

# Women working towards excellence: OurLives

Communities Bradford

October 2009  
[www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)



In 2004, JRF made a ten-year commitment to work in Bradford. We work in partnership with others to make a positive difference to the people in the city, and improve our understanding of issues in a diverse community.

This summary highlights a project that used digital media to explore the views and experiences of Muslim women in Bradford.



**JOSEPH ROWNTREE**  
FOUNDATION

# Key points at a glance

This project used digital media to explore the views and experiences of Muslim women in Bradford. Supported by professional film-makers, a group of women worked together to make films about their lives that would educate and inspire a wider audience.

- Issues affecting Muslim women include families and parenting, education, fashion, music, the media, drug abuse, gang violence, anti-terrorism initiatives and the environment. Most of the women taking part felt the Muslim community was at a critical point in the history of the Muslim experience in Britain.
- Project participants were articulate and independent, with aspirations for themselves and their families and a desire to live modern lives. It did not matter what background they were from or what level of education they had, all had something to say.
- Faith was an important aspect of the women's identity, but many had friends of different faiths and backgrounds which they felt enriched their lives and those of their children.
- The majority of women felt a connection to their country of heritage but would identify themselves as British Muslims. They viewed Britain as a land of opportunity and openness.
- The women felt a deep connection with Bradford despite its problems. It was seen as a place where they felt relatively safe; with local resources and support networks enhancing their sense of belonging.
- The vast majority of women felt they ended up as 'pawns' in national debates on issues such as dress code. Complaints about media representation of Islam and Muslims were common.
- Marriage and motherhood was important to all of the women. A supportive, compatible soul-mate was seen as essential but difficult to find, with more women now delaying marriage.

Cover photo: Digital media was used to explore the views of Muslim women in Bradford.



The films challenged negative stereotypes and assumptions about Muslim women.

- Marriages to men living in different continents were perceived to be less appealing and forced marriages considered un-Islamic. Divorcees often felt ostracised, but most women felt that anyone who had experienced forced marriage or domestic violence should be openly supported.
- Some women expressed genuine fear about the rise of far-right groups such as the British National Party and increasing levels of Islamophobia after 9/11 and 7/7.
- Most women saw matters affecting Muslims in the UK as a priority but also expressed concerns about Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan. They also believed that tackling illiteracy, poverty and injustice was important for the whole of humanity, not just Muslims.

## Background

Women working towards excellence: OurLives is a community action project using digital media to capture the experiences of Muslim women in Bradford. With support from professional film-makers and project workers, a core group of women worked together to create resources that would inform and inspire a wider audience.

Digital media is an area which is often considered inaccessible to women and there are not many women working in the industry. For Muslim women in particular, there are taboos associated with appearing on screen and being a subject rather than a viewer. While there has been much discussion about Muslims living in Britain after 9/11 and 7/7, the voices of Muslim women are rarely heard, though this is steadily changing. OurLives project co-ordinator Wahida Shaffi admits 'I was one of those voices'. The project started with the idea that digital media, especially documentary film, could provide a natural outlet for these voices.

One of the things we really wanted to do was to use some creative means to channel the voices of Muslim women and bring them to a wider audience, not just in Bradford, but around Britain and the rest of the world as well.

*Wahida Shaffi, project co-ordinator*

## Aims of the project

By recruiting Muslim women to work with digital media, the project aimed to:

- help a core group of Muslim women gain new skills which they could pass on to others;
- provide a space for Muslim women to talk about their lives and get their voices heard by a wider audience;
- find out more about the issues affecting Muslim women and create resources to communicate these issues to the community as a whole, including service providers and policy-makers;
- encourage community action by bringing people together and building the foundations for social change.

## Project work

The Women working towards excellence (WWTE) OurLives project went through several stages and used a variety of approaches to achieve its aims.

### Background research

The first stage of the project involved audio recordings and online surveys to find out about the views of Muslim women of various backgrounds from different parts of Bradford. These would go on to inform the resources created during the project.

### Digital media training

Ten Muslim women were recruited to work with professional film-makers, producers, directors, photographers and artists. As part of their training, the women made three short films as previews for their later work. These appeared at the Bite the Mango Film Festival at the National Media Museum in Bradford.

Training also included a two-day trip to Snowdonia where the women were exposed to a number of new challenges including climbing, canoeing and filming in extreme weather conditions.

