



UNIVERSITY OF  
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COLLEGE OF  
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# BREXIT, BIRMINGHAM AND BELONGING: ANXIETIES ABOUT 'HOME' AMONG SECONDARY MIGRANT SOMALI FAMILIES

BIRMINGHAM'S MUSLIMS: in the city, of the city

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Identity & Belonging Workstream

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## *Birmingham's Muslims: in the city, of the city*

This project is more than academic research. Bold and unique, this three year programme will consider the story of the city's Muslim communities – their past, present and future – to better understand their contribution to the success of the city. Recent events across the city and country have significantly impacted cohesion. Often misrepresented or misunderstood, Muslim communities deserve a safe space where they have the opportunity to have open and honest conversations with leaders, institutions and policymakers about the issues that matter to them and impact their everyday lives. As a leading Russell Group institution, the University of Birmingham occupies a singular niche to facilitate this. Building on our links across the political sphere, state apparatus and the city, we aim to bring together diverse groups for a range of engaging, relevant and pertinent activities.

Birmingham – as a city and as a university – has a strong commitment to fairness, tolerance and co-operation. This project aspires to generate new ideas to support and encourage others to understand Birmingham's Muslim communities as both 'in' and 'of' the city.

### **DISCLAIMER**

This paper contains the views of individuals that were engaged and duly interpreted by members of the project's research team. Responsibility for any errors therefore lies with the author(s):

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## INTRODUCTION

The text of this briefing paper was originally published as a post on the *Sociological Review Blog*<sup>1</sup>.

## BREXIT, BIRMINGHAM AND BELONGING

Having obtained full EU citizenship status elsewhere (including in Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden), a significant number of Somalis have arrived in Britain since the year 2000. Research suggests that Britain was preferred as a destination of secondary migration on the basis that it was perceived to be more tolerant of cultural and religious difference<sup>2</sup>. Maybe unsurprisingly, many settled in Birmingham, a city that not only has a long history of welcoming and being home to many diverse communities but one that has also been referred to as being the best place in Europe to be 'pure Muslim'<sup>3</sup>.

In making Birmingham their home, many of those that have settled have had families while at the same time creating organisations and services that support their cultural, theological and political needs. In doing so, they have established themselves as a distinct 'community'. Birmingham is most definitely seen to be 'home'; their sense of belonging to the city being routinely conveyed to us when we

began to engage Somali families in the city as part of a research project that sought to explore the impact of Brexit on a number of different minority communities. As one of those we engaged put it:

*"The number one factor here is the social life. I grew up in Sweden and Sweden was a very secluded environment where people kept themselves to themselves... But here in the UK, especially Birmingham, people do more outdoor activities, go to restaurants... whether it is sheesha, whether it is the gym, people are always outside. So that's what I like... And the mosque community in the UK, especially Birmingham, is very active. There are always activities. Not necessarily religious, they could be any sort. People can come from outside, say government or schools, and you can have awareness of different issues. So you're never bored in terms of that aspect."*

Because the Somalis we spoke to were European rather than British citizens however, the vote for Britain to leave the European Union threw any sense of 'home' or belonging they had into disarray.

Most of the families we spoke to voiced how they felt 'shock' and 'disbelief' when the referendum result was announced. While this did not prompt an immediate response for most, one family member spoke about how their sister and brother instantaneously decided to leave the UK to return to Sweden. Nonetheless, all those we spoke to expressed anxiety:

*"I think Brexit made a lot of people unsettled. Because for the longest time they were settled or comfortable; nobody in their wildest mind thought that was going to happen... It was a drastic shift. So when that happened... even myself, I thought 'Oh my God, what is going to happen to me?'"*

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<sup>1</sup> See, <https://www.thesociologicalreview.com/blog/brexit-birmingham-and-belonging-anxieties-about-home-among-secondary-migrant-somali-families.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ilse Van Liempt. "And then one day they all moved to Leicester': the relocation of Somalis from the Netherlands to the UK explained." *Population, Space and Place* 17.3 (2011): 254-266.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Allen. "Birmingham's Muslims: a city of challenges and opportunities" *Huffington Post*, 20 October 2016 [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-chris-allen/birmingham-muslims\\_b\\_12567710.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-chris-allen/birmingham-muslims_b_12567710.html).

