, High Wycombe)

I met a sister through [the masjid] and she was wearing niqab and she spoke to me about it and she emphasised the importance of it and stuff like that. And she said, “Try it and see how you feel!” And I tried it and I never went back. (Interviewee 52, 31 years old, Luton)

26 women reported having “many friends” (i.e. more than five) who wore the niqab prior to themselves. Of these 26, all but one adopted it after 1998;¹⁰⁰ 22 (85 percent) had started wearing it from 2000 onwards.

Whether it was through family or friends, the niqab was part of most interviewees’ surroundings. In total, only 32 respondents (26 percent) had no close friends or relatives who were wearing the niqab. This suggests that niqab-wearing is no longer a marginal or isolated practice among Muslim women in the UK. As Interviewee 09 (28 years old, North London), an American citizen, pointed out:

Here there's no one single household that is not touched by the niqab in some way. And there's no Muslim household where a friend of a friend, or the sister or the mother or the in-laws—somebody—wears niqab in that family, in that household.

Many respondents had both friends and relatives who were wearing the niqab.

There were quite a lot of people wearing it then: my sister, my sister-in-law. Then there was another friend who was doing it. I knew about four or five people, even more about ten, doing the niqab. (Interviewee 59, 45 years old, Glasgow)

4.5 Conclusion

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown has stated that some Muslim parents worry that their daughters will become spinsters.¹⁰¹ However, the evidence from respondents suggests that rather than encouraging their daughters to wear the niqab to avoid spinsterness, some parents feared that the niqab would rebuff potential suitors. The findings in this research challenge the dominant image of parents forcing their daughters to wear the niqab. The testimonies suggest that when parental pressure was applied it was directed at convincing their daughters to remove it.

One respondent said that her husband had forced her to wear the niqab on a permanent basis, although up to the time of her marriage she had not worn it full-time. Some husbands were very influential in their wives' decision to adopt the veil, while a couple opposed their partner's choice. A majority of married women had taken to the niqab before meeting their husbands and those who adopted it after their marriage were in most cases supported by their partners.

Of the interviewees, 60 percent had at least one close friend and 39 percent had at least one relative who had donned the niqab before them. In other words, the niqab was a visible part of the environment of most of the respondents. Such an environment is likely to be conducive to the increasing uptake of the full-face veil among the UK Muslim female population, as friends and relatives may influence or inspire one another. However, a quarter of respondents knew of no friends or relatives who were wearing the niqab prior to them.

The research findings challenge assumptions that the niqab reflects hierarchical power structures privileging male over female, parent over child by coercion or force. The findings here reveal multidimensional and dynamic relationships in decision-making on the niqab, for instance female friends encouraging each other, mothers influenced by daughters, younger sisters inspired by older siblings. These narratives portray a complex

range of experiences, feelings and perceptions which are absent from the mainstream discourse: the parents who pressurise their daughters to remove the niqab; the tension that wearing the niqab can trigger inside the family in relation to non-mahram relatives; the embarrassment felt by some husbands (or relatives) on being confronted by the gazes from passers-by; the awkwardness felt by an unveiled mother confronted by her daughter's devotion, and the U-turns made by fathers and husbands.

5. Routes to the niqab: Islamic references

A series of questions were asked to establish how respondents acquired their knowledge of the niqab and who they considered as sources of authority in Islamic matters. Most women stated that they had a good amount of Islamic knowledge of the niqab prior to wearing it. Eight respondents cited Muslim teachers or scholars as their inspiration for wearing the niqab. This section begins with a discussion of the debate on whether the niqab is compulsory, and second, the different channels through which knowledge on Islam is acquired.

5.1 Is the niqab compulsory?

What is the relevance of the niqab from an Islamic perspective? What are the opinions of Muslim scholars on the veil? When surveying Islamic literature and pronouncements on the subject it takes little effort to understand that there is no unanimity on the subject. Sheikh Haitham al-Haddad,¹⁰² a London-based scholar and board member of several Islamic organisations (including the Islamic Sharia Council), was cited by some respondents as one of their sources of authority. Sheikh Haitham believes that under certain circumstances wearing the niqab is compulsory.¹⁰³ In answering a question posted on an Islamic consultation website Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, a prominent Sunni scholar, stated that the full-face veil is not obligatory but that Islamic opinions stating otherwise should not be dismissed.¹⁰⁴

However, among the scholars who do not consider the niqab compulsory there are differences over the degrees of importance attached to wearing it. The niqab can be deemed highly recommended, recommended or permissible, depending on circumstances. Because there is no single source of authority in Sunni Islam, the various opin-

ions which prevail among the Muslim communities on the niqab are based on many factors, such as the means of transmitting traditions, the international and national contexts and the personal situation of each Muslim.

For some interviewees whether they regarded wearing the niqab as compulsory depended on various factors: whether one’s physical safety is compromised, whether one can handle the strain attached to it, or whether one wears make-up or not.

Table 18. Is the niqab compulsory?

Response	No. of respondents
Yes	39
No	65
Other	17
Did not answer	1

Just over half the respondents (54 percent) did not believe that wearing the niqab was compulsory, but defined it as *sunna*¹⁰⁵ (non-compulsory). However, one-third of respondents considered the niqab compulsory (*fard* or *wajib*) and 14 percent had not formed a clear-cut opinion, acknowledging that Muslim scholars themselves held different opinions on the issue.

Interviewee 23 (24 years old, Birmingham) was non-committal:

To answer that question, I sort of refrain from it. When I started wearing the niqab, I intentionally didn’t do much research on it, such as if it is compulsory or not, because the scholars are still debating on that now. But I knew that all of them think it is something good to do. And you know; it is virtuous to do! So I thought, “If it is virtuous, then just go ahead.” But if it is compulsory, then I refrain from that question.

Interviewee 17 (29 years old, High Wycombe) stated:

I think it is highly recommended ... I don’t think it is compulsory ... For me, anything that brings you close to Allah then do, because that is our ultimate goal. Also the Prophet *alayhi al salaam*’s wives did that, and they are our role models. And the Prophet (PBUH) recommended it.

Interviewee 16 (36 years old, West London) considered that wearing the niqab is *fard*. When asked on what basis, considering a minority of scholars support it, she said:

It’s not a minority! They differed on the exact amount, but in the Qur’an the main commentators of the Qur’an, al-Bukhari, Ibn Kathir ... say it’s *fard*. Even in Saudi Arabia they consider it as a *fard*.

Interviewee 19 had another slant on the topic:

I do believe that a woman is supposed to cover her adornments and I believe that a lot of women are very beautiful creations and adornment is in the face. So I do believe it's a bit of a fitna. Asked if whether it's compulsory I don't point fingers at people who don't wear it and say, "What you're doing is haram (forbidden)!" But I take it as something that is compulsory to do because Allah says cover your adornments.

5.2 Is it sinful not to wear the niqab?

Table 19. Is it sinful not to wear the niqab?

Response	No. of respondents
Yes	8
No	40
Other	6
Did not want to answer	2

We also asked the women who replied that the veil was “compulsory” and “highly recommended”, whether they thought not wearing the niqab was sinful. While 71 percent thought it was not sinful, 14 percent believed it was. Other interviewees were unsure.

No, not at all! I know some people are not able to do it. For health reasons; maybe they don't have that relationship with Allah, maybe they don't like it. As long as they dress modestly, then it is up to them. (Interviewee 75, 29 years old, East London)

I think you have to practise Islam to the best of your ability and there are some people you meet who say “I couldn't do that,” but then I thought [so] too initially. You know I think it depends on Allah, how He guides you and if you can do it, do it. (Interviewee 27, 35 years old, Birmingham)

5.3 Islamic knowledge on the niqab prior to wearing it

More than 76 percent of respondents thought they had a firm grasp of Islamic knowledge about the niqab prior to adopting it, answering that they had either “extensive” or a “good” amount of Islamic knowledge. Knowledge of the niqab was acquired through a variety of channels: books; Muslim websites; Islamic lectures and courses; Islamic institutions both in the UK and abroad, and Muslim peers (see below).

Table 20. Respondents' knowledge about the niqab before wearing it

Response	No. of respondents
Had extensive Islamic knowledge	28
Had a good amount of Islamic knowledge	62
Had a small amount of Islamic knowledge	21
Had barely any Islamic knowledge	6
Had no Islamic knowledge	1
Did not answer	4

A handful of interviewees (6 percent) felt they had “barely any” or “no” Islamic knowledge of the niqab when they initially decided to wear it.¹⁰⁶ Interviewee 52 was one example.

I heard about it. I didn't really read about it. She said try it and see how you feel. And I felt good and I felt free and I liked it. And I actually got a certain amount of respect by wearing it when I was out. And it was good and I kept it on. And afterwards I learnt more about it.

Interviewee 11 (28 years old, East London) had a similar experience:

I started reading about it after [wearing it]. I [initially] put it on and then I was like, “Oh wow! This is amazing. I absolutely love it.” And then people asked me, “Why are you wearing that?” And I was, “I don't actually know! Let me try and read about it,” and then I did.

About 18 percent of respondents admitted to having a “small amount of Islamic knowledge on the niqab” before donning it.

By contrast, three-quarters of interviewees felt they had a good grasp of Islamic knowledge on the niqab when they decided to wear it, for instance through reading. Interviewee 02 (30 years old, East London) said:

I read some fatwa about it; most of them from Saudi scholars, Bin Baz, Ibn Uthaymeen¹⁰⁷ ... Most of them say it's obligatory for a woman to cover her face in front of a non-mahram ... For me, especially if I'm in a country where it's easy to wear it then I'll wear it.

On the other hand, Interviewee 78 (19 years old, West London) used the internet:

I didn't read books but I went to IslamQA.¹⁰⁸ For people's different opinions on the niqab I went on YouTube—why some people wear the niqab and all that stuff ... I go to different sorts of websites.

Interviewee 22 (24 years old, Birmingham) went to some women’s seminars at the masjid. She felt she would like to wear the niqab while she was attending a session learning about it.

I heard the opinion of some of the scholars, I think Sheikh Bin Baz says that if a woman is not covering her face then she could be in sin ... I didn’t follow this opinion. There was another opinion that said that if you are in a place of fitna, then it was better to cover your face. And if you are in a place where there isn’t much [fitna], then it’s OK not to cover your face, basically. So I thought OK, why not, closer to taqwa? And I am not being prevented from doing this in this country.

5.4 Acquiring Islamic knowledge

One of the most striking aspects of the respondents’ testimonies is the centrality of religious practices in their daily lives: the amount of time many of them dedicated to deepening their knowledge of Islam through self-education and their participation in religious activities, such as sisters’ circles and Islamic lectures. Many respondents had also enrolled in Islamic courses, either by attending classes or through online distance learning. This high proportion of dedicated Muslims may be partially the result of the selection process for recruiting respondents (see Methodology, Chapter 1).

Fifty-two percent of the interviewees went to the mosque at least once a week and only 7 percent of the respondents stated that they never went to the mosque, mostly because they had small children. Only one respondent told us that she never attended the mosque because she believed a woman should pray at home.

Table 21. Mosque attendance

Response	No. of respondents
Every day	5
Often	30
Once a week	24
Twice a month	6
Less than once a month	40
Never	8
Did not answer	9

To broaden their knowledge of Islam, as well as to socialise with their peers, around 70 percent of the respondents attended sisters’ circles at least “sometimes”, with more

than 40 percent attending on a “regular basis” or “often”. Only three respondents reported that they neither went to sisters’ circles nor to Islamic lectures.

Sisters’ circles consist of informal gatherings of Muslim women hosted by one of the participants, to discuss specific Islamic issues, sometimes through studying a particular book. The testimonies all highlighted the fact that the women who attended sisters’ circles held different positions on the niqab: some would wear it and others would not even be wearing a hijab.

Table 22. Attending sisters’ circles and Islamic lectures

Responses: sisters’ circles	No. of respondents	Responses: Islamic lectures	No. of respondents
On a regular basis	33	On a regular basis	20
Often	21	Often	31
Sometimes	29	Sometimes	36
Rarely	23	Rarely	24
Never	14	Never	8
Did not answer	2	Did not answer	3

We have nice sisters’ gatherings here. Some ladies wear hijab, some ladies don’t wear hijab, some ladies wear niqab. Some are converts, some are not converts, some are from abroad. Everybody respects one another and welcomes one another. (Interviewee 14, 31 years old, High Wycombe)

The many institutions and teaching models have made it easier for Muslim women, whether they are housewives, students or in full employment, to enrol in Islamic classes. A few respondents attended an Islamic school on a full-time basis; some were following online courses and other respondents regularly participated in intensive courses during the summer holidays or at weekends.

Basically I’m doing online studies with a Saudi university because it’s comprehensive and then I go to Ebrahim College¹⁰⁹ for Arabic and stuff. And then there are other institutes ... I do intensive weekends. Bilal Philips¹¹⁰ has got an online university, the Knowledge International University (KIU), which has some of his materials ... it is more comprehensive because it has the backing of some Saudi scholars. (Interviewee 08, 32 years old, East London)

Another respondent gave details of the course of education she was following:

We have lots of classes going on in our local mosques. Two really good institutes have come to the UK: one is Al Maghrib Institute¹¹¹ which was originally American-based and the other is Al Kauthar Institute,¹¹² which was originally Australian-based. They do weekend seminar courses in local universities. They can have classes of 400–500 attending a lecture,

or a series of lectures and they organise whole weekends on different topics in Islam. I'm involved in a five year programme online, done by Al Kauthar Institute and they cover all the main areas of study of Islam. (Interviewee 21, 32 years old, South London)

Interviewee 53 had enrolled for a three-year course in Liverpool on Islamic studies (sira, theology, fiqh and aqidah) at an Islamic centre called Micro Madrasa, physically attending the centre once a week.

5.4.1 Websites

Most respondents used the internet to access knowledge on Islam. Websites such as YouTube were primarily used to listen to famous scholars, while Islamic websites were consulted to deepen knowledge on a range of themes or find answers to specific questions. Consultation websites such as IslamQA.com,¹¹³ Askimam.org¹¹⁴ or Fatwa-online,¹¹⁵ where users can seek guidance from authoritative sources directly, were among the most cited by respondents. Both IslamQA.com and Fatwa-online.com state that the niqab is compulsory.¹¹⁶

The respondents were asked if they often used the internet to access information on Islam. The answers varied, though certain websites cropped up frequently.

