

Mental Well-being in the Muslim Women community of North Kensington

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Introduction

There are just under **20,000 Muslims living in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea** and Muslim women make up a fairly large portion of North Kensington's population itself. Unfortunately, in many communities, mental health is a very taboo subject with a stigma around it. The impact of the Grenfell fire, for example, was felt by the entire local area, and leaves the Muslim community heartbroken to this day. **70% of those who lived in the tower were Muslim and just over 54% of those who passed away were Muslims**, showing how expansive that network of grief is in a community that stigmatise mental wellbeing and view it as a weakness. Through this project, I set out to explore what mental well-being services there are available, if there are enough, and how they benefit the Muslim community, specifically Muslim women.

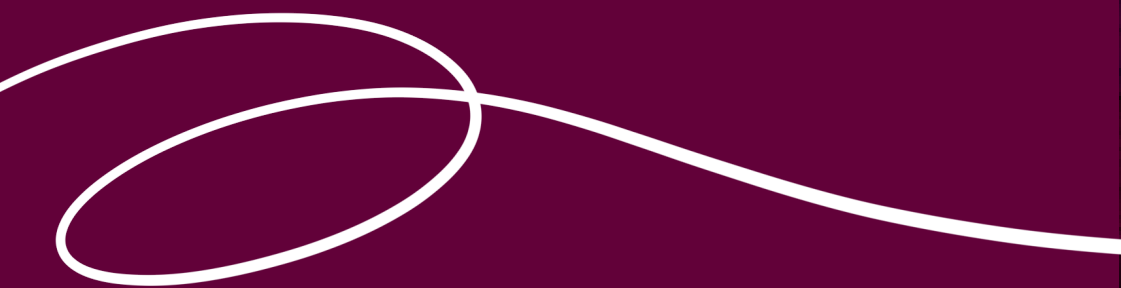
I conducted interviews with the professionals in North Kensington's mental well-being spaces. I asked the professionals about access to mental well-being support in North Kensington and how Muslim women feel talking about their own mental well-being. We also discussed the stigma surrounding mental health

and questioned whether there are enough spaces for Muslim women to seek help and how to make more of these women open to actively improving their mental well-being.

As mental well-being is an extremely intimate and personal topic, I decided to interview Muslim women in pairs or groups with other women that they were comfortable with. I wanted there to be an overarching theme of support, sisterhood. Sisters by religion yet also sisters in the literal sense; women who have spent their lives together in North Kensington; sisters 'by blood' or sisters 'by friendship', who have supported each other in life and are comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences. I kept hand-written notes instead of audio-recording the interviews. I wanted the interviews to be as relaxed and casual as possible so that the women would feel more comfortable speaking their minds. The women I interviewed spoke eloquently about their understandings and experiences of mental well-being and impressions of mental health services. In this zine, as much as possible, I present their ideas in their own words.

Mental health services for Muslim women

There are, in fact, several helpful mental health services for Muslim women. The most profound barriers to better mental health for the community is not lack of accessibility, but lies rather in Muslim women themselves. There is a mutual fear and shame surrounding getting help and many of the women I interviewed reinforced this school of thought. All the women expressed a deep longing to have mental health as a subject that they can talk about more openly in their circles and communities. The professionals too voiced that Muslim women in the area have so many places to go to but not enough women are open to the idea, as the irrational fears felt by the community have unfortunately stigmatised these mental health services.



“After Grenfell, a lot of Muslim women sought help, but when they started therapy and asked if they would rather do it in their mother tongue, they asked for a ‘white woman’ - out of fear that them seeking help would go back into the community.”

- Michelle

OUR HEARTS ARE WITH YOU
GRENFELL TOWER

“Opening up to a friend sometimes means opening up to the whole community. There’s a general lack of awareness when it comes to these things.”

- Zohra

“You need to feel like you’re understood and can be related to, to have that confidence that you can be helped. To understand what it’s like being an ethnic minority in Britain, what it’s like to be a woman - a Muslim woman. To know how we feel.”

- Hafsa

“They might also feel like they can’t trust anyone with these personal issues on their mind that they’ve never opened up to anyone about before.”

- Nadia



“It’s difficult to know what therapy is and all without going out of your way to do research. £100 per hour for therapy? It’s never that deep, I’ll just keep it stepping *laughs*.”

