

‘Cultural transformation’ as Muslim girls out-perform boys academically, research says

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Muslim girls are performing better academically than Muslim boys, in a “cultural transformation” of previous trends, research says.

In a “new and remarkable” shift, more young Muslim women than men have degrees, research presented at the British Sociological Association’s annual conference in Birmingham this week will reveal.

Dr Nabil Khattab and Professor Tariq Modood found 25 per cent of Muslim women aged 21-24 had degrees, compared with 22 per cent of Muslim men of the same age.

Using survey data on 6,600 people in England, they also found that GCSE results and average scores in school tests at age 11 and 14 were higher for Muslim girls.

“Muslim girls seem to now be outperforming Muslim boys, especially in relation to their school performance,” said Dr Khattab, of the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Qatar. “This is a very interesting and a new finding, especially given what we know about the gender gap among Muslims, not only in education but also in the labour market.

“While older men are more likely to be degree holders than their female counterparts, younger women are more likely to have degrees.

“This trend has been present amongst white Christians for some time. On the other hand, it is very new amongst Muslims, with women more likely than men to have degrees only in the 21-24 age bracket.

“Nevertheless, that it has happened at all is quite remarkable when one considers that in 1990 and 1991 Pakistani and Bangladeshi men admitted to higher education outnumbered their female peers by more than two to one and more than three to one respectively.”

One reason for this was that “Muslim women, especially those planning to become economically active after leaving school, understand that they are likely to face labour market penalties due to widespread stereotypes and racism, perhaps more so than Muslim men.

“This can reinforce their determination to obtain higher education qualifications not only as good as those of the majority group but even better in order to resist the anticipated labour market discrimination preventing them from achieving a desired job.

“It is possible that Muslim women who are British born, unlike their mothers, have undergone a cultural transformation.”

Dr Khattab and Professor Modood, of the University of Bristol, also found that the reason that Muslims overall were less likely to have degrees and attend an elite university than white people was due to their falling behind at primary school. When they adjusted the data statistically to remove that initial deficit, they found that in secondary school they performed as well as white students, and were catching up when they took GCSEs.

“Once we take the previous school performance into account, Muslim students seem to be performing as well as the majority group, even in attending elite Russell group universities.

“At the GCSE level, there was a clear advantaged among Muslims. This finding is striking given the well-established educational disadvantages among some Muslim ethnic groups, most notably Pakistanis and Bangladeshis.”

Notes

- 1.** The researchers used results from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, carried out from 2002-2013. The number of people surveyed varied from 1,824 to 8,343, depending on which questions were asked. The sample sizes are representative of the wider population.
- 2.** Among Muslims, they found that 25% of women aged 21-24 had degrees, and 22% of men. For older age groups, more men than women had degrees. They found that on average Muslim girls achieved 6.46 GCSE/GNVQ examinations at grades A* to C, compared with 4.98 for Muslim boys. In school tests at age 11 and 14, Muslim girls scored higher than Muslim boys.
- 3.** When analysing progress at school, they found that at age 11, Muslim students overall had fallen behind their white counterparts. But when looking at their progress at age 14, and when taking GCSEs and applying to university, they found that they had not fallen behind further – by removing statistically the advantage gained at age 11, they found white students and Muslims were equally likely to succeed.
- 4.** The British Sociological Association’s annual conference takes place Aston University from 6 to 8 April 2016. Around 600 research presentations are given. The British Sociological Association’s charitable aim is to promote sociology. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235
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For more information, please contact:

Tony Trueman
British Sociological Association
Tel: 07964 023392
tony.trueman@britsoc.org.uk