Interviewee 46 used IslamQA.com usually for her teenage daughters. Interviewee 23 used IslamQA.com very frequently, mentioning the quality and diversity of the information. She mentioned another website called Islamicnetwork,¹¹⁷ notable because it held "some proper scholarship". Interviewee 05 mainly used IslamQA.com and Askimam.org for everyday concerns like going to a restaurant which sells alcohol, or when to pray after her periods. She also accessed lectures on YouTube and audio lectures from Farhat Hashmi¹¹⁸ on the Al-Huda International site. Interviewee 75 sometimes read articles on Kalamullah.com,¹¹⁹ which she had been using since she became a Muslim. Another respondent mentioned Halal Tube.¹²⁰

5.4.2 Satellite channels

Programmes on satellite channels formed another source of information for respondents and were sometimes watched via the internet, as many interviewees had no TV set at home, or found it more practical to watch a programme in front of a computer screen in their own time. The most watched satellite channels among respondents were Peace TV, Islam Channel and Iqraa. Peace TV, based in Dubai, has been telecasting since January 2006. Most of its programmes are broadcast in English and the channel claims to reach around

150 countries. The station was founded and is owned by the Islamic Research Foundation (IRF), whose president is the Indian-born scholar Dr Zakir Naik. Islam Channel with its headquarters in Central London has been on the air in the UK since 2004. Broadcasting in English, the channel provides Islamic-focused content but also covers contemporary politics with current affairs shows. The different shows on youngsters and Muslim lifestyle in the West give Islam Channel a more liberal outlook than Peace TV. Iqraa TV, also mentioned by many respondents, is owned by the Arab Media Corporation, which is backed by the Saudi billionaire Saleh Abdullah Kamel. It started broadcasting in Saudi Arabia in 1998 and was one of the earliest channels dedicated to the broadcast of Islamic content on a media platform.¹²¹ The channel extended its global reach when in August 2011 it started broadcasting in English for North American and UK markets.

Interviewee 02 used many satellite channels. She cited:

Islam Channel, Iqraa TV¹²² as well ... the Mecca Channel broadcasts all day ... live pictures from the Ka'baa. Islam Channel and Iqraa have lots of reports, like courses. You have a lot of questions and answers about Islam and a lot of programmes for example on revert¹²³ people, or the history of Islam.

Interviewee 64 preferred lectures on YouTube, Islamtube and WatchIslam, and Interviewee 10 sometimes watched Peace TV or Islam Channel.

5.5 Islamic traditions

Due to the sensitive nature of the subject, the respondents' associations with particular Islamic movements and traditions were approached with caution. While all the interviewees explicitly or implicitly reported that they were Sunni Muslims, 70 women provided further information. Although the answers were varied, the two main Islamic traditions which emerged from the sample were the Hanafi Deobandi¹²⁴ tradition and the Salafi¹²⁵ tradition. More specifically:

- Thirty-eight respondents said they followed the Hanafi fiqh (jurisprudence), which mirrored the majority of Muslims in the UK. Among those, 16 described themselves as close to the Hanafi Deobandi tradition.
- Twelve respondents followed the Hanbali fiqh, of whom six said they were close to the Hanbali Salafi tradition. Another 13 women defined themselves as Salafi without using a specific school of thought as an additional identifier.
- Five respondents reported following the Shaff'i school of law.

- In addition, a large number of women stated that they did not ascribe to one particular madhab (school of law), while a couple of respondents identified themselves with two different schools.¹²⁶

It is important to note that although the Deobandi and Salafi movements have been described as revivalist movements, formed during periods of waning Muslim empires and expansionist Western ones, as pointed out by many researchers, neither of them represents easily identifiable monolithic movements.¹²⁷

Interviewee 22 (24 years old, Birmingham), who was happy to associate herself with the Salafi tradition, said:

Since I was 14, I was exposed a lot to the Salafi daw'ah ... influences from older scholars: Ibn Al Qayyim,¹²⁸ Ibn Taymiyya, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, books from Imam Abu Hanifa ... I would be more comfortable in taking knowledge from the older scholars of our time ... than from the scholars who are alive today. The people I would take from would be like Sheikh Albani ... Sheikh Uthaymeen... a lot based in Saudi, and that sort of area ... and the scholars of Medina and Mecca ... it was Sheikh Albani and Sheikh Bin Baz's opinion who I was referring to ... I am aware that there are other religious sects where it is encouraged ... [like] the Deobandi scholars.

Interviewee 62, 30 years old, from Birmingham, said that initially she did not follow any madhab. But when she came back from studying she started to follow the Hanafi madhab and her references are generally from the Deobandi school.

Some women, such as Interviewee 23, rejected the Salafi label because of the negative connotations associated with it or because they considered this type of association as sectarian. She stated:

I would go with the Text, the Quran and the Sunnah, but Hanbali fiqh is what I am learning at the moment. In terms of aqidah, then I follow Imam Ahmad, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab,¹²⁹ Ibn Taymiyya ... I would be termed as [Salafi], definitely. I think someone would call me a Salafi. I wouldn't accept it though, because I don't know what they mean when they say that. It has different connotations.

Interviewee 30 was asked if she considered herself a Salafi:

I don't label myself anything ... the reason being people who name themselves, label themselves, ostracise others and it becomes like a clan, like a cult, like a clique and I don't wanna become a part of that because then it means I'm this and anybody who's not this is outside of my circle and this is not what the Prophet (s) [was preaching].

The most commonly cited sources of authorities by respondents were classical scholars of the early generations and those usually linked to the Salafi tradition such as Sheikh Bin Baz,¹³⁰ Sheikh Albani, Sheikh Uthaymeen and Ibn Taymiyya.

6. Routes to the niqab: wearing the niqab

6.1 Why are more women wearing the niqab?

There was a general consensus that the practice of the niqab was a growing phenomenon. Respondents were asked why they thought this was happening. Many thought it was a response to a perceived anti-Muslim climate: greater media coverage of Islam encouraged both Muslims and non-Muslims to learn more about the religion. Interviewee 01 said:

To be honest I think it's the media as well. The more they show hatred towards Islam the more it's pulling Muslims closer to their *deen*. Then Muslims start to realise and ask more questions about Islam, about their own identities.

This in turn, it was argued, persuaded Muslims to become more devout as well as to assert their Islamic identity in a more visible manner by wearing the niqab.

Some respondents, such as Interviewee 09, argued that the Western values which had been instilled in them, such as individualism, the freedom of choice and equality, had facilitated their adoption of the niqab:

I think it's just to go against the mainstream ideas and the mainstream society. Just to feel they have more of a connection with their Islamic roots. And also the more pressure you put on a society to be a certain way the more they're going to go the opposite direction. Maybe it'll work if [Muslims] were from a foreign country and they came here to live and they

were wearing the veil and you came and said, “You should have a bit of freedom,” because all their lives they were veiled. So they would think, “Let me try it.” But for somebody who experienced Western lifestyle they would say, “We already experienced that! We want to do it this way now.” This society taught us we are liberated by making our own decisions and now you’re trying to take that away from us.

This is illustrated by Interviewee 21’s journey. She was born and raised in Pakistan, and settled in London as a young student, where she started to study Islam. A relative gave her a copy of the Qur’an, which for the first time she was able to understand because it included an English translation.

CASE STUDY 6

Interviewee 21 was first introduced to the niqab while researching Muslim websites, and decided she wanted to wear the niqab because she felt there were lots of benefits. The main website she used was IslamQA.com.

Interviewee 21 was unsure whether she would have adopted the niqab, a practice alien to her family, if she had stayed in Pakistan. She goes as far as describing her adoption of the niqab as a “product” of her “Western education”.

Interviewee 21 said: “Back home we have a really protected life, a closed life. So when I came here as a student and I experienced all this independence I just loved it. So for the first time I was thinking about things for myself and making my own decisions. In fact the decision to wear the niqab is a product of my Western education because in the West we are encouraged to make a decision for ourselves. Back home I don’t know if I would have taken that decision. So obviously in the holidays I would go back home but after a few weeks I’d be waiting for my holidays to be over and come back here. So I’ve always felt really comfortable here. Obviously I miss back home as well: I miss my family so I do go back to visit and my parents come here as well. On a day-to-day basis I much prefer the life here compared to back home and I do feel very comfortable.”

A second explanation for the increasing visibility of the niqab was connected to the settling of Muslims in British society. Some respondents explained that first-generation migrants were preoccupied with ensuring that the basic requirements to practise one’s faith were met. Following generations could now focus on the next steps, which concerned the deepening of Islamic education and its proliferation. These developments were taking place in a context where second- and third-generation Muslims were better

educated and more assertive than their parents in social surroundings that were more accepting of differences.

Interviewee 20 (22 years old, East London) said:

Nowadays everyone is wearing hijab and niqab because society is more accepting. When we came to this country ... my dad had the perception that they're in this country and that they're here to work, but they shouldn't make things difficult for themselves ... that's why people didn't wear hijab. But now people feel more free to wear what they want, and due to the recent events in the media Muslims feel stronger in their Islam or their imam, and so they decide to take up hijab or niqab.

Interviewee 23 (24 years old, Birmingham) thought that it was more about confidence.

When the first Muslims came, it was all about earning money, making sure that there are halal meat shops, even setting up some masjids. But for us now, they have done all that, and we can go out and learn and we are just adding to what they have already done. And that's probably why you see more of niqab.

Interviewees pointed out that another contributing factor was the proliferation of Islamic institutes, satellite TV and online education centres, as discussed above. They explained that the expansion of global communication and the increasing availability of English translations of Arabic Islamic literature have made Islamic knowledge much more accessible.

Interviewees said that the Islamic revival was not limited solely to the West and not defined simply by a rise in the number of women wearing the niqab. The respondents who had travelled abroad or visited their parents' (or grandparents') countries of birth remarked that even in countries where the niqab was not part of the local Islamic tradition women were increasingly adopting it.

Interviewee 15 (36 years old, North London) noted:

There is an Islamic revival. Everybody's becoming more practising. ... Every sister has got a different reason for wearing it, but maybe because they see more sisters wearing [the niqab] encourages them as well.

Indeed, other Muslim observations of faith were also increasing. As Interviewee 21 said:

You can see this trend in most places of the world. A revival of going back and studying the *deen*, and this is very recent, maybe over the last decade. Because in 1999 ... back home I never saw anyone in niqab. But now when you go back home there are so many sisters you see everywhere, in the marketplace, wearing it.

6.2 Frequency of wearing the niqab

More than three-quarters of the interviewees wore the niqab permanently when they were outside their homes. Within this group a distinction was made between those who wore it indoors in the presence of their non-mahram male relatives (cousins, uncles, brothers-in-law) and those who did not. The most common reason for removing it in front of these male relatives was to avoid family tensions, with many respondents saying that family members (of both sexes) would be offended if it was left on.

A quarter of the interviewees wore the niqab selectively. All of these considered the niqab to be highly commendable, but did not believe it to be a compulsory practice and therefore adopted a pragmatic approach. The women’s motives and the frequency with which they veiled varied greatly. Some women, for example, did not don the niqab in certain places for fear of abuse. Interviewee 24, for example, wore the veil most of the time but did not put it on in “areas where there is going to be a lot of non-Muslims, and I probably will get more crap from wearing it than not wearing it”.

Two respondents would unveil their faces in situations where they felt the niqab would constitute a barrier to communication and interaction with non-Muslims.

Table 23. Frequency of wearing the niqab

Response	No. of respondents
Always (even in front of non-mahram male relatives)	60
Always (except in the presence of some or all non-mahram male relatives)	33
Most of the time	17
Sometimes	7
Not often	3
Rarely	2

Interviewee 12 (28 years old, High Wycombe) said: “When I pick my daughter up from school I wear it all the way until I get to the road and then I lift it up to go and get her because there are not many Muslims at the school and they don’t understand.”

Interviewee 58 (26 years old, Glasgow) said that when she went into the hospital she took it off “because the children get scared ... I don’t put it on in some places. It just makes it a lot easier for people to communicate.”

A few women explained that they felt it was unnecessary to wear the niqab while driving at night. Interviewee 56 (46 years old, Glasgow) said she wore the niqab most of the time, but

Where it’s very dark outside and I’m in the car, I won’t always keep it on even in the car. I think it’s too dark and I can’t see anybody else.

Others removed it for work as it impeded their effectiveness or was counterproductive. Interviewee 62 is a counsellor:

When I’m sitting with a couple (a husband and a wife) the man is there and yes he’s a guy and technically I should be wearing it in front of him, but I don’t. The reason is because to actually benefit that couple’s marriage I have to interact and I have to use my face and I have to use expressions. You have to build rapport and [wearing the niqab] is seen as a barrier.

Interviewee 56 works with children:

Because we go on trips like to a park, I won’t always keep it on because if I’ve got fifty-odd young children with you then you’re the only one with this black niqab on. I feel that I am standing out more and it beats the purpose of what I’m trying to do, blend in.

6.3 What does the niqab represent?

“What is it about Islam, I thought, that can make a woman so strong that she no longer strives to be noticed by men, no longer needs the admiring gaze to feel attractive, no longer puts herself on display when the rest of the world is doing just that?” Na’ima B. Robert, *From my sisters’ lips*³¹

“The veil is often downright intimidating. It implies a submission that is upsetting when women here fought so hard to be free.”³² Allison Pearson, novelist and columnist, *Daily Mail*

Freedom was, unexpectedly, the value most commonly associated with the niqab by respondents, as this case study shows.

CASE STUDY 7

Interviewee 19, a 25-year-old convert and mother of two daughters, had considered a modelling career. Her life took a strikingly different direction when, soon after converting to Islam, she decided to cover her entire body and face with the niqab. Having displayed her body in two radically contrasting ways, she was in no doubt which one left her with a greater sense of liberty. She even alluded to her previous life as a form of “imprisonment”, thus reversing one of the most potent stereotypes of niqab wearers.