### ***Inspiring Change seminars***

A series of seminars and events was organised based on the issues identified by Muslim women as important to them. These fitted into the broad themes of: parenting, education, young people, identity, creativity, global threats and solutions, and faith and spirituality.

Leading practitioners in the fields of psychiatry, parenting and philosophy came to speak at the seminars. Comics, musicians and story-tellers also shared their talents. While they were conceived by the women involved in the project, the Inspiring Change seminars were open to anyone, both Muslim and non-Muslim.

The OurLives project is a great initiative to train women in film who have never been involved with film in the past. It helps them realise that they have an ability, given the right tools and the right opportunities, to do something spectacular and even opens doors to pursuing a career in the industry.

*(Addy Rutter, former Director of the Bite the Mango Film Festival)*





The idea was to inspire and inform an audience who would not normally be able to hear such important speakers, and encourage debate about the issues facing Muslim women. The seminars developed relationships between individuals and decision-makers, building the foundations for social change.

Key events included:

- *Exploring global solutions to global threats:* Professor Tariq Ramadan, one of the world's leading Muslim critical thinkers in the field of conflict, philosophy and Islamic thought, spoke about global threats and solutions in today's society.
- *Exploring parenting:* Dr Mahmood Mabayat, a leading psychiatrist and expert in parenting, spoke about parenting and other aspects of modern life for people of all cultural and religious backgrounds.
- *Lyrics and friendship:* This day-long music workshop was organised in partnership with Bradford Grammar School. Over a hundred young women from the district came to work with leading musicians from America, as well as the highly acclaimed Danish rap group, Outlandish.

Hundreds of people participated in the Inspiring Change seminars. It was hugely empowering because we organised them on the back of what women were saying.

(Wahida Shaffi, project co-ordinator)

I found the project inspiring and encouraging. It has really built my confidence. I have met lots of different people, from different fields. It's been a very popular project, very enjoyable and I have appreciated being part of it.

(Sajida Parveen)

There has always been a negative portrayal of Muslims on screen, so giving women the opportunity of reversing some of those trends has been really successful. What you have is women who have never picked up a camera in their lives and never been in front of the camera all of a sudden taking on those roles and, from that point of view, it's been incredible.

*(Wahida Shaffi, project co-ordinator)*

### The films

Six films were produced as part of the project, with Muslim women involved in front of and behind the camera. This work was supported by digital media experts, including the award-winning film-maker Nick Francis. The OurLives films delve into the daily lives and opinions