- Nasteexo

Interpretations of 'mental health'

Another prevalent theme in the interviews, especially with the older generation, was the inability to correctly define mental well-being itself. There is an immense misconception that mental health is not as vital as physical health, that the services available will not be beneficial, and that mental health support is not for everyone. Initially, the older group of participants misinterpreted mental health to indicate a serious mental condition such as schizophrenia, Bipolar disorder and so on. They did not recognise that they themselves, like everyone else, need to care for their mental well-being as much as their physical, at least in the early stages of the interview. The professionals also asserted this in their interviews, mentioning that misinformation within the community is a vital piece in the puzzle in the discussion as to why many Muslim women disregard their mental well-being.

“Our generation of older parents worry about how to raise our children. Britain isn’t where most of us were raised and we don’t know what it’s like for our kids and what challenges they face as children of immigrants. No one worries about themselves, we’re always thinking about those around us. Some of us might compare their family dynamics to the traditional white British family and the idea of a ‘perfect mum’ in a place where we have no idea what childhood looks like. People parent the way they are parented, both mothers and fathers need to be willing to change but it frightens a lot of people to deny how you were raised and what you were taught to be right from wrong.”

- Zohra



“There’s a clear, clear relationship between faith and mental health - it’s symbiotic even. The older generation are misinformed on mental health, it’s not their fault because it’s something that’s more recognised globally in all societies and cultures.”

- Mumtaz

“They grow up not knowing how to look after themselves mentally.”

- Nasteexo

“Having Sabr (patience) in Islam is an act of worship. But there’s a difference between being patient and sitting in it, not doing anything to better yourself. You can still have Sabr, trust in Allah and do your best.”

- Balqees



“In our generation, I think that these women feel like mental health is not for everyone.”

- Nadia

“Most people think going to these places are for the “crazy” or “mentally sick” people.”

- Zohra

“Many people have trouble naming their emotions, and because of this stigma, they simply end up thinking that they are just ‘mad’ for feeling these complex emotions.”


- Nacera

“There’s no code of conduct on how to deal with our problems because it’s not in our culture.”

- Zohra

Availability and diversity of services

Despite the multitude of services available here, the general consensus is that Muslim women do not have enough spaces in the area. There are, and in fact they reach full capacity: Al-Manaar mosque here in North Kensington, the community centres for the different ethnicities here such as Midaye and Al-Hasaniya, and Community Living Well at St. Charles Hospital. These are just some of the places Muslim women are welcomed to use. The participants expressed that they, as well as those in their circles, are unaware of the various forms of support available, or do not want to know in the first place, as the stigma still remains. Six years after the Grenfell fire, are to this day accepting help and actively seeking it through therapy now that mental well-being is becoming less taboo, but the taboo has not completely gone.



“We offer gardening, walks, day trips, even here at Al-Manaar we have the ‘Kitchen Hub’, where Muslim women can cook together and eat together. So many people in North Kensington come here for counselling and the mental well-being activities offered in so many languages like Arabic, English and French. They can go through their trauma together and build their resilience together.”

- Nacera

“From what I know, there are so many places that offer support and reach full capacity. There can always be more of anything, but at the moment there are so many services here for Muslim women to get emotional support no matter how unique their situations may be.”

- Michelle

Dealing with different pressures

Another point to mention is that a common worry that Muslim women had was assimilation into British culture, workspace and healthcare system. They also struggled balancing their own lives and looking after their mental well-being.

“North Kensington is already many people’s second home from all around the world, the only home for a lot of them even. It’s hard to really feel at home when the area is undergoing mass gentrification; the disparity becomes even more apparent.”

- *Nasteexo*

“I’ve been searching on the NHS directory for a Black Muslim Female therapist, someone who is just like me and will understand me, but there wasn’t a single one when I looked through it. A white male therapist will never be able to fully understand me because we have lived very different lives.”

- Mumtaz

“Feeling conscious about how we dress as we’re easy to identify as Muslimahs (Muslim women)’. Sometimes, you can’t help but think that is all someone sees - ‘just your hijab’. It’s a blessing and I am proud of it and who I am, but you can’t help thinking about it sometimes. I don’t want to feel like I’m ‘just another Muslim’ when I’m giving a complaint at a store. Islamophobia is frightening.”