She said: “When I’m wearing it I know that I have to have a certain conduct. For me it represents dignity, honour, freedom.”

Asked why so many women refer to freedom, Interviewee 19 replied:

“My father used to show me off to his friends. That kind of shaped why I do wear [the niqab] ... because I have freedom to be judged for who I am. People can deal with me for me and not for what I look like, and I like that ... I got fed up of men treating me like I was something that they could pick up off the shelf and throw away. I don’t want that for my children. I think as a woman who shapes society, because we raise the next generation, we deserve a lot more respect than that and I think we need to respect ourselves a lot more as well. I didn’t like that kind of imprisonment that I was in before.”

Many women echoed Interviewee 19’s feeling of liberation from the dominance of physical appearances.

I felt really strong ... I felt almost invisible! People would just listen to my voice. They won’t know what I’m thinking, how I’m feeling; if I’m feeling sad. I can show them my strength of character more than my appearance. So it helped a lot especially with men because men took you a lot more seriously ... especially Muslim men. (Interviewee 09, 28 years old, North London)

Interviewee 07 (31 years old, South London) said, “I used to feel quite insecure and unhappy with my appearance. So I’d want to be hidden, in a sense.”

Interviewee 30 (36 years old, West London): “When I put on the hijab I felt like everyone was looking at me, it looked ridiculous. But with the niqab I felt so proud of myself. I felt I’ve achieved what I wanted to do. I felt in control ... because when you don’t wear the niqab you’re not in control of yourself, everybody can interact with you.”

A 29 year-old respondent of mixed-race descent from High Wycombe (Interviewee 17) felt that the niqab freed her from racial stereotypes: “It gave me confidence, my skin is

quite dark, I had a lot of racism, I was always called crocodile skin: ‘Your skin is very dark and it’s tough.’ I was called ‘darky’, ‘blacky’, ‘nigger this, nigger that’ ... When I wore the niqab I wasn’t seen as a ‘black’ sister. They judged me according to how I treated them. They saw me as a person.”¹³³

Some respondents felt that wearing the niqab demonstrated assertiveness and courage. Interviewee 04 (25 years old, Forest Gate, East London) said: “You have to be strong-minded and it has to be your own choice. There’s no nonsense about your husband. It just represents someone who is strong and you really have to have that belief in Allah, that you are doing it only for Him.”

Many interviewees explained that wearing the niqab is as an act of worship that brings them closer to God and represents a higher level of faith than the hijab or jilbab, such as Interviewee 18 (34 years old, South London): “I think it’s a step further in practising Islam ... I do it to please my lord; I think it’s an act of worship. There’s a reward in there.”

6.4 First day wearing the niqab

Many women remembered feelings of pride, happiness and accomplishment when they first put on the niqab.

I felt the most beautiful woman in the world, *wallahi*.¹³⁴ (Interviewee 28, 26 years old, Birmingham)

The very first few times I wore it I felt very special and very proud of it. It may be due to the fact that I was with people at that time who were encouraging it, not forcing but encouraging, and I didn’t have the guilt of not wearing it any more. (Interviewee 05, 32 years old, South London)

You feel so comfortable and you feel so safe. And you just feel this is right. You feel peace. (Interviewee 06, 37 years old, South London)

I felt that nobody was looking at me any more. I felt free. I felt like I didn’t have to hide away in my book, or behind my book. I could sit there freely without worrying who’s staring at me. (Interviewee 10, 30 years old, East London)

Interviewee 08, however, said: “I just put it on. It didn’t make me feel any different. I was never bothered by what people thought of me or when they looked at me.”

Not all women recorded positive emotions. Others remembered anxiety about anticipating their parents’ and relatives’ reactions. Interviewee 21 was concerned about her in-laws’ reactions. Interviewee 09 had butterflies in her stomach, and was worrying about what her father and her friends outside school would think.

Some respondents were bothered by the discomfort of wearing a veil over the face. As Interviewee 17 (29 years, High Wycombe) remarked: “I felt like, ‘Oh my gosh, this is on my face, and it is so uncomfortable!’ Imagine, for 25 years I never had anything on my face.”

It was hard, to be honest; first, because I’m asthmatic. It was getting to summer and I was reminding myself if you do it for the sake of Allah, you will get the reward one day. Not in this world but hereafter ... I got used to it but when I was pregnant with her sometimes I would take it off. (Interviewee 29, 19 years old, Birmingham)

A handful of testimonies relating the initial experience with the veil were visually striking. For example, Interviewee 14’s story:

The first time I wore a niqab on a public train ... I was a little bit nervous of going into London and was going to be on my own ... I sat down and the lady opposite me was a punk. So she looked at me like, “What a weirdo!” and I looked at her like, “You’re such a weirdo, because you have the coloured hair, the earrings and eye make-up.” And we smiled at each other because we felt peace that we were both a little bit strange. She spent a few seconds examining me and I spent a few seconds examining her but then I just relaxed. We just felt comfort in the fact that we were both just expressing different ways of life. She smiled at me, like a warm smile ... It’s a very clear memory.

6.5 Respondents’ explanations

Respondents were asked why they had been drawn to the veil. The variety of answers suggests that there is no one single path leading to the niqab. While motives of a spiritual nature, in particular the quest for greater piety, are central to many narratives, a plethora of other factors play a significant role, sometimes superseding, albeit temporarily, its spiritual dimension. For most women the spiritual dimension was the initial driver. For many the motivation was to emulate the Prophet’s wives and the wives of his companions, who are perceived as the ultimate role models. For some women the niqab is a way of moving closer to God and establishing a permanent connection with Him.

The religious motive was very pronounced. For instance, Interviewee 22 said that the most important argument for her was to please Allah. Interviewee 14 felt that it was her love of the sunna combined with the sense of contentment wearing the niqab brought. Another interviewee had a profound religious motivation:

My deep desire [was] to emulate the Prophet’s wives and the early Muslim community because when you’re first starting your Islamic studies and you’re trying to find yourself

you have a real deep yearning to be with the Prophet (PBUH) and to be with their campaigns and their struggles and the history of it. And I felt if I wore the veil, then I would have a more meaningful connection with them. Then when I started reading Islamic scholars' opinions it just made more sense to me. (Interviewee 09)

The motives of two of the interviewees also evolved over time. They initially wore it for practical reasons but after learning more about the niqab they became convinced it was a religious necessity. Interviewee 11, who initially adopted the niqab to be able to attend a wedding with her make-up on, was convinced when she read the evidence.

There was another book that I only read recently after wearing the niqab for seven years. It's called *Veiling in Islam or The Veiling of a Muslim Woman*,¹³⁵ which focuses on the niqab being fard, by Sheikh Madkhalee, Sheikh Bin Baz and Sheikh Uthaymeen.

The religious was sometimes combined with other preoccupations and unsurprisingly the most common was the need to avoid male attention. As mentioned earlier (see case study of Interviewee 10 in Chapter 4), incidents with male passers-by often led to the adoption of the niqab. These incidents were rarely the main reason, but they played a significant role in the urge to wear it. For instance, Interviewee 19, a convert from Brixton, started wearing the niqab after an incident outside the mosque. Before wearing it, she had little knowledge about the niqab but had seen women from her mosque wearing it.

I started wearing the niqab—I didn't fully understand what it meant to wear a niqab. One time it was Jemaah and I went to Brixton masjid to pray and I came out of the masjid and I had my blue hijab on and there were these Muslim brothers, [two of whom] I had known from before I was a Muslim, and I tried to walk straight and they were like, "M-A-S-H-A-L-L-A-H!" and I was so embarrassed. I was like, "This is not supposed to be happening outside a masjid and they are not supposed to be looking at me like that!" [I realised] that I'm not actually covering my beauty, I'm being a fitna for other men who aren't my husband and my brother or my dad or anything. (Interviewee 19)

Interviewee 17 felt she had been harassed on the street, and it was this that persuaded to put on the niqab:

I was walking to take my son to school, and as I am wearing these clothes and covering my hair, and this dirty man, he is a non-Muslim... You know like a man who is breaking his neck to see this woman. I felt so violated ... And I said, I am covering up. This is my body, I should have the choice, I should be able to choose who can look at me and who can't.

Interviewee 30 felt strongly that only people close to her should see her face:

I believe not every man should see my face ... this is my face and I feel that it's private and I feel that only those who are close to me and my husband, my father, my uncles should see it and the females around me.

But even when the wearing of the niqab was triggered by an incident the religious dimension was of primary importance in the medium and long term, as is shown by Interviewee 62's experiences. She put on the niqab for practical reasons while she was attending an Islamic centre in Pakistan. When she was about to return home she decided that the niqab would keep her closer to God. So although her initial intention had not been religiously motivated, the decision to keep it on when she left Pakistan was. People back home asked her why she was wearing it and her response was:

You realise the benefits of it ... how much closer you feel to Allah, just knowing you're in your own zone. "Allah, I'm doing this for you!" And actually it's like a protection in a sense. And when I felt those benefits I thought, "No, I can't let this go. This is something I really want."

The local environment was also a contributing factor. Many respondents moved in surroundings where Muslim women were wearing the niqab. Some, too, were introduced to Islamic literature promoting the niqab while reading books, attending Islamic classes or doing research on the internet. Interviewee 06 was influenced by the sisters whom she saw wearing it, especially when her children started at nursery and the other mothers were wearing niqab.

Interviewee 46 first came across the niqab at Islamic talks by prominent Salafi scholars organised by Jamiyyat Ihya Minhaj as Sunnah (JIMAS), the Society for the Revival of the Prophetic Way,¹³⁶ when she was at university, which influenced her to adopt it. She was one of the few respondents who adopted the niqab in the early 1990s.

[There] were some [talks] by Abu Muntasir¹³⁷ and Abdur Raheem Green¹³⁸ ... Just through listening to talks and being in good company I saw lots of niqab sisters among the people who attended these circles and conferences ... I would hear that it was recommended, highly recommended. So I felt maybe that it was something good and I really should.

Other influences mentioned by interviewees included the birth of a first child in the case of Interviewee 52, or for Interviewee 60 the pilgrimage to Mecca. Here again, the religious significance of the niqab and the environment were the central factors, but it was an actual event which made them take the first step.

Interviewee 52 was in her early 20s and was pregnant with her son when she realised:

“I’m going to be responsible for a life!” And that is what made me realise to take [it] on ... When you have a child inside you feel it and emotionally it moved me and made me look into all the blessings Allah has given us. So it was with conviction that I started wearing it. I thought, “You need to be a good role model.”

She said that her conviction to wear the niqab was reinforced by knowing that the wives of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad wore it for their protection and their safety, and were the best examples of women to follow.

For Interviewee 60 it was going to the pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia in 1993 that persuaded her, because everybody there was wearing the niqab. “It was something inside me [saw that] this is the right way. You felt so comfortable that nobody looked at you, no matter how you were ... and you can do make-up, you can do anything when you’re covered and nobody would look at you.”

While the surroundings of the interviewees often facilitated the adoption of the niqab, the narratives suggest that for the overwhelming majority the decision remained an individual choice. There were also some respondents whose journey to the niqab was solitary and independent of their immediate environment; for these, the research they undertook led them to the niqab, often to the surprise or disapproval of the people around them.

6.6 Two journeys to the niqab

Below are case studies illustrating two women’s very different journeys to the niqab.

CASE STUDY 8

Interviewee 07 is a political campaigner in her early 30s. Raised by her mother, who she described as “fairly practising” in her childhood, she started fasting at the age of 10 but did not pray regularly until later. She characterised herself and her siblings as very Anglicised children, as their main reference points were European and British culture: “We were reading things like Dostoyevsky when we were 13, listening to music like The Smiths and The Cure when we were like 10, and not into the same things at all that our peers were. Very, very Anglicised! You could say that I was a ‘coconut’; not through being ashamed of my Pakistani heritage. That’s just the way it happened, because my mum had to go out and work so we were not around her as much.”

The turning point occurred when she was 14, when she attended an Islamic conference organised by Hizb-ut Tahrir, a pan-Islamic political organisation, whose main goal is to restore the Caliphate (union of all Muslim countries under an Islamic state). From the age of 15 she was attending Hizb-ut Tahrir talks weekly: "I shared their ideology." She adopted the hijab at 16 and the jilbab at 18. However, when she went to university she decided to distance herself from Hizb-ut Tahrir: "I did a lot of research on the internet: reading things from Salafi websites; Sufi websites ... what Ikhwan al-Muslimeen¹³⁹ say."

Interviewee 07's journey to the niqab was a lone odyssey. Like more than a quarter of respondents, she had no friends or family members who wore it and it was her own research on Islamic websites that led her to adopt it when she was 19. She shared the same motives as most of the respondents: she was aware that the Prophet's wives wore it and discovered that with the exception of Hizb-ut Tahrir, all other Muslim groups she encountered think that it is either recommended or obligatory. Interviewee 07 defined herself as being close to the Hanbali Salafi tradition, but her Islamic influences are diverse and she is not uncritical of elements of Salafism. For example, she believes that Salafi dawah can sometimes overlook the diversity of valid Islamic opinions on a given topic, leading some of its followers to become rigid and judgemental of others: "I did find that I was gravitating more towards Salafi daw'ah. But I think you couldn't pigeonhole me so easily, as I would see faults in their daw'ah as well."

CASE STUDY 9

Interviewee 12 from High Wycombe is a 28-year-old white British convert and a mother of three. She grew up in a non-practising Christian household and the only church service she ever attended was a wedding during her childhood. She was born and brought up in Luton and obtained a hairdressing National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). Her parents' divorce, when she was 16 or 17, deeply unsettled her and she asked for God's guidance: "I remember just sitting in my room and saying, 'Oh God, please help me.'" She recalled having turned to God "at times of hardship" on several occasions when she was a child.

Around this time Interviewee 12 started borrowing library books on Islam. After a couple of years, she felt ready to progress to the next step and visited the local mosque where she met a local Muslim woman, who gave her instruction, and she took her Shahadah.¹⁴⁰ She was then 19 and was working in a mobile phone shop. She soon felt able to put on the hijab, but her conversion made relations with her work colleagues difficult and she became very isolated. Then her Muslim contact asked her whether she would be interested in getting married, and she replied positively. She got married, left her job and moved with her husband to a house near the mosque.