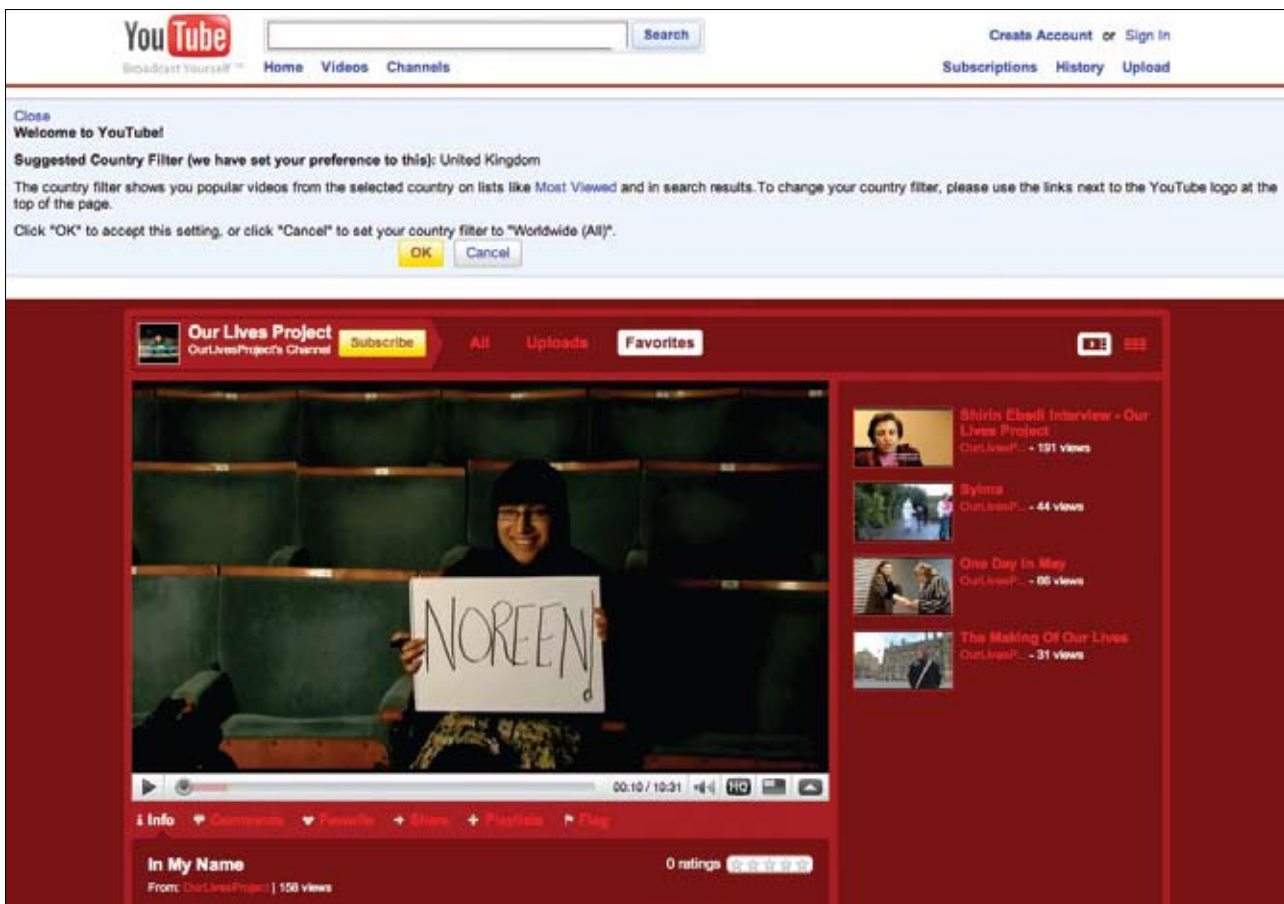
of Muslim women in Bradford, from May, the refugee dedicating her life to helping others, to Saiqa, the professional golfer who epitomises a successful, confident woman.

### The book

Twenty women were selected to feature in a book entitled *Our Stories, Our Lives: Inspiring Muslim women's voices*. The aim was to present stories of exceptional Muslim women in a creative yet accessible way.

### The website

A website ([www.ourlivesproject.net](http://www.ourlivesproject.net)) was set up to display the rich material created during the project, including films, photographs and audio recordings. Films are accessed through YouTube, showing that this method of distribution is not only about entertainment but also about getting messages out to a global audience cheaply and effectively. To date, the website has been accessed by people as far afield as the USA, Malaysia and Pakistan. This takes the project beyond the local level and leaves a sustainable legacy.



## Lessons for participants

Project activities took participants out of their comfort zone and gave them opportunities to develop a range of skills.

- **Film-making**

Working closely with award-winning professionals, participants learnt the basic principles and techniques of film-making. These included editing, filming on location, storyboarding, concept design and photography.

- **Public speaking**

Training in public speaking and more general development of confidence and communication skills enabled the women to speak at local and national events. Some of the women have taken part in panel discussions at events attended by over 200 delegates.

One of the lessons for me is the time and effort it takes to build trust with people. It's very important to talk to people, not in a bureaucratic way, but in a heartfelt and genuine way.

*Wahida Shaffi, project co-ordinator*

It's been quite empowering to see the transformation. Others have observed my transformation and I observed the transformation in other women from being quite set-back, quite shy, then taking the steps to come forward to speak for themselves, and that's an observation that's been quite empowering for me and encouraging to see that changes are happening for Muslim women.

*(Rifat Akram)*

- **Outdoor activities**

The two-day training trip to Snowdonia supported teamworking and gave the women a chance to take part in physical activities such as climbing, canoeing and filming in extreme weather conditions.

- **Personal development**

The project took a person-centred approach, empowering women to embrace opportunities to improve their skills and pass them on. This principle was central to the wider impact of the project.