Their anxiety manifested in various forms. For some, it was socio-political and socio-cultural. For example, one family was concerned about whether their teenage children would be able to go to university in the UK without incurring the level of fees normally reserved for international students. For others, this pragmatism took the form of being worried about access to welfare including free healthcare and income support. There was some anxiety also about the levels of prejudice and discrimination that might encounter if they were to return to their countries of citizenship:

*"I'm also worried about that when I go back to Holland how am I going to get used to society there? At the moment, if I'm honest, you can't see this on the recording but my attire is quite conservative... I know in Holland there will be issues and I will not get employment. So I am worried from that aspect as well."*

Alongside these, there was also a more specific anxiety relating to belonging. For some, this meant to question the extent to which they had ever truly belonged in Birmingham or indeed Europe. One might argue that this was little more than a mere coping mechanism as almost all of those who voiced such anxieties had previously spoken warmly about feeling at 'home' in Birmingham. However, our research demonstrates that notions of belonging were extremely complex among Birmingham's Somalis and are influenced numerous factors including the multiplicity of their identities, their socio-economic status and migration journeys.

This can be illustrated by one of our participants. As a Somali woman who had arrived from Sweden, she explained how she had subsequently married – and had children with – a convert to Islam who was

also living in Birmingham but was a Polish citizen that had come to the UK as an economic migrant. The anxiety this caused for her as regards belonging and more so 'home' was palpable:

*"Do you have to leave? Do you not have to leave? Everything is just leaving a question mark. Especially for my husband because he does not want to go back to Poland. If not Poland then what? We were wondering 'Where?' Especially for us because neither of us have 'home-home'. So it's like, 'Okay, where next?'"*

Key here was her use of the phrase 'home-home' in that it simultaneously acknowledged the different journeys and histories of her and her husband while also their shared lives and experiences in terms of where 'home' was for them as a family.

In her book, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*<sup>4</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis states that when we speak about 'home', we typically refer to a place that we have an emotional attachment to. Embodying the everyday and normative, she adds that it is where we also tend to feel most safe and secure. While she goes on to explain how notions of 'home' tend to encompass individual, familial and communal choice, for those Somali families, the Brexit vote rendered that notion of choice – and by consequence, agency – redundant. Simultaneously, Brexit also directly threatened all that was normative and everyday for them.

Drawing on Yuval-Davis's theory of the politics of belonging, the referendum result undeniably politicized the notion of 'home' and the sense of belonging for many individuals, families and communities. The result – as ultimate culmination of the leave

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<sup>4</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis. *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*. London: Sage, 2011.

campaign - achieved this by politically and conceptually constructing an 'us' from 'them' in that it immediately functioned to demarcate who Britain could be 'home' for from those it could not. For those who could not, their emotional attachments – be they individual, familial or communal – and their legitimacy were immediately challenged, questioned and cast into doubt. This may even be what many of those who voted to leave the EU may have hoped for.

While Brexit functioned to reinforce an overly simplistic understanding of 'us' and 'them', such constructions – be they along the lines of race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, citizenship or indeed any other descriptor – fail to take into account the inherent demographic complexities and multiplicity of identities that are an integral part of the contemporary British social patchwork. This was evident in the wider programme of research into the impact of the Brexit campaign and referendum result on different minority communities. As such, the feeling of not being able to belong here was sadly not exclusive to Somali families only.

Consequently, the futures of many of those we engaged with remain uncertain. For most, the choice will be between returning to the EU member state where they originally claimed citizenship or applying for citizenship here in the UK. For those without a 'home-home', both those choices are inappropriate and inadequate. Irrespective of which choices these and many others will be forced to take, those choices will be indeterminably shaped by how the politics of belonging in a post-Brexit Britain will unfold rather than by any individual, familial or communal decisions.