Six months after her conversion and two months after her marriage she decided to adopt the niqab, for practical reasons. There were always Muslim men outside her house because it was so near the mosque, which made it uncomfortable for her when she stepped outside. Interviewee 12 reported that although it was her husband who suggested she wear the veil she was not coerced into wearing it: "I hadn't really thought about it before but I also agreed, and I didn't feel any harm at the time of doing it because I understood why."

Interviewee 12 had little knowledge of the niqab prior to donning it; indeed the Muslim woman she had initially met was wearing one, but it had not attracted her.

7. Experience of abuse

7.1 Frequency and nature of abuse

This section focuses on the frequency and nature of abuse, both verbal and physical, that respondents experienced. The large majority (80 percent) reported suffering abuse as a result of wearing their niqab; 20 percent said that they had never faced any form of verbal or physical abuse.¹⁴¹

Table 24. Type of abuse experienced

Type of abuse	No. of respondents
Verbal	79
Verbal and physical	15
None	24
Not applicable ¹⁴²	4

67 percent of respondents reported experiencing verbal abuse, and 13 percent said they had been both verbally and physically harassed.

A woman rolled her car [window] down in the middle of all the traffic to tell me to “eff off” and “go back home”. And the people behind her were laughing at me just because this woman told me to “go home”. I was more British than some of these people. At least I’ve got better manners. (Interviewee 64, 22 years old, Birmingham)

When I was pregnant ... I was pushed very badly ... It was Eid day and we were walking to the Eid prayer ... I went out of Leyton station and this guy just decided to pick on me. He screamed, "Ninja!" Normally I'm not someone who responds but I was so angry and I said something to him and he pushed me and I just went flying but there was a car there. And I was so upset ... I cried. (Interviewee 04, 25 years old, East London)

7.1.1 Frequency of verbal abuse

Table 25. Frequency of verbal abuse

Frequency	No. of respondents
Often	10
Sometimes	34
Rarely	47
Never	24
Depends	3
Did not answer	4

Respondents were asked about the frequency of verbal abuse they had been exposed to; 40 percent of respondents reported that such abuse occurred rarely:

I think actually there was only one time where I was actually abused. I was in a lift and I had my friend's baby in the pram ... there was a couple there ... I remember getting abuse from them actually; saying that I was stupid, that we smell. (Interviewee 22, 24 years old Birmingham)

For 29 percent it happened sometimes. However, 8 percent reported facing abuse often.

Physical: not as often. No. Verbal: verbal is constant, it's every day! (Interviewee 30, 26 years old, West London)

The level of abuse was variable and depended mainly on the ethnic and religious composition of the area. Interviewee 29 recalled that she was often abused when she went to predominantly non-Muslim areas and never when she was in a Muslim neighbourhood. Interviewee 85 (36 years old, East London) experienced severe verbal and physical abuse every time she left her house when she was living in Canning Town, but had never been abused since moving to Forest Gate.¹⁴³

Interviewee 08, 32 years old, who grew up in Yorkshire, said that she was rarely abused in her East London neighbourhood but was often harassed when she visited her family in the north:

In London, it's one reason why I choose to live in this area, it's basically OK; especially in this area because they're used to niqabis. But up north it's not nice; it's not nice at all. When I go to my mum's I'll go reluctantly.

When asked why the abuse was worse in the north she responded:

Because here [London] [we] are not a minority, are [we]? And these people are cowards. One time [in Yorkshire] a guy came really close to me and said to me, "Scuse me." And I said, "Yes?" And I was just trying to fix the window on my car. And he said to me, "Have you got a gun under there then, you bloody terrorist?"

A respondent who had been wearing the niqab for over a decade explained that the incidence of abuse had been particularly high after the 7/7 terrorist attacks in London but had decreased since.

I had one white woman [who] swore at my children: "Effing Muslim children." I've also had one man ... at the checkout [in Sainsbury's] and he put his nose on my nose and said, "Leave me alone! Why are you following me? Do you want to blow us all up? Are you hiding something under there?" And his wife actually ran to the door and said, "What are you doing? Come and run! Save yourself! Why are you standing there, she might blow us all up!" The whole of Sainsbury's stood still because he screamed at the top of his voice, "Why are you following us?" (Interviewee 10, 30 years old, East London)

Interviewee 10 said that this sort of thing used to happen whenever she went out¹⁴⁴ a few years ago, but now it would generally happen on a weekly basis.

7.1.2 Nature of verbal abuse

The most common epithets aimed at respondents were "ninja" and "letterbox". Comments in relation to terrorism were also a common occurrence, echoing a link that has often been made in the tabloid press. Interviewee 16, sitting on a bus with a friend, was asked: "Which one of you is Bin Laden's wife?" Many of the insults were also hurtful and threatening.

One elderly man in Tesco's big public shopping supermarket shouted at me, "You must be ugly. That's why you wear that." (Interviewee 14, 31 years old, High Wycombe)

"Go back to your country!" They'll call you a 'black bitch. They'll say, "You effing nigger", "You Batman". They're very nasty, they've got dirty language. (Interviewee 04, 25 years old, East London)

In the corridor of the hospital a white man, in his 20s/early 30s, said, "Take that mask off; you don't need to wear that effing mask!" And there was a nurse and two midwives behind

me. I ignored it because I didn't want any conflict. They started shouting at that man. I didn't even stop to listen to them. He got angry and waited for me outside. And there were four or five other skinheads with him. And I was in such a dilemma because I had to go to the car park at midnight and I didn't know what to do. And my baby was at home crying ... But the security man saw that these people were standing outside swearing, "Wait until she comes out. We'll kill her!" "We're going to do this to her, we're going to do that to her!" He dealt with them, and I think he called the police. (Interviewee 10)

A common experience shared by women wearing the niqab is people's distrust.

One time in Sainsbury's, the lady had a milk [carton] and it was dripping everywhere so I gave her a wipe and she didn't want to take it from me because I had the niqab—she was scared. I was like, "It's just a wipe. I've got a baby ... I don't have a disease!" (Interviewee 12, 28 years old High Wycombe)

7.1.3 Descriptions of physical abuse

Of the 122 women surveyed, 15 (12.3 percent) reported that they had been physically harassed, eight of them no more than once.

Table 26. How many times have you been physically harassed?

Response	No. of respondents
Once	8
Twice	4
Three times	1
Many times	2

In-depth interviews were conducted with some of the women who faced physical abuse and detailed accounts of the incidents were gathered. The types of physical abuse ranged from being violently pushed and spat on, to having their niqabs pulled. Several women reported being violently pushed by passers-by. It happened to Interviewee 19 while she was on a bus carrying her daughter in her arms. Interviewee 31 (31 years old, East London) was pushed as she was walking down the stairs in a train station with her two children. A similar thing happened to Interviewee 20 (22 years old, East London):

It was at Stratford station and I was walking. There were lots of people and this man barged me very hard on my shoulder as he was walking past and he did it on purpose because there was plenty of space for him to walk by himself and there was plenty of space for me to walk. (Interviewee 20)

Interviewee 90, 22 years old, described what happened to her:

I was in a shopping centre and this guy was following me around the shop ... very white English people. I waited for him to pay and go and then I was going to pay for my things and go. I got outside the shop and he came up behind me and he grabbed me from my waist and he was laughing and said, "Oh, I just bumped into you!"

Interviewee 30 described another incident:

A white woman, middle-aged, very well spoken ... gave me this one horrible look and I was thinking, "Ya Allah I hope this woman doesn't sit next to me." I'm really not in the mood for her. She came and sat next to me and she says, "Are you gonna blow up?" I said to her, "What?" "Are you gonna blow up?" I said, "Course I'm not! Leave me alone!" And then she turns around and says "Are you a terrorist?" I said, "I'm not a terrorist. I don't have time for you, please leave me alone." She turns around, she goes, "Take that off your face, take that off," and she grabbed my niqab and she tried to pull it down. It got half way down and I stopped her and I said to her, "How dare you!" and she pulled it down again.¹⁴⁵ (36 years old, West London)

A man in his late 20s, riding a bike, came towards Interviewee 122 while she was at a market with her children. He spat in her face and rode off.

Several interviewees had objects thrown at them; these included eggs, plastic bottles and water.

We were coming from Asda, the shopping centre, and a bunch of youths were there and they just started throwing (eggs) at us and swearing. (Interviewee 04)

Out of all of the respondents Interviewee 85 (36 years old, East London) experienced the most severe level of abuse when she lived in Canning Town. Stones had been thrown at her, she was spat on, her car windows were broken and she suffered a constant stream of verbal abuse.

Bus drivers

Respondents were asked whether they felt they had ever been "unfairly treated" by members of staff at UK Borders, at their local GPs and hospitals, or while taking public transport. The great majority of interviewees reported never having faced any issues, and those who did generally considered their experiences as either not serious or possibly unrelated to their appearance. Many women praised the facilities available to them at the UK border (UK Border Agency). The only grievance, expressed by several women, concerned the attitude of some bus drivers.

Table 27. Have you been unfairly treated by a bus driver?

Response	No. of respondents
Yes	19
No	81
Not applicable ¹⁴⁶	18
Did not answer	4

Of the women travelling by bus, 19 percent recalled having been unfairly treated by a bus driver, most commonly when the driver did not stop when the respondent was standing alone at a bus stop.

Interviewee 19, 25 years old, from Brixton in South London, reported that her worst experiences had been with bus drivers. She recounts one of the incidents:

It is difficult with the bus drivers ... I don't know if they've signed some kind of pact because they're really horrible to women who wear the niqab. They'd see me coming towards the bus and they'd shut their door and they'd drive off or they would see me coming and they would not stop for me, but then two minutes down the road they would stop for a non-Muslim person. I would be so agitated and angry, especially when I've got two kids.

7.2 The location of abuse

The research suggests significant variation in the experiences of abuse: even women living in the same area or borough experienced levels of abuse that were sometimes strikingly different. For example, in Luton, among the five women interviewed, three had never been exposed to any type of abuse, and two respondents reported being verbally abused “often” and “sometimes”, respectively, and had also been physically harassed, although not seriously.

A number of factors appear to influence the harassment: the ethnic, religious and class composition of a location and the respondent's daily routine. Abuse also varied over time, with periods where there was an increase in abuse seeming to be connected to national and international events such as terrorist attacks.

Interviewee 47 (30 years old, from Luton), reported being exposed to frequent verbal abuse:

The worst was once when I was walking back from work through a park, so a man on a bike following me, and making comments at me: “Are you going to blow me up?” “Is there a bomb underneath there?” I listened to him for about ten minutes and I just said: “Can I go now?” And then I walked off.

Interviewee 52, 31 years old, also from Luton reported that she had rarely experienced any physical abuse:

But after the July 7th attacks in London I think for about a month I had to be a lot more cautious. Some sisters took it off out of fear of retaliation. I didn't because I'm stubborn. Nothing too much happened, other than a few instances where people walked past and made a comment. It was stuff like, "Go back home."

7.2.1 Daily routine

The narratives provide some indication that the daily routines of the respondents may account for these differences, for example, the mode of transport. Those who travel largely on foot or public transport were more likely to be in situations where they faced abuse compared with those travelling by car.

In Forest Gate, Interviewee 02 and Interviewee 04 reported that they had "often" been exposed to verbal abuse,¹⁴⁷ while another group of women told us that they had "never" experienced any problems. Interviewee 02 and Interviewee 04 are both housewives who mostly travel by foot. Every weekday they would take their children to school and go out shopping. By contrast, all three interviewees from the other group do not have children; two of them are students (one attends university and the other one college) and the third woman works for the NHS. There is no further qualitative information on the second group of women, but it may be that the environments in which these women move through their different daily activities and mode of transport expose them to different experiences with the outside world.

In Glasgow two sisters were interviewed who live in the same neighbourhood, who had been wearing the niqab for years and who were both housewives. One of the sisters recalled never having faced any harassment while the other sister, Interviewee 59 (45 years old) said that she experienced mild forms of verbal abuse:

Verbally yes, many a time, many times. Walking down the street you'll get the odd "Ninja". But then you turn round and say, "Excuse me!" and they run because they expect, they think you're oppressed and you probably don't know any English ... I was walking down the street and I was passing a butcher's shop. A guy in there goes, "Here come the ninjas!"

Interviewee 59 recalled that the most common insult was "ninja" and that other remarks were things like: "Go back to where you came from," or "You don't belong here!" She believes that her experience of abuse differed from her sister's because she mainly walked to places while her sister often drove.

A few respondents pointed out that they changed their routine when they started wearing the niqab to avoid being abused. For example, Interviewee 21 started learning to drive to avoid relying on public transport and she also adjusted her timing for shopping.

I used to use public transport a lot. I would be very comfortable—even walking down the road. But when I started wearing the niqab my husband didn't want me to go by myself anywhere. So now that I have a car he's really happy for me to go anywhere ... I have to be more careful what time I'm going out... And I would avoid going places ... for example the time I go to the supermarket: I actually try to go when there are less people because I don't want people to say something to me because of my niqab.

Interviewee 14 made some adjustments in the places she visits and her mode of transport.

I'll only go to places which are child-friendly, where you hope people are going to be nice because they've got children; or definitely in daylight. I'll use my car. I've changed my life style a lot. I had a dental conference in central London and I ended up driving to London and catching the underground. There are a variety of people [on the tube]. You can easily get off and on the underground. If you feel uncomfortable you can get off and get into another one.

7.3 Profile of abusers

Respondents were asked about the profile of the abuser. Fifty-two women who had faced either a small amount or no verbal harassment were excluded from this section of the survey questionnaire. Seventy respondents were asked questions about the age, gender and ethnic background of the abuser(s).

7.3.1 Gender and age

The following two questions were put to respondents: “Are the abusers predominantly men, women or both?” and “Are they predominantly young, middle-aged, old, or all ages?”