- Nadia

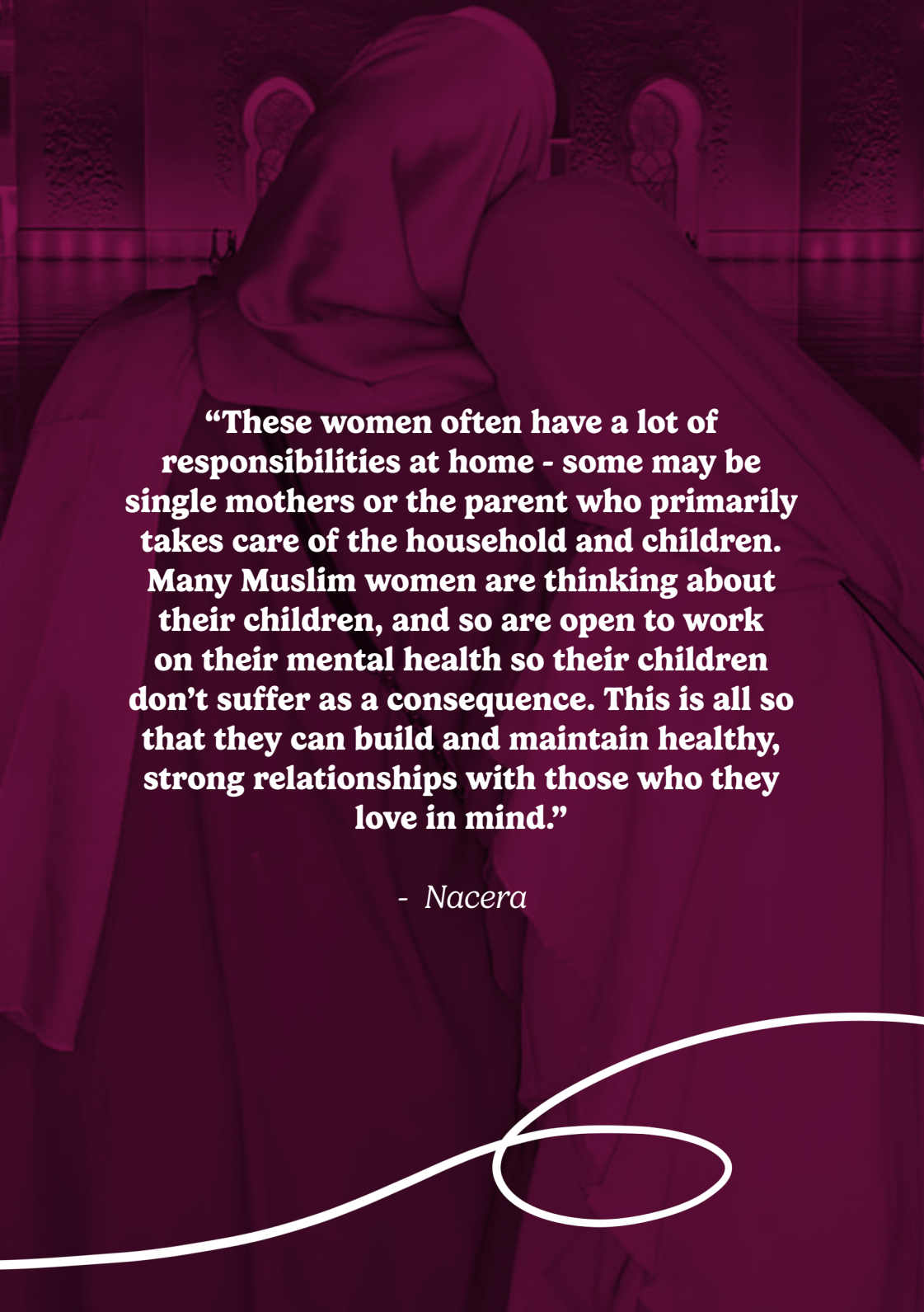
“It’s universally known that immigrants have to overcompensate to compete with their White counterparts. We feel as though you have to do your best to fit in. Life nowadays is so system-driven and people tend to get caught up on how to look, act and speak.”

- Aasiya

“Settling in somewhere that you already know is not where you’re originally from is not easy at all. Even though there are so many things out there, you can’t help but think that it just isn’t for you.”

- Hafsa



A photograph of two women wearing hijabs, embracing each other from behind. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent dark purple filter. At the bottom of the image, there is a white, flowing, abstract line that loops and curves across the frame.

“These women often have a lot of responsibilities at home - some may be single mothers or the parent who primarily takes care of the household and children. Many Muslim women are thinking about their children, and so are open to work on their mental health so their children don’t suffer as a consequence. This is all so that they can build and maintain healthy, strong relationships with those who they love in mind.”