## Key findings from the project

The project provided valuable insights into Muslim life in modern Britain:

- Most of the women felt that the Muslim community was at a critical point in the history of the Muslim experience in Britain. Issues affecting Muslim women related to families and parenting, education, fashion, music, the media, drug abuse, gang violence, anti-terrorism initiatives and the environment.
- All the women had aspirations for themselves and their families, with many expressing an interest in opening up their own businesses. Articulate, strong-willed, and independent, the women involved in the project wanted to succeed against the odds. It did not matter what background they were from or what level of education they had, all of them had an opinion to express.
- Most Muslim women wanted to live modern lives: to go on holidays with family or friends to places other than Pakistan, to dine in restaurants, go shopping for bargains and follow consumer trends.

The project is a really good idea. It's important that people realise the diversity within the female Muslim population, in terms of women that wear the hijab and women who do not wear the hijab.

*(Saima Nazir)*

The outcomes exceeded expectations, in my opinion. We'll end up with six films, which is more than the planned outcomes. Every member of the team worked above and beyond the call of duty. One of the privileges of working with the people I worked with is that it was always about the women and far less about bureaucracy – about the women more than any other aspect – and that made it a real success.

*(Wahida Shaffi)*

- The women spoke of having friends of different faiths and backgrounds which enriched their own lives and those of their children. But they also spoke of their deep sense of responsibility for reaching out to those of other faiths and emphasised the need for reciprocation and inter-faith communication beyond emotive reactions and perceived fears.
- Faith was an important aspect of the women's identity, and they were happy to be identified with Islam and seek guidance from the teachings of Shakh Hamza Yusuf and Shakh Zaid Shakir.
- The majority of women felt a connection with their country of heritage but would identify themselves as British Muslims. They viewed Britain as a land of opportunity and openness, as opposed to more secular societies like France and Turkey where they felt women were unable to practice their faiths openly.

I found the project inspiring,  
enlightening and a good  
insight into how women can  
collaborate and bring together a  
lot of good work.

*(Sharin)*

- The women felt a deep connection with Bradford despite its problems. It was viewed as a place where they felt relatively safe; the accessibility of resources and support networks enhanced their sense of belonging.
- The vast majority of women felt they ended up as ‘pawns’ in national debates on issues such as dress code. Complaints about media representation of Islam and Muslims were common. It was agreed that the solution lay in more Muslims working in the media industry to challenge institutional racism.
- Marriage and motherhood was important to all of the women. A secure, supportive, compatible soul-mate was seen as essential but difficult to find. More and more women were getting married later in life and therefore reducing the involvement of extended family in their decision.
- Marriages to men living on other continents were seen as less appealing and forced marriages considered un-Islamic and in violation of a woman’s right to choose her partner. Divorcees often felt ostracised, but most women felt that anyone who had undergone a forced marriage or endured domestic violence should be openly supported.
- Some women expressed genuine fear about the rise of far-right groups such as the British National Party and increasing levels of Islamophobia after 9/11 and 7/7.
- Most women felt that matters affecting Muslims in the UK were a priority but also passionately voiced concerns about Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan. They believed that tackling illiteracy and poverty and reducing the gap between rich and poor nations was important for the whole of humanity, not just Muslims.

## The future

Overall, the project involved over 100 Muslim women in Bradford between the ages of 14 and 80. By encouraging these women to pass on their learning in their homes, communities and to a global audience, the project has inspired them to become agents of social change.

While the main project phases have come to an end, there are many ways WWTE OurLives can be sustained and replicated. The model of using digital media to explore social issues can be used in other projects, not only with Muslim women but with all sections of society. This work should maintain its person-centred approach and human values to attract funders locally and nationally.

There is still potential to do more with the films produced during the project. For example, they could reach more people by being added to social networking sites, which have seen a shift away from traditional media distribution. The women are currently working on a film called *If I was Prime Minister* and further opportunities are being explored.

With these new directions ahead, project co-ordinator Wahida Shaffi describes the OurLives project as a “work in progress – something without a beginning, middle or an end”. For many of those involved, the project has been a life-changing experience.

It's been absolutely amazing to work with such inspirational women. I learnt so much about making films and I learnt so much about the different women I worked with. Now I have seen the films on the big screen it's given me a totally different perspective.

*(Sophia Hussain)*



### About this project

This project used digital media to explore the views and experiences of Muslim women in Bradford.

The *Our Stories, Our Lives* book is available for purchase: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/our-stories-our-lives>

The related films can also be viewed at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/our-stories-our-lives>

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These views, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

Other formats available.

Tel: 01904 615905

email: [info@jrf.org.uk](mailto:info@jrf.org.uk)