Table 28. Profile of the abuser, by gender and age

Gender	No. of respondents	Age	No. of respondents
Predominantly male	36	All ages	28
Male and female	29	Predominantly young	13
Predominantly female	2	Predominantly middle-aged	16
Did not answer	3	Combination of two age groups	8
		Predominantly old	2
		Did not answer	3

A small majority (54 percent) of respondents said that the abusers were predominantly male, while 43 percent of them reported that both men and women abused them. Male abusers were also reported to be more aggressive or violent than women. Asked if it was men or women who abused her, Interviewee 09 replied:

Mainly men, surprisingly ... Even one time some old men (which I would never have guessed) said to me, “What do you have under there? You got a bomb?” ... The men are more aggressive ... One man cursed at me, “You effing cunt.” I had no idea what it meant. I went home to my husband and said, “A man said this to me.” And he went, “Oh! It has a bad meaning.” I didn’t have a reaction either way. I was just confused.

The results from the question on the age of the abusers were inconclusive with 42 percent of respondents answering that they came from all age groups. During the in-depth interviews respondents sometimes needed prompting, as the age of the abuser(s) was not forthcoming. However, nearly 20 percent of respondents reported that the abuse came predominantly from youngsters. Many women had also received mild forms of harassment from children; some respondents considered it as abuse, but most did not.

7.3.2 Muslim abusers

Respondents were asked whether they faced abuse from other Muslims and 11 percent of interviewees reported in the affirmative, though it was rare, and its nature never serious. An example of a Muslim abuser came from Interviewee 06:

One time a man said to me, “Do you think you’re going to go to Jannah [paradise] with that?” I said, “I don’t think anything.” He said, “Why have you got that on?” And I said, “It’s a free country and I can do what I like.” But he kept saying, “Do you think you’re going to go to Jannah?” And I said, “Who knows about Jannah?” That was shocking because it was a Muslim. But non-Muslims, so far, it’s been OK.

In general respondents felt respected and many said that Muslims would perceive them as particularly virtuous women (a perception which most women were quick to add was wrong).

I think they automatically think, because you are wearing it, that you have to be more virtuous and pious than other people. And I say that, because even before I wore it, I had this initial perception that women who cover must be spiritual inside. Only after I wore it, I realised they had the same kind of struggles, in terms of their daily prayers. (Interviewee 23)

I think people are quite good here about this. Even the sisters who are not wearing niqab don't look down upon you. In a way they consider niqabi sisters better Muslims. There is no doubt about that; Muslims respect niqabis especially here [in the UK]. (Interviewee 05)

A few women also mentioned that harassment came from family members in the form of negative or hurtful comments.

Many recognised that perceptions varied between different Muslims. Interviewee 08 explained that the attitudes of Muslims in her Yorkshire home town were different from those in East London where she lives. "Up North they [Muslims] just want to be invisible" and try to "fit in" more, she told us. As a result she believed that Muslims in Yorkshire were less supportive.

There are certain modernist new types of Muslims that don't feel that you have to have any symbol of Islam: you don't have to wear hijab; you don't have to grow a beard ... and they are quite hostile towards niqab. (Interviewee 20, East London)

A few respondents also remarked that although the attitude of other Muslims was generally not an issue, some had been influenced by the negative portrayal of the niqab in the media. Interviewee 09 reported that some of her Somali acquaintances in London assumed that she was a supporter of Al-Shabaab.¹⁴⁸ Some interviewees also expressed their annoyance at being approached by Muslims who would lecture them saying that the wearing of the niqab is not compulsory. Interviewee 03 said:

There were people ... they'd say, "Niqab's not part of the religion." "Women shouldn't be wearing it." They failed to realise is that if they don't uphold the rights of niqabi women now, after the niqab goes give it a few years down the line, next time they're going to argue about your hijab.

Interviewee 07, a human rights campaigner, had another experience:

Some people see those who wear it [as] being spiritually superior. But many times you see people who wear niqab and their character is not very good; they're just like everybody else ...

One sister said to me (she was in a hijab and jilbab), “I came to one of your protests. So many people in niqab [were] there, and I just thought, ‘Why are there no normal Muslims there?’ I did find that a bit insulting ... there were a lot of Muslims of all backgrounds [at the protest], yet due to the presence of niqab, she found the campaign sinister. (Interviewee 07, South London)

7.3.3 Ethnic background

The 70 respondents whose experience of abuse was frequent or relatively frequent were asked about the ethnic background of their abusers:¹⁴⁹

Table 29. Profile of the abuser

Response ¹⁵⁰	No. of respondents
Predominantly white	52
White and black	10
All backgrounds	3
Predominantly black	1

Seventy-four percent of the respondents reported that their abusers were predominantly white people. Incidents involving Asians were extremely rare. 15 percent of interviewees replied that abuse came from both white and black people. The only respondent who reported being abused predominantly by black people, Interviewee 38 (35 years old), was of Somali descent and lived in a mixed neighbourhood in North London.

Like most interviewees in the sample, the 15 percent of respondents who said they had been harassed by both white and black people lived in working-class, mixed or Muslim neighbourhoods. The research did not gather sufficient information on the ethnic components of the neighbourhoods respondents lived in to assess whether those who experienced harassment from individuals who were black lived in areas with a significant black community. The narratives from black Muslim respondents suggest that underpinning the remarks from other black people are perceptions that wearing the niqab constituted a betrayal of their racial or ethnic identity and an adoption of an Asian or Arab culture:

I was with my sister and my younger sister, and my two children as well. This guy could see my sisters were black Caribbean and one of my sisters had a Jamaican flag on her. And he was Jamaican. And he was really, really angry at the fact that we had Jamaican in us and I was covered like this. He was livid. He was swearing ... He was saying stuff like, “You’re lost. You’re going down the wrong path,” “You’re a sell-out!” “How can you be a Muslim? That’s not your ting! It’s for Asians.” My sister [said something] back to him and he said, “I’ll beat you lot up!” (Interviewee 19)

Interviewee 02, who is French of Senegalese descent, said: “Sometimes even by black—sometimes you can be attacked by your own people as well.” She said they were not black Muslims, but black Christians “or whatever, black people anyway. They see me, they ask me: ‘Why do you wear this thing on your face—it’s not in our tradition, why are you making yourself an Arab like this?’”

But some respondents had also received support from black people when harassed by a white person. An eastern European man tried to pull off the niqab of one of Interviewee 02’s friends when they were together:

He was saying, “Ninja, ninja” and she was very upset ... she pushed him. One woman came, she wasn’t even Muslim, a black woman, and she started insulting him saying, “Why did you do this?” And she said to us, “Let’s rally against him and let’s beat him up.”

7.4 Media coverage

Most women who had been wearing the niqab for over a decade said that they experienced more abuse after 9/11 than before. A few women also said that they noticed an increase in abuse around the time of 7/7, as well as after the broadcast of documentaries on mainstream TV channels about Muslims and extremism or terrorism:

A lot of people that we know used to wear niqab around 9/11 or before that and they stopped wearing it: especially after 7/7 a lot of people were worried about their safety. (Interviewee 07)

I think it was after the terrorist attack there was a lot of abuse then. And then when there were a few documentaries that came on TV, which really inflamed and worsened things. I was speaking to my colleagues at school about the documentaries that had come on and they had to address it to the staff, because I think they were getting calls from the media as well—the school was. They [introduced] hidden cameras in the masjids and madrassas and they were talking about schools as well and how some of the schools were hotbeds for breeding terrorists and things.¹⁵¹ (Interviewee 10)

It is impossible to quantify the upsurge in abuse because the questions were only asked during in-depth interviews with a small number of women who had been wearing the niqab for at least six years. Respondents agreed that prior to 9/11 incidents were rare, but were less certain about the period of the 7/7 terrorist attacks.

All the respondents questioned were unanimous in placing responsibility on the media for developing stereotypes of women who wear the niqab, linking them to terrorism.

Media has had a huge impact on people’s perceptions because there’s not that many niqabis and they are so concentrated that the average British person may never have come across

one. A British quality is that they are quite accepting of different cultures ... but that has changed in regard to Muslims recently. Let's say that somebody was arrested on a terrorist charge; the picture will have a group of women in niqabs.¹⁵² There's absolutely no relation between the story, the article and the picture of the niqab ... I think the average person who has never come across a niqab is going to believe what they read ... and that's what has happened over the last few years and the reason why I blame the media. I used to wear the niqab many years ago and people generally didn't have a problem with it. And what the media has done is it has depicted us as the criminals so people feel at ease to say to us what they want. (Interviewee 14)

Interviewee 21 remarked: "It really starts happening if it's been in the media, in the news."

Many respondents anticipated an increase in abuse towards them in the aftermath of negative media coverage or a terrorist attack perpetrated by Muslims. However, the link between media coverage and abuse is not mechanical, as the anticipated increase in attacks did not always materialise:

Every time something comes up in the media about niqab it doesn't matter who says it or what it said, it's obvious that it's going to cause a lot more Islamophobia and that's why it's been picked up and made into such a big issue because they are like, "Let's attack them again" or "Let's do this to them again" ... When it happened with Jack Straw I said to my husband, "I think I'm going to get another few months of verbal abuse or something." I don't think much happened. (Interviewee 62)

7.5 Responses to abuse

7.5.1 Personal responses

During the in-depth interviews, respondents were asked about how they reacted to being abused in public places. Some women said that they always reacted, some preferred to ignore their abusers, but the majority fell somewhere in between.

Respondents invoked various reasons to remain silent in the face of abuse. Some, like Interviewee 21, thought that replying could escalate the situation. Others believed that in Islamic terms silence was the most appropriate attitude.

Sometimes I have said things, but then I've kind of regretted, thinking, "You know what, it's really not worth saying anything! It's not good Islamic practice" ... Part of me thinks, "No, maybe I should say something," because I'm able to verbalise what I want to say quite well. But then at the same time by speaking back I might anger them more. So most of the time, I've just ignored it. (Interviewee 03)

Sometimes I'm not gonna retaliate, because I could be doing an act of worship, and I wouldn't want to ruin it for these people. So I am going to refrain from saying anything and just make daw'ahs that Allah guides them. Or I tell them, "May Allah guide you," peacefully. (Interviewee 17)

The respondents' attitudes also depended on whether they believed that they could change the perception of the abusers and those around them. Some of the respondents' replies to those who directed abuse at them were conceived as an opportunity to challenge stereotypes that are held about women who wear the niqab and to act in a way that reflects their Islamic values.

A few women had no misgivings about replying to abuse, but they were clearly in a minority of respondents.

At the beginning I was very afraid because I felt that wearing niqab was something wrong. They say, "We don't see your face? We don't know what you're thinking. We don't know who you are. We don't know what you've got inside your big dress you're wearing." They call you Batman. But then I said, "If I don't stand up for myself and look brave", because I used to always walk with my arms crossed, "You look like you are scared". We started practising among sisters: "When you walk you have to walk with your head high. You look brave if something happens to you. And you give them what they want to see. You are intimidating!" And you do feel quite good actually. I wasn't scared any more. So when they say something I respond but I don't respond in an abusive way; you just put them in their place. (Interviewee 04, Forest Gate)

Often abusers assumed that the niqab-wearer was unable to speak English or that she was unlikely to fight back.

Interviewee 29 (19 years old, Birmingham) said she did sometimes reply because some of the culprits thought that when you wear the niqab you cannot speak English: "This lady was swearing at me, she was an old lady. And I told her, 'You're like my Grandma. Why are you swearing at me?'" She was shocked and said, 'Actually I didn't know you could speak.'

Interviewee 09 (28 years old, North London) commented that sometimes she told abusers: "Because I'm a woman you want to pick on me but if my husband was here ... (because I never get anything when my husband is around) you wouldn't say a word to me. Because I'm by myself you feel a bit strong." She added that her abusers were: "Shocked, because they're not expecting it. As soon as I open my mouth they're automatically confused because they're thinking, 'OK here's a woman veiled with an American accent.' So they're a bit thrown off."

Original and even rude answers left many abusers, in the words of one respondent, "gobsmacked".

“This man, he was over fifty, nearly sixty years old, and I was walking home and he saw me and said to me, “What are you in there? Are you a man or a woman?” And I said, “What do you think?” And he said, “I don’t know? For all I know you might have a bomb in there.” And I said to him, “Well you better run for your life then!” Interviewee 18 (34 years old, South London)

7.5.2 Reporting physical assault

An overwhelming majority (83,5 percent) of women said that they would report any physical assault to the police. Many respondents also had no qualms in reporting abuse to employers when, for example, they had been abused by a customer or colleagues.

Table 30. Did you report physical assault to the police?

Response	No. of respondents
Yes	102
No	6
Depends how serious	9
Unsure	1
Did not answer	4

The motivation for reporting to the police varied. Some felt that it was important to report serious incidents to the police so that their experience was recorded and the case recognised, whether or not the police took action:

I thought that they [the police] would agree with the abuse so what’s the point of going to the police to tell them? But recently we have been told by scholars and other people that if you are being abused quite badly and especially if it’s physical you should go to report it because it’s still a crime and they can’t just get away with things like this. (Interviewee 20, East London)

The decision on whether to report the physical abuse can depend on the severity of the physical assault. Some suggested that there was a threshold of physical harassment they would tolerate without going to the police. Others even indicated that they partly understood the abuser’s perspective.

Interviewee 53 said: “I think it would depend on its extent. Because you know ... I can’t blame people, you know non-Muslims, reacting the way they do because of negativity around the veil, so it depends on the extent of the assault.” She admitted that if the injury meant that she was “basically really badly hurt”, then she would go to the police, but not if she was pushed violently in the street. She would also probably report it if someone

tried to tear off her niqab: “But again it depends who it is. Because if it’s someone like a youth, or if it’s someone who’s in a drunken state, or if it’s someone who’s really old like an old woman, then I wouldn’t unless it’s something that’s caused me huge harm.”

She also wondered if reporting them to the police “might make them just hate niqab wearers more, if they were cautioned or taken to prison.”

Six respondents said that they would never report a physical attack to the police. In-depth interviews were conducted with three of these respondents: two had had previous dealings with the police and felt alienated by their experience and the third woman based her judgement on the context of the police treatment of Babar Ahmad,¹⁵³ who used to live near her in Tooting. Ahmad’s name was also mentioned by other respondents.