- Nacera

“do your best to explore out of your comfort zone. Go to the workshops and don’t be afraid to ask ‘what is counselling?’ And learn about it. Learn about yourself bit by bit with a professional. Your concerns are kept safe with us. Although it is scary, there is no shame in looking after yourself mentally. There are so many other Muslim women who you will meet and relate to and grow with - you are not alone.”

- Nacera

“there has been a lot of progress in my 12 years of experience in the field, but if we compare that progress to other groups like, it hasn’t progressed at the same rate at all. There are still so many opportunities, workshops and sessions in our local area for Muslim women, in a professional community setting that are made with all the challenges and worries Muslim women may have in mind.”

- Michelle



“Behaviour and mindset in our generation needs to be changed. The women in our communities need to tackle the stigma surrounding mental health. It shouldn’t be taboo. We need to voice our concerns, if not with professionals then at least those close to us.”

- Zohra

“having a therapist or counsellor who you can book a slot with when you’re having a bad week, no consultation or diagnosis, would help so many women who cannot commit to regular sessions because they are working mothers”

- Aasiya

“A hub for Muslim women other than the mosque, regardless of ethnic background and age. Somewhere we can meet each other, have events and exercise together. The biggest barrier in terms of exercising and looking after our physical health is modesty after all.”

- Hafsa

“Anything educating people on what mental well-being is itself and raising awareness on the significance of not neglecting it. Mental well-being services for women going through menopause! Women are really struggling and have no clue how to deal with it emotionally and mentally.”

- Nadia



“So many Muslim women of all ages are willing to learn, it’s just a matter of raising awareness and teaching them, and advertising effectively.

Investing in their marketing. Education is so key, educating people that taking care of your mental health is good and a part of faith too. A collaboration between mental health professionals or training Muslim women to become them, this should happen in all under-represented groups so everyone can be seen, heard and understood.”

- Balqees

“Creating a mental health initiative for younger Muslim women so they have the tools and resources to look after themselves and the successive generations to come - break that continuous cycle of generational trauma. Setting up playful, fun and exciting environments for us: sports, baking, arts and crafts, a book club even - so we don’t have to spend loads of money just to de-stress and enjoy ourselves with other women.”


- Mumtaz



“Having girl’s coffee mornings, evenings, game and quiz nights at our community centres and mosques just for Muslim girls. It will build such a strong network for the girls who were raised here. They need as much exposure as possible: hire a professional to keep websites up to date and easy to use, post on social media accounts on different platforms, create brochures and post them wherever they can - make sure no one is left behind.”

- Nasteexo

Conclusion



Being the community I am most familiar with, Muslim women is just one of many groups that I decided to focus on. There are many other ethnicities, age groups and genders that feel under-represented in the mental well-being space. This really echoes the fact that overall, we need to cater to all. Starting by removing the stigma and eventually having spaces and activities that appeal to everyone so that everyone’s mental health can be a priority like it truly should be.

Grandmothers

work colleagues
sisters by friendship

NADIA

48 years in NK
Moroccan

ZAHRA

37 years in NK
Yemeni
mother of

Working mothers

AISHA

Yemeni + Somali
Community pharmacist for
RBCK, Brent, Westminster

sisters by
blood
30+ years in
NK

HAFSA

Yemeni + Somali
programme manager in
innovation sector

family friends/sisters by friendship

sisters by blood/ 20+ years in NK

NASTEEXO

specialist in
publishing sector

BALQEES

engineering
graduate

MUMTAZ

undergraduate
student

NACERA

counselling
practitioner at Al
Manaar Muslim
Heritage Centre

7 years working in
NK since Grenfell

MICHELLE

community
development manager
for community living
well at St. Charles
Hospital

12 years working in
NK community spaces
such as 'Al-Hosaniya'

The **Good Life in North Kensington** brings together a team of residents to explore what a 'good life' means for people in North Kensington, London, and what some of the barriers are to achieving it. In 2023, seven local residents became 'citizen social scientists' and carried out their own research projects, investigating issues which matter to them and their communities.

They have been trained and supported by UCL's Citizen Science Academy, based at the Institute for Global Prosperity, in collaboration with the University of Manchester and the Westway Trust. They have since been awarded the Citizen Science Certificate by the UCL Office for Open Science and are now working with local organisations to help ensure citizen voices are part of decision-making processes.

The Good Life North Kensington is part of a larger project on rethinking neighbourhood change and urban futures in the aftermath of housing tragedies. The project is led by Dr Constance Smith (University of Manchester) as part of a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship. For more information see www.highriselandscapes.org



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