Interviewee 04 was asked why she had not reported the man who had violently pushed her outside Leyton tube station while she was pregnant. Her reply was: “The police themselves are racist for me.” But she had reported a previous incident in Dagenham when men had thrown eggs at her, because

it was too much and we live in the area. And the police, when they came, first of all they came with muddy shoes inside my house. And they’re like, “Sorry. We can’t take off our shoes.” And then they were very dismissive. They were not compassionate because at the end of the day, I’m a victim. I called you because I was attacked and assaulted! The way they were taking the interview was like it’s my fault. I just gave them my statement and they said that they would be in touch and they left ... They never got in touch.

Most of the women said that they would not report verbal abuse. Either they thought there was little the police could do or they considered it harmless.

8. Conclusion

The practice of wearing the full veil in the UK has become a more visible, and therefore, more controversial topic in the past decades. Jack Straw revealed in his newspaper article, which had sparked the first face veil debate in 2006, that for a year he had been asking all veiled constituents visiting his surgery to lift their veil. The response was noteworthy when he said, ‘I can’t recall a single occasion when a lady has refused to lift [it].’¹⁵⁴ However, when he published his autobiography in 2012, he stated that when veiled women came to him for advice, “Some remove their veil; some don’t.”¹⁵⁵ The increasing hostility towards the face veil in the media and among individual politicians must be taken into account for this apparent behavioural shift; this seems to have hardened the attitude of Mr Straw’s veiled constituents.

In a similar vein, a report by the Open Society Justice Initiative¹⁵⁶ on the impact of the French ban on niqab wearers published in 2013 showed not only the failure of the legislation to eradicate the practice of the veil in France but that previously unveiled women had even started to adopt the niqab after the implementation of the ban. The debates over Muslim women’s dress codes do not occur in a vacuum but most often within a context of over-saturated and overwhelmingly hostile media coverage on Muslim issues, and they are framed within wider social problems,¹⁵⁷ which render those debates more often than not counterproductive.

The interviews conducted by the Open Society Foundations in the UK reveal that the women making these decisions are highly conscious of the larger debate regarding wearing the veil. The majority were adults when they first started to wear the niqab, and regarded it as a choice, rather than a requirement.

Indeed, a great many of those interviewed framed wearing the niqab as a very personal decision. Many women were inspired to start wearing a veil by seeing a friend

do so, so the increasing visibility of the niqab in the British context is a factor. A high proportion of the women did not grow up in a household where their mothers wore a veil, and made the decision to wear one themselves quite deliberately, as an extension of their practice of Islam. The paths that drew them to wear the niqab were diverse, and included both spiritual and practical dimensions.

The women interviewed also spoke about a sense of freedom and strength that wearing the veil provided. However, the overwhelming majority of women reported experiencing harassment or abuse at least occasionally because they were wearing a niqab, ranging from name-calling to physical violence.

The niqab continues to be a focus of debate in the UK, involving fundamental questions of women's personal freedom, religious expression and cultural identity. A constructive dialogue needs to be based on rigorous empirical studies and academic research on the face veil phenomenon and should also include those whose lives are most affected by the debates: the Muslim women who wear it. In order to implement efficient policies, it is clear that there needs to be a dialogue between on the one hand, policymakers and institutions creating guidelines, and on the other, the veiled women themselves.

Notes

1. See John Esposito (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, OUP, Oxford, 2003 (hereafter Esposito, *Islam*).
2. See Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the future of Islam*, OUP, Oxford, 2004, p. 254.
3. Esposito, *Islam*.
4. Esposito, *Islam*.
5. Esposito, *Islam*.
6. Malise Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, Granita, London, 2006.
7. Esposito, *Islam*.
8. Esposito, *Islam*.
9. Esposito, *Islam*.
10. According to the 2011 census, out of a total population in England and Wales of 56,075,912 the total Muslim population is 2,706,666 (4.83 percent). Of those, Muslim men comprise 1,409,290 million and Muslim women 1,296,776. Out of the 8.2 million London population, 1,012,000 (12.39 percent) were Muslim (521,000 Muslim men and 491,000 Muslim women). See <http://data.london.gov.uk/datastorefiles/documents/2011-census-snapshot-religion.pdf> (accessed July 2014) and Table DC2107EW Religion by sex (filtered by London), at www.nomisweb.com (accessed November 2014)
11. In 2011 Birmingham's population was recorded at 1,073,045. The Muslim population of 234,411 (21.8 percent of the city's population) was the second-largest religious group after Christians and was the second-largest concentration of Muslims in the UK. Pakistanis, who make up 13.5 percent of Birmingham's population, are one of the largest ethnic groups in Birmingham. See <http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/cs/Satellite?c=Page&childpagename=SystemAdmin%2FCFPageLayout&cid=1223096353755&packedargs=website%3D4&pagename=BCC%2FCommon%2FWrapper%2FCFWrapper&rendermode=live> (accessed July 2014).

12. Glasgow's total population in 2011 was 593,245. The Muslim community numbered 32,117 (up from 17,792 in 2001), comprising 5.4 percent of Glasgow's population. See <http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=16943> (accessed July 2014).

13. Of Luton's 203,200 inhabitants, 24.6 percent (49,991) were Muslims (2011 census). See <http://www.luton.gov.uk/Environment/Lists/LutonDocuments/PDF/Planning/Census/2011%20census%20data/LUTON%20BOROUGH%20PROFILE.pdf> (accessed July 2014). In recent times Luton has become known in media and political circles as the home of two radical groups, the extremist Muslim organisation Al-Muhajiroun (banned several times and re-formed under different guises) and the far-right organisation, the English Defence League. See "Proud and Prejudiced", Channel 4, first broadcast on 27 February 2012. See also Mark Hughes, "How Luton became the epicentre of the global clash of civilisations", *The Independent*, 14 December 2010, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/how-luton-became-the-epicentre-of-the-global-clash-of-civilisations-2159578.html> (accessed July 2014).

14. High Wycombe, in the county of Buckinghamshire, is west of London and had a population of over 120,256 in the 2011 census. The district Wycombe, which incorporates High Wycombe, contained 15,022 Muslims, accounting for 8.75 percent of the total population (information provided by Nomisweb, telephone conversation July 2014. See Table DC2201EW Ethnic group (filtered by Wycombe), at www.nomisweb.com (accessed November 2014).

15. These six locations are Bradford, Dartford, Manchester, Nuneaton, Slough and Watford.

16. No specific guidance was provided to interviewees on the different categories of class in the UK. So although researchers rarely encountered any hesitation or wariness in interviewees' responses, responses about class might have differed had a more official/academic categorisation been provided..

17. In comparison, the 2011 Census of England and Wales (See Table DC2207EW Country of birth by religion by sex at www.nomisweb.co.uk) revealed that 48.75 percent of all Muslim females who lived in the UK were also born in the country.

18. The question related to the age on arrival was not systematically put to respondents who were born abroad. Thus, the number of women who arrived in the UK before the age of 10 could be higher than 14.

19. Source: 2011 Census of England and Wales: 68 percent of the Muslim population of England and Wales were of Asian descent: 38 percent from Pakistani, 15 percent from Bangladeshi and 7.3 percent from Indian backgrounds. See <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/mro/news-release/2011-census-latest-findings/2011-census-latest-findingsnr.html> and Table DC2201EW Ethnic group by religion, at www.nomisweb.co.uk (accessed November 2014).

20. According to the 2011 census, 49.92 percent of UK Muslim women were under the age of 25, well above the overall UK female average of 29.64 percent. See Table DC2107EW Religion by sex by age, at www.nomisweb.co.uk (accessed November 2014).

21. Among the handful of cases were those of the Alvi sisters turned away from Altrincham Grammar School for Girls in late 1989 for wearing headscarves. See <http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1990/British-School-s-Reversal-Ends-Religious-Scarf-Dispute/id-9d63d9f5c5012521ff4e-08a65b596c3f> (accessed September 2014). See also the case of Shabina Begum in 2002. Ms

Begum's refusal to remove her jilbab led to the highest court in the land at the time, the Judicial Committee of the House of Lords, eventually finding in favour of Denbigh High School, a decision supported by the government's Department of Education and Skills. See the Law Lords decision at <http://www.bailii.org/uk/cases/UKHL/2006/15.html> (accessed September 2014).

22. See Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, *Image of Islam in the UK*, Kerry Moore, Paul Mason and Justin Lewis, at <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/resources/o8channel4-dispatches.pdf> (accessed September 2014).

23. See Imperial College Policy on Dress, at <http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/secretariatold/colleg-info/collegenotices%200708/05-06/originaldresscode> (accessed June 2014).

24. Organisations Issue Statement Calling for Clarification (FOSIS), at <http://media.fosis.org.uk/press-releases/210-organisations-issue-statement-calling-for-clarification-statement> (accessed June 2014).

25. A *Daily Mail* article, "Students' fury at ban on hoodies and Islam veils" (24th November 2005) reported that the veil ban was the result of Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly's, earlier urging of universities to clamp down on extremism at their campuses. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-369564/Students-fury-ban-hoodies-Islam-veils.html>(accessed November 2014)

26. Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Kerry Moore, Paul Mason and Justin Lewis, "Image of Islam in the UK", at <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/resources/o8channel4-dispatches.pdf> (accessed September 2014).

27. John Reid, "Muslim must stop extremists", *Sun*, 19 November 2006.

28. Jack Straw's article, "I want to unveil my views on an important issue", was republished by both the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Guardian* on 6 October 2006. See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1530718/I-want-to-unveil-my-views-on-an-important-issue.html> and <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/oct/06/politics.uk> (both accessed November 2014) (hereafter, Straw, "I want to unveil my views on an important issue").

29. Straw, "I want to unveil my views on an important issue".

30. James Sturcke and agencies, "Straw: I'd rather no one wore veils", *Guardian*, 6 October 2006, at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/oct/06/immigrationpolicy.religion> (accessed November 2014).

31. The *Daily Express* and *Daily Star* demanding "Ban the veil" and "Get 'em off" respectively. See CNN, "Veil: British papers back Straw", 7 October 2006, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/europe/10/07/uk.straw> (accessed November 2014).

32. Gholam Khiabany and Milly Williamson, "Veiled bodies—naked racism: culture, politics and race in the Sun", *Race & Class* 50 (2) (2008), pp. 69–88.

33. Simon Jenkins, "Political Fancy Footwork under Straw's veil of moderation", *Sunday Times*, 8 October 2006.

34. Henry Porter, "Jack Straw should be praised for lifting the veil on a taboo", *Observer*, 8 October 2006, at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/oct/08/comment.religion> (accessed November 2014).

35. Charles Moore, “My Straw poll: extremists must be seen for what they are”, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 October 2006, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3632947/My-Straw-poll-extremists-must-be-seen-for-what-they-are.html> (accessed November 2014).
36. Allison Pearson, “Here’s why the veil offends me”, *Daily Mail*, 10 October 2006, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/columnists/article-409749/Heres-veil-offends-me.html> (accessed November 2014).
37. Joan Smith, “The veil is a feminist issue”, *Independent on Sunday*, 8 October 2006, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/joan-smith/joan-smith-the-veil-is-a-feminist-issue-419119.html> (accessed November 2014).
38. Suzanne Moore, “The veil has no place ... in Kabul or Blackburn”, *Mail on Sunday*, 8 October 2006, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/columnists/article-409248/The-veil-place--Kabul-Blackburn.html> (accessed November 2014). See also articles at this time by *Guardian* journalist Polly Toynbee such as “Only a fully secular state can protect women’s rights”, *Guardian*, 17 October 2006, at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/oct/17/comment.politics3> (accessed November 2014).
39. Peter Osborne, “Blair, the veil. and a new low in politics”, *Daily Mail*, 21 October 2006, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-411783/Peter-Oborne-Blair-The-veil-And-new-low-politics.html#ixzz2QrBqY9gD> (accessed November 2014).
40. India Knight, “Muslims are the new Jews”, *Sunday Times*, 15 October 2006, at <http://z13.invisionfree.com/julyseventh/ar/t851.htm> (accessed November 2014).
41. Madeleine Bunting, “Jack Straw has unleashed a storm of prejudice and intensified division”, *Guardian*, 9 October 2006, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/oct/09/comment.politics> (accessed November 2014).
42. Jason Bennetto, Ian Herbert and Jeremy Clarke, “Attacks on Muslims rise after veils row”, *Independent*, 14 October 2006, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/attacks-on-muslims-rise-after-veils-row-420002.html> (accessed November 2014).
43. Graeme Wilson, “Brown breaks ranks to back Straw over lifting Muslim veils”, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 October 2006, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1531106/Brown-breaks-ranks-to-back-Straw-over-lifting-Muslim-veils.html> (accessed November 2014).
44. “Veils harm equal rights – Harman”, 11 October 2006, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6040016.stm (accessed November 2014).
45. There was support for Mr Straw from Paul Goodman, MP for Wycombe, and Philip Davies, MP for Shipley.
46. Will Woodward, “Prescott leads ministers disagreeing with Straw over call to remove Muslim veils”, *Guardian*, 9 October 2006, at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/oct/09/uk.religion> (accessed November 2014).
47. “See Prescott back rights to veil”, BBC, 8 October 2006, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4801801.stm (accessed November 2014); “Straw’s veil comments spark anger”, BBC, 5 October 2006, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/5410472.stm> (accessed November 2014).
48. James Sturcke, “Muslims being demonized, says Livingstone”, *Guardian*, at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/oct/24/london.london> (accessed November 2014).

49. “Straw’s veil comments spark anger”, BBC, 5 October 2006, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/5410472.stm> (accessed November 2014).

50. Two reasons were given by the school for her suspension: “first, she had not obeyed the instruction issued by Mr Smith (the head teacher) not to be veiled whilst in communication with the children, second, a failure to keep in contact with the school and submit sick notes during her recent absence”. See Employment Appeal Tribunal judgment of 30 March 2007, at http://www.employmentappeals.gov.uk/Public/Upload/07_0009ResfnAMMAA.doc (accessed November 2014).

51. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/player/nol/newsid_6050000/newsid_6059600/6059660.stm?bw=bb&mp=rm&news=1&bbcws=1 (accessed November 2014) and “Blair’s concerns over face veils”, BBC, 17 October 2006”.

52. David Davis was the then shadow home secretary and a trenchant critic of multiculturalism. In his article “Do Muslims really want apartheid here?” he backed Mr Straw: “His comments were perfectly proper and he highlighted an issue that is both important and difficult: the question of the very unity of our nation.” See David Davis, “Do Muslims really want apartheid here?” Sunday Telegraph, 15 October 2006, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3633204/Do-Muslims-really-want-apartheid-here.html> (accessed November 2014).

53. The address can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xlszdc3Kck&feature=Playlist&p=7F01F4CD4EDE86E4&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=14 (accessed November 2014).

54. With the exception of the far-right British National Party (BNP) whose calls to ban the burka in 2008 failed to provoke a new fresh veil debate. See BNP’s Richard Barnbrook’s calls for flying the Union Jack and a ban on burkas, Martin Fletcher, *Times*, 5 May 2008.

55. UKIP, a self-proclaimed libertarian party, initially grew out of an early 1990s anti-federalist movement opposed to greater integration with the European Union. Its closest ties have been with Conservative Party Eurosceptics, controversially agreeing not to field UKIP candidates against certain Tory Eurosceptics in the 2010 general election. However, in recent times some commentators have argued that UKIP is breaking the myth of being only popular in the southern counties and is attracting alienated working-class voters from the Midlands and increasingly in the north of England. Apart from apathy towards the Westminster political elite, it has campaigned to end multiculturalism and “mass uncontrolled immigration”. See the 2010 UKIP General Election Manifesto, at <http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/ge10/man/parties/UKIPManifesto2010.pdf> (accessed November 2014).

56. Lord Pearson of Rannoch, a former Conservative Party peer, was reported as having raised the spectre of the Muslim demographic timebomb, declaring that they were “breeding ten times faster than us”: Mehdi Hasan, “Lord Pearson’s anti-Muslim rant”, *New Statesman*, 2 November 2009, at <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/mehdi-hasan/2009/11/lord-pearson-ukip-islam-muslim> (accessed November 2014). He was also known for inviting the controversial Dutch Freedom Party leader, Geert Wilders, to the Houses of Parliament in 2009 to screen the anti-Islam film *Fitna*. Mr Wilders was banned from entering the UK by the Labour government. See “Dutch MP refused entry to Britain”, BBC, 12 February 2009, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7885918.stm (accessed November 2014).

57. “UKIP to call for ban on wearing burka”, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 January 2010, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/ukip/7004127/UKIP-to-call-for-ban-on-wearing-burka.html> (accessed November 2014). See also UKIP’s policy document, “Restoring Britishness: A cultural policy for an independent Britain”, released in January 2010. Here UKIP’s ban in public places excluded streets: see <http://devolutionmatters.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/ukip-britishness.pdf> (accessed November 2014).

58. See <http://devolutionmatters.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/ukip-britishness.pdf> (accessed November 2014). Farage also commented that “the wearing of the veil is a symptom ... of extremist elements in the Muslim community trying to impose their way of life upon us”: see Politics Show, BBC, 17 January 2010, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8464124.stm> (accessed November 2014).

59. See the video of the “Politics Show”, 17 January 2010, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8464124.stm> (accessed November 2014). It is noticeable that the 200,000 figure of those believed to be wearing a niqab is the same number of people UKIP claimed regarded the 7/7 London bombers as martyrs. See “Restoring Britishness: A cultural policy for an independent Britain”, at <http://devolutionmatters.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/ukip-britishness.pdf> (accessed November 2014).

60. “UKIP chief Nigel Farage calls for burka ban”, BBC, 17 January 2014, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8464124.stm> (accessed November 2014).

61. See <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmbills/020/11020.i-i.html#j003> (accessed November 2014).

62. By public places the bill refers to a definition from the 1936 Public Order Act as “any highway, public park or garden, any sea beach, and any public bridge, road, lane, footway, square, court, alley or passage, whether a thoroughfare or not; and includes any open space to which, for the time being, the public have or are permitted access, whether on payment or otherwise”.

63. There were to be exceptions for people covering their faces such as those playing sport, performing art, or wearing the veil on health grounds.

64. Andrew Grice, “Champion of UK burka ban declares war on veil-wearing constituents”, *Independent*, 17 July 2010, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/champion-of-uk-burka-ban-declares-war-on-veilwearing-constituents-2028669.html> (accessed November 2014). The human rights group Liberty warned the Tory MP that he would face legal action if he carried out what it called an act of discrimination. See <https://www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk/news/press-releases/liberty-warns-mp-who-refuses-see-veiled-constituents-unlawful-discrimination> (accessed November 2014).

65. Despite the backing of the prime minister, David Cameron, the college overturned its decision to ban face coverings within 48 hours of the issue coming to light, after protests from student organisations such as the NUS Black Students and campaigners. See Katy Hallam, “Muslim students banned from wearing veils at Birmingham Metropolitan College”, *Birmingham Mail*, 10 September 2013, at <http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/local-news/birmingham-metropolitan-college-bans-veils-5872305> (accessed November 2014). See also Jonathan Brown, “Birmingham college forced into U-turn over Muslim veil ban following outcry”, *Independent*, 13 September 2013, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/birmingham-college-forced-into-uturn-over-muslim->

veil-ban-following-outcry-8814502.html (accessed November 2014); Tamara Cohen, "Cameron backs Birmingham college ban on Muslim students wearing religious veils but Clegg feels 'uneasy'", *Daily Mail*, 12 September 2013, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2418989/Cameron-backs-Birmingham-college-ban-Muslim-students-wearing-religious-veils-Clegg-feels-uneasy.html> (accessed November 2014).

66. In September 2013, Judge Murphy allowed Ms Dawson to enter a plea at a pre-trial hearing wearing a face veil after she had been positively identified privately by a police officer (reversing an earlier decision which barred her from doing so). Days later Judge Murphy delivered a decision on whether Ms Dawson could wear the face veil at her trial and found that the defendant had to remove her face veil if she wanted to give evidence, but could wear it at all other times, thus favouring the right of a fair trial (in which the jurors could see the defendant properly in the witness box) above the right of the defendant to express their religion. The decision can be read at "The Queen v. D (R) Judgement of H.H. Judge Peter Murphy in relation to wearing of Niqab by defendant during proceedings in Crown Court", at <http://www.judiciary.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/JCO/Documents/Judgments/The+Queen+v+D+%28R%29.pdf> (accessed November 2014). Coming at the same time as the perceived climbdown by Birmingham Metropolitan College, some newspapers were critical of Judge Murphy, who they felt made a "series of extraordinary concessions". See Rebecca Camber, "You must take off your veil: Judge rules that Muslim defendant can wear niqab during trial but NOT when giving evidence", *Daily Mail*, 16 September 2013, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2421893/Judge-Peter-Murphy-rules-Muslim-woman-REMOVE-face-veil-evidence.html#ixzz3HAlyEYiU> (accessed November 2014).

67. See note 66 and <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/429309/Cowardly-surrender-by-Birmingham-Metropolitan-college-after-U-turn-on-its-face-veil-ban> (accessed November 2014).

68. See <https://twitter.com/drwillastonmp/status/379199657165197312> (accessed November 2014).

69. Press Association/*Guardian*, "Lib Dem minister calls for debate on Islamic veil", 16 September 2013, at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/sep/16/debate-muslim-veil-lib-dem-minister> (accessed November 2014). See also Jeremy Browne's interview on the Politics Show, BBC, 16 September 2013, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SDrPyAAcJE> (accessed November 2014).

70. See details of the alternative queen's speech at the Conservative Home blog, at <http://www.conservativehome.com/thetorydiary/2013/06/the-alternative-queens-speech-the-full-list-of-40-rebel-bills.html> (accessed November 2014).

71. Apart from a minor amendment on 4(2), the bill was the same as the earlier bill, at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/2013-2014/0031/14031.pdf> (accessed November 2014).

72. See <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2013-14/facecoveringsprohibition/stages.html> (accessed November 2014) The transcript is available at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmhansrd/cm140228/debtext/140228-0002.htm#14022871000003> (accessed November 2014).

73. See <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2013-14/facecoveringsprohibition.html> (accessed November 2014).

74. Case of S.A.S vs France. While the court upheld the law as it protected the “living together” of individuals, which the niqab threatened, the court dismissed claims that the French law upheld respect for gender equality and human dignity as well as being a proportionate response to security threats. See [http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-145466#{%22itmid%22:\[%22001-145466%22\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-145466#{%22itmid%22:[%22001-145466%22]}) (accessed November 2014).

75. Press Association, “MP Pleads for British Ban on Veil”, *Daily Mail*, 3 July 2014, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-2679206/MP-PLEADS-FOR-BRITISH-BAN-ON-VEIL.html> (accessed November 2014).

76. Three respondents could not remember the precise year (between two years) they adopted the niqab. Therefore a one-year margin of error must be taken into account for them. One respondent, Interviewee 57, whose story is related in Chapter 4, started wearing it when she attended boarding school at the age of 13 (in the late 1990s), but because of her mother’s opposition she did not wear it outside school until she was 17 (in 2001). We therefore retained 2001 as the adoption date for her.

77. As we only have the interviewees’ ages and not their dates of birth there is a potential margin of error of one year.

78. A further two respondents (sisters) were raised in the UK by their Kenyan Christian mother. Their Muslim father, who lived abroad, asked their mother to raise them as Muslims. She took them to church but also encouraged them to broaden their knowledge of Islam by getting their Algerian Muslim neighbours to teach them the tenets of Islam. They also had an aunt living in the UK, who was a Muslim. So despite growing up in a non-Muslim household their experiences significantly differed from converts who either had no relationship, or a very distant one, with Islam in their formative years.

79. The categories were defined as follows:

- Strongly practising (unless health and/or job situation prevents him/her to do so), prays and fasts; attends the mosque on a regular basis; reads Qur’an regularly; often fasts outside Ramadan.
- Fairly practising (unless health prevents her/him from doing so), prays five times a day and fasts during Ramadan.
- Practises a little: fasts and consumes no alcohol or pork.
- Not religious: does not pray, does not fast and may or may not drink alcohol or eat pork, but identifies himself/herself as a Muslim culturally.

80. The percentages are based on 103 interviewees and not 105 (as the two “did not answer” responses have been excluded).

81. Myriam Cherti and Laura Bradley, *Inside Madrassas: Understanding and Engaging with British-Muslim Faith Supplementary Schools*, Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), 2011.

82. She is referring to her sister who wore the niqab around the same period.

83. The “did not answer” responses were not taken into account in the calculation of percentages.

84. While there is state funding for religious schools including some Muslim schools, most Muslim schools in the UK are privately funded. They could therefore fall into the categories of state school and public school. For this survey we categorised Muslim schools separately.

85. Department of Education guidelines say: “It is for the governing body of a school to decide whether there should be a school uniform and other rules relating to appearance, and if so what they should be”. However, school governors must to adhere to a number of acts including the Human Rights Act (1998) and the Race Relations Act (1976) when formulating school uniform policy. Although the Department of Education has laid out guidelines, they are not obligatory and need to take into consideration religious freedom, health, security and learning issues. See https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/315587/Equality_Act_Advice_Final.pdf (accessed July 2014).

86. Email correspondence with the researcher in February/March 2012.

87. See David Barrett, “British schools where girls must wear the Islamic veil”, *Daily Telegraph*, 2 October 2010. See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/8038820/British-schools-where-girls-must-wear-the-Islamic-veil.html> (accessed July 2014).

88. Hanafi Deobandi refers to the adherents of the Indo-Pakistani reformist movement (centred in the Dār al’Ulum in the district of Deoband) which was founded in 1867.

89. Phone interview with researcher on 15 May 2012.

90. The first question was initially phrased: “Was anyone very influential in your decision to wear the niqab?” However, due to the negative connotations the question might have evoked among the respondents, we used “inspire” instead of “influence”.

91. “Not applicable” concerns cases where the respondent has not grown up with her father because either the parents are separated or the father is deceased. In one other case one woman did not wish to answer the question.

92. A convert to Islam, Imam Siraj Wahaj is a former member of the Nation of Islam who left to become an orthodox Sunni, eventually setting up his own mosque in Brooklyn, NY. He has held a number of other positions in American Muslim organisations including leadership of the Muslim Alliance of North America. See his lectures at <http://www.halaltube.com/speaker/siraj-wahhaj> (accessed July 2014).

93. Two respondents fell into the category “Before/after”. Interviewee 10, mentioned previously, adopted the niqab aged 17, but had to remove it one year later. She wore it again two years after her marriage. Interviewee 27 was a divorcee at the time the in-depth interview was conducted but had remarried another man when the survey questionnaire was carried out. She said that her former husband had “encouraged” her to wear the niqab but she carried on wearing it after she divorced him. As her second husband bore no influence in her adopting the niqab we also put her in the category “Before/after”.

94. The answer “Other” relates to the cases of two respondents. One of them said that “taking off the niqab” would imply such a radical shift in her mindset that she could barely envisage its implications in terms of her husband’s reaction. The second case involves that of a woman, Interviewee 52, who removed her niqab, and only wore it on very rare occasions, because of her children’s hearing impairments. She had been wearing the niqab for six years and said her husband never liked it and was happy when she removed it.

95. The “No answer”, which refers to the women who were not asked the question, has been excluded from the equation when creating the chart and calculating percentages.

96. “Immediate family” refers to mothers, sisters and/or daughters. Extended family refers to cousins and aunts. “In-laws” refer to the mother-in-law and sisters-in-law.

97. “Not applicable” applies to those cases where the mother was deceased or did not live with the respondent.

98. This point will be discussed further in Section 6.2.

99. Sister-in-law in Urdu.

100. The only respondent who adopted the niqab before 1998 (in 1996) was a 30-year-old married Pakistani. The date of arrival in the UK is not clear, but her Pakistani citizenship suggests that she probably did not settle in the UK until after her childhood.

101. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, “The burka empowering women? You must be mad, minister”, *Daily Mail*, 21 July 2010.

102. Sheikh Haitham was born in Saudi Arabia and studied under Sheikh Bin Baz. See http://www.sabeel.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=105&catid=29&Itemid=65 (accessed July 2014).

103. In a TV interview on the Islamic TV channel, Huda TV, Sheikh Haitham stated that “all Muslim Ummah ... agree that it is something that is highly recommended”, and that Islamic scholars have formed a consensus that only in certain circumstances such as the time of fitna (upheaval or chaos) or the beauty of the woman is the niqab compulsory and that in these contexts it’s sinful not to wear it.” See the Huda TV interview on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9jLtMfMb2A> (accessed July 2014).

104. See <http://kakhchik.com/sheikh-qaradawi-on-niqab/> (accessed July 2014).

105. Commonly a religious practice deemed sunna is considered as non-compulsory, but there can also be several degrees attached to it; for example a practice can be qualified as sunna muakada (strongly recommended), or sunna mustahaba (simply recommended).

106. We will be examining these women’s motives in the following section.

107. Sheikh Abu ‘Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Saalih ibn Muhammad ibn al-Uthaymeen at-Tamimi (1925–2001) was a contemporary of Bin Baz. He was a member of the Saudi Board of Senior Ulama: see http://www.fatwa-online.com/scholarsbiographies/15thcentury/ibnuthaymeen_whatthepapersay.htm#2 (accessed July 2014).

108. A website launched in 1997 which provides answers on Muslim issues. The responses to the questions submitted online are provided by the Salafi Saudi scholar, Sheikh Muhammed Salih Al-Munajjid (who studied under Bin Baz). See <http://islamopediaonline.org/profile/muhammad-saalih-al-munajjid> (accessed July 2014).

109. Ebrahim College is based in East London. See <http://ebrahimcollege.org.uk/ebrahim> (accessed July 2014).

110. Bilal Philips, a Jamaican convert, is a Salafi scholar, a speaker, writer and a regular contributor to Peace TV. He is the creator of the Islamic Online University (IOU), which offers free undergraduate and graduate courses in Islamic studies. A number of scholars at the Knowledge

International University are instructors at the IOU. See <http://islamiconlineuniversity.com> (accessed July 2014).

111. The Al Maghrib Institute describes itself as “the leading Islamic Institute in the West teaching premier Islamic education to the largest Islamic sciences student body”. See <http://almaghrib.org> (accessed July 2014). Abu Eesa Niamatullah, one of its instructors, has written about the niqab: “Islamically speaking, the majority of scholars consider the covering of the face for an adult Muslim female with the face-veil or niqab in the presence of non-related adult males as a religiously praiseworthy action, whereas a minority considers it an obligatory act. Thus, for a Muslim woman to remove her veil in the presence of ‘foreign’ men would be considered abominable at the very least and at its most serious, totally prohibited.” See “You wanted a debate Jack. You’ve sure got one”, at http://asmasociety.typepad.com/mlt/2006/10/you_wanted_a_de.html (accessed July 2014).

112. See <http://www.alkauthar.org> (accessed July 2014). Al Kauthar describes itself as a tertiary level, academic Islamic knowledge institute, with branches in seven countries including the UK. The courses taught include aqidah, fiqh, historical Islamic finance and hadith. Lectures are delivered to mixed-gender audiences.

113. IslamQA.com, which was launched in 1997, provides authoritative responses to questions about Islam: see <http://www.islamqa.com/en> (accessed July 2014). The site’s founder and supervisor is the Salafi Saudi scholar, Sheikh Muhammed Salih Al-Munajjid, who studied under Bin Baz. See <http://islamopediaonline.org/profile/muhammad-salih-al-munajjid> (accessed July 2014).

114. See <http://askimam.org> (accessed July 2014). Mufti Ebrahim Desai, who answers most of the questions, operates from South Africa, providing English-language resources. He studied at the Deobandi Seminary in Dabhel, India.

115. See <http://www.fatwa-online.com> (accessed July 2014).

116. See <http://islamqa.info/en/ref/2198>, and <http://www.fatwa-online.com/fataawa/womensissues/hijaab/0100724.htm> (all accessed July 2014).

117. See <http://www.islaam.net/main/> (accessed July 2014).

118. Al-Huda International Welfare Foundation is an educational establishment (that also undertakes social welfare programmes), which was founded in Pakistan in 1994 and has branches in the United States and Canada. One of the main scholars is Dr Farhat Hashmi, who appears in a niqab on her website. See <http://www.alhudainstitute.ca> (accessed July 2014).

119. See www.kalamullah.com, which is a resource centre for Muslims containing articles and videos on a number of Islamic themes and scholars (accessed July 2014). It is also has a shop-front for selling books by a number of scholars, including Sheikh Muhammed Salih Al-Munajjid of IslamQA.com.

120. See <http://www.halaltube.com> (accessed July 2014)

121. For further information on Islamic media see Ahmed Abu Haiba, “Islamic Media and the Shaping of an Arab Identity”, *Perspective*, 3(2) (February 2011).

122. Iqraa TV is a UK-based Islamic TV satellite channel broadcasting Islamic and educational shows. It broadcasts in multiple languages. See <http://en.iqraa.com/en/newsdetails.aspx?NewsID=17> (accessed July 2014).

123. “Revert” means a convert. In Islam children are seen as born with an innate sense of God, so by converting to Islam they are “returning” or “reverting” to their original faith.

124. Deobandi refers to the adherents of the Indo-Pakistani ulama reformist movement (founded 1867). The goal was to preserve the faith in a period of non-Muslim rule and social change. The formally trained and popularly supported ulama were central to the movement. The school emphasised hadith and the Hanafi legal tradition, and encouraged spiritual transformation through Sufism. By 1967 Deobandis had founded nearly 9,000 schools in India and Pakistan. Since the 1920s the Deobandi apolitical stance has taken shape in the transnational movement Tablighi Jamaat, but Islamist trends such as those of Pakistan’s Jamiatul Ulama-i Islam and Afghanistan’s Taliban have also emerged from the ranks.

125. Salafi (from salaf, “pious ancestors”) was initially a modern revivalist movement, which believes in the restoration of Islamic doctrines to pure form, adherence to the Qur’an and sunna, rejection of later interpretations, and maintenance of the unity of ummah. The term is nowadays used to describe the movements ideologically close to the leading ulama of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. It can refer to the different Islamic groups who claim to model themselves on the first three or four generations of Muslims and who reject the classical Islamic sciences in favour of exclusive reliance on Qur’an and ahadith. Salafi mosques account for less than 6 percent of the total number of mosques in the UK: the main Salafi mosques are in Birmingham, Brixton and the Islamic Centre in Luton.

126. Although differences exist between the four schools of thought, each regards the other as legitimate. It is therefore common for a Sunni Muslim to follow different madhabs on different issues or for a Muslim scholar from a specific madhab to adopt an opinion from another school of jurisprudence.

127. See Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2006; Barbara D. Metcalf, “Traditionalist” Islamic Activism: Deoband, Tablighis, and Talibs, Social Science Research Council, 2002.

128. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah, Shams al-Din Abu Bakr was a Hanbali jurist from Baghdad and a disciple of Ibn Taymiyyah and compiler of his works. See Esposito, *Islam*.

129. Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1791) was a Saudi Arabian conservative theologian, Hanbali jurist, reformer and first ideologue of the Salafi movement. His creed revolves around the strict adherence to the concept of tawhid (the oneness of God) and a fierce rejection of all practices that were perceived as challenging tawhid, such as shrine cults and saint worship. His alliance with Ibn al-Saud helped form the Saudi state. See Esposito, *Islam*.

130. Sheikh Bin Baz (Abdul Aziz Bin Abdullah Bin Abdul Rahman Bin Muhammad Bin Abdullah Al-Baz) (1910–1999) was one of the main Salafi scholars of the 20th century in Saudi Arabia. He studied in the Hanbali school, became a judge and lectured at the Religious Institute in Riyadh on fiqh, Islamic theology and hadith, and became a rector of the University of Medina. At the time of his death one of his most senior posts was Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia. Ibn Baz’s fatwa demonstrated the influence he wielded throughout the Saudi kingdom, specifically over gender roles in contemporary society. Bin Baz is one of four scholars who have contributed to a book (*The Four Essays on the Obligation of Veiling*), which was cited by a few respondents as endorsing the niqab as fard.

131. Na’ima B. Robert, *From my sisters’ lips*, Bantam, London 2006, p. 25.

132. See Allison Pearson, "Here's why the veil offends me", *Daily Mail*, 10 October 2006, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/columnists/article-409749/Heres-veil-offends-me.html> (accessed July 2014).

133. In most cases, it is almost impossible to define the age, appearance and sometimes even ethnicity of a woman who wears a niqab, particularly when it is worn with an additional thin layer over the eyes.

134. I swear.

135. Abd al-'Azīz ibn 'Abd Allāh Ibn Bāz, Muḥammad Šāliḥ 'Uthaymīn, Zayd ibn Muḥammad ibn Hādī Madkhalī, *Three Essays on the Obligation of Veiling*, Al-Ibannah Book Publishing, 2003. The book was updated in 2006 and called *Four Essays on the Obligation of Veiling*.

136. A Salafi organisation set up in the UK.

137. An important figure in the development of Salafism in the UK. See Sadek Hamid, "The Development of British Salafism", *ISIM Review* 21, Spring 2008.

138. Abdur Raheem Green is a British convert to Islam who regularly appears on the TV channels Peace TV and Islam Channel, at http://islamevents.com/speakers/speaker_detail.php?spid=10 (accessed July 2014).

139. The Muslim Brotherhood.

140. Attestation of faith.

141. The perceptions of respondents experiencing "mild" forms of abuse (such as being called "ninja") differed from one woman to the next: some considered it as "verbal abuse", while others did not.

142. "Not applicable" concerns respondents who had not been wearing the niqab for long enough in the UK to elicit a reaction, like two young women who had started wearing the niqab on the day of the interview (not taken into account when calculating the percentages).

143. Canning Town and Forest Gate lie within the same East London borough of Newham, but the ethnic compositions of the two areas differ significantly. In 2011 the Canning Town South ward comprised the largest concentration of white British people in Newham (29.68 percent), while Green Street West (partly in Forest Gate) contained the lowest (4.76 percent) as well as the highest density of Muslims (50.43 percent), consisting overwhelmingly of people from Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani descent (68.04 percent of the ward's population). The 2011 census data for Newham can be retrieved from <http://www.ukcensusdata.com/newham-e0900025#sthash.5VzsKjup.dpbs> (accessed November 2014).

144. The respondent is referring to the period after the 7 July London terrorist attacks in 2005.

145. Interviewee 30 called the police and her aggressor was charged and sentenced to community service.

146. "Not applicable" here concerns respondents who do not travel by bus.

147. Interviewee 04 also recalled three physical assaults, none of which occurred in Forest Gate.

148. A Somali-based Islamist organisation with alleged links to Al-Qaeda.

149. Fifty-two women were not asked the question because their experience of abuse was either marginal or non-existent.

150. The question was: “Are the people who abuse you White, Black, Asian, Mixed Race, or all kinds of backgrounds?”

151. It is possible the interviewee is referring to the Channel Four documentary, “Undercover Mosque”, first broadcast on 15 January 2007. See <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/dispatches/episode-guide/series-19/episode-1> (accessed July 2014).

152. An example in which the niqab has been exploited to make a negative point (and has marginal if any relevance to the story) was for an article on the worldwide Muslim population. The two photographs accompanying the article are both of niqabi women, one beneath a headline “The Global Spread of Islam”: “How almost one in four people in the world are Muslim... and 1,647,000 live in Britain”, *Daily Mail*, 28 January 2011. See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1218934/Pew-Forum-Report-Global-Muslim-population-Nearly-in-world-people-practice-Islam--1-647-000-live-Britain.html> (accessed July 2014).

153. Babar Ahmad was abused and badly beaten in front of his family when members of the Territorial Support Group raided his home and arrested him in 2004. Although Ahmad was later awarded compensation, no officers were found guilty of any criminal offences. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/jun/03/police-not-guilty-babar-ahmad> (accessed July 2014). Ahmad has never been charged or tried in a UK law court but he was nonetheless extradited to the United States in October 2012. In December 2013 Ahmad admitted providing material support for Taliban and Chechen fighters, deemed as terrorists, in a plea agreement with US authorities and in July 2014 was handed down a 150-month sentence by a US federal court, which concluded that Ahmad was not an international terrorist. Having already spent 10 years in UK and US custody it has been reported that Ahmad may serve 13 months before being released. See Dominic Casciani, “Babar Ahmad: The godfather of internet jihad?”, BBC, 17 July 2014, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-28324222> (accessed July 2014); Ed Pilkington, “Briton Babar Ahmad given 12-year US prison term for aiding Taliban”, *Guardian*, 16 July 2014, at <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jul/16/babar-ahmad-12-years-prison-taliban> (accessed July 2014).

154. “I want to unveil my views on an important issue”, Jack Straw, *Daily Telegraph*, 6 October 2006, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1530718/I-want-to-unveil-my-views-on-an-important-issue.html> (accessed November 2014).

155. The extract from *Last Man Standing: Memoirs of a Political Survivor* by Jack Straw (MacMillan, London, 2012) appeared in a *Daily Mail* article, “My battle to lift the veil: Jack Straw tells why he was willing to confront one of modern Britain’s great taboos”, Jack Straw, 25 September 2012, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2208579/My-battle-lift-veil-Jack-Straw-tells-willing-confront-modern-Britains-great-taboos.html> (accessed November 2014).

156. *After the ban: The Experiences of 35 Women of the Full-Face Veil in France*, Naima Bouteldja, Open Society Foundations, September 2013, at <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/after-the-ban-experience-full-face-veil-france-20140210.pdf> (accessed November 2014).

157. The security threat posed by the women who wear the veil has been a recurrent theme for its detractors. But the veil has also been associated with social fragmentation and the failure of Muslims to integrate into British society and with the imposition of a foreign